

Political Empowerment of Women in Himachal Pradesh: A Socio-Political Study

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Abstract

Women's participation in the political sphere is a vital indicator of democratic maturity and social equity. In Himachal Pradesh, a hill state with a rich cultural fabric and distinct socio-political landscape, women's political engagement remains shaped by entrenched patriarchal norms, socio-economic disparities, and regional diversities. Despite constitutional interventions like the 73rd Amendment, which improved numerical representation in local bodies, women's roles often remain symbolic, with many functioning under male influence. Legislative and parliamentary representation has been limited, with only four women serving in the Lok Sabha and eight in the Rajya Sabha over seven decades, and female presence in the State Assembly rarely exceeding 10%. Factors such as education, health, economic independence, caste, and cultural traditions significantly influence both entry into and effectiveness within political spaces. The paper argues that genuine empowerment requires a multifaceted approach, including gender-sensitive education, economic support systems, party commitment, leadership training, and societal transformation, to shift from tokenism to meaningful participation and reinforce democratic inclusivity in Himachal Pradesh.

Keywords: *Political Participation, Gender Equality, Reservation, Panchayati Raj, Decision-Making*

Introduction

Democratic systems around the world are premised on the principle of equal representation. However, the persistent underrepresentation of women in political institutions highlights a critical gap between democratic ideals and social realities. In India, and particularly in Himachal Pradesh, this gap is both a reflection of entrenched patriarchy and a challenge for inclusive governance. Women's participation in politics not only contributes to the democratic process but also brings diverse perspectives into policy-making. However, despite constitutional guarantees and progressive legal provisions, women in Himachal Pradesh remain marginalized in the political sphere.

This paper explores the trajectory of women's political participation in Himachal Pradesh through a socio-political lens, focusing on systemic, cultural, and structural factors that hinder or facilitate their involvement. While there has been noticeable progress in women's roles at the Panchayati Raj level due to reservation policies, their presence in state and national politics remains limited.

Historical and Cultural Context of Himachal Pradesh

Himachal Pradesh, located in the western Himalayas, is known for its geographic diversity, cultural multiplicity, and a complex social structure influenced by its tribal and rural

composition. Historically, the societal setup in the region has been predominantly patriarchal, with women confined to traditional household roles and limited access to decision-making arenas. The variations in cultural patterns between lower and upper Himachal regions, owing to influences from Punjab in the plains and the old Pahari system in the hills, have further created heterogeneous experiences for women.

The social norms prevalent in the region have long dictated a woman's role as one of domestic responsibility, with minimal exposure to public life or leadership roles. Practices like polygamy, gendered division of labour, and the perception of women as 'paraya dhan' (another's property) have traditionally discouraged female autonomy. Even with reforms and modern education, these mindsets persist in subtle forms, affecting women's aspirations and participation in the political realm.

The geographical isolation of many regions within Himachal Pradesh also contributes to limited access to infrastructure, education, and health services, further marginalizing women. Moreover, caste dynamics and customary laws often prevent lower-caste and tribal women from accessing leadership roles. Consequently, while Himachal Pradesh boasts a relatively high sex ratio (972/1000 as per the 2011 Census), the representation of women in political decision-making continues to lag.

Trends in Women's Political Representation

The analysis of women's participation in politics in Himachal Pradesh reveals a consistent pattern of underrepresentation at almost every level of governance. This section examines women's involvement in the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha, the State Legislative Assembly, and Panchayati Raj Institutions.

Representation in Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha

India held its first general elections in 1952, and since then, women have constituted only a minuscule percentage of Lok Sabha members. Nationally, the figure stood at 4.4% in 1952 and marginally increased to 13.6 % by 2024. In the context of Himachal Pradesh, the situation is even more concerning. Since the first Lok Sabha elections in 1952 up to the 18th Lok Sabha in 2024, Himachal Pradesh has elected four women as Members of Parliament (MPs) to the Lok Sabha. Given that the state has four Lok Sabha constituencies and 18 general elections have been held, this amounts to 72 total MP terms (4 seats × 18 elections). With only four women elected during this period, the overall percentage of women MPs from Himachal Pradesh stands at approximately 5.56%.

Women MPs from Himachal Pradesh

1. Rajkumari Amrit Kaur

Elected in 1952 from the Mandi-Mahasu constituency, she was India's first Health Minister and hailed from the Kapurthala royal family.

2. Chandresh Kumari Katoch

Elected in 1984 from the Kangra constituency, she belonged to the Jodhpur royal family and was married into the Kangra royal family.

3. Pratibha Singh

Elected from the Mandi constituency in 2004, 2013 (by-election), and 2021 (by-election), she is associated with the Congress party and is the widow of former Chief Minister Virbhadra Singh.

4. Kangana Ranaut

Elected in 2024 from the Mandi constituency representing the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), she is the first woman from Himachal Pradesh without a royal lineage to be elected to the Lok Sabha.

Similarly, the Rajya Sabha has seen negligible representation of women from Himachal Pradesh. From 1956 to 2024, Himachal Pradesh has elected eight women to the Rajya Sabha, India's Upper House of Parliament. Given that the state has had three Rajya Sabha seats since 1956 and elections are held every six years, there have been approximately 34 total Rajya Sabha terms from Himachal Pradesh during this period. With women occupying 10 of these terms, the overall percentage of female representation stands at approximately 29.4%.

Women Rajya Sabha Members from Himachal Pradesh

1. Lila Devi (1956-1962): The first woman from Himachal Pradesh to be elected to the Rajya Sabha.
2. Mohinder Kaur (1964-1967 and 1978-1984): Served two terms; also represented Punjab in the Rajya Sabha.
3. Satyavati Dang (1968-1974): Associated with the Indian National Congress.
4. Usha Malhotra (1980-1986): Represented the Congress party.
5. Chandresh Kumari Katoch (1996-2000): Also served as a Lok Sabha MP from Himachal Pradesh.
6. Viplav Thakur (2006-2012 and 2014-2020): The only woman from the state to serve two terms in the Rajya Sabha.
7. Bimla Kashyap Sood (2010-2016): Represented the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).
8. Indu Goswami (2020-2026): Currently serving and affiliated with the BJP.

These eight women have collectively served 10 terms in the Rajya Sabha from Himachal Pradesh. While this reflects progress in women's political representation, it also highlights the need for continued efforts to achieve gender parity in parliamentary participation.

Representation in the Himachal Pradesh Legislative Assembly

Since the inception of the Himachal Pradesh Legislative Assembly in 1967, the participation of women as elected Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) has remained consistently low. Throughout 15 assembly elections from 1967 to 2022, only 43 women have been elected, accounting for approximately 5.3% of the total 807 MLAs elected during this period.

Women MLAs in Himachal Pradesh Assembly Elections (1967–2022)

Election Year	Women MLAs Elected	Total MLAs	Percentage of Women MLAs
1967	0	68	0.00%
1972	4	68	5.88%
1977	1	68	1.47%
1982	3	68	4.41%
1985	3	68	4.41%
1990	4	68	5.88%
1993	3	68	4.41%
1998	6	68	8.82%
2003	4	68	5.88%
2007	5	68	7.35%
2012	3	68	4.41%
2017	4	68	5.88%
2022	1	68	1.47%

Source: Election Commission of India. *Statistical Reports of Himachal Pradesh Legislative Assembly Elections (1967–2022)*. Retrieved from <https://eci.gov.in>

The highest representation of women was in the 1998 elections, with six women elected, constituting 8.82% of the assembly. However, this number has not seen significant improvement over the years, and in the most recent 2022 elections, only one woman, Reena Kashyap of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), was elected.

Despite women constituting nearly 49% of the electorate in Himachal Pradesh, their representation in the legislative assembly remains disproportionately low. This disparity highlights the ongoing challenges in achieving gender parity in political representation within the state.

Representation in Panchayati Raj Institutions.

Since the implementation of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment in 1993, Himachal Pradesh has made significant strides in promoting women's participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). The state initially reserved 33% of seats for women, which was later increased to 50% through the Himachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj (Amendment) Act in 2008. This proactive approach has led to women holding a substantial proportion of elected positions in PRIs.

In Himachal Pradesh, women continue to encounter various barriers that impede their full engagement in politics, despite constitutional protections and growing awareness. These challenges arise from socio-cultural norms, economic disadvantages, educational disparities, and political structural dynamics.

Women's Participation in Himachal Pradesh PRIs

Percentage Representation: As of the latest data, women constitute approximately 58% of elected representatives in Himachal Pradesh's PRIs, surpassing the mandated reservation.

Number of Women Elected: In the most recent panchayat elections, 15,450 women were elected, compared to 13,550 men, indicating a higher success rate for female candidates.

Total Women Representatives: According to a 2019 report, Himachal Pradesh had 14,398 elected women representatives across various levels of PRIs.

These figures highlight Himachal Pradesh's commitment to empowering women at the grassroots level. The state's emphasis on gender equality in local governance serves as a model for other regions aiming to enhance women's participation in political processes.

However, a critical observation is that many elected women leaders at the Panchayat level often act as proxies for their husbands or male relative, a phenomenon referred to as the “Sarpanch Pati” culture. This indicates that numerical representation alone does not equate to genuine empowerment or leadership.

Barriers to Women's Political Participation

Despite constitutional guarantees and growing awareness, women in Himachal Pradesh still face numerous barriers that limit their full participation in politics. These challenges arise from socio-cultural norms, economic disadvantages, educational inequalities, and political structural dynamics.

Socio-Cultural and Patriarchal Constraints

Himachal Pradesh, like much of India, is rooted in a patriarchal social structure where women are traditionally confined to domestic roles. The cultural perception of politics as a “male domain” discourages women from entering public life. Girls are often socialized from birth to prioritize marriage and family over ambition or public engagement, being treated as ‘Paraya Dhan’ (someone else's property). This mindset permeates both rural and urban settings, limiting women’s self-perception as political agents.

Moreover, prevalent myths such as the idea that women are too emotional or indecisive to lead—undermine their confidence and public support. Family members often actively dissuade women from joining politics, fearing loss of honor or social criticism.

Economic and Educational Challenges

A significant barrier to women’s political participation is economic dependence. Election campaigns in India, including those in Himachal Pradesh, require significant financial resources. Women, especially from rural or underprivileged backgrounds, lack the monetary resources to fund campaigns, print publicity material, or mobilize support. Political parties tend to nominate candidates who are financially well-off or from politically influential families, criteria that few women meet.

Education also plays a critical role. While Himachal Pradesh has made notable progress in female literacy, political awareness remains limited. A large number of women, especially in remote areas, are unaware of their constitutional rights, political processes, or the implications of governance. Without this foundational understanding, their ability to assert themselves politically is severely restricted.

Political Party Dynamics

Political parties in Himachal Pradesh, as elsewhere in India, remain male-dominated. Decision-making bodies within parties often exclude women, and candidate selection tends to favor men. When women are nominated, it is often in constituencies considered “unwinnable,” suggesting a lack of genuine intent to promote women’s political success.

Moreover, women leaders who lack political family backgrounds often face greater scrutiny and skepticism. Political parties rarely provide mentorship or training to prepare female candidates, which further weakens their prospects.

The limited number of women in visible political leadership roles also means there are few role models to inspire or guide emerging women leaders.

Impact of Reservation and Constitutional Provisions

The Indian Constitution and subsequent legislative measures have laid a firm foundation for women’s participation in political processes. Among these, the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1992) stands out as a transformative policy that institutionalized gender equity in local governance. Himachal Pradesh, in line with national mandates, has not only implemented this amendment but also gone a step further by increasing the reservation for women to 50% in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs).

The 73rd Amendment and its Implementation in Himachal Pradesh

The 73rd Amendment established that a minimum of one-third of all seats in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) must be reserved for women, including those designated for the role of chairpersons. Himachal Pradesh adopted this law with progressive intent and enhanced the reservation to 50%, which has had a direct impact on the political landscape at the grassroots level. As a result, thousands of women have entered local political institutions across the state.

These women have been elected as Pradhans, Up-Pradhans, Ward Members, and Zila Parishad members, bringing governance closer to communities and, crucially, integrating women’s perspectives into developmental decision-making.

Challenges Despite Reservation

While the reservation has led to a surge in women’s numerical representation, it has not automatically translated into effective leadership. Many women elected to local bodies act as proxies for their husbands or male relatives, a phenomenon colloquially referred to as “Pati Panchayat.” These male family members often influence or outright control decision-making, undermining the very spirit of gender empowerment.

Further, due to limited education and exposure, many women representatives are not fully aware of their rights, responsibilities, or powers. As a result, they struggle to navigate bureaucratic structures or assert themselves in male-dominated Panchayat meetings.

Moreover, the lack of institutional support, such as training programs, financial resources, and legal literacy, hinders the operational effectiveness of these elected women. Without structured support, the reservation system risks becoming a symbolic gesture rather than a transformative reform.

Political Mobilization and Visibility

Despite the challenges, reservation has undoubtedly contributed to an increase in the visibility and legitimacy of women in public life. Women's active presence in village councils has gradually started to normalize their leadership, especially among younger generations. It has also helped build networks of women leaders who are increasingly demanding space in higher echelons of governance.

Several successful grassroots women leaders have emerged from these structures and are slowly making their way into mainstream party politics, hinting at a positive, albeit slow, cultural shift.

Role of Education, Employment, and Social Change

While policy frameworks and legal provisions are essential for ensuring women's representation, social transformation through education and economic empowerment plays a pivotal role in sustaining and deepening women's political participation. In Himachal Pradesh, steady progress in education and employment opportunities for women has begun to shift cultural norms and raise aspirations for public life.

Education as a Catalyst for Political Awareness

Education is the bedrock of empowerment. In recent decades, Himachal Pradesh has seen a commendable rise in female literacy rates, with female literacy reaching 76.6% as per the 2011 Census, higher than the national average. Schools, colleges, and adult education programs have expanded access to knowledge, enabling more women to engage critically with socio-political issues.

Educated women are better equipped to question patriarchal norms, understand their legal rights, and participate meaningfully in governance. Education also enhances their ability to communicate, lead community initiatives, and demand accountability from institutions. Women who have completed even secondary education are more likely to contest local elections or support other women in doing so.

Despite these gains, disparities remain. Rural women, particularly from marginalized castes and remote regions, still face barriers to quality education due to infrastructural gaps, cultural restrictions, and poverty. Until these are addressed comprehensively, the full potential of education as a tool for political participation will remain unrealized.

Employment and Economic Independence

The growth of employment opportunities, especially in teaching, health services, and the informal sector, has contributed to the economic independence of many women in Himachal Pradesh. Working women gain exposure to public interactions, decision-making, and institutional processes, which prepares them for civic participation.

Economic independence also reduces the control that male family members exercise over women, allowing them greater freedom to pursue leadership roles. Women who earn and

contribute financially to their families are more likely to command respect and negotiate space in decision-making, both at home and in politics.

However, the feminization of low-paid, insecure jobs, such as in agriculture and domestic work, continues to limit the economic mobility and empowerment of many women. Ensuring fair wages, workplace safety, and access to credit for women is crucial for translating economic activity into political empowerment.

Shifting Social Norms and Youth Engagement

The involvement of young women in educational institutions and civil society organizations is gradually changing the narrative around gender roles. Exposure to media, digital platforms, and feminist discourse is encouraging a new generation to challenge traditional power structures.

Moreover, community-based programs and NGOs in Himachal Pradesh have begun training women in leadership, governance, and legal literacy, creating a grassroots-level ripple effect. These efforts are fostering not just individual leaders but a culture of female political engagement.

Still, patriarchal attitudes remain embedded in many families and institutions. Social acceptance of women in positions of authority, especially beyond the local level, needs further cultivation through consistent public awareness campaigns, media representation, and male allyship.

Recommendations and Way Forward

To transform the quantitative gains in women's political representation into qualitative empowerment, a multi-pronged strategy is required. Legal reforms, institutional mechanisms, educational outreach, and cultural change must work in tandem to create an enabling environment for women's full participation in the political sphere.

Strengthening Capacity and Leadership Skills

- **Training and Orientation Programs:** Regular and mandatory training sessions for elected women representatives at the Panchayati Raj and Legislative Assembly levels should be institutionalized. These should cover political processes, legal rights, administrative procedures, and budgeting.
- **Mentorship Networks:** Establishing mentorship models where experienced women leaders guide and support new entrants can build confidence and create peer-learning ecosystems.
- **Leadership Schools:** Partnering with academic institutions to create short-term courses on political leadership, communication, and governance specifically tailored for women can equip aspirants for higher responsibilities.

Political Party Reforms

- **Internal Reservation in Parties:** Political parties should adopt internal quotas for women candidates during ticket distribution. This should not be symbolic but

accompanied by genuine support, including financial backing and campaign infrastructure.

- **Incentives for Parties:** The Election Commission could consider incentives, like additional party funding or media time, for parties that meet minimum benchmarks for women candidates.
- **Addressing Gender Bias:** Gender sensitization workshops within parties must become routine to dismantle stereotypes that see women as less competent leaders.

Legal and Policy Initiatives

- **Implementation of the Women's Reservation Bill:** The Constitution (One Hundred and Twenty-Eighth Amendment) Bill, 2023, seeks to reserve one-third of all seats for women in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies. Its timely implementation can significantly enhance women's representation.
- **Anti-Proxies Law Enforcement:** Laws to penalize proxy governance by male relatives in PRIs should be strictly enforced. Women must be empowered to lodge complaints anonymously if they are being manipulated.
- **Incentives for Performance:** Introduction of recognition and reward schemes for high-performing women representatives can encourage accountability and set positive precedents.

Socio-Cultural Reforms

- **Community Engagement:** Grassroots awareness campaigns aimed at families and communities can help change perceptions about women's roles in public life.
- **Inclusion in School Curricula:** Gender equality, constitutional rights, and democratic values should be integrated into school syllabi to instill respect for women leaders from an early age.
- **Male Engagement:** Programs that involve men in discussions about shared responsibilities and women's political rights can help create allyship and reduce resistance.

Enhancing Economic and Educational Support

- **Scholarships and Fellowships:** Financial aid for women interested in public policy, law, and administration can prepare a pool of educated future leaders.
- **Employment-linked Governance Exposure:** Linking women's employment schemes (like MGNREGS) with civic training modules can introduce rural women to governance models.
- **Digital Literacy and Access:** Since many governance processes are becoming digitized, ensuring women's access to smartphones, internet, and training in digital tools is vital.

Conclusion

The participation of women in politics is not merely a question of equity but a necessary condition for inclusive and representative democracy. In the case of Himachal Pradesh, while

commendable strides have been made, particularly at the grassroots level through Panchayati Raj Institutions, true political empowerment remains uneven and often symbolic.

Historical data from the Lok Sabha, Rajya Sabha, and State Legislative Assembly clearly reflect a persistent gender gap. Structural reforms such as the 73rd Constitutional Amendment and the Himachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act, 1994 have opened doors for thousands of women, but many still face socio-cultural taboos, economic dependency, and systemic exclusion from decision-making processes.

The interplay of education, employment, and social change has demonstrated a positive influence on women's agency and political aspirations. However, deeply ingrained patriarchal attitudes and institutional biases continue to restrict women's rise beyond tokenistic roles. Without deliberate efforts to reform party politics, enhance leadership training, and reshape cultural norms, the goal of genuine gender parity in politics will remain elusive.

This research affirms that reservation alone is not enough. It must be accompanied by strategic policy initiatives, grassroots capacity building, and sustained cultural transformation. As Himachal Pradesh progresses socially and economically, the inclusion of women in political life must not be left behind; it should be at the forefront of democratic consolidation.

By promoting women's political participation not just as a right but as a developmental imperative, Himachal Pradesh can set a benchmark for other states and affirm the idea that when women lead, societies grow stronger, more equitable, and more resilient.

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