

Empowering Equality: Addressing Women's Underrepresentation in Indian Politics

Dhruvi Karia



Abstract: *Equality and fairness are values that we uphold in the modern period. Even Nevertheless, there has been a disproportionate amount of progress made in the global representation of women in politics. Women still confront significant impediments to entering political venues, whether they are in the quiet corners of rural communities or the busy streets of metropolises. Women's potential as leaders and change makers is hampered by the continued existence of discriminatory legislation, cultural norms, and structural biases. If things continue as they are, gender equality in the top positions of power won't be achieved for 130 years, according to UN Women. Women have been involved in politics since the colonial era, both with and without the right to vote. They have worked for and against the revolution by their words, deeds, and labor; yet, it is concerning that they are underrepresented in today's political environment. Thus, using qualitative research methodologies, this study aims to investigate women's political leadership in both the lower and upper houses of parliament, the percentage of women voters nationwide, and women's political awareness.*

Keywords: *Political Participation, Women's Rights, Empowerment, Democracy, Elections, Voting Systems, Leadership*

I. INTRODUCTION

As Abraham Lincoln put it, a true democracy is a government of the people, by the people, and for the people. Although most democracies have a system where all societal segments elect their government [1], it is questionable if this government truly represents all of the diverse societal segments and, more importantly, whether it serves all of the citizens of the democracy. In this particular context, democracies are particularly concerned about the issue of women's low involvement, and true democracy will never be realised without addressing this [2].

Despite making up half of the global population, women are disproportionately underrepresented in politics in the majority of the world's nations. The UNDP's Gender Social Norms Index [GSNI], which was updated in 2023, reveals the major barriers that women and girls must overcome in order for the world to realise their full potential [3].

In order to achieve inclusion, growth, and harmony, the Beijing Declaration [1995] emphasised that women's empowerment and full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of culture, including participation in

decision-making processes and authority, are crucial. As a result, the UN declared that the fifth Millennium Development Goal to be implemented between 2000 and 2015 is women's empowerment [4].

The UN General Assembly (2015) and other international policy bodies have acknowledged women's empowerment as a global policy goal and a vital element of global health and poverty-fighting initiatives [World Bank 2012; Every Woman Every Child 2017] [5]. Nonetheless, development researchers have frequently noted that improving the conceptualisation and measurement of empowerment is a research priority [Ibrahim and Alkire 2007; Cunningham et al. 2014; Carlson et al. 2015]. They have also frequently run into problems when creating indicators for its measurement [Kabeer 1999; Richardson 2018; Malhotra and Schuyler 2005; Raj 2017] [6].

About 50% of people worldwide still think that men are more suitable for political leadership roles than women [7], despite a wealth of study theories and awareness regarding women's empowerment [8]. Women have obstacles to equal participation in governmental institutions as a result of all these negative perceptions about politics [9]. These obstacles demand quick attention. This is the explanation:

Since women make up half of the population in every nation, it is only fair that they have an equal say in the processes that determine policy [10].

- There is a correlation between a higher degree of women's political participation and a lower danger of civil war as well as a decreased chance of state-perpetrated political violence, which includes fewer killings, forced disappearances, torture, and political imprisonment [11].

Women are more likely to be held accountable by their constituents when they are elected to political office, which promotes responsive and open governance [12].

- Women have distinct viewpoints on gendered problems like equal pay, reproductive rights, and domestic violence because of their lived experiences [13].
- Stereotypes are dispelled, social norms are altered, and opinions of women leaders are altered by those in positions of leadership.

Despite its obvious benefits, there is still a long way to go before gender equality in politics is achieved universally.

A. Women's Political Participation in India

"Political participation" is a word with a fairly broad definition. It is connected to the "Right to Vote" as well as political activism, political consciousness, and involvement in the decision-making process. The two most prominent forms of political participation for women are voting and political activism.

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*Correspondence Author(s)

Dhruvi Karia*, Department of Law, Monarch Residency 4, Raiji Baug, Moti Baug, Junagadh (Gujarat), India. Email ID: karia.druvi@gmail.com

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II. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

From being at par status in ancient history to being in veils (the *parda* system) throughout the medieval era, the position of women in India has witnessed numerous ups and downs throughout history. Women's status gained momentum after India got independence, and it has continued to improve ever since. In India after independence, women have taken part in nearly every kind of economic activity, daily housework, voting for improved government, and active participation in politics. India has elected Pratibha Patil as president and Indira Gandhi as prime minister. Approximately 25% of the Indian cabinet in the current central government is made up of women.

A. Indian Freedom Movement

Women participated in the freedom movement with true spirit and undaunted courage and faced various tortures, exploitations and hardships to earn us freedom. Many great Indian women like Rani Lakshmi Bai Sarojini Naidu, Kasturba Gandhi, Vijayalakshmi Pandit, Annie Besant need no introduction for their dedication and undying devotion to the service of India

III. INTRODUCTION TO INDIAN ELECTORAL SYSTEM

Women bravely and with unwavering spirit took part in the freedom movement, enduring numerous forms of torture, exploitation, and hardship in order to secure our freedom. There is no need to introduce the many famous Indian women who have dedicated their lives to serving India, such as Annie Besant, Vijayalakshmi Pandit, Kasturba Gandhi, Sarojini Naidu, Rani Lakshmi Bai, and Annie Besant.

At the national level, the head of government, Prime minister, is elected by the members of Lok Sabha, lower house of the parliament. Unlike most of the other democracies of the world, India gave voting rights to women right since the first election. Members of Rajya Sabha, upper house of Indian parliament, are elected by electoral college comprising of members of Lok Sabha, elected members of legislative assemblies of states and union territories of India. Similar structure is in place in various states of India with two bodies called Vidhan Sabha and Vidhan Parishad. Data of successive central and state elections show that Indian Democracy is truly representative of women when it comes to their participation in elections but it significantly lacks women participation as legislature and executive [1].

IV. POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN

Three aspects of women's political participation can be measured: their voting behaviour, their involvement as elected officials, and their involvement in the actual decision-making process. With very few exceptions, the first of these two dimensions has been measured and reported by the Election Commission from the initial election, which took place in 1952. The smallest unit in the Indian electoral

system, the booth, is where the data on women's voting participation is kept track of. The trend of women's involvement in subsequent elections is displayed in the table below:

Table 1: The Trend of Women's Involvement in Subsequent Elections

Year	Voting Percentage of Women Voters out of Total Voters in General Elections
1962	46.6%
1967	55.5%
1971	49.1%
1977	54.9%
1980	51.2%
1984	59.2%
1989	57.3%
1991	51.4%
1996	53.4%
1998	58.0%
1999	55.7%
2004	53.3%
2009	55.8%
2014	65.6%

With the electoral reforms that have taken place which include the recording of elections at sensitive places, information on women participation can be relied upon with a high degree of confidence. This information is not only helpful for the electoral process but can also be used by the policymakers to identify the areas with lesser women participation and take remedial actions. As an example, government can open a girls school where the difference between men voting percentage and women voting percentage is more than 20% [3].

The Indian constitution's 73rd amendment, which established reservations for women, is largely responsible for the high percentage of women serving as elected representatives at the municipal level. There were barely eight crore voters in the 1951 elections. This amounted to 42 crores in the 2009 elections, with 19 crores being female. Voter turnout rose by 13.7 crore to 55 crore in 2014, with 26 crore of those voters being female. Women's rates were 5.8 times higher than men's, at 5.2 times higher.

A. Statistics for Local Level Development

In examining the National Statistical System, the National Statistical Commission [NSC], led by Dr. C. Rangarajan, made several recommendations in its report about the fundamental statistics for local level planning. It emphasized the necessity of creating a system for routine data gathering on a number of essential variables. The Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation [MoSPI] established a high-level expert committee in 2006 with the goal of conceptualising the system. The committee's report to the Indian government offered a comprehensive framework for implementing a schematic approach to collect and compile data for rural areas using the PRI mechanism.



Table 2: Measurement of Women’s Political Participation at the Local Level: India Experience

States	Loksabha	Vidhansabha	Panchayat
Andhra Pradesh	7.00%	8.16%	33.46%
Assam	14.29%	11.90%	36.89%
Bihar	7.50%	14.81%	50.00%
Chhattisgarh	9.09%	11.11%	54.50%
Goa	0.00%	2.50%	32.33%
Gujarat	15.38%	6.59%	33.02%
Haryana	0.00%	10.00%	36.50%
Himachal Pradesh	0.00%	4.41%	50.11%
Jammu and Kashmir	16.67%	3.45%	0.00%
Jharkhand	0.00%	9.88%	58.56%
Karnataka	3.57%	1.33%	43.62%
Kerala	5.00%	5.00%	51.85%
Madhya Pradesh	17.24%	13.48%	50.47%
Maharashtra	10.42%	3.82%	49.93%
Odisha	9.52%	4.76%	0.00%
Punjab	7.69%	11.97%	34.93%
Rajasthan	4.00%	14.00%	50.00%
Tamil Nadu	10.26%	7.26%	35.00%
Tripura	0.00%	8.33%	36.01%
Uttar Pradesh	16.25%	8.93%	39.99%
Uttarakhand	20.00%	7.14%	56.13%
West Bengal	28.57%	11.56%	38.43%

In order to determine the availability of needed data from identifiable sources and to investigate the need, potential financial ramifications, and data sources, the ministry, acting on the advice of the Planning Commission, initiated a nationwide pilot program in 2008–09. A report with the pilot’s results has already been posted to the Ministry’s website (www.mospi.gov.in).

As per the provisions of Article 243D of the Constitution, one third of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in panchayats [local self-government] at all levels and also those of the chair persons are reserved for women. Some states like Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan, Odisha, Maharashtra, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Tripura and Uttarakhand have legislated for 50% reservation for women. In Sikkim reservation for women is 40%. As a result of this initiative, out of about 28 lakh elected members in panchayats, around 10 lakh are women. The last 15 years of Panchayati Raj in India have seen women go from strength to strength in terms of their political participation.

V. CURRENT SCENARIO

India is expected to be the third largest economy in the world by 2030, after the USA and China. According to International Monetary Fund [IMF], India’s economy will grow by 6.8% compared to the USA’s 1.6%. Despite its economic growth, women’s participation in the country’s economy, polity and society has not kept pace.

There has been a noticeable difference in Indian elections lately. The number of women voting has increased nationwide, with a rise recorded in the votes cast by women in seven of the eight states in 2022.

Even while this seems encouraging and positive, more women are not running for office despite the rising percentage of female voters in municipal, state, and federal elections.

A. Female Turnout Declined in 2024 Compared to 2019

Even with more women registering to vote, female voter turnout declined in 2024 compared to 2019, widening the gender gap in political participation. The Election Commission of India [ECI] at the end of the seventh phase of voting released the preliminary picture emerging from the statewide overall voting percentages. The data reveal that all India voting percentage dropped from 67.40% in 2019 to 65.79% in 2024 [5].

This decline in voter turnout has been sharper among women than men. The proportion of electors who voted was marginally higher for women than men in 2019, however that’s not the case with 2024. In 2024, 31.2 crore women voted and all India turnout was 65.80% for men and 65.79% for women [6].

In at least 18 states or Union Territories, the turnout percentage of women was higher than the average turnout for the state. These included West Bengal, Himachal Pradesh, Manipur, Puducherry, Kerala, Goa, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Uttarakhand, and Nagaland.

B. Women in Parliament [2024]

i. The Total Number of Women Elected to Parliament has Come Down from 78 in 2019 to 74 in 2024

N. Manimekalai, director of the Centre for Women’s Development Studies, said that there has been a positive trend in the turnout among women since 2009 regardless of regional differences and fluctuations. This would contribute to increased voting by women and a higher voter turnout in general, though this did not happen in 2024. Manimekalai added that the turnout of women voters from the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes was higher than those from the General categories, indicating that women from economically and socially vulnerable communities do come out to vote, which is a positive sign.

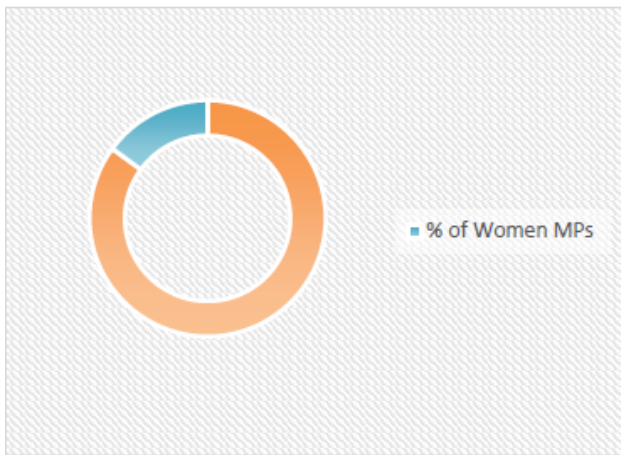
Manimekalai said that in the context of reservation for women in Parliament and Assemblies, to be implemented in the elections to be held from 2029 onwards, more women will be elected and there is dire need for more women to cast their votes [7].

Table 3: % of Women MLA’s

States	Last Assembly Elections	% of Women MLA’s
Tripura	2023	15.00
Chhattisgarh	2018	14.44
West Bengal	2021	13.70
Jharkhand	2019	12.35
Rajasthan	2018	12.00
Puducherry	2021	3.33
Nagaland	2023	3.33
Jammu and Kashmir	2014	2.30
Himachal Pradesh	2022	1.47
Mizoram	2018	0

Below given data indicates % of women in Lok Sabha in 2024.





[Fig.1: 13.62% of Women in Lok Sabha [2024]]

The representation of women in Lok Sabha as well as Rajya Sabha has been increasing with the help of reforms, however the representation is still low.

In India, it is usually seen that women are often seen in supporting roles, they are not included in important decisions of the household, they aren't expected to know about the worldly affairs and especially the political system. Their opinions are often derived from the ideas of male members of the family about politics, hence their idea of leaders in politics or politics in general isn't original. However women are today are adequately informed and educated about right and wrong, they are exposed to politics and affairs through education, social media and many other means. The chart given below represents the condition throughout the years.

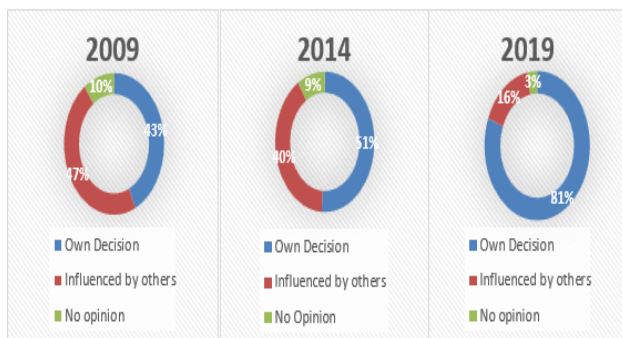


Fig.2: Women Increasingly Exercising their own Free Choice in Election Vote: What Women Said about their Election Pick on Lok Sabha Elections [In 1%]]

The above three pie charts clearly shows that Awareness among Indian Women increased a lot and they started voting as per their decision, judgement and opinions.

In their national legislatures, Scandinavian nations like Sweden, Norway, and South Africa have more than 45% female representation. Japan trails behind India by 10%.

The Lok Sabha elections of 2019 saw a higher percentage of female voters than male voters. In the 2019 general election, 67.18% of female voters cast ballots, compared to 67.01% of male voters. In 2024 the number of women contesting in general elections has increased from 2.9 % in 1957 to nearly 10% in 2024. This marked a steady increase from previous elections: 7 % in 2009, 8% in 2014, and 9% in 2019 but the total number of women elected to the Lower house experienced a slight decrease.

BJP led with 69 women out of 440 in Lok Sabha nominees, constituting 16%. The Congress had 41 women out of 327 candidates, making up 13%.

Notably, smaller parties and regional players fielded a higher proportion of female candidates.

Table 4: Party Wise Winners 2024 Lok Sabha Elections

Party	Number of Women Elected
BJP	69 women candidates, 31 elected
Congress	41 women candidates, 13 elected
TMC	11 women candidates, 11 elected
Samajwadi	Party 5 women elected
DMK	3 women elected
JDU	2 women elected
RJD	1 women elected
LJP	1 women elected
Apna Dal	1 women elected
TDP	1 women elected
YSRCP	1 women elected
SAD	1 women elected
JMM	1 women elected
NCP	1 women elected ⁹

Historical Comparison

- 16th Lok Sabha [2014-2019]: 64 Women MPs**
- 17th Lok Sabha [2019-2024]: 78 Women MPs [Highest]**
- 18th Lok Sabha [2024- Present]: 74 Women MPs¹⁰**

All the data above given describes a very fluctuating position of women in Indian politics and Elections. It keeps on changing every year but one thing that has remained constant throughout is India's efforts to bring more and more women in Politics. Women in Politics symbolizes strength, empowerment and brilliance.

C. A Sneak Peak into Women Reservation Act, 2023

About

- During the special session of Parliament on September 19, 2023, the Constitution (One Hundred and Sixth Amendment) Act, also referred to as the Women's Reservation Bill, 2023 (IAST: Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam), was presented to the Lok Sabha. The goal of this legislation is to give women 33 percent of the seats in the state legislative assemblies and the directly elected Lok Sabha.
- The bill is the possible culmination of a legislative debate that had been ongoing for 27 years, including the lapsed Women's Reservation Bill (2010), due to the lack of consensus among political parties. The bill was the first that was considered in the new parliament building. On 20 September 2023, Lok Sabha passed the bill with 454 votes in favour and two against. The Rajya Sabha passed the bill unanimously with 214 votes in favour and none against, on 21 September 2023. President Murmu signed the bill on 28 September 2023, and the gazette notification was also published the same day, which made it clear that the reservation will come into force soon after the first delimitation (frozen until 2026) [2].
- On the first day of the newly constructed Parliament House, Union Minister of Law and Justice Arjun Ram Meghwal filed a bill with the goal of making the total number of women parliamentarians 181. There were 542 members in the Lok Sabha for 2023, with 78 of them being female. In a similar vein, 24 of the 224 members of



the Rajya Sabha were women. In 2023, there were 102 female lawmakers in office. However 18th Lok Sabha [2024] has over 13.62% female MPs. This is a marginal drop from the 17th Lok Sabha, which had the highest female representation at over 14%.

VI. REASONS OF WOMEN'S UNDERREPRESENTATION IN POLITICS

1. Patriarchal Mindset
 - India is a deeply patriarchal society, and women are often considered inferior to men.
2. Social Norms and Stereotypes
 - Women in India are often expected to conform to traditional gender roles and are discouraged from pursuing careers in politics. Social norms and stereotypes dictate that women should prioritize their roles as wives and mothers, and politics is often considered a man's domain.
3. Lack of Access to Education
 - Women in India have historically had limited access to education which has hindered their ability to participate in politics. Even though there have been improvements in recent years, many women still lack the necessary education and skills to run for political office.
4. Limited Representation in Political Parties
 - Women are often underrepresented in political parties, making it difficult for them to rise through the ranks and secure party nominations for elections.
5. Violence and Harassment
 - Women in politics are often subjected to violence and harassment, both physical and online, which can deter them from entering politics or speaking out on issues. The lack of safe and inclusive spaces in politics is a significant barrier to women's participation.
6. Unequal Opportunities
 - Women in politics often face unequal opportunities, such as lower salaries, less access to resources, and limited networking opportunities. This inequality can make it challenging for women to compete with male candidates and succeed in politics.
7. Structural Impediments
 - Structural impediments to women's empowerment, in general, are the primary issues that make it difficult for them to be a part of the services.

VII. HOW CAN WOMEN BE MORE EFFECTIVELY REPRESENTED IN POLITICS?

1. Reservation of Seats
 - One of the most effective ways to increase women's representation in politics is to reserve seats for women in legislative bodies.
2. Political Parties should ensure Women Representation
 - Political parties should ensure that women are given adequate representation in candidate selection for elections.
3. Education and Training
 - Education and training programs can be conducted to empower women to participate in politics.
4. Encourage Participation from Local Women Leaders

- Women's representation in politics can be increased by encouraging and supporting local women leaders. This can be achieved through mentorship programs and other support initiatives.
5. Address Violence against Women in Politics
 - Violence against women in politics is a significant barrier to their effective representation. Steps such as raising awareness, creating safe environment etc, should be taken to address this issue and ensure the safety and security of women in politics.
 6. Address Social and Cultural Barriers
 - Women's effective representation in politics can be hindered by social and cultural barriers such as patriarchy and gender norms. These issues should be addressed through campaigns, education and awareness programs, and social reform initiatives like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao Scheme, Sukanya Samridhi Yojana.
 7. Provide Support for Work-Life Balance
 - Many women face challenges in balancing their political responsibilities with their family and personal lives. Providing support for work-life balance, such as flexible schedules, childcare, and parental leave, can help to address this issue.
 - Recently, Kerala government announced to grant menstrual leave for female students in all state universities under the Department of Higher Education

VIII. WHAT INDIA HAS DONE FOR REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN POLITICS?

A. Some of the Key Laws Include

- *Reservation of Seats for Women*
As I have discussed earlier, the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments provide for the reservation of one-third of all seats for women in Panchayats and Municipalities. These reservations are aimed at increasing the participation of women in the decision-making process at the local level, and at ensuring that women's voices are heard and their needs are taken into account.
- *The Representation of People Act, 1951*
This Act contains provisions to ensure the fair conduct of elections, and also has provisions related to women's participation in politics. It contains provisions to reserve seats for women in the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha (the two houses of India's parliament), as well as the State Legislative Assemblies.
- *The Women's Reservation Bill*
This bill, which has been proposed but not yet passed by the Indian parliament, would reserve one-third of all seats in the Lok Sabha and the State Legislative Assemblies for women. It aims to increase the participation of women in the highest levels of government and ensure their representation in the decision-making process.
The prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth Act 1955, aims to prevent discrimination against women candidates during elections.
The Election Commission of India (ECI) has also taken steps to increase the participation of women in electoral process,



such as encouraging women to register to vote and promoting women's representation in the electoral process as polling officials.

It's important to note that while these laws and initiatives have made progress in increasing the representation of women in Indian politics, there are still significant challenges to be addressed. Implementation of these laws is often inadequate, and women still face significant barriers to political participation.

IX. CONCLUSION

Inadequate financial security prevents female leaders from concentrating on carving out a place for themselves in politics. Even after working for party activities for many years, patriarchy and gender segregation for higher political authorities are a major impediment to women's ability to remain compliant in politics. Since many development initiatives call for independent thinking and professional judgment, women must be capable of handling governance with ease. Gender-based violence against women in politics can take many different forms, such as verbal abuse, attacks on one's personal dignity, and sexism, which prevents women from participating more fully in politics.

Lastly, as effective administration depends on the cooperation of male colleagues, women representatives frequently implement a variety of strategies to foster more mutual trust. Based on their experiences, women politicians have shown that workable policies at the state and federal levels are necessary to keep women in politics and to sustain their involvement in governance.

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I must verify the accuracy of the following information as the article's author.

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