

A Constitutional Reckoning with Democratic Exclusion

Choose a specific policy or initiative aimed at promoting female leadership. Why do you think it's effective?

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When India's Parliament passed the Constitution (One Hundred and Twenty-Eighth Amendment) Act in September 2023, it marked the culmination of a twenty-seven-year legislative struggle that would fundamentally reshape the nation's democratic architecture. The Act reserves one-third of seats in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies for women, representing perhaps the most ambitious gender inclusion initiative in democratic history. As a sixteen-year-old Indian witnessing this historic moment, I observe not merely a policy shift but a constitutional reimagining of representative democracy itself.

The Act's primary strength lies in its constitutional approach to dismantling entrenched barriers that have historically constrained women's political participation. Women currently constitute only 15% of Lok Sabha members, a modest increase from 5% in 1952, yet still far from adequate representation (Palshikar, 2023). Unlike voluntary party initiatives or cultural appeals for change, constitutional reservation creates legal imperatives that transcend political calculations and social prejudices. This intervention recognises that systemic exclusion requires systemic solutions, voluntary measures have demonstrably failed to achieve meaningful representation over seven decades of independence. The constitutional framework transforms women's political participation from aspiration into structural necessity, compelling political parties to actively identify, support, and field female candidates rather than maintaining status quo exclusions (Krook, 2009).

Furthermore, the Act builds upon demonstrated effectiveness of women's reservation in local governance, where three decades of implementation have yielded compelling transformative evidence. Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) found that women leaders in panchayats invested more in public goods such as health and education, and showed that exposure to female leaders reduced gender bias and raised aspirations of young girls. The Mani Shankar Aiyar Committee Report (2008) confirmed that political reservations enabled nearly one million women to participate in panchayats without significant elite capture, indicating the policy's democratic authenticity. This empirical foundation provides legitimacy for scaling reservation policies to national levels, demonstrating that such interventions enhance rather than compromise governance quality.

Most significantly, the Act creates measurable mechanisms for political transformation that extend beyond numerical representation to reshape democratic culture itself. Randomised evaluations reveal that quotas not only increase women's political participation but also alter perceptions of leadership, with men recognising women's effectiveness and reducing associations of women with purely domestic roles (Beaman et al., 2012). Evidence suggests spillover effects: reservation increases female candidates in non-reserved constituencies, thereby normalising women's political presence (Jensenius, 2017). This cultural dimension proves crucial because political representation both reflects and shapes social attitudes about gender capabilities, creating positive feedback loops that extend beyond reserved seats.

Critics argue that reservation policies risk tokenism or may limit voter choice in reserved constituencies. However, this perspective misunderstands the entrenched nature of existing barriers. Current political structures already constrain voter choice through informal networks, financial obstacles, and cultural biases that systematically exclude women (Jensenius, 2017). Reservations therefore democratise rather than restrict choice by expanding the pool of viable candidates. Moreover, local governance experience demonstrates that women representatives frequently outperform men in developmental outcomes (Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2004), suggesting that quotas enhance rather than compromise representative quality.

India's Women's Reservation Act represents a sophisticated constitutional intervention that addresses historical exclusions while creating frameworks for democratic evolution. Its effectiveness stems not from idealistic assumptions about gender, but from empirical recognition of systemic barriers and proven solutions. The Act demonstrates that meaningful change requires more than good intentions, it demands constitutional commitment to restructuring democratic participation itself.

References:

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