

Women Empowerment Through Political Participation: A Study on Women's Political Representation in Kerala State Politics

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Abstract: *Women's political participation is an important dimension of democratic inclusion, but the presence of women in elected institutions differs across levels of government. This article examines women's representation in Kerala's local self-government institutions and Legislative Assembly using published secondary election statistics. The study adopts a descriptive and comparative approach, drawing on the Kerala Local Self Government Department's 2020 local-body election figures and official statistical reports for the 2021 and 2026 Kerala Legislative Assembly elections. In the 2020 local-body figures, women accounted for 11,965 of 21,847 members in the gender-wise total, or approximately 54.77%. In contrast, women won 11 of the 140 Assembly seats in both 2021 and 2026, representing 7.86% of the legislature. In 2026, 94 of 883 contestants were women, approximately 10.64%. These figures reveal a substantial difference between women's numerical representation at the local level and their presence in state-level legislative politics. The article discusses reservation, party nomination practices, access to resources and leadership pathways as factors relevant to this gap, while recognising that election counts alone cannot measure women's decision-making autonomy or policy influence. The study recommends transparent candidate selection, leadership development, mentoring and further research based on verified interviews and constituency-level evidence.*

Keywords: women's political representation, political empowerment, Kerala, local self-government, Legislative Assembly

1. Introduction

Political empowerment involves more than the formal right to vote. It also includes the opportunity to contest elections, hold public office, influence decisions and participate meaningfully in governance. Women's representation is therefore an important indicator of how inclusive a democratic system is. Numerical representation, often described as descriptive representation, can broaden the presence of women in institutions. However, it does not automatically guarantee that elected women have equal authority or influence over policy.

Kerala provides a useful setting for examining this distinction. Women are strongly represented in local self-government, where reservation policies have expanded access to elected positions. Yet their representation in the Kerala Legislative Assembly remains comparatively low. This article compares official figures from local-body elections in 2020 and Assembly elections in 2021 and 2026 to examine the difference between grassroots and state-level representation.

The objective is to describe women's representation across these institutions, interpret the contrast and identify practical areas for further action. The article does not claim to measure individual experiences or policy impact because verified primary interview or survey data were not conducted for this analysis.

2. Review of Context and Conceptual Framework

Women's political representation can be understood through two related concepts. Descriptive representation concerns

the number or proportion of women elected to an institution. Substantive representation concerns whether and how representatives advance issues, interests or policies relevant to women and other underrepresented groups. Numerical data can establish the first, but the second requires evidence about legislative behaviour, policy outcomes, committee work and decision-making processes.

Local-government reservation is a significant institutional mechanism for increasing women's access to elected office. Kerala's local self-government framework provides for substantial reservation of seats for women, and the state has reported extending women's reservation from 33% to 50% in local bodies [1], [2]. Such rules can create entry points into public leadership. Representation at the state legislative level, however, depends on additional processes, including party nominations, selection of candidates for competitive constituencies, campaign resources, political networks and opportunities to progress from local to higher office.

These factors are discussed here as relevant explanations identified in the broader research context, not as causal effects directly measured by the election totals. Establishing their relative importance would require additional empirical work.

3. Methodology

The study uses a descriptive, documentary and comparative research design. Data were taken from official published sources: the Kerala Local Self Government Department's 2020 local-body election statistics [1], the official statistical report for the 2021 Kerala Legislative Assembly election [3], and the Chief Electoral Officer, Kerala's 2026 election highlights [4]. The PRS Legislative Research profile of the

15th Kerala Legislative Assembly was consulted for contextual information [5].

Women's share of local-body members was calculated by dividing the published female-member count by the gender-wise total and multiplying by 100. Women's share of Assembly seats was calculated by dividing the number of women elected by 140 and multiplying by 100. The percentage of women among 2026 contestants was calculated by dividing 94 by 883 and multiplying by 100. Percentages are rounded to two decimal places.

A limitation in the local-government source is disclosed rather than silently corrected: its page displays an overall headline total of 21,865, while its gender-wise totals—9,882 men and 11,965 women—sum to 21,847. The calculation in this article uses the gender-wise total of 21,847. The election years and institutional categories are not identical; consequently, the comparison indicates a broad representational difference rather than a controlled same-year comparison. No interviews, focus-group responses or survey results are presented.

4. Results

Table 1: Women's representation in Kerala local self-government, 2020

Local body	Men	Women	Total
District Panchayat	157	173	330
Block Panchayat	947	1,131	2,078
Municipality	1,391	1,685	3,076
Corporation	189	225	414
Grama Panchayat	7,198	8,751	15,949
Gender-wise total	9,882	11,965	21,847

Source: Kerala Local Self Government Department, LSGI Election – 2020 [1].

Women accounted for 11,965 of the 21,847 members in the gender-wise total, equivalent to 54.77%. Men accounted for 45.23%. Women outnumbered men in each of the five listed categories of local body. Grama Panchayats accounted for the largest absolute number of women members (8,751), reflecting the scale of this tier of local government.

Table 2: Women's representation in Kerala Assembly elections

Election year	Women contestants	Women elected	Women's share of seats
2021	86 of 881 contestants	11 of 140	7.86%
2026	94 of 883 contestants	11 of 140	7.86%

Sources: Chief Electoral Officer, Kerala, 2021 statistical report [3] and 2026 election highlights [4].

The Assembly results show a contrasting pattern. In both 2021 and 2026, women won 11 of 140 seats, or 7.86%. In 2026, women made up 94 of 883 contestants, approximately 10.64%. The low share of women among contestants and elected members indicates that the numerical gains visible in local self-government have not been matched in the state legislature.

5. Discussion

The central finding is the gap between local and state-level representation. Women held approximately 54.77% of the positions in the 2020 local-body gender-wise totals, whereas they held 7.86% of Assembly seats after the 2021 and 2026 elections. Although these figures refer to different election cycles and different types of institutions, the size of the contrast is substantial and merits attention.

Reservation is an important part of the local-level context. Rules that reserve seats for women can create a predictable route into public office and broaden the pool of people with electoral and administrative experience. The local-body figures are consistent with the view that institutional design can influence descriptive representation. However, the data alone cannot establish how much of the observed representation is attributable to reservation or how independently elected representatives exercise authority.

The Assembly figures point to a different set of questions. Political parties play a key role in determining who contests elections and in which constituencies. If women are nominated less often, or are less frequently selected for constituencies considered winnable, their chances of winning remain limited even when they have political experience. Unequal access to campaign funding, informal networks, mentoring and public visibility may also affect advancement. These are plausible issues for investigation, not causal conclusions proven by the current dataset.

A second implication is that descriptive representation and substantive empowerment should not be treated as interchangeable. The number of women elected is important, but it does not reveal their influence on budgets, legislation, committee decisions or party priorities. Future research should therefore combine election statistics with interviews, analysis of candidate nominations, legislative participation and policy outcomes. Research involving participants should use informed consent and transparent data collection procedures.

The source discrepancy in the local-body total also illustrates the importance of careful data handling. Reporting the difference between the headline figure and gender-wise sum makes the calculation reproducible and prevents false precision. Official figures should be cited with their reference year, definitions and limitations.

6. Recommendations

First, political parties should publish transparent criteria for candidate selection and report the gender composition of candidates, including how many are nominated in competitive constituencies. Second, parties and public institutions should expand leadership development, campaign training, mentoring and access to networks for women aspiring to higher office. Third, practical support such as safe campaign environments, measures against harassment and scheduling that recognises caregiving responsibilities can help reduce barriers to participation. Fourth, researchers should track whether women elected at the local level progress to district, state and national

institutions. Finally, future studies should investigate substantive representation through verified interviews, legislative records, committee participation and policy analysis.

7. Conclusion

Official election statistics show a marked difference between women's representation in Kerala's local self-government institutions and the Legislative Assembly. Women represented 54.77% of members in the 2020 local-body gender-wise totals, while women won 7.86% of Assembly seats in both 2021 and 2026. Women also accounted for only 10.64% of Assembly contestants in 2026. The findings suggest that strong grassroots representation does not automatically translate into comparable representation at the state level. Reservation can open institutional pathways, but sustained empowerment also requires fair access to candidacy, resources and leadership opportunities. Because the study is based on secondary election data, it cannot determine the degree of women's independent influence over decisions. Further empirical research is needed to understand both the barriers to higher-level representation and the substantive effects of women's participation.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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