

Women Empowerment in the Political Landscape of Arunachal Pradesh: Challenges and Solutions

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36348/sjhss.2026.v11i03.003>

| Received: 25.12.2025 | Accepted: 27.02.2026 | Published: 18.03.2026

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Abstract

This study is on how women's political engagement has changed in the tribal rich state of Arunachal Pradesh. It charts the transition from customary exclusion to leadership positions, illustrating the influence of policy and societal change. The study examines historical roles, representation growth, and advocacy using primary and secondary sources, such as APWWS reports and statistics from the Legislative Assembly and PRIs. It looks at important issues and ways to empower women in politics. Despite advancements brought about by constitutional and legislative backing, full participation is nevertheless impeded by institutional and cultural hurdles, underscoring both the successes and continuous challenges in women's political empowerment.

Keywords: Transition, Customary, APWWS, PRI, Empowerment, Advocacy.

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INTRODUCTION

The State, Arunachal Pradesh, which holds a strategic position at the northeastern extremity of the Indian subcontinent, is unique in that it is characterised by an incredibly complex and multifaceted amalgamation of diverse tribal cultures and customs that together contribute to its remarkably unique sociocultural identity [6, 2]. Historically speaking, the political dynamics of this area have been primarily marked by a strong male-centric orientation that has been greatly moulded and impacted by deeply ingrained patriarchal norms and broader societal structures that have, for a considerable amount of time, consistently marginalised and oppressed women [12]. However, it is important to remember that over the course of several decades, women in the state of Arunachal Pradesh have gradually and assertively established a unique and powerful presence in the political landscape, changing dramatically from being passive observers of political activities to active participants and powerful leaders who are actively influencing the political discourse and governance of their respective communities [10].

This transformation is particularly noteworthy in the context of Arunachal Pradesh, a state that is richly abundant in cultural diversity and tribal heritage, as it has undergone a gradual yet markedly significant evolution in the political engagement and empowerment of women, which underscores a profound transition from

traditional exclusionary practices to the emergence of leadership roles that reflect broader societal transformations and the positive impact of significant policy interventions such as the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, which has been instrumental in promoting and enhancing women's political participation across various strata of governance [8-14].

The political empowerment of women, especially within the unique context of tribal societies like Arunachal Pradesh, can be effectively and comprehensively analyzed through the theoretical frameworks of Feminist Institutionalism and Empowerment Theory. Feminist Institutionalism critically explores the intricate ways in which gendered power dynamics are systematically embedded within both formal and informal political institutions, revealing the complex interactions that exist between societal norms and institutional practices. It draws attention to the various ways that deeply ingrained patriarchal norms, cultural practices, and male-dominated political structures work to limit and impede women's access to significant political power and representation. This theoretical framework offers important insights into the factors influencing women's limited political participation, despite constitutional guarantees intended to promote equality and representation, in the particular context of Arunachal Pradesh, where long-standing

tribal traditions and customary laws frequently serve to marginalise and silence women's voices [4].

In contrast, Empowerment Theory places significant emphasis on the dynamic process through which individuals or groups, particularly those historically marginalized, gain control over the decisions and resources that profoundly affect their lives and their communities [9]. Political empowerment, according to this theory, is viewed as a multidimensional and iterative process that encompasses various elements such as awareness-raising, capacity-building, active participation, and the provision of institutional support. This theoretical approach is especially helpful in assessing the success of important policy initiatives, such as the well-known 73rd Constitutional Amendment, and the crucial roles that groups like the Arunachal Pradesh Women's Welfare Society (APWWS) play in promoting political engagement and mobilisation at the grassroots level. When taken into account collectively, these theoretical frameworks offer a dual analytical lens that can be used to comprehend the structural limitations placed on women as well as the revolutionary potential that comes with their involvement in Arunachal Pradesh politics. It is clear that social mobilisation, legal requirements, and institutional reforms may all work together to help address the enduring gender-based exclusions that have long hampered political participation and governance in this culturally varied and wealthy area.

A fascinating case study that eloquently demonstrates the complex and multidimensional link between social development and the persistent political barriers that continue to exist in a number of forms is the political history of women in Arunachal Pradesh. Despite the implementation of various policy initiatives and the creation of constitutional provisions specifically aimed at promoting women's active participation in governance, institutional barriers and deeply ingrained societal norms remain major obstacles that hinder women's ability to participate meaningfully in political processes and decision-making [3-10]. In order to effectively advance women's empowerment in this setting, it becomes imperative to prioritise and carry out programs that are specifically intended to improve education, create capacity-building initiatives, and introduce supportive legislation that seeks to achieve equal representation while also enabling women to reach their full potential in the state's political landscape [13-15]. The lived experiences of women who actively participate in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) further highlight this contradiction between potential and reality. While constitutional mandates have created new opportunities for participation, systemic injustices and cultural barriers still exist, requiring continued efforts to make sure that women's inclusion in governance is both meaningful and long-lasting [16]. A good and promising trend that points to a shift towards greater inclusion and

participation of women in governance roles is the noticeable rise in the number of women in both legislative assemblies and grassroots organisations. This observation highlights the crucial idea that women's political empowerment goes beyond the simple act of counting female representatives and is in fact crucial to the general development and advancement of society as a whole [1-17].

Aim of the Study

The study's goal is to investigate the obstacles to and solutions for women's empowerment in Arunachal Pradesh's political environment.

METHODS

The wide range of information required to carry out this academic investigation has been painstakingly collected from a variety of primary and secondary sources, guaranteeing that the study is supported by strong evidence. To achieve the overall goals outlined in the scope of this investigation, a wide range of published and unpublished research articles, academic papers, reputable books, and various government reports, among other pertinent documents, have been rigorously analysed and critically examined. The reports produced by the Arunachal Pradesh Women's Welfare Society (APWWS), the comprehensive statistical reports of the Legislative Assembly of Arunachal Pradesh's general elections, and the detailed reports of the Panchayati Raj Department of the Government of Arunachal Pradesh, located in Itanagar, have been given special attention. All of these reports have been painstakingly gathered and modified as needed to meet the particular needs of the study. The research aims to contribute to the larger conversation on women's welfare and governance in the area by synthesising this abundance of data and offering a comprehensive view of the problems at hand.

MATERIALS

1. Historical Background:

Conventional Positions and Early Political Involvement In the context of Arunachal Pradesh's larger historical framework, it is crucial to acknowledge that the tribal societies that have thrived in this area for many centuries were primarily dominated by a patriarchal system, with the majority of power and decision-making responsibilities held by the older male members of each community [14].

The societal roles that were assigned to women were largely confined to the domestic sphere, which inherently restricted their active participation in formal political processes and decision-making arenas, a situation that has been further elucidated by the scholarly works of Nayak and Mahanta in 2009. One of the pioneers in breaking down these long-standing, traditional barriers to women's political engagement was Sibbo Kai, who in the historic year of 1978 became the first woman to be nominated to the Arunachal Pradesh

Legislative Assembly, representing the interests and voices of the Singpho community—a historic achievement [6]. Following this momentous accomplishment, Nyari Welly became another trailblazer in this field when she was elected as the first female member of the Assembly from the Seppa constituency in 1980. This landmark event not only changed the political landscape of the state but also paved the way for later generations of women to actively participate in Arunachal Pradesh politics¹⁵. Undoubtedly, the courageous efforts and groundbreaking achievements of these trailblazing women laid a firm foundation for the emergence of later female activists and political leaders, allowing them to expand their influence and forge successful careers in a field that had previously been dominated by men.

2. Historical Events of Importance

In addition to being a groundbreaking accomplishment, Siboi Kai's 1978 nomination as the first female member of the Arunachal Pradesh Legislative Assembly marked a huge step toward improving women's political representation and inclusion within the state's governance framework. The event's historical significance cannot be overstated. It offered a thorough examination of this significant advancement, stressing its wider effects on public perceptions of women in politics. Furthermore, a significant turning point was reached in 1980 when Nyari Welly was elected from the Seppa constituency, becoming the first woman to be elected to the Assembly. It is noteworthy that, in addition to being a committed social activist, she was also an uneducated woman, which made her achievements even more impressive as she skillfully addressed a number of urgent social issues, including child marriage, polygamy, and bride prices, within the legislative framework [3].

In spite of encountering considerable resistance and pushback from her male counterparts, her unwavering commitment and activist efforts truly laid the groundwork for the emergence of future women leaders in the state, both of whom emphasize the transformative impact of these women's contributions to the political landscape of Arunachal Pradesh [13-15].

3. Expansion and Inclusion

In 2024, the Arunachal Pradesh government stated that since the state's historic achievement of independence in 1987, the political scene has changed significantly, especially with the election of 15 women to the Legislative Assembly. Although this may not seem like much, it is a significant step towards allowing women to hold positions of authority and decision-making. The example of Niani Natung stands out among these notable female politicians; she rose to prominence after successfully running for and winning the Pakke-Kessang by-election in 2001 after her husband, Dera Natung, passed away too soon, and then assumed the crucial position of Minister of State for Social Welfare,

Women, and Child Development, demonstrating that women can become leaders under difficult conditions. Another significant figure within this framework is Dasanglu Pul, who, as the widow of the former Chief Minister Kalikho Pul, adeptly secured the Hayuliang seat during the elections of 2016, and has since been re-elected multiple times; moreover, in the critical political developments that transpired in 2024, she was appointed to a crucial ministerial position that encompasses the oversight of Women & Child Development, Cultural Affairs, and Science & Technology, as documented by the Election Commission of India. The advancement of women's representation is further exemplified by the case of Chakat Aboh, who, after the tragic passing of her husband, Tirong Aboh, successfully triumphed in the 2019 by-election for the Khonsa West constituency, thereby contributing to the ongoing progress of women's representation within the Assembly. Furthermore, Tsering Lhamu's triumph in the Lumla seat in a 2023 by-election after the premature death of her husband, Jambey Tashi, is evidence of the tenacity, strength, and resolve displayed by women in politics. Last but not least, Nyabi Jini Dirchi, a recent arrival to the political scene, made headlines in 2024 after defeating the incumbent Legislative Assembly member in the Basar seat, suggesting that new voices and viewpoints are starting to enter the political sphere. Notwithstanding these admirable accomplishments, it is crucial to recognize that, as per the data provided by the Indian Election Commission in 2024, women still make up only roughly 6.6% of the 60 members of the Arunachal Pradesh Legislative Assembly. This highlights the necessity for additional endeavors to increase the representation of women in governance. It is equally important to take into account that a sizable percentage of female politicians have entered politics primarily through family ties, frequently taking over from their late spouses or other male relatives. This raises serious concerns about the scope and legitimacy of women's independent political agency [11].

4. Civil Society and Advocacy: Fostering Change

In a variety of socioeconomic circumstances, groups like the Arunachal Pradesh Women's Welfare Society (APWWS) have been crucial in advancing women's political engagement and the unwavering fight for women's rights. As highlighted in their most recent report (APWWS, 2023), this esteemed organization, which was established in 1979, has worked diligently to advocate for the enactment of progressive policies, including the establishment of the State Commission for Women, the implementation of gender-sensitive budgeting practices, and the promotion of increased reservation quotas for women within the framework of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). In a significant stride forward, as reported by The Arunachal Times (2023), the society made a remarkable proposal in 2023 aimed at instituting a ban on individuals engaged in polygamous relationships from seeking public office, with the

ultimate goal of fostering gender equality and safeguarding the rights of women within the sociopolitical landscape.

5. Panchayati Raj Institutions: An Opportunity for Local Involvement

The enactment of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act in the year 1992, which established a compulsory minimum reservation of 33% specifically for women within the operational structure of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), has resulted in the creation of an essential and transformative platform that enables women to engage actively in the governance processes at the grassroots level, thereby significantly enhancing their representation within local political frameworks [8]. According to studies on indigenous groups, especially the Idu Mishmi, these reservation laws have been crucial in enabling women to take on leadership roles in their communities, giving them a sense of agency and empowerment that was previously elusive and out of reach for many [16].

Importantly, the steadily increasing presence of educated and professionally employed women is progressively altering societal perceptions, resulting in a growing recognition of their contributions as vital assets that not only elevate their social status but also bolster their involvement in crucial decision-making processes that shape the future of their communities. However, it is crucial to recognize that a multitude of challenges still persist within this institutional framework, which hinders the full realization of women's potential. Despite the active participation of women within PRIs, empirical research conducted in specific districts, such as Kurung Kumey, reveals that a variety of factors—including insufficient educational opportunities, a general lack of awareness regarding their rights, and deeply entrenched social norms that inhibit women from asserting their rightful place in public life—frequently obstruct their genuine engagement and meaningful participation. Furthermore, male relatives frequently have a disproportionate amount of influence over the decision-making processes in these institutions, which ultimately defeats the main goal of having women represented in governance and reduces them to the status of proxies, reducing their ability to actually affect change [11-16].

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Barriers to Women's Participation in Political Processes in Arunachal Pradesh

The difficulty of guaranteeing women's fair representation in the various political processes is especially acute in the state of Arunachal Pradesh, where, in spite of significant advancements and significant turning points in the field of political participation, the actual representation of women in legislative bodies and other local governance structures is still woefully low. Research conducted by scholars has uncovered a multitude of enduring challenges that

continue to obstruct women's ability to participate fully and effectively in the political landscape of the state, and these barriers persist even in the face of a plethora of social reform initiatives and constitutional mandates that are ostensibly designed to advance gender equality and promote women's empowerment [11, 12].

1. Deeply Rooted Patriarchal Cultural Norms and Traditions

Arunachal Pradesh's social fabric is characterized by deeply ingrained patriarchal traditions that not only shape interpersonal relationships but also have a significant impact on the state's political landscape. This region is home to a diverse array of tribal communities, each boasting its own distinctive cultural customs and rituals, which adds complexity to the societal landscape. The customs that have been deeply woven into the very fabric of these traditions often serve to restrict women's access to public forums and political spaces, thereby significantly diminishing their chances of engaging in meaningful political discourse and activity. In numerous tribal councils, women continue to face formidable obstacles that hinder their ability to voice their opinions or assume traditional leadership roles, a situation that is well-documented in the works of Chaudhuri (2004) and Singh (2017).

2. Insufficient Political Literacy and Educational Attainment

Despite witnessing a considerable enhancement in women's literacy rates over recent years, political literacy within Arunachal Pradesh remains alarmingly low, which in turn constitutes a significant barrier to women's active involvement in political processes. There exists a pronounced deficiency in awareness regarding women's rights, the intricacies of governance, and the imperative need for political participation, all of which serve to dissuade women from pursuing public office or aspiring to leadership roles within their communities. In addition to preventing women from participating, this widespread ignorance of politics feeds the cycles of marginalization and disenfranchisement [13, 16].

3. The Token Representation Phenomenon and Familialism

One significant change in Arunachal Pradesh's political scene is the growing number of women entering the political sphere primarily through family ties, frequently taking on positions previously occupied by male relatives who have either died or resigned from their official positions. While this pathway may afford women an initial entry point into the political domain, it frequently results in their occupying positions of authority without possessing any genuine political agency or influence of their own. This phenomenon is evidenced in the experiences of prominent figures such as Dasanglu Pul, Chakat Aboh, and Tsering Lhamu, who were able to secure their places in the Arunachal Legislative Assembly in 2024 following the untimely

demise of their husbands, as noted by the Government of Arunachal Pradesh and the Election Commission of India in the same year.

4. Prevalent Social Perceptions and Stereotypes

Women who want to be in positions of political leadership frequently have to contend with a constant assault of unfavorable stereotypes and biased views, such as the deeply ingrained notion that they might not be able to make the decisions or have the emotional strength required to effectively manage the duties involved in such roles. In addition to discouraging women from actively participating in politics, these deeply rooted prejudices also contribute to the widespread trend of voters favoring male candidates over female ones. Further inhibiting women from pursuing and holding positions of public leadership are the traditional beliefs of many tribal tribes, which frequently perpetuate the idea that politics is primarily a male-dominated field [11].

5. Economic Dependency

The significant absence of independent financial resources among women, coupled with their pervasive reliance on male family members for economic sustenance, serves as a considerable impediment that restricts their capacity to not only finance their own election campaigns but also to even entertain the notion of pursuing a career in the political arena. Women are clearly at a disadvantage because of this strong economic reliance, especially when they try to use the funds or networks of patronage that are primarily used by males to increase their competitiveness in elections. As a result, this leads to a number of significant obstacles that women must overcome to participate in politics in a meaningful way, which offer a thorough analysis of these structural issues [12-16].

6. Intimidation and Political Violence

The tangible fear of bodily injury or reputational damage is a powerful disincentive that severely limits women's intention to participate in politics. The concerning rise in political violence and intimidation, especially during election seasons, further distances women from meaningful political engagement, making it extremely difficult for them to stand up for their rights and actively participate in the political process. A study explains that women in areas like Tirap and Longding, which are rife with insurgency and inter-group strife, frequently feel pressured to refrain from doing anything political because of the widespread and overwhelming fear of violence that hangs over their possible participation [16-18].

7. Poor Policy Execution

Arunachal Pradesh has regrettably failed to meet the benchmarks established by the 73rd Amendment, which mandates a 33% reservation quota

for women in the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), thereby underscoring a critical shortfall in policy execution and compliance. The successful development of women leaders at the grassroots level has been significantly hampered by a lack of proper monitoring and ongoing implementation issues, which has stifled their potential for advancement and impact. Significantly, even when seats are supposedly designated for women, it has been noted that men usually hold the majority of decision-making authority and function primarily in the background, as demonstrated by a study on the experiences of Idu Mishmi women [8-16], thus sustaining gender inequality in the political system.

8. Insufficient Mentorship and Support Networks

There are glaringly few websites that are dedicated to giving prospective female politicians the mentorship, specialized training, and strong support systems that are essential to their success in politics. In addition to leaving many women unprepared to handle the complexity of political activity, this obvious shortcoming seriously damages their self-esteem, making them reluctant to join in what can frequently be a difficult and volatile political atmosphere. The state's infrastructure for women's political empowerment and training is still woefully inadequate, failing to adequately address the needs and aspirations of future female leaders, as evidenced by the reports published by the Arunachal Pradesh Women's Welfare Society (APWWS) in spite of the admirable efforts made by the organization to close this crucial gap [1].

INITIATIVES TO PROMOTE WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN THE POLITICAL ARENA

1. Improving Programs for Political Literacy and Education

Improving women's overall political literacy and their comprehension of the governing mechanisms that influence their lives and communities is a crucial and fundamental step that may greatly aid in their political empowerment. The implementation of state-sponsored educational initiatives designed to elevate political awareness, alongside the organization of workshops and leadership training sessions that are specifically tailored for women—particularly those hailing from rural and tribal backgrounds—can effectively serve to unravel the complexities of the electoral process and elucidate the various governance frameworks that exist. Such comprehensive programs have the potential to not only increase women's self-esteem but also to actively encourage and motivate them to participate in politics, which is crucial for fostering a more diverse and representative political environment [12-15].

2. Putting Capacity-Building and Mentoring Initiatives into Action

It is critical that well-designed mentorship programs be put in place with the specific goal of giving

aspiring female leaders a thorough political education, as well as developing excellent communication skills and providing them with beneficial networking opportunities that are essential to their success in the political sphere. Women from a range of backgrounds and situations can have equal access to the resources and direction they require to thrive in the political sphere by expanding efforts to provide mentorship and support throughout all districts through cooperative partnerships with non-governmental organisations, such as the Arunachal Pradesh Women's Welfare Society [1-11].

3. Political Reservations Extension and Implementation

In addition, even though the 73rd Constitutional Amendment has effectively required a 33% reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), it is imperative that tenacious lobbying efforts be made to support legislative reservations in both state assemblies and the national parliament. The introduction and strict enforcement of such quotas have been shown to considerably increase the representation and active participation of women within governance institutions, which in turn contributes to more equal political representation [8-16].

4. Promoting Self-Sufficiency and Leadership

Beyond their responsibilities in the family, women should be given the freedom to participate in politics on their own by creating forums that encourage them to do so. For independent female candidates and political parties that are sincere about attaining gender parity and advancing women's leadership in many political contexts, this might include financial backing and all-encompassing support systems [2].

5. Using Media and Community Campaigns to Dispel Stereotypes

By presenting women leaders in a favourable and constructive light, the media has significant influence on how the general public views them. It is possible to confront and demolish long-standing gender stereotypes while also advancing empowering stories of women in leadership roles by putting community-based awareness campaigns into action and strategically using local language radio and television programming [14-17].

6. Strengthening Legal Protection and Political Safety

It is imperative that the safety and security of women in public life are prioritized and adequately addressed within the political framework. Legal mechanisms that effectively confront issues of harassment and political violence must be substantially strengthened, particularly in regions that are susceptible to conflict and civil unrest. The establishment of secure political environments would serve to encourage a greater number of women to actively engage in electoral

politics, thereby contributing to the evolution of a more balanced and representative political environment that reflects the diverse voices of the populace [16].

7. Encouraging Political Participation with Financial Support

In order to foster a more inclusive political landscape, it is imperative that we establish comprehensive financial support networks that specifically cater to the needs of female candidates hailing from under-represented demographics, which should unequivocally be regarded as a paramount priority on our collective agenda. Initiatives such as campaign subsidies, microgrants tailored for grassroots activism, and the formation of political fellowship programs designed to empower women can significantly enhance the economic capacity of these individuals, thereby enabling them to more effectively articulate the concerns and aspirations of their communities while simultaneously taking on a proactive role within the political arena¹². In addition to making it easier to get necessary campaigning tools, the influx of financial resources also helps to legitimate women's voices in fields that have traditionally undervalued female contributions and impact.

8. Establishing Gender-Sensitive Party Reforms

As the pillars of democratic participation, political parties have a vital duty to take the initiative and implement internal reforms that give priority to the implementation of gender quotas that guarantee fair representation in positions of leadership. This includes, but is not limited to, the creation of specialised women's wings with substantial decision-making power and the need that all party members, regardless of position or experience, undergo gender-sensitivity training. In order to foster a political climate that is essentially more just and equitable, such transformative changes are not just administrative tweaks; they are crucial measures that support women's leadership and active engagement in politics [11]. Political parties may help remove the systemic obstacles that have traditionally prevented women from participating in government by adopting and implementing these changes.

CONCLUSION

The history of women's political involvement in Arunachal Pradesh is a gripping account that captures both the notable advancements and the difficulties that still face female political players. Even though laws and constitutional requirements have made it possible for women to participate fully in the political process, it is important to recognise that institutional obstacles and deeply ingrained cultural norms still severely restrict the options and opportunities open to women. Empowering women via focused education, skill-development initiatives, and supporting legal frameworks that enable their active participation in political processes is crucial to ensuring that equal representation is not just a

theoretical ideal but a practical reality. Women's engagement in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), where progress has been achieved but issues remain, is a striking example of the juxtaposition of progress against persistent challenges.

Despite the fact that societal perceptions and legal amendments have indeed opened up new avenues for participation, it is abundantly clear that ongoing and concerted efforts are necessary to dismantle the barriers that inhibit women from fully engaging in the political sphere. There must be a steadfast dedication to strengthening community support, improving educational opportunities, and funding capacity-building projects that empower women at all levels of governance if the goal of gender equality within local government institutions is to be truly realised. In the end, women's political journey in Arunachal Pradesh has been marked by tenacity and steady advancement, as evidenced by the growing number of women in legislative assemblies and grassroots organisations. This is unquestionably a step in the right direction towards attaining inclusive governance. Promoting women's political empowerment is essential to achieving societal parity and creating a more equitable and democratic society; it goes beyond merely increasing their numerical representation.

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