EMPOWERING WOMEN THROUGH LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO INDIA AND TELANGANA

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Abstract

Women's empowerment constitutes a foundational pillar of inclusive growth and sustainable development. Despite representing nearly half of the global population, women remain significantly underrepresented in leadership positions across political, corporate, and institutional domains due to deeply entrenched structural, cultural, and socio-institutional barriers. Leadership development has emerged as an indispensable strategy for bridging this gap, enabling women to participate effectively in decision-making processes and governance. This paper offers a comprehensive analysis of the role of leadership development in strengthening women's empowerment, with particular focus on India and the state of Telangana. Drawing upon secondary data from the Election Commission of India, the Census of India 2011, World Economic Forum Gender Gap Reports, and peer-reviewed academic literature, the study examines women's representation across legislative bodies, including the Lok Sabha, Rajya Sabha, Telangana Legislative Assembly, and Telangana Legislative Council. The findings demonstrate a gradual but insufficient improvement in women's political participation over two decades. The study further identifies key structural barriers to women's leadership and proposes evidence-based policy recommendations for advancing gender equity in leadership. Empowering women through leadership development is not merely a social justice imperative but a critical driver of democratic governance, economic growth, and sustainable national development.

1. INTRODUCTION

Gender equality and women's empowerment have long been recognized as central to the achievement of just and sustainable societies. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 5 (Gender Equality) and Goal 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), explicitly affirm the necessity of ensuring women's full and effective participation in leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic, and public life (United Nations, 2015). Despite decades of legislative reforms, awareness campaigns, and institutional interventions, women continue to occupy a disproportionately small share of leadership roles across the world and particularly in South Asian contexts.

In India, the paradox of gender inequality is especially pronounced. On one hand, ancient Indian scriptures celebrated the dignity and centrality of women in social life. The celebrated verse from the Manusmriti — Yatra naryastu pujyante ramante tatra devatah — meaning 'Where women are worshipped, there the gods rejoice' — reflects the ethical and philosophical esteem accorded to women in classical Indian thought (Sharma, 2005). On the other hand, historical practices of patriarchy, caste-based discrimination, and structural exclusion have persistently marginalized women from positions of public authority and leadership.

Contemporary India presents a complex and contradictory picture. Women have achieved remarkable milestones — serving as President, Prime Minister, Chief Ministers, ambassadors, scientists, and military officers — yet they remain severely underrepresented in legislative bodies, corporate boardrooms, and administrative hierarchies. The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report (2023) ranked India 127th out of 146 countries in overall gender parity, with particularly poor

performance in political empowerment indicators, reflecting the persistent structural inequalities that prevent women from ascending to leadership positions.

Leadership development has thus emerged as a critical intervention strategy. Scholars such as Eagly and Carli (2007) argue that women face a 'labyrinth' of challenges in their journey to leadership — a complex web of social biases, organizational barriers, and personal constraints — and that systematic investment in leadership development programs can substantially dismantle these barriers. Similarly, Kabeer (1999) posits that genuine women's empowerment entails not only access to resources but the development of agency — the capacity to make meaningful choices and act upon them — which leadership development directly fosters.

Against this backdrop, the present study examines the contemporary state of women's representation in India's major legislative bodies, with special reference to the state of Telangana. It analyses trends across five general elections and three state assembly elections, situates these trends within broader theoretical frameworks of empowerment and leadership, and proposes concrete strategies for accelerating women's leadership development in the Indian context.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study is guided by the following specific objectives:

- To analyse women's representation in national and state legislative bodies in India from 2004 to 2024.
- To examine trends in women's political participation in the Telangana Legislative Assembly and Council.
- To explore the theoretical and conceptual dimensions of leadership development as a strategy for women's empowerment.
- To identify the structural, institutional, and socio-cultural barriers inhibiting women's access to leadership positions.
- To propose evidence-based strategies and policy recommendations for strengthening women's leadership development in India.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology based on secondary data analysis. The research employs a descriptive and analytical design, examining existing data on women's political representation and interpreting it within the framework of empowerment theory and leadership studies. The method is consistent with established approaches in social science research where primary data collection is supplemented or replaced by rigorous secondary analysis (Bryman, 2016).

3.1 Sources of Data

The study draws upon the following secondary sources:

- Election Commission of India — Statistical Reports on General Elections to the House of the People (2004–2024) and State Legislative Assemblies.
- Census of India 2011 — Primary Census Abstracts and gender-disaggregated population data.
- World Economic Forum — Global Gender Gap Reports (2020–2023).
- Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) — Women in National Parliaments databases.
- Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India — Annual Reports.
- Peer-reviewed academic journals, including the Indian Journal of Gender Studies, Economic and Political Weekly, and International Journal of Research in Social Sciences.

3.2 Method of Analysis

Data were analysed using descriptive statistical methods and comparative trend analysis. Percentages and frequency distributions were used to measure and compare women's representation across legislative bodies and electoral cycles. The qualitative analysis draws upon theoretical frameworks from feminist leadership scholarship, development economics, and political science.

4. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND LEADERSHIP

The concept of women's empowerment is multidimensional, encompassing economic, social, political, and psychological dimensions. Kabeer (1999) defines empowerment as the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such ability. From this perspective, leadership development is not merely a professional training intervention; it is a transformative process that enables women to claim agency, voice, and authority in both public and private domains.

Rowlands (1997) identifies three dimensions of empowerment — personal (developing confidence and capabilities), relational (developing the ability to negotiate and influence), and collective (working with others to achieve greater impact). Leadership development programs that address all three dimensions are particularly effective in catalyzing women's empowerment at the individual, community, and societal levels.

From the perspective of political theory, Pitkin's (1967) concept of 'descriptive representation' holds that legislative bodies should mirror the composition of the population they represent. Given that women constitute approximately 48.46 percent of India's population (Census of India, 2011), their proportional representation in Parliament and state legislatures should approach parity. The persistent gap between demographic proportion and political representation signals a systemic failure that leadership development policies must address.

Norris and Inglehart (2001) advance a 'cultural' theory of women's political participation, arguing that societies with more egalitarian gender norms tend to elect more women to positions of power. This suggests that leadership development must be accompanied by broader cultural transformation — challenging patriarchal norms, stereotypes about women's competence in public life, and discriminatory institutional practices.

The McKinsey Global Institute (2015) estimated that advancing women's equality in India could add USD 700 billion to the country's GDP by 2025. This economic argument reinforces the case that investing in women's leadership development is not merely a moral imperative but a pragmatic strategy for national development. Women in leadership positions have been demonstrated to bring diverse perspectives, foster inclusive decision-making, and drive organizational performance (Catalyst, 2020).

5. WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN INDIAN PARLIAMENT

5.1 Women in the Lok Sabha (2004–2024)

The Lok Sabha, or House of the People, is the lower house of the Indian Parliament and the primary elected legislative chamber. The representation of women in the Lok Sabha across five successive general elections from 2004 to 2024 is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Women's Representation in the Lok Sabha (2004–2024)

Sl. No	Election Year (Lok Sabha)	Total MPs	Men MPs	Women MPs	Women (%)
01	2004 (14th LS)	543	498	45	8.3%
02	2009 (15th LS)	543	484	59	10.9%
03	2014 (16th LS)	543	479	64	11.8%
04	2019 (17th LS)	543	465	78	14.3%
05	2024 (18th LS)	543	469	74	13.6%

Source: Election Commission of India, Statistical Reports on General Elections (2004–2024)

The data in Table 1 reveal a gradual but uneven improvement in women's representation in the Lok Sabha over twenty years. In 2004, only 45 women were elected to the 543-member house, constituting a mere 8.3 percent of total membership. This figure progressively increased through successive elections, reaching a historic high of 78 women MPs (14.3 percent)

in the 2019 elections. However, the 2024 elections witnessed a marginal decline, with 74 women MPs accounting for 13.6 percent of the total.

While the overall trend is positive, the numbers remain far below the global average. The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU, 2024) reports that the global average of women in national parliaments stands at approximately 26.9 percent. India's representation of 13.6 percent in 2024 is less than half of this benchmark, underscoring the urgent need for structural reforms, including legislative reservations and institutional support mechanisms for women candidates.

Scholars such as Deshpande and Bhavnani (2019) have noted that affirmative action policies in local governance — specifically the constitutional reservation of one-third of seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions under the 73rd Constitutional Amendment (1992) — have dramatically increased women's participation at the grassroots level. However, similar provisions do not extend to Parliament and state legislatures, resulting in the persistent gap observed in Table 1.

5.2 Women in the Rajya Sabha (2004–2024)

The Rajya Sabha, or Council of States, is the upper house of the Indian Parliament. Members are elected by elected members of state legislative assemblies through proportional representation, and twelve members are nominated by the President for their expertise in literature, science, art, and social service. Each member serves a six-year term, with one-third retiring every two years.

Table 2: Women's Representation in the Rajya Sabha (2004–2024)

Sl. No	Year	Total MPs	Men MPs	Women MPs	Women (%)
01	2004	245	217	28	11.4%
02	2009	245	219	26	10.6%
03	2014	245	214	31	12.7%
04	2019	245	218	27	11.0%
05	2024	245	211	34	13.8%

Source: Election Commission of India; Rajya Sabha Secretariat (2024)

Women's representation in the Rajya Sabha has fluctuated between 10.6 percent and 13.8 percent over the period 2004 to 2024, as shown in Table 2. In 2024, women held 34 of 245 seats (13.8 percent), the highest representation recorded in the upper house during the reference period. Despite this, the Rajya Sabha too remains far below international benchmarks for gender parity in national legislative bodies.

The pattern of fluctuation — with representation declining in 2009 and 2019 before recovering in subsequent years — suggests the absence of a systematic institutional mechanism to guarantee or progressively improve women's presence in the upper house. The Women's Reservation Bill, which provides for 33 percent reservation of seats for women in the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies, was passed by Parliament as the Constitution (106th Amendment) Act in September 2023; however, its implementation is tied to the completion of a fresh delimitation exercise, which means effective implementation remains pending (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2023).

6. WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN TELANGANA

6.1 Women in the Telangana Legislative Assembly (2014–2023)

The state of Telangana was formally carved out of Andhra Pradesh on June 2, 2014, as India's 29th state. The Telangana Legislative Assembly comprises 119 seats. Table 3 presents the representation of women in the Assembly across three election cycles since the state's formation.

Table 3: Women's Representation in the Telangana Legislative Assembly (2014–2023)

Sl.No	Election Year	Total MLAs	Men MLAs	Women MLAs	Women (%)
01	2014	119	110	09	7.56%
02	2018	119	113	06	5.04%
03	2023	119	109	10	8.62%

Source: Election Commission of India, Telangana State Assembly Election Reports (2014, 2018, 2023)

Table 3 reveals a deeply concerning picture of women's political representation in the Telangana Legislative Assembly. In 2014, the first elections held after the state's bifurcation, only 9 women MLAs were elected, constituting 7.56 percent of the total membership. This percentage declined sharply in 2018, when only 6 women won seats — a representation of 5.04 percent, the lowest across all three election cycles. Although 2023 showed a marginal improvement with 10 women MLAs (8.62 percent), the overall trend reflects structural barriers that consistently limit women's political participation.

These figures are particularly stark given that Telangana's estimated female population constitutes approximately 50 percent of the state's total population (Census of India, 2011). The persistent underrepresentation of women in the state assembly signals systemic issues including reluctance of political parties to field women candidates, limited campaign finance for women aspirants, and the persistence of patriarchal norms in political culture (Lovenduski, 2005). Studies on Telangana's political landscape have highlighted that women's participation in electoral politics is often mediated through family connections, with many women candidates being wives, daughters, or sisters of established male politicians — a phenomenon sometimes termed 'dynastic representation' (Bhavnani, 2009).

6.2 Women in the Telangana Legislative Council (2014–2023)

The Telangana Legislative Council is the upper house of the state legislature. It comprises 40 members who serve six-year terms, with one-third retiring every two years. Members are elected through multiple constituencies, including graduate and teachers' constituencies, elected by members of the legislative assembly, and nominated by the Governor.

Table 4: Women's Representation in the Telangana Legislative Council (2014–2023)

Sl.No	Year	Total MLCs	Men MLCs	Women MLCs	Women (%)
01	2014	40	39	01	2.5%
02	2018	40	38	02	5.0%
03	2023	40	37	03	7.5%

Source: Telangana Legislative Council Secretariat; Election Commission of India (2023)

The data in Table 4 reveal even more pronounced underrepresentation of women in the Telangana Legislative Council. In 2014, only a single woman MLC was present among 40 members, amounting to a mere 2.5 percent representation. Though there has been a steady increase to 2 women in 2018 and 3 in 2023, the absolute numbers remain negligible. With women constituting 7.5 percent of the Council in 2023, the upper house of Telangana's legislature presents one of the most skewed gender compositions in Indian legislative bodies. This underscores the need for institutional reform and targeted affirmative action policies at the state level.

7. DEMOGRAPHIC CONTEXT: CENSUS DATA AND VOTER REPRESENTATION

7.1 India's Population by Gender (Census 2011)

Table 5: India's Population by Gender — Census of India 2011

Sl.No	Gender	Population	Percentage (%)
01	Male	62,37,24,248	51.54%
02	Female	58,64,69,174	48.46%
03	Total	1,21,08,54,977	100%

Source: Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, India — Census of India 2011

As shown in Table 5, India's total population as per the 2011 Census stood at 1,210,854,977 (approximately 121.08 crore). Of this, males numbered 62,37,24,248 (51.54 percent) and females 58,64,69,174 (48.46 percent). The national sex ratio was recorded at 943 females per 1,000 males, indicating a pre-existing demographic imbalance. The overall literacy rate stood at 74.04 percent; however, the female literacy rate was significantly lower at 65.46 percent compared to 82.14 percent for males (Census of India, 2011). This literacy gap has direct implications for women's political awareness, mobilization, and capacity to participate in leadership roles.

7.2 Registered Voters in India by Gender (2004–2024)

Table 6: Registered Voters in India by Gender (2004–2024)

Sl.No	Election Year	Men Voters (Crore)	Women Voters (Crore)	Total Voters (Crore)
01	2004	34.98	32.16	67.14
02	2009	37.41	34.28	71.69
03	2014	43.70	39.70	83.41
04	2019	48.50	43.10	91.60
05	2024	49.70	47.10	97.80

Source: Election Commission of India, Electoral Roll Statistics (2004–2024)

Table 6 demonstrates a consistent and significant increase in the number of registered women voters across five general election cycles. Women voters grew from 32.16 crore in 2004 to 47.10 crore in 2024 — an increase of nearly 47 percent over two decades. The gender gap in voter registration has also been progressively narrowing, from a difference of 2.82 crore in 2004 to 2.60 crore in 2024.

This trend reflects improvements in women's political consciousness, literacy, and civic engagement. The Election Commission of India has systematically worked to include more women in electoral rolls through targeted campaigns and special drives. Significantly, in certain states, women's voter turnout has actually exceeded that of men in recent elections, demonstrating that women are not passive participants in democracy but are increasingly asserting their democratic rights (Lokniti-CSDS, 2019). However, the paradox remains: while women are growing as a force among the electorate, their representation as elected legislators has not risen commensurately.

8. BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN INDIA

Despite growing awareness and institutional support, women in India continue to face formidable barriers to leadership. Understanding these barriers is essential for designing effective interventions. The literature identifies the following categories of obstacles:

8.1 Structural and Institutional Barriers

Structural barriers include the absence of gender-sensitive laws and policies, limited access to finance for women candidates, the high cost of electoral campaigns, and the dominance of established political families and party hierarchies. The lack of legislative representation for women in Parliament and state assemblies (before the 2023 amendment, which is yet to be implemented) has been a significant structural gap. Research by Deshpande and Bhavnani (2019) demonstrates that mandatory reservation policies at the local governance level have been the primary driver of women's increased participation in Panchayati Raj, underlining the efficacy of affirmative action mechanisms.

8.2 Cultural and Social Barriers

Patriarchal social norms, gender stereotypes, and deeply embedded expectations regarding women's roles as primarily domestic caregivers create an unsupportive environment for women aspiring to leadership. Chafetz and Dworkin (1986) argue that societies with rigid gender hierarchies actively suppress women's access to power through both formal and informal means. In the Indian context, caste-based discrimination intersects with gender to create compounded disadvantages for women from marginalized communities (Deshpande, 2011). Family opposition to women's public roles, particularly in conservative and rural settings, remains a significant deterrent.

8.3 Violence and Intimidation

Political violence, intimidation, and harassment disproportionately affect women politicians and candidates. The fear of physical violence, sexual harassment, and online abuse discourages many women from entering political life (UN Women, 2018). Studies in India have documented that women candidates and elected representatives face systematic intimidation, threats, and character assassination — challenges that male candidates rarely confront at comparable levels.

8.4 Organizational and Professional Barriers

In professional and corporate contexts, women face what Eagly and Carli (2007) term the 'leadership labyrinth' — a complex network of biases, double standards, and organizational practices that impede women's advancement. The absence of mentors and role models, inflexible work arrangements, and implicit bias in promotion decisions collectively suppress women's career progression into leadership positions. The 'glass ceiling' phenomenon — an invisible barrier that prevents qualified women from reaching senior positions — remains operative across public and private sector organizations in India (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2018).

9. LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES FOR WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

Addressing the barriers outlined above requires a comprehensive and multi-pronged approach to women's leadership development. The following strategies, grounded in international best practices and evidence from the Indian context, are proposed:

9.1 Legislative and Policy Reforms

The early and effective implementation of the Constitution (106th Amendment) Act 2023, which reserves 33 percent of seats for women in Parliament and state legislatures, is a critical and non-negotiable first step. The Government should expedite the delimitation exercise to ensure timely enforcement. Additionally, political parties should voluntarily commit to fielding women candidates in at least 33 percent of constituencies, as recommended by the National Commission for Women (2023).

9.2 Education and Capacity Building

Investing in girls' education and women's higher education is foundational to long-term leadership development. Evidence consistently shows that educated women are more likely to enter public life, exercise political agency, and attain leadership positions (UNESCO, 2020). State governments should expand access to scholarships, residential schools, and skill development programs targeting women from rural and marginalized communities, building on successful models like the Telangana Residential Educational Institutions Society (TREIS).

9.3 Mentorship and Networking Programs

Structured mentorship programs that connect emerging women leaders with established mentors in their fields can significantly accelerate leadership development. Organizations like the National Women's Leadership Network and state-level Women's Development Corporations can play a facilitative role in creating peer networks, leadership training camps, and public-speaking programs that build women's confidence and political literacy (Catalyst, 2020).

9.4 Economic Empowerment and Financial Inclusion

Economic independence is a prerequisite for political and social empowerment. Expanding women's access to microcredit, Self-Help Group banking linkages, and entrepreneurship support programs enhances their financial autonomy and reduces economic dependence on male family members — a key determinant of women's ability to exercise independent choices. The NRLM-Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana and state SHG federations represent effective platforms for integrating leadership training with economic empowerment initiatives.

9.5 Awareness and Cultural Change

Long-term cultural transformation requires sustained public education campaigns that challenge gender stereotypes and promote positive representations of women in leadership. Schools, community organizations, media, and civil society must work in concert to reshape social attitudes about women's roles and capabilities. Evidence from Scandinavian countries demonstrates that cultural change, supported by policy reform, can dramatically improve gender parity in leadership over time (WEF, 2023).

10. SUGGESTIONS

Based on the analysis of data and review of literature, the following specific recommendations are offered to accelerate women's empowerment through leadership development in India and Telangana:

- Implement the Women's Reservation Act (2023) at the earliest opportunity by expediting the delimitation exercise and conducting a Census-based delimitation as required by law.
- Mandate political parties to field women candidates in a minimum of 33 percent of constituencies, with financial incentives for parties that exceed this threshold.
- Establish dedicated Women's Leadership Academies at the state level, offering training in public speaking, governance, legislative processes, financial management, and conflict resolution.

- Universalize girls' secondary and higher education, with special focus on tribal, rural, and Dalit communities, through scholarships, residential institutions, and community mobilization.
- Strengthen and expand SHG-based women's federations as platforms for grassroots leadership training and political mobilization.
- Introduce gender-responsive budgeting across all government departments to ensure adequate allocation of resources for women's empowerment programs.
- Develop robust legal frameworks to address violence, intimidation, and harassment of women politicians and public servants.
- Ensure representation of women in proportion to their population in all government advisory bodies, committees, and public institutions.

11. CONCLUSION

The analysis presented in this paper affirms that while India has made measurable progress in expanding women's participation in legislative bodies over the past two decades, the pace and scale of change remain deeply inadequate. Women's representation in the Lok Sabha has grown from 8.3 percent in 2004 to 13.6 percent in 2024 — a modest improvement that still leaves India far below the global parliamentary average of 26.9 percent. The situation in Telangana is particularly concerning, with women constituting less than 10 percent of the Legislative Assembly and a negligible 7.5 percent of the Legislative Council.

Empowering women through leadership development is not a matter of charity or tokenism; it is a structural imperative for democratic legitimacy and sustainable development. When women participate equally in leadership, governance outcomes improve, social justice priorities receive greater attention, and development policies become more responsive to the needs of the entire population. The evidence from Panchayati Raj institutions demonstrates that legislative reservation can dramatically increase women's participation — a lesson that must be urgently applied at the state and national legislative levels.

The path forward requires a confluence of policy reform, institutional capacity building, cultural transformation, and economic empowerment. The Constitution (106th Amendment) Act 2023 offers a historic opportunity; its timely and effective implementation will be a defining test of India's commitment to gender equality. Complementing this legal reform with investments in education, mentorship, and leadership training will create the enabling conditions for women to fulfil their vast and currently unrealized potential as leaders, innovators, and architects of India's development.

As Mahatma Gandhi famously observed, 'To call woman the weaker sex is a libel; it is man's injustice to woman.' Realising the full promise of gender justice demands not only recognizing women's capabilities but actively dismantling the structures that have historically constrained them. The empowerment of women through leadership development is the most powerful investment India can make for its own future.

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