



Political participation and Representation: A Study of Women in Kerala Legislative Assembly

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ARTICLE DETAILS	ABSTRACT
Research Paper Received: 28-06-2026 Accepted: 23-07-2026 Published: 20-08-2026 Keywords: <i>women's political participation, representation, Kerala legislative assembly, women reservation bill, patriarchy, political movements.</i>	The role of women in society is crucial and deserves attention. In a democratic setup, it is imperative to ensure equal rights and opportunities for all citizens, regardless of gender, caste, or creed. However, women continue to face barriers in accessing resources and holding positions of power. Political empowerment is essential for women to have a voice in decision-making processes and to advocate for their rights in various aspects of life. Therefore, the representation of women in legislative bodies, such as Legislative Assemblies, holds significant importance in their overall political empowerment. This study tries to examine the political participation and representation of women in Kerala's legislative assembly, comparing the percentage of women legislators from 1957 to 2026. Even though Kerala tops high rank in India's human development index, women are underrepresented in political scenarios. This research aims to have a brief look at Kerala's political history and to find out the important roles played by women legislators till now. The question is why female representation in Kerala legislative assembly is not exceeding 10%. The research highlights the importance of addressing structural obstacles to women representation and promoting gender equality.

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Introduction

Political participation constitutes one of the fundamental pillars of democracy. A democratic political system derives its legitimacy from the active participation of citizens in political decision-making and governance. Women's participation in politics extends beyond voting; it includes contesting elections, participating in political parties, influencing public policy, holding legislative and executive positions, and contributing to democratic governance.

Globally, women's political representation has improved over the past few decades through constitutional reforms, electoral quotas, affirmative action policies, and advocacy by women's movements. Nevertheless, women continue to be underrepresented in legislative bodies across many democratic societies. The persistence of gender disparities in political representation raises important questions regarding equality, democratic inclusion, and social justice.

Kerala presents an interesting case for examining women's political representation. The state is internationally recognised for its achievements in literacy, healthcare, education, and gender development. Despite these advances, women's representation in the Kerala Legislative Assembly has remained comparatively low. This apparent contradiction highlights the complex relationship between social development and political empowerment.

Understanding the various facets of development, women's situation in Kerala is a fascinating case study. It is the state that continually asserts that its Human Development Index is the highest in all of India. At first glance, it appears that Kerala politics fairly represents women. Despite the fact that certain women in Kerala have historically held prominent political positions, the overall presence of women in politics is still appallingly low. Kerala takes pride in being a leader in promoting gender equality and women's empowerment. (Chacko, 2003; Mukhopadhyay, 2007; Saradmoni, 1999). But over time, the state assembly's representation of women has painted a different picture. Records indicate that in the 66 years since the state's current realignment, the proportion of women in the Kerala Legislative Assembly has never surpassed 10%. It's interesting to note that despite women holding 50% of the seats in municipal bodies, there is still a low representation of women in the assembly. While expecting a change in the political landscape as a result of the Women's Reservation Bill's enactment, which grants women a 33% reservation in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies.

Women's participation in Kerala's political sphere has historically been shaped by social reform movements, nationalist struggles, left political traditions, and local self-government reforms. The introduction of



reservations for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions significantly enhanced women's participation at the grassroots level. However, these gains have not been translated proportionately into representation within the State Legislative Assembly.

This article critically examines the historical evolution, current status, determinants, and challenges of women's representation in the Kerala Legislative Assembly. It also discusses policy measures that may contribute to achieving more inclusive and gender-balanced democratic governance.

Review of Literature

Women's political participation and representation have attracted considerable scholarly attention across political science, sociology, gender studies, and development studies. The literature highlights that equal political representation is fundamental to democratic governance, social justice, and inclusive policymaking. Although women have made significant progress in education, employment, and local governance, their representation in legislative bodies remains comparatively low in many democracies, including India.

One of the earliest and most influential contributions is by Hanna Pitkin (1967), who conceptualized political representation as descriptive, substantive, formalistic, and symbolic representation. Pitkin argued that a representative democracy should not only reflect the demographic composition of society but should also ensure that representatives actively promote the interests of the groups they represent. This framework has become central to studies examining women's representation in legislatures.

Anne Phillips (1995) further advanced the debate through her concept of the Politics of Presence. She argued that democratic institutions become more legitimate and responsive when historically marginalized groups, including women, are physically present in decision-making bodies. According to Phillips, women legislators contribute unique experiences and perspectives that cannot be fully represented by male representatives alone.

Similarly, Drude Dahlerup (2006) examined gender quotas as an effective mechanism for increasing women's political representation. Her comparative research demonstrated that quota systems significantly improve women's legislative presence when supported by political commitment and institutional enforcement. However, she also emphasized that numerical representation alone does not guarantee substantive empowerment.

Within the Indian context, Nivedita Menon (2004) observed that despite constitutional guarantees of equality, patriarchal social structures continue to influence women's access to political power. Political



parties frequently nominate fewer women candidates, while cultural expectations regarding family responsibilities and gender roles restrict women's opportunities to pursue political careers.

Historical and Present Background

In terms of women's representation, the state got off to a great start. The state started strong with regards to women representation. The first woman to join the Legislative Council of Travancore State was Mary Poonon Lukose in 1922. She was in fact one of 23 women that joined the assemblies of erstwhile Travancore and Cochin before the creation of Kerala in 1956. After the formation of Kerala, the first MLA to swear an oath was a woman, Rosamma Punnose. Accamma Cherian, popularly known as 'Jhansi Rani of Travancore', was imprisoned multiple times for her involvement in the Freedom Struggle. She was also chosen as the Acting President of the Travancore State Congress in 1942. A.V. Kuttimalu Amma was a prominent figure in the Civil Disobedience Movement, and as a result of her activities was also imprisoned multiple times. Lukose became the first female member of the Legislative Council of Travancore State in 1922. Before Kerala was formed in 1956, she was actually one of 23 women who joined the assembly of the former Travancore and Cochin. Rosamma Punnose was the first female Member of Legislative to take an oath following the creation of Kerala. Because of her participation in the Freedom Struggle, Accamma Cherian, also known as "Jhansi Rani of Travancore," was imprisoned several times. In 1942, she was also elected to the position of Acting President of the Travancore State Congress. Leading participant in the Civil Disobedience Movement, A.V. Kuttimalu Amma served several jail terms as a result of her actions.

In Kerala politics, Susheela Gopalan and K.R. Gowri gained popularity in the 1960s and 1970s. Throughout her political career, Susheela Gopalan held a number of positions, including Minister of Industries and Social Welfare, and she was elected as an MLA several times. When the Chief Minister position was up for grabs in 1996, she famously lost by one vote to E.K. Nayanar in a ballot conducted internally within the party's State Committee. Oddly enough, E.K. Nayanar had not even run in the 1996 election (he did, however, run in and win a by-election as required by the ECI).

One of the pioneers of the Communist movement in Kerala, K.R. Gowri served as the state's first revenue minister and as the second-longest serving Member of Legislative Assembly in the state's history. She was regarded as one of Kerala's most prominent politicians when she passed away in the early months of May 2021.

More recently, K.K. Shailaja, another woman, too showed herself to be a formidable leader. She was a successful lawmaker, a party member, and one of India's most well-known State Health Ministers. She won her seat in the 2021 election with the biggest margin of victory achieved by any candidate in the previous 20

years in the Kerala elections. Nevertheless, despite her outstanding success as a candidate and as a minister, Shailaja "Teacher" was not included in the cabinet following the 2021 elections.

The 15th Kerala Legislative Assembly (2021–2026) comprised 140 members, of whom 12 were women, representing 8.6% of the total membership. Although this was one of the highest levels of women's representation in the history of the Kerala Legislative Assembly, it still fell short of the 10% mark, reflecting the persistent gender gap in state politics. In the 16th Kerala Legislative Assembly (2026–2031), women's representation declined slightly, with only 11 women MLAs, accounting for 7.9% of the Assembly. This decline occurred despite major political parties nominating more women candidates during the 2026 election. The defeat of several prominent women leaders suggests that increased nominations alone are insufficient to ensure greater representation. These trends highlight the continuing challenges faced by women in Kerala's electoral politics, including limited access to winnable constituencies, unequal opportunities within political parties, and the persistence of patriarchal political structures. Thus, despite Kerala's remarkable achievements in education, literacy, and human development, women's representation in the Legislative Assembly remains disproportionately low, emphasizing the need for stronger political commitment and institutional reforms to achieve meaningful gender equality in legislative representation.

TABLE:1 Percentage of female representatives in Kerala Assembly

Assembly	Total members	Women members	percentage
1957-1959	127	6	4.7
1960-1964	133	7	5.3
1967-1970	133	1	0.8
1970-1977	133	2	1.5
1977-1979	140	1	0.7
1980-1982	140	5	3.5
1982-1987	140	5	3.5
1987-1991	140	8	5.7
1991-1996	140	8	5.7
1996-2001	140	13	9.3
2001-2006	140	9	6.4
2006-2011	140	7	5
2011-2016	140	7	5



2016-2021	140	9	6.4
2021-2026	140	12	8.6
2026- 2031	140	11	7.9

Research Objectives

The present study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

1. To examine the trend of women's representation in the Kerala Legislative Assembly from 1957 to 2026.
2. To identify the socio-political and institutional barriers that limit women's political participation in Kerala.
3. To analyse the relationship between women's educational and social advancement and their political representation.
4. To explore the role of political parties in selecting and supporting women candidates.
5. To suggest policy measures for improving women's representation in legislative politics.

Research Questions

This study addresses the following questions:

1. Why has women's representation in the Kerala Legislative Assembly remained below 10 percent despite the state's high human development indicators?
2. What are the major structural and cultural barriers to women's political participation?
3. How do political parties influence women's electoral opportunities?
4. What policy interventions can improve women's representation in state politics?

Research Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive and historical research design based entirely on secondary data. Information has been collected from published books, peer-reviewed journal articles, reports of the Election Commission of India, Kerala Legislative Assembly records, government publications, and reliable online databases. The



study covers the period from 1957 to 2026, tracing the changing pattern of women's representation in the Kerala Legislative Assembly. Percentage analysis and trend analysis have been used to interpret the data and identify long-term changes in women's political participation. Secondary data are considered appropriate because the study focuses on historical trends rather than primary field investigation.

Sources of Data

The study is based entirely on secondary sources, including:

- Reports of the Election Commission of India.
- Kerala Legislative Assembly publications.
- Census of India reports.
- Government policy documents.
- Scholarly books and peer-reviewed journal articles.
- Reports of national and international organizations.
- Publications relating to gender and political participation.

Method of Analysis

The collected information is analysed using descriptive and interpretative approaches. Historical trends, election-wise developments, party-wise representation, and policy initiatives are examined through thematic analysis to understand the changing nature of women's political participation in Kerala.

Scope of the Study

The study focuses exclusively on women's representation in the Kerala Legislative Assembly from its establishment in 1957 to the most recent Assembly election. While references to national developments and local self-government institutions are included where relevant, the principal emphasis remains on legislative representation at the state level.

Theoretical Framework

The study is guided by Feminist Political Theory and Hanna Pitkin's Theory of Political Representation. Feminist Political Theory argues that unequal political participation is rooted in patriarchal social structures



that restrict women's access to decision-making positions. Pitkin distinguishes between descriptive representation (the numerical presence of women in legislatures) and substantive representation (the extent to which women influence policy decisions). These perspectives provide a useful framework for understanding why Kerala, despite its high literacy and social development, continues to experience low levels of women's legislative representation.

Feminist Political Theory argues that democratic institutions have historically reflected patriarchal power structures that limit women's participation in decision-making. It advocates equal political opportunities, institutional reforms, and gender-sensitive public policies to ensure substantive equality.

Pitkin's (1967) theory distinguishes between descriptive and substantive representation. Descriptive representation refers to the numerical presence of women in legislative institutions, whereas substantive representation concerns the extent to which elected representatives promote women's interests through policymaking and legislative action. This theoretical perspective provides an appropriate framework for analysing both the quantity and quality of women's representation in the Kerala Legislative Assembly.

Anne Phillips' concept of the Politics of Presence further strengthens this framework by emphasizing that the inclusion of women in legislative institutions enhances democratic legitimacy, broadens policy perspectives, and improves responsiveness to gender-related concerns.

A closer look on women politicians in Kerala

Out of 140 MLAs, Kerala currently has 11 female MLAs, meaning that around 7.9 % of the Assembly is made up of female members. In the assembly, the percentage of women has never topped 10% and has dropped as low as less than 1% (there was only one woman MLA in 1967 and 1977). Data indicates that while the proportion of female candidates has been steadily rising over time, women's representation in the Assembly has not kept up with this increase. This demonstrates that the low number of female candidates nominated tells only part of the tale. Fascinatingly, in previous years, when there were fewer female candidates, there was a stronger proportion of women in the Assembly. This implies that previously, women may have been assigned "safe" seats where they had a higher chance of winning.

An analysis of the male and female candidates in greater detail illustrates how women do on social factors. In the past, female candidates have typically had far higher educational backgrounds than male contenders. Since 1965, over one-third of all female candidates for the Kerala Assembly have at least a high school diploma, and over one-fifth have at least a bachelor's degree. Men have, in comparison, had far lower levels of education; roughly one-sixth have at least a high school diploma, and slightly over one-twelfth have a



doctoral degree or higher. This shows that women attempt to overcome political constraints by investing more in their education. One of the metrics used by the United Nations Development Programme to evaluate gender empowerment is political engagement, which is determined by the proportion of female legislators and members of parliament. Women's political involvement at the state legislature level is incredibly low, notwithstanding Kerala's high literacy rate and traditionally strong labour union participation. Despite the fact that women cast 50% of all votes, the percentage of female lawmakers has been less than 6% from the state's creation in 1956, with the exception of the years 1995–2001 (KSWDC, 2010). However, the percentage of women serving in panchayats, or local government bodies, is significantly greater. Around 33 and 50 percent of the available seats are occupied by women. However, a major contributing factor to this is the rule under federal legislation that 33% of these seats be reserved for women. What is remarkable about Kerala is that, unlike other parts of India, women's autonomous collective action has not resulted from the state's very high levels of political engagement and democratic participation among the people (Erwer, 2003).

Why are Women Under represented in Kerala Politics ?

Political movements from the middle of the 20th century onwards funnelled their activism into more suitably feminine fields such as "social work," thereby entrenching the new form of patriarchy (Devika & Sukumar, 2006). These movements marginalized women activists. Women's participation in politics was restricted and the development of an independent women's movement was essentially blunted by the class-based politics that dominated post-independence politics (Erwer, 2003; Devika & Sukumar, 2006). Kerala women have only recently made an effort to organize themselves independently across party lines.

It is challenging for women to advance through the ranks and win party nominations for elections since they are frequently underrepresented in political parties. Gender bias among political parties and the belief that women are less electable than males are to blame for this underrepresentation. Even though Kerala reserves 50% of its seats for women in local elections in both cities and villages, parties controlled by men have prevented women from rising to positions of political authority. Unfortunately, the persistence of patriarchy in party and electoral politics is demonstrated by the fact that women's underrepresentation in this state—where they have made remarkable strides in nearly every other field—remains, if not more so. One of the biggest obstacles to women's engagement in politics is the absence of secure and welcoming environments. It is evident that women in Kerala have different social and political statuses, and that women should not bear the entire burden of empowerment.



Structural barriers to women's empowerment, in general, are the fundamental issues that make it difficult for them to be a part of the services. Some sociocultural issues that cause women to choose not to pursue such professions include patriarchal conditioning, postings in distant cadres, and the need to balance work and family obligations. In addition, there is a widespread belief that "soft" ministries such as women's and child development, social welfare, and culture should favour women. Rather, the emphasis should be on resolving the systemic barriers to women's representation. Historically, the only ways to effectively combat archaic yet potent laws have been through progressive legislation and court interventions.

How can Women be more Effectively Represented in Politics?

Reserving seats for women in legislative bodies is one of the best methods to boost the representation of women in politics. Political parties should additionally guarantee that women receive sufficient representation when choosing candidates for elections. Women candidates should be actively sought after and given preference for seats that can be won.

In order to encourage women to engage in politics, education and training initiatives could be carried out. This will assist women in gaining self-assurance, developing their skill set, and comprehending the nuances of politics. Moreover, encouraging and assisting local women leaders can help improve the representation of women in politics. Mentoring programs and other forms of assistance can help achieve this.

Many women struggle to find a balance between their personal and family lives and their political obligations. This problem can be solved by offering work-life balance supports like flexible scheduling, child care, and parental leave. At the same time Greater attention and acknowledgment for the achievements of women in politics are required. This has the potential to foster a culture of greater gender equality in politics and serve as an inspiration for more women to enter the field.

The women's reservation act 2023, officially enacted as the constitutional amendment act 2023 and also known as Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, reserves one third (33%) of all seats for women in lok sabha.

The women's reservation act 2023 will structurally resolve Kerala's long standing gender paradox where the state boasts high female literacy and 51.56% of total voting electorate and the act will improve women representation of the Kerala Legislative Assembly at least 47 women MLAs.

Limitations

The study is based exclusively on secondary data and therefore does not include interviews or field surveys with women politicians or party leaders. It is limited to the Kerala Legislative Assembly and does not



examine women's representation in Parliament or local self-government institutions. The findings should therefore be interpreted within the scope of state-level legislative politics.

Implications of study

The analysis suggests that improving women's representation requires:

- Greater commitment by political parties to nominate women candidates.
- Leadership development and political mentoring programmes.
- Improved access to campaign finance.
- Capacity-building for aspiring women leaders.
- Internal party reforms promoting gender-inclusive decision-making.
- Continued advocacy by civil society organizations and women's movements.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are proposed:

- Political parties should voluntarily increase the proportion of women candidates in Assembly elections.
- Greater representation of women should be ensured within party executive committees and candidate selection bodies.
- Leadership development programmes should be organized to prepare women for legislative politics.
- Financial and organizational support mechanisms should be strengthened to reduce campaign-related barriers.
- Women's political participation should be encouraged through civic education, mentoring programmes, and public awareness campaigns.
- Stronger collaboration between government agencies, universities, civil society organizations, and women's organizations should be promoted to develop future women leaders.
- Research and documentation on women's political participation should be expanded to support evidence-based policymaking.



Conclusion

The study highlights the critical need for enhancing political participation and representation of women in the Kerala legislative assembly, as women continue to face barriers in accessing resources and holding positions of power. Despite Kerala's high human development index, there has been a historical underrepresentation of women in politics, with the proportion of female legislators never exceeding 10% since the state's formation. The presence of only 7.9 % female MLAs in the current assembly indicates a persistent lack of gender parity. Structural obstacles, patriarchal norms, and party control have hindered women's rise to political authority, emphasizing the necessity to address these systemic barriers and promote gender equality to ensure equal rights and opportunities for all citizens, irrespective of gender, caste, or creed. Efforts to achieve gender equality in political representation in Kerala are essential for fostering inclusive decision-making processes and advocating for women's rights in all aspects of life. The research emphasizes that, in spite of the state's progress toward gender equality and human development, women are still disproportionately underrepresented in Kerala's Legislative Assembly. It emphasizes how important it is to implement proactive policies and structural changes to increase women's political representation and engagement, stressing that real democratic empowerment requires reaching gender parity in politics.

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