

# Impact of Reserved Seats on Substantive Representation of Women: Evidence from Bangladesh and India

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines whether reserved seats for women improve substantive representation, understood not simply as an increase in women's descriptive presence in elected bodies, but as a change in policy priorities, institutional responsiveness, and the articulation of women's interests in governance. In South Asia, Bangladesh and India provide a useful comparison because both countries adopted reservations for women, yet they did so through different institutional designs. Bangladesh relies heavily on indirectly filled reserved seats at the national parliamentary level, while India's most influential evidence comes from directly elected and often randomly reserved positions in local government under the Panchayati Raj system. The paper argues that institutional design strongly conditions substantive outcomes. In Bangladesh, reserved seats have increased women's presence in parliament, but the indirect mode of election, weak constituency linkage, and dependence on party leadership often limit autonomous advocacy and reduce the transformative effect of quotas on legislative responsiveness to women's everyday concerns. In India, by contrast, the reservation of leadership positions in village councils produced stronger evidence of substantive representation: women leaders shifted spending and monitoring priorities toward goods more closely aligned with women's reported needs, including drinking water, fuel, roads, and local participation, and repeated exposure to female leadership changed social aspirations for girls and parents. The comparison shows that quotas work best when women in reserved positions have electoral legitimacy, clearly defined authority, regular interaction with constituents, and institutional conditions that lower dependence on male patrons or party gatekeepers. The paper concludes that reserved seats are neither symbolic nor automatically transformative; their substantive effect depends on whether quota design enables women to act as accountable political agents rather than merely as descriptive placeholders.

**Keywords:** Reserved Seats, Women's Political Representation, Substantive Representation, Bangladesh, India, Panchayati Raj, Parliament, Gender Quotas

**How to cite this article:** Gehlot N, Vijay S. Impact of Reserved Seats on Substantive Representation of Women: Evidence from Bangladesh and India. *Int J Drug Deliv Technol.* 2026;16(19s): 768-772. DOI: 10.25258/ijddt.16.19s.90

**Source of support:** Nil.

**Conflict of interest:** None

## Introduction

The underrepresentation of women in political institutions has long prompted demands for affirmative institutional reform. Reserved seats are among the most widely used tools to address this imbalance because they can alter the composition of decision-making bodies more rapidly than waiting for social norms or party incentives to evolve on their own. Yet a central debate remains unresolved: does descriptive representation lead to substantive representation? In other words, does placing more women in office actually change policy priorities, political discourse, or responsiveness to women's concerns?

This question is especially important in South Asia, where women have often achieved symbolic visibility without proportional influence over governance outcomes. Bangladesh and India offer two contrasting models. Bangladesh has institutionalized reserved seats for women at multiple levels of government, including parliament, but at the national level these seats are filled indirectly through party-based allocation rather than direct territorial election. India's constitutional reforms under the 73rd Amendment reserved one-third of seats and chairperson positions in local government for women, and in several states the quota was later raised to 50 percent. The most influential research on India exploits the randomized rotation of reserved positions in

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village councils, making it possible to estimate the causal effect of women's political leadership on governance outcomes.

This paper argues that reserved seats can improve substantive representation, but their impact is highly contingent on institutional design. Bangladesh demonstrates the limits of quota systems that expand numerical presence without ensuring independent electoral legitimacy or strong accountability to citizens. India demonstrates that when women in reserved positions wield real authority and interact directly with voters, reservations can reshape spending decisions, participation patterns, and even gender norms across generations. The analysis proceeds by first setting out the conceptual framework, then examining the Bangladesh case, followed by the India case, and finally comparing the two in order to draw broader conclusions for quota design.

### Conceptual framework

Political representation is often divided into descriptive, substantive, and symbolic forms. Descriptive representation refers to the numerical presence of women in office; substantive representation refers to acting for women by voicing their concerns, reallocating resources, or changing institutional behavior; symbolic representation concerns the meanings and signals attached to women's visibility in public office. Reserved seats are most often justified by their immediate capacity to improve descriptive representation, but their normative legitimacy depends largely on whether they eventually generate substantive gains.

The relationship between descriptive and substantive representation is not automatic. Simply increasing the number of women in legislatures does not guarantee that they can influence agendas, committees, budgets, or implementation. Institutional location matters. A woman elected from a territorial constituency with autonomous legitimacy may have a stronger incentive and capacity to respond to women voters than a woman who owes her seat primarily to party nomination. Likewise, authority matters: reserved members who hold office but lack control over spending, agenda setting, or monitoring may symbolize inclusion without reshaping outcomes.

The literature reflected in the India evidence highlights several causal channels through which reserved seats may matter. First, women leaders may hold policy preferences that differ from those of male leaders, especially in settings where gendered division of labor

makes women more sensitive to issues such as water, fuel, roads, education, and local safety. Second, the presence of women leaders may alter participation by encouraging other women to speak in meetings, attend decision-making forums, and communicate grievances to local officials. Third, repeated exposure to women in authority can shift social norms, aspirations, and expectations about leadership itself. A comparative study of quota outcomes must therefore ask not only whether women enter office, but whether they acquire voice, authority, accountability, and autonomy.

### Bangladesh

Bangladesh has one of the oldest reserved seat arrangements for women in South Asia, and the system applies at multiple levels of government. At the national level, the Constitution currently provides 50 reserved seats for women in parliament out of 350 total seats, making the reserved share roughly 14 percent; when women elected in general seats are also counted, women made up 21 percent of the 11th Parliament in 2018.

General parliamentary seats are filled through first-past-the-post elections, but reserved seats are allocated to parties in proportion to the number of general seats they win, and women for those seats are effectively selected through party-centered procedures.

This institutional design raises an immediate concern for substantive representation. Reserved-seat members of parliament do not represent distinct territorial constituencies in the same way as directly elected members. According to the IFES fact sheet, the whole country functions as one large multimember electoral area for reserved seats, while the electorate for these positions consists of already elected MPs rather than ordinary voters. In practice, the single transferable vote mechanism has never actually been used because party leaders nominate only as many candidates as there are seats available to the party, so no competitive vote occurs.

This means access to office depends heavily on party leadership rather than voter approval.

That pattern matters because substantive representation generally requires some combination of autonomy and accountability. If a reserved-seat MP's political future depends on party nomination, the incentives to challenge party hierarchies, develop independent local bases, or foreground controversial women's issues may be weaker. The critical analysis of Bangladesh's parliamentary reserved seats notes that the system raises questions about "meaningful representation" precisely because

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women in these positions do not enjoy the same constituency relationship that characterizes general-seat MPs. The problem is not the presence of women in parliament as such, but the mediated and dependent form of their inclusion.

The broader Bangladeshi evidence shows a similar pattern across tiers of government: reserved seats clearly improve women's entry into institutions, but women remain rare in general seats and top executive local offices. IFES reports that women held only 23 of 300 general parliamentary seats, 5 of 492 subdistrict chair positions, 1 of 12 city corporation mayoralities, 8 of 328 municipality mayoralities, and 29 of 4,571 union council chair positions in the figures compiled for 2020. At lower tiers, reserved seats often exist in "superdistrict" arrangements or indirectly elected formats that bundle several wards together, which can increase the area women must cover while reducing parity with male ward representatives. These arrangements may broaden formal access but can also dilute local accountability and overburden women representatives.

This does not mean Bangladesh's reservations are irrelevant. They have unquestionably prevented women's near exclusion from representative institutions and created an institutional pathway for female political participation. They also matter symbolically by normalizing women's presence within formal politics and by making it easier for parties to include women at scale. Still, available evidence from the sources gathered here suggests that the parliamentary model in Bangladesh produces a weaker form of substantive representation than systems where women are directly elected with clearly defined constituencies and stronger independent mandates.

Several structural features help explain the gap between descriptive and substantive outcomes in Bangladesh. First, the mode of selection reinforces dependence on party elites, especially in the parliamentary system where reserved-seat appointments are effectively controlled from above. Second, reserved-seat members may struggle to build durable grassroots linkages because they do not emerge from territorial competition in the same way as general-seat MPs. Third, the coexistence of reserved seats with very low female success in general seats indicates that quotas have not yet fully dismantled the barriers women face in mainstream electoral politics. As a result, reserved seats often function as

compensatory access points rather than as mechanisms that transform the broader distribution of power.

The Bangladesh case therefore illustrates a central point in quota theory: institutional access alone is insufficient. Reserved seats can create presence without equal power, and presence without strong mandate can limit substantive advocacy. Women may be in parliament, but if their authority is derivative, their incentives constrained, and their legislative role detached from a specific electorate, the transition from descriptive to substantive representation is likely to remain partial.

### India

India's experience with women's reservations in local government provides some of the strongest causal evidence in the world that reserved seats can enhance substantive representation. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment required states to reserve one-third of positions of chairpersons and one-third of seats in Panchayati Raj Institutions for women. These provisions were implemented in the 1990s, and many states later expanded the quota to 50 percent. Unlike the Bangladeshi parliamentary system, the relevant Indian evidence comes from directly elected local institutions with meaningful authority over local public goods and everyday governance.

The most influential study, by Chattopadhyay and Duflo, exploited the random assignment of reserved Gram Panchayat leadership positions in West Bengal. Because village councils were randomly selected for reservation, differences in policy outcomes between reserved and unreserved councils could be interpreted causally rather than as the product of voter preferences or preexisting gender norms. Their findings are foundational for the literature on substantive representation. Women leaders in reserved councils invested more in drinking water infrastructure, roads, and fuel-related facilities, while men invested relatively more in education; women also increased women's participation in the policy process.

These results are substantively significant for two reasons. First, the policy shifts tracked gendered needs generated by the social division of labor in rural India. Women were more directly affected by inadequate water access, fuel scarcity, poor roads, and burdens associated with domestic work, so the shift in spending priorities reflected a more responsive allocation of public goods rather than simply a female presence in office. Second, the findings undermine the claim that quotas merely change officeholders without affecting governance. In

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this case, the identity of leaders changed what governments did.

India's reservation system also appears to have generated symbolic and long-run substantive effects beyond immediate spending patterns. Beaman and coauthors found that exposure to female leadership in reserved village councils altered aspirations and educational outcomes among adolescents and their parents. In villages assigned a female leader for two election cycles, the gender gap in aspirations closed by 20 percent among parents and 32 percent among adolescents. The study also found improvements in girls' educational attainment, indicating that women's visible leadership can reshape norms about what girls can become and what families expect from them.

The Indian case is particularly important because early criticism of reservations often argued that women elected under quotas would merely act as proxies for husbands or male relatives. Chattopadhyay and Duflo explicitly engaged with that concern by examining whether observed effects were attributable to inexperience, term limits, or other features of reserved office, and still found robust differences in policy outcomes. Even if some women entered office with less prior political experience, the reservation system gave them sufficient authority to influence actual decisions over public goods. This suggests that substantive representation does not require women leaders to be socially unconstrained from the outset; it requires institutions that give them power to act and channels through which women's preferences can enter policy.

Another important aspect of the Indian design is its relationship to accountability. Reserved leaders in Panchayats operate in geographically bounded local jurisdictions where citizens can observe service delivery and voice concerns in public forums. Chattopadhyay and Duflo describe Gram Panchayats as institutions responsible for roads, drinking water, irrigation, public buildings, and implementation of development programs, with regular village meetings that allow citizens to engage local governance. This local embeddedness increases the likelihood that women leaders will hear women's concerns directly and that citizens can evaluate whether reserved office changes outcomes.

At the same time, the India experience should not be romanticized. The evidence cited here is strongest for local government, not for higher legislatures. Substantive gains in village councils do not automatically imply

equivalent gains in state assemblies or parliament. Yet the local evidence remains highly consequential, because it demonstrates that quota design can causally alter policy in favor of women's interests under the right institutional conditions. India therefore offers a compelling empirical answer to the skeptics of reserved seats: under a system of direct election, meaningful local authority, and repeated exposure, reservations can move beyond symbolism and generate both policy change and social change.

### Comparative analysis

A comparison of Bangladesh and India shows that reserved seats do not have a single, uniform effect. Their substantive consequences vary according to at least four institutional dimensions: mode of selection, constituency linkage, policy authority, and autonomy from gatekeepers.

First, mode of selection is crucial. In Bangladesh's parliament, reserved-seat women are effectively chosen through party allocation after general elections, and the competitive electoral step is largely absent because parties nominate only as many candidates as they have seats. In India's Panchayats, reserved leadership positions are filled through direct local electoral processes in specified jurisdictions. Direct election strengthens legitimacy and often improves the representative's incentive to respond to a defined constituency.

Second, constituency linkage shapes whether women can act substantively. Bangladeshi reserved-seat MPs do not represent territorial constituencies in the same way as general-seat MPs, weakening their day-to-day accountability and reducing opportunities to cultivate an autonomous support base. Indian women leaders in reserved village councils govern concrete local areas where policy outputs such as water points, roads, or school oversight are visible and politically attributable. That proximity helps turn women's presence into responsive action.

Third, authority over resources matters. Reserved representatives who lack budgetary influence, agenda control, or monitoring powers may be symbolically present but substantively weak. In West Bengal's Panchayats, village councils had authority over a range of local public works and welfare functions, allowing women leaders to redirect spending and administrative attention. Bangladesh's national parliamentary reserved seats provide a weaker link between presence and

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distributive policymaking because access is filtered through party hierarchy and detached from specific territorial mandates.

Fourth, autonomy from party or familial gatekeepers affects the meaning of quotas. Both Bangladesh and India face patriarchal constraints, and both have been criticized for patronage or proxy politics. But the Indian evidence indicates that even where women have less experience or encounter social mediation, institutional power can still produce measurable substantive gains. Bangladesh's parliamentary model, by contrast, appears more vulnerable to elite control because party leaders dominate the nomination process for reserved-seat MPs. This comparison suggests that autonomy is not an all-or-nothing condition; rather, the more quota beneficiaries depend on centralized selectors instead of voters, the weaker substantive representation is likely to be.

The comparison also reveals an important theoretical distinction between symbolic and substantive gains. Bangladesh shows strong evidence of symbolic and descriptive inclusion: women are present in parliament and local councils because quotas guarantee entry. India shows descriptive inclusion as well, but the randomized evidence further demonstrates concrete shifts in policy outcomes and social aspirations. The difference is not that one country adopted quotas and the other did not; it is that the structure of quotas generated different political incentives and capacities.

### Implications

The evidence from Bangladesh and India carries broader lessons for the design of gender quotas. Reserved seats are most likely to improve substantive representation when they meet several conditions. Women should ideally be directly elected, attached to clear constituencies, and equipped with real policy authority over spending or implementation. Institutions should also reduce overdependence on party leaders and create forums through which women citizens can communicate demands to women representatives.

For Bangladesh, reform implications follow directly from the weaknesses of the current parliamentary arrangement. A stronger system would reduce party monopoly over reserved-seat selection, expand direct electoral legitimacy, and create clearer constituency accountability for women representatives. Such reforms would not replace quotas; rather, they would deepen their democratic value by making women in reserved seats more independent actors.

For India, the main lesson is that quotas can work, but their effects should be consolidated through complementary measures such as training, protection against backlash, and institutional support that helps women sustain careers beyond one rotation cycle. The aspiration effects found after repeated exposure to female leadership suggest that quota systems can have cumulative benefits over time, especially when women remain visible across successive electoral cycles.

Substantive representation is therefore not just a matter of seat allocation; it is also a matter of institutional repetition and normalization.

More generally, the comparison shows that the success of reserved seats should not be judged by numbers alone. A parliament with more women is not necessarily more responsive to women's needs if those women lack mandate or independence. Conversely, even in patriarchal settings, reserved leadership with real authority can shift state action in measurable ways. Evaluating quotas therefore requires attention to how women enter office, what powers they hold, and to whom they are accountable.

### Conclusion

Reserved seats remain one of the most important instruments for correcting women's political exclusion, but their impact on substantive representation varies sharply across institutional contexts. Bangladesh demonstrates that quotas can ensure women's presence while still producing a limited form of representation when reserved members are indirectly selected, weakly linked to constituencies, and heavily dependent on party leadership. India demonstrates that when reserved positions are directly elected, endowed with local authority, and embedded in participatory governance, women leaders can alter policy priorities and social expectations in ways that clearly reflect substantive representation.

The comparison therefore supports a conditional conclusion. Reserved seats do matter, and they can do more than satisfy symbolic demands for inclusion. But they are most transformative when they create politically empowered women rather than politically nominated placeholders. The key lesson from Bangladesh and India is not simply that quotas should exist, but that their design determines whether women in office can speak, decide, and govern in ways that materially advance women's interests.