

GENDER AND ELECTORAL REPRESENTATION IN INDIA: MOVING BEYOND TOKENISM

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ABSTRACT

Women constitute nearly half of India's population, yet their representation in Parliament and State legislatures remains disproportionately low. Despite Constitutional guarantees of equality and initiatives such as the Women's Reservation Bill (2023), which reserves one-third of seats for women in legislatures, the gap between symbolic presence (tokenism) and substantive participation persists. Tokenism refers to the numerical or symbolic inclusion of women without granting them real influence in decision-making, while substantive participation implies active involvement in policy formulation, governance, and legislative debates. This study examines the structural, social, and institutional barriers preventing women from exercising genuine political power. Drawing upon doctrinal research, statistical trends, and insights from Panchayati Raj institutions where women's reservation has shown measurable impact the paper explores strategies to move beyond tokenistic representation. Comparative examples from countries such as Rwanda and Nordic nations illustrate how quotas and supportive frameworks can convert presence into meaningful empowerment. The study concludes that while reservation is necessary, it is insufficient; comprehensive reforms in party structures, financial support, capacity building, and societal attitudes are required to ensure women's effective participation in India's democratic processes.

Keywords: Women, Elections, Representation, Tokenism, Participation.

1. INTRODUCTION

"For me, a better democracy is a democracy where women do not only have the right to vote and to elect but to be elected." – Michelle Bachelet¹.

The question of women's political representation in India has acquired renewed urgency in recent years. Despite women constituting nearly 48% of India's population,² their participation in legislative institutions remains

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¹ Former President of Chile & United Nation Women Executive Director.

² Aditi Singh, "Women contribute only 18% to GDP despite 48% share in population: Study ",

disproportionately low. The results of the 2024 Lok Sabha elections highlight this paradox: while women voters turned out in almost equal measure to men, with female voter participation recorded at 65.78%, the proportion of women elected to the Lok Sabha stood at a mere 13.6%, reflecting a decline from 14.4% in 2019.³ This glaring underrepresentation raises critical questions about the nature of women's political presence whether it signifies a genuine shift in power dynamics or remains confined to token inclusion within a male-dominated political sphere. The passage of the Constitution (One Hundred and Twenty-Eighth Amendment) Bill, 2023, commonly known as the Women's Reservation Bill, has been hailed as a landmark development in addressing this disparity. The Bill provides for 33% reservation of seats for women in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies. However, its implementation has been deferred until after the next census and delimitation exercise, likely pushing its enforcement to 2029. This delay has fuelled both optimism and skepticism, while proponents celebrate it as a long-awaited legislative intervention, critics warn of the risk of it becoming a symbolic gesture without immediate tangible outcomes. The discourse on gender and politics in India is often framed around the idea of tokenism.⁴

Tokenism refers to the superficial inclusion of underrepresented groups here, women without conferring substantive authority or influence.⁵ For instance, women elected through party nominations or quota provisions are frequently seen as dependent on male political patronage, with limited agency in decision-making processes. The persistence of such dynamics raises the concern that legislative quotas, though essential, may not automatically dismantle entrenched hierarchies of power. Globally, comparative experiences show mixed results. Countries like Rwanda, which has one of the highest proportions of women in parliament at over 60%, demonstrate how well-designed quota systems can translate into meaningful empowerment. In contrast, several other nations reveal that mere numerical presence does not guarantee gender-sensitive governance unless accompanied by institutional reforms, political will, and societal acceptance.⁶ India's challenge, therefore, is to ensure that reservations are not reduced to a symbolic exercise but

³ *The Economic Times*, March 2, 2024.

⁴ Women Voters Clocked 65.8%, Men 65.6% in '24 Lok Sabha Polls," *Times of India*, December 27, 2024, available at: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/women-voters-clocked-65-8-men-65-6-in-24-lok-sabha-polls-election-commission/articleshow/116694411.cms>.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Pamela Paxton and Melanie M. Hughes, *Women, Politics, and Power: A Global Perspective*, Rowman & Littlefield, New York, 2021.

⁶ Voter Turnout Dipped in 2024 Lok Sabha Polls Though Overall Voters Increased," *Hindustan Times*, December 26, 2024, available at: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/voter-turnout-dipped-in-2024-lok-sabha-polls-though-overall-voters-increased-eci-101735210138313.html> (last visited on Sept. 12, 2025).

instead evolve into a transformative tool for gender justice and participatory democracy.

In this context, it is essential to critically examine whether India's political system is moving beyond tokenism in relation to women's representation. By situating the broader framework of electoral democracy, constitutional reforms, and comparative international experiences, the analysis evaluates whether the Women's Reservation Bill can transform symbolic inclusion into substantive political empowerment. It also considers structural barriers such as entrenched patriarchy, restrictive party hierarchies, electoral finance inequalities, and persistent social stereotypes that continue to constrain women's effective participation in politics, despite legislative advances.⁷ The challenge extends beyond merely increasing numbers; it involves redefining the quality of representation. A vibrant democracy cannot flourish when nearly half of its citizens remain marginalized in political decision-making. Moving beyond tokenism demands a reimaging of electoral politics one that enables women to act as autonomous political actors, shaping governance, legislation, and policy in ways that reflect their lived experiences and collective aspirations.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the current state of women's representation in Indian electoral politics.
2. To identify structural, social, and institutional barriers limiting women's substantive participation.
3. To propose strategies for transforming numerical representation into meaningful political engagement.

1.2 Research Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive and analytical research approach to examine women's electoral representation in India and evaluate whether it reflects substantive participation beyond tokenism. It is based entirely on secondary sources, including official reports from the Election Commission of India, the Ministry of Panchayati Raj, scholarly articles, and reputable news outlets. Data were collected on women's representation in the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies, voter turnout by gender in the 2024 elections, and the proportion of women elected to Panchayati Raj Institutions, while also drawing comparisons with global benchmarks of female political participation. The analysis employs

⁷ *Supra* note 5.

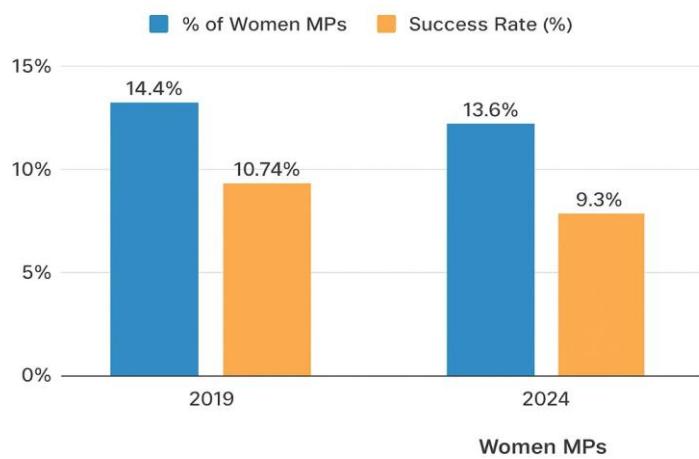
tables, graphs, and percentage distributions to identify trends, disparities, and patterns, providing both quantitative and qualitative insights into the nature of women's political engagement. While the study is limited to secondary data and recent electoral cycles, it offers a focused evaluation of the extent to which India is moving beyond tokenistic inclusion of women in governance.

1.3 Data Analysis

The analysis of women's participation in electoral politics in India reveals a complex interplay of historical, socio-cultural, economic, and political factors. Despite constitutional guarantees under Articles 14, 15, and 19, which ensure equality and freedom of participation, women remain underrepresented in legislative bodies. This section critically examines statistical trends, socio-political determinants, and comparative insights to understand the current scenario.

1.3.1 Women's Representation in the 2024 Lok Sabha Elections

In the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, India elected 74 women Members of Parliament (MPs), constituting 13.6% of the total 543 seats. This marks a slight decline from 14.4% in 2019. The success rate for female candidates was approximately 9.3%, down from 10.74% in the previous election cycle.⁸

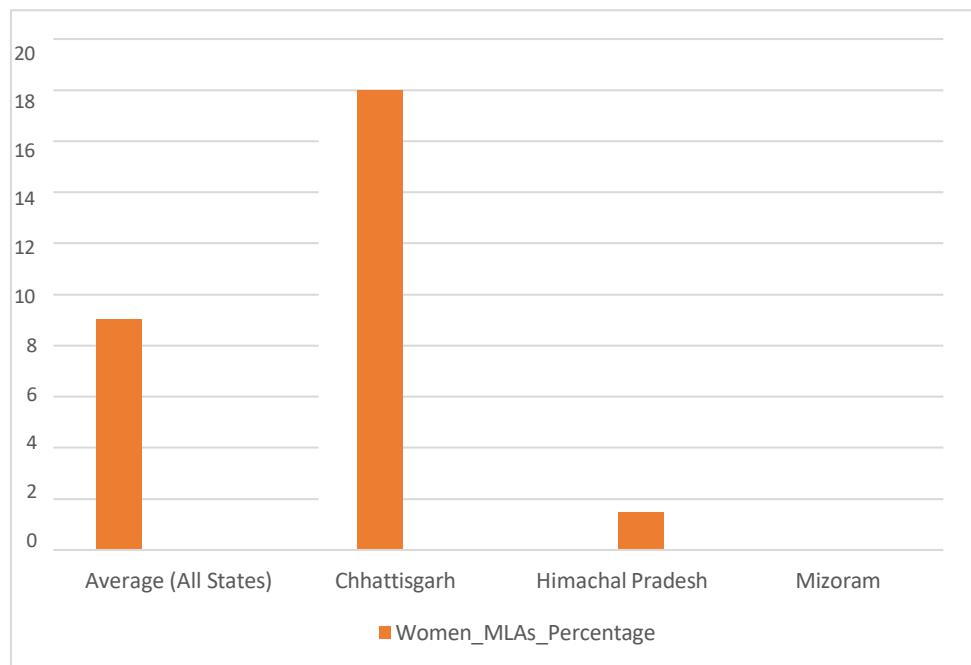


Graph 1: Trend of Women's Representation in Lok Sabha

⁸ "What Lies Behind India's Rising Female Voter Turnout," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, April 5, 2024, available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/04/what-lies-behind-indias-rising-female-voter-turnout?lang=en>. (last visited September 12, 2025).

1.3.2 Women's Representation in State Legislative Assemblies

At the state level, women's representation in legislative assemblies averages around 9%. Notably, Chhattisgarh has the highest proportion, with 18% female legislators. Other states like Himachal Pradesh have only one woman MLA, while some, such as Mizoram, have none.⁹



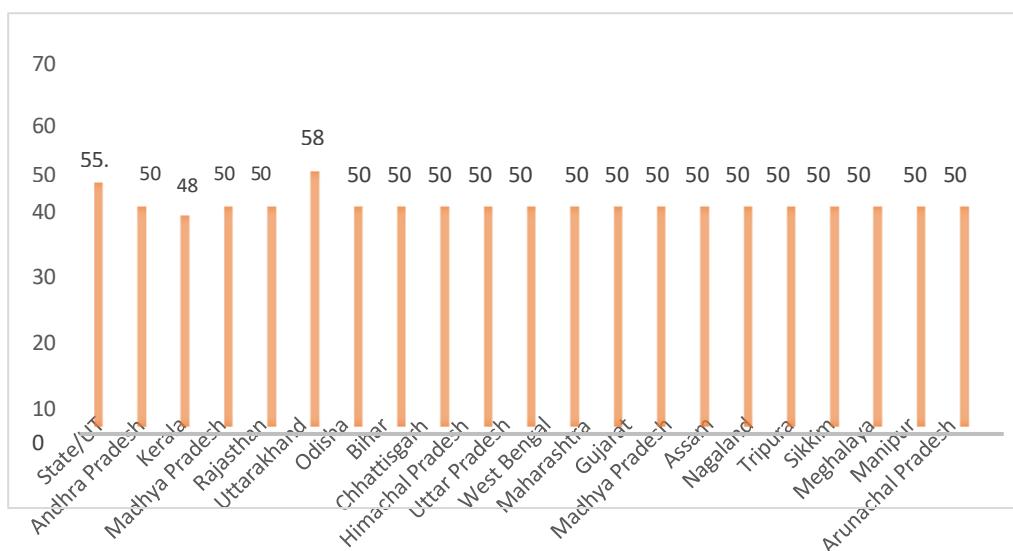
Graph 2: State-wise Percentage of Women in Legislative Assemblies

The data shows that women's representation in state legislative assemblies is low, averaging just 9%. Chhattisgarh leads with 18%, while Himachal Pradesh has only 1.47% and Mizoram none, highlighting significant gender disparities. This indicates that women remain underrepresented in state politics, emphasizing the need for stronger gender-inclusive policies and mechanisms to improve political participation.

⁹ “The Gender-Gap in Voting: Policy Supply and Young Women’s Electoral Behaviour” 67 *British Journal of Political Science* 89 (2021).

1.3.3 Women's Representation in Panchayati Raj Institutions

Women's participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) has emerged as one of the most significant indicators of gender empowerment in India's grassroots democracy.¹⁰ States such as Andhra Pradesh (55.5%), Kerala (50%), and Madhya Pradesh (48%) exemplify higher levels of female representation, reflecting the effectiveness of constitutional provisions, such as the 73rd Amendment, and proactive state-level policies aimed at promoting gender equity.¹¹ This growing presence not only enhances inclusivity in governance but also empowers women to influence development priorities, resource allocation, and policy implementation in their communities.¹²



Graph 3: Percentage of Women Representatives in Panchayati Raj Institutions by State

The data indicates that a significant number of states and Union Territories in India have implemented the 50% reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions, leading to substantial female participation in local governance. This move aligns with the constitutional mandate and aims to empower women at the grassroots level.

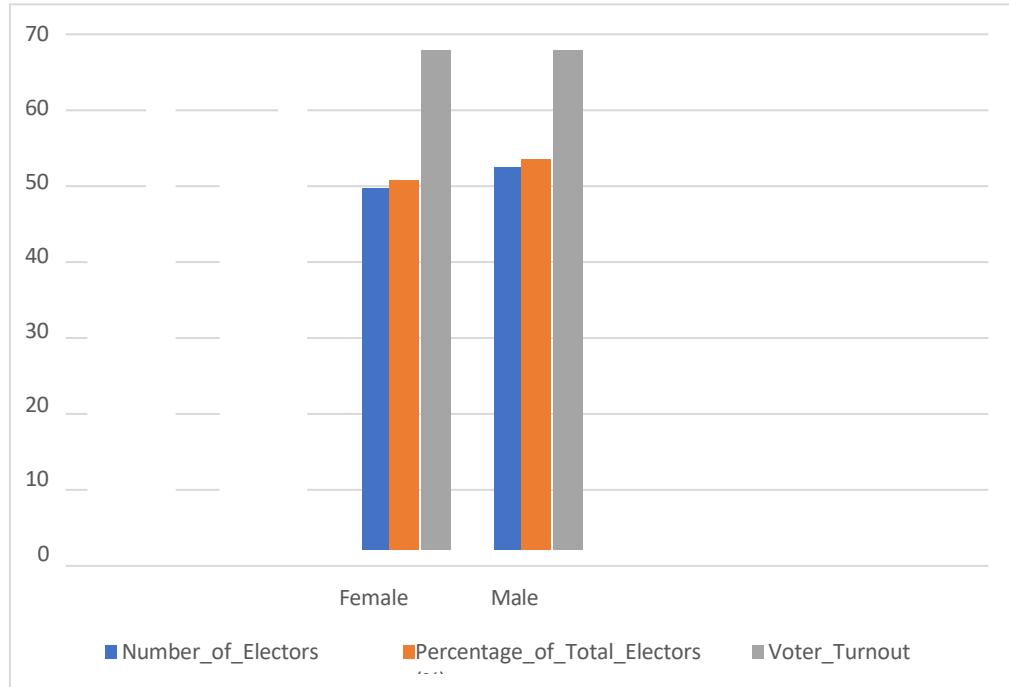
¹⁰ Women's Participation in Electoral Politics: A Study of Indian General Elections" 10 *International Journal of Social Science and Economic Research* 102 (2025).

¹¹ Ministry of Panchayati Raj, "Women Elected Representatives in Panchayati Raj Institutions," Press Release No. PRS/2025/08, August 7, 2025, available at: <https://www.babushahi.com/full-news.php?id=208734>. (last visited September 12, 2025).

¹² *Ibid.*

1.3.4 Voter Turnout and Gender Dynamics

The 2024 general elections in India offer a compelling insight into the evolving gender dynamics of voter participation. Historically, women in India faced numerous social, economic, and cultural barriers that limited their engagement in the political process. Over the decades, however, these obstacles have been gradually addressed through increased awareness, legislative measures, and concerted efforts by political parties and civil society organizations to encourage female participation. In the most recent electoral cycle, women accounted for approximately 48.62% of the total electorate, amounting to nearly 47.63 crore voters, while men constituted 51.38%, or 50.34 crore voters.¹³ What is particularly striking is that voter turnout among women was recorded at 65.78%, almost identical to the male turnout of 65.8%, demonstrating that women are exercising their right to vote with a level of engagement comparable to men. This near parity is indicative of a significant shift in the political landscape, suggesting that women are increasingly asserting their influence in shaping governance and public policy.¹⁴



¹³ Election Commission of India, "65.79% Voter Turnout Recorded at Polling Stations in GE 2024," Press Note No. ECI/PN/116/2024, June 6, 2024, available at: <https://elections.24.eci.gov.in/docs/BnS4hhbvK9.pdf>. (last visited September 12, 2025).

¹⁴ The Sage Handbook of Electoral Behaviour, SAGE Publications, New Delhi, 2024.

Such trends also reflect the effectiveness of voter education campaigns, reservation policies in local governance, and the broader social transformation that has empowered women to participate fully in democratic processes.

By actively engaging in elections at levels comparable to their male counterparts, women are not only contributing to the legitimacy of the democratic process but are also playing a critical role in ensuring that issues affecting half of the population are adequately represented in legislative decision-making.¹⁵

The 2024 electoral data revealed a nearly balanced gender composition among electors, with female voters accounting for 48.62% and male voters 51.38% of the total electorate. Interestingly, voter turnout rates are almost identical, with 65.78% of women and 65.8% of men casting their votes. This parity in participation reflects the growing engagement of women in the democratic process, signalling progress toward gender-inclusive political involvement. Despite historical disparities, the 2024 elections demonstrate that women are exercising their electoral rights at levels comparable to men, reinforcing their role in shaping electoral outcomes.

1.4 Arguments and Discussion

The discourse on gender and electoral politics in India reveals a complex interplay of social, cultural, and institutional factors that influence women's political participation. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality and numerous legislative measures aimed at enhancing female representation, women continue to be significantly underrepresented in both national and state-level legislatures.¹⁶ At the national level, women constitute only 13.6% of the Lok Sabha and 14.05% of the Rajya Sabha, figures that are substantially lower than the global average of 26.9%. At the State level, disparities are even more pronounced. States such as Chhattisgarh have achieved relatively higher representation, with women occupying 18% of legislative seats, whereas states like Mizoram and Himachal Pradesh report extremely low or zero female legislative presence. A closer examination suggests that socio-cultural factors play a decisive role in shaping the political landscape. Deep-rooted patriarchal attitudes and stereotypes often discourage women from pursuing electoral careers. Political parties, acting as gatekeepers to electoral success, frequently field a disproportionately low number of women candidates, further constraining opportunities for political advancement.

¹⁵ *Supra* note 13.

¹⁶ Diwakar, Rekha, "Voter Turnout in the Indian States: An Empirical Analysis" 18 *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 75 (2008).

¹⁷ R. S. Deshpande, "Women Voters and the Shifting Electoral Landscape in India" 53 *Economic and Political Weekly* 72 (2018).

While legislative initiatives such as the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam and other gender-sensitive policies demonstrate a commitment to improving representation, their effectiveness is mitigated by the lack of supportive political and societal infrastructure.¹⁷ Moreover, the electoral success rate of women candidates remains low, with only approximately 9.3% of female contestants winning in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. This highlights that beyond mere candidacy, systemic challenges such as voter bias, financial constraints, and inadequate access to political networks continue to limit women's success in elections. Comparative insights from global contexts reveal that countries achieving higher female parliamentary representation often combine formal mechanisms, such as gender quotas, with informal support structures including leadership training, mentorship programs, and public sensitization campaigns. These approaches not only enhance electoral outcomes but also normalize the presence of women in decision-making roles, fostering long-term cultural shifts towards gender inclusivity. Therefore, while India has taken legislative and policy initiatives to address gender disparity, the persistent low representation reflects the need for a multidimensional strategy encompassing legal reforms, political party accountability, and socio-cultural transformation.

1.5 Findings of the Study

The analysis of recent electoral data and historical trends reveals several critical insights into women's political representation in India. First, women remain significantly underrepresented across all levels of governance. Despite constituting nearly half of the population, their presence in legislative bodies is limited, with figures consistently below 15% at both state and national levels. Second, there exists considerable regional variation in women's representation. While Chhattisgarh demonstrates a relatively higher proportion of female legislators, other states, including Mizoram, report negligible or zero representation, reflecting the influence of localized cultural norms, party politics, and socio-economic conditions. Third, the slight decline in the proportion of women elected to the Lok Sabha from 14.4% in 2019 to 13.6% in 2024 underscores persistent structural and systemic barriers that hinder women's electoral success. Factors such as unequal access to party tickets, financial constraints, and voter prejudices contribute to this trend. Fourth, legislative measures aimed at promoting gender inclusivity, including the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, although significant in intent, have yet to translate into measurable improvements in electoral outcomes. Finally, when compared with international standards, India lags behind significantly, with its female parliamentary representation remaining well below the global average of 26.9%, highlighting the urgency for more robust institutional interventions and social reforms.

1.6 Conclusion and Suggestions

The study of gender and electoral politics in India clearly indicates that, despite incremental progress, women continue to be marginalized in political representation. Achieving gender parity in legislative bodies is not merely a symbolic requirement but a crucial component of democratic legitimacy and inclusive governance. The persistent underrepresentation of women reflects a confluence of structural, political, and cultural barriers that demand a multifaceted approach. Effective strategies to enhance women's participation in politics must extend beyond legislative mandates to include systemic reforms within political parties, targeted capacity-building initiatives, and public sensitization campaigns. Institutional mechanisms such as binding quotas for women's representation, transparent nomination processes, and leadership training programs can provide structural support for women's political empowerment. Concurrently, addressing socio-cultural biases through awareness campaigns and highlighting successful female leaders can foster a conducive environment for women to actively engage in politics. In conclusion, while India has taken notable steps through policy frameworks and legislative efforts, achieving substantive gender equality in electoral politics requires sustained commitment at both institutional and societal levels. Empowering women politically is essential for fostering a more representative, equitable, and effective democratic system, ensuring that governance reflects the diversity and aspirations of the entire population.