

Reservation Deferred, Representation Denied: The Compound Barriers Facing Women in India's Party Politics

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In various types of political regimes, the presence of women in legislatures not only enhances representational quality but also shapes policy priorities, institutional trust, and the perceived responsiveness of governance. Although the 2024 Indian national election was hailed as the world's largest democratic exercise, it also highlighted the persistent institutional barriers that continue to limit women's entry into party politics.

Of the 1,108 candidates fielded by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Indian National Congress (INC), and their respective alliances, only 165 (14.9%) were women in the 2024 national election ([Election Commission of India, 2024](#)). This figure falls below both global and regional averages especially in gender quota-based systems and reflects not a shortage of women candidates, but conditional access, where women must meet multiple informal criteria to secure party nominations. This article conceptualises these constraints as “compound taxation,” wherein overlapping barriers like dynastic ties, financial capital, and educational attainment systematically limit women’s electoral entry.

Dynastic Pathways and Gendered Access

Dynastic politics have long shaped electoral competition in South Asia, but in India, its gendered consequences are particularly stark. In the 2024 elections, 40.6% of women candidates emerged from political families. Party-level data indicate near parity: 42.2% of BJP’s women candidates and 38.3% of INC’s were dynastic entrants. Among the total pool of 220 dynastic candidates, 67 were women, accounting for approximately 30.5% of all women candidates (based on data compiled by the authors).

By contrast, only 16.2% of male candidates were dynastic. While men can access political opportunities through party organisational work, financial resources, and patronage, women’s entry is disproportionately mediated by familial networks. Dynastic affiliation thus functions less as an advantage and more as a gatekeeping mechanism for women, reinforcing elite capture within their political representation.

This pattern resonates with findings from other political regimes where candidate selection processes are centralised and informal. However, in the Indian case, dynastic succession substitutes for rather than adds to other informal route of party entry.

Wealth Thresholds and Economic Gatekeeping

Financial capital constitutes a second critical filter among candidates with declared assets exceeding ₹500 million (≈ \$5.29 million USD); women are overrepresented compared to men, indicating that extreme wealth compensates for other institutional barriers. This dynamic is particularly evident within the BJP, where the average declared assets of women candidates reach ₹515 million (≈ \$5.45 million USD), approximately 2.8 times higher than the ₹348 million (≈ \$3.68 million USD) average for INC women candidates (based on data compiled from [ADR, 2024](#)). The BJP visibly imposes a higher financial threshold on women than the INC, though both parties nominate women disproportionately from privileged economic backgrounds.

These findings align with broader global trends in candidate selection, where campaign finance requirements and the increasing monetisation of politics disadvantage women, who often have less access to financial resources (Enns-Jedenastik et al. 2017; Herrnson et al. 2003; Cross 1996). In India, however, this economic barrier appears to be more selectively applied, intensifying the constraints on women relative to men.

Education as Conditional Merit

Educational attainment offers a partial counterbalance to deficits in wealth and dynastic access: approximately 41.2% of women candidates hold postgraduate or doctoral degrees, compared to 31.3% of men (based on data compiled from [ADR, 2024](#)). Non-dynastic women, in particular, exhibit higher educational qualifications, suggesting that meritocratic credentials serve as an alternative pathway into politics in both the INC and the BJP.

However, the compensatory capacity of education is asymmetric. Financial capital can compensate for lower qualification, but not vice-versa.

Crucially, there are no observed instances of women candidates who simultaneously lack wealth, dynastic affiliation, and high educational qualifications. This absence overemphasizes the exclusionary nature of candidate selection processes, which effectively eliminate actively involved women party workers from non-elite backgrounds.

Reserved Constituencies and Limited Correctives

Reserved constituencies, which are designed to enhance representation for historically marginalised groups like Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, offer partial relief. Women constituted 31.2% of candidates in reserved seats, compared to 23.5% of men. The BJP allocated 28 of its 131 reserved constituencies to women, while the INC allocated 25 of 122 (based on data compiled from [ADR, 2024](#)).

Although these figures suggest a marginally greater willingness, particularly by the BJP, to field women in reserved seats, the overall impact remains limited. Consequently, reserved seats function as a supplementary rather than a transformative mechanism for gender inclusion in both parties.

Legislative Reform and the Politics of Implementation

The passage of the Women's Reservation Bill in 2023 marked a significant institutional development, mandating 33% reservation for women in the Indian Parliament and state assemblies. The BJP's role in securing unanimous parliamentary approval ahead of the 2024 elections reads as both a substantive reform and a strategic political signal.

However, the Act's implementation was contingent upon delimitation, effectively postponing its operationalisation, and this temporal gap raises questions regarding political commitment, particularly considering the limited efforts by major Indian parties to enhance women's representation in the interim. Regional state parties, including the Samajwadi Party and the Trinamool Congress, have complicated reform efforts, as their reluctance to fully support delimitation-linked measures has delayed implementation of the Women's Reservation Bill at both national and sub-national levels in the April 2026 special parliamentary session.

Implications for Democratic Representation

From an international perspective, the Indian case overemphasizes a critical distinction between formal and substantive inclusion. While legislative measures such as the Women's Reservation Bill 2023 represent an important institutional commitment, they remain insufficient without corresponding reforms in party-level candidate selection. Comparative evidence shows that gender quotas are most effective when combined with intra-party democratisation and transparent nomination procedures.

The concept of "compound taxation" explains the persistent gender gap in political representation by highlighting how informal selection criteria such as dynastic ties, financial resources, and high educational attainment might limit women's access to electoral candidacy. This narrows the pool of viable women candidates and reinforces existing socio-economic gender-based hierarchies. The 2024 national elections suggest a paradox: despite an attempt of legislative progress, including the Women's Reservation Bill 2023, party-level candidate selection remains exclusionary. Both the BJP and the INC exhibit enduring gender biases, indicating limited political will to endorse women candidates. Hence, achieving genuine gender inclusion requires transforming these informal institutional barriers in Indian party politics, not just increasing numerical representation of women.

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