



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF TRENDS IN EMERGING RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF TRENDS IN EMERGING RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

Volume 4; Issue 2; 2026; Page No. 113-123

Received: 04-01-2026
Accepted: 10-02-2026
Published: 07-03-2026

Measuring Gender Legitimacy in Governance: Beyond Descriptive Representation

Radha

Research Scholar, Department of Continuing Education and Extension, University of Delhi, Delhi, India

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21357727>

Corresponding Author: Radha

Abstract

The question of gender equality in governance has gained prominence in contemporary debates on democracy, political representation, and institutional legitimacy. Existing literature predominantly assesses women's political participation through descriptive indicators such as the proportion of women in legislatures, cabinets, and local governments. However, these measures are limited as they do not account for whether women possess substantive political authority or influence in decision-making processes. This study argues that numerical representation alone is insufficient for evaluating genuine gender equality in governance. It introduces and develops the concept of Gender Legitimacy as a broader analytical framework. The primary objective of the research is to examine the relationship between gender, power, and governance by moving beyond conventional representation metrics. Adopting a qualitative and comparative research design, the study is grounded in political theory, feminist institutionalism, and democratic governance literature. It conducts a comparative analysis of four democratic contexts: India, the United States, Sweden, and Rwanda. These cases were selected to capture variation in institutional structures, political culture, and levels of women's political participation. The central contribution of this paper is the development of the Gender Legitimacy Index (GLI), an original multidimensional framework to assess gender equality in governance. The GLI comprises five dimensions: Descriptive Representation, Substantive Influence, Institutional Power Distribution, Policy Responsiveness and Outcomes, and Societal Acceptance and Political Culture. Unlike existing approaches that focus primarily on numerical participation, the GLI evaluates whether governance systems provide women with genuine authority, decision-making capacity, and institutional legitimacy. Findings from the comparative analysis indicate that higher levels of women's representation do not necessarily correlate with greater political power or democratic equality. Meaningful gender equality is contingent upon the interaction of institutional design, political culture, policy outcomes, and societal recognition, rather than representation alone. The study concludes that Gender Legitimacy should be recognized as an essential dimension of democratic legitimacy. The GLI is proposed as a practical tool for future comparative research and for evaluating public policy aimed at achieving substantive gender equality in governance.

Keywords: Gender Equality, Governance, Gender Legitimacy, Gender Legitimacy Index (GLI), Political Representation, Democratic Legitimacy, Women's Political Participation, Comparative Politics

1. Introduction

Gender equality has remained one of the central concerns of political theory and democratic governance. In contemporary political discourse, the question of gender equality in governance occupies a significant position within debates on democratic justice, political representation, and institutional legitimacy. Across the world, democratic governments have increasingly adopted constitutional reforms, gender quotas, reservation policies, and

institutional mechanisms to enhance women's participation in political decision-making. These developments reflect the growing recognition that inclusive governance is an essential characteristic of a democratic political system (United Nations, 2015; UN Women, 2024) ^[20, 21]. Although democracy is founded upon the principles of equality, liberty, and political participation, the historical development of political institutions has largely been shaped by patriarchal structures that systematically excluded

women from formal political processes. For centuries, women were denied equal opportunities to participate in governance, legislative institutions, and public decision-making despite philosophical arguments supporting political equality. Consequently, the evolution of democratic governance reveals a significant gap between the normative ideals of democracy and the practical inclusion of women within political institutions (Pateman, 1988; Phillips, 1995)^[12, 13]. The question of women's political participation is not a recent concern in political philosophy. One of the earliest discussions can be found in Plato's *The Republic*, where he argued that the eligibility to govern should be determined by an individual's abilities rather than by gender. Plato challenged the conventional assumption that political authority should remain exclusively in the hands of men and suggested that capable women should be allowed to perform the same governing functions as men (Plato, trans. 1992)^[15]. Similarly, John Locke's theory of natural rights emphasized the inherent equality and moral worth of individuals, providing an important philosophical foundation for later democratic thought. Although Locke did not explicitly advocate equal political participation for women, his principles of natural rights and equality significantly influenced subsequent movements for democratic citizenship and equal political rights (Locke, 1689/1988)^[18]. Despite these philosophical foundations, women's participation in governance remained extremely limited for much of history. Meaningful progress emerged gradually during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries through industrialization, the expansion of education, women's increasing participation in the labour force, and the rise of feminist movements. The First and Second World Wars further accelerated this transformation by encouraging women's participation in public administration, industry, and governmental institutions, thereby challenging the traditional separation between the public and private spheres. These developments ultimately contributed to the expansion of women's suffrage and increased representation within legislatures, bureaucracies, and local governments across many democratic societies (UN Women, 2024)^[21]. In recent decades, the assessment of gender equality in governance has largely relied upon quantitative indicators such as the percentage of women in legislatures, ministerial positions, executive offices, and local governments. International organisations, including the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), UN Women, and the World Economic Forum, frequently use these indicators to evaluate the progress of democratic countries toward gender equality (IPU, 2025; World Economic Forum, 2025). While these indicators provide valuable information regarding women's descriptive representation, they primarily measure numerical participation rather than the actual distribution of political authority. The present study argues that numerical representation alone is insufficient for evaluating gender equality in democratic governance. The presence of women within political institutions does not necessarily imply that they possess equal decision-making authority, policy influence, institutional power, or political legitimacy. Women may occupy elected positions while continuing to experience structural barriers that restrict their capacity to influence governance. Therefore, a comprehensive evaluation of gender equality must move beyond descriptive

representation and examine whether women exercise meaningful political agency and institutional authority within democratic systems (Pitkin, 1967; Phillips, 1995; Young, 2000)^[14, 13, 24]. This study seeks to address this conceptual limitation by proposing Gender Legitimacy as a broader analytical framework for understanding gender equality in governance. Rather than evaluating democracy solely through the numerical presence of women in political institutions, the study argues that democratic legitimacy should also consider women's authority, influence, institutional participation, and capacity to shape public policy. In support of this argument, the study introduces the Gender Legitimacy Index (GLI) as a multidimensional framework for assessing gender equality beyond descriptive representation. Using a comparative qualitative research approach based on secondary data, this study examines four democratic contexts—India, the United States, Sweden, and Brazil—to analyse the relationship between women's political representation and their substantive role in governance. The comparative analysis demonstrates that higher levels of representation do not necessarily translate into genuine political equality or equal decision-making authority. By moving beyond numerical indicators, this research contributes to contemporary debates on democratic governance, political legitimacy, and gender equality while offering an alternative framework for evaluating women's position within democratic institutions.

1.1 Aim of the Study

The primary aim of this study is to examine gender equality in democratic governance beyond the traditional measure of numerical political representation. The study seeks to develop the concept of Gender Legitimacy as a theoretical framework for understanding whether women possess not only political representation but also meaningful authority, institutional influence, and decision-making power within democratic systems. Furthermore, the study aims to propose a Gender Legitimacy Index (GLI) as a comprehensive analytical framework for assessing gender equality across democratic governance systems.

1.2 Research Methodology (Brief)

This study adopts a comparative qualitative research design based on secondary sources of data. The analysis draws upon academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports, publications of international organisations, and comparative governance datasets. Four democratic countries—India, the United States, Sweden, and Brazil—have been selected as comparative case studies to examine the relationship between women's political representation and their actual role in governance. The study employs comparative analysis to evaluate whether higher levels of women's representation necessarily result in greater political authority, institutional influence, and democratic legitimacy. The proposed Gender Legitimacy Index (GLI) serves as the analytical framework for interpreting the comparative findings.

1.3 Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it attempts to move beyond the conventional understanding of gender equality based solely on descriptive political representation. By introducing

the concept of Gender Legitimacy, the research provides a broader perspective for evaluating women's position within democratic governance. The proposed framework contributes to the fields of political science, democratic theory, governance studies, and gender studies by offering an alternative approach to assessing political inclusion. The findings of this study may also assist policymakers, researchers, and democratic institutions in designing governance reforms that strengthen not only women's representation but also their substantive participation and institutional authority.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Historical Evolution of Women in Governance

The participation of women in governance has evolved gradually through different historical periods. Although women have played important social and economic roles throughout history, their involvement in formal political institutions remained limited for centuries. Traditional political systems largely confined women to the private sphere, while governance and public decision-making were considered the responsibility of men. As a result, women were systematically excluded from positions of political authority despite their significant contributions to society (Pateman, 1988) ^[12]. The earliest philosophical support for women's participation in governance can be found in Plato's *The Republic*. Plato argued that political leadership should be determined by knowledge, ability, and virtue rather than by gender. According to him, women who possessed the required capabilities should receive the same education and opportunities to govern as men. Although these ideas were not widely accepted during his time, they laid an important philosophical foundation for later discussions on political equality (Plato, trans. Reeve, 1992) ^[15].

The modern idea of political equality developed further during the seventeenth century through the writings of John Locke, who emphasized natural rights, liberty, and equality as the basis of legitimate government. While Locke did not specifically advocate equal political participation for women, his principles of individual rights later influenced democratic reforms and women's rights movements across Europe and North America (Locke, 1689/1988) ^[8]. Significant progress occurred during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Industrial Revolution, expansion of education, women's growing participation in the labour force, and the rise of feminist movements challenged traditional gender roles. Events such as the Seneca Falls Convention (1848) marked the beginning of organized campaigns for women's political rights, while the First and Second World Wars demonstrated women's capacity to contribute to public administration, industry, and governance. These developments accelerated the expansion of women's suffrage and increased their participation in democratic institutions (DuBois, 1998; Evans, 2016). The second half of the twentieth century witnessed major international efforts to promote gender equality in governance. The adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 1979) ^[3] and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) ^[19] recognized women's equal participation in political and public life as an essential requirement of democracy. More recently, the 2030 Agenda

for Sustainable Development, particularly Sustainable Development Goal 5, has reaffirmed gender equality as a global development priority (United Nations, 1979; United Nations, 1995; United Nations, 2015) ^[3, 19, 20]. In India, women's participation in governance expanded significantly after the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments (1992–93), which introduced reservations for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies. These reforms enabled millions of women to participate in local governance and strengthened democratic decentralization. Similarly, several democratic countries have adopted constitutional reforms, gender quotas, and electoral policies to improve women's representation in political institutions (Government of India, 1992; Dahlerup, 2006) ^[6, 4]. Despite these historical achievements, equal participation has not always resulted in equal political authority. Women have gained greater representation in democratic institutions, yet they continue to face barriers in leadership positions, executive decision-making, and institutional influence. This historical evolution demonstrates that numerical participation alone cannot fully explain gender equality in governance. Therefore, it is necessary to examine not only the presence of women in political institutions but also their ability to exercise meaningful authority within democratic systems (Phillips, 1995; Young, 2000) ^[13, 24].

2.2 Descriptive Representation and Its Limitations

Descriptive representation refers to the numerical presence of women within political institutions. It measures the extent to which elected representatives reflect the demographic composition of society. In the context of gender equality, descriptive representation is generally assessed through indicators such as the percentage of women in legislatures, ministerial positions, executive offices, and local governments. Many democratic countries consider higher female representation as evidence of greater political inclusion (Pitkin, 1967; Phillips, 1995) ^[14, 13]. The concept gained significant importance through Hanna Pitkin's theory of political representation, which distinguished descriptive representation from substantive representation. According to Pitkin, descriptive representation ensures that political institutions resemble the society they represent. Later, Anne Phillips argued that the presence of women in political institutions is essential because democratic systems cannot claim to be fully representative if half of the population remains excluded from decision-making (Pitkin, 1967; Phillips, 1995) ^[14, 13]. To improve women's representation, several countries have introduced reservation policies, electoral quotas, and constitutional reforms. These measures have successfully increased the number of women in legislatures and local governments. International organisations such as UN Women, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), and the World Economic Forum (WEF) regularly use these indicators to compare women's political participation across countries (UN Women, 2024; IPU, 2025) ^[21]. However, descriptive representation has important limitations. The numerical presence of women does not necessarily ensure equal political authority or influence over public policy. Women may occupy elected positions while remaining excluded from key leadership roles, executive decision-making, financial committees, or strategic policy discussions. Therefore, representation alone cannot fully

explain the quality of gender equality within democratic governance (Young, 2000; Pateman, 1988) ^[24, 12]. These limitations suggest that measuring only the number of women in political institutions provides an incomplete understanding of democratic equality. A broader framework is required to examine whether women possess genuine decision-making power, institutional authority, and political legitimacy after entering governance structures.

2.3 Gender, Power, and Institutional Structures

Political power is a central element of democratic governance. While democratic constitution's guarantee equal political rights, the distribution of power within institutions is often influenced by historical, cultural, and social structures. As a result, women may enjoy equal legal rights but continue to face barriers in accessing positions of authority and leadership (Weber, 1978; Lukes, 2005) ^[22, 9]. Feminist political theorists argue that political institutions are not gender-neutral. Carole Pateman explains that modern democratic institutions have historically developed within patriarchal social structures, which continue to shape political authority and leadership opportunities. Similarly, Iris Marion Young argues that genuine democratic inclusion requires meaningful participation in decision-making rather than symbolic representation alone (Pateman, 1988; Young, 2000) ^[12, 24]. Power also operates beyond formal political institutions. Steven Lukes identifies three dimensions of power: decision-making power, agenda-setting power, and ideological power. These dimensions explain how individuals or groups may influence political outcomes even without holding formal political office. Consequently, women may be represented within political institutions but still possess limited influence over policy agendas or institutional priorities (Lukes, 2005) ^[9]. Therefore, understanding gender equality requires analysing both representation and institutional power. Democratic governance should evaluate not only whether women are present in political institutions but also whether they participate equally in leadership, policymaking, and executive decision making. This perspective provides the foundation for developing broader approaches to measuring gender equality.

2.4 Women in Global Governance

Women's political participation has increased considerably across democratic countries during the last few decades. Constitutional reforms, quota systems, international conventions, and feminist movements have contributed to greater female representation in national parliaments, local governments, and executive institutions. Nevertheless, the level of participation continues to vary significantly among countries (UN Women, 2024; IPU, 2025) ^[21]. Countries such as Sweden have consistently maintained high levels of women's parliamentary representation through strong political commitment to gender equality and voluntary party quotas. In contrast, countries such as India have achieved substantial progress at the local government level through constitutional reservations, while women's representation at higher legislative levels has improved more gradually. Similarly, the United States and Brazil have experienced increasing female participation, although women continue to remain underrepresented in several senior political positions

(OECD, 2023; World Economic Forum, 2025) ^[11]. International organisations have played a crucial role in promoting women's participation through initiatives such as CEDAW, the Beijing Platform for Action, and the Sustainable Development Goals. These frameworks recognise equal political participation as an essential component of democratic governance and sustainable development. Consequently, governments across the world increasingly consider gender equality as both a democratic principle and a policy objective (United Nations, 1979; United Nations, 1995; United Nations, 2015) ^[3, 19, 20]. Despite these developments, comparative evidence suggests that higher representation does not always translate into equal political influence. Women often remain underrepresented in executive leadership, financial decision-making, defence ministries, and strategic policy institutions. Therefore, global experience indicates that measuring only descriptive representation cannot fully explain women's actual position within democratic governance.

2.5 The Concept of Gender Legitimacy

The existing literature on gender equality has primarily focused on women's representation, political participation, and electoral inclusion. While these approaches have significantly contributed to democratic reforms, they often evaluate gender equality through numerical indicators rather than institutional authority. As a result, an important question remains unanswered: Does greater representation necessarily produce equal political legitimacy? This study argues that gender equality should be understood not only through the presence of women in political institutions but also through their ability to exercise authority, influence public policy, and participate equally in democratic decision-making. For this reason, the study introduces the concept of Gender Legitimacy, which refers to the degree to which women possess equal and legitimate authority within governance institutions. Unlike descriptive representation, Gender Legitimacy evaluates multiple dimensions of democratic participation, including political authority, leadership opportunities, institutional influence, policy participation, and decision-making power. It recognises that genuine democratic equality cannot be achieved solely by increasing the number of women in political office but requires equal access to meaningful political power. Based on this concept, the study proposes the Gender Legitimacy Index (GLI) as a multidimensional framework for assessing women's position within democratic governance. The GLI moves beyond numerical representation and provides a broader analytical tool for comparing gender equality across democratic countries. The following chapters develop this framework and apply it to the comparative analysis of India, the United States, Sweden, and Brazil.

3 Gender, Power, and Institutional Structures

Gender equality in governance is often assessed by examining the number of women represented in political institutions. Although increasing women's representation is an important indicator of democratic progress, numerical participation alone cannot ensure genuine equality. Women may occupy positions in legislatures, cabinets, and local governments while continuing to remain excluded from key decision-making processes. Therefore, understanding

gender equality requires analysing not only representation but also the distribution of power within political institutions (Pitkin, 1967; Phillips, 1995) ^[14, 13]. Power is generally understood as the capacity to influence political decisions, shape public policy, and determine institutional outcomes. Traditional political theory associated power primarily with formal authority and public office. However, contemporary scholars argue that power extends beyond official positions. Steven Lukes (2005) ^[9] explains that power also operates by shaping political agendas, influencing public preferences, and determining which issues receive institutional attention. Consequently, individuals may formally participate in governance while exercising little real influence over political decision-making. This perspective is particularly relevant to women's participation in governance. Women may hold elected offices and occupy visible political positions, yet remain excluded from informal networks where many important political decisions are made. Leadership committees, party organisations, cabinet discussions, and policy-setting groups often determine political priorities before formal decisions are taken. As a result, numerical representation alone does not necessarily reflect women's actual political influence within democratic institutions (Lukes, 2005; Young, 2000) ^[9, 24]. Feminist political theorists argue that these inequalities are closely connected with the historical development of patriarchal institutions. Carole Pateman (1988) ^[12], in *The Sexual Contract*, argues that modern democratic institutions continue to reflect historical patterns of male dominance despite constitutional commitments to equality. According to Pateman, formal legal equality does not automatically eliminate institutional practices that disadvantage women. Consequently, barriers to women's political participation frequently arise from the functioning of political institutions rather than from explicit legal discrimination alone. Institutional inequality is further reinforced through political parties, leadership structures, campaign financing, and informal political networks. Political parties generally determine candidate selection, leadership opportunities, and access to organisational resources. Since many of these institutions have historically been dominated by men, women often experience greater difficulty in obtaining leadership positions, financial support, and policy influence. These structural barriers continue to shape women's political opportunities even within democratic systems that guarantee equal constitutional rights (Phillips, 1995) ^[13]. Cultural norms also influence the exercise of political power. Leadership qualities such as authority, decisiveness, and political strength have traditionally been associated with men, while women leaders frequently face greater public scrutiny and criticism. Such gender stereotypes influence electoral behaviour, media representation, and institutional expectations, making it more difficult for women to exercise authority on equal terms with their male counterparts (Eagly & Karau, 2002; UN Women, 2024) ^[5, 21]. The relationship between individual agency and institutional structure demonstrates that the success of individual women should not be interpreted as evidence that systemic inequalities have disappeared. The election of women to senior political offices undoubtedly reflects democratic progress; however, isolated examples of successful women cannot by themselves eliminate deeply embedded institutional barriers.

Genuine gender equality requires structural reforms that expand women's participation in leadership, decision-making, and policy formulation across all levels of governance (Young, 2000) ^[24]. Therefore, evaluating gender equality requires moving beyond the simple measurement of women's representation. Democratic governance should assess whether women possess equal opportunities to influence political decisions, shape public policy, and participate in institutional leadership. This broader understanding provides the foundation for the concept of Gender Legitimacy, which argues that democratic equality should be evaluated not only through women's presence in governance but also through the legitimacy of their political authority and institutional influence.

4. Gender, Power, and International Structures

The relationship between gender and governance extends beyond national political systems to the broader framework of international institutions and global governance. In an increasingly interconnected world, organisations such as the United Nations (UN), the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and other multilateral institutions play a significant role in shaping policies related to development, security, human rights, and economic cooperation. Consequently, understanding gender equality in governance requires examining not only domestic political institutions but also the international structures that influence decision-making across countries. Following the Second World War, the establishment of international organisations transformed the global governance system. These institutions were created to promote international cooperation, peace, economic development, and human rights. Over time, they also became important actors in advancing gender equality through international conventions, policy recommendations, and development programmes. However, feminist scholars argue that despite their universal objectives, many international institutions have historically been dominated by male leadership and decision-making structures, limiting the representation of women's perspectives in global policymaking (Tickner, 2001) ^[17]. The recognition of gender equality as a global political objective developed gradually through international human rights initiatives. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) ^[18] established the principle that all individuals are entitled to equal rights and freedoms without discrimination. This commitment was further strengthened by the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 1979) ^[3], which specifically addressed discrimination against women in political, social, and economic life. Later, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) ^[19] identified women's equal participation in decision-making as a fundamental requirement for democratic governance and sustainable development (United Nations, 1948; United Nations, 1979; United Nations, 1995) ^[3, 19, 20]. Despite these international commitments, scholars of feminist international relations argue that gender inequality continues to exist within global governance institutions. J. Ann Tickner (2001) ^[17] contends that international politics has traditionally been analysed through perspectives that prioritise state power, military security, and economic competition while overlooking women's experiences and

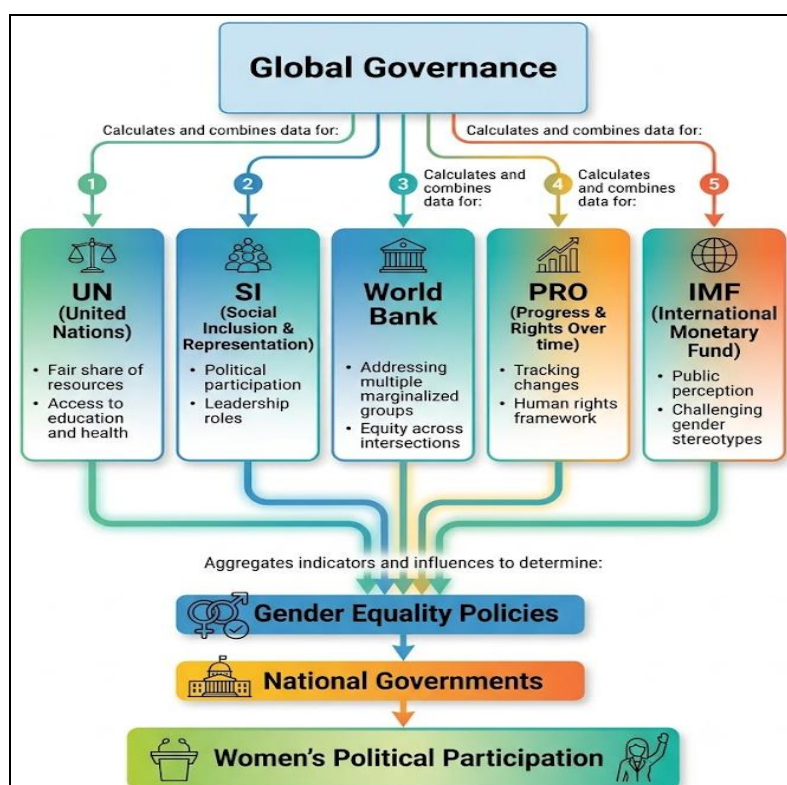
contributions. As a result, women often remain underrepresented in international negotiations, peace processes, and global policy formulation. The unequal distribution of power within international institutions further reinforces these challenges. According to Steven Lukes (2005) ^[9], power is not limited to formal decision-making but also includes the ability to shape political agendas and determine which issues receive institutional attention. Within international governance, women may be represented in organisations yet continue to have limited influence over strategic priorities, financial resource allocation, and high-level policy decisions. Therefore, representation alone cannot ensure meaningful participation in global governance. These inequalities are particularly significant for women from developing countries. In addition to gender-based barriers, they often face economic, political, and geopolitical constraints that reduce their influence within international institutions. Limited access to financial resources, diplomatic representation, and global decision-making networks frequently restricts their participation in shaping international policies. Consequently, gender inequality in global governance is closely connected with broader inequalities in wealth, political influence, and global power structures (UN Women, 2024) ^[21]. Although the number of women occupying leadership positions within international organisations has increased over recent decades, men continue to dominate many of the most influential institutions and senior decision-making roles. This demonstrates that increasing women's representation is an important step, but it does not necessarily ensure equal authority or policy influence. Genuine gender equality requires that women participate not only as representatives but also as influential decision-makers capable of shaping global governance. The study of gender, power, and international institutions therefore demonstrates that

evaluating gender equality requires more than measuring women's numerical participation. It is equally important to examine who possesses the authority to influence international policies, allocate resources, and shape institutional priorities. This broader understanding provides the foundation for the concept of Gender Legitimacy, which argues that genuine equality depends upon women's meaningful authority and influence within both national and international governance structures.

5. Gender Legitimacy Index (GLI): A New Framework

The concept of Gender Legitimacy, discussed in the previous chapter, provides a broader perspective for understanding gender equality in governance. However, for this concept to contribute meaningfully to empirical research, it must be translated into measurable indicators. Existing approaches to evaluating gender equality primarily rely on descriptive measures such as the percentage of women in legislatures, cabinets, or local governments. Although these indicators are useful for measuring representation, they do not adequately capture whether women possess real political authority, influence institutional decisions, or participate meaningfully in governance. This limitation creates a significant gap between measuring women's presence and evaluating their political legitimacy (Pitkin, 1967; Phillips, 1995) ^[14, 13].

To address this gap, the present study proposes the Gender Legitimacy Index (GLI) as a multidimensional framework for evaluating gender equality in democratic governance. Unlike existing indices that focus mainly on numerical representation, the GLI examines whether women exercise meaningful authority, participate in decision-making, influence public policy, and receive institutional and societal legitimacy. The framework therefore shifts the focus from representation alone to the broader concept of political legitimacy.



The proposed Gender Legitimacy Index (GLI) consists of five interrelated dimensions, each representing an essential aspect of women's position within governance systems.

1. Descriptive Representation (DR)

The first dimension measures the numerical representation of women in political institutions. It examines the proportion of women in legislatures, executive offices, local governments, ministerial positions, and senior administrative roles. Descriptive representation is the foundation of democratic inclusion because meaningful participation cannot occur without adequate representation. However, this dimension alone is insufficient for evaluating genuine gender equality (Pitkin, 1967)^[14].

2. Substantive Influence (SI)

The second dimension evaluates the extent to which women influence political decisions and policy outcomes. Representation becomes meaningful only when women participate in agenda-setting, legislative debates, cabinet decisions, and leadership positions within political parties and parliamentary committees. This dimension reflects the distinction between political presence and political influence discussed by Pitkin and Lukes (Pitkin, 1967; Lukes, 2005)^[14, 9].

3. Institutional Power Distribution (IPD)

The third dimension examines how political authority is distributed within governance institutions. Women may occupy elected offices while remaining excluded from positions where major political decisions are made. This dimension therefore considers women's representation in cabinet portfolios, judicial leadership, constitutional bodies, senior bureaucratic positions, and other institutions responsible for exercising state authority. It evaluates whether women possess genuine institutional power rather than symbolic representation.

4. Policy Responsiveness and Outcomes (PRO)

The fourth dimension focuses on the outcomes of governance. It evaluates whether public policies effectively address issues affecting women, including protection against gender-based violence, equal employment opportunities, healthcare, education, and political participation. This dimension recognises that gender equality should be assessed not only through political representation but also through the ability of governance institutions to produce policies that improve women's social, political, and economic conditions.

5. Societal Acceptance and Political Culture (SAC)

The fifth dimension recognises that political legitimacy is influenced not only by institutions but also by society. Drawing upon Max Weber's concept of legitimacy, this dimension examines public acceptance of women in leadership, societal trust in female political leaders, media representation, and broader political culture. Even when constitutional equality exists, negative public attitudes and gender stereotypes may continue to restrict women's political authority (Weber, 1978)^[22].

Each of these five dimensions is assigned equal weight (20%), resulting in a composite score ranging from 0 to 100.

Equal weighting reflects the assumption that each dimension contributes equally to the overall legitimacy of women's participation in governance. While future research may develop alternative weighting methods based on empirical evidence, the present study adopts equal weights to maintain conceptual clarity and methodological simplicity.

The proposed Gender Legitimacy Index (GLI) is calculated using the following formula:

$$GLI = \frac{DR + SI + IPD + PRO + SAC}{5}$$

Where,

- **DR** = Descriptive Representation
- **SI** = Substantive Influence
- **IPD** = Institutional Power Distribution
- **PRO** = Policy Responsiveness and Outcomes
- **SAC** = Societal Acceptance and Political Culture

This formula provides a practical and comprehensive framework for comparing democratic governance across different political systems. Unlike existing measures that rely primarily on numerical representation, the GLI captures multiple dimensions of women's political participation, authority, and legitimacy. It therefore offers a more comprehensive approach to evaluating gender equality within democratic institutions. The significance of the Gender Legitimacy Index lies in its ability to distinguish between symbolic inclusion and meaningful political empowerment. A country may have a high proportion of women in political office while providing them with limited authority over policymaking or institutional decisions. Conversely, another country may have comparatively fewer women representatives but offer greater opportunities for leadership, policy influence, and institutional participation. The GLI captures these differences by integrating representation with authority, institutional power, policy outcomes, and societal acceptance. The significance of the Gender Legitimacy Index lies in its ability to distinguish between symbolic inclusion and meaningful political empowerment. A country may have a high proportion of women in political office while providing them with limited authority over policymaking or institutional decisions. Conversely, another country may have comparatively fewer women representatives but offer greater opportunities for leadership, policy influence, and institutional participation. The GLI captures these differences by integrating representation with authority, institutional power, policy outcomes, and societal acceptance. More broadly, the proposed framework contributes to democratic theory by expanding the understanding of political legitimacy. Traditional assessments of democracy primarily emphasise elections, political participation, and constitutional representation. The GLI argues that democratic legitimacy should also include an evaluation of whether women possess equal opportunities to influence governance and exercise political authority. In this way, gender equality becomes an essential component of democratic legitimacy rather than merely an indicator of political representation.

The following chapter applies the Gender Legitimacy Index (GLI) to a comparative analysis of selected democratic countries. By examining India, the United States, Sweden,

and Brazil, the study demonstrates how the proposed framework provides a deeper understanding of women's political participation beyond numerical representation.

6. A Comparative Analysis of Countries

The Gender Legitimacy Index (GLI) was developed to provide a more comprehensive assessment of gender equality in governance. Unlike conventional measures that focus primarily on women's numerical representation, the GLI evaluates five dimensions: descriptive representation, substantive influence, institutional power distribution, policy responsiveness and outcomes, and societal acceptance and political culture. Using these dimensions, this chapter compares four democratic contexts-India, the United States, Sweden, and Rwanda-to examine how different governance systems promote women's political legitimacy.

6.1 India: India presents a unique case in the study of gender equality in governance. Constitutional reforms, particularly the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, significantly increased women's representation in local government through political reservations. These reforms enabled millions of women to enter democratic institutions and participate in public decision-making. However, research also indicates that many elected women representatives continue to face structural barriers, including limited institutional authority, political dependence on male family members, and restricted influence over policymaking (Government of India, 1992; Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004) ^[6, 2]. Despite these challenges, women's participation has produced positive outcomes in areas such as education, healthcare, sanitation, and community development. India's experience therefore demonstrates that while descriptive representation has improved considerably, greater efforts are required to strengthen women's political influence, institutional authority, and societal acceptance. From the perspective of the GLI, India performs relatively well in representation but continues to face challenges in several other dimensions of gender legitimacy.

6.2 United States

The United States is one of the world's oldest constitutional democracies and has long been recognised for its commitment to democratic institutions, individual rights, and representative government. Women's participation in American politics has increased steadily over recent decades, with women serving in Congress, state legislatures, the judiciary, and executive offices. Nevertheless, significant gender disparities remain in political leadership and executive decision-making. Several scholars argue that campaign financing, political party structures, media representation, and persistent gender stereotypes continue to limit women's advancement to the highest political offices. Although women have achieved greater visibility in governance, the United States has never elected a female President, illustrating that equal political opportunity has not yet translated into equal access to the country's highest executive office. Consequently, while the United States performs strongly in democratic institutions and political participation, challenges remain in achieving full gender legitimacy (Lawless & Fox, 2010; IPU, 2025).

6.3 Sweden

Sweden is widely regarded as one of the leading examples of gender equality in democratic governance. Rather than focusing solely on increasing women's representation, Sweden has integrated gender equality into its political institutions, public policies, and administrative structures. Women have consistently held significant positions within Parliament, the Cabinet, political parties, and public administration, while institutional reforms have promoted equal participation in decision-making (Phillips, 1995; OECD, 2023) ^[13, 11]. Sweden's success is supported by policies such as parental leave, workplace equality, social welfare programmes, and political party initiatives that encourage women's leadership. Equally important, Swedish political culture demonstrates broad public acceptance of women as political leaders. Consequently, Sweden performs strongly across all five dimensions of the Gender Legitimacy Index and represents one of the closest contemporary examples of gender legitimacy within democratic governance.

6.4 Rwanda

Rwanda provides an important case for evaluating the Gender Legitimacy framework. Following the 1994 genocide, constitutional reforms significantly increased women's political representation, resulting in the highest proportion of women parliamentarians in the world. From the perspective of descriptive representation, Rwanda has achieved remarkable success and is frequently recognised as a global leader in women's parliamentary participation (IPU, 2025). However, the present study argues that numerical representation alone cannot determine gender legitimacy. Questions remain regarding institutional independence, political pluralism, executive authority, and women's actual influence over national policymaking. Consequently, Rwanda demonstrates that high levels of representation do not automatically guarantee equal political power or democratic legitimacy. The Rwandan experience therefore reinforces the central argument of this study that gender equality must be evaluated through multiple dimensions rather than representation alone.

6.5 Comparative Assessment

The comparison of India, the United States, Sweden, and Rwanda demonstrates that each country represents a different model of women's political participation. India illustrates the importance of constitutional reservations in expanding representation, but also highlights continuing challenges related to institutional authority. The United States demonstrates that mature democracies may still experience significant gender inequalities despite strong democratic institutions. Sweden shows how institutional reforms and supportive political culture can promote both representation and substantive equality. Rwanda, meanwhile, illustrates that exceptionally high representation does not necessarily translate into equal political legitimacy. Based on the proposed Gender Legitimacy Index (GLI), Sweden would likely achieve the highest overall score because of its balanced performance across all five dimensions. The United States would perform strongly in institutional development but comparatively lower in political representation and executive leadership. India

would score relatively well in descriptive representation but lower in substantive influence and institutional power distribution. Rwanda would achieve an excellent score in representation while demonstrating comparatively weaker performance in other dimensions of political legitimacy. The comparative analysis confirms the central argument of this study that representation alone is not sufficient to evaluate gender equality in governance. Democratic legitimacy should also consider women's influence over political decisions, access to institutional authority, policy outcomes, and societal acceptance as political leaders. By integrating these dimensions, the Gender Legitimacy Index provides a more comprehensive framework for comparing governance systems and assessing women's actual position within democratic institutions. The following chapter examines the structural challenges that continue to limit the achievement of gender legitimacy across democratic societies.

7. Challenges to Gender Legitimacy and Democratic Reforms

Despite significant progress in women's political participation across the world, achieving genuine gender equality in governance remains a major democratic challenge. The increasing presence of women in political institutions does not necessarily guarantee equal political authority or influence. Women may occupy elected offices, participate in legislative processes, and hold leadership positions while continuing to face structural barriers that restrict their ability to exercise meaningful power. These barriers are embedded within political institutions, social norms, economic structures, and cultural beliefs. Therefore, strengthening Gender Legitimacy requires comprehensive democratic reforms that extend beyond increasing women's numerical representation (Pateman, 1988; Phillips, 1995)^[12, 13]. One of the most persistent challenges is the continued existence of patriarchal social attitudes. Although legal frameworks in many democracies guarantee equal political rights, leadership continues to be widely associated with traditionally masculine qualities such as authority, decisiveness, and strength. Consequently, women political leaders are often evaluated more critically than their male counterparts. These perceptions influence voter behaviour, media coverage, political recruitment, and institutional practices. As Carole Pateman (1988)^[12] argues, democratic institutions frequently retain historical assumptions of male political authority despite formal commitments to equality. Addressing this challenge requires not only legal reforms but also long-term social change through education, public awareness campaigns, and the promotion of gender-sensitive political culture. A second challenge concerns the unequal distribution of power within political institutions. According to Steven Lukes (2005)^[9], power operates not only through visible decision-making but also through the ability to shape political agendas and determine institutional priorities. Women may formally participate in legislatures or political parties while remaining excluded from informal decision-making networks where critical political strategies are developed. Candidate selection, leadership appointments, campaign financing, and policy priorities are frequently controlled by party elites, many of whom continue to be predominantly male. Democratic reforms

should therefore promote transparent party structures, inclusive leadership opportunities, and equal participation in political decision-making (Lukes, 2005; Young, 2000)^[9, 24]. Economic inequality also limits women's political participation and weakens gender legitimacy. Successful electoral competition often requires financial resources, political networks, and institutional support, all of which are distributed unequally in many societies. Women frequently encounter greater difficulty in securing campaign funding, building political networks, and maintaining financial independence during their political careers. Expanding public funding mechanisms, financial assistance, and institutional support for women candidates would strengthen both political participation and democratic equality (UN Women, 2024; OECD, 2023)^[21, 11]. Another significant challenge is the increasing incidence of political violence and harassment against women. Female political leaders are often subjected to intimidation, abuse, misinformation campaigns, and online harassment that discourage political participation and undermine democratic inclusion. Such behaviour violates the principles of equal political participation and weakens democratic legitimacy. Governments should strengthen legal protections, improve enforcement mechanisms, and establish institutional safeguards that protect women from political violence, discrimination, and intimidation (UN Women, 2024)^[21]. The issue of political representation also requires careful examination. Reservation policies and gender quotas have successfully increased women's representation in many democratic countries, particularly at the local level. However, as observed in countries such as India, descriptive representation does not always translate into substantive political authority. The persistence of proxy leadership, where elected women representatives remain dependent upon male relatives or political patrons, illustrates the limitations of representation without empowerment. Leadership training, political mentorship, and institutional capacity-building programmes are therefore essential for enabling women to exercise independent political authority (Government of India, 1992; Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004)^[6, 2]. Media representation constitutes another important challenge to gender legitimacy. The media significantly influences public perceptions of political leadership. Women politicians are frequently evaluated on their appearance, family responsibilities, or personal characteristics rather than their political performance and policy achievements. Such patterns reinforce gender stereotypes and reduce public confidence in women's leadership. Responsible and gender-sensitive political reporting is therefore necessary to promote equal democratic participation and strengthen societal acceptance of women leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002)^[5]. Gender legitimacy also depends upon the responsiveness of democratic institutions. Governments cannot claim democratic legitimacy if public policies fail to address the needs and experiences of half of the population. Policies relating to education, healthcare, employment, social protection, political participation, and violence against women directly affect women's ability to participate fully in democratic life. Instruments such as gender-responsive budgeting, gender impact assessments, and institutional gender audits can improve policy accountability and ensure that governance systems produce

more equitable outcomes (UN Women, 2024; OECD, 2023)^[21, 11]. The challenge of gender legitimacy extends beyond national governments to international governance institutions. Although global organisations increasingly recognise gender equality as a democratic priority, women remain underrepresented in many international decision-making processes. Strengthening women's participation within international institutions, promoting gender-sensitive global governance, and encouraging international cooperation on democratic reforms are essential for advancing gender equality across political systems (United Nations, 2015; Tickner, 2001)^[20, 17]. Overall, the challenges discussed in this chapter demonstrate that achieving gender legitimacy requires far more than increasing women's representation in political institutions. Patriarchal norms, unequal power structures, economic disparities, political violence, institutional exclusion, and persistent cultural stereotypes continue to shape women's political opportunities. Democratic reforms must therefore address both formal institutional arrangements and informal systems of power that limit women's participation. Ultimately, Gender Legitimacy should be understood as a fundamental condition of democratic governance rather than simply a women's issue. A democratic system cannot be considered fully legitimate unless women possess equal opportunities to participate in decision-making, exercise political authority, influence public policy, and receive equal societal recognition as political leaders. Only through such structural and institutional transformation can democracies move beyond symbolic inclusion and achieve genuine political equality.

8. Conclusion

This study examined whether gender equality in governance can be adequately measured simply by counting the number of women in political institutions. Although women's political participation has increased significantly through constitutional reforms, electoral quotas, affirmative policies, and international commitments, greater representation has not automatically resulted in equal political authority. While these developments reflect important progress toward democratic inclusion, descriptive representation alone cannot guarantee women's meaningful participation in decision-making or influence over public policy. Genuine gender equality therefore depends not only on representation but also on the distribution of power, institutional authority, and the ability to shape governance outcomes.

The study further demonstrates that these challenges extend beyond national political systems to global governance. Despite increasing international efforts to promote gender equality, women continue to face unequal access to leadership positions and decision-making authority within many institutions. This highlights the limitations of measuring gender equality solely through numerical representation and emphasises the need for a broader framework to evaluate democratic governance.

To address this gap, the study introduced the concept of Gender Legitimacy, which argues that democratic institutions should be assessed not only by the presence of women but also by their ability to exercise meaningful political authority, influence public policy, and participate equally in governance. Building on this concept, the study

proposed the Gender Legitimacy Index (GLI) as a multidimensional framework consisting of five dimensions: Descriptive Representation, Substantive Influence, Institutional Power Distribution, Policy Responsiveness and Outcomes, and Societal Acceptance and Political Culture.

The comparative analysis of India, the United States, Sweden, and Rwanda demonstrates that countries with higher numerical representation do not necessarily achieve higher gender legitimacy. Instead, meaningful political authority, institutional support, and inclusive political culture are essential for genuine democratic equality. The study also identifies persistent barriers such as patriarchal norms, unequal institutional power, economic inequality, political violence, media bias, and limited leadership opportunities, all of which continue to restrict women's effective participation in governance.

The principal contribution of this research is the introduction of Gender Legitimacy and the Gender Legitimacy Index (GLI) as new theoretical and methodological tools for evaluating governance from a broader gender perspective. The study concludes that democracy cannot be judged solely by elections or numerical representation. Democratic legitimacy remains incomplete unless women possess equal authority, influence, and institutional recognition. Future research should further test and refine the GLI across different political systems to strengthen the understanding of gender equality and contribute to the development of more inclusive, equitable, and legitimate democratic governance.

9. References

1. Beauvoir S de. *The Second Sex*. Borde C, Malovany-Chevallier S, translators. New York: Vintage Books; c2011.
2. Chattopadhyay R, Duflo E. Women as policy makers: Evidence from a randomized policy experiment in India. *Econometrica*. 2004;72(5):1409-1443.
3. United Nations. *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women*. United Nations Treaty Series. 1979;1249:13-28.
4. Dahl RA. *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*. New Haven (CT): Yale University Press; c1971.
5. Eagly AH, Karau SJ. Role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders. *Psychological Review*. 2002;109(3):573-598.
6. Government of India. *The Constitution (Seventy-Third Amendment) Act, 1992*. New Delhi: Government of India; c1992.
7. Inter-Parliamentary Union. *Women in Parliament 2025*. Geneva: Inter-Parliamentary Union; c2025.
8. Locke J. *Two Treatises of Government*. Laslett P, editor. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; c1988.
9. Lukes S. *Power: A Radical View*. 2nd ed. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan; c2005.
10. Mill JS. *The Subjection of Women*. Indianapolis (IN): Hackett Publishing; c1988.
11. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. *Government at a Glance 2023*. Paris: OECD Publishing; c2023.
12. Pateman C. *The Sexual Contract*. Stanford (CA): Stanford University Press; c1988.
13. Phillips A. *The Politics of Presence*. Oxford: Oxford

- University Press; c1995.
14. Pitkin HF. *The Concept of Representation*. Berkeley (CA): University of California Press; c1967.
 15. Plato. *Republic*. Grube GMA, translator; Reeve CDC, reviser. Indianapolis (IN): Hackett Publishing; c1992.
 16. Rawls J. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press; c1971.
 17. Tickner JA. *Gendering World Politics: Issues and Approaches in the Post-Cold War Era*. New York: Columbia University Press; c2001.
 18. United Nations. *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. New York: United Nations; c1948.
 19. United Nations. *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action*. Fourth World Conference on Women. New York: United Nations; c1995.
 20. United Nations. *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. New York: United Nations; c2015.
 21. UN Women. *Women in Politics: 2024*. New York: UN Women; c2024.
 22. Weber M. *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*. Roth G, Wittich C, editors. Berkeley (CA): University of California Press; c1978.
 23. World Bank. *Women, Business and the Law 2024*. Washington (DC): World Bank; c2024.
 24. Young IM. *Inclusion and Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; c2000.

Creative Commons (CC) License

This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) license. This license permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.