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# **ANALYZING THE UNDERREPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP AND POLITICAL REPRESENTATION IN INDIA.**

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## **1. ABSTRACT:**

Gender equality remains a cornerstone of inclusive governance, yet the underrepresentation of women in leadership and political roles in India persistently challenges this aspiration. This research paper critically examines the multifaceted issue of women's underrepresentation in these vital spheres. Through an exploration of historical context, systemic challenges, and societal norms, this study sheds light on the underlying factors that contribute to this gender gap. In the realm of politics, women's participation in parliamentary roles is alarmingly low, with barriers to entry ranging from deeply entrenched gender norms to limited access to resources and networks. Women's representation in India's Parliament is a main rhythmical way to judge progress in bridging neuter inequities in the country. The representation of women in the Indian Parliament is an important metric for assessing progress in overcoming gender inequalities in the country. India has a female population of 662.9 million and is the largest and one of the most resilient parliamentary democracies in the world. As the country attains 77 years of independence, this paper provides a historical overview of advances in women's representation in Parliament over the past few decades. It compares women's parliamentary representation with their share of legislative positions at lower levels. It notes that despite the impressive increase in female voter turnout, creating scope for women's participation in electoral politics has been a slow process due to deep-rooted structural constraints. It is argued that institutional change coupled with socio-economic emancipation holds the key to increasing women's participation in political elections.

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**KEYWORDS:** Gender disparity, underrepresentation, Indian politics, leadership, parliamentary roles, legal fraternity, gender equality, diversity.

## 2. INTRODUCTION:

A truly representative democracy seeks adequate representation of women in politics.<sup>2</sup> Although representative governments have increased around the world in recent decades, women's participation remains low. According to UN Women, as of September 2022, there were 30 women elected heads of state and/or government in 28 countries (out of a total of 193 UN member states). This is despite concerted, multiple efforts recently to promote women's empowerment and Improving gender equality. Legislative representation is fundamental to political empowerment and enables participation in the legislative process. Legislation plays a crucial role in stimulating debate and discussion on various aspects of governance and in holding the government accountable. The representation of women in national parliaments is a key indicator of the extent of gender equality in parliamentary politics. India is the largest and one of the most resilient parliamentary democracies in the world with a female population of 662.9 million. This makes India an important case study for women's parliamentary representation. This article examines how, if at all, women's representation in the Indian Parliament has improved since independence.

The paper begins by underscoring the need for gender equality in political representation and setting out the international and national constitutional and legal obligations to achieve it. The change in women's representation in the Indian Parliament since independence is then discussed and compared to their share of seats in state parliaments and local self-government bodies. Attention is drawn to the dichotomy between the rapid increase in women's participation as voters in elections and other political activities and the slow increase in women's representation in Parliament. The third section examines the intersection of institutional and sociocultural factors that impede greater representation of women in parliament. The paper concludes with an overview of specific institutional reforms that could improve women's representation in parliamentary politics.

As of May 2022, the global average of female representation in national parliaments was 26.2 percent.<sup>3</sup> The representation of women in Asia also varies, with South Asian countries performing

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<sup>2</sup> Barbara J Nelson and Najma Chowdhury (eds) *Women and Politics Worldwide*. London: Yale University Press, 1994.

<sup>3</sup> IPU Parline: Global data on National Parliaments, 2022, <https://data.ipu.org/womenranking?month=5&year=2022>

worse than the rest. For example, IPU data from May 2022 showed that the proportion of women was 34 percent in Nepal, 21 percent in Bangladesh, 20 percent in Pakistan, 17 percent in Bhutan and 5 percent in Sri Lanka. In India, the proportion of women in the Lok Sabha (lower house) is slightly below 15 percent.

➤ OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

- To analyze the representation of women in politics since independence.
- Identify the key barriers and challenges that hinder women's entry and advancement in leadership and politics.
- Examine the impact of gender imbalance on governance, policies, and societal development.
- To explore where there's a need for reservation.

## **2.1. Historical Gender Inequality in Politics**

Proportionate political representation of all populations is a fundamental ethos of modern constitutional democracy. Women, who constitute almost one-half of the world's population<sup>4</sup> (49.58 percent), have historically been politically marginalised in both developed and developing nations. From the mid-19th century onwards, however, social movements have succeeded in effecting widespread reforms. The charter of the United Nations Organization (UNO, started in 1945) supported women's rights. Buttressed by the feminist movements of the 1960s and '70s, the UN General Assembly in 1979 adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), often considered as an International Bill of Rights for women. In the Convention, Article 7 upholds women's right to hold political and public office.

Years later, in 2000, UN member states adopted the Millennium Declaration and set out eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to be achieved by 2015, which included promoting gender equality. In January 2016, the initiative was expanded to pursue 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), of which Goal 5 aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls and the full and effective participation of women and equal rights Opportunities for leadership positions at all levels of decision-making in political, business and public life. Political scientists have outlined the benefits of increasing women's participation in representative

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<sup>4</sup> "Gender ratio in the world", Statistics Times, August 2021, <https://statisticstimes.com/demographics/world-sex-ratio.php#:~:text=Gender%20ratio%20in%20the%20World&text=The%20population%20of%20females%20in,million%20more%20males%20than%20females.>

institutions. Anne Phillips (2017) has noted that women bring diverse skills to politics and are role models for future generations; they appeal to gender justice; and their involvement in politics facilitates the representation of women's specific interests in state politics and creates conditions for a revitalized democracy that bridges the gap between representation and participation. Many years earlier, Hannah Pitkin (1967) had discussed two forms of political representation: descriptive and substantive, where descriptive involves an accurate account of all communities that are part of the polity, and substantive refers to tangible political outcomes of such representation. Emanuela Lombardo and Petra Meier (2014) have argued that there is a third form of representation, namely the symbolic, which represents not only the visual dimension expressed through symbols, but also a discursive dimension found in metaphors and stereotypes, which are often expressed in political discourses. A combination of all three dimensions of political representation is crucial to ensure democratic participation and transformation, especially by and for women.

## **2.2. Women 's Political Participation in India:**

India has a history of marginalization and exploitation of women shaped by patriarchal social structures and mindsets. Beginning in the 19th century, social reform movements succeeded in promoting the well-being and empowerment of women. The Indian freedom movement, starting with the swadeshi movement in Bengal (1905-08) also witnessed the impressive participation of women<sup>5</sup>, who organised political demonstrations and mobilised resources, as well as occupied leadership positions in those movements.<sup>6</sup> After India's independence, the constitution guaranteed equal status for men and women in all political, social and economic fields. Part III of the Constitution guarantees the basic rights of men and women. The policy principles of state policy ensure economic empowerment by ensuring equal pay for equal work for men and women, decent working conditions and maternity relief.

Any Indian citizen who is registered as a voter and is over 25 years of age may vote in elections to the Lower House of Parliament (Lok Sabha) or the State Legislative Assemblies; for the Upper House (Rajya Sabha) the minimum age is 30 years. Articles 325 and 326 of the Constitution guarantee political equality and the right to vote. There are constitutional provisions for reserving

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<sup>5</sup> Janaki Nair, *Women and Law in Colonial India: A Social History*. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1996.

<sup>6</sup> Radha Kumar, *The History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women's Rights and Feminism in India 1800-1990*. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1997; Vina Mazumdar (Ed.) (1979) *Symbols of Power: Studies on the Political Status of Women*.

seats for enlisted castes and enlisted tribes in Parliament and Legislative Assemblies. A proposal to provide for a similar quota for women was rejected when the constitution was drafted. It was opposed by leading Indian women's organizations and the ruling party, Congress, who believed women should be elected on an equal footing with men. Later, in 1974, the report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India advocated for greater representation of women in political institutions and again brought the issue of seat reservation for women to the fore. Then, in 1992, the 73rd and 74th Amendments provided for a single amendment reservation. Proposals to legislate the reservation of seats for women in parliament and state assemblies first emerged in 1997, but they have met with much opposition, and no such law has yet been passed.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, India has taken a number of steps to empower women in other areas such as marriage and employment. For example, the Supreme Court has granted daughters in Hindu families the equal status of joint heirs, giving them inheritance rights. It was also decided that women officers in the Army should be entitled to permanent positions of service and leadership in all services other than combat and that they must be considered for them regardless of their length of service. The minimum age for girls to marry was recently raised from 18 to 21.

### **2.2.1. Taking stock of progress:**

There are three main parameters to assess the status of women's participation in politics in India: how many of them go to vote; How many of them vote in elections and how many of them are elected to legislatures at the national, state and local levels. A fourth parameter is the participation of women in electoral and other political activities as party staff and supporters.

### **2.2.2. Women as voters:**

After independence, the participation of women as voters was not immediately enthusiastic. However, it gradually increased; In the last Lok Sabha election in 2019, almost as many women voted as men – a turning point in India's progress towards gender equality in politics, which has been dubbed the Quiet Revolution of Self-Empowerment. The increased participation, particularly since the 1990s, is due to several factors. First, higher levels of literacy among women and their greater participation in the workforce have contributed to increasing their political awareness and confidence to cast their vote.<sup>8</sup> Second, the growth of electronic media and the digital revolution

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<sup>7</sup> Praveen Rai, "Women's Participation in Electoral Politics in India," South Asia Research Vol. 37(1): 58–77, 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Milan Vaishnav, "Indian Women are Voting More Than Ever. Will They Change Indian society?," Carnegie

have expanded the reach of electoral rights awareness campaigns conducted by both the Electoral Commission of India and other organizations. Third, the Electoral Commission has taken institutional measures to encourage women to vote, such as ensuring security by protecting against intimidation and creating separate queues for women in voting booths. Female-friendly pink booths will be set up where all staff, including election officials, police and security personnel, will be female. Increased security measures at elections over the years have largely reduced violence and voter intimidation on election day, encouraging women to participate.

Fourth, reservations for women in panchayats and municipalities have also helped enhance female inclusion in the structures of power at the local level.<sup>9</sup> Fifth, political reforms, technological transformation, and notions of women's rights are gaining momentum and encouraging more women to vote.<sup>10</sup>

Women in India run in two types of constituencies. First, as argued in a paper by economists Mudit Kapoor and Shamika Ravi, female candidates are more likely to run in constituencies that have a relatively higher proportion of males. Second, the Francescas study found that women tended to compete more often for places reserved for certain castes and tribes. A possible explanation for the first pattern could be that women prefer to stand in constituencies where their numbers are smaller because winning such seats is crucial to making their voices heard. One reason for the second phenomenon could be the increasing pressure on parties to nominate more female candidates. It is easier for parties to remove male incumbents from reserved seats and replace them with women, as the male politicians from the SC and ST communities are perceived as more expendable than other male incumbents. Overall, however, the number of female candidates in parliamentary elections has increased over time (Figure 1 below shows) their proportion remains low compared to male candidates. In the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, less than 9 percent of the 8,049 candidates were women.

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Endowment for International Peace, November 8, 2018,

<https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/11/08/indian-women-are-voting-more-thanever.-will-they-change-indian-society-pub-77677>.

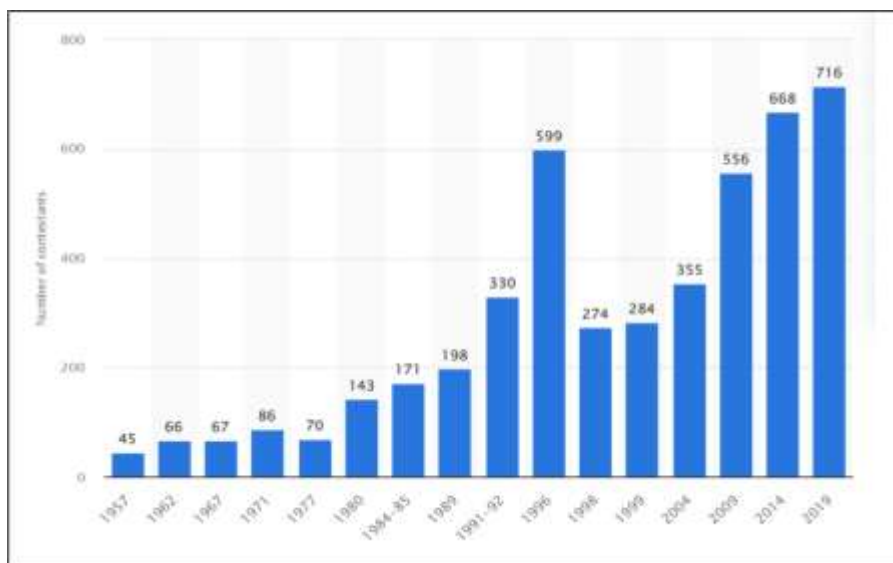
<sup>9</sup> Sanjay Kumar (eds). *Women Voters in Indian Elections: Changing Trends and Emerging Patterns*, Routledge, 2022.

<sup>10</sup> Rai, "Women's Participation in Electoral Politics in India".

### 3. ANALYSIS:

#### 3.1. FIGURE 1:

Number of Women Candidates in the Lok Sabha Elections (1957-2019)



(Source abstracted from: *Statista Data on 2019 Lok Sabha election*)<sup>11</sup>

The underrepresentation of women in the Lok Sabha, with only 78 out of 719 women candidates becoming Members of Parliament in the 2019 elections, highlights a critical need for increased women's representation. This gender gap, constituting just 14% of total seats, has far-reaching implications. Firstly, a diverse Parliament is essential to accurately reflect the nation's demographics and adequately address gender-specific concerns. With women comprising nearly half of India's population, their experiences and perspectives deserve active representation. Secondly, inclusive decision-making benefits from diverse viewpoints. Women's underrepresentation leads to policy blind spots and missed opportunities for gender-sensitive legislation. Encouraging women's participation is not only a democratic imperative but also aligns with global commitments towards gender equality and empowerment.

#### 3.1.1. Women's Representation in the Indian Parliament:

Representation of women in parliament Parliaments and state legislatures not only make laws and hold the executive branch accountable, but also claim to represent different constituencies, identity

<sup>11</sup> Statista Data on 2019 Lok Sabha election, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/993595/india-states-with-most-women-parliamentarians/>.

groups and interests. In parliamentary democracies like India, membership of Parliament is also a requirement for participation in government as a minister. Although the participation of women as voters in elections has increased significantly, data on women's representation in both the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha suggest that the proportion of female MPs has remained low compared to their male counterparts (see Tables 4 and 5). The highest proportion of women MPs elected to the Lok Sabha to date was in the 2019 election, accounting for less than 15 percent of total membership. The number of female candidates and members of parliament varies greatly between states and parties. Currently, Lok Sabha (17th), Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal have the most women MPs. In terms of proportion, 14 percent of all Lok Sabha MPs in UP are women, and in Bengal the proportion is 26 percent.

Among political parties, Congress nominated 54 women candidates in 2019 (12.9 percent of all candidates who he put up that year); and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) had 53 women (12.6 percent). Overall, UP, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal and Bihar states had significant numbers of women running that year. In terms of percentage, Goa and Manipur had the highest proportion of female candidates, accounting for 17 percent of all candidates in each of the two states. In the same year, parties such as the Biju Janata Dal (BJD) in Odisha and the TMC in West Bengal fielded more women in the Lok Sabha polls: in Odisha, the BJD nominated 33 percent of the candidates, 44 and the TMC in Bengal 41 percent.

Women's representation in the Rajya Sabha was slightly lower than in the Lok Sabha, not yet surpassing 13 percent of total House membership, according to 2020 data. In state legislatures, or vidhan sabhas, average representation is even lower, typically under 10 percent.

### **3.2. What are the reasons for low representation?**

- **Gender stereotypes:** The role of managing household activities is traditionally assigned to women. Women should be encouraged to break out of their stereotyped roles and participate in the country's decision-making process.
- **Competition:** Politics is like every other field, a competitive field. At the end of the day, women politicians are also their competitors. Many politicians fear that if women are reserved, their seats could be reserved alternately for female candidates, thereby losing any chance of even fighting for their seats.
- **Lack of political networks:** The lack of openness in political decision-making and undemocratic internal processes pose a challenge for all newcomers, but especially for women, who tend to lack

insider knowledge or political networks.

- **Lack of resources:** Due to their low proportion of India's internal political party structure, women fail to gather resources and support to advance their political constituency. Women do not receive sufficient financial support from political parties to participate in elections.
- **Social conditioning:** They must accept the dictates imposed on them and bear the burden of society. Public opinion determines not only how many female candidates win a general election, but also directly and indirectly how many are considered and nominated for office.

### 3.3. FIGURE 2

#### *Women's Representation in the Lok Sabha*

Year of Election	Number of Women Representatives	Percentage of Women Representatives (%)
1951	22	5
1957	22	5
1962	31	6
1967	29	6
1971	28	5
1977	19	4
1980	28	5
1984	43	8
1989	29	6
1991	39	7
1996	40	7
1998	43	8
1999	49	9
2004	45	8
2009	59	11
2014	66	12
2019	78	14

*(Source: Election Commission of India)*

According to data compiled by the IPU, of which India is a member, women make up 14.44% of all Lok Sabha members. According to the latest data from the Election Commission of India (ECI): As of October 2021: Women make up 10.5% of the total Members of Parliament. The scenario for women members of Legislative Assemblies (MLAs) in all state parliaments in India is even worse, with the national average being a paltry 9%. In the last 75 years of independence, women's representation in Lok Sabha has increased by less than 10%. In terms of electoral representation, India has fallen several places in the Inter-Parliamentary Union's global ranking of women's

parliamentary presence, from 117 after the 2014 election to 143 in January 2020. India currently lags behind Pakistan (106), Bangladesh (98) and Nepal (43) and off Sri Lanka (182).

### 3.4. FIGURE 3:

#### *Women's Representation in the Rajya Sabha*

Year of Election	Number of Women Representatives	Percentage of Women Representatives (%)
1952	15	6.9
1954	17	7.8
1956	20	8.6
1958	22	9.5
1960	24	10.2
1962	18	7.2
1964	21	8.9
1966	23	9.8
1968	22	9.6
1970	14	5.8
1972	18	7.4
1974	18	7.5
1976	24	10.1
1978	25	10.2
1980	29	12
1982	24	10.1
1984	24	10.3
1986	28	11.5
1988	25	10.6
1990	24	10.3
1992	17	7.2
1994	20	8.3
1996	19	7.8
1998	19	7.7
2000	22	9
2002	25	10.2
2004	28	11.4
2006	25	10.2
2008	24	9.8
2010	27	11
2012	26	10.6
2014	31	12.7
2016	27	11
2018	28	11.4
2020	25	10.2

(Source: Election Commission of India)

#### **3.4.1. Women as Political Workers:**

Surveys by the Center for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) show that women's involvement in political activities such as attending election rallies, conducting door-to-door campaigns, distributing election pamphlets, and fundraising of election money has increased

over the past three decades. However, this participation remains low overall. This suggests that higher levels of education, political awareness and exposure to public life have led to greater political mobilization of women as voters, but various institutional and structural challenges continue to prevent them from fully participating in many other aspects of electoral politics.

### **3.5. Achievements in women's participation in local politics:**

In India, at the local level, there is a third tier of government in the form of communes or local government bodies in towns and cities, and PRIs in rural areas. The 73rd and 74th amendments to the Constitution were introduced in 1992 to provide new opportunities for local level planning, effective implementation and oversight of various social and economic development programs in the country. One of the most important and transformative aspects of these amendments was the provision that one-third of the total seats in local elections should be reserved for women. Studies have shown that politics has resulted in a phenomenal increase in women's political participation at the local level. Since then, 20 of India's 28 states have increased the reservation to 50 percent. The challenge of proxy representation has also decreased, as women elected to office have largely been controlled by their male family members. Grassroots initiatives undertaken by both governmental and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have helped improve the performance of elected female political leaders.

### **3.6. Government Initiatives and Future Recommendations:**

The Indian government has introduced several significant measures to address the gender disparity in political representation:

**3.6.1. Women's Reservation Bill 2008:** This proposed constitutional amendment seeks to reserve one-third of seats in the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies for women. Passing this bill would provide a formal and structured pathway to amplify women's voices in the political arena.

**3.6.2. Reservation in Panchayati Raj Institutions:** Article 243D of the Constitution mandates at least one-third reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions. This move recognizes the importance of women's participation at the grassroots level, fostering their leadership skills and political engagement.

**3.6.3. Parliamentary Committee on Empowerment of Women:** Established in 1997, this

committee transcends party lines to focus on women's empowerment. It serves as a platform to prioritize and advocate for policies that uplift women in politics and leadership.

### 3.7. Future Recommendations:

**3.7.1. *Passage of Women's Reservation Bill:*** To strengthen women's representation, the government should prioritize passing the Women's Reservation Bill, reserving 33% of seats in Parliament and state legislative assemblies for women. This step would ensure women's substantive participation in decision-making processes.

**3.7.2. *Utilizing Local Governance Experience:*** Women who have excelled as sarpanches and in local governance possess invaluable experience. Their transition to state assemblies and Parliament can infuse fresh perspectives and expertise into higher levels of governance.

**3.7.3. *Mandatory Quotas for Political Parties:*** Encouraging all recognized political parties to allocate a minimum agreed percentage of tickets to women candidates in State Assembly and Parliamentary elections can drive systemic change. This approach ensures proactive efforts to address the gender gap.

**3.7.4. *Gender-Sensitive Policies:*** Political parties should adopt gender-sensitive policies that prioritize women's leadership development and offer mentorship opportunities. Building a pipeline of capable women leaders can pave the way for greater representation.

**3.7.5. *Media Campaigns and Awareness:*** Promoting awareness campaigns that emphasize the importance of women's participation in politics can help change societal attitudes and perceptions. Media can play a crucial role in highlighting women's accomplishments and potential.

The women's reservation Bill cannot wait any longer. With ample evidence of women leaders making a mark, India ought not to overlook the pivotal role women can play in nation building and development. While women have broken through the glass ceiling of patriarchy in all areas, politics is where women find it hardest to find a place. While India gained the right to vote early, women still face significant barriers to political participation and have no right to govern. It is disheartening to see that even 75 years after independence, Parliament still lacks substantial representation for half the population and women hold only 14% of the seats. It is time to recognize the systematic exclusion of women from politics and to call for action to create a fairer political landscape.

Women played a crucial role in India's struggle for independence by organizing demonstrations, leading rallies and raising awareness. There were also numerous female representatives in the Constituent Assembly. Just a decade ago, three of India's largest states, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh, were in the spotlight for being led by female prime ministers. While Sushma Swaraj led the opposition in the Lok Sabha, Sonia Gandhi was both President of the Congress Party and Chair of the United Progressive Alliance. Around the same time, India also had its first female President, Pratibha Patil.

#### **4. OTHER AREA: GENDER DISPARITY IN INDIAN SUPREME COURT.**

In the 73-year history of the Indian Supreme Court, the glaring underrepresentation of women judges stands out starkly. Among the 268 judges who have graced the highest judicial bench, only 11 have been women. This paltry representation translates to a mere 4% of all Supreme Court judges, underscoring a profound gender disparity that resonates through the echelons of the judiciary. The absence of a woman Chief Justice of India further highlights the gender imbalance in the uppermost echelons of the judiciary. Throughout its history, the Supreme Court has not witnessed a woman holding the highest judicial position. This dearth of women at the pinnacle of the Indian judicial system not only symbolizes a missed opportunity for diversity and inclusivity but also points to systemic barriers that hinder women's progression to leadership roles.

Several factors contribute to this stark underrepresentation. Firstly, traditional gender roles and societal expectations have historically limited women's access to legal education and practice, thereby creating a smaller pool of eligible candidates. Additionally, deeply embedded patriarchal norms within the legal profession might influence appointment processes, perpetuating the status quo. Furthermore, unconscious biases could subtly influence decision-making regarding judicial appointments, favoring male candidates over equally qualified female ones. The repercussions of such a glaring gender gap in the Supreme Court are multifaceted. The absence of diverse perspectives, including women's experiences and viewpoints, undermines the court's ability to address the full spectrum of legal and social issues. It might also impact the quality of judgments in cases involving women's rights and gender-related matters.

Addressing this gender disparity requires multifaceted efforts. Encouraging more women to

pursue legal education and practice is crucial. Additionally, transparent and gender-neutral appointment procedures should be adopted to ensure that merit is the sole criterion for elevation to the judiciary. Mentoring programs and affirmative action could also help bridge the gap, fostering a more inclusive and diverse bench. In conclusion, the fact that only 4% of all Supreme Court judges in its 73-year history have been women is indicative of a larger issue that needs urgent attention. A more representative judiciary not only upholds principles of equality but also ensures a more comprehensive and nuanced interpretation of the law. Through targeted efforts and a commitment to inclusivity, the Indian judiciary can take a significant step toward addressing this gender disparity and fostering a more equitable legal landscape.

## **5. CONCLUSION:**

The organic shift towards opening up spaces for women in Indian parliamentary politics has been slow. Given the deep structural constraints that hamper progress in women's political participation, institutional change can usher in inclusive politics, albeit only to a limited extent. Another imperative is social transformation. As mentioned in this paper, better educational opportunities for women, their financial stability, the relative reduction in social prejudice combined with greater media awareness have compelled political parties to create spaces for women's participation. As the number of female voters increases, political parties have developed pro-female welfare policies in recent years to win their voter support. As the movement for women's political emancipation gains momentum, women's organizations and networks within political parties and civil society must continue to help them assert their interests and presence in the larger political and social landscape. Political mobilization of women can be pushed towards imperative institutional reform towards greater representation of women in India's Parliament and provincial assemblies. More women are needed on these platforms to transform the discourse on governance and policy making and move India towards a truly inclusive and representative democracy.