
RETHINKING WOMEN IN POLITICS: SYMBOLIC PRESENT, SUBSTANTIVELY ABSENT

Aadhya A, BITS Law School

ABSTRACT

International Relations has been dominated by patriarchal ideas of power, territorial dominance and militarism.¹ We observe how these narratives shape global politics and define interactions between states. Feminist international relations (IR) theories have long provided interventions and insights into the embedded asymmetrical gender relations of global politics, particularly in areas such as security, state-nationalism, rights-citizenship, and global political economies.² The masculine narrative has been questioned largely by international feminists who refer to it as “incomplete” without the inclusion of the feminist narrative. The feminist narrative provides an alternate perception on the exercise of power, dominance and other factors that contribute to shaping the idea of the nation, which might differ from the male-centric narrative. They challenge this historical sidelining of women by pointing at the paradoxical position they hold in the imagination of a nation- symbolically present yet substantively absent. Feminist IR argue that the state is gendered and that power relations within shape both internal and external politics.³ The paper aims at bringing this feminist narrative to the forefront by understanding the persisting structural inequalities, by deeply examining the root causes within each society. The study of India and Finland, two contrasting cases, particularly in the way they have placed women in their political spheres serves as the key aspect of the analysis. The paper concludes by emphasising that women cannot be left out of global politics in present times given their emerging roles they have to play in the era of globalisation the world is moving in.

¹Robert Bahlieda, Chapter 1: The Legacy of Patriarchy, in 488 COUNTERPOINTS, THE DEMOCRATIC GULAG: PATRIARCHY, LEADERSHIP & EDUCATION 25 (Peter Lang AG 2015).

²Anna M. Agathangelou & Heather M. Turcotte, Feminist Theoretical Inquiries and IR Locked, OXFORD RESEARCH ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES (Mar. 1, 2010) <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.374>.

³Saskia Stachowitsch, Military Gender Integration and Foreign Policy in the United States: A Feminist International Relations Perspective, 43 INT’L STUD. REV. 887 (2012), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26301919>.

Introduction

Historically in India, women were perceived as symbols of purity, calmness, divinity and patriotism without actual political representation. However today they hold powerful leadership positions involving decision making authority to influence matters related to domestic and international policy, but this shift remains limited. This inconsistency originated from the beginning of the nationalist movements of the 19th century where women were used to represent the figure of Bharat Mata - a sacred feminine image of a woman with values of motherhood and morality.⁴ Yet she was never given the agency in participating in nation building, instead her role was merely associated with emotional symbolism. This image of femininity had to be projected in a particular way so that while it facilitated the Indian man's efforts to prove his 'masculinity' in the external domain, it also maintained traditional patriarchal relations within the family by offering no threat to the dominance of male attitudes.⁵

This understanding evolved parallel to a time when the position of women's status within India was widely criticized due to the influence that "Modernized perspective" imposed by the British had on the educated Indian masses leading to the adaptation of an image of an idealized "new woman".⁶ They contributed in diverse ways both within and outside the home they held meetings and demonstrations, took part in satyagraha, picketed toddy and foreign-cloth shops, went to prison and suffered brutalities at the hands of the British police. Though these seemed liberal, they were not truly emancipatory in nature, rather the actual political framework was concentrated in the hands of the male freedom fighters. This image of a "new woman" who reflected divinity and patriotism seemed to be in conflict with the image of a common woman who was vulgar and immoral, showing how they limited women's choices and suppressed real agency to these mythologically derived traits of an ideal woman and imposed ways for them to seek recognition keeping them away from radical decision making.⁷ They were educated but with an idea to make them good care takers, wives and homemakers. It was shaped in a manner to provide for women yet ultimately retain masculinity.

The 20th century evolved to accommodate the changing political stand of the country, the definition of "new woman" kept evolving to the political tension faced by the country at that time. It is important to discuss how prominent leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi envisaged

⁴Suruchi Thapar, *Women as Activists; Women as Symbols: A Study of the Indian Nationalist Movement*, (1993), <https://doi.org/10.2307/1395197>.

⁵*id.*

⁶*id.*

⁷*id.*

the role of women in the national movement. He emphasised on their participation because of them inertly fostering attributes like self- sacrifice and silent suffering which aligned with his essential elements of struggles such as satyagraha and ahimsa.⁸ Though he was against all social evils against women such as purdah, dowry and the devadasi system, he believed in gender specific roles which reflected the way he wanted women to participate in the national struggle.⁹ He focused on ensuring women's role in being present symbolically but remaining excluded from using agency. In Hind Swaraj, he advocates about inclusion and mass participation in the freedom struggle, further persuading them to undertake roles within their symbolic and emotional realm. He purposefully made them spin Khadi, write poems of the struggle and stationed them in the frontline of the protests. Women also actively believed in his ideology, for example Saraladevi Sarabhai saw participation as a part of their Dharma. Despite displaying them like this publicly, he remained a traditionalist. He never wanted to change the way women were regarded in the family structures and suggested that domestic duties must never be substituted with political participation. Masculinity in that decade was still a very sensitive matter, an example for that is exhibited in the way he wanted to exclude women from the first salt march on 6th April 1930.¹⁰ Mirroring the way their roles were confined and narrow with lesser power, autonomy and leadership.

In the Section I of this paper, I explore how roles for women emerged post the nationalist movement through a critical feminist lens which critically examines the patriarchal structures that are embedded within the society, it looks beyond the liberal feminist need for inclusion and looks at how power operates, how norms are set and could be sustainable. It also addresses the question of how this representation is still flawed. In Section II, I focus on a comparative analysis of women in politics across two specific jurisdictions, India and Finland by examining it through the lens of intersectionality encompassing implications of caste, class and gender on women, these metrics thereby being in direct nexus to their marginalized political representation. The comparison aforementioned delves into how social norms influence the way women's agency is perceived within the political framework. This paper, in Section III, draws parallels between Finland's principles of state feminism which highlights the importance of institutional reforms and nation building to include women in governance and highlights the inadequacies within the Indian system, herein concluding as to how women's

⁸*id.*

⁹*id.*

¹⁰*Id.*

preference towards peacekeeping policies over defence mechanisms embedded with hard power becomes a diplomatic choice in the modern world.

Section I: Why then are women not represented enough?

Post independence, despite the Indian constitution promising equality and diversity to all its citizens, women never got proportional representation in policy making and political parties of the nation. Critical feminists recognize the relationships between the cultural, historical, and linguistic construction of human identity and social experiences and highlight that mere recognition of rights does not ensure equality.¹¹ Critical feminist scholars argue that masculine norms such as patriarchy, capitalism, militarisation and caste-based differences continue to exclude women particularly in the political arena, since these norms actively influence and determine the roles of participants, decision makers whose knowledge must be valued.¹²

Nevertheless, women were not passive subjects to this male driven system, instead historically and even today they continue to strive for their rights to be recognized in the political space. Critical feminists advocate for the difference between *formal equality* which advocates equal treatment for all, and *substantive equality*, which emphasizes equitable outcomes based on individual needs.¹³ Subsequently, to elucidate on the aforementioned distinction, mere right to vote without accounting for them in the parliament and political parties remains a point of contention¹⁴, since it incorporates elements of mere formal equality rendering these mechanisms devoid of substantive equality, thereby resulting into these policies being further discriminatory to women. Moreover, enquiring into the Indian Constituent Assembly Debates, it can be asserted that the process of nation-building did not actively consider women and their issues, hereby re-enforcing hegemonic masculinity nullifying these issues and denying their existence in entirety.

The imposition of hegemonic masculinity was further embedded into the electoral politics of India, due to which women participation in the Lok Sabha has never exceeded over double digits. Even after 14 Lok Sabha elections, female participation marginally increased

¹¹Deborah L. Rhode, Feminist Critical Theories, 42 LAW & SOC'Y REV. 931 (1990), <https://doi.org/10.2307/1228887>.

¹²*id.*

¹³Mandar Govindrao Latpate, Formal and Substantive Equality, IJLMH (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1000/IJLMH.115977>.

¹⁴Maraju Rama Chary, Women and Political Participation in India: A Historical Perspective, 47 ECON. & POL. WKLY. 69 (2012), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41856567>.

from 4.9 percent to 8.1 percent, hereby explaining the failure of this substantive translation. Articles 325 and 326 of the Constitution of India guarantee political equality, that is, equal right to participation in political activities and right to vote respectively. While the latter has been accessed, exercised and enjoyed by many women, the former that is, right to equal political participation is still a distant dream.¹⁵ Additionally, lack of space for participation in political bodies has not only resulted in their presence in meagre numbers in these decision-making bodies but also in the neglect of their issues and experiences in policy making. This distinction explicitly portrays the divide between the way women were expected to participate and the way power was guaranteed to them. Decisions pertaining to their welfare would also not actively involve them, rather they would be treated as mere spectators.

It is important to analyse the gap through the lens of intersectionality. The concept of "intersectionality" refers to the interactivity of social identity structures such as race, class, and gender in fostering life experiences, especially experiences of privilege and oppression.¹⁶ Suggesting gender is alone not a reason for exclusion from politics. Elite women who were educated, had generational political association gained access to the political rights much earlier as compared to women from the backward caste, rural areas and minority religion. Throwing light on Indira Gandhi, whose entry into politics was supported by her generational association with polity and access to quality education. In contrast to this Droupadi Murmu, a tribal woman's raise to presidency has taken such a long time. Thus, illustrating how structural intersectionality presents sub strata within the strata of women.

Critical feminism also raises questions on the assimilationist pressure even though giving women the right to vote became a necessity, the need to do away with the male centric norms was never actively encouraged. Instead, it can be observed that women who held leadership positions were often seen adapting to the masculine norms being assertive, egoistic, individualistic to be taken seriously, this adaption reflects the innate inequality by not being able to express their emotions, perceptions and ideas freely. This reflects how they were never at par with men but rather replicated the same traits that men brought into politics. Further liberal feminists suggest that rather than token inclusivity, women must be provided their own separate opportunities to shape the narrative of the nation. Mere pronouncement of policies and making national and international statements has not really changed the levels of power

¹⁵*id.*

¹⁶Ahir Gopaldas, Intersectionality 101, 41 J. MACROMARKETING 164 (2013), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43305317>.

structure within the country. The need for gender sensitive policies and coming up with strategies for the same must be realistically implemented. It is important to prove that women in politics does make an impactful difference to the way the policies are shaped and carried forward, taking it a step ahead it also impacts the relations of other countries with ours.

Section II : Comparative analysis of women in India and the Finland

Globally, there has been a growing consensus for the principle that women deserve political representation and that their voices and opinions are necessary to seek justice for all citizens. Recognition of this sort has led to various countries raising important discussions on the emerging roles of women in leadership positions at par with men in politics. Unequal gender relations are not natural, rather they are created by historical and cultural practices that treat masculine and feminine as mutually exclusive gendered identities, that, in part, sustain the nation-state system.¹⁷

In India, the masculinist notions are so deep rooted within the political framework. Leaders often glorify emotions such as aggression, power and individualism as desirable and ideal traits to make a good leader. Ironically despite the symbolic reverence of a feminine image of the nation, Bharat Mata, the political domain heavily embodies male characteristics. While women often face prejudice as leaders because of leadership assumed to be for men. Indian leaders, such as Mamta Banerjee, Jayalalitha and Nirmala Sitaraman who have made dramatic changes in the electoral politics have often been criticised and scrutinized harshly by their male counterparts. Their exertion of power is often perceived with much negativity than anything else.¹⁸ This necessitates a need for feminist political recognition, which recognises a framework that goes beyond mere power and examines the nature of justice, power struggle and representation by women like that of the Nordic countries.

In contrast, several countries have broken the patriarchal norms across the globe- particularly Finland and the Nordic nations. These countries demonstrate greater internal stability by supporting integration of women into various streams of governance. These nations are built based on equality, respect and mutual consensus among its "people". They demonstrate how peaceful internal politics can enhance peaceful diplomacy externally. By

¹⁷Pamela Paxton, Sheri Kunovich & Melanie M. Hughes, Gender in Politics, 62 ANN. REV. SOC. 263 (2007), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/29737763>.

¹⁸Maraju Rama Chary, Women and Political Participation in India: A Historical Perspective, 47 ECON. & POL. WKLY. 69 (2012), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41856567>.

integrating women into the nation-building process these countries have made a significant difference in fostering a humane and egalitarian policy framework.

An ideal demonstration of this would be Finland's approach to gender equality. They not just merely add women to the existing structures but redefine societal roles. This ensures that there is absolute and substantive inclusivity instead of mere formal changes. Their initiatives include an effort to shift conventional male centric roles to females, what is often not acknowledged is this redefining could not have been possible had there not been any support from the Finnish men. As recent as 2019, Sanna Marin who served as the prime Minister, she led a coalition government dominated by women. Domestically her government implemented the Government action plan for gender equality which emphasised on equality in the workplace, sharing parenting responsibilities, protection against violence. On the international front, Marin responded to Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 by condemning Russia's aggression and advocating for unity in imposing sanctions. This stand depicts bold leadership and a strong voice for ethical governance. Her tour to war struck cities of Ukraine was a strategic gesture to support Ukraine's educational system which reflects a feminist peace building strategy which focuses on reconstruction and empowerment over military intervention. She signed the NATO membership to seek defensive alliances but clearly balanced it by affirming that Finland did not seek permanent NATO intervention, thus carrying forward the peace principle of Finland.¹⁹

The sex role discussion emphasised on regarding the Finnish people as "individuals" instead of men or women. women must not be considered rivals instead must be given active representation because they constitute half of the whole people living in a nation. Studies on the Nordic countries suggest that this inclusivity is rooted in their cultural narrative on the economic and social status that women are associated within the country. This takes us back to the way nationalism was initially perceived by them, where collective identification integrated women's rights and provided for adequate national recognition for the same. The Nordic countries are frequently considered ideal models of gender equality. The role of sex was addressed by different scholars of the 19th century, constant debates and community building was done in order to institutionalise the various policies that pertained to the issues of gender equality, recognition often termed as the Nordic state feminism.²⁰ They have facilitated the

¹⁹Aashi Sadana, From Neutral to NATO: Why Finland Joining the Alliance Matters, INDIAN EXPRESS (Apr. 6, 2023), <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-global/finland-joins-nato-explained-8541436/>.

²⁰Beth Reba Weise, Feminism in Scandinavia, 19 SIGNS 987 (1990), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25797236>.

dual role of women in the public and private sphere by drawing a balance between the traditionally assigned roles to the roles that they took up by choice in the making of the nation state.

The principal example is the national parliament, where the proportion of women in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden exceeds 30 percent. Finland was the first country in the world to give women full suffrage, and the right to run for political office. After the election of 1991 women in Finland have, so to speak, "taken the lead," constituting 38.5 percent of all members of parliament (MPs). There's this notion that Finnish women can do anything, can survive anything and are supposed to be strong and capable". Finland is a more traditional country than the others (Sweden, Denmark and Norway), yet Eighty percent of Finnish women work outside the home, and almost all of them work full time.²¹ By the 21st century they had become the hallmark for feminist parties and policies.²²

The Nordic states not only use feminism to build a nation brand symbolically but also compliment it with substantive changes. The very fact that most funding for educational institutions is made by public institutions emphasises on the positive attitude that the state has towards orienting national policy decisions towards women development. The Nordic community believes in working together and clearly does not treat women as rivals. In comparison with India, the Finnish women are collectively more independent because of the recognition they receive from the state be it in terms of socio-economic development or financial welfare.²³ Rationalizing adequate policies and providing tangible support for their substantive recognition India on the other hand continues to limit women by not institutionalizing adequate policies and providing tangible support for their substantive recognition.

India continues to face surface level changes, as per the Inter-parliamentary union's report on women in national parliament database India ranks 152nd globally with a mere 13 percent representation rate.²⁴ The policy initiatives for gender equality remain inadequate in its implementation. According to the UN Data on women, India ranks poorly in terms of their agency, education and health. One of the most visible failures is the prolonged delays at

²¹*id.*

²²Solveig Bergman, Nordic Cooperation in Women's Studies, 20 WOMEN'S STUD. INT'L F. 363 (1992), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40003703>.

²³*Id.*

²⁴Inter-Parliamentary Union, Monthly Ranking of Women in National Parliaments (Mar. 1, 2025), <https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking/>.

providing the Women's Reservation Bill. Introduced two decades back yet remains a mere idea. Financial independence, education, health and socio-economic barriers in participation of women in the workplace reflect the status of development in India.

Section III: Results of the above comparative analysis

Research shows that women's meaningful participation in the economy, politics, and Peace keeping processes is linked with greater economic growth, a decrease in human rights abuse, and more sustainable peace. Nations seeking to advance global security, maximize the utility of their foreign aid, and bolster stable and democratic partners should prioritize women's advancement.²⁵ An analysis on foreign policy and defence through the lens of gender ultimately reveals that national security strategies have been shaped by patriarchal norms which often favour offensive military strategies over diplomacy. Male leaders have often adopted coercion, territorial domination as key approaches sidelining humanitarian concerns, peace strategies and long-term peacekeeping.²⁶ It is necessary to challenge these frameworks by advocating for a shift from short term warfare interventions to long term strategic diplomacy building. Feminists have time and again emphasised on the need to account for the broader sense of security which aims at minimal warfare and maximizing economic well-being, access to all resources, political representation and social status.²⁷ As of 2023, it could be seen that women represent less than 10% in any peace process taken across the globe.²⁸ Yet, certain countries do seem to have made a progress.

Countries like Finland have integrated women into defence and foreign policy making as we have discussed earlier. Leaders like Sanna Marin have ensured that national and international diplomacy is maintained not by nuclear warfare but by providing support on civil matters, inclusive decision making and prevention of nuclear weapons. Even though they don't completely move away from military readiness they strike a balance with the humanitarian factors affecting a nation in the long run. This reaffirms the nexus between state-sanctioned

²⁵Council on Foreign Relations, Advancing Gender Equality in Foreign Policy (Apr. 7, 2020), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep29911>.

²⁶Soraya Salsabilla, The Overlooked Heroes: Women's Role and Exclusion in War and Peace, MODERN DIPLOMACY (Dec. 1, 2024), <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2024/12/01/the-overlooked-heroes-womens-role-and-exclusion-in-war-and-peace/>.

²⁷Saskia Stachowitsch, Military Gender Integration and Foreign Policy in the United States: A Feminist International Relations Perspective, 43 INT'L STUD. REV. 887 (2012), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26301919>.

²⁸Soraya Salsabilla, The Overlooked Heroes: Women's Role and Exclusion in War and Peace, MODERN DIPLOMACY (Dec. 1, 2024), <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2024/12/01/the-overlooked-heroes-womens-role-and-exclusion-in-war-and-peace/>.

violence and masculinity and thus contributes to the remasculinization of warfare.²⁹

India, in contrast presents a very complex position on defence and foreign policy, despite having powerful leaders like Indira Gandhi who held office as the prime minister and Nirmala Sitharaman as the defence minister its strategies remained deeply rooted in the power tradition driven by men. Both leaders operated within the male dominated institutional structures of India. Their leadership, though symbolic, did not transform India's defence orientation, instead merely reflected assimilation power. This contrast illustrates a critical insight on the fact that mere presence is alone not enough, rather a structural shift is necessary. As the world confronts several non-traditional threats, diplomacy seems to be a strategic approach over warfare.

Conclusion

This comparative analysis between India and Finland highlights the need for more structural transformation for accommodating women in Indian Politics. While Finland emerged as the happiest country in the world, India still has a long battle to fight patriarchy and set the diplomatic tone across nations. Adapting to feminism through policy making is merely one part of the integration process, the real representation happens only when women's voice is heard by respecting the "women issues" and taking into consideration their suggestions in global politics. Women must be guaranteed minimum percentage of seats in the political governance. Women who have no access to resources must be given financial incentives and schemes to help the ground reality change. India should develop a female foreign policy framework in order to account for gender principles in global politics and diplomacy building.

²⁹Saskia Stachowitsch, Military Gender Integration and Foreign Policy in the United States: A Feminist International Relations Perspective, 43 INT'L STUD. REV. 887 (2012), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26301919>.