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Pioneering Voices: Women Leaders and their Role in Shaping Public Policy in India

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Abstract

The importance of women being included in the policy creation process is growing, as this is essential for inclusive, fair and sustainable government. In the past ten years in India, there has been a shift in how women leaders have been perceived; rather than being relegated to a role of 'symbolic representation,' women are playing an increasingly important role in creating, directing and executing public policies in all areas of social welfare, health, education, environment, digital technology, and economic development. This chapter will provide an overview of the contributions of women leaders to the framing, shaping and delivery of public policy in contemporary India, focusing specifically on developments in each of these sectors over the last decade. The chapter will draw on feminist leadership and democratic governance theory to detail the ways in which women policymakers contribute to the development of agendas, legislative amendments and the implementation of policies through the 'bottom up'. The analysis will include more established, nationally recognized leaders, as well as collective leadership among women leaders in the area of local government, particularly with respect to Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). The chapter also includes examples from recent public policy-making activity, including gender responsive budgets, health and nutrition missions, digital inclusion projects and social protection schemes, to demonstrate how women's leadership can offer a participatory, empathetic and intersectional approach to the policy-making process. Additionally, the chapter will identify ongoing structural barriers (i.e. patriarchal culture, tokenism, unequal access to political power) to maximizing the ability of women to reach their full potential in terms of providing political leadership.

Keywords: Women Leadership, Public Policy, Gender and Governance, Feminine Leadership, Indian Democracy, Policy Formulation.

Introduction

Feminist theorists and practitioners have long held that the experience of leadership and policy production has been shaped by both gender and race, but as women have become more prevalent in these areas, particularly in the last decade since 2001, this perspective is being validated. Until recently, in India, the majority of women have not had access to formal political or policy-making positions due to cultural norms, unequal structures of society, and various institutional constraints. However, in the past few years, there has been a noticeable increase in the number of women who are involved in the creation, advocacy and execution of government policy at the national level, state legislative level, ministerial and local government levels.

In this chapter women leaders play an important role to set the tone of new ways that women will be effective in shaping and leading India's policies. The author describes women's policy leadership as part of a larger discussion regarding feminine leadership characteristics such as collaboration, empathy, inclusiveness, and the long-term effects of decisions on individuals and society. These characteristics differ from most traditional male-centered leadership models in which leadership is demonstrated through authority and maximizing hierarchical structures, while those things have become less important as nations develop increasingly complex democratic structures and norms. This chapter will focus on how women leaders in India can inform, empower and provide an academic platform for women of all generations that create policies addressing issues women are currently experiencing including poverty, inequities in health care, technology's impact on everyday life, and sustainability. This chapter is based on recent developments related to women's policy leadership and supported through existing scholarly and institutional publications.

Conceptual Framework: Feminine Leadership and Policy-Making

Feminine leadership does not strictly mean leadership by women nor does it mean having set characteristics of women only. Instead, feminine leadership refers to the types of leadership that are historically linked to social experiences related to females; these include empathy, cooperation, ethical sensitivity, and inclusiveness. In the Indian context, many women are entering into political office through avenues such as activism, social work or grassroots organizations. Therefore, women often bring their own views of what constitutes a 'problem' to the table when developing public policies. For example, many public policies developed by women leaders tend to favor human-development indicators such as nutrition, education, and sanitation. Feminine leadership shares a close affiliation with the tenets of gender-responsive governance and inclusive development.

Historical Context and the Contemporary Shift

While women such as Indira Gandhi played pivotal roles in Indian political history, women's leadership for much of the post-independence period remained exceptional rather than systemic.

Indira Gandhi is indeed considered the most influential political leader in Indian history. She brought a new approach to both Indian politics and policy-making that was revolutionary by the nature of its ability to centralize political power and provide the Indian Government with a mechanism for carrying out socio-economic transformation. As India's first and only female Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi was instrumental in India achieving this through various socio-economic reforms that were largely aligned to socialist principles. For example, through Indira Gandhi's Socialistic Policies, as evidenced by the Nationalization of Indian Banks in 1969, the Abolishment of the Right of Way of the Rulers in India, and the creation of the "GaribiHatao" Campaign for improvement of poverty conditions in 1972, proved the commitment to Socialism by Indira Gandhi through various means. In addition, Indira Gandhi was, and still is viewed as an advocate of India's Strategic Independence through her various engagements and treaties with other nations as well as her Role as the leader of India during the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971, that Changed the Political map of South Asian countries. Nonetheless, there exists considerable controversy surrounding Indira Gandhi's Decision-Making Processes, especially regarding her Declaration of Emergency (1975-1977) leading to the Suspension of Civil Rights and a deterioration of democratic Institutions. Indira Gandhi's legacy has been defined by her commitment to achieving actual policy results, her strong and assertive leadership style, and her continued influence on governance and Political Culture in India.

The focus of individuals has shifted since the year 2001 from merely ensuring the involvement of women in the political sphere, to understanding how to create success for women within this setting as well as how to create change and influence other individuals. The increased focus on development strategies that include women's participation has also strengthened the idea that women should lead in the development of policy as a result of the commitments made by nations in adopting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). On the other hand, with the passage of the 'Women's Reservation Bill' (Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam) in 2023, legislation illustrates another potential step towards establishing legislative measures to create gender equality and increase female representation within government.

Women Leaders and Policy Framing at the National Level

Across several sectors, women have played an important part in developing an effective advocacy system for numerous policies at the national level. Through their positions as Ministers and MPs, they have also helped to establish legislation

regarding Health, Education, Children and Young People, Digital Governance, and Social Justice, among other areas of policy development.

Case Study: Sushma Swaraj and Citizen-Centric Foreign Policy Governance

In India, Sushma Swaraj, who served as the External Affairs Minister, is frequently mentioned while discussing women's roles in leadership and creating policy, especially in citizen-centric governance. The changes she brought forth through institutions and processes continue to influence how India administers its foreign policy today. The Humanization of Foreign Policy Through Citizen Engagement was one of her greatest achievements. The use of digital media (Twitter) to respond directly to grievances from citizens relating to passports, foreign emergencies, consular assistance, etc., has changed a Ministry of External Affairs that was previously not responsive or accessible into one that is focused on providing services to people. Her method reframes the way that foreign policy is viewed. It has broken down the notion of foreign policy as the practice of elite diplomats and turned it into a service-oriented policy of the government for its people.

The positive outcomes that resulted from her leadership experience include successfully increasing access to Passport Seva by streamlining and speeding up how quickly an Indian citizen could receive a passport in addition to increasing access to Passport Seva for senior citizens, women and those that are economically marginalized. The impact of these reforms can still be seen post-2019 and illustrates how much impact women's leadership can have on a country's long-term policies.

Swaraj's leadership style was also extremely effective in making sure that Indian citizens who were evacuated from war-torn countries were treated humanely and with dignity when they returned to India. When people were brought back to India from a war zone after being evacuated, the SOP (Standard Operating Procedures) that were created during the evacuation process are still used to help shape India's response to a crisis today. Overall, Swaraj exemplified what it means to lead using feminine leadership principles, such as empathy, accountability, and sensitivity toward ethical issues, and later showed how much change women leaders can create in a country through the use of policies, programs, and processes without changing the way an organization operates.

Her contributions remain relevant to contemporary governance as they illustrate how leadership rooted in compassion and accessibility can strengthen public trust in policy institutions and set enduring administrative standards.

Nirmala Sitharaman: Economic Policy Leadership and Gender-Responsive Governance

Nirmala Sitharaman is the first full-time woman to hold the position of Minister of Finance in India. She has created opportunities for women by providing them with access to decision-making roles regarding Economic Policy. Since

becoming Minister, she has developed the Union Budget, which provides direction for India's Fiscal Policies during extremely challenging times (i.e., COVID-19, economic recession and recovery)

The budget she has developed has placed a significant focus on Infrastructure-Driven Growth, Financial Assistance for the Poor and Social Expenditure.

Under her leadership, Nirmala has successfully merged historically gender-responsive initiatives (i.e., women's initiatives, Self-Help Groups, and Rural Women Entrepreneurs) with an understanding of what Fiscal Policy means.

Nirmala's experience as Finance Minister has demonstrated the misguided thinking that Economic Governance is Gender-Neutral and that Gender-Neutrality does not accurately reflect the real world. Therefore, her experience demonstrates how Women in Leadership Positions can also have a positive influence on Technical Policy Areas.

Health and Nutrition Policy

Women leaders have been central to strengthening policies addressing maternal and child health, nutrition, and public health delivery. Initiatives under the National Health Mission and POSHAN Abhiyaan have benefited from women's leadership that emphasises community outreach, behavioural change communication, and inter-sectoral coordination.

Social Welfare and Inclusive Development

Policies related to housing, sanitation, and financial inclusion reflect the influence of women policymakers who foreground lived realities of women and marginalised groups. Gender-sensitive design in schemes such as direct benefit transfers and self-help group-based livelihoods demonstrates how women leaders shape inclusive policy frameworks.

Smriti Irani: Social Policy, Education, and Women-Centric Welfare

Smriti Irani has played an essential role in pushing the social sector agenda for the Modi government, especially through her time as the Minister for Women and Children Development. Smriti Irani's work has created a stronger foundation for nutrition, child welfare, and safety for women initiatives after 2019, as well as establishing a framework for various women's schemes into one comprehensive structure called Mission Shakti

Smriti Irani's influence extended to human development outcomes in her earlier work with education policy. Smriti Irani was an early proponent of a leadership style that is consistent with the characteristics of women, as it emphasises access and accountability through institutional reform to achieve social equity for all women.

Through her advocacy of policy and administrative oversight, Smriti Irani's example illustrates how women directors can create a long-term social policy agenda.

Annapurna Devi: Education and Social Mobility

The ascent of Annapurna Devi in the Modi administration represents the growing recognition of women from rural and socially diverse backgrounds in the national policy-making space. Through her work in Education, Annapurna has engaged in policy dialogues regarding accessing schools, teacher training, and including marginalised populations. As a leader in Education, Annapurna demonstrates how critical it is to have representatives from a variety of backgrounds when developing policies at the national level. The inclusion of local perspectives into national education policy via women leaders such as Annapurna Devi creates pathways to connect local realities to central governmental authorities and promotes inclusive and participatory approaches to policymaking.

Savitri Thakur and Other Ministers of State: Grassroots Perspectives in National Policy

Women State Ministers and Ministers of State like Savitri Thakur serve as key links between national policy objectives and the delivery of these policies in addition to implementing the objectives of their respective localities. Women State Ministers' connection and engagement with tribal and marginalised communities give voices to regional diversity within government policy frameworks and ensure the inclusion of all social groups in the policymaking process. Even though they aren't as visible as Cabinet or other top-level executive positions, they can play an active role in carrying out, monitoring and reaching out regarding Government policies.

The profiles of Women Ministers of State demonstrate that Women are providing leadership on Government policy issues at multiple levels of the Modi administration, not just at the highest levels of executive management but through sustained interaction and active governance aimed at delivering Government services.

State-Level Leadership and Policy Innovation

Several Indian states have witnessed strong women leadership influencing policy innovation in education, health, and social security. Women chief ministers, ministers, and senior bureaucrats have introduced reforms focusing on school education quality, women's safety, and welfare delivery.

Case Study: Vasundhara Raje and State-Led Governance Reforms in Rajasthan

Former Chief Minister of Rajasthan Vasundhara Raje is a prime example of women's leadership within the BJP-led governing structure at the state level through the creation of public policy. Raje created many institutions and systems of governance during her time in office that still have an impact on how the public policy

landscape of Rajasthan is developed today and can be used as an example when discussing how to lead women-led growth for the future.

Raje's emphasis on her strategies being women-centric and inclusive when it comes to governance was an enormous contribution to the women-led welfare system. The Bhamashah Yojana is one of the first welfare programs in India to provide women access to financial services through formal banking and digital systems by linking all household benefits to a woman's bank account. The Bhamashah Yojana has influenced digital banking models at the national level. The Bhamashah Yojana has also been an important example of gender-responsive direct benefit transfers as well as national-level digital governance reform efforts.

Raje played an important role in enhancing public service delivery by establishing Rajasthan Sampark and through the Atal Seva Kendras, which were aimed at improving the quality and quantity of services delivered by the state to its citizens. Through her leadership approach, she emphasised Accessibility and Accountability as well as Responsive Institutions, which are the fundamental principles of feminine Leadership in the Policy Making Process. Through her administration's policies on Education and Health, Raje promoted Girl's Education, Maternal Health, and Access to Rural Healthcare to ensure that all citizens had access to the most basic of services. Programmes designed to support Child Nutrition, Retention in Schools, and the Development of Health Care Infrastructure also reflect an Integrated Policy Approach that incorporates the socio-economic realities of the Region. Raje's success as a Woman Chief Minister serves as a model of how female Executive leaders can have an impact on the establishment of Long-Term Governance Frameworks within their respective states. Raje's contributions to the establishment of policies that are Gender-Based and represented a continuity of reform by Women Leaders also illustrate how a female executive leader has the opportunity to create a continuing Legacy within their respective states that will continue to benefit their citizens long after they leave office.

Case Study: Mamata Banerjee and Social Welfare–Centric Governance in West Bengal

In West Bengal, there are many opportunities where women-led leaders have focused on creating policy frameworks that consider social welfare and human development of all people or citizens. Prior to 2019, Mamata Banerjee launched several flagship policies that received both domestic and global attention, including: Kanyashree Prakalpa, Swasthya Sathi and Lakshmir Bhandar; all initiatives with strong gender focus, to improve girls' education retention rates and provide women with universal health coverage and provide direct income support for the women of West Bengal.

The Kanyashree Prakalpa initiative is considered by many to be a model for reducing school drop-out rates for girls and delaying early marriages. The reason for this success lies within the structure of the initiative; Kanyashree encompasses educational, health and social security objectives together as a cohesive policy, which reflects a feminine approach to policy decision-making and recognizes the holistic nature of policy challenges.

Case Study: Jayalalithaa's Policy Legacy and Its Contemporary Continuation in Tamil Nadu

The impact of J. Jayalalithaa's legacy and influence upon the government and administrative policies of Tamil Nadu is evident by the many programs established by the government that support women in areas such as providing subsidised food, expanding women's access to health services, and developing social protection mechanisms for female citizens. The establishment of women's policy frameworks by the Government of Tamil Nadu through the continued evolution of the above programs since 2019 and the increased implementation of the state's government-sponsored frameworks of support have demonstrated the potential for women's visions to have a lasting impact on the Developmentally Solid Infrastructure of a State.

The recent launch of free transportation for women and girls in Tamil Nadu is a further illustration of how Gender Responsive Policies contribute to and facilitate the growth of women's participation in the workforce by increasing their ability to travel to and from work and improve mobility options. Pajak's book highlights the power of a woman's leadership at the State Level to foster and promote the continuing development of innovative policies at the State Level through Gender Responsive Policies.

Grassroots Governance: Panchayati Raj and Urban Local Bodies

Local government represents one of the most profound transformations in the space of women's leadership in public policy in India. Women Public Policy Leaders at both Panchayat and municipal levels are very important to developing policy on water and sanitation, basic health, social welfare, etc.

Case Study: Women Sarpanch and Local Development Outcomes

Research studies published since 2001 has shown that Gram Panchayats where women serve as sarpanches tend to invest more on public goods directly related to family (household) welfare, including access to drinking water, sanitation, and anganwadi (India's child care centres). Women leaders in states such as Rajasthan and Odisha and Bihar have consistently demonstrated significant contributions to nutrition-related schemes, monitoring students' attendance in schools, and delivering welfare benefits effectively.

While facing challenges like social resistance and the prevalence of proxy representation, many women sarpanch have developed independent decision-making capabilities. At a grassroots level, the style of women's leadership exemplifies how feminine policy leadership works by using consensus-building, involvement within the community, and ethical accountability to guide their work.

Case Study: Urban Local Bodies and Women's Leadership During Public Health Crises

Women leaders at the local level were at the forefront of discouraging responses to COVID-19, providing much of the leadership during this time through their positions as mayor/municipal councillor of many urban local bodies. Women mayors/municipal councillors coordinated all aspects of response (e.g., distributing resources required for relief efforts, transporting patients to hospitals, providing education and raising awareness of health issues, etc.) throughout their communities. The women leaders' leadership style demonstrated the need for policies to be decentralised and for governing authorities to be empathetic toward those impacted by disasters.

Studies show that women leaders often prioritise serving those considered vulnerable. In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, the vulnerable populations that were most impacted by the virus included migrants and individuals working in the informal sector, senior citizens, and women working in the informal sector. Thus, the argument can be made that women in leadership positions often create policies that are more humane and responsive to the needs of touch disabled people.

There have been many women in powerful positions in the Union Council of Ministers during the years of Prime Minister Modi's (2014-present) administration. These women (the most recent members of Modi's Cabinet, sworn in June 2024) encompass a wide range of responsibilities in various areas of national policy: economic governance, social development and welfare, healthcare, and tribal rights. Over time, Prime Minister Modi's Cabinet has continued to include women leaders in both the Cabinet and Minister of State roles. While this is only a beginning to making gender inclusion in the executive leadership an institutionalised practice, it is something that needs to be expanded and advanced.

Nirmala Sitharaman – Finance and Economic Governance

Sitharaman: Being the first-ever female full-time finance minister of India, she is one of the most influential members of the Modi Government's national economic policy team. She has presented India's Union Budget multiple times (including during the initial stages of India's Post-COVID economic recovery, and consideration of future financial policies) and led the coordination of development- and economy-wide reform efforts, as well as the coordination and execution of country-wide fiscal policy and expenditure framework/strategy for achieving inclusive development objectives.

Smriti Irani: Women and Child Development, & Human Resource Development

Smriti Irani has served in many Ministerial capacities, including the following women's and children's sectors: Women and Child Development (earlier) and Ministry of Human Resources Development, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting Ministry of Textiles. In addition, she has worked on numerous initiatives/legislation relating to educational policy, inclusive development through welfare opportunities, and efforts related to the improvement of child and women well-being overall.

Annpurna Devi – Education and Social Welfare Leadership

In the current Modi government, Annpurna Devi has been given a role in the Cabinet level that represents Rural and OBC (Other Backward Classes) interests, as well as focusing on educational policies for improving access to education and creating pathways to upward mobility. As a Minister of State in Education, she has helped the Government develop its educational policy with a focus on providing access to schools and training teachers.

The leaders discussed in this article provide examples of how national policy incorporates various regional, tribal and local Government forms. They are Shobha Karandlaje, Karnataka's Minister for State, who focuses primarily on the oversight of Parliament and rural development, Raksha Khadse, Maharashtra, with a focus on Returning Economic Improvement and Quality of Life for all people through Development and Welfare Programmes, and Savitri Thakur, a Tribal Leader, who provides an opportunity for administrators and decision-makers to gain a better understanding of the inclusion of indigenous views within the political processes used by modern Governments. These leaders serve to connect National Policy with the voices of those citizens, especially at the grassroots level, who are concerned with social justice, equitable social service delivery and inclusiveness. Shobha Karandlaje, Raksha Khadse & Savitri Thakur – Minister of State Roles.

Broader Policy Impacts and Representation

The composition of the Cabinet in 2024 included a record number of 7 women, 2 of whom held Cabinet status and the remainder as Ministers of State; this level of representation for women within the Modi government is among the highest historically. While Women's overall representation is still below average when compared to other nations around the world, the appointment of women to major ministries like Finance, Education and Women and Child Development demonstrates that women will play a strategic role in areas with high impact policy.

Conclusion

Women have played an increasing role in shaping policies that are being made at all three levels of Indian Government since 2001 as demonstrated by data and other information provided in this chapter. In this new environment, women leaders are no longer viewed simply as a form of "symbolic representation" and have

been able to affect positive change in policy development by providing outcome-oriented leadership at each level (i.e., national/state/local) of government. Through their leadership roles within the government, Women leaders have changed the policies and programs that are implemented at all levels of government in India today by focusing more directly on issues related to social equity and human development (the goal of building a truly equitable and just society) and on the need for Inclusive Economic growth (economic development where all sectors of society can equally participate) in the development process. The policy changes experienced by India are due primarily to increased participation by Women in the legislative process, in addition to policy changes resulting from Digital Governance, social welfare reform, and citizen-centric services.

Since 2001, the increasing involvement of women in shaping public policy has been evidence of the change in how Indian societies perceive Democracy and Governance. This chapter provides many examples where the role of women in leadership has transitioned from being primarily a 'symbolic representation' to now being a source for developing Public Policies at all levels of Government (National, State, and Local) within India, through concrete inputs that focus on results. Women leaders have also helped drive the focus of policies generated at every level of Government within India, towards Social Equity and Human Development (to create a society where every person has equal opportunities to succeed) and Inclusive Economic Development (to create Economies that allow all members of Society to fully participate on an equal basis). The greater degree of Social Equity and Human Development and Inclusive Economic Development has been made possible by the combination of the Legislation, Policy Reform, Digital Governance and Citizen Engagement.

Women continue to be excluded from political space because they lack access to most of the same networks and power as men, but also because of the historical importance placed on women's role to raise children, etc. Thus, although many organizations have created laws such as the Women's Reservation Act to support women's involvement and growth in political life, in order to achieve meaningful change we must invest in building and creating institutional capacity and changing the governance culture to support equal status for women. In India, women at all ages and across social strata are becoming leaders, giving them an opportunity to contribute positively to the future of society, as well as incentivizing them for this action. The examples of current female leaders discussed in this chapter show how leadership in practice demonstrates compassion, inclusion, ethics, and social responsibility produces increased opportunities for the development of more effective and humane public policies. Women's involvement in policy creation produces meaningful changes in how general policies govern the interactions of men and women, leading to a more equal and just society, thus a better Indian democracy.

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