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Gender and Political Participation in Pakistan: A Comparative Study with India

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a comparative analysis of gender and political participation in Pakistan and India, examining how divergent institutional mechanisms interact with shared patriarchal contexts to shape women's descriptive and substantive representation. Employing a qualitative comparative case study design, the research draws on historical analysis, policy documents, and recent empirical studies to trace the trajectories of women's political participation in both countries since 1947. The findings reveal that while patriarchal social norms constitute a common foundational barrier, Pakistan's system of reserved seats in national and provincial assemblies and India's constitutional quotas in local Panchayati Raj Institutions have produced significantly different patterns of women's political engagement. Pakistan achieves approximately 20 percent women's representation in parliament through reserved seats, yet women legislators face constraints including party dependence, lack of constituencies, and implementation gaps that limit substantive influence. India's grassroots quota experiment has generated approximately 1.4 million elected women representatives, yet intersecting hierarchies of caste, class, and patriarchy, manifesting in phenomena such as *sarpanch pati*, constrain the translation of presence into power. The article argues that the key distinction lies in the level at which affirmative action operates and the consequent possibilities for women to develop political agency through practice and constituency relationships, with implications for policy reform in both countries.

Keywords: Gender and Politics, Political Participation, Pakistan, India, Reserved Seats, Panchayati Raj Institutions

Introduction

The persistent underrepresentation of women in political institutions constitutes one of the most significant democratic deficits of the twenty-first century. As the 2025 High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development underscored, Sustainable Development Goal target 5.5 mandating women's full and effective participation in leadership at all decision-making levels demands urgent action, yet women remain substantially excluded from legislative chambers, executive roles, and party leadership



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structures globally (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2025; UNESCO, 2025). This representation gap carries profound implications for democratic governance: when half the population is systematically marginalized, policy outcomes reflect partial perspectives and incomplete experiential knowledge. Feminist political theorists have long argued that women's embodied experiences particularly in domains such as caregiving, reproductive labour, and navigating gender-based violence generate situated knowledge crucial for equitable policy formulation (Young, 2000; Phillips, 1995). The exclusion of such perspectives from male-dominated institutional frameworks perpetuates structural injustice and reinforces elite control over the policy agenda. As the International Knowledge Network of Women in Politics (2025) emphasizes, advancing gender parity requires integrated, evidence-based policies that dismantle legal, institutional, and cultural barriers, moving commitments from symbolic gestures to structural realities. Democratic legitimacy is predicated on representative character; governance that fails to reflect the composition of the governed polity suffers from diminished deliberative integrity and moral authority (Mansbridge, 1999).

South Asia presents a particularly intriguing puzzle for scholars of gender and politics a phenomenon termed the "South Asian Paradox." The region has produced a remarkable roster of female heads of state wielding substantial executive power: Indira Gandhi in India, Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan, Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia in Bangladesh, and Sirimavo Bandaranaike in Sri Lanka. Yet these high-profile leadership successes coexist with persistently low levels of female political participation and representation in legislative bodies across the region. Bangladesh's recent electoral experience dramatically illustrates this paradox: for more than three decades, the country was among the few globally led by women, yet in the February 2026 elections, women constituted less than four percent of candidates contesting for 300 parliamentary seats (Human Rights Watch, 2026). This disjuncture between symbolic representation at the apex of power and substantive marginalization throughout the political system raises fundamental questions about the mechanisms that enable or constrain women's political agency. The South Asian experience suggests that the presence of women in high executive office often facilitated by dynastic political structures and family connections does not automatically transform patriarchal political cultures or dismantle barriers facing ordinary women seeking political careers (Jalalzai, 2013; Basu, 2016). The paradox thus challenges scholars to move beyond counting heads at the summit of power and instead interrogate the institutional, social, and cultural architectures that structure women's political participation across all levels of the political system.

Pakistan and India offer an analytically powerful paired comparison for investigating these dynamics. Both countries share foundational commonalities suitable for a "most similar systems" design: the legacy of British colonial rule, the traumatic partition of 1947 that shaped subsequent state formation in profound and gendered ways (Butalia, 1998; Menon & Bhasin, 1998), and deep cultural continuities including patriarchal social structures organized around kinship, caste-like hierarchies, and religiously inflected personal laws (Kandiyoti, 1988; Chakravarti, 2003). Yet since independence, they have charted significantly different political trajectories. India maintained continuous parliamentary democracy and enacted constitutional amendments in 1992–1993 reserving one-third of seats for women in local Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) a revolutionary intervention resulting in approximately 1.4 million women serving as elected local representatives (Government of India, 1992; Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004). Pakistan's political history, marked by recurrent military interventions, developed a primary mechanism of reserved seats in national and provincial assemblies a system



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born of the 1973 Constitution that currently guarantees 60 seats for women in the National Assembly (Khan & Naqvi, 2022). While substantial literature examines women's political participation in each country individually, focused comparative work analyzing how different institutional mechanisms interact with shared patriarchal contexts remains underdeveloped (Singh et al., 2024).

This study addresses that gap by advancing a central argument: while patriarchal social norms constitute a common foundational barrier in both countries, their divergent political structures Pakistan's reserved national seats versus India's local governance quotas have produced significantly different patterns of women's descriptive and substantive representation. In Pakistan, reserved seats ensure a guaranteed minimum presence approximating 20 percent of legislative seats (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2025), yet this numerical presence has not translated into commensurate political influence, with women legislators dependent on party leadership, lacking geographic constituencies, and confronting persistent patriarchal gatekeeping (Bano, 2021; Yusuf, 2023). Khalid and Shah (2025) document that nearly one-third of women's reserved seats in Pakistan's National Assembly remained vacant more than a year after the 2024 election, demonstrating the fragility of constitutional guarantees when enforcement mechanisms are weak. In India, the constitutional mandate at grassroots level has created an expansive laboratory for women's political participation, yet numerical inclusion does not automatically dismantle caste, class, and kinship-based hierarchies that shape women's political ambitions (Jensenius, 2017; Dunning & Nilekani, 2013). The phenomenon of *sarpanch pati* (husband ruling on behalf of his wife) parallels Pakistan's experience of women serving as political placeholders (Kumar, 2022; Chopra, 2023). However, emerging evidence suggests important differences: research from Jharkhand and Maharashtra indicates that Dalit and Adivasi women often develop more practice-based leadership from collective mobilization than their upper-caste counterparts, complicating assumptions that social advantage translates straightforwardly into political autonomy (Policy & Development Advisory Group & Align Platform, 2026). This study thus argues that the key distinction lies not simply in quota presence or absence, but in the level of government at which affirmative action operates national and provincial in Pakistan, local in India and the consequent possibilities for women to develop political agency through practice, constituency relationships, and gradual accumulation of governing experience.

Literature Review

Political participation encompasses activities through which citizens engage with the political system, ranging from conventional forms such as voting and party activism to unconventional modes including protesting and connective action (Barnes & Kaase, 1979; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). This conventional-unconventional distinction, however, rests on reductive binary thinking that obscures participation occupying the continuum between polar opposites (Eklundh, 2021). The public-private dualism is particularly salient for feminist analysis, constituting what Youngs (2024) terms the "patriarchal prism" through which political space has been viewed. Feminist theorists have fundamentally challenged this abstraction, revealing how prioritization of the public over the private obscures operations of gendered power (Pateman, 1989). Pateman's foundational work demonstrates that the liberal-democratic conception of the political is built upon systematic exclusion of the private sphere the domain of women's labour and reproduction from consideration as properly political. This patriarchal structure operates simultaneously within state, family, and civil society, limiting women's agency by



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delegitimizing their concerns as "private" matters unsuited for public deliberation (Youngs, 2024).

The trajectory of women's political participation in Pakistan reveals complex interplay between constitutional guarantees and authoritarian reversals. Women received suffrage in 1947, with reserved parliamentary seats existing throughout constitutional history from 1956 to 1973 (Nazaria-i-Pakistan Trust, 2025). The Bhutto regime (1970-1977) opened government services to women and guaranteed non-discrimination in the 1973 Constitution. However, General Zia-ul-Haq's 1977 coup initiated profound reversal through Islamization. The Hudood Ordinances (1979) criminalized non-marital sexual relations and made rape victims vulnerable to adultery prosecution without four male witnesses a standard Amnesty International (1998) documented resulted in over one-third of imprisoned women being held on zina charges. The Law of Evidence Order further institutionalized discrimination by stipulating women's testimony carried half the weight of men's (Nazaria-i-Pakistan Trust, 2025). In response, women launched the Women's Action Forum (1981), building Pakistan's first national women's movement. Subsequent regimes, including Benazir Bhutto's historic tenure as first woman prime minister of a Muslim country, faced constitutional constraints protecting Zia-era laws, yet established the First Women Bank Ltd. (1989) and Ministry of Women's Development (Nazaria-i-Pakistan Trust, 2025). The contemporary reserved seat mechanism guarantees 60 women in the National Assembly, yet feudal and religious orthodoxies continue constraining substantive influence (Khan & Naqvi, 2022).

India's approach follows a distinct trajectory through constitutional engineering. The 73rd Amendment (1992) reserved one-third of seats for women in local Panchayati Raj Institutions, creating an expansive laboratory resulting in approximately 1.4 million elected women representatives (Government of India, 1992; Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004). However, critical scholarship interrogates whether numerical inclusion automatically translates into empowerment. Research on tribal women in western India reveals PRI participation paradoxically produced "disempowerment" through cultural assimilation into upper-caste norms, undermining distinct ethnic identity (Samantaray, 2025). At national levels, India's first-past-the-post system without gender quotas produces persistently low women's representation below 15 percent in the Lok Sabha (Jenselius, 2017). Caste proves crucial: Dalit and Adivasi women navigate distinct opportunity structures shaped by both gender discrimination and caste-based marginalisation, yet recent evidence suggests such women often develop more practice-based leadership from collective mobilization than upper-caste counterparts (Policy & Development Advisory Group & Align Platform, 2026). Despite rich single-country scholarship, direct comparative studies of Pakistan and India remain underdeveloped. Existing work tends toward statistical comparisons of aggregate indicators, failing to capture qualitative mechanisms through which different quota designs interact with shared patriarchal contexts (Nitza-Makowska, 2024). Recent comparative analysis reveals intriguing divergences: support for gender equality positively correlates with democratic support in India but negatively in Pakistan, suggesting fundamentally different cultural-political linkages demanding qualitative investigation (Farooq et al., 2025). This article addresses that gap by systematically analyzing how Pakistan's reserved national seats versus India's local governance quotas produce distinct patterns of representation within their shared patriarchal contexts.



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Problem Statement

Despite decades of constitutional guarantees and targeted policy interventions in both Pakistan and India, women remain systematically marginalized from meaningful political participation across South Asia. In Pakistan, the reserved seat mechanism ensures a nominal parliamentary presence approximating 20 percent, yet women legislators frequently function as political placeholders dependent on party leadership, lacking geographic constituencies and confronting entrenched feudal and religious orthodoxies that render their substantive influence negligible. In India, the revolutionary Panchayati Raj quota system has produced over 1.4 million elected women representatives at the grassroots level, yet numerical inclusion has not dismantled intersecting hierarchies of caste, class, and patriarchy that curtail genuine political agency. Existing scholarship examines these phenomena in isolation, producing rich single-country analyses but failing to leverage comparative inquiry that could illuminate how different institutional mechanisms interact with shared patriarchal contexts to produce divergent outcomes. Consequently, policymakers lack nuanced understanding of why increased descriptive representation fails to translate into substantive influence, and whether Pakistan's national-level reserved seats or India's grassroots quotas offer more effective pathways for transformative women's political empowerment. This study addresses that critical gap.

Research Objectives

To compare levels and forms of women's political participation voting, candidacy, and leadership in Pakistan and India.

To analyze socio-cultural, economic, and political barriers confronting women in both countries.

To evaluate and compare state-led mechanisms Pakistan's reserved seats versus India's PRI quotas in enhancing women's descriptive and substantive representation.

To examine the role of social movements and civil society in shaping women's political agency in both nations.

Research Questions

What are the similarities and differences in historical trajectories of women's political engagement in both countries?

How do divergent political structures federalism, party systems, and electoral systems shape opportunities for women's political participation?

How do intersecting factors like class, caste (India), and *biradari*/kinship (Pakistan) influence women's political journeys?

What role do extra-parliamentary movements play in shaping women's political landscape in both countries?

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative comparative case study design, utilizing a "most similar systems" approach to examine gender and political participation in Pakistan and India. These countries are selected due to their shared cultural heritage, colonial legacy, and patriarchal social structures, while exhibiting divergent political institutions and quota mechanisms making them analytically powerful for controlled comparison. Data will be drawn from multiple sources to ensure triangulation and depth. Primary data will consist of semi-structured interviews with approximately 40 women political actors, including elected representatives at local, provincial/state, and national levels, as well as party workers and civil society activists from both countries. Interviewees will be selected through purposive sampling to ensure diversity across class, caste (in India), *biradari*/kinship networks (in Pakistan), and geographic regions. Secondary data will



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include analysis of parliamentary records, policy documents, election commission statistics, and existing academic literature. Thematic analysis will guide data interpretation, identifying recurring patterns, barriers, and narratives within each country before conducting systematic cross-case comparison. This methodological approach enables nuanced understanding of how institutional mechanisms interact with socio-cultural contexts to shape women's political agency, moving beyond statistical comparisons to capture lived experiences and qualitative dimensions of participation.

Historical and Constitutional Context of Women's Political Status

The constitutional foundations of women's political participation in Pakistan and India were laid during the colonial crucible of the 1930s, when the Government of India Act 1935 first introduced reserved seats for women in legislative bodies across the subcontinent. This landmark legislation enfranchised women and allocated six seats in the Council of State and nine in the Federal Assembly, establishing a systemic mechanism for women's representation that would profoundly shape post-independence trajectories (Nair, 2025). As Krook (2009) demonstrates in her comparative analysis of quota adoption, this shared colonial inheritance nonetheless produced dramatically divergent outcomes after 1947. Pakistan's first Constituent Assembly (1947–1954) included only two women among seventy-nine members, yet Mohammad Ali Jinnah deliberately reserved these seats, emphasizing that women's political participation was essential for national progress (Krook, 2009). The All Pakistan Women's Association (APWA), founded in 1949, immediately mobilised for expanded representation, leading thousands of women to march on the Lahore assembly chambers (Krook, 2009). India's constitutional moment was simultaneously shaped by what Chetan (2025) terms the "founding mothers" fifteen women elected to the Constituent Assembly who brought decades of feminist organising to the drafting process. Leaders like Hansa Mehta, Amrit Kaur, and Dakshayani Velayudhan had already consolidated a feminist constitutional vision through the Indian Women's Charter of Rights and Duties (1945), demanding comprehensive reforms in property rights, marriage laws, and political representation (Chetan, 2025). Their strategic interventions particularly through Notes of Dissent in key committees ensured that Directive Principles became fundamental to governance (Article 37) and challenged the relegation of women's rights to non-justiciable status (Chetan, 2025).

Pakistan's constitutional evolution reflects a turbulent interplay between democratic aspirations and authoritarian interruptions that has continuously reshaped women's political space. The 1956 Constitution endorsed female suffrage and reserved seats, yet the indirect elections produced no elected women (Kamray, 2020). Ayub Khan's 1962 Constitution delivered a significant setback by abolishing female suffrage through territorial constituencies, reducing women's legislative presence to a mere six members (Kamray, 2020). The 1973 Constitution marked a watershed moment: Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's democratic regime reserved ten seats for women in the National Assembly, opened all government services to women, and appointed Begum Ashraf Abbassi as the first female Deputy Speaker while Samia Usman became the first woman Senator (Women's Parliamentary Caucus, 2025). Crucially, the 1977 elections witnessed Begum Naseem Wali Khan become the first woman directly elected from a general seat in Pakistan's history a record that remains unmatched in the province (Women's Parliamentary Caucus, 2025). However, General Zia-ul-Haq's 1977 coup initiated a profound reversal through state-sponsored Islamization. The Hudood Ordinances (1979) criminalised non-marital sexual relations and made rape victims vulnerable to adultery



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prosecution without four male witnesses a standard documented to have resulted in over one-third of imprisoned women being held on zina charges (Amnesty International, 1998). In response, women launched the Women's Action Forum in 1981, staging public protests and building Pakistan's first full-fledged national women's movement (Nazaria-i-Pakistan Trust, 2025). Subsequent regimes, including Benazir Bhutto's historic tenure as the first woman prime minister of a Muslim country (1988–1990, 1993–1996), operated under constitutional constraints the eighth amendment protected Zia-era laws from legislative modification yet established the First Women Bank Ltd. (1989) and advanced institutional mechanisms for women's empowerment (Nazaria-i-Pakistan Trust, 2025).

India's constitutional journey has been characterised by continuous democratic governance and incremental institutional innovation, yet the translation of constitutional promises into substantive political presence has proven remarkably contested. Despite the founding mothers' influence, the Constituent Assembly rejected reserved seats for women at the national level, with leaders like Amrit Kaur arguing that women should compete on merit rather than seek special protections (Krook, 2009). This decision embedded a fundamental tension: constitutional equality coexisted with profound political marginalisation. The revolutionary breakthrough arrived with the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments (1992-1993), which reserved one-third of seats for women in local Panchayati Raj Institutions creating an expansive laboratory that now encompasses approximately 1.4 million elected women representatives, with most states subsequently increasing reservations to 50 percent (Singh et al., 2025). As Singh and colleagues document in their comprehensive comparative study of South Asian local governance, India now leads the region with approximately 46 percent of elected local representatives being women, supported by constitutional mandates and state-level innovations (Singh et al., 2025). Yet the national parliament tells a different story: the Women's Reservation Bill, proposing 33 percent reservation in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies, has repeatedly languished since its first introduction in 1996, blocked by cross-party opposition and patriarchal gatekeeping (Krook, 2009). The contrasting trajectories of Pakistan's national-level reserved seats system and India's grassroots quota experiment thus illuminate fundamentally different institutional philosophies: Pakistan has consistently employed constitutional engineering at the apex of power, while India has invested in transformative potential at the base, leaving national representation to the vagaries of first-past-the-post politics where women's representation remains persistently below 15 percent (Jenselius, 2017). These divergent pathways, as Krook (2009) argues, reflect not merely different policy choices but fundamentally different configurations of actors, strategies, and normative commitments that continue to shape women's political possibilities in both nations.

Institutional Mechanisms and Descriptive Representation

Pakistan's institutional approach to enhancing women's political representation has centred on reserved seats in national and provincial assemblies, a mechanism embedded in the 1973 Constitution and subsequently expanded. Currently, 60 seats are reserved for women in the National Assembly, with analogous quotas in provincial legislatures, ensuring a guaranteed minimum presence approximating 20 percent of parliamentary seats (Khan & Naqvi, 2022). This system operates through indirect election: political parties submit lists of women candidates, and seats are allocated proportionally based on parties' general seat victories. While this mechanism guarantees numerical representation, critical scholarship reveals significant limitations. Women legislators selected through reserved seats lack geographic constituencies, rendering them dependent



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on party leadership for their political survival and limiting their ability to develop independent power bases (Bano, 2021). Furthermore, implementation remains precarious: Khalid and Shah (2025) documented that nearly one-third of women's reserved seats in Pakistan's National Assembly remained vacant more than a year after the 2024 general election, demonstrating the fragility of constitutionally guaranteed representation when enforcement mechanisms are weak. The system thus achieves descriptive representation on paper while constraining the conditions for meaningful political agency.

India's institutional trajectory diverges dramatically, investing in grassroots transformation through the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments (1992–1993), which reserved one-third of seats for women in local Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). This revolutionary intervention has created an expansive laboratory for women's political participation, resulting in approximately 1.4 million elected women representatives, with most states subsequently increasing reservations to 50 percent (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2024). Unlike Pakistan's national-level focus, India's quotas operate at the grassroots, enabling women to develop political experience through direct constituency relationships and gradual accumulation of governing expertise. Recent comparative analysis demonstrates that India now leads the South Asian region with approximately 46 percent of elected local representatives being women, supported by constitutional mandates and state-level innovations (Singh et al., 2025). However, at national and state levels, India's first-past-the-post system operating without gender quotas produces persistently low women's representation consistently below 15 percent in the Lok Sabha despite the Women's Reservation Bill repeatedly languishing in parliament since 1996 (Jenselius, 2017). This institutional bifurcation between vibrant local presence and stagnant national representation constitutes India's distinctive pattern of descriptive representation.

Barriers to Participation and the Quest for Substantive Representation

The translation of women's numerical presence into genuine political influence confronts deeply entrenched socio-cultural barriers that operate across both public and private spheres in Pakistan and India. Patriarchal traditions form an unyielding bedrock that systematically stifles women's political agency, with religion and culture reinforcing discrimination and segregation that mark politics as an exclusively male domain (The Indian Express, 2025). During elections in Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province in 2000-01, religious fundamentalists issued fatwas declaring women's political involvement a "great sin," even threatening jihad against female candidates (The Indian Express, 2025). In India, the preference for male children manifests in female foeticide and dowry burdens, signalling from birth that daughters are liabilities rather than potential leaders a 2019 Pew Research Center report documented that at least 9 million girls "went missing" between 2000-2019 due to selective abortions (The Indian Express, 2025). These cultural constraints operate through what feminist theorists identify as the "patriarchal prism," through which women's concerns are delegitimized as "private" matters unsuited for public deliberation (Youngs, 2024). Even when women attain office, they face relentless scrutiny and misogynistic dismissal Benazir Bhutto faced mockery for juggling motherhood and leadership, with critics quipping that "the only thing Benazir Bhutto managed to deliver as prime minister was a baby," while Indira Gandhi was dismissed as a "dumb doll" by Congress leaders before being revered as "Mother Indira" only after consolidating power through authoritarian means (The Indian Express, 2025).



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Institutional barriers compound these socio-cultural constraints, manifesting in what the National Human Rights Commission of India has condemned as unconstitutional proxy governance that reduces elected women to nominal heads while male relatives exercise actual power. The Supreme Court of India has recently condemned the *sarpanch pati* phenomenon, describing it as unconstitutional and unlawful, yet a complaint to the NHRC alleged that "notwithstanding constitutional and judicial safeguards intended to empower women, elected women representatives are often reduced to nominal or symbolic heads, while actual administrative and decision-making powers are exercised by their male relatives" (The Tribune, 2025). Despite India's constitutional mandate of at least one-third reservation for women in panchayat chairperson positions, proxy governance "defeats the constitutional mandate" and compromises accountability to the electorate (The Tribune, 2025). A Ministry of Panchayati Raj panel has recommended "exemplary penalties" for proven cases of proxy leadership to curb the practice of *Pradhan Pati*, *Sarpanch Pati*, or *Mukhiya Pati* in gram panchayats (The Tribune, 2025). In Pakistan, the Women's Parliamentary Caucus recently launched a dialogue series acknowledging that women elected on reserved seats face unequal treatment, particularly in access to development funds and intra-party opportunities, despite their active involvement in election campaigns and constituency outreach (National Assembly of Pakistan, 2026). The dialogue highlighted "serious gaps in the implementation of the mandated 5% general seat allocation for women," with participants observing that the entrenched *biradari* system often restricts women without strong clan backing from contesting elections (National Assembly of Pakistan, 2026).

The quest for substantive representation moving beyond descriptive presence to policy influence reveals how intersecting hierarchies of class, caste, kinship, and religion shape women's political journeys in fundamentally different ways across both countries. In India, caste and gender are co-constitutive and inextricable categories: Dalit and Adivasi women navigate distinct political opportunity structures shaped by both gender discrimination and caste-based marginalisation (Policy & Development Advisory Group & Align Platform, 2026). The Hindu Right's accommodation of lower-caste members like Uma Bharati demonstrates how caste and gender subjectivities are shaped by intersections of both privilege and oppression in complex ways while feminists use intersectionality to understand social marginalities and chart transformative politics, the Hindu Right manipulates differences to mask inherent casteism and sexism (Dhawan, 2019). In Pakistan, the *biradari* (kinship) system similarly constrains women's political agency, with women parliamentarians noting that those entering politics through limited pathways are frequently labelled "token" representatives, undermining their legitimacy (National Assembly of Pakistan, 2026). The call for a shift "from symbolic inclusion to substantive empowerment" resonates across both countries (Singh et al., 2025). Recent comparative research demonstrates that even where quotas achieve approximately 46 percent women's representation in India's local governance and Pakistan maintains 20 percent in national assemblies, persistent party gatekeeping, capacity gaps, and "proxy" leadership constrain the translation of presence into power (Singh et al., 2025). As Singh et al. (2025) document, while quotas have yielded documented gains in infrastructure investment and changing aspirations, the fundamental challenge remains dismantling the patriarchal structures that enable numerical inclusion while preserving masculine control over decision-making.



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Conclusion

This comparative study has demonstrated that while patriarchal social norms constitute a common foundational barrier constraining women's political participation in both Pakistan and India, the divergent political structures that have evolved since 1947 have produced significantly different patterns of women's descriptive and substantive representation. Pakistan's system of reserved seats in national and provincial assemblies' guarantees a numerical presence approximating 20 percent, yet this mechanism has proven insufficient for translating presence into power. Women legislators remain dependent on party leadership, lack geographic constituencies, and confront entrenched feudal and religious orthodoxies that render their substantive influence negligible. The recent revelation that nearly one-third of women's reserved seats in Pakistan's National Assembly remained vacant more than a year after the 2024 general election underscores the fragility of constitutional guarantees when enforcement mechanisms are weak. India's grassroots quota experiment through Panchayati Raj Institutions has created an expansive laboratory encompassing approximately 1.4 million elected women representatives, yet numerical inclusion has not dismantled intersecting hierarchies of caste, class, and patriarchy. The persistent phenomenon of *sarpanch pati* husbands ruling on behalf of elected wives demonstrates how patriarchal structures adapt to preserve masculine control even within women-majority institutions. The key distinction thus lies not simply in quota presence or absence, but in the level of government at which affirmative action operates and the consequent possibilities for women to develop political agency through practice and constituency relationships.

The findings carry significant implications for policy and future research. For Pakistan, the evidence suggests that strengthening enforcement mechanisms for existing reserved seats, ensuring timely elections, and expanding quotas to the local level could enhance women's opportunities to develop governing experience independent of party patronage. For India, the persistent stagnation of women's representation at national and state levels consistently below 15 percent in the Lok Sabha despite vibrant local presence demands renewed attention to the long-pending Women's Reservation Bill. More fundamentally, both countries must confront the underlying patriarchal structures that enable numerical inclusion while preserving substantive exclusion. The challenge is not merely counting more women in legislative chambers, but transforming the institutional cultures, party gatekeeping practices, and socio-cultural norms that render women's presence politically inconsequential. Future research should investigate the conditions under which grassroots participation in India translates into pathways to higher office, and whether Pakistan's local government reforms might similarly create pipelines for women's political advancement. Ultimately, this comparison reveals that institutional design matters profoundly, but institutions alone cannot dismantle the patriarchal prism through which women's political agency continues to be refracted and diminished.

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