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GENDER AND GRASSROOTS GOVERNANCE: WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT IN INDIA IN COMPARISON WITH NEIGHBOURING COUNTRIES

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Abstract

This article examines women's political participation in local self-government in India and compares it with selected South Asian neighbors—Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and Bhutan. Using a mixed, desk-based comparative approach, it maps constitutional and statutory quota frameworks, participation levels, and early evidence on policy outcomes. India's 73rd/74th Constitutional Amendments (1992–93) catalyzed a dramatic rise in women's representation, with approximately **46%** of elected local representatives now women, supported by state-level 50% reservations in most states/UTs. Nepal's 2015 Constitution and subsequent electoral laws delivered roughly **41%** women across local roles (2017, 2022), while Sri Lanka's 25% local-level quota, Pakistan's province-specific arrangements following the 2001 devolution reforms, Bangladesh's reserved seats at the Union Parishad level, and the Maldives' 33% local quota show varied but significant institutional designs. Bhutan, without legislated quotas, continues to show low female representation at the local executive level. The paper situates these developments within theories of descriptive, substantive and symbolic representation, and discusses persistent constraints (party gate keeping, "proxy" leadership, capacity gaps) alongside documented gains (infrastructure and social service investments, changing aspirations). It concludes with policy recommendations on quota design, candidate pipelines, party reforms, and institutional supports to translate presence into power.

Keywords: gender quotas; local governance; Panchayati Raj; South Asia; descriptive and substantive representation

1. Introduction

Women's presence in local decision-making is normative central to democratic inclusion and instrumentally linked to service delivery that reflects gendered needs. South Asia—home to robust decentralization experiments and gender-quota innovations—offers a natural laboratory to study how institutional design affects women's political incorporation. India's constitutionalism of Panchayat and Municipalities (73rd/74th Amendments) mandated women's reservation, spurring one of the world's largest experiments in local gender quotas. We compare India's trajectory with neighbouring countries that have adopted diverse models—ranging from reserved seats and candidate list quotas to mixed electoral systems—highlighting lessons for translating numeric presence into effective voice.

1.1. Background: Gender and Democracy at the Grassroots

The question of women's participation in governance has gained renewed scholarly and policy attention in the last three decades. Democracy, to be substantive, must reflect not only the presence of men and women in decision-making but also ensure that diverse voices influence public policy outcomes. While national parliaments often attract the most scrutiny, local self-government is arguably more critical in enhancing gender equality, for it directly addresses the day-to-day issues that disproportionately affect women—such as drinking water, sanitation, healthcare, child welfare, and livelihood support. Grassroots political spaces also serve as entry points into political leadership, providing women with vital experience that may enable them to ascend to higher tiers of governance.

Historically, women's participation in politics in South Asia has been constrained by **deep-rooted patriarchal structures**, **gendered division of labour**, and **structural barriers** such as illiteracy, poverty, and exclusion from male-dominated networks of power. While the region has seen prominent women leaders at the national level—from Indira Gandhi in India to Sirimavo Bandaranaike in Sri Lanka and Sheikh Hasina in Bangladesh—these exceptional cases have not translated into widespread political empowerment of women at the grassroots. Instead, women have remained underrepresented, often relegated to symbolic rather than substantive roles. The emergence of legislated quotas for women in local government across South Asia represents an attempt to correct this imbalance.

1.2. India's Transformation through Constitutional Mandates

India's experiment with gender quotas in local governance is globally unparalleled in its scale and ambition. The **73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments of 1992–93** institutionalized Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and Urban Local Bodies (ULBs), mandating that **one-third of seats and chairperson posts** be reserved for women. Many states subsequently enhanced the quota to **50%**, creating the largest affirmative action initiative for women in political history.

As a result, India today has approximately **14.5 lakh elected women representatives (EWRs)** across rural and urban local bodies, constituting nearly **46% of all elected representatives at the grassroots level**. In states such as Bihar, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan, women now constitute a majority in Panchayats, altering the gendered composition of decision-making structures. Beyond sheer numbers, empirical studies have documented shifts in governance priorities when women lead—investments in water supply, sanitation, schools, and welfare schemes are more likely, reflecting gendered experiences and needs. Equally significant, exposure to women leaders has been shown to reduce gender bias, raise aspirations among girls, and increase parental investment in daughters' education.

However, challenges persist. Instances of **proxy representation**—where male relatives informally wield power on behalf of elected women—raise concerns about autonomy. Limited education, lack of political training, and patriarchal social attitudes further constrain women leaders. Moreover, indirect elections to higher tiers of Panchayats (Block and District) sometimes weaken women's authority, as party gate keeping and bureaucratic dominance overshadow grassroots voices. Thus, while India's legal architecture has created unprecedented opportunities for women, translating presence into power remains an ongoing struggle.

1.3. Comparative Regional Context: Neighbouring South Asian Countries

A comparative lens enriches the analysis of India's achievements by situating them within the broader **South Asian experience**, where countries have adopted diverse models of gender quotas and witnessed varied outcomes.

Bangladesh introduced **reserved seats for women in Union Parishads** as early as 1976. A landmark reform in 1997 mandated **direct elections** for these reserved seats, enabling women to secure a grassroots mandate. Today, every Union Parishad has three women members elected directly, yet structural constraints—mobility restrictions, overlapping roles with male councilors, and limited resources—continue to weaken their effectiveness.

Pakistan experimented with ambitious quotas under General Musharraf's **Devolution Plan (2001)**, which reserved **33% of seats** for women in district, tehsil, and union councils. While this briefly catapulted hundreds of thousands of women into local councils, subsequent constitutional changes devolved responsibility to provinces, leading to uneven quota retention. Currently, Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa retain 33%, while Sindh and Punjab apply different formulas. Representation thus varies, with women often marginalized by patronage networks and weak institutional support.

Nepal stands out for its robust constitutional provisions following the **2015 Constitution**. Local election laws mandate the election of women (including Dalit women) at the ward level, and parties must ensure at least one woman candidate in key executive positions such as mayor or deputy mayor. Consequently, women now occupy **around 41% of local posts**, with nearly all deputy mayors being women. This not only guarantees numerical strength but also enhances intersectional representation by including historically marginalised communities.

Sri Lanka, long criticised for its abysmally low female representation (below 2% in local councils pre-2011), passed the **Local Authorities Elections (Amendment) Act of 2017**, ensuring a minimum of **25% women** in local authorities. The 2018 elections marked a dramatic increase in women councillors, though questions remain about enforcement, party list placement, and the substantive influence of women within male-dominated councils.

The Maldives amended its Decentralization **Act** in 2019/2020 to introduce a **33% women's quota** in local councils. The 2020–21 elections saw hundreds of women elected, a breakthrough in a society where political space has traditionally been limited for women.

Bhutan, by contrast, does not have legislated quotas. Women remain underrepresented, with only a small percentage of elected local leaders being female. While government and donor-led initiatives have promoted leadership training and capacity building, progress has been incremental and fragile without legal guarantees.

1.4 Theoretical Rationale: From Numbers to Power

The comparative experience underscores a key question: does increased **descriptive representation** (the number of women) translate into **substantive representation** (policy influence) and **symbolic representation** (norm change)? Scholars such as HANNA PITKIN (1967) and ANNE PHILLIPS (1995) argue that mere numerical presence is insufficient unless women's voices genuinely shape policy agendas. QUOTA design matters—reserved seats, list quotas, placement mandates, and enforcement mechanisms yield different outcomes. Likewise, socio-cultural

contexts—literacy rates, patriarchal norms, party dynamics—mediate how women exercise their roles.

India provides strong evidence of substantive and symbolic effects, as women leaders prioritize gendered concerns and inspire new aspirations. Nepal's inter-sectional quotas suggest pathways for including marginalize women. Conversely, Sri Lanka and Pakistan show that poorly enforced or unstable quota frameworks can limit women's impact despite numerical increases. This variation highlights the importance of institutional design and complementary measures such as training, budgetary support, and party reforms.

1.5 Research Objectives and Contribution

Against this backdrop, this paper seeks to:

Analyse India's trajectory of women's participation in local self-government since the 73rd/74th Amendments, highlighting both successes and challenges.

Compare India's experience with neighbouring South Asian countries (Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Bhutan), identifying similarities and divergences in quota design, participation levels, and governance outcomes.

Assess the translation of descriptive representation into substantive and symbolic empowerment, focusing on governance priorities, community perceptions, and policy responsiveness.

Offer policy recommendations for strengthening women's grassroots participation, drawing on lessons across the region.

This comparative approach contributes to the growing body of literature on gender and governance in two ways. First, it situates India's large-scale experiment within a **regional policy laboratory**, enabling cross-country learning. Second, it bridges theory and practice by moving beyond descriptive statistics to examine the **qualitative dimensions of empowerment**—how women's voices reshape governance agendas and community norms.

1.6. Significance

By situating India within the broader South Asian canvas, the paper demonstrates that grassroots governance reforms are not merely technical interventions but part of a wider struggle for gender justice and democratic deepening. The comparative perspective underscores that while quotas can rapidly increase women's political presence, ensuring **meaningful participation** requires careful institutional design, supportive party structures, and sociocultural change. This makes the study relevant not only to scholars of gender and politics but also to policymakers, development practitioners, and advocates seeking to strengthen inclusive democracy in the Global South.

2. Theoretical Framework

We draw on PITKIN's classic typology—**descriptive**, **substantive**, and **symbolic** representation—to distinguish between women's **numbers** and their **policy influence** and **norm change**. PHILLIPS' "politics of presence" underscores why the composition of assemblies matters for democratic legitimacy, while DAHLERUP's "fast-track" thesis shows how quotas can accelerate parity when combined with enabling conditions (resources, placement rules, party compliance). These frameworks ground our analysis of how different quota designs interact with party systems and local state capacity.

The study of women's participation in grassroots governance can be situated within classical and contemporary theories of political representation. **Pitkin (1967)** provides

the foundational framework by distinguishing between *descriptive*, *substantive*, and *symbolic* representation. Descriptive representation refers to the numerical presence of women in elected bodies, substantive representation relates to their ability to advance women's interests in policy, and symbolic representation concerns the broader societal impact of their presence in political institutions. This tripartite framework is highly relevant to South Asia, where institutional quotas have increased women's descriptive presence but raised questions about their substantive influence.

Building on this, **Phillips (1995)** introduces the idea of a "politics of presence," arguing that democratic representation requires the physical inclusion of women in decision-making institutions, rather than assuming that male representatives can speak for them. This perspective is particularly applicable to India's Panchayati Raj system, where legislated quotas ensure women's presence in governance and symbolically challenge male monopolies in political spaces.

Dahlerup's (1988) "fast-track model" of women's political participation also informs this analysis. In contrast to gradual liberal strategies that expect women's representation to increase over time, the fast-track approach highlights how quotas accelerate entry into political spaces. South Asia exemplifies this model, with quota mechanisms enabling millions of women to assume leadership roles within a short time span.

Furthermore, **Mansbridge (1999)** argues for the necessity of descriptive representation in contexts of historical marginalization. She contends that the lived experiences of excluded groups, including women, provide unique perspectives that enhance democratic legitimacy. In the case of local self-government, women leaders' direct experiences with healthcare, education, and domestic responsibilities influence governance priorities and resource allocation.

Finally, feminist political theorist **Fraser (1997)** extends the debate by emphasizing *participatory parity*. For Fraser, achieving gender equality in governance requires more than numerical representation—it demands institutional reforms that enable women to exercise genuine authority and voice. This approach is crucial in South Asia, where patriarchal norms, party gatekeeping, and weak institutional support often undermine women's effectiveness in office.

Together, these theoretical perspectives provide a composite framework for analyzing women's political participation in grassroots governance. They allow us to assess not only the **extent** of women's presence in local self-government but also the **quality** of their empowerment, as reflected in policy outcomes, institutional influence, and normative change.

3. Methodology

This study uses a **qualitative comparative approach** combined with an **empirical field survey**.

The **comparative analysis** draws on constitutional amendments, electoral acts, government communiques, UN Women datasets, and peer-reviewed scholarship. It focuses on:

(a) **legal design** of quotas and placement rules,
(b) **participation outcomes** in terms of women elected/appointed, and
(c) **early policy effects**, such as shifts in governance priorities.

To complement this, an **empirical survey of 120 elected women representatives** from Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) was conducted. Using a structured questionnaire, the survey examined demographics,

pathways to politics, quota effectiveness, challenges, symbolic/community impact, and policy recommendations.

Quantitative responses were summarized through percentages, while qualitative inputs were thematically analyzed. This **mixed approach** grounds India's experience in the wider South Asian comparative framework, demonstrating how quota-driven descriptive representation interacts with substantive outcomes and symbolic change.

4. India: From Constitutional Mandate to Critical Mass
4.1 Legal Architecture and Scale

The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments institutionalized local self-government and reserved **not less than one-third** of seats and chairperson posts for women in Panchayats and Municipalities. Many states later expanded this to **50%**. As of 2025, official figures indicate **~14.5 lakh** elected women representatives (EWRs)—about **46%** of all local representatives—across roughly 31 lakh seats. **21 states and 2 Union Territories** have legislated **50%** reservation for women in PRIs.

The reservation clause under Article 243D of the Constitution specifically guaranteed that women would hold a **minimum of 33%** of elected positions in local bodies. However, over time, several Indian states—including Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Kerala, Maharashtra, and Rajasthan—moved beyond the constitutional minimum, enacting legislation that increased women's reservation to **50%** (Kumar, 2017). As of 2025, **21 states and 2 Union Territories** have formally adopted the 50% reservation model, thereby creating one of the most extensive affirmative action policies for women in political history (Press Information Bureau [PIB], 2025).

The impact of these provisions has been staggering in terms of scale. India today has nearly **14.5 lakh elected women representatives (EWRs)** across PRIs and ULBs, which accounts for about **46% of the total elected positions** at the grassroots level (PIB, 2025). This numerical transformation has turned India into a global leader in women's local political representation, far surpassing the current global average of **36% women in local government** (UN Women, 2023). In many states, women not only outnumber men in Panchayati Raj bodies but also occupy leadership positions such as sarpanch (village head), pradhan, or chairperson at block and district levels.

The Indian model is unique in two respects. First, it constitutionally mandates reservation across both **rural and urban governance structures**, unlike several other South Asian countries that focus only on village or municipal tiers. Second, it allows states the flexibility to exceed the one-third minimum, which has resulted in a federal mosaic of reservation percentages that collectively push the average closer to parity. This combination of **constitutional guarantee** and **state-level innovation** explains why India has reached a "critical mass" of women in grassroots politics, where their presence is no longer tokenism but systemic.

In essence, the legal framework not only provided a formal entry point for women into politics but also set into motion a social transformation. By institutionalizing women's presence in nearly half of all grassroots positions, the 73rd and 74th Amendments have reconfigured the gendered character of Indian democracy and created an unprecedented experiment in inclusive governance.

4.2 Substantive Effects: What Changes with Women in Office?

A large econometric literature exploits the randomized rotation of reserved seats to identify causal effects:

Public goods alignment: Female-headed councils invest more in women-salient infrastructure such as drinking water, roads near habitations, and sanitation.While the constitutional amendments created space for women's descriptive representation, their true significance lies in the extent to which this presence has reshaped local governance priorities and practices. A large body of empirical research demonstrates that women leaders in Indian Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) have altered patterns of resource allocation, policy responsiveness, and community engagement in ways that reflect their lived experiences and gendered perspectives.Beyond infrastructure and aspirations, women's leadership has also been associated with improved **social sector outcomes**. For instance, **Bardhan, Mookherjee, and Torrado (2010)** found that female sarpanchs were more likely to prioritise health and education programs, while **Afridi, Iversen, and Sharan (2017)** observed better outcomes in maternal health awareness and nutritional schemes in villages with female representation. Women leaders often display greater sensitivity toward welfare entitlements, including child nutrition programs and women's self-help groups, thereby fostering social inclusion.

Norms and aspirations: Exposure to female leaders reduces bias and raises girls' aspirations and educational attainment. One of the most influential contributions in this area is the experimental work by **Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004)**, who analysed randomly reserved village council positions in West Bengal and Rajasthan. They found that female-headed councils invested significantly more in public goods aligned with women's priorities, such as drinking water, roads near residential areas, and sanitation facilities. These findings were corroborated by **Beaman, Chattopadhyay, Duflo, Pande, and Topalova (2009)**, who demonstrated that exposure to women leaders altered villagers' perceptions, reduced gender bias, and increased parental aspirations for girls, especially in education.

These effects qualify as **substantive** and **symbolic** representation gains, not just descriptive parity.Another critical substantive effect is the **symbolic empowerment of women within communities**. The presence of women leaders has challenged entrenched patriarchal attitudes, encouraging ordinary women to participate in gram sabhas (village assemblies) and to articulate concerns that were historically excluded from public discourse (Ban & Rao, 2008). In several states, all-women gram sabhas have become institutionalized, offering safe spaces for deliberation and agenda-setting (Rai, 2011).

Nevertheless, the extent of substantive change is not uniform. Studies also highlight challenges such as the persistence of "proxy leadership," where male relatives informally control decision-making on behalf of elected women (Rai, 2018). Moreover, the effectiveness of women representatives is shaped by **structural variables**, including literacy levels, availability of training, bureaucratic support, and control over discretionary funds (Jha, 2013). Where institutional and social supports are strong, women's presence has translated into tangible governance outcomes; where they are weak, representation risks becoming nominal.

Taken together, these studies suggest that women's entry into grassroots governance in India has produced measurable substantive effects in terms of **policy priorities, public goods provision, and shifts in gender norms**. While the journey toward full empowerment remains uneven, the evidence underscores that the inclusion of women at the local level is not merely symbolic—it has the capacity to transform governance agendas and democratize decision-making processes.

4.3 Persistent Constraints

Challenges include party gatekeeping for powerful posts, capacity gaps, occasional **proxy leadership** ("sarpanch-pati"), and uneven support from local bureaucracies. Recent work argues institutional practices—committee rules, indirect elections to higher tiers—can dilute women's authority more than household patriarchy alone. Addressing these requires reforms beyond quotas (training, staff support, budget discretion). Despite the impressive rise in women's representation at the grassroots level, their substantive empowerment remains uneven across India. Several persistent constraints continue to undermine the transformative potential of constitutional quotas.

A first challenge is **party gatekeeping in the distribution of powerful posts**. Although women are guaranteed representation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and Urban Local Bodies (ULBs), the most influential offices—such as chairpersons of district panchayats or mayors in urban councils—are often monopolized by political parties and male elites. Women are frequently nominated to less influential posts, while party hierarchies limit their upward political mobility (Buch, 2009; Rai, 2018). This reflects broader structural inequalities in candidate selection and intra-party democracy.

Second, **capacity gaps** hinder women's ability to exercise authority. Many elected women representatives (EWRs) come from marginalized socio-economic backgrounds and have limited access to formal education or prior political experience (Jha, 2013). While this demonstrates the democratizing reach of quotas, it also underscores the need for training, mentoring, and institutional support to ensure effective governance. Without such interventions, women may struggle to navigate complex administrative procedures, access resources, or assert their priorities within male-dominated councils.

Third, the problem of **proxy leadership**—often referred to as the "sarpanch-pati" phenomenon—remains a critical barrier. In some cases, male relatives, particularly husbands, informally exercise decision-making power on behalf of elected women (Kumari, 2010). Although this is not universal and should not obscure genuine cases of women's leadership, it does highlight how entrenched patriarchal norms can limit women's autonomy, especially in contexts where cultural expectations continue to discourage women from speaking in public forums.

Fourth, **institutional practices within local government structures** often dilute women's authority. Studies suggest that **committee rules, indirect elections to higher tiers of panchayats, and bureaucratic dominance** can weaken the impact of women's descriptive representation (Chowdhury, 2019). For instance, when executive decisions are routed through committees controlled by male members or when district-level leadership positions are filled indirectly, women's influence is curtailed. In many cases, women leaders encounter passive or obstructive bureaucracies, which limit their ability to direct funds or implement policies (Ban & Rao, 2008).

Recent scholarship further argues that these **institutional constraints** may in fact outweigh the influence of household-level patriarchy. While family resistance and gender norms remain important, it is the design of local institutions—rules governing elections, committees, and budget allocation—that decisively shapes women's ability to act independently (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004; Rao, 2014). Addressing these barriers therefore requires reforms beyond quotas.

Effective strategies include **capacity-building programs** for women leaders, dedicated **staff support** to reduce dependence on male relatives, and greater **budgetary discretion** for female representatives to design and implement local projects. Moreover, reforms to strengthen **direct elections** at higher tiers of PRIs and transparent committee procedures could ensure that women leaders exercise genuine power rather than symbolic representation.

In short, while quotas have created an unprecedented numerical shift, institutional and structural constraints continue to limit the depth of women's empowerment in Indian local governance. Overcoming these challenges is essential to move from mere presence to meaningful political influence.

4.4 Empirical Evidence from Field Survey (n=120)

To complement the comparative and theoretical analysis, an empirical field survey was conducted with **120 women representatives** from local self-government institutions. The objective was to examine their sociolect-demographic background, motivations for entering politics, perceptions of the quota system, challenges faced, and the broader symbolic and substantive impact of their participation.

Question	Response Options	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Q1. Age Group	18–30 years	24	20.0
	31–40 years	32	26.7
	41–50 years	37	30.8
	51+ years	27	22.5
	Total	**120**	**100.0**
Q2. Entry Pathway into Politics	Self-motivation	28	23.3
	Family encouragement	36	30.0
	Party nomination	22	18.3
	Community support	26	21.7
	Others	8	6.7
	Total	**120**	**100.0**
Q3. Motivation for Contesting	Reservation/Quota	40	33.3
	Community service	34	28.3
	Political ambition	18	15.0
	Family influence	20	16.7
	Others	8	6.7
	Total	**120**	**100.0**
Q4. Effectiveness of Quotas	Very high	30	25.0
	High	38	31.7
	Moderate	28	23.3
	Low	16	13.3
	Not effective	8	6.7
	Total	**120**	**100.0**
Q5. Do women leaders influence policy differently?	Strongly Agree	42	35.0

	Agree	48	40.0
	Neutral	16	13.3
	Disagree	10	8.3
	Strongly Disagree	4	3.4
	Total	**120**	**100.0**
Q6. Challenges Faced	Proxy leadership by males	24	20.0
	Lack of training	28	23.3
	Limited financial resources	22	18.3
	Party gatekeeping	18	15.0
	Bureaucratic hurdles	16	13.3
	Social/cultural restrictions	12	10.0
	Total	**120**	**100.0**
Q7. Change in Community Perceptions	Strongly Agree	38	31.7
	Agree	44	36.6
	Neutral	18	15.0
	Disagree	14	11.7
	Strongly Disagree	6	5.0
	Total	**120**	**100.0**
Q8. Change in Girls' Aspirations	Strongly Agree	40	33.3
	Agree	42	35.0
	Neutral	20	16.7
	Disagree	12	10.0
	Strongly Disagree	6	5.0
	Total	**120**	**100.0**
Q9. Suggested Reforms	Training & capacity building	32	26.7
	Budgetary autonomy	24	20.0
	Reserved executive posts	18	15.0
	Mentorship/networking	14	11.7
	Party reforms	20	16.7
	Awareness campaigns	12	10.0
	Total	**120**	**100.0**

Source: Field Survey, 2025 (compiled and interpreted by author)

4.5 Analysis of Empirical Findings

The survey of 120 elected women representatives in local self-government highlights several important trends regarding their participation, challenges, and influence.

The **age profile** shows that women in their forties (30.8%) dominate grassroots leadership, followed by those in their thirties (26.7%). This finding aligns with previous studies suggesting that women often enter politics after establishing household responsibilities and gaining community respect (Rai, 2018). Younger women (18–30) remain underrepresented (20%), reflecting continuing barriers such as mobility restrictions and family opposition (Jha, 2013).

With respect to **entry pathways**, family encouragement (30%) and self-motivation (23.3%) emerged as strong drivers of participation. However, nearly one-fifth (18.3%) of respondents attributed their entry to party nomination, while community support accounted for 21.7%. The presence of quotas as the primary motivation for 33.3% of respondents underscores their role as a fast-track mechanism for women's entry into politics, consistent with Dahlerup's (1988) argument that quotas accelerate representation compared to gradual liberal strategies.

The survey further confirms the **effectiveness of quotas**: more than half of respondents (56.7%) rated them as "high" or "very high" in empowering women in decision-making. This supports theoretical perspectives emphasizing the importance of institutional design in increasing women's political presence (Phillips, 1995; Pitkin, 1967). However, a minority (20%) considered quotas "low" or "not effective," indicating that descriptive representation alone does not guarantee substantive empowerment.

Encouragingly, a large majority (75%) **agreed or strongly agreed** that women leaders influence policy priorities differently than men, particularly in areas such as drinking water, sanitation, health, and welfare schemes. This finding resonates with Pitkin's (1967) notion of **substantive representation** and corroborates evidence from experimental research in India showing that female-headed councils prioritize women-salient goods (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004).

Despite these gains, persistent **challenges** remain: lack of training (23.3%), proxy leadership by male relatives (20%), limited financial resources (18.3%), and party gatekeeping (15%). Such constraints echo earlier findings that institutional and structural barriers often dilute the effectiveness of women's descriptive presence (Buch, 2009; Chowdhury, 2019).

Symbolically, women's participation has made a visible difference in community attitudes: 68.3% of respondents reported that perceptions of women in politics have improved, and 68.3% observed rising **aspirations among girls** for education and leadership. This reflects the importance of **symbolic representation**, whereby women's presence challenges patriarchal norms and inspires younger generations (Beaman et al., 2009).

Finally, respondents' **policy recommendations**—including training programs (26.7%), greater budgetary autonomy (20%), and party reforms (16.7%)—underscore the necessity of institutional supports to consolidate the gains of quotas. These grassroots suggestions align with broader policy literature emphasizing the importance of complementary reforms to sustain women's empowerment (Rai, 2011; UN Women, 2023).

Overall, the empirical evidence demonstrates that while quotas have successfully enhanced **descriptive representation**, the transition to **substantive and symbolic empowerment** requires continuous reforms, capacity building, and greater autonomy for women leaders.

5. Comparative Perspectives: Neighbouring Countries
5.1 Bangladesh
Bangladesh introduced **reserved seats for women** in **Union Parishads** in 1976, shifting to **direct election** for these reserved seats in **1997**—a milestone in local-level empowerment. Evidence shows persistent barriers (mobility constraints, role definition), but the institutional pathway for direct election is significant.

5.2 Pakistan

Pakistan's **Devolution of Power Plan (2001)** reserved **33%** of seats for women across district/tehsil/union councils. After the 2010 constitutional devolution, provinces adopted divergent quotas; current UN Women summaries indicate **33%** in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, **22%** in Sindh (varies by tier), and specified numbers/percentages in Punjab (seat caps in some bodies). Implementation and continuity have fluctuated with local government restructuring, but the 33% benchmark remains an important reference in several jurisdictions.

5.3 Nepal

Nepal's 2015 Constitution and local election laws embedded **strong gender-inclusive provisions**, including reserved positions at ward level (women and Dalit women) and rules that effectively yielded **~41%** women across local government in **2017** and **2022** elections. Notably, the deputy mayor posts have been overwhelmingly female, creating visible leadership pipelines—though party nomination control and gender norms still shape who advances to executive mayoral roles.

5.4 Sri Lanka

A series of amendments culminating in the **Local Authorities Elections (Amendment) Act, No. 16 of 2017** guarantees **not less than 25%** women in local authorities via mixed-member rules (including a 50% women requirement on proportional lists and minimum women nominations). Representation surged from historically low levels after the **2018** local polls; however, party-list exemptions and candidate gate-keeping have limited the full effect.

5.5 Maldives

The Decentralization **Act** was amended (2019/2020 reforms) to establish a **33% quota** for women in local councils. The 2020–21 local elections reserved hundreds of seats for women and produced several hundred elected women councilors, an important structural change in a highly centralized island context.

5.6 Bhutan

Bhutan lacks legislated quotas for elected local offices; women's representation remains low, though incremental gains are visible (e.g., an increase in female **gups** to ~3.4% in one local cycle). National strategies and donor-supported training have aimed to build pipelines, but without a binding quota, progress is gradual.

Country	Quota Type (Local)	Design Details (Illustrative)	Recent Participation Signal
India	Reserved seats & chairposts	Constitutional minimum **33%**; **21 states + 2 UTs** at **50%**	**~46%** women EWRs (≈14.5 lakh of ~31 lakh)
Bangladesh	Reserved seats	**3 women** directly elected to reserved seats in each Union Parishad since **1997**	Coverage nationwide; persistent role constraints noted
Pakistan	Reserved seats (province-specific)	**33%** (Balochistan/KP, etc.); **22%** in Sindh (varies by tier); numeric caps in Punjab bodies	Implementation varies with LG reforms
Nepal	Reserved positions & list rules	Ward-level reserved women seats incl. **Dalit women**; deputy mayors largely women	**~41%** of local posts held by women (2017, 2022)

Sri Lanka	Minimum outcome quota	**≥25%** women mandated at LG level (Act No. 16 of 2017); 50% women on PR lists	Sharp rise after **2018**; enforcement/gate keeping issues
Maldives	Reserved seats	**33%** quota under Decentralisation Act amendment (2019/2020)	Hundreds of women elected (2020–21 cycle)
Bhutan	None (no binding quota)	Capacity-building initiatives; policy debate on quotas	Low shares at executive local level (e.g., ~3.4% groups in one cycle)

Source ; (compiled and interpreted by author)

6. Discussion: What Explains Variation?
6.1 Design Features Matter
Outcome quotas (Sri Lanka) guarantee a floor but require robust list-composition and seat-allocation rules to avoid loopholes. **Placement** and **enforcement** determine whether quotas yield winnable positions.

Reserved seats with direct election (India; Bangladesh's reserved UP seats) create clear accountability links between women councilors and constituents, aligning with DAHLERUP's fast-track logic when backed by resources.

Multi-axis inclusion (Nepal) that reserves positions for **Dalit women** advances inter sectional representation beyond gender alone—important in stratified societies.

6.2 Parties as Gatekeepers
Quota efficacy depends on **candidate selection** and **list ranking**. Where parties retain discretion without placement rules, women may be nominated to unwinnable seats or sidelined from leadership offices (e.g., mayor/chair). Strengthening intra-party democracy and enforcing placement rules are thus critical.

6.3 From Presence to Power
India's evidence base demonstrates **policy responsiveness** (water, roads, social services) and **norm change** (reduced bias, girls' aspirations). These effects are strongest where women hold **executive** roles and control **budgets**. Conversely, **indirect elections** to higher-tier offices and committee rules can blunt influence even under high descriptive representation.

6.4 Addressing "Proxy" Leadership Narratives
While instances of proxy leadership exist, scholarship cautions against over-generalization: institutional design (indirect election, weak staff support, opaque files) can be more binding than household patriarchy. Reforms should therefore target **institutional levers**—transparent file movement, direct elections to powerful posts, and role-specific induction—rather than attributing causality exclusively to culture.

7. Policy Implications
Consolidate/expand reservations to 50% with chairperson rotation: India's state-level shift to **50%** has contributed to near-parity; neighbour could consider calibrated increases paired with meaningful powers for reserved-seat office-holders.

Tighten quota design with placement/enforcement: Sri Lanka's 25% floor should be backed by strict **list composition** and **allocation** rules that preclude token placements; independent oversight can audit compliance before list acceptance.

Prioritize direct elections to executive posts: Avoid indirect modes that facilitate elite control and proxy dynamics; where indirect elections remain, specify transparent voting and disclosure rules.

Institutional supports: Mandatory, funded **induction**, **mentoring**, staff support, and **gender-responsive budgeting** training for new women councilors; earmark discretionary funds controlled by women executives to strengthen autonomy. (Inference from India/Nepal evidence base.)

Inter-sectional inclusion: Nepal's **Dalit-women** provisions suggest pathways to embed caste/class/ethnic inclusion within gender quotas.

Party reforms and pipelines: Public funding tied to women's candidacy/leadership targets; internal party democracy and candidate-school pipelines for women (including local civil society partnerships). (Synthesis from regional experiences.)

8. Limitations and Future Research

Local-level, cross-national **comparable statistics** remain patchy, especially on **policy outcomes** beyond infrastructure (e.g., health, education, climate resilience). Micro-level RCT-style evidence is abundant for India but scarcer elsewhere. Future work should collect **panel administrative data** across municipalities and wards, and trace **career progression** from local to state/national office to evaluate pipeline effects of local quotas.

9. Conclusion

South Asia demonstrates that well-designed quotas can rapidly increase women's **descriptive** representation in local government. India and Nepal now approach or surpass **40–46%** women locally; Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Bangladesh, and Pakistan have taken important (if uneven) steps through differing quota architectures. Yet **presence** does not automatically translate into **power**. The decisive variables are **design details** (direct elections, placement rules), **party behaviour**, and **institutional supports** that enable women leaders to exercise authority. Where these elements align, evidence from India indicates measurable policy responsiveness and norm shifts—offering a practical road-map for the region's next reform wave.

The survey findings confirm that while quotas have dramatically increased the **descriptive representation** of women, the journey toward **substantive and symbolic empowerment** remains uneven. Women leaders are reshaping governance priorities and community attitudes, yet they continue to face structural and institutional barriers. The empirical evidence thus reinforces the central argument of this paper: that the design of quotas, coupled with institutional supports and party reforms, is decisive in translating presence into power. The findings of this empirical survey reinforce the broader comparative patterns observed across South Asia. In India, as in Nepal, quotas have not only expanded the numerical presence of women but also begun to shape governance priorities and community attitudes, supporting evidence of both substantive and symbolic representation (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004; Beaman et al., 2009). Bangladesh and Pakistan illustrate that while quotas facilitate entry, structural barriers—such as party gate keeping, overlapping roles, and inadequate institutional support—continue to constrain women's autonomy (International IDEA & UN Women, 2019). Similarly, Sri Lanka's 25% quota and the Maldives' 33% quota demonstrate that well-designed institutional frameworks can significantly raise women's representation, but effectiveness depends on placement rules and enforcement mechanisms (UNDP, 2018; Transparency Maldives, 2021). Bhutan,

which lacks legislated quotas, remains an outlier, highlighting how incremental training alone cannot match the trans formative impact of reservation systems. Against this regional backdrop, the Indian experience—validated by the voices of the 120 surveyed women—underscores that quotas are necessary but insufficient: true empowerment requires complementary reforms in training, budgetary autonomy, and party democratization. Thus, the South Asian comparison illustrates both the promise and the limits of quota-driven inclusion, emphasizing that translating **presence into power** depends on the synergy between institutional design and sustained grassroots capacity building.

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