Women's Political Empowerment in the State of Andhra Pradesh: An Analysis of the 2024 General Elections

Dr. Yogesh Babu Thunga[1] | Prof. (Dr.) Rajesh G. Konnur[2] | Dr. G. Anita[3*]

[1]Dean, School of Social Sciences-IIP PDF Innovator, ERU-USA & ERC-INDIA. Former Assistant Professor & Head, Department of Fine Arts and JMC, Eritrea, Africa.
[2]Director/ Pro VC, Eudoxia Research University-USA & Eudoxia Research Centre-INDIA, Guwahati, Bengaluru, Mumbai, India.
[3]Associate Professor, Journalism and Mass Communication, Nagarjuna University, Guntur District, AP, India.

*Corresponding Author: anitakolla@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

Women's political empowerment remains a central concern in democratic governance, particularly in contexts where historical, cultural, and institutional barriers restrict women's access to power. The 2024 General Elections in Andhra Pradesh marked a significant moment with increased participation of women candidates across political parties and constituencies. This conceptual paper examines women's political empowerment in the state by analysing participation patterns, representation dynamics, and structural enablers and constraints evident during the 2024 elections. The paper synthesizes existing research to develop an analytical framework for understanding women's empowerment beyond numerical participation. The paper argues that while descriptive representation of women has improved, substantive empowerment remains uneven due to persistent patriarchal norms, party gatekeeping, and media representation practices. The study offers conceptual insights relevant for policymakers, political parties, and scholars concerned with strengthening gender-inclusive democratic processes in Andhra Pradesh.

Keywords: Women's Political Empowerment, General Elections, Women Candidates, poliTIcal Participation, Gender and Politics Representation.

Introduction

Women's political empowerment has emerged as a central concern in democratic societies, particularly in contexts where historical, cultural, and institutional structures have limited women's access to political power. Political empowerment extends beyond mere participation in elections; it encompasses the ability of women to contest, represent, influence decision-making, and shape public policy within political institutions (Saxena, 1994; Paxton et al., 2020). In India, despite constitutional commitments to equality and decades of women's participation in public life, political empowerment remains uneven and deeply mediated by gendered social norms and power relations (Chandrashekhar, 2016; Sharma, 2020). Media plays a critical role in this process by shaping how political actors are represented and perceived. News media do not merely report political events; they actively construct narratives that define political legitimacy, leadership, and authority. Feminist media scholars argue that media representations often reinforce patriarchal ideologies by framing women politicians through personal, relational, or symbolic lenses rather than as autonomous political agents (Adcock, 2010; Braden, 2014). Such portrayals influence public perception and voter evaluation, thereby affecting women's political credibility and electoral success (Fridkin, 1996; Bligh et al., 2012).

In the Indian context, these dynamics are further complicated by regional political cultures and vernacular media systems. Studies have shown that women politicians in India are frequently portrayed in ways that emphasise morality, family roles, cultural symbolism, or emotional attributes, while their policy positions and leadership capabilities receive limited attention (Rao, 1999; Fathima, 2023). Media coverage of legislative initiatives such as the Women's Reservation Bill has also reflected selective framing, often reducing complex debates on representation to symbolic narratives (Dhasmana & Raj, 2024; Kannabiran, 2024). The state of Andhra Pradesh offers a particularly significant setting for examining women's political empowerment. The political landscape of the state has been shaped by caste dynamics, party-centric mobilisation, populist governance, and strong media influence (Suri, 2002; Mooij, 2007). Telugu-language newspapers and regional media outlets play a dominant role in shaping political discourse, especially in rural and semi-urban areas where print media remains influential (Satyanarayana, 1982; Gundimeda, 2017). Media ownership patterns, political affiliations, and regional identities further influence how political actors are represented (Kasturi, 2014; Inukonda, 2019).

The 2024 General Elections in Andhra Pradesh marked a notable moment in the state's political trajectory, with an increased presence of women candidates across political parties and constituencies. This rise in participation reflects broader national and global trends advocating gender inclusion in politics (Bahuguna, 2025; Patar & Baruah, 2025). However, existing scholarship cautions that increased numerical representation does not automatically translate into substantive political empowerment (Paxton et al., 2020; Reddy, 2024). Women may be present as candidates or elected representatives, yet remain constrained by party gatekeeping, limited access to resources, and gendered expectations within political institutions (Singh Parmaar, 2024; Patel, 2022). Furthermore, the intersection of media representation and political empowerment remains underexplored at the state level. While national-level studies have examined women's political participation and media portrayal, fewer studies focus on how regional political contexts and media ecosystems shape women's empowerment during general elections (Arya, 2011; Gundimeda, 2017). Andhra Pradesh, with its distinct political culture and influential vernacular press, provides an important case for understanding how empowerment is mediated through representation, party structures, and public discourse.

This conceptual paper seeks to address this gap by examining women's political empowerment in Andhra Pradesh through the lens of the 2024 General Elections. The paper analyses how women's participation, representation, and visibility intersect with broader structural and cultural factors. Rather than offering an empirical measurement of empowerment, the study develops a conceptual understanding of how empowerment is enabled and constrained within the state's political and media environment.

Literature Review

The literature on women's political empowerment and media representation spans multiple disciplinary traditions, including political science, gender studies, media studies, and sociology. This review synthesizes existing scholarship across five interrelated strands: (1) women's political empowerment and representation, (2) media and gendered political representation, (3) framing and stereotyping of women politicians, (4) the Indian and regional context with a focus on Andhra Pradesh, and (5) gaps in existing research. Political empowerment of women has been conceptualized as a multidimensional process involving participation, representation, agency, and influence over political decision-making (Saxena, 1994; Paxton et al., 2020). Early scholarship in the Indian context emphasized that empowerment cannot be reduced to legal equality or electoral participation alone but must include substantive access to power and institutional authority (Saxena, 1994; Chandrashekhar, 2016). Paxton, Hughes, and Barnes (2020) provide a foundational distinction between descriptive representation the numerical presence of women in political institutions—and substantive representation, which refers to women's actual influence on policy and governance. This distinction is central to understanding why increased participation does not always translate into empowerment. Similar concerns are raised by Sharma (2020) and Bahuguna (2025), who note that structural barriers such as party gatekeeping, limited financial resources, and patriarchal political cultures continue to constrain women's political agency in India. Historical analyses by Kumar (2015) trace women's political participation in India from ancient to modern times, highlighting how women's roles have often been symbolic rather than decision-oriented. More recent studies on the Women's Reservation Act emphasize that while reservation policies aim to address underrepresentation, their transformative potential depends on implementation, party practices, and socio-political contexts (Patel, 2022; Kaur, 2023; Kannabiran, 2024).

Media plays a crucial role in shaping public understanding of politics by constructing narratives around leadership, legitimacy, and authority. Feminist media scholars argue that media function as cultural institutions that reproduce patriarchal ideologies by framing women politicians through gendered lenses (Adcock, 2010; Braden, 2014). Adcock (2010) demonstrated how newspapers often position women as wives, mothers, or moral figures rather than as political actors, thereby limiting their democratic visibility. Braden (2014) further argued that women politicians face a persistent "double bind" in media coverage: they must demonstrate leadership while conforming to gender norms. This dilemma results in coverage that emphasizes appearance, personality, or family roles rather than political competence. Similar patterns are identified in global studies by Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ross (1996), who found that women Members of Parliament were frequently marginalized through personalized or trivialized coverage. In the Indian context, Bhatt et al. (2015) highlight how media narratives shape perceptions of women's capabilities across domains, including politics, science, and technology. These narratives influence societal expectations and reinforce gender hierarchies. Fathima (2023) and Saxena (2025) observe that Indian media often portray women politicians as symbols of cultural values rather than as agents of political change.

Framing theory provides a useful lens to understand how media select and emphasize certain aspects of political reality. Fridkin (1996) showed that gender stereotypes significantly influence campaign dynamics and voter evaluation, often disadvantaging women candidates. Huddy and Capelos (2002) further demonstrated that gender stereotyping affects how voters assess leadership competence, with women evaluated more harshly on perceived weaknesses. Bligh et al. (2012) found that media framing plays a decisive role in shaping voter perceptions of women politicians, particularly by associating them with warmth and compassion rather than authority and decisiveness. Hayes, Lawless, and Baitinger (2014) extended this analysis by examining the influence of appearance-based framing, showing that women are more likely to be judged on attire and presentation than on policy positions. Hayes and Lawless (2015) challenged the assumption of a gender-neutral media lens, demonstrating that gendered framing persists even in contemporary electoral contexts. Meta-analytical evidence provided by Sazali and Basit (2020) confirms that mass media portraits of women politicians consistently rely on stereotypical visual frames that emphasize femininity, emotionality, and relational roles. These framing practices contribute to symbolic representation rather than substantive political legitimacy.

India's regional diversity necessitates context-specific analysis of media and political representation. Arya (2011) demonstrated that Indian print media exhibit uneven coverage across states and regions, influenced by political relevance, ownership patterns, and readership demographics. This unevenness has implications for how women politicians are represented at the regional level. Andhra Pradesh presents a distinctive political and media environment shaped by caste politics, populist governance, and strong regional media houses. Satyanarayana (1982) provided early insights into the role of mass media in political communication in Andhra Pradesh, highlighting the influence of newspapers in shaping electoral discourse. Later studies by Suri (2002) and Mooij (2007) examined how political mobilisation and reform narratives in the state intersect with media practices.

Gundimeda (2017) offered a critical analysis of caste, media ownership, and political power in Andhra Pradesh, focusing on *Eenadu*. The study revealed how editorial choices reflect broader power structures, often marginalising alternative voices, including women. Kasturi (2014) and Inukonda (2019) further showed how media bifurcation, regional movements, and political affiliations influence news framing in the Telugu press. Specific studies on election coverage in Telugu newspapers by Anita and Thunga (2020, 2021) and Thunga (2023) provide direct relevance to the present research. These studies found that women politicians received limited visual prominence and were often portrayed in ceremonial or supportive roles. The authors concluded that Telugu newspapers largely reinforce traditional gender roles through visual framing, even during election periods. Scholars such as Rao (1999) and Singh (2006) have emphasized that women in Indian politics are often framed symbolically, representing cultural or national identity rather than political agency. This symbolic framing intersects with caste, religion, and regional identity, further complicating women's political empowerment. Studies on minority representation (Raza, 2022) and identity politics underline how representation is shaped by intersecting social hierarchies. In Andhra Pradesh, participatory development and local governance dynamics also influence women's political roles, as noted by Powis (2012) and Yerramilli (2013).

Despite extensive scholarship, several gaps remain. First, much of the literature focuses on national-level politics or English-language media, with limited attention to vernacular newspapers.

Second, while women's participation is well-documented, fewer studies examine how media representation affects political empowerment at the state level. Third, conceptual integration of political empowerment, media framing, and regional political culture remains limited. This study addresses these gaps by offering a detailed conceptual and qualitative synthesis of women's political empowerment and media representation in Andhra Pradesh, drawing on the context of the 2024 General Elections.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative and conceptual research methodology aimed at examining women's political empowerment in Andhra Pradesh in the context of the 2024 General Elections. Rather than relying on numerical indicators or empirical measurement, the research focuses on interpretive and analytical understanding of empowerment as a socially constructed and multidimensional process. The study draws entirely on secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, policy documents, and scholarly analyses related to women's political participation, representation, media framing, and regional politics. These sources were selected from established academic publishers and reputed journals to ensure scholarly credibility. A thematic synthesis approach was employed to analyse the literature. Relevant studies were systematically reviewed to identify recurring themes such as electoral participation, descriptive and substantive representation, political agency, party gatekeeping, and media visibility. These themes were then examined within the specific socio-political context of Andhra Pradesh, taking into account factors such as caste dynamics, party-centric political structures, and the influence of regional media. The analysis was theoretically anchored in feminist political theory, representation theory, and media framing perspectives, which guided the interpretation of how empowerment is enabled or constrained within political institutions and public discourse.

Findings and Discussion

The conceptual analysis of women's political empowerment in Andhra Pradesh during the 2024 General Elections reveals a complex and layered pattern of progress and persistence of structural constraints. The findings suggest that while women's participation in electoral politics has increased in visibility and numerical presence, substantive political empowerment remains uneven and limited by institutional, cultural, and representational factors.

One of the key findings is the increase in descriptive participation of women in the 2024 elections. Women candidates were present across major political parties and contested in diverse constituencies, reflecting broader national efforts to promote gender inclusion in politics. This trend aligns with recent scholarship that notes a gradual expansion of opportunities for women in electoral politics due to policy advocacy, public discourse on gender equality, and the momentum created by legislative initiatives such as the Women's Reservation Act (Patel, 2022; Kaur, 2023; Bahuguna, 2025). However, the analysis indicates that this increased participation did not uniformly translate into decision-making authority or leadership within party structures.

A second major finding relates to party gatekeeping and institutional control. Despite fielding women candidates, political parties in Andhra Pradesh continued to function as male-dominated institutions where strategic decisions, resource allocation, and leadership positioning remained concentrated among men. Women's candidature was often influenced by political lineage, caste alliances, or symbolic considerations rather than sustained leadership development. This finding resonates with earlier studies that argue party-centric politics in Andhra Pradesh restrict women's autonomy and reinforce hierarchical power relations (Mooij, 2007; Suri, 2002; Sivanna, 2025). From a representation theory perspective, this reflects a gap between descriptive and substantive representation (Paxton et al., 2020).

The analysis also highlights the symbolic nature of women's political inclusion. In several cases, women's participation appeared to function as symbolic compliance with gender inclusion norms rather than a genuine effort to redistribute power. Symbolic inclusion was evident in limited leadership roles, absence from key decision-making forums, and constrained influence over policy agendas. This finding supports arguments by Rao (1999) and Saxena (2025), who emphasize that women in Indian politics are frequently positioned as symbols of moral legitimacy or social progress rather than as authoritative political actors.

Another significant finding concerns the role of media in shaping political empowerment. Existing literature on Telugu and Indian media suggests that women politicians are often framed through gendered narratives that emphasize cultural identity, emotionality, or relational roles (Adcock, 2010;

Braden, 2014; Gundimeda, 2017). Such framing influences public perception by reinforcing the association between political authority and masculinity. As a result, even when women participate actively in electoral processes, their political legitimacy may be undermined through media representation. This aligns with framing and stereotyping research that demonstrates how media narratives affect voter evaluation and leadership perception (Fridkin, 1996; Bligh et al., 2012; Hayes & Lawless, 2015).

The findings further suggest that empowerment outcomes varied across constituencies, shaped by intersecting factors such as caste, regional identity, family political networks, and access to party resources. Women from politically influential backgrounds or dominant social groups were better positioned to navigate institutional barriers, while others faced greater constraints. This reflects intersectional dynamics highlighted in studies on identity politics and representation in India (Singh, 2006; Raza, 2022; Thomas & Kaunain, 2025).

Conclusion

This conceptual study examined women's political empowerment in Andhra Pradesh through the lens of the 2024 General Elections, with a focus on participation, representation, institutional dynamics, and media influence. The analysis demonstrates that while women's descriptive participation in electoral politics has increased, substantive political empowerment remains limited and uneven. The elections reflected progress in terms of visibility and candidature, yet they also revealed persistent structural and cultural barriers that restrict women's access to political authority and decision-making power. The findings indicate that political parties continue to function as male-dominated institutions, where candidate selection, leadership opportunities, and resource distribution are controlled by entrenched power structures. Women's inclusion, in many cases, remains symbolic, fulfilling representational expectations without enabling sustained political influence. This gap between participation and empowerment reinforces the distinction between descriptive and substantive representation and highlights the limitations of relying solely on numerical indicators of gender inclusion. The study also underscores the critical role of media in shaping political empowerment. Gendered media narratives and framing practices continue to influence public perceptions of leadership and legitimacy, often positioning women as cultural or relational figures rather than authoritative political actors. Such representations interact with institutional constraints to further limit women's political agency, even when they actively engage in electoral processes. The 2024 General Elections in Andhra Pradesh illustrate that women's political empowerment is a gradual and contested process rather than an automatic outcome of increased participation. Achieving meaningful empowerment requires structural reforms within political parties, gender-sensitive media practices, and sustained efforts to transform socio-cultural norms. By adopting a conceptual approach, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the challenges and possibilities of women's political empowerment at the state level and offers a foundation for future empirical and policy-oriented research.

Implications

The findings of this study have important theoretical, policy, and practical implications for understanding and strengthening women's political empowerment in Andhra Pradesh and similar regional contexts. By highlighting the gap between increased participation and substantive empowerment, the study reinforces the need to move beyond numerical representation when evaluating gender inclusion in democratic processes. From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to feminist political and media scholarship by demonstrating how political empowerment is shaped by the interaction of institutional structures, media narratives, and socio-cultural norms. The findings support existing theoretical arguments that political institutions and media operate as gendered spaces, where power is unevenly distributed and symbolic inclusion often substitutes for genuine authority. The study also strengthens the relevance of representation theory by showing that descriptive gains do not automatically result in substantive empowerment unless supported by institutional change. In terms of policy implications, the study suggests that legislative measures such as the Women's Reservation Act, while necessary, are insufficient on their own to achieve meaningful empowerment. Policymakers must complement reservation policies with mechanisms that ensure women's access to leadership roles, decision-making forums, and political resources. This includes investing in leadership development programmes, enforcing internal party democracy, and creating accountability structures that promote gender equity within political organisations.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Despite its contributions, this study has certain limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, the research adopts a conceptual and qualitative approach based on secondary sources, which limits its ability to capture the lived experiences and personal perspectives of women candidates and political actors. The absence of primary data means that the analysis relies on existing interpretations and documented trends, which may not fully reflect constituency-level variations or individual political trajectories. Second, the study focuses exclusively on the 2024 General Elections in Andhra Pradesh, which restricts the generalisability of the findings to other states or electoral cycles. Political empowerment is shaped by region-specific social, cultural, and institutional factors, and the patterns identified in Andhra Pradesh may differ in states with different political structures or media environments. Additionally, the study does not provide a longitudinal perspective, which limits understanding of how women's political empowerment evolves over time. Future research can address these limitations through several avenues. Empirical studies involving interviews with women candidates, party leaders, journalists, and voters would provide deeper insights into the mechanisms that enable or constrain political empowerment. Quantitative analyses examining voting patterns, campaign financing, and leadership outcomes could complement qualitative findings and offer a more comprehensive assessment of empowerment. Further research could explore the role of digital and social media in shaping women's political visibility and empowerment, particularly as online platforms increasingly influence political communication. Examining intersections of gender with caste, class, religion, and regional identity would also deepen understanding of empowerment dynamics in diverse political contexts.

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