

Substantive Representation and Gendered Interactions in Leadership: A Comparative Study into Women's Political Representation as Elected Women Representatives in Governance

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Parliaments are inherently designed to serve as representatives of their respective societies. Citizens who align themselves with contemporary parliamentary systems actively seek resolutions to their issues and goals. The representation and participation of women in politics vary significantly between and within nations. A socially inclusive society allows women to 'have a voice in making decisions that affect their lives', which is a crucial component of democratic governance. This pertains to the idea that political involvement is a human right and that women have the same citizenship rights as males. However, even after these many years, why do we have so few women in politics? Are they willing to run for office? What happens when they do? How much does their presence systematically influence the legislative process? These are all critical questions to answer. The present study explores the term 'substantive representation' proposed by Hannah Pitkin in her pivotal work *'The Concept of Representation,'* connoting the 'acting for' aspect of women's political participation. The study further analyses the gender interfaces in leadership using the Global Gender Gap index report gathered by the World Economic Forum using the Comparative-Narrative methodological paradigm. From the theoretical model, this paper examines the gendered interactions at local self-government institutions and analyses the scenario of women's representation at local level, national level and global levels by employing a comparative framework. Insights from the study submit the argument that inclusivity in decision-making mechanisms needs to be brought in for the substantive representation of women.

Keywords: Women's Political Participation, Substantive Representation, Local Governance, Decision Making, Gender inclusivity, Women's Representation

Women and men have fought hard for women's ability to vote and occupy office, from suffragettes to modern-day feminists. The idea of representation has been examined more closely by political theorists than political philosophers. A crucial aspect of daily living in one's life is representation. As a result of our daily immersion in representation—through which we comprehend both our surroundings and one another—people constantly engage in representational practice. 'Representation'

today is a widely and significantly used word. In the contemporary era, all governments assert their commitment to representing any faction or movement seeking representation. Considering the concept's prominence, there has been little discussion regarding its in-depth inquiry regarding meaning. Conceivably it is one of the central concepts taken for granted that a closer look into the concept is not yet made possible or to say it has been discouraged by the thinker. Thinker Thomas Hobbes gave a systematic and fully developed meaning for representation in his idea of representative government (Hobbes, 1996). The thinker John Stuart Mill who also devoted an entire book to the representative government, did not consider explaining in detail what representation is or means (Mill, 1861). However, the available works of literature are full of disagreements or critiques over its meaning. The fundamental question is: Are all the governments representative or not, or some of them? Representation is a human idea. A person can be said to be represented when that person feels so. What makes people feel represented? When will one feel that they are being represented? How can they identify whether they are represented, and what evidence should be based on this? On the contrary, those who feel being represented may not be in the actual sense or reality. Conversely, some people imagine being represented, while an objective observer would say he/she is not. Pitkin also assumes that

Representation does have identifiable meaning, applied in different but controlled and discoverable ways in different contexts. It is not vague and shifting but a single, highly complex concept that has not changed much in its basic meaning since the seventeenth century. As the word's etymological origins indicate, representation is re-presentation, a making present. Generally, representation means making present in some sense something which is nevertheless not present literally or in fact (Pitkin, 1967).

Therefore, it is vital to differentiate the psychological feeling of being represented and the rational way of being represented. It is necessary to identify the 'whys and wherefores' of what representation means

Hannah Fenichel Pitkin on the Concept of Representation: Theoretical Framework

A glance into the pivotal work by Hannah Fenichel Pitkin, that is, 'The Concept of Representation' gives a rich pool of information on the significance of women's participation and representation in decision-making positions and hence the present study thematically narrates the theoretical framework. Four sorts of representation are distinguished by Hannah Fenichel Pitkin in the foundational work, "The Concept of Representation": formalistic, descriptive, symbolic, and substantive (Pitkin, 1967). The formal conferring of authority on a person to act on behalf of others is characterised as the formalistic representation. This representation is flawed because, regardless of the quality displayed, all of the representatives' activities count as "representation". The idea of descriptive representation implies a similarity between the traits of the represented and the represents. This idea is constrained, nevertheless, because it places more emphasis on a political institution's makeup than on its operations. Instead, symbolic representation deals with the attitudes and beliefs of the portrayed. These ideas' weaknesses include their susceptibility to manipulation by representatives and their propensity to use subjective imagery. Contrary to the other three notions, representatives must respond to the represented in the case of

substantive representation (Garboni, 2015). The feminist movement and gender and politics have spent the most time researching descriptive and substantive representation, two of Pitkin's four types of representation, as well as the relationships that may be made between them (Childs & Krook, 2009).

Substantive representation (Pitkin, 1967), the term familiarised through the works of Hannah Pitkin, connotes the idea of acting in the interests of those they represent. It also involves the activity of rational judgment, an objective assessment, and an unbiased view of matters. For the representation to be 'substantive,' it is requisite to represent the interests of the group of people he or she represents. One notion in this form of representation is that the person who is represented should act in a manner responsive to the group. The decisions are to be made independently; hence, other actors have no involvement. The least significant in this representation is the personal or individual interest, termed by the social scientist Edmund Burke as 'unattached abstractions'; the consultation of anyone's wishes seems less significant (Lensi, 2023). The more the represented views welfare or interests objectively, as determined by the people rather than others whose interests are, the more flexible it is for the representative to further the visions of the constituents. Substantive representation is not about arbitrary acts. It is 'standing for' the aspirations and welfare of the constituents. Deliberation and reason are needed in substantive representation against descriptive, formalistic, and symbolic representation (Pitkin, 1967).

A representation is substantive when interests are involved that are meant for the layman. The substantive 'acting for' view contends that if a legislator represents his or her constituency, he or she must advance the interests of the specific voters they are responsible for. However, it must be kept in mind that there is diversity in the views and interests of the people. The representative has their views or decisions on issues of common interests, that are sometimes considered by the people as unsound or undesirable. However, pressure groups such as local political parties or lobbyists might impact decisions constraining the elected representative from substantively acting. There are many compromises in finally making a decision. Therefore, in the legislative realm, a lot of complexity and plurality of factors are at work, influencing the legislative decisions.

Political representation functions in a manner that is intricately similar to that of large-scale social arrangements and is primarily a public and institutionalised arrangement tying together numerous individuals and groups. The system's general structure and operation, or patterns involving a variety of behaviours by the total actors, are what define this as "representative," not just the individual players who make up the system. A democratic issue of justice, legitimacy, responsiveness, and efficiency is the underrepresentation of a group (women) in decision-making (Pitkin, 1967). In a democracy, legislative representation is important because laws affect voters' lives both directly and indirectly. Only at the end of the 20th century did political scientists, especially feminists, begin exploring concerns about women's representation. The issues were finally resolved when gender and politics were given a wider context. The primary issue with women's political participation up until recently was their numerical presence in parliaments or their "descriptive" underrepresentation. The sex quota (reserved seats, legislative quotas, or party quotas) was the most popular strategy adopted in many nations' efforts to raise the proportion of Women members of parliament. These tactics have been effective over time in several nations, which has led to numerous debates about the representation

of women. The state must also make an effort to create a gender-friendly environment where everyone has an equal chance to express their demands if representation is to be meaningful. Substantive representation research is still in its early stages. This is partially because there were formerly very few nations with a sizable proportion of women elected. As was already said, there are other complexities, such as those related to how parliaments operate as institutions. There is a misconception that women are not willing to become candidates in the election before they can be elected. Therefore, this paper mainly deals with the nature of representation in governance.

Methodological Framework

The present study explores the term ‘substantive representation’ proposed by Hannah Pitkin in her pivotal work *‘The Concept of Representation’*, connoting the ‘*acting for*’ aspect of women’s political participation. The study further analyses the gender interfaces in leadership using the Global Gender Gap Index Report 2023 gathered by the World Economic Forum using the ‘Narrative methodological paradigm’. From the theoretical model ‘The Concept of Representation’ proposed by Hannah Fenichel Pitkin, this paper examines the gendered interactions at local self-government institutions and analyses the scenario of women’s representation at the local, national, and global levels by using secondary sources of existing literature in a ‘Comparative Research Framework’. Model of governing systems from different regions considering their approaches to bringing women into leadership positions are conceptually compared and discussed using a sociological flavour of critical inquiry.

Gendered Interactions in Elections: Literature Analysis

Democracy, as the term itself, implies that all voices are addressed or heard. Among the global population, women constitute about fifty percent, underrepresented in policymaking practices at all levels of power. This can be seen all around the world and interpreted that they still lack adequate access to political leadership and other supplementary resources. The meagre ratio of womenfolk in administrative institutions is a rampant one in ancient and present-day democracies. The right to vote brought dramatic changes but did not imply representative legislatures, especially for women. The real challenge lies in ensuring more qualitative women’s participation rather than electing a more exaggerated number of women in the legislature. On the other hand, it also connotes changing the age-old rampant observation that the public sphere is predominantly a realm for men. Women represent half the potential talents and skills of humanity, and their underrepresentation in decision-making is a loss for society as a whole (Smith, 2013). This reveals female participation and involvement in the civic domain. Gender parity is a significant element in backing a nation’s monetary prosperity. The United Nations Population Fund (www.unpf.org) observed that financial prosperity and societal parity ought to go simultaneously, further stressing that, “Gender inequality holds back the growth of individuals, development of countries, and the evolution of societies, to the disadvantage of men and women”

Inglehart and Norris debated that Post-industrial civilisations have a more equal view of women in leadership positions. Furthermore, the study found that institutional processes are ineffective without sufficient cultural change; hence, a simple ‘culture shift’ will not eliminate the gender gap (www.worldeconomicforum.org) in

hierarchies. In the study, it was also noted that the shift in perspectives is a long-standing course that is closely related to the progress of upgrading (Inglehart 2003).

Women are now underrepresented in political leadership, which is caused by several circumstances. There are a variety of structural and functional limitations that differ and affect how involved women are in politics and how they can access formal political power systems. Political, socioeconomic, ideological, and psychological impediments cause women to be underrepresented in politics (Shvedova, 1998). To emphasise the need to boost women's engagement in leadership and decision-making roles, the General Assembly issued Resolution 58/142 about women and their administrative involvement (United Nations, 2003). It exhorts leaders, the public, and other stakeholders to create comprehensive policies for women. Resolution 66/130 on 'women and political engagement' later that year, in 2011, emphasised the significance of women's government partaking in entire settings (United Nations, 2011).

Despite making up half of the world's population, women comprise less than a quarter of those who sit in national parliaments worldwide. Such descriptive or numerical underrepresentation may impact how well women's interests are represented in general. Increased political involvement by women does result in policy decisions that are more sensitive to the interests and concerns of women (Chattopadhyay R & Duflo E, 2004). There have been many observations regarding women's political participation since the First Indian Independence Struggle. The Swadeshi movement, which started in Bengal in 1905 and spread throughout India, started Indian women's involvement in nationalist activities and raised the issue of suffrage and voting civil rights. Finding the roots of the woman suffrage drive in India, Forbes (Forbes & Geraldine, 1979) observed:

The firm insistence of organised women that they are treated as equals of men on the franchise issue emerged not from the perceptions of the needs of the women in India, but as the result of the influence of certain British women, in the case of the first demand for the franchise, 1917, and as a response to the nationalist movement, in the case of the second demand for the franchise, 1927-33...

Consequently, the push for women's voting rights in India started at the beginning of the 20th century and stood inspired by British women reformers who had worked in India. But finally, the suffrage campaign accepted nationalist objections. For the Indian audience to relate, suffragist principles had to be rationalised in Indian expressions and connected to nationalist concerns about civil human rights and colonial standing. In India, the 1920s and 1930s saw a fresh wave of a movement that dominated the country's public conversation (Southard, 1993).

Between 1920 and 1929, inadequate voting constitutional rights were granted to women in various regions as a result of this new movement. Based on property requirements, only a relatively small segment of Indian women was awarded suffrage. Through the 1935 Government of India Act, women were accorded the right to, but they were never allowed to avail other socio-political rights like full property ownership. According to the Act, 'one woman for every five men enfranchised' (Visram, 1992). The new Constitution that was adopted after India attained independence in 1947 did not set aside any seats for women in the legislature. Even though the colonial era's final days saw the reserving of seats for women in the

legislature, which were separated laterally through secular streaks, it offered womenfolk a grip on the law-making process. It established a standard that women might use decades later (Jenkins, 2003).

Women's participation in electoral activities, such as participating in campaigns, hearing candidate speeches, or joining political parties, is high. If Women get proper representation, they will be able to understand how political institutions operate, learn leadership abilities, and have a voice in family decisions. The study 'Political Participation of Women: Deconstructing the Indian Reality'; stated that the vast majority of women who have entered politics have altered politics. These women have an impact on state policies due to their active involvement as leaders. As a result, the State starts to address issues like gender inequity, discrimination, poverty, and poor health. Additionally, elected women leaders are frequently more aware of the issues that a typical woman might encounter in her daily life, helping to shape stronger legislation for women (Garg, 2021).

Several factors influence how much women participate in formal politics; some of these elements are universal and gender-specific, while others are national and regional. It has been observed that women's democratic involvement is typically lesser than that of men in India and other countries either because of their different socialisation, particularly about marriage, maternity, job, and property ownership or because they have less money (Burns N, Verba S & Schlozman 2009). Similar to males, women's socioeconomic characteristics and gender-specific factors have determined their level of engagement in the electoral process at different levels. The degree to which women participate in politics is influenced by their social background and the degree of freedom and liberty they experience. Casting a vote is important, and women should participate in electoral activities without being influenced by family or other actors. Therefore, women's vote also matters, and the conception that their vote had no bearing on decision-making needs to be eliminated (Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, 2004).

It is observed that men are openly encouraged to run for office while women are not. Fox and Lawless observed that equally competent and experienced women run for office less frequently than their male counterparts. These findings suggest that to level the playing field, policies that encourage women's participation in politics may be needed, as there are fewer female candidates overall due to women's aversion to competition (J & Lawless, 2004). Even if women are elected to office, institutional restraints prevent them from having a considerable impact on decision-making within political parties. In India, the proportion of women voting has greatly increased over the past fifty years, which is seen as a positive development. However, the progression of women into leadership positions is low, compared to voter turnouts. It reveals that the state along with other patriarchal institutions limits women's agency.

The Global Gender Gap Index (World Economic Forum Report, 2023) has been used as a compass over the past 14 years to assess relative progress gaps between men and women in the areas of health, education, the economy, and politics. Stakeholders within each category identify the underrepresented using this yearly benchmark. The index's four dimensions—economic participation, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment—are combined to create the total gender gap. The global gender gap score in 2023 stands at 68.4 percent,

indicating a modest improvement of 0.3 percent points compared to the previous year. At the current rate of progress, it would take 131 years to achieve full gender parity, showing a significant slowdown in the overall rate of change. The political empowerment gender gap remains significant, with a closure rate of 22.1 percent globally and a projected timeline of 162 years to close the gap. The gender gap in economic participation and opportunity stands at 60.1 percent globally, highlighting the persistent challenges in achieving gender equality in the workforce. India's progress in economic participation and opportunity remains a challenge, with only 36.7 percent gender parity achieved in this domain. While there has been an uptick in parity in wages and income, there is a slight drop in the representation of women in senior positions and technical roles. India has made strides in political empowerment, achieving 25.3 percent parity in this domain. Women represent 15.1 percent of parliamentarians, which is the highest representation since the inaugural report in 2006. Through the 'ratio of women to men in ministerial positions and the ratio of women to men in parliamentary positions', this sub-index gauges the gender disparity at the highest levels of political decision-making. Women are severely underrepresented in all other nations rated by the index in terms of political empowerment. The score of Iceland is over four times higher than the average worldwide and ten percentage points better than Norway, which is rated second (World Economic Forum Report, 2023).

Women still have very little role in politics internationally, as evidenced by the fact that only a small number of nations have closed at least 50 percent of their political empowerment disparities. Only 25 percent of the 35,127 global seats—the total number of seats in all 153 of the nations covered by the index—are held by women. As of December 31, 2022, around 27.9 percent of the world's population, which is equivalent to 2.12 billion individuals, reside in various countries led by a woman in a position of political leadership. Although this metric remained unchanged from 2013 and 2021, there was a substantial rise in 2022. There is another recent encouraging trend in the increasing representation of women in parliaments. According to data from 2013, women accounted for only 18.7 percent of parliament members in the 76 nations that had reliable data. By 2022, the percentage had progressively increased to 22.9 percent. Considerable progress has also been achieved in terms of the global representation of women in municipal administration. Out of the 117 countries with available statistics since 2017, 18 countries, including Bolivia (50.4 percent), India (44.4 percent), and France (42.3 percent), have achieved participation of women of above 40 percent in local governance. According to the annual assessment report, India is 127 out of 153 nations in the world for the Global Gender Gap (World Economic Forum 2023).

Women's Political Participation at the Grass Root Level: A Comparative Analysis

Women's political participation is crucial in a political setup wherein they are elected to run the office. Grass root-level political participation is inevitable to ensure the adequate representation of women through their representation at the office. Local-level participation of women guarantees their role in decision-making and addressing local-level issues and concerns. To understand the participation of women at the local level of governance, their descriptive representation can be considered. The right to participate in the democratic process makes everyone capable of

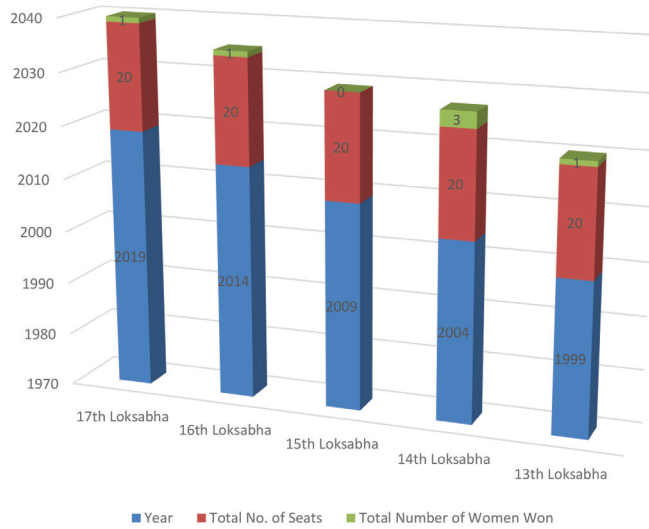
exercising their choice of the person they want to see in power. The present paper tries to bring in the decentralised patterns of governing systems and the participation and representation of women in different regions.

Women's Political Participation: Indian Scenario

Following equal rights to vote, the Indian Constitution gave both men and women the right to universal suffrage. However, the societal value structure, the work-home responsibilities, socialisation, and the dominance of men in administrative establishments prevent womenfolk from ensuring their right to vote and from fairly participating in the election process. India has had one woman prime minister and two female presidents since independence in 1947. Fifteen women have served as chief ministers so far (Singh, 2024). The lack of female representation in India's political party structures further undermines women's efforts to garner funding and support for cultivating and expanding their political constituencies as well as mobilising the human and financial resources necessary to meet their constituency's needs and aspirations. Women are inevitably seen as weak representatives as a result, and people in their constituency typically reject them as political leaders. Because of their small numbers, the Women elected to public office address issues that have a long-term positive impact, such as education, well-being, domestic violence, and women and child issues whereas men focus on problems such as roads, communal and market centres, tanks, and, bridges (UN 2020). Therefore, when men get elected women's challenges and needs cannot be addressed effectively feel vulnerable and seek alliances based on caste, religion, and local identities rather than on shared gendered priorities (IWRRAW, 1998). As a result, Women who serve as the public's representatives frequently find themselves co-opted into the development objectives' male-centric framework. Women have faced significant barriers to entering politics at the most basic Panchayati raj institutions (Grassroots level), as well as repercussions of viciousness meant to prevent them from participating in democratic political affairs. Voter education plays a significant role in increasing women's election involvement. Voter education, in its broadest definition, refers to the process of educating voters about their rights to vote, the political process, candidates, and topics, as well as where and how to cast their ballots. Situations where a single household member votes on behalf of the whole household or where a husband and wife cast ballots together continues to come in news even in the latest elections. This undermines personal autonomy and have a detrimental impact on women.

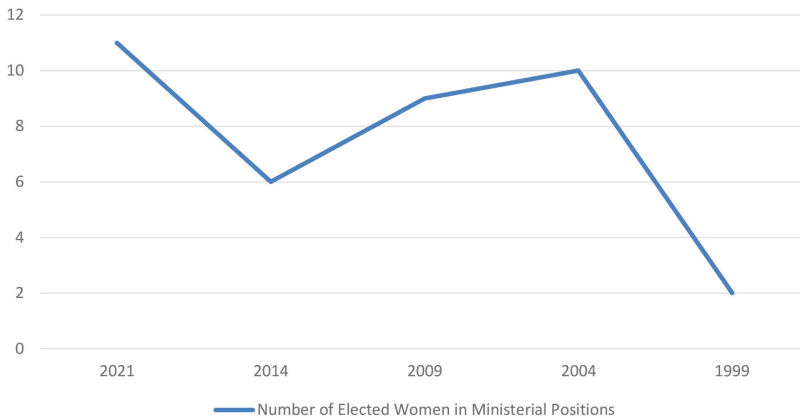
The representation of women in important cabinet positions in India, such as finance, the home, defence and health is filled/allocated mostly by men. In contrast, most of the ministries given to women during cabinet formation are ministries like women's and children's welfare, information and culture, social welfare. The numerical representation of women in cabinet positions stands 11 (Table 1) among the 78-member cabinet in the 2021 election (Election Commission of India, 2020). In addition to affirmative action, the main obstacles preventing women from actively participating in the electoral process need to be removed. These include increasing the representation of women in political parties, including them in decision-making bodies, and giving them important cabinet positions in both the federal and state governments. The government should make a deliberate effort in collaboration with civil society to support and encourage women to participate in formal politics to a higher standard. In addition to ensuring political parity and equality with males,

Table 1: Representation of Women in Lok Sabha from Kerala



(Source: Secondary, Election Commission of India)

Table 2: Number of Elected Women in Ministerial Positions in India



(Source: Secondary: Election Commission of India)

more political engagement by women in all facets of governmental and electoral competitiveness specifically will also benefit the more important concerns affecting women, namely the uplift and empowerment of Indian women.

Women in India appear to have been through the ‘glass ceiling’, and they are now only allowed to participate in power-sharing at the very top. From table no 2, the progression of women toward ministerial positions during the past five elections reveals that it took more than fifty years to ensure the representation of women in major decision-making positions. For the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, out of 194 candidates for 20 seats, 169 were men and only 25 were women. There is a lack of will

to give women 'opportunities' to contest (Chakraborty, 2024). The pertinent reasons for underrepresentation include the prevailing traditional socio-cultural fabric, binding patriarchal values and norms, reminders of duties and responsibilities at home, and lack of opportunities and awareness of political participation. Breaking the existing barriers and ensuring the effective participation of women in ministerial positions reduce the gender gap and boost the confidence of women in guaranteeing political participation.

Grassroot Governance: The Case of Kerala

Kerala's decentralisation experience over the past 20 years has gained international recognition as one of the most important institutional innovations in public governance. If we look at the electoral process and pattern in Kerala, a state in India, the local situation is different. Elections were held in 2020 for 1199 local bodies, including 15,962 wards in 941 Grama Panchayats, 2080 seats in 152 Block Panchayats, 331 seats in 14 District Panchayats, 3078 wards in 86 municipalities, and 414 wards in 6 corporations, out of Kerala's 1200 local self-government institutions spread across 14 districts (State Election Commission, 2020). This included 36,305 women candidates; however, statistics contrast the 38,268 women candidates in the local body election held in 2015 and more than 50000 candidates in the 2010 local elections. This clearly shows that numbers have been decreased over the years. The Kerala Panchayati Raj (Second Amendment) Bill -2009 and the Kerala Municipalities (Amendment) Bill -2009 gave a revolutionary clause of enhancing women's representation in local self-government institutions from 33.33 percent to 50 percent. From 2015 onwards Kerala has implemented a 50 percent reservation for all posts of its local self-governing bodies. The local body election 2020, shows a significant 'win' of 12039 women candidates, even though the number of candidates contested decreased compared to the previous year. It reveals that still there is an underrepresentation of women even when there is 50 percent women's reservation in the state. Hence, the civil society must reflect on what makes the women population lag in representation. The major obstacles that women in general face include a patriarchal mindset, biased attitudes against women being in leadership positions, work-family conflict, fear of cyber-attacks, gender bias, atrocities towards women and systemic pressures. But, even if they get elected, to the office, are often discouraged by their colleagues as weak representatives, advised to not get too much involved in politics, and exist for the namesake, thereby lowering their confidence and growth.

Political Participation of Women in Local Governance: Best Practices in International Scenario

Iceland has maintained its top spot for the past 14 years, with a gender gap that is judged to be closed at 91.2 percent (www.worldeconomicforum.org). Only one nation has closed the gap to the tune of more than 90 percent. Proportional representation is practised in the country and local deliberative bodies are elected using restricted proportional elections (UN Women, 2023). There are no legislated gender quotas or additional quotas in the state, but Iceland continues to be in the first position in terms of the political empowerment of women. The unitary republic in Georgia provides gender quotas in the form of candidate quotas, sanctions, incentives, and ranking/placement in the state. During the election, the candidate list should maintain

a gender balance. If the list does not follow the gender balance as prescribed, that list will be rejected by the authority. If they maintain gender balance they will be provided additional funding, by the Organic Law of Georgia. Sri Lanka follows legislated candidate quotas with a mandatory provision to include 10 percent nomination for women and 25 percent of the total members to be elected from each ward must be women (UN Women, 2023). The Forum of Women Parliamentarians (FFRP), which is multi-party and multi-ethnic, was established in Rwanda consisting of all women lawmakers from both houses of parliament. In Rwanda 44 percent of members of local deliberative bodies, 61 percent of parliamentarians, and 48 percent are women. There is a mandatory provision to include one woman and one man from each council to ensure women are participating in at least 30 percent of the total executive council (UN Women, 2023). Creating space for women in decision-making bodies deliberately was implemented by The Stability Pact Gender Task Force created in 12 countries, which strives to increase the competence of women in local decision-making organisations (Lokar, 2006).

In general, the best chances for women to become candidates are provided by parties that uphold internal democracy and have open nomination processes. Party-political lobbying in several nations has implemented voluntary targets or shares that define a minimum figure or share of womenfolk on their nominee lists to ensure more equitable representation. On the lists, they might even alternate between men and women. This has been made a legal obligation in various nations. ‘Women’s wings’ have been founded by numerous political parties. Parties and their organisational structures are only one aspect of political engagement. Women can participate in politics through a variety of channels, including the government apparatus, non-governmental organisations, women’s clusters and networks, the mass media, trade unions, and supplementary associations.

What Makes Representation ‘Inclusive’? Major Insights and Debate

The hardest part of making progress toward gender equality and women’s empowerment has been getting women’s opinions heard in politics and governance. Therefore, it is crucial to keep improving the resources accessible to women and to continue having a conversation about their engagement in politics. This suggests a greater proportion of elected women at all levels of government, as well as a greater impact on the women who are elected to those posts. Society identifies ‘representative government’ as the one that runs for office, but it is time to redefine the concept of representation with facts and experience. There is a plurality of events and determinants within the structure, which entails many other factors that function in a socio-cultural framework. What makes its representation is not the action of one individual but rather a series of social arrangements that operate together to work into a system.

There are regional-wise models of administrative deliberations taken with the motive of bringing more women to governing positions. Electing women to office, making their voices heard as a decision-maker, and implementing gender-equal policies and reforms are crucial steps towards political empowerment. The involvement of women in the formulation and implementation of policies is mandatory. If men make decisions on behalf of women, efforts taken towards the advancement of women will be ineffective. Disproving the stereotype that men are society’s top leaders, requires fostering an encouraging picture of women as front-

runners and representatives. Women can have a more powerful voice in politics if law-making and administrative institutions accommodate the interests of women. Hence the role of legislative institutions is crucial in promoting more inclusivity.

There are systemic as well as structural concerns that need to be addressed for women to achieve gender inclusivity. The theoretical paradigm proposed by Fenichel Pitkin is supposed to ensure the actual representativeness of women in the decision-making bodies. Even after being elected to office, they are sometimes not provided with the opportunity to express their opinion and voice against deliberate attempts to shut them down. 'Substantive'-ness can be checked by critically evaluating these questions along with the socio-economic and cultural fabric of society. Descriptive representation has been ensured through the reservation policies, but, whether the elected women representatives are functional in making decisions or substantive in their leadership position is proven otherwise from the analysis conducted. There are multiple factors such as familial, institutional, and societal structures that inhibit women from being an active leader, while only a few can stand for themselves and act independently. Women elected to public office address issues that have a long-term positive impact, such as education, well-being, domestic violence, and women and child issues whereas men focus on problems such as roads, communal and market centres, tanks, and, bridges (UN 2020). Therefore, when men get elected, women's challenges and needs cannot be addressed effectively. The opportunity to take part in the political process, major obstacles and societal barriers, need for equal participation are the areas that need attention. Thus, the goal of reaching participatory decision-making is still in a progressive stage and requires academic attention and policy implementations with periodical review.

Recommendations

Gender stereotypes, psychological and social hurdles, and disparities in education, training, and resources are just a few of the many challenges that still stand in the way of women voting equally in elections. Women's organisations have a substantial impact on facilitating and sustaining increased female political engagement. The analysis conducted for the present study gave the following reflections. The condition of women in terms of decision-making is still low, with persistent gender bias towards them. Effective participation needs, a safe work environment, free from the pressure to act for others. Equal and participatory decision-making can be fostered by actively striving to achieve and maintain descriptive representation. A comparative understanding of global governing systems shows that the quality or merit/performance of a person must be considered while making the candidate list. To dramatically increase women's political engagement and to make it easier for them to participate both inside party structures and during election seasons, political parties should become the institutional vehicle for doing so. Second, awareness-raising campaigns to involve women are required. Women must be informed and educated about the fact that political engagement is not just about mobilising for elections. They must also understand that equal involvement by men and women is necessary for political engagement to be open to all. They are not to be a 'back seat driver' or 'proxy' to their male counterparts. It is the patriarchal mindset of the society that still considers the opinion of men to be 'appropriate' and 'valid', which needs to be addressed with the active involvement of women legislators. Thirdly, governments ought to give independent female politicians and political parties more

financial support. This can provide opportunities and confidence. When women get financial autonomy and independence, they will be able to perform effectively. This will encourage political parties to nominate more women for office. Fourth, governments ought to support women's economic liberty. Once women achieve financial independence, they will be able to make their own decisions and enter politics without being constrained by their male counterparts. Instances are proving that women are considered homemakers and not 'fit' to be 'breadwinners. This might be stemmed from the way individuals are brought up from childhood and unable to break the 'socialised' conceptions. Fifth, descriptive representation should be checked to see if they are substantially represented. Merely ensuring a group's representation is insufficient to achieve the desired outcomes; it's crucial to confirm that they are truly exercising decision-making authority in their leadership roles. Key performance indicators such as the number of policies framed or suggested during the tenure, the initiatives taken for crisis management, local level involvement and interaction with the people, presentation of issues and resolution, and activities conducted during the term should be checked periodically to improve the participation and effective representation. Analysis from the present study brings in another crucial insight that elected women representatives need awareness and training regarding the nature and extent of their duties and responsibilities. Only then the functionality of the decision-making mechanisms can be ensured and double-checked. Ensuring participatory inclusivity requires ongoing responsiveness, innovative reforms, and transparent representation.

High-quality representation of women in key decision-making positions will inevitably ensure that their needs are reflected and addressed in public policies and programmes. Regardless of gender, people must have equal opportunity to exercise their political rights and compete in elections for democracy to succeed. The inclusion of women in the political system and their proportional electoral participation will eliminate barriers they face and help close the existing gender gap in the electoral arena. In the long run, it will enhance women's agency and pave the way for women's empowerment and social growth.

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