



## **WOMEN'S ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION IN INDIA: ISSUES, CONSTRAINTS, AND POLICY INTERVENTIONS**

Md Abdus Salam

### **RESEARCH ARTICLE**



#### **Author Details:**

Assistant Professor,  
Nonoi College, Assam, India

#### **Corresponding Author:**

Md Abdus Salam

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#### **Abstract**

Women's electoral participation constitutes a critical dimension of democratic inclusiveness and political equality. In India, although constitutional guarantees have ensured formal political rights for women since independence, their substantive participation in electoral politics remains uneven. This paper examines the key social, economic, cultural, and institutional factors influencing women's participation as voters, candidates, and political representatives. Using illustrative trend-based indicators, the study highlights a persistent gap between women's increasing voter turnout and their limited representation in legislative institutions. The paper further analyses existing policy measures and proposes strategic interventions aimed at enhancing women's political empowerment. It argues that achieving equitable representation requires institutional reforms complemented by sustained socio-cultural transformation and political commitment.

**Keywords:** *Women's Electoral Participation; Political Representation; Gender Equality; Democratic Governance; India*

### **Introduction**

Electoral participation is a foundational element of democratic governance, reflecting both political inclusion and representational equity. As the world's largest democracy, India adopted universal adult franchise at the time of independence, granting women equal political rights alongside men. Despite this progressive constitutional framework, gender disparities continue to characterise political representation and leadership.

Electoral participation extends beyond the act of voting to include contesting elections, political mobilisation, and involvement in decision-making processes. While women's voter turnout has improved steadily over successive elections, their representation in Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies remains disproportionately low. This paper seeks to analyse the challenges shaping women's electoral participation in India and to evaluate policy responses aimed at strengthening women's role within democratic institutions.

### **Constitutional and Institutional Context of Women's Electoral Participation**

The Indian Constitution guarantees political equality through Articles 325 and 326, which prohibit discrimination in electoral participation and establish universal adult suffrage. Over time, affirmative policy measures – most notably reservations in Panchayati Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies – have sought to enhance women's political representation.

These initiatives have resulted in a significant increase in women's participation at the grassroots level. However, similar progress has not been achieved in State Legislatures or Parliament. Despite rising voter turnout among women, their numerical strength as voters has not translated into proportional representation in decision-making bodies. This divergence underscores the distinction between formal political rights and substantive political empowerment.

### **Key Issues and Constraints Affecting Women's Electoral Participation**

#### **Socio-Cultural Constraints**

Deep-rooted patriarchal norms continue to define politics as a male-dominated sphere. Traditional gender roles restrict women's mobility, time, and acceptance in public life, often discouraging political engagement beyond voting.

#### **Economic Barriers**

Limited access to financial resources remains a major obstacle for women candidates. The high cost of electoral campaigns disproportionately affects women, particularly those from economically marginalised backgrounds.

### Educational Inequalities and Political Awareness

Although female literacy rates have improved, educational disparities persist, especially in rural and remote regions. Lower levels of education and political awareness restrict women’s understanding of electoral processes and leadership opportunities.

### Violence and Intimidation

Women involved in electoral politics frequently encounter harassment, intimidation, and character-based attacks. Such forms of political violence create insecurity and discourage active participation.

### Underrepresentation and Absence of Role Models

The limited presence of women in higher legislative institutions reinforces cycles of exclusion. The lack of visible women leaders reduces political aspirations among younger women.

### Political Party Structures and Candidate Selection

Political parties play a decisive role in determining electoral outcomes. Women are often denied nominations in winnable constituencies, and internal party mechanisms rarely prioritise gender equity.

### Intersectional Disadvantages

Women from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, minority communities, and persons with disabilities face compounded disadvantages due to the intersection of gender with caste, class, and ethnicity.

### Trends in Women’s Electoral Participation: Illustrative Indicators

Table 1 presents hypothetical trend-based indicators illustrating women’s electoral participation in India between 2014 and 2024. While illustrative in nature, these indicators broadly reflect patterns documented in official reports and academic literature.

Table 1: Key Indicators of Women’s Electoral Participation in India (Empirical Data)

Sl. No.	Indicator	2014	2019	2024 (Actual)	Remarks / Source Notes
1	Female Voter Turnout (%) – Lok Sabha	~65.6%	~67.2%	<b>65.8%</b>	Women recorded 65.8% turnout, slightly higher than men in 2024 Lok Sabha polls.
2	Women in Lok Sabha (%)	<b>11.4%</b> (~62/543)	<b>14.4%</b> (~78/543)	<b>13.6%</b> (~74/543)	Representation peaked in 2019 and slightly dipped in 2024.
3	Women in Rajya Sabha (%)	~12–13%	~13–14%	<b>~15–17%</b>	Rajya Sabha women MPs approx. 39–42 out of total (17%).
4	Women in State Legislative Assemblies (%)	~9% average	~9% average	~9% average	National average of women MLAs remains low (~9% across assemblies).
5	Women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (%)	~44%	~46%	~46%+	Approx. 14.5 lakh elected women representatives (~46% share).
6	Women Candidates Contesting General Elections (%)	~8.0%	~8.6–9.0%	<b>~9.5%</b>	Women constituted about 9.5% of candidates in 2024 LS polls.
7	Female Literacy Rate (%)	<b>65.8%</b> (2011 Census)	<b>70.3%</b> (NFHS-5 approx.)	<b>~74–76%</b> (Projected)*	NFHS and Census-based figures show rising female literacy. (Latest official projections may vary)
8	Female Victory Rate / Women MPs Elected	—	14.3% elected MPs	<b>13.6% elected MPs</b>	74 women MPs won in 2024, about 9.3% success rate among women candidates.

### Notes on the Empirical Indicators:

- **Female Voter Turnout:** In the 2024 general election, women voter turnout (65.78%) exceeded that of men (65.55%) — the second time this has happened in India’s electoral history.
- **Women in Parliament:** Women’s share in the Lok Sabha stands at ~13.6% (74 of 543 seats) in the 18th Lok Sabha.
- **Women in Rajya Sabha:** Estimates suggest around 39–42 female members in the upper house, roughly 15–17% of total seats.
- **State Assemblies:** The national average of women MLAs remains low at about 9%. No state exceeds ~20% representation.
- **Local Governance:** Following the 73rd/74th amendments and state policies, women account for roughly 46% of elected representatives in Panchayati Raj Institutions.
- **Women Candidates:** In the 2024 Lok Sabha election, 800 women candidates contested, constituting about 9.5% of all contestants.
- **Female Literacy:** The table uses the latest available literacy proxies (Census + National surveys), reflecting continued improvement over the decade. (For precise 2024 literacy percentages, refer to NFHS and Census updates once released.)

### Interpretation of Trends

The indicators reveal a steady increase in women’s voter turnout, suggesting enhanced political awareness and effective voter mobilisation. However, this positive trend contrasts sharply with women’s continued underrepresentation in Parliament and State

Legislative Assemblies. While reservations have significantly strengthened women's participation at the local level, similar mechanisms have not been effectively operationalised at higher levels of governance.

The modest rise in women candidates indicates incremental progress, yet political parties continue to act as restrictive gatekeepers. Improvements in literacy have enhanced political awareness, but education alone has not been sufficient to overcome entrenched institutional and socio-cultural barriers. Persistent concerns regarding electoral violence further highlight the need for safer political environments.

### **Policy Responses and Future Directions**

#### **Institutional and Legal Reforms**

The effective implementation of reservations in Parliament and State Legislatures, along with stronger legal protections against electoral violence, is essential. Political parties must also be encouraged to adopt transparent and inclusive candidate selection practices.

#### **Promoting Socio-Cultural Change**

Long-term improvement in women's political participation requires challenging patriarchal norms through civic education, community engagement, and leadership development initiatives.

#### **Economic and Capacity-Building Support**

Financial assistance, campaign subsidies, and structured political training programmes can help reduce economic barriers faced by women candidates. Reforms in campaign finance may further promote electoral equity.

#### **Role of Civil Society and Media**

Civil society organisations and the media play a critical role in advocating gender-sensitive political discourse, promoting reform, and amplifying women's political contributions without reinforcing stereotypes.

### **Conclusion**

Women's electoral participation is integral to the legitimacy and quality of democratic governance in India. While progress has been made in women's participation as voters and grassroots representatives, significant structural and institutional barriers continue to limit their influence at higher levels of political power. Addressing these challenges requires sustained political will, inclusive policy frameworks, and broader socio-cultural transformation. Ensuring meaningful participation of women in electoral politics is essential not only for gender justice but also for strengthening democratic resilience.

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