

BREAKING THE GLASS CEILING: ANALYZING THE BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S POLITICAL LEADERSHIP IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Author*

Dr. S. RAMA DEVI MA, MEd

Asst professor of political science,
Vivekananda Government Degree college,
Vidyanagar, Hyderabad, Telangana.

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the multifaceted barriers hindering women's attainment and exercise of political leadership in the 21st century, focusing on institutional discrimination, political party exclusion, socio-cultural expectations, economic constraints, and gender-based violence. Using a quantitative research design and a purposive sample of 120 respondents, the study employs Exploratory Factor Analysis to identify key impediments and enabling factors. The findings reveal persistent structural and cultural challenges, including biased electoral systems and caregiving burdens, which limit women's political agency. Simultaneously, measures such as party quotas, civic education, leadership training, and local political engagement demonstrate strong potential to enhance women's participation and effectiveness. The study emphasizes that advancing women's political leadership requires systemic reforms and sustained support. It offers region-specific insights to inform inclusive policy frameworks and equitable governance models.

INTRODUCTION

The 21st century has brought sweeping changes to political systems, technology, and social structures, yet the equitable participation of women in political leadership remains a global concern. Despite democratic ideals promoting inclusion, women continue to be underrepresented in decision-making roles across the world. This underrepresentation—despite women comprising nearly half of the global population—reflects persistent structural inequalities that undermine the inclusiveness and legitimacy of democratic governance. Political leadership remains largely shaped by historical and institutional male dominance. Women face a range of challenges—from limited access to campaign finance and party nominations to biased media portrayal and cultural expectations. Although legal frameworks supporting women's rights have expanded, gaps between policy and practice remain, particularly where informal power systems dominate political life. The metaphorical “glass

ceiling” persists, keeping women from rising to influential positions even in progressive systems.

Social and cultural expectations further restrict women’s leadership trajectories. Stereotypes positioning women primarily as caregivers limit their perceived ability to lead. Women are expected to juggle domestic responsibilities alongside political roles, often without adequate institutional or familial support. Gender-based violence, both overt and implied, remains a serious barrier, discouraging active participation and public visibility. Institutional discrimination within electoral and party systems compounds these challenges. Male-dominated networks, limited mentorship, and inequitable resource distribution create environments where women are systematically disadvantaged. While interventions like gender quotas and political training programs have been introduced, their success often depends on local political will, enforcement, and social acceptance. Nonetheless, the rise of digital platforms, grassroots mobilization, and civil society efforts have created new avenues for women to engage politically. Digital advocacy has amplified female voices, allowing women to challenge patriarchal structures and mobilize outside traditional party frameworks. Mentorship, civic education, and localized leadership roles are increasingly recognized as essential tools for empowerment.

In regions such as Telangana, where caste, class, and regional politics intersect, these challenges are intensified. Despite national efforts, local-level realities often dilute the effectiveness of inclusive reforms. Understanding region-specific barriers is vital for creating sustainable pathways to women’s political empowerment. As we navigate the 21st century, a nuanced and intersectional approach remains essential to advance women’s leadership in political spaces.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Norris (2005) aimed to examine the evolving role of women in U.S. electoral politics, focusing on both advancements and ongoing challenges in political representation. The book compiles multiple essays analyzing research on women as candidates and officeholders, using case studies and empirical data related to recruitment, media framing, voter behavior, and institutional barriers. Findings reveal a paradox: while high-profile candidacies have raised visibility, progress in electing women to Congress and state legislatures has stagnated. The

volume also highlights the experiences of women of color and provides comparative insights on women parliamentarians globally. The study concludes that despite increased representation and awareness, significant structural and cultural hurdles continue to impede women's political leadership in the 21st century.

Kiamba (2009) aimed to explore the persistent challenges faced by women, particularly African women, in attaining leadership positions across public and private sectors. The study employed a qualitative literature-based approach to examine cultural, social, and personal barriers. Findings indicated that deeply rooted cultural expectations, the pressure to balance work and family life, and internalized fears of success significantly hinder women's leadership advancement. These factors collectively contribute to the underrepresentation of women in leadership despite their aspirations. The paper concludes that overcoming these barriers requires cultural transformation, supportive policies, and empowerment strategies targeting women's self-perception and societal norms.

Al Maaitah, Oweis et al. (2012) aimed to identify the barriers preventing Jordanian women from advancing to higher political and leadership positions and to propose effective strategies for their empowerment. A cross-sectional survey was conducted using both quantitative and qualitative data from 500 women across various sectors through a self-administered questionnaire. Findings revealed a wide range of obstacles political, legal, personal, socio-cultural, and economic with discrimination as a common thread across all. Women leaders highlighted the need for political and legal support, awareness initiatives, and empowerment programs. The study concluded that establishing gender-sensitive policies and involving women in democratic reform processes are essential for enhancing their leadership roles in Jordan.

Cowper-Smith et al. (2017) aimed to explore the obstacles and motivations influencing women's participation in political leadership in Guelph-Wellington, Canada. The study employed qualitative methods, including 16 interviews and 3 focus groups, and was grounded in a literature review conducted by the University of Guelph's Political Science Department. Findings revealed that women face structural, cultural, and personal barriers to running for office, but also identified strong motivators such as community impact and role models. Participants proposed solutions like mentorship, awareness programs, and institutional support to enhance women's political engagement. The study concluded that targeted community-based strategies are essential to fostering women's political leadership at the local level.

Aradhana Sharma (2019), Gender equality and equal chances are necessary components of a just society, progress, and national and international security. A structural interventional strategy in social work seeks to promote gender empowerment via women's effective engagement in politics. The challenges that females encounter in Indian politics were discussed in this paper. The prime aim of this paper is to study the challenges faced by women leadership in politics. To achieve the aim of this paper, secondary sources of information was used. For this purpose various articles, case studies on women leadership in politics are selected and studied. The paper concluded that, while India is still a long way from attaining the necessary 33 percent female representation in government, Indian women have a bright future in politics. The survival of Indian democracy requires a gender-balanced political leadership.

Michael (2019) aimed to investigate the growing discourse on women's political leadership in Cameroon, with a focus on the north region. The study used a qualitative analysis of women's political participation, emphasizing their roles as voters, campaign mobilizers, and supporters. Findings revealed that although women make up more than half the population and are active in political processes, they face significant barriers including restrictive cultural norms, discriminatory traditional laws, and rigid gender roles within families. These challenges hinder women's access to political leadership and decision-making roles. The study concluded that entrenched social and religious structures must be addressed to enhance women's political empowerment and leadership opportunities in the region.

Sumbas (2020) sought to explore the unique political challenges encountered by female mayors within the context of local politics in Turkey. The study employed a qualitative methodology using in-depth interviews with 34 female mayors elected during the 2004–2009 and 2009–2014 municipal terms. Findings indicated that cultural norms and gendered political structures created significant barriers, including male dominance in political roles, masculine political discourse, and the burden of traditional domestic expectations. These factors marginalized women's leadership, devalued their contributions, and perpetuated gender bias and inequality in democratic representation. The study concluded that systemic change is necessary to address distributive injustice and ensure inclusive political participation for women in Turkey.

Smith and Sinkford (2022) aimed to explore the critical role of women in global health care, assess persistent gender disparities in leadership, and propose strategies to advance gender equality. The authors applied a comprehensive literature review and analyzed global datasets

from institutions such as the UN, WHO, and ILO to examine gender participation rates, leadership gaps, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women in health sectors. Their findings revealed that while women make up 70% of the health and social workforce, they hold only 25% of senior leadership roles, with the pandemic exacerbating gender-based disparities in workload, pay, and leadership representation. The review identified structural and cultural barriers such as unpaid caregiving burdens, lack of paid leave policies, and societal resistance to female leadership. The authors concluded that integrating gender mainstreaming, gender-based analysis, and gender transformative leadership (GTL) is essential to dismantle systemic inequalities and promote inclusive, equitable leadership in global health systems.

Chowdhury (2024) aimed to examine the complex barriers hindering women's participation and leadership in politics across various levels of governance. The study employed a comprehensive literature review, analyzing empirical studies, theoretical frameworks, and policy evaluations to explore institutional, socio-cultural, and systemic challenges. Findings revealed that gendered biases, discriminatory institutions, cultural norms, and election processes significantly limit women's political advancement, especially for marginalized groups facing intersectional disadvantages. The study also evaluated supportive strategies such as mentoring, quota systems, affirmative action, and grassroots mobilization. It concluded that achieving gender-inclusive governance requires addressing structural inequities and implementing multi-layered empowerment interventions.

Singh (2024) aimed to investigate the persistent barriers to women's political participation and advocate for their greater inclusion in governance. The study employed a conceptual and literature-based analysis of global trends, drawing on comparative examples such as Rwanda and Sweden to illustrate progress and gaps. Findings revealed that although some countries have advanced through policies like gender quotas, global representation of women in national parliaments remains below 30%, with deeper underrepresentation in developing nations. Cultural norms, institutional biases, and traditional gender roles continue to restrict women's political involvement worldwide. The article concludes that achieving gender parity requires multifaceted strategies including legal reforms, societal change, and resource accessibility to support women's leadership.

Gomes Neto et al. (2025) aimed to analyze the gender-based barriers limiting women's participation in Brazilian politics. The study employed semi-structured interviews with 40 women from the Southeast and Northeast regions and analyzed the data using Gioia's method.

Findings revealed that women face psychosocial, cultural, and political party-related obstacles, with existing gender policies proving inadequate to support their political engagement and retention. These barriers contribute to lower female political participation and are compounded by experiences of violence, leading to health challenges and disengagement. The study concluded that comprehensive policy reforms and support systems are necessary to address systemic gender inequality in Brazil's political landscape.

RESEARCH GAP

Despite extensive literature exploring the barriers to women's political leadership across global, regional, and national contexts, there is a noticeable research gap in examining how these challenges manifest within localized socio-political environments, particularly in Telangana. Existing studies emphasize broad structural, cultural, and institutional barriers, yet few address the nuanced, intersectional experiences of women in decentralized governance systems at the state or local level. The role of digital advocacy, grassroots mobilization, and regional political cultures remains underexplored. Additionally, there is limited empirical data on how women navigate political pathways within Telangana's unique caste, community, and party structures. Therefore, the present study titled **"Breaking The Glass Ceiling: Analyzing The Barriers To Women's Political Leadership in the 21st Century"** in Telangana.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To examine the key barriers faced by women in attaining and exercising political leadership.
2. To identify the potential measures that enhance women's participation and effectiveness in political leadership within the region.

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The study focuses on identifying and analyzing the key barriers that hinder women from attaining and exercising political leadership in the 21st century. It critically examines challenges such as institutional discrimination, lack of political party support, socio-cultural expectations, economic constraints, and gender-based violence. In addition, the study seeks to explore and evaluate concrete measures—such as policy reforms, leadership development programs, and structural changes—that can enhance women's participation, representation, and effectiveness in political leadership. The scope is confined to women's leadership within formal political structures and excludes corporate or non-governmental leadership domains.

The study remains grounded within a specific regional context to ensure relevance to local socio-political dynamics.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a **quantitative research design** to examine the barriers and enabling measures influencing women’s political leadership in the 21st century. A **non-probability purposive sampling method** was employed to select respondents with relevant political exposure and awareness. The **sample size comprised 120 participants**, including women engaged in or aspiring toward political roles across various levels. To analyze the collected data, **Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)** was used as the primary statistical tool to identify and group key underlying constructs. This approach helped uncover patterns and dimensions within the perceived barriers and supportive measures for women's political leadership.

Objective -1: To examine the key barriers faced by women in attaining and exercising political leadership.

Table – 1 KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.760
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	205.549
	Df	105
	Sig.	.000

Source: Primary Data

The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) value of 0.760 indicates a adequate level of sampling adequacy, suggesting that factor analysis is appropriate for the dataset. Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity is significant ($p < 0.001$), confirming that the correlation matrix is not an identity matrix and that variables are sufficiently correlated for factor extraction. Therefore, the data is suitable for identifying underlying dimensions of barriers faced by women in political leadership.

Table –2: Barriers faced by women in attaining and exercising political leadership.

	Component				
	1	2	3	4	5
Institutional Discrimination					

Electoral systems and processes are structured in ways that favor male candidates over female candidates.	0.599				
Women have limited access to formal leadership training and political mentorship opportunities.	0.543				
Illiteracy and lack of political awareness are major obstacles preventing women from engaging in politics.	0.663				
Lack of Political Party Support					
Lack of political party support limits women's chances of contesting elections successfully.		0.569			
Women receive fewer opportunities and support within political parties, even after joining them.		0.516			
Women have less access to political networks and connections compared to men.		0.655			
Socio-Cultural Expectations					
Women are expected to prioritize household and caregiving responsibilities over political involvement.			0.732		
Societal norms and cultural expectations discourage women from pursuing leadership roles.			0.676		
Women leaders face higher levels of stress due to balancing political responsibilities with family duties.			0.541		
Economic Constraints					
Poverty disproportionately hinders women, especially those from marginalized castes or classes, from entering politics.				0.668	
Socioeconomic status significantly affects a woman's ability to participate in political leadership.				0.724	
Women from lower castes and rural backgrounds face additional barriers in accessing political leadership.				0.559	
Gender-Based Violence					
Gender-based violence or the fear of it discourages women from participating in politics.					0.526
The need to constantly prove competence makes political leadership more difficult for women than for men.					0.631
Healthcare inequality and gender bias in medical services affect women's capacity to engage in public leadership roles.					0.567

Source: Primary Data

The purpose of the Component Matrix analysis was to identify the underlying dimensions or groupings among the barriers faced by women in attaining and exercising political leadership. The analysis extracted five clear components corresponding to the conceptual categories: Institutional Discrimination, Lack of Political Party Support, Socio-Cultural Expectations, Economic Constraints, and Gender-Based Violence. The factor loadings indicate that each group of statements aligns strongly with its respective component, confirming the thematic validity of the instrument. For example, electoral bias (0.599) and lack of leadership training (0.543) loaded under Institutional Discrimination, while stress from dual responsibilities (0.541) and traditional norms (0.676) aligned under Socio-Cultural Expectations. Gender-based violence-related items showed consistent loading under Component 5, emphasizing their distinct impact. These results confirm that the scale effectively captures five key dimensions of barriers. In conclusion, the component matrix validates the multidimensional structure of the barriers framework and supports further analysis or policy planning based on these categorized insights.

Objective -2: To identify the potential measures that enhance women's participation and effectiveness in political leadership within the region.

Table – 3: KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.831
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	111.450
	df	55
	Sig.	.000

Source: Primary Data

The KMO value of 0.831 indicates a adequate level of sampling adequacy, suggesting that the data is acceptable for factor analysis. Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity is highly significant ($p < 0.001$), confirming sufficient correlations among variables for structure detection. Thus, the dataset is suitable for identifying key measures that enhance women's participation and effectiveness in political leadership.

Table –4
Measures that enhance women's participation and effectiveness in political leadership

	Component			
	1	2	3	4
Quotas within parties promote gender-balanced representation.	.643			
Gender-sensitive civic education strengthens political	.614			
State-sponsored seminars support women's political engagement.	.601			
Leadership orientation improves effectiveness of elected women.	.516			
Fundraising training empowers women to contest elections.	.506			
Mentorship programs develop women's political competencies effectively.		.363		
Creating women's platforms increases political visibility.		.178		
Political parties must conduct gender equity audits.		.554		
Providing continuous training enhances women's political leadership.			.602	
Financial support for caregiving boosts women's candidacy.			.568	
Local positions help women gain political experience.				.739

Source: Primary Data

The table shows the Component Matrix extracted using Principal Component Analysis to identify key measures that enhance women's participation and effectiveness in political leadership. Four components were extracted, each grouping related interventions based on factor loadings. Component 1 includes structural and institutional reforms such as party quotas (0.643), civic education (0.614), and leadership orientation (0.516), emphasizing foundational capacity-building strategies. Component 2 captures organizational and visibility-enhancing efforts like mentorship, women's platforms, and equity audits. Component 3 reflects sustained

support systems like continuous training (0.602) and caregiving assistance (0.568), highlighting the importance of long-term institutional backing. Component 4 stands out with a high loading on local-level experience (0.739), underlining grassroots political involvement as a springboard for leadership. The findings confirm that enhancing women's political leadership is a multidimensional challenge that requires simultaneous focus on institutional reforms, skill-building, visibility, and social support. In conclusion, the factor structure validates the comprehensive and interconnected nature of the proposed measures.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

1. Institutional discrimination remains a major barrier, with electoral systems favoring male candidates (loading = 0.599), thereby limiting women's entry into formal political spaces.
2. Lack of political party support, such as limited access to political networks (loading = 0.655), continues to restrict women's opportunities to effectively compete and thrive in elections.
3. Socio-cultural expectations significantly impact women leaders, with caregiving burdens (loading = 0.732) and gender norms reducing their capacity to engage equally in political life.
4. Gender-based violence and bias, such as the constant need to prove competence (loading = 0.631), create psychological and structural deterrents that suppress women's political participation.
5. Quotas within political parties (loading = 0.643) emerged as a strong institutional measure that promotes gender-balanced representation and supports women's entry into political leadership.
6. Gender-sensitive civic education (loading = 0.614) was identified as a vital awareness-building strategy that fosters informed participation and leadership readiness among women.
7. Providing continuous political training for women (loading = 0.602) contributes significantly to skill development and long-term effectiveness in leadership roles.
8. Local political positions (loading = 0.739) were found to be the most influential measure, offering practical experience and serving as a foundational step toward higher leadership levels.

CONCLUSION OF THE STUDY

The study concludes that women's political leadership in the 21st century continues to be hindered by deeply embedded structural, institutional, and socio-cultural barriers. Key challenges include electoral systems biased toward male candidates, limited political party support, entrenched gender roles, and the pervasive threat of gender-based violence. These factors collectively suppress women's access to leadership and limit their influence in political decision-making. However, the findings also highlight actionable measures that can bridge this gap, including the implementation of party quotas, gender-sensitive civic education, and continuous leadership training. Local political participation emerged as a critical gateway for building leadership capacity. Addressing these barriers and leveraging identified enablers can significantly enhance women's participation, visibility, and effectiveness in political spaces. A sustained commitment from institutions, parties, and society at large is essential to break the glass ceiling and realize inclusive, gender-equitable governance.

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