



SC Calls for Reform to Empower Women Leaders

For Prelims: [Supreme Court](#), [Elected Women Representatives](#), [Panchayati Raj Institutions](#), [Pradhan-pati](#), [Self Help Groups](#), [Urban local bodies](#), [Delimitation exercise](#).

For Mains: Gender Equality and Women Empowerment in India, Governance Reforms for Women Leaders, Political Participation of Women in India

[Source: HT](#)

The [Supreme Court \(SC\) of India](#) has called for governance reforms to **empower female elected representatives** and protect their autonomy. It highlighted **systemic gender bias, bureaucratic overreach**, and **discriminatory practices** that undermine women in leadership roles.

- SC urges for introspection and structural changes to promote gender equality in governance.

What are the Challenges Faced by Women Leaders in Governance?

- **Systemic Discrimination:** [Elected Women Representatives \(EWRs\) of India's Panchayati Raj Institutions \(PRIs\)](#) are often treated as subordinates to bureaucrats, who frequently ignore their legitimacy.
 - Bureaucrats may overstep their roles, making **unilateral decisions** without consulting elected representatives, thereby undermining the democratic process.
 - This power imbalance stifles the decision-making capabilities of elected representatives, particularly women.
- **Sarpanch-Patism:** Also known as [pradhan-pati](#), practice where **husbands of elected women panchayat leaders exercise power**, undermining women's autonomy and leadership. This reinforces [patriarchy](#) and weakens the intent of the **73rd Constitutional Amendment** (women's reservation in panchayats) to empower women.
- **Political Barriers:** Women leaders often face **limited financial support** and fewer **political connections** compared to their male counterparts.
 - Political parties may allocate fewer resources to female candidates, making it more difficult for them to **run for office and gain recognition**.
 - Additionally, most female leaders in PRIs hold office for only a single term due to limited resources, which hinders their ability to participate again.
- **Violence and Intimidation:** Female leaders may **face threats, harassment, and violence**, which can prevent them from fully engaging in their roles.
 - Administrative authorities and panchayat members often team up to take revenge against female leaders.
- **Neglect of Principles of Natural Justice:** The removal of elected female representatives undermines democratic norms and fairness by denying them a **fair hearing and making opaque decisions**, perpetuating discrimination and biased practices in governance.
- **Structural Barriers:** Delayed work orders and procedural hurdles obstruct women's developmental initiatives, discouraging their participation in governance.

What is the Role of Women in Governance?

- **Promotes Gender Equality:** Women's participation in governance addresses long-standing gender disparities, promoting equality in decision-making processes.
 - It challenges societal norms that limit [women's roles to the private sphere](#), ensuring representation in public and political domains.
- **Enhances Policy Outcomes:** Women bring diverse perspectives rooted in their lived experiences, leading to more comprehensive and empathetic policymaking.
 - For instance, EWRs in Rajasthan have been actively promoting environmental sustainability through initiatives aligned with the [Swachh Bharat Abhiyan](#) and efforts to [curb plastic usage](#), contributing to a cleaner and greener future.
 - Women leaders are often **perceived as less corrupt** and more committed to their responsibilities, fostering transparency and **trust in public administration**.
 - Their inclusion ensures the formulation of [gender-sensitive policies](#), addressing issues like **maternal health, workplace equity, and education**.
- **Encourages Grassroots Participation:** Women's involvement in local governance inspires other women to participate, creating a **ripple effect of empowerment**. This involvement also assists in the growth of [Self-Help Groups \(SHGs\)](#), thereby improving livelihoods.
 - India's above 44% participation of EWRs in local governance demonstrates the success of seat reservations and women-centric policies.
- **Addresses Gender-Based Violence:** Women leaders play a critical role in addressing [domestic violence](#), [child marriage](#), and other gender-based issues.
 - **For instance**, according to the Ministry of Women and Child Development **2 lakh child marriages were prevented in 2023**. EWRs were found to have intervened to stop abuse reported by women in their constituencies.
- **Supports Democratic Values:** Women's involvement strengthens democratic principles by ensuring that half the population has a **voice in policy-making**. It upholds social justice and the right to equal representation in political processes.

Women's Representation in India's Governance

- **Parliament:** In the **Lok Sabha**, women's representation has risen from 5-10% until 2004 to 13.6% in the 18th Lok Sabha (2024- Present), while in the [Rajya Sabha](#), it stands at 13%.
 - The number of women contesting elections has increased significantly, **from 45 women candidates in 1957 to 799 (9.5% of total candidates) in 2024**.
- **State Legislatures:** The national average of **women's representation in State Legislative Assemblies** is just 9%, with no state exceeding 20% female legislators. Chhattisgarh has the highest at 18%.
- **Panchayati Raj Institution:** According to a 2024 report by the [Reserve Bank of India \(RBI\)](#), 45.6% of the total representatives of PRIs are EWRs.
- **Urban Local Bodies:** In India, 46% of councillors are women, with over 60% in 19 of 21 capital cities with active urban local bodies.
- **Global Scenario:** India ranks **143 out of 185 countries** in terms of women's representation in the lower house of Parliament.

What are India's Efforts to Promote Women in Governance?

- **Reservation in Panchayats:** The [73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992](#) mandates that one-third of the seats in **Panchayats (local government bodies)** are reserved for women, including the positions of chairpersons.
- **Reservation in Urban Local Bodies:** Similar to the Panchayats, the **74th Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992** ensures one-third reservation for women in urban local bodies, such as municipalities.
- **Women's Reservation Act, 2023:** The legislation under the [106th Constitutional Amendment \(2023\)](#) mandates the reservation of one-third of all seats in the Lok Sabha, and state legislative assemblies for women.

- The reservation will be implemented after the **first census** following the commencement of the **106th Amendment Act** including a [delimitation exercise](#).
- **National Commission for Women (NCW):** Established in 1992, the [NCW](#) works to protect and promote the interests of women, including those in governance roles.
- **Supportive Legislation:** Laws such as the [Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005](#), and the [Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace \(Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal\) Act, 2013](#), provide a safer environment for women to participate in governance.
- **Initiatives:**
 - **Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan (RGSA):** Launched in 2018, [RGSA](#) aims to strengthen PRIs' capacity for responsive rural governance, using technology and resources to promote sustainable solutions and incentivize women's participation.
 - **Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP):** [GPDP guidelines](#) promote women's empowerment through active participation in budgeting, planning, implementation, and monitoring, including [Mahila Sabhas before Gram Sabhas](#).

WOMEN

Reservation Act, 2023

(106th Constitutional Amendment Act)

OBJECTIVE

- Reserve 1/3rd of total seats in LS and state Legislative Assemblies (LAs) for women

BACKGROUND

- Bill previously introduced in: 1996, 1998, 2009, 2010, 2014
- Related Committees:
 - » Committee on the Status of Women in India (1971)
 - » Committee under Margaret Alva (1987)
 - » Geeta Mukherjee Committee (1996)
 - » Committee on the Status of Women (2013)

Key Features

- **Articles Inserted:**
 - Article 330A – Reservation for Women in LS
 - Article 332A – Reservation for Women in State LAs
 - Article 239AA – Reservation for Women in NCT of Delhi
 - Article 334A – Reservations to become effective after delimitation is undertaken and Census is conducted
- **Time Period:**
 - Reservation to be provided for 15 years (can be extended)
- **Rotation of Seats Reserved:**
 - After each delimitation

NEED

- Political Underrepresentation:
 - » Only **82 Women MPs in LS (15.2%)** and 31 in RS (13%)
 - » On avg, women constitute only **9% of the total members in State LAs**

ARGUMENTS

- In Favour:
 - » Vital step towards gender equality
 - » Broader range of perspectives to the decision-making process
 - » Helps eliminate discrimination against women in political/public life
- Against:
 - » Delimitation based on 2021 census (yet to be conducted) is mandatory
 - » No women's reservation in RS and State Legislative Councils

STEPS AHEAD

- Reservation for women within political parties
- Independent political decision-making by women; overcoming Sarpanch-patrim





Way Forward

- **Structural Reforms:** Redesign governance frameworks to ensure **equal treatment of elected**

representatives and bureaucrats. Strengthen accountability mechanisms to prevent **misuse of administrative power.**

- **Technology Integration:** Utilize digital platforms to monitor attendance, and engagement of women leaders. Mobile applications for voicing women's issues and ensuring grassroots accountability.
- **Promotion of Women's Leadership:** Encourage capacity-building initiatives for female leaders, especially in rural areas. Provide **mentorship and support** to help them navigate systemic challenges.
 - Increase female representation in Panchayat roles (e.g., Panchayat Secretary) by selecting candidates from forums like [Self Help Groups](#). Implement monitoring mechanisms to **limit male interference.**
- **Inclusive Governance Practices:** Ensure fair representation of women in decision-making bodies at all levels. Foster a culture of collaboration between **elected representatives and administrative authorities.**
- **Legal Safeguards:** Introduce stringent penalties for violations of principles of [natural justice](#) in cases of elected representatives. Develop grievance redressal mechanisms to address systemic harassment promptly.

Drishti Mains Question:

Q. Discuss the challenges faced by women leaders in governance and suggest reforms that could promote their active participation in the political process.

UPSC Civil Services Examination Previous Year Question

Mains

Q.1 What are the continued challenges for Women in India against time and space? **(2019)**

Q.2 Discuss the desirability of greater representation to women in the higher judiciary to ensure diversity, equity and inclusiveness. **(2021)**