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GENDER GOVERNANCE IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA: A STUDY WITH REFERENCE TO THE STATE OF WEST BENGAL

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Abstract

Gender governance in India has gone through a substantial transformation from a welfare-oriented and protectionist approach to a rights-based framework. The change is intended to promote equality, participation, and empowerment. In spite of having substantial constitutional rights, progressive legislation, and gender-responsive policy interventions, the recognition of substantive gender equality remains uneven. This paper examines the contemporary landscape of gender governance in India in reference to the state of West Bengal. Drawing upon constitutional provisions, legislative advances, policy initiatives, and recent scholarly literature, the study analyses the extent to which gender-inclusive governance has translated into meaningful social, economic, and political empowerment for women.

The paper argues that through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment and the institutionalisation of gender quotas in local self-government, India has witnessed considerable progress in expanding the formal rights of women and their political representation. Still, there are significant gaps that persist between descriptive representation and substantive empowerment. The political landscape of the state of West Bengal demonstrates both the attainments and limitations of gender governance.

The study highlights the need to move beyond symbolic inclusion and legislative expansion toward transformative governance. A governance structure that addresses structural inequalities and intersectional forms of exclusion. The paper concludes that effective gender governance requires stronger implementation mechanisms, sustained capacity-building, institutional accountability, and cultural transformation. The case study of the state of West Bengal illustrates that numerical representation alone cannot ensure gender justice; rather, substantive empowerment depends upon the redistribution of power, resources, and

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opportunities within governance structures. The paper contributes to ongoing debates on gender governance and democratic inclusion by emphasising the necessity of integrating gender justice as a central principle of public policy and governance in contemporary India.

Keywords: Gender Governance, Women's Empowerment, Panchayati Raj Institutions, Political Participation, Gender Justice, West Bengal, Intersectionality, Inclusive Governance.

Introduction

In India, gender governance was primarily a protectionist framework where the priority has been given to the well-being of the individual. It has evolved to become a more rights-based and empowerment-based model. Nevertheless, the paradigm shift from formal equality to substantive equality is still ongoing. This paper analyses the trend of gender governance in India, with special reference to the state of West Bengal. It has been a fact that legal and policy developments are rapidly increasing. However, the normative architecture of gender justice, implementation gaps, intersectional exclusions, and structural inequalities continue to make the transformation difficult.

Governance does not mean only administration and economic development anymore. In most cases, it is seen through the lens of inclusion, equity, and justice. In this regard, gender governance involves the process of integrating gender into the mechanism of the government as a core element instead of a peripheral one. The Indian context of democracy witnesses the shift in gender governance from welfare-based protectionism to the rights-based approach. The Constitution of India laid a strong normative foundation for equality and dignity. However, translating constitutional principles into reality requires constant legal intervention, judicial insight, and policy innovation. Over the past two decades, gender-responsive laws and welfare programs have been expanded in India. Yet, the question remains: has governance moved beyond symbolic recognition to structural change?

Constitutional Framework and Legal Provisions for Gender Equality

The Constitution of India is one such document which establishes the legal foundation for the empowerment of women and gender equality. (Das, 2025) It has shown a great concern for gender equality and has many provisions which guarantee equal treatment for women, protect them from discrimination, and promote affirmative action for women. Central to this

framework are Articles 14 (equality before the law), Article 15 (prohibition of discrimination based on sex), and Article 16 (equality of opportunity in public employment). (Das, 2025) Furthermore, the protection of the right to life and personal liberty in Article 21 has been interpreted by the judiciary to include dignity, reproductive rights, and protection from violence, to mention a few. The Directive Principles of State Policy, particularly Articles 39(a), 39(d), and 42, further guide the state in formulating gender-equitable policies related to livelihood, equal pay, and working conditions. (Jharta & Chand, 2025) The Constitution of India recognises the principle of gender equality and guarantees equal rights to both men and women to participate in political affairs and hold public office. However, despite these constitutional guarantees of equality and increased representation in electoral politics, women are subjected to numerous structural and social barriers that limit their active participation in political processes. (Bhatt, 2026)

Legislative Advancement and Gender Protection Framework

In addition to the constitutional provisions, India has enacted wide-ranging legislation for the protection of women in different areas. (Shukla, 2025) There is no denying that women make up a considerable part of the Indian workforce, but there exists inequality, poor working conditions, and limited access to effective legal protection. Key legal measures include but are not limited to the Maternity Benefit Act (1961), the Equal Remuneration Act (1976), the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005), and the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act (2013), which together form a comprehensive protection framework. (Johnson, 2026)

The evolution of gender equality laws in India reflects progressive judicial interpretation and legislative innovation. (Narang, 2023) The Indian legal framework has been shaped by a growing body of constitutional provisions and judicial precedents that have steadily enhanced the legal status of women. Landmark judicial interventions by the Supreme Court of India have addressed issues such as sexual harassment in the workplace, maternity benefits, equal pay, and non-discriminatory employment practices. (Kshiraj, 2026) Through interpretation in cases such as *Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan* (1997), the Supreme Court has transformed international norms such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) into binding legal standards applicable within India's domestic legal framework. (Rani, 2023)

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment and Local Governance: Impact on Political Participation of Women

Institutional Structure and Quota System

A turning point in India's democratic history came with the 73rd Constitutional Amendment in 1992, which established Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and mandated the reservation of one-third of seats for women. (Choudhary, Tiwari, Das, Raj, & Bharti, 2025) This reform aimed to increase women's representation and strengthen their role in grassroots governance. (Burman, 2026) Women's participation in local governance in West Bengal has increased significantly since the 73rd Constitutional Amendment (1992), which mandated gender reservation in Panchayati Raj Institutions. Over the past three decades, women have constituted around 46% of elected representatives in PRIs, making India a global leader in gender-inclusive local governance. (Dutta, 2023). India has protected a place for women in democratic institutions through an amendment to the Constitution. But the major challenge remain is to convert this numerical presence into real power and influence.

The three-level structure of the Panchayati Raj system, comprising gram panchayats (village), panchayat samiti (block level), and Zila Parshad (district level), has provided more opportunities for women's political participation at the grassroots level. (Kumar and Dwivedi, 2024). Qualitative data studies about local governance suggest that there are positive changes in community development, particularly in education, healthcare, and sanitation, driven by women leaders. However, their agency is still constrained by persistent socio-cultural and structural barriers, such as patriarchal norms, proxy leadership, and limited access to resources.

National Trends in Gender Governance: From Protection to Empowerment **Historical Development: From Legal Protection to Empowerment Framework**

The development of women's governance in different countries displays an incredible transition from being governed by laws that protect women to those that empower women. (Das, 2025) The Constitution of India reflects this shift through provisions on fundamental rights, including Article 14 (equality before the law), Article 15 (prohibition of discrimination on the grounds of sex, where the State has power to make special provisions), and Article 16 (equality of opportunity in public employment). But these provisions are just the basic step in the evolution of gender governance. (Gupta and Lasya, 2025) There is no doubt that in India, the constitutional and legal framework is well developed. However, the systemic neglect and the existence of socio-legal gaps demonstrate how wide the gap is between constitutional

commitments and reality. The increase in violence against women and the pendency of judicial cases further widens the gulf.

Constitutional changes specifically aimed at enhancing women's political participation have accelerated the shift from protection to empowerment. (Karmakar, 2026) India's 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments of 1992 transformed women's participation in local self-government by mandating the reservation of one-third (50 per cent in many states) of the seats for women in Panchayati Raj institutions and urban local bodies. This has enabled millions of women to enter formal politics and influence governance at the grassroots level. This model has become influential around the world, although the impact of such mandates varies greatly depending on institutional design and the capacity to implement them in different settings.

Quota Systems and Descriptive Representation: Breaking Barriers

Gender quotas serve as an important tool for increasing women's participation in governance structures. (Gehlot and Vijay, 2026) The quota system of seat reservations for women has widened their presence in parliaments across South Asia, although the impact depends largely on institutional structure. In Bangladesh, the indirect elections, with weak constituency linkages, reduce the scope for independent advocacy, while in India, directly elected and often randomly reserved positions in the Panchayati Raj system prove to be very successful in demonstrating the effect of substantive representation. In India, female politicians reoriented resource allocation according to women's perceived needs, such as the provision of drinking water and roads.

In relation to the adoption of quotas, there have been both substantial successes and challenges. (Nyuon and Elia, 2025) A study done in 2024 reveals that women held approximately 32.4% of parliamentary seats while occupying only 14% of executive posts, which shows that the existence of patriarchal values and resistance from political parties undermines formal policy. (Carvalho and Setyowati, 2026) Thus, it can be said that parliamentary representation may increase as a result of quota policies; however, the influence of women seems limited due to the presence of strong patriarchal thinking, elite gatekeeping, and persistent gender-based violence, suggesting that truly empowering women requires moving beyond quotas to structural reforms and cultural change.

Descriptive-Substantive Representation Gap

A major challenge in contemporary gender governance is the persistent gap between descriptive representation (presence in numbers) and substantive representation (actual

influence on policy and decision-making). (Chiazor, 2025) The impact of actual representation varies greatly depending on the governance context and institutional support. (Mechkova, Dahlem, & Petrarca, 2022) While women's political inclusion has become the international norm, with many countries implementing gender quotas, descriptive representation does not automatically improve governance; women's presence can be used as "window-dressing" to justify regimes where male patrons dominate decision-making, and under high corruption levels, women's empowerment is associated with poor human development outcomes. (Mechkova and Edgell, 2023)

Institutional Barriers and Structural Constraints

Despite legal regulations and quota systems, women leaders face significant structural and cultural barriers that reduce their impact. (Srisailam, 2026) Male-dominated rule and proxy leadership pose particularly profound challenges. (Malik & Patnaik, 2026) Dalit women face unique and heightened oppression as women, dalits, and generally poor, with approximately 85% of elected positions controlled by others; they are often not taken seriously in meetings, their issues are rarely discussed, approved, or implemented, especially when existing power structures are challenged; and elected Dalit women often face vocal, physical, and caste-based violence, including threats, harassment, and attempted murder for asserting their rights. (Malik & Patnaik, 2026)

The challenge of converting numbers into effective participation pervades the governance sector. (Chaudhary, Tiwari, Das, Raj, & Bharti, 2025) Although Panchayati Raj institutions have provided women with opportunities to participate in and influence rural development programs, their full decision-making capacity remains hindered by ingrained patriarchal mindsets, proxy leadership, lack of training opportunities, rotating seat reservations, and a lack of digital literacy.

West Bengal: From Left Front to Trinamool Congress

West Bengal's unique political trajectory has created varying opportunities and challenges for women in local governance. (Barman, 2026) The state's long-term Left Front rule, followed by the Trinamool Congress, has created different political conditions for women's participation. Although women now hold more than half of the Panchayat seats in West Bengal, their effective empowerment and influence in higher-level politics remain limited. (Malik and Singh, 2026) A study examining women's political awareness and participation in West Bengal from 2000 to 2023 examined women's political awareness, voting behavior, and their participation

in election campaigns, community mobilisation, and decision-making, while also considering socio-economic and educational factors that influence women's political participation at the state level. Research shows that women in West Bengal are gradually increasing their political knowledge and participation, especially in voter turnout and grassroots political activity, although barriers remain in leadership and decision-making. (Malik and Singh, 2026)

In West Bengal's Panchayat system, significant successes have been documented. (Barman, 2026) Women leaders have helped improve basic services like drinking water, sanitation, and roads, and impacted social outcomes like education and health in their communities. Their presence has also had a strengthening symbolic effect, raising expectations among girls and increasing responsiveness to women's needs. However, translating the numerical strength of women into real power in rural governance requires ongoing capacity building, institutional support, and shifts in societal attitudes.

Social and Cultural Barriers and Proxy Leadership

Patriarchal Ideals and Proxy Representation

Despite increased formal representation, women in local governance face significant sociocultural barriers that limit their freedom and power to make decisions. (Chaudhary, Tiwari, Das, Raj, & Bharti, 2025) Their autonomy and influence are hampered by ingrained patriarchal mindsets, the use of proxy leadership, lack of training opportunities, rotating seat reservations, and a lack of digital literacy. One of the biggest challenges is the issue of proxy leadership, where elected women representatives are effectively controlled by male family members or dominant caste groups. (Malik & Patnaik, 2026) They are often not taken seriously in meetings, and their issues are rarely discussed, approved, or implemented, especially when they challenge existing power structures.

Proxy leadership is not limited to marginalised communities; it affects women panchayat leaders on a much broader scale. (Singh et al., 2026) Despite constitutional reservations, male-dominated norms, lack of education, economic dependence, and government constraints continue to limit the effective participation and decision-making power of women. The women often face proxy representation by male family members, caste discrimination, lack of administrative knowledge, financial constraints, and social pressure, sometimes from larger caste groups. Existing research shows that providing women with opportunities to participate in governance does not automatically translate into empowerment or a significant impact on policy outcomes.

Intersectional Marginalisation: Gender, Caste, and Religion

Various forms of discrimination based on gender, caste, and religion have been found among women in the local governance structures of West Bengal. (Hussaini, 2026) Based on extensive data collected for Panchayat elections, studies examining the institutional, structural, and behavioural mechanisms underlying the political inclusion of marginalised women show that even when conditions for demographic representation are in place, supply-side restrictions hinder the political involvement of women significantly. It is shown how past co-ethnic competition and the demographic potential affect the decision of women to enter politics. Dalit women face particularly significant challenges related to their ability to participate in the governance structures. (Malik & Patnaik, 2026) There have been numerous cases of verbal, physical, and caste-based violence, including threats, harassment, and even attempted murder, made against the elected Dalit women. The increased oppression of being women, Dalits, and generally poor simultaneously creates unique barriers that leave them politically isolated despite constitutional mandates for representation. (Chakraborty, Mandal, & Karmakar, 2026). Major barriers include lack of education and training, family pressure, caste discrimination, and the unsupportive nature of male political leaders.

Women's Empowerment and Political Participation in West Bengal

Political Awareness and Electoral Participation

Studies done in West Bengal reveal very intricate forms of involvement of women in politics. (Saha, 2026) The study, which is an analysis of factors affecting women's political awareness and political participation in Malda district, West Bengal, shows that a combination of education, socio-economic status, membership in self-help groups (SHGs), social networks, media exposure, and gender quotas has a considerable effect on civic engagement. The literature shows that SHG membership and growing women's networks have significantly contributed to increasing women's political knowledge and participation in rural India. The implementation of India's 73rd Amendment has created new opportunities for women at the grassroots level, despite existing struggles with patriarchy and a lack of female literacy. More educated women, the presence of SHGs, and access to specific welfare initiatives are associated with increased women's voting rates and civic engagement, while a lack of information and socio-cultural barriers reduce engagement. Women have become a significant political voting bloc in West Bengal, with voting behaviour and campaign participation demonstrating significant political mobilisation. (Sharma and Ariya, 2021) A comparative study of the Raiganj and Islampur blocks of North Dinajpur district in West Bengal, examining the socio-

economic conditions and experiences of elected women representatives and their participation in various sectors of grassroots politics, reveals that women's empowerment requires a shift in the mindset of patriarchal society and social institutions. Lack of proper information, education, dependency, and family influence continues to hinder women representatives' ability to effectively perform their political duties. (Malik and Singh, 2026) The study reveals that despite increased political awareness and participation, women continue to face barriers to leadership and decision-making.

Performance in Development Outcomes and Service Delivery

Women Panchayat leaders in West Bengal have worked effectively to address local development needs. (Barman, 2026) Women leaders have helped improve basic services such as drinking water, sanitation, and roads, and have impacted social outcomes such as education and health in their communities. Women's leadership in rural development is crucial to understanding the potential impact of gender-inclusive governance on sector success, service delivery, and community welfare. However, systemic limitations on decision-making power limit effectiveness. (Bhaluk, 2025) The Panchayat system in West Bengal, while aiming to increase administrative efficiency through its committee structure, faces significant challenges. Lack of training and capacity building are significant challenges in the West Bengal Panchayat system, as committees often have members who, despite their enthusiasm, lack the necessary skills in governance, financial management, and strategic planning. This lack of knowledge hinders effective decision-making and limits the efficient execution of development projects. Furthermore, Panchayat committees struggle with limited financial resources; funds received by Panchayats from higher governments are often delayed or mismanaged.

Economic Empowerment and Social Participation: Self-Help Groups and Beyond

Self-help Groups as Catalysts for Empowerment

Self-help groups (SHGs) have emerged as a key institutional mechanism through which government policy works to empower women in rural India, including West Bengal. (Babu, 2024) The Government of India launched the self-help group model as a key strategy for empowering women in its Ninth Five-Year Plan (1997–2002). It has further developed into one of the largest and fastest-growing microfinance projects in the developing world. An empirical study carried out in Surulia village, Purulia district, West Bengal, with 100 members of SHGs,

revealed several advantages that accrue through SHGs. These include improved literacy level, increased family income and gaining knowledge about women's rights to property. Empowerment through SHGs in sociopolitical and psychological aspects is particularly noteworthy. (Chatterjee & Charles, 2025) Also, a comparative analysis in East Medinipur, West Bengal, revealed a higher level of achievement by SHG members than government schemes in terms of socio-political and psychological empowerment. Members reported greater involvement in household decisions, participation in local governance, and increased self-confidence due to their group-based, process-oriented approach, which builds social capital and collective agency. The SHG-PACS (Primary Agricultural Credit Societies) model offers a more robust path to holistic and sustainable empowerment than direct benefit transfer government schemes, although government schemes also provide essential immediate welfare support.

Tribal Women Empowerment and Sustainable Development

In tribal-dominated areas of West Bengal, women's empowerment is significantly linked to sustainable development. (Mukherjee, Maharshi, Chakraborty, & Santikari, 2026) In Purulia district, where Scheduled Tribes constitute 18.27% of the population, a study of the relationship between women's empowerment, participation in entrepreneurship, and sustainable development found that participation in entrepreneurship had a limited direct impact on women's decision-making. However, women-led enterprises significantly contribute to sustainable livelihood outcomes, and access to financial resources improves the entrepreneurship-empowerment relationship, strengthening agency and household stability. This study advances an integrated analytical framework for examining gender-inclusive development in socially marginalised communities and emphasises the need to strengthen financial inclusion and increase support for women-led enterprises within local governance platforms. (Mukherjee, Maharshi, Chakraborty, & Santikari, 2026)

West Medinipur and Jhargram districts reveal disparities in empowerment outcomes. (January 2025) Approximately 31% of SHG members in West Medinipur district and approximately 20% in Jhargram district are empowered in social, financial, and political spheres, while only 7% and 2.5% of non-SHG members in these two districts are empowered. This differential empowerment highlights the critical role of institutional systems and collective participation in advancing women's agency and autonomy in rural areas. (Jana, 2025)

Gender Governance, Violence and Rights Implementation: Challenges Today

Violence Against Women and the Rights Enforcement Gap

Despite extensive legal protections, a significant gap persists between constitutional principles and social reality in addressing violence against women. (Gupta & Lasya, 2025) Although the Indian Constitution provides for women's empowerment, including equality, prevention of exploitation, and affirmative action, bureaucratic shortcomings and cultural and institutional barriers hinder their effectiveness. Research findings reveal a significant gap between legal mandates and ground-level implementation, leading to a 4% increase in violence against women and a significant judicial backlog (95% case pendency). While judicial activism has enhanced women's safety through landmark decisions on violence against women, privacy, and gender discrimination, these protection failures—such as inadequate victim support, inadequate infrastructure, and gender-insensitive laws—undermine their effectiveness. Gender-based violence continues to function as a means of controlling women's political and public participation. (Malik & Patnaik, 2026) Dalit women elected to local governance positions often face verbal, physical, and caste-based violence, including threats, harassment, and even attempted murder, when they assert their authority. This violence is a form of patriarchal control and hinders women's ability to exercise genuine political participation and leadership.

Visual Politics and Contemporary Representation

Today's media and digital platforms continue to replicate gender norms, even when women are contesting elections and holding political office. (Banerjee & Mitra, 2024) An examination of the visual politics of gender in electoral politics in West Bengal during the 2021 state elections reveals that women political candidates construct their non-verbal political performances on social media in ways that are connected to social mores and societal expectations of femininity. Findings about visual politics reveal a combination of cultural, political, and gendered cues, which are connected to societal expectations and historical narratives. Women candidates' clothing choices (traditional or Western), use of culturally specific religious symbols (sindoor, bindi), and gendered/non-gendered political actions such as cooking or serving food consistently replicate colonial legacies and social differences. It shows how the use of body politics in the 'new' online sphere recreates 'old' social, political, and cultural markers and norms related to gender.

India has witnessed a shift in the gender governance framework, from laws protecting women to those empowering them. Laws such as the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, recognised domestic violence as a violation of rights rather than a private family matter. Similarly, the implementation of the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, has expanded workplace accountability across the formal and informal sectors. Furthermore, reproductive labour has been recognised to some degree within the employment structure with the extension of paid maternity leave to twenty-six weeks in the formal sector. This was made possible by the introduction of the Maternity Benefit Amendment Act, 2017. The new Labour Codes 2025 strengthen women's roles in workplaces through greater representation and enhanced maternity support. These legal changes are necessary because they promote normalcy. However, their transformative potential is limited by the lack of implementation processes and outcomes. This is particularly evident in the informal sector, where most Indian women work. Therefore, gender governance cannot be evaluated solely by legal regulations. It must be evaluated through implementation methods and institutional responsiveness.

Special Government Programs: Limitations and Promise

Government programs specifically addressing women's issues in West Bengal demonstrate both successes and shortcomings. (Chattopadhyay, 2023) The Kanyashree program, launched by the Trinamool Congress government as a policy to empower women, is an example of gender-centric governance. During Mamata Banerjee's tenure as Chief Minister, a large number of women candidates were fielded, while girls were also encouraged to become economically independent and socially aware. However, experience shows that social violence against women and empowerment programs pose a conundrum regarding the awards received by the West Bengal government for women-centric programs. Kanyashree's inclusive approach challenges politicisation and normalisation, although it actually presents "development as freedom" in a highly politicised democratic environment.

Political Leadership, Party Dynamics, and Women's Advancement

At the state level, women's leadership has shaped the political landscape of West Bengal in complex ways. (Chowdhury, 2021) Mamata Banerjee's political performance and her leadership of the All India Trinamool Congress exemplify how women leaders navigate the androcentric underpinnings that support idealised models of populist leadership. Women leaders' self-perceptions often involve difficult balancing acts, forcing them to adapt

conventional thinking and modes of power to fit within traditional leadership models. Through an interpretive analysis of selected party documents, autobiographies, and interviews with followers and critics, Banerjee's construction of herself as an ascetic emerges as a complex one, where her distinctive gendered perspectives significantly contribute to reconfiguring the boundaries of political leadership, while remaining strained and contested.

Barriers to Political Advancement and the Representation Gap

While more women are participating in politics at the grassroots level, comparatively, there remains an underrepresentation of women at the state and national levels. (Karmakar, 2026) A persistent vertical gap in political empowerment exists between women's participation at the grassroots level and their representation at the state and national levels. While descriptive representation at the grassroots level has improved significantly, substantive representation and leadership mobility require institutional reforms, capacity-building initiatives within political parties, and broader socio-economic transformation. (Bhalotra, Clottes-Figueras, & Iyer, 2017) Research on electoral success and future political participation shows that women incumbents are more likely to contest re-election than their male counterparts, yet the entry of new candidates has declined. This pattern is most pronounced in states where gender bias is prevalent and male-dominated parties are present.

The ability of women leaders to shape policy outcomes is undermined by significant governance challenges. (Mechkova, Dahlem, & Petrarca, 2022) While women's political inclusion has the potential for progress, it can be used as a "sham" to justify governance where male supporters dominate decision-making. Women representatives recruited from the same corrupt networks perpetuate the existing status quo, even when they reduce corruption compared to male leaders. This finding suggests that women's empowerment may not always be a surefire way to increase fair representation, especially when corruption levels are high and governance is weak.

Caste, Religion and Political Inclusion of Marginalised Women

The Gram Sabha, a village assembly meant to facilitate direct democratic participation, demonstrates how caste dynamics continue to hinder genuine participation. (Dutta and Pal, 2026) While the Gram Sabha provides a superficial democratic structure, significant participation by marginalised socio-economic groups is severely limited by constitutional requirements, political theory, and extensive analysis of interdisciplinary research. Deeply entrenched caste hierarchies, intertwined with class differences, political favouritism, and

everyday institutional practices, continue to determine who has access to, representation, and power in local government. Consequently, participation often feels symbolic rather than meaningful or fosters empowerment. (Sarbadhikari and Roy, 2023) The recent case of the Matua Matru Sena (Army of Holy Women) within the Matua sect of West Bengal offers another model of gendered political organisation. The emergence of the Matru Sena as a complex identity at the nexus of religion, caste, gender, and nation serves two-fold purposes: actualising the spirit of gender equality within the Matua religious foundation, and demanding legal citizenship status for community members through a new gendered ideology. The female gurus of the Matru Sena play a role as influencers in private and public Matua life by portraying themselves as ideal mothers of the family, community, and thus, the nation. (Sarbadhikari and Roy, 2023)

Muslim Women and Inter-Departmental Barriers

Muslim women in West Bengal, like women like them across India, face various barriers due to religious personal laws and patriarchal community structures. (Choudhary, 2019) Muslim women in India often find themselves torn between loyalty to their religious or ethnic community and a desire for greater freedom and equality. They face great difficulty in reconciling these divergent influences, and many do so due to poverty. Many members of religious minorities, being women and often poor, are at a threefold disadvantage.

Contemporary Challenges and Policy Implications

Structural Reforms and Capacity Building Needs

Substantial progress towards gender-inclusive governance requires addressing structural and institutional limitations beyond legal norms. (Chaudhary, Tiwari, Das, Raj, & Bharti, 2025) While PRIs have provided previously unheard-of opportunities for women to participate, empowerment remains uneven and dependent on structural changes, capacity-building, and the promotion of community settings. This paper advances larger discussions on decentralisation, gender equality, and inclusive governance by examining both successes and limitations. Specific recommendations include improved training programs, structured fiscal channels, robust transparency protocols, and measures to strengthen accountability frameworks and prevent corrupt practices.

Capacity-building should address multiple aspects of empowerment. (Jharta and Chand, 2025) Women's participation in politics is essential for building a dynamic and inclusive democracy, as it is the foundation for effective democratic governance, social justice, and sustainable

development. However, the gap between constitutional provisions and women's actual participation remains a serious issue in India's democratic framework. Strategic measures to increase participation and representation include addressing socio-cultural barriers, improving institutional frameworks, and promoting greater political representation for women at all levels of governance.

Policy Intersectionality and the Participation of Marginalised Women

In contemporary gender governance, it is increasingly recognised that women's experiences are shaped by interconnected identities such as caste, class, ethnicity, and geography. (Silwal & Budhathoki, 2025) Nepal's federal system has created the necessary institutional space for women's entry into local politics through constitutional quotas; however, intersectional analysis reveals significant disparities among women—while Dalit women constitute 47.4% of female ward members due to specific quotas, their representation in higher positions is very low, and women from Madhesi and Muslim communities remain consistently underrepresented, suggesting that numerical quotas alone cannot address the complex, interconnected barriers faced by marginalized women.

The intersection of gender with other identity dimensions significantly reduces empowerment outcomes. (Khalfoun & Haddadi, 2026) Even in progress made in laws and quota systems, the participation of women in politics remains limited due to deeply ingrained socio-cultural norms and institutional inertia. In addition, participatory democracy remains largely formal, with limited effective citizen participation in policymaking and governance processes.

Solving the intersecting issues in women's political participation requires targeted, context-sensitive policy approaches. (Fidelis, 2025) Women's political participation is constrained by several factors, including limited educational opportunities, religio-cultural factors and economic restrictions. Without addressing these underlying causes, such as educational inequality, patriarchal cultural values, and economic disempowerment, efforts to promote women's political representation will remain shallow and untenable.

Towards Transformative Governance: Beyond the Symbolism of Quotas

For gender equality in politics to be realised, there is a need to go beyond mere numerical quotas in addressing the power structure issue. (Majhi and Raut, 2025) Despite the substantial progress made in India at the grassroots level through the Panchayati Raj system, the participation of women in politics remains low. Patriarchy, party structures, electoral process, and socio-economic inequalities contribute to the marginalisation of women. This research

focuses on how political exclusion compromises the principles of equality, justice, and participatory democracy. Democratisation of political space requires not only legal change in the form of reservation policies, but also cultural change that will break down centuries of gender prejudice. (Singh, 2024) Although there has been some improvement in women's empowerment levels in Indian states, sustained efforts are needed to fully eliminate gender prejudice and improve women's empowerment. These efforts must address the deeply ingrained patriarchal mindsets that perpetuate gender prejudice in both the public and private domains.

Conclusion

Academic research emphasises that sustainable gender equality in governance requires an integrated, multi-level approach, moving beyond single-intervention models. (Ritu, 2025) Women's empowerment through political participation in India facilitates access to decision-making, public institutions, and collective authority; while legal frameworks have gradually facilitated progress, structural barriers, limited autonomy, and institutional inertia continue to prevent real impact, especially at higher levels. However, where participation is supported by enabling conditions such as internal party reforms, capacity-building, and civic education, it has the potential to reshape gender hierarchies and advance women's empowerment across material, social, cognitive, and institutional dimensions.

Effective gender governance requires a synergy of activities in legal, institutional, and cultural domains. (Pradhan, 2025) Gender-specific legislation is a vital component of efforts worldwide to secure women's rights and address systemic inequalities; impact often depends on strong enforcement mechanisms, public awareness, and a political climate. Gender-neutral language sometimes obscures the specific challenges faced by women, highlighting the need for gender-sensitive legal drafting while adhering to universal human rights standards.

The evolution from a protection-focused framework to a broader empowerment model represents a major shift in gender governance; however, the persistence of a significant gap between legal commitments and reality highlights the difficulty of sustainable change. (Majhi and Raut, 2025) The political exclusion of women compromises the principles of equality, justice, and participatory democracy; democratising political spaces requires not only legal changes in the form of reservation policies, but also cultural transformation that breaks down centuries of ingrained gender discrimination. Success requires sustained institutional reforms,

capacity-building initiatives, women's fair participation in decision-making processes, and significant changes to patriarchal norms that continue to restrict women's agency even when formal systems exist to ensure their representation.

A study of gender governance in India today, particularly in the case of West Bengal, reveals a curious juxtaposition of formal progress as well as substantive limitations. The constitutional framework provides one of the world's most comprehensive gender equality architectures, while the 73rd Amendment has created unprecedented opportunities for women's political participation at the grassroots level. West Bengal, in particular, demonstrates how women have significantly increased their numbers, now holding more than half of the Panchayat seats.

Yet, this numerical advantage has not translated into consistent, meaningful power or greater decision-making authority. Persistent patriarchal rule, the prevalence of proxy leadership, various forms of discrimination based on caste and religion, inadequate resources and training, and persistent violence against women continue to stifle women's agency and political influence. The gap between constitutional guarantees and ground realities remains glaring, requiring not only legal reforms but also cultural change, institutional capacity-building, and structural transformation of power relations.

West Bengal's unique political trajectory from Left Front rule to the Trinamool Congress era has created distinct opportunities and challenges that reflect broader national patterns while also demonstrating state-specific variations. Government initiatives like the Kanyashree and SHG models, when combined with institutional support, promise comprehensive empowerment, yet they fall short in addressing entrenched social inequalities. The challenge for today's India, and West Bengal in particular, is to transform descriptive representation into substantive empowerment, ensuring that women not only hold office but also wield significant power to shape governance outcomes and policy priorities, promoting genuine gender equality and social justice.

Gender governance in India is at a critical juncture. The normative architecture, constitutional guarantees, progressive laws, and judicial expansion appear strong. States like West Bengal demonstrate new welfare models that prioritise women's financial inclusion and educational access. However, governance must now move beyond symbolic schemes and isolated reforms. The ultimate test lies in dismantling the structural hierarchies that perpetuate inequality.

Transformative gender governance requires institutional reform, intersectional sensitivity, and sustained political commitment. As India reimagines public policy in the face of rapid economic and technological change, gender justice must remain central to governance discourse, not peripheral. Only then can constitutional promises translate into realised equality.

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