



# Strengthening Women's Political Participation in PRIs: Addressing Structural and Digital Barriers

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## Summary

This paper examines the trajectory of women's political participation in India's Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), highlighting both the transformative impact of reservation policies and the structural limitations that continue to constrain substantive empowerment. The introduction of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment marked a critical shift in India's governance framework by institutionalising gender quotas, leading to a significant increase in women's representation at the grassroots level. With women constituting over 46 percent of elected representatives in PRIs, India stands among the leading countries globally in terms of local-level gender inclusion.

However, the analysis reveals that this numerical success is not uniformly reflected across higher levels of governance. Data from State Legislative Assemblies indicates persistently low representation of women, pointing to a vertical gap between grassroots participation and upward political mobility. This disparity is further reinforced by structural barriers such as patriarchal norms, proxy representation, and socio-cultural constraints, as well as institutional challenges including lack of experience, limited training, and discontinuity caused by seat rotation.

The study also highlights the growing importance of digital governance and the implications of the gender digital divide. As governance processes become increasingly digitised, unequal access to technology and limited digital literacy among women representatives create new forms of exclusion. While initiatives aimed at digital transformation have the potential to enhance efficiency and transparency, their benefits remain unevenly distributed in the absence of targeted inclusion strategies.

Through policy analysis, the paper demonstrates that while reservation policies have been effective in achieving descriptive representation, their impact on substantive empowerment remains conditional. The effectiveness of women's participation is shaped by the interaction of institutional design, socio-economic context, and access to resources, including digital infrastructure. The recommendations proposed emphasise the need for a more integrated and capability-driven approach that combines capacity-building, institutional reforms, financial support, and digital inclusion.

## Introduction (With Data Interpretation & Visual Analysis Integrated)

The political representation of women is widely recognised as a critical component of deepening democracy and advancing gender equality. Beyond normative commitments to inclusion, empirical research demonstrates that increased participation of women in governance leads to more effective policy outcomes, reduced corruption, and improved developmental performance. Women leaders tend to prioritise social welfare, enhance public service delivery, and promote greater inclusion in the labour force, thereby generating both political and economic gains. These outcomes align with the propositions of

*critical mass theory*, which argues that a threshold level of women's representation is necessary not only for descriptive inclusion but also for enabling substantive policy influence.

In response to historical gender imbalances, many countries have adopted gender quotas as a corrective policy mechanism. Globally, legislated quotas have proven effective in increasing women's representation, with countries implementing such measures reporting higher participation rates in local governance. As of 2023, 88 countries have introduced legislated quotas for local elections, reflecting a broader global commitment to gender-inclusive governance frameworks.

India represents one of the most significant examples of quota-based gender inclusion through the enactment of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, which institutionalised a minimum of 33 percent reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). Over the past three decades, this reform has resulted in over 1.45 million women participating in grassroots governance, with women constituting approximately 44.4 percent of elected representatives in local bodies. This positions India among the global leaders in women's participation at the local level.

However, a closer examination of representation across levels of governance reveals a significant structural imbalance. Data trends indicate that while women's representation in local governance has expanded substantially, their presence in national legislatures remains comparatively low. For instance, the proportion of women Members of Parliament in the Lok Sabha has increased gradually over successive terms but remains below 15 percent, reflecting slow and uneven progress at higher levels of governance. In contrast, several countries—including Sweden, Norway, and South Africa—report significantly higher representation in national legislatures, often exceeding 40 percent. India's relatively lower ranking in this regard highlights a vertical disparity between grassroots inclusion and national-level political participation.

This contrast is further reinforced by global patterns of representation in local governance. Evidence from cross-country comparisons shows that India's performance at the local level surpasses many developed and developing nations, indicating the relative success of decentralised quota-based interventions. However, the global distribution of women's representation, as reflected in comparative data, remains uneven, with several regions continuing to exhibit low participation rates. This suggests that while institutional mechanisms such as quotas are effective, their outcomes are contingent upon broader socio-political and economic conditions.

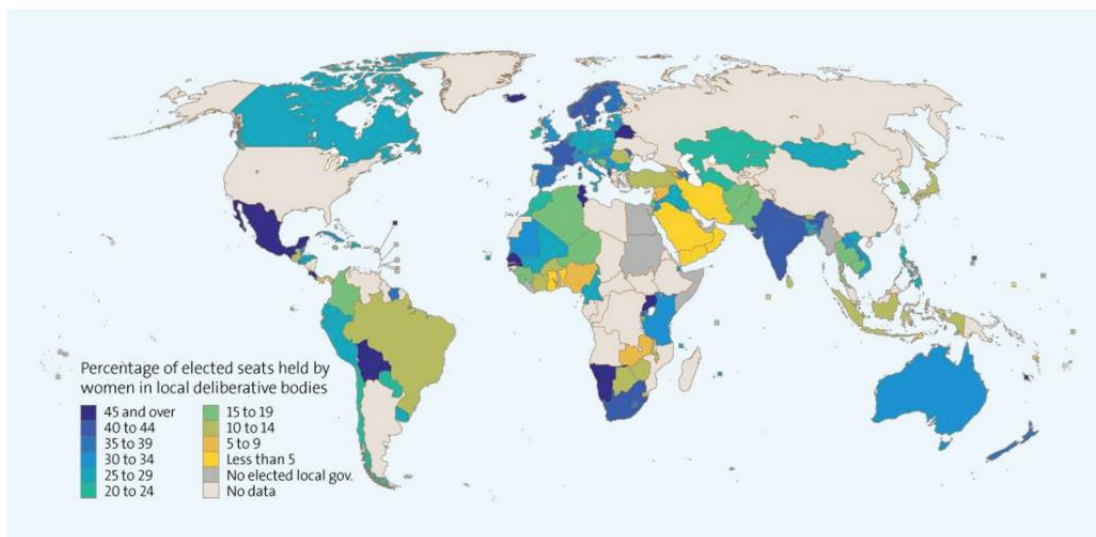
The inclusion of women's political participation as a target within the **United Nations** Sustainable Development Goals further underscores its importance in promoting inclusive and sustainable development. There is growing recognition that women's leadership at the local level contributes to improved allocation of public goods, particularly in sectors such as education, healthcare, and sanitation, thereby strengthening decentralised governance systems.

At the same time, the trajectory of women's participation in India must be understood within a broader socio-economic transformation. Since the early 1990s, key gender indicators—including literacy rates, fertility levels, and age of marriage—have improved significantly, enabling greater entry of women into political spaces. However, these gains have not uniformly translated into sustained political authority or leadership consolidation, indicating that structural and institutional barriers continue to shape outcomes.

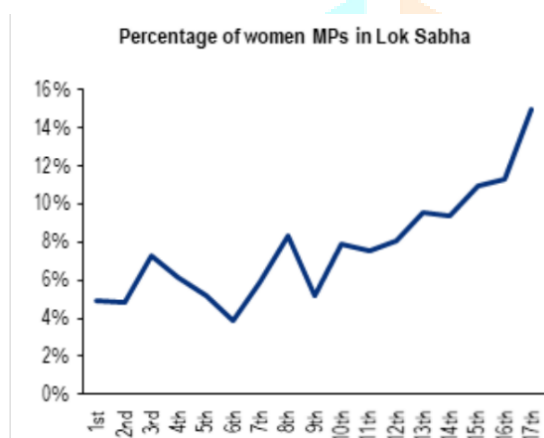
In recent years, the expansion of digital governance has introduced a new dimension to this discourse. Initiatives such as Digital India aim to enhance transparency, efficiency, and citizen participation through technology-driven governance systems. However, the persistence of a gendered digital divide—characterised by unequal access to digital infrastructure, limited digital literacy, and socio-cultural constraints—poses a significant challenge to women's effective engagement. This creates a paradox wherein digital transformation simultaneously enables and constrains participation, particularly for women in rural governance structures.

Against this backdrop, this paper examines the evolution of women's participation in local governance in India, focusing on Panchayati Raj Institutions. By analysing both statistical trends and comparative global patterns, the study moves beyond a descriptive account of representation to critically evaluate the gap between numerical inclusion and substantive empowerment. It seeks to identify the institutional, socio-

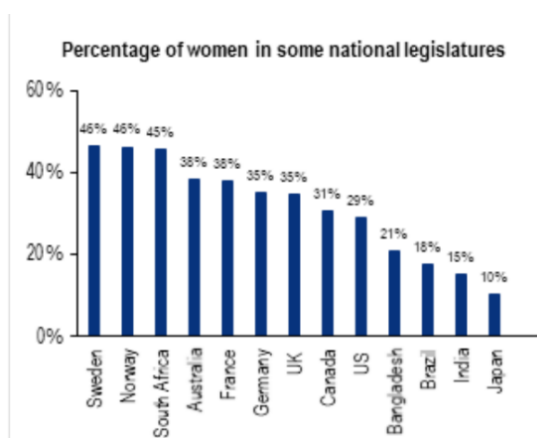
economic, and technological conditions necessary for achieving meaningful and sustained political participation for women in governance.



Source: UN Women<sup>7</sup>



Sources: Gender-Wise Statistical List, Lok Sabha, 2019; PRS.



Sources: Inter-Parliamentary Union Website as accessed on September 19, 2023; PRS.

**Problem Statement (With Bar Graph Analysis Integrated)**

Despite the substantial expansion of women’s political representation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), the transition from numerical inclusion to substantive empowerment remains uneven and incomplete. While women now constitute over 46 percent of elected representatives at the grassroots level, this progress is not reflected uniformly across higher levels of governance, revealing a significant structural imbalance in political representation.

An examination of women’s representation in State Legislative Assemblies highlights this disparity more clearly. Data indicates that the percentage of women Members of Legislative Assemblies (MLAs) across Indian states remains consistently low, generally ranging between 5 percent and 14 percent in most states, with only a few exceptions such as Chhattisgarh reaching approximately 18 percent. Several states, including Nagaland and Mizoram, report negligible or near-zero representation. This stark contrast between high participation in PRIs and limited representation at the state level underscores a systemic bottleneck that restricts women’s upward political mobility. It suggests that while entry into politics has been facilitated through quotas at the local level, the transition to higher political offices remains constrained by structural and institutional barriers.

At the structural level, deeply entrenched patriarchal norms continue to shape both the entry and functioning of women in governance. Although reservation policies have created formal political space for women, informal power hierarchies persist within households and communities. A significant proportion of elected women representatives function as proxy candidates, with decision-making authority

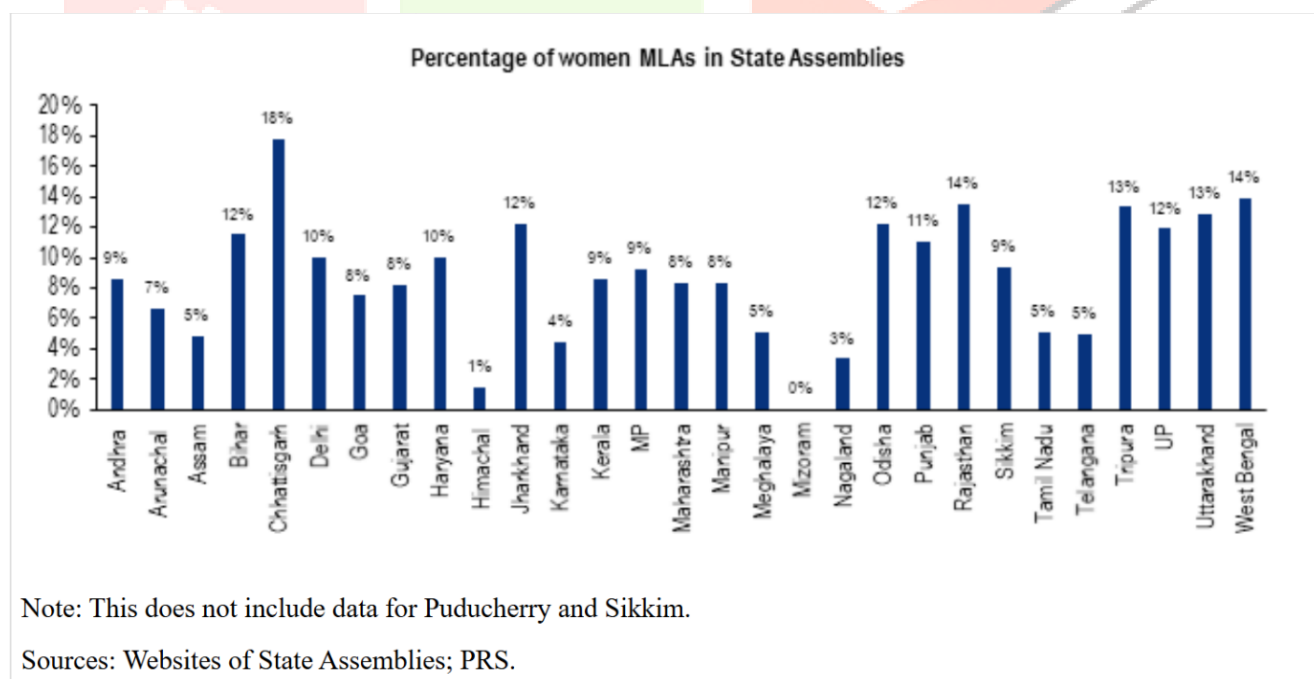
often exercised by male family members. This reflects the persistence of gendered power relations within democratic institutions, where formal inclusion does not necessarily translate into substantive authority.

Socio-cultural constraints further limit women's effective participation. Women representatives often face restrictions on mobility, limited access to public forums, and a disproportionate burden of unpaid domestic responsibilities. These factors reduce their ability to actively engage in governance processes such as gram sabha meetings and administrative interactions. Additionally, gender biases in public perception frequently result in women leaders receiving less recognition and legitimacy, even when their governance outcomes are comparable or superior to those of male representatives.

Institutional limitations compound these challenges. Many women representatives are first-time entrants with limited political experience, lower levels of education, and inadequate exposure to administrative systems. The absence of continuous and structured capacity-building mechanisms restricts their ability to navigate governance processes effectively. Furthermore, the rotational nature of reserved seats disrupts leadership continuity, preventing women from accumulating political capital and limiting their prospects for re-election or advancement to higher offices.

A critical and emerging constraint is the gendered digital divide. As governance systems increasingly rely on digital platforms, access to technology and digital literacy have become essential for effective participation. However, significant disparities persist, with only 42 percent of rural women having access to the internet compared to 62 percent of men. Limited access to digital devices, inadequate infrastructure, and socio-cultural restrictions on technology use further marginalise women representatives from e-governance systems.

Taken together, these factors highlight a fundamental gap between representation and empowerment. While reservation policies have been successful in facilitating entry into political institutions, they have not adequately addressed the structural, institutional, and technological barriers that limit women's ability to exercise independent authority and sustain political careers. The disparity between grassroots and higher-level representation, as evidenced by state assembly data, further reinforces the need for a more comprehensive approach to gender-inclusive governance.



### Policy Analysis (With Table Analysis Integrated)

India's policy framework for enhancing women's political participation through reservations in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) represents a landmark intervention in decentralised governance. By mandating a minimum of 33 percent reservation—extended to 50 percent in several states—the policy has significantly expanded women's access to political spaces, resulting in over 1.45 million women participating in local governance.

A closer examination of state-level data on women's representation in PRIs provides important insights into the effectiveness of this policy. The data indicates that many states, including Bihar (52.2%), Rajasthan (51.31%), Odisha (52.68%), and Kerala (52.41%), have successfully achieved or exceeded 50 percent representation, reflecting strong implementation of reservation policies. In some states, such as Uttarakhand (56.01%) and Assam (54.6%), women's participation significantly surpasses the mandated quota, suggesting not only compliance but also a degree of political acceptance and normalisation of women's leadership.

However, the data also reveals notable regional disparities. States such as Uttar Pradesh (33.34%) and Jammu and Kashmir (33.18%) remain closer to the minimum mandated threshold, indicating limited expansion beyond constitutional requirements. These variations suggest that the effectiveness of reservation policies is contingent upon state-specific socio-political contexts, administrative capacity, and levels of institutional support. In states where complementary measures—such as capacity-building programmes, self-help group networks, and gender-sensitive governance initiatives—have been implemented, women's participation appears to be more robust and sustained.

From a policy effectiveness perspective, these trends demonstrate that quota-based interventions have been successful in achieving descriptive representation. Women-led panchayats have contributed to improved governance outcomes, particularly in the allocation of public goods such as water, sanitation, education, and healthcare. Increased participation has also enhanced citizen engagement, especially among women, thereby strengthening the inclusiveness of local governance processes.

However, the policy framework exhibits several structural limitations. The reliance on quotas as the primary mechanism of inclusion has not been accompanied by sufficient investment in capacity-building and institutional strengthening. As a result, many women representatives remain dependent on informal networks for information and decision-making, limiting their autonomy and effectiveness. The persistence of proxy representation further undermines the intended impact of the policy.

The design of the reservation system, particularly the rotation of reserved seats, presents another critical challenge. While rotation promotes broader participation, it disrupts leadership continuity and prevents the accumulation of political experience. This limits women's ability to transition from local governance to higher levels of political representation, contributing to the disparities observed in state assemblies and national legislatures.

The increasing digitisation of governance introduces both opportunities and challenges within this framework. Initiatives under programmes such as Digital India have the potential to enhance transparency, efficiency, and service delivery. However, the benefits of these initiatives are unevenly distributed due to the persistence of the gender digital divide. Women representatives with limited digital access or literacy are less able to engage with e-governance platforms, thereby reinforcing existing inequalities within governance systems.

Overall, the analysis of state-level data suggests that while India's reservation policy has been effective in expanding participation, its impact on substantive empowerment remains conditional. The success of the policy is shaped by the interaction of institutional design, socio-cultural context, and access to resources. States that have complemented reservation with capacity-building, financial decentralisation, and community-based support mechanisms demonstrate more positive outcomes, highlighting the need for a more integrated and capability-driven policy approach.

States	Percentage	States	Percentage
Andhra Pradesh	50	Manipur	50.69
Arunachal Pradesh	38.98	Odisha	52.68
Assam	54.6	Punjab	41.79
Bihar	52.2	Rajasthan	51.31
Chhattisgarh	54.78	Sikkim	50.3
Goa	36.72	Tamil Nadu	52.98
Gujarat	49.96	Telangana	50.34
Haryana	42.12	Tripura	45.23
Himachal Pradesh	50.12	Uttar Pradesh	33.34
Jammu and Kashmir	33.18	Uttarakhand	56.01
Jharkhand	51.57	West Bengal	51.42
Karnataka	50.05		
Kerala	52.41		
Madhya Pradesh	49.99		
Maharashtra	53.47		

Source: PIB<sup>28</sup>

## Policy Recommendations

Addressing the persistent gap between women's numerical representation and substantive empowerment in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) requires a comprehensive and multi-layered policy approach. While reservation policies have successfully facilitated women's entry into political institutions, they have not adequately addressed the structural, institutional, and technological barriers that limit their effectiveness. Consequently, there is a need to shift from a quota-centric framework to one that prioritises capability enhancement, institutional support, and inclusive governance ecosystems.

A critical starting point lies in strengthening and institutionalising capacity-building mechanisms for elected women representatives (EWRs). Although training programmes have expanded in recent years, they remain fragmented and largely confined to initial induction phases. To ensure sustained effectiveness, capacity-building must be conceived as a continuous process that equips women with the skills required to navigate complex governance structures. This includes training in financial management, administrative procedures, legal frameworks, and public policy implementation. Equally important is the integration of digital governance training into these programmes, given the increasing reliance on technology in administrative processes. However, beyond the content of training, attention must also be given to the format and environment in which it is delivered. Women representatives often exhibit lower participation in mixed training settings due to social conditioning and hesitation; therefore, creating supportive and inclusive learning environments is essential for enhancing engagement and confidence.

Closely linked to capacity-building is the urgent need to address the gendered digital divide, which has emerged as a significant barrier in the context of expanding e-governance systems. As governance increasingly shifts towards digital platforms, the ability to access and utilise technology becomes central to effective participation. However, disparities in digital access and literacy continue to exclude many women representatives from these processes. Bridging this divide requires targeted interventions, including the provision of affordable digital devices, expansion of rural internet infrastructure, and the introduction of structured digital literacy programmes tailored specifically for women in governance roles. Evidence from grassroots experiences suggests that when women are equipped with digital tools, they are better able to access information, monitor development programmes, and engage with citizens more

effectively. Therefore, digital inclusion must be viewed not merely as a technological intervention but as a core component of democratic empowerment.

In addition to individual capacity enhancement, strengthening collective support systems is essential for sustaining women's participation in governance. Self-help groups (SHGs) have emerged as important platforms for fostering women's socio-economic and political agency. Women associated with SHGs often demonstrate higher levels of political awareness, stronger networks, and greater confidence in decision-making. Institutionalising linkages between PRIs and SHGs can create a supportive ecosystem that enhances both governance outcomes and women's leadership. Successful models, such as the Kudumbashree initiative in Kerala, illustrate how convergence between community networks and governance structures can facilitate more effective policy implementation and grassroots mobilisation.

At the same time, addressing the issue of proxy representation is critical to preserving the integrity of democratic processes. Despite formal inclusion, many women representatives continue to face interference from male family members, which undermines their autonomy and reduces governance effectiveness. This necessitates the establishment of institutional monitoring mechanisms to ensure that elected representatives are able to exercise their authority independently. Regular audits of participation, strengthened grievance redressal systems, and legal safeguards against unauthorised interference can help address this issue. Equally important are community-level awareness initiatives aimed at challenging entrenched gender norms that legitimise proxy leadership.

Reforms in the design of the reservation system are also necessary to enhance long-term political empowerment. The current practice of rotating reserved seats, while intended to broaden participation, often disrupts leadership continuity and prevents women from building sustained political careers. Allowing women to serve multiple consecutive terms in reserved constituencies would enable them to accumulate administrative experience, strengthen their political networks, and improve their prospects for re-election. Furthermore, encouraging political parties to nominate women in unreserved seats is essential for facilitating their transition to higher levels of governance, thereby addressing the observed disparity between local and state-level representation.

Economic constraints constitute another significant barrier to women's participation in politics. Many women representatives come from economically weaker backgrounds and face financial challenges both in contesting elections and performing their roles effectively. Providing financial support mechanisms, such as state funding for candidates or increased remuneration for elected representatives, can reduce these barriers and incentivise greater participation. In parallel, strengthening fiscal decentralisation is essential to enhance the functional autonomy of PRIs. Without adequate financial resources, even well-intentioned leadership remains constrained in its ability to deliver meaningful development outcomes.

Institutional environments within governance structures must also be made more gender-sensitive. The predominance of men in administrative and bureaucratic roles often creates additional barriers for women representatives, particularly those with limited prior exposure to public institutions. Increasing the representation of women in administrative positions, along with implementing gender-sensitisation programmes for officials and elected representatives, can help create a more inclusive and supportive working environment. The emergence of federations of elected women representatives in certain states further demonstrates the potential of collective platforms in amplifying women's voices and addressing shared challenges; such initiatives should be actively supported and scaled.

Finally, the availability of reliable and disaggregated data is essential for informed policy-making. While aggregate data on women's representation is available, there is a lack of detailed, region-specific information on the challenges faced by women representatives. Developing comprehensive data systems that capture variations across regions, socio-economic backgrounds, and levels of digital access would enable more targeted and effective policy interventions. Data-driven approaches are particularly important in a diverse country like India, where governance outcomes are shaped by local contexts.

In conclusion, the effective empowerment of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions requires a holistic policy framework that integrates capacity-building, digital inclusion, institutional reform, and socio-cultural transformation. Only by addressing these interconnected dimensions can India move beyond

symbolic representation and ensure that women's participation in governance translates into meaningful and sustained political agency.

## Conclusion

India's experience with gender-based reservations in local governance represents a significant milestone in advancing inclusive democracy. The expansion of women's representation in Panchayati Raj Institutions has not only altered the composition of political institutions but has also contributed to more responsive and development-oriented governance at the grassroots level. These achievements underscore the importance of affirmative policy interventions in addressing historical gender disparities in political participation.

However, as this paper demonstrates, the presence of women in governance does not automatically translate into empowerment. The persistence of structural inequalities, institutional limitations, and emerging technological divides continues to shape the extent and effectiveness of women's participation. The gap between representation and authority, particularly evident in the contrast between local and higher levels of governance, highlights the limitations of a purely quota-based approach.

Moving forward, the challenge lies in transforming participation into sustained political agency. This requires a shift towards a more holistic policy framework that integrates capacity-building, institutional strengthening, and digital inclusion with broader socio-cultural change. In particular, bridging the gender digital divide will be crucial in ensuring that women are not excluded from evolving governance systems in an increasingly technology-driven environment.

Ultimately, strengthening women's political empowerment is not only a matter of representation but a prerequisite for achieving equitable, inclusive, and effective governance. By enabling women to actively shape policy processes and decision-making, India can move closer to realising the full potential of its democratic institutions and ensuring that governance outcomes reflect the needs and aspirations of all sections of society.

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