

Enfranchisement to Empowerment: Women's Electoral Surge and Representation Paradox in India

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No society can be free, fair or prosperous unless it is inclusive

– Amartya Sen

Abstract: *Women's suffrage has evolved through long constitutional struggles and social reform movements across different parts of the world. The journey from exclusion to political participation reflects changing ideas about equality, citizenship, and democratic governance. India's experience with women's voting rights gained momentum during the freedom movement and culminated in universal adult franchise at the birth of the Republic in 1950. Over the decades, women's participation in elections has steadily expanded, moving from limited engagement to becoming a decisive electoral force in several states and national elections. Electoral data from recent Lok Sabha elections reveals that women voters now participate at rates equal to or higher than men in many regions of the country. Increased literacy, grassroots political involvement, welfare-oriented governance, reservation in local bodies, and focused voter awareness programmes have strengthened women's independent political choices, particularly in states such as Bihar where female turnout reached historic levels. At the same time, the paper points to a continuing imbalance between women's electoral participation and their actual representation in legislatures, both in India and globally. Although women increasingly shape electoral outcomes, their share in Parliament and leadership positions remains comparatively low. The study concludes that democratic inclusion cannot be measured only through voting participation, but also through equal access to political representation and decision-making institutions.*

Keywords: women's suffrage, electoral participation, women voters, political representation, democratic equality

Right to vote is an essential feature of a Democracy. It empowers citizens to be a part of the democratic governance of their country and ensures that the substratum of political authority is derived from the will of the people. Through voting, individuals have the opportunity to choose their representatives and influence public policy.

Historically, women have been excluded from voting rights or political decision making. The right to vote was considered a valued responsibility reserved for men because people believed men were better suited for public life. Women were denied this right largely due to the widespread belief that they lacked the political knowledge, rational judgment, and expertise needed to choose leaders

Analyzing into the world history, there were nations which set an early trend and granted their women the right to vote challenging the social belief system and ushering a new era of inclusivity and equality of women in political decision making. Nations such as New Zealand (1893 CE) became the first country in the world to grant national voting rights to women, followed by Australia (1902 CE). Finland (1906 CE) became the first in Europe to grant women the right to vote and stand for office. However, there were nations that attained independence in the eighteenth century like United States in 1776 and France (which was freed from monarchy rule and became republic) in 1792, failed to extend voting rights to women at the time of their founding, with women's suffrage being recognized only after prolonged political and constitutional struggles.

The organized fight for women's voting rights in United States began in the mid-1800. The Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 was the first women's rights convention, marking the

formal beginning of the women's suffrage movement and laying the foundation for future struggles. Its Declaration of Sentiments boldly demanded equal social, civil, and political rights for women, including the right to vote. These demands also got accelerated because women took on key roles during WWI owing to which governments could no longer deny them political equality. Consequently, United States, 19th amendment was passed in the year 1920 granting women the right to vote, stating that suffrage cannot be denied based on gender.

During the early 20th Century in the United Kingdom, Feminist activist Emmeline Pankhurst founded the Members of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), which adopted a militant approach to garner support for their right to vote. Their motto was "Deeds not Words", and their tactics included civil disobedience, smashing windows, arson, and chaining themselves to railings. The movement to secure voting rights for women (women's suffrage) became a significant political issue. Consequently, The Representation of the People Act 1918 granted the vote to women over the age of 30 who met a certain criteria surrounding property ownership. Later in 1928 The Equal Franchise Act 1928 lowered the voting age for women to 21, granting them the right to vote on the same terms as men and achieving full universal suffrage. (The voting age was later lowered to 18 for both men and women in 1969.)

Enfranchisement of Women in India

The Women in India till 19th Century never had the right to vote. The Govt. of India Act 1919, (Montague- Chelmsford Reforms) during British India granted limited voting rights to women who satisfied a certain economic criterion (such as ownership of property, tax payments, educational

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qualifications). In 1921, Bombay Presidency and Madras Presidency became the first provinces to give limited right to vote to women. Between 1923 and 1930, seven other provinces allowed women franchise. The Government of India Act, 1935 expanded women's political participation by providing reserved seats for women in provincial legislatures. Therefore, in pre Independence era women had limited voting rights and universal adult suffrage was absent.

During the Constituent assembly debates, Hansa Mehta who was a social reformer, a feminist activist, actively supported women voting rights said, "We women of India have never asked for privileges. What we have asked for is equal status." Renuka Ray, a social activist, freedom fighter and politician said that: The right to vote should not be dependent on any qualification except citizenship. Begum Aizaz Rasul, the only Muslim woman representative in the Constituent Assembly of India said that Democracy in India must rest on the equality of all citizens, irrespective of sex." Dr. B. R Ambedkar remarked in favour of Women suffrage "Political democracy cannot last unless there lies at the base of it social democracy." The unanimous consensus in favour of universal suffrage was motivated largely by the significant participation of women in the freedom struggle and the recognition that women valued the nation's freedom as deeply as men. Denying women, the right to vote would have undermined the social reform movements in India that sought to elevate the status of women and advocated for their education and individual freedom.

It was only after Independence in 1950; Women were granted universal voting rights irrespective of any educational qualification or economic status. The Constitution of India in its Article 326 states that 'Elections to the House of the People and to the Legislative Assemblies of States to be on the basis of adult suffrage.' Thus, Women of India were granted Right to vote from the dawn of Indian Republic.

Elections in India: Increase in Women Voter Turnout

The constitutional framework for elections in India is established under Articles 324 to 329 of the Constitution. Complementing this, the Representation of the People Acts of 1950 and 1951 provide the detailed foundation for electoral processes, including voter qualifications, the structure of election machinery, and the conduct of elections. Together, these provisions form the backbone of India's democratic system.

The first election of India was a mammoth exercise in which a large population voted, making it the largest election conducted at that time. 17.32 crore voters from across the country (excluding Jammu and Kashmir) were enrolled out of which 45% were women. Since India's first general election in 1951-52, women's participation in the democratic process has seen a steady and remarkable rise. However, in the early years, turnout among women lagged behind that of men.

Table 1

General Election (Lok Sabha)	Male Turnout (%)	Female Turnout (%)
1962 (3rd)	63.31	46.63
1967 (4th)	66.73	55.48
1971 (5th)	60.09	49.11
1977 (6th)	65.63	54.91
1980 (7th)	62.16	51.22
1984 (8th)	61.2	58.6
1989 (9th)	66.13	57.32
1991 (10th)	61.58	51.35
1996 (11th)	62.06	53.41
1998 (12th)	65.72	57.88
1999 (13th)	63.97	55.64
2004 (14th)	61.66	53.3
2009 (15th)	60.24	55.82
2014 (16th)	67.09	65.3
2019 (17th)	67.01	67.18
2024 (18 th)	65.55	65.78

Source: Election Commission of India (ECI) statistical reports

As seen in Table 1 above, in 1962, about 46.6 % of women electors voted, compared with 63.3 % of men electors.

These differences reflected social norms, varying levels of awareness, and barriers to participation that women faced at that time.

Over subsequent decades, the gender gap in voter turnout narrowed significantly. By the 1980s and 1990s, women were voting in greater proportions, and the differences between male and female voter turnout percentages became lesser. In the 2014 and 2019 Lok Sabha elections, women's turnout closely matched that of men.

General Election 2024 trends: Women Vote more than Men

The General elections in 2024 were historic in many ways. Women's voter turnout was about 65.78 %, slightly higher than men's turnout of 65.55 %.

In 19 states and Union territories, women turned out to vote in greater percentages than men. These numbers reflect a powerful trend that women in India are now voting at equal or even higher rates than men, demonstrating their growing influence in shaping electoral outcomes.

The highest women's turnout of 85.46 per cent was recorded in Lakshadweep, followed closely by Assam (81.71 per cent) and Tripura (80.57 per cent). At the Parliamentary Constituency level, Dhubri in Assam recorded a stunning 92.17 per cent turnout among women. Such a striking rise in the number of Women voters underscores the rise of political consciousness and their growing electoral agency. The various economic and socio-political factors that have led to this change are:

- **Increased literacy among women.** The increase in women's voting over time has closely paralleled improvements in female literacy and sustained voter awareness initiatives. Female literacy in India rose from approximately 8 to 9 percent at Independence to over 70 percent in recent decades, significantly expanding women's capacity to access electoral information and engage in political discourse. Improved literacy has enabled her to have autonomy and agency over her choices and decisions. It is evident from the data that with an increase in literacy ratio amongst women, there is an increase in their electoral agency and participation.
- **Greater political engagement among women.** has also contributed significantly to higher voter turnout. Women's participation has expanded beyond passive voting to active involvement in self-help groups, local governance institutions, and issue-based mobilization around welfare, health, education, and safety. The Seventy-Third and Seventy-Fourth Constitutional Amendment Acts, institutionalised women's participation through reservation of seats in Panchayati Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies. These amendments have facilitated the entry of millions of women into formal political spaces, enhancing political awareness, leadership skills, and policy engagement at the grassroots level. The growing visibility of women as political stakeholders at Panchayat and Urban Local Bodies level has shaped the perception of the women voters encouraging them to use their voting rights and focus on practical benefits that improve their household well-being. Studies also note that women voters are more likely than men to make choices based on performance or issue-oriented factors, such as safety, education, and access to public services, rather than only caste or religion. The voting pattern in the women bloc has changed from a caste based voting to an issue based voting.
- **Efforts by the Election Commission of India** and civil society to encourage women's participation. Institutional interventions by the Election Commission of India, supported by civil society organisations, have played a critical role in translating awareness into participation. Measures such as systematic voter enrolment drives, women-only polling stations, improved polling accessibility, deployment of female polling officials, and gender-sensitive voter outreach campaigns have lowered logistical and social barriers to voting. Initiatives like the Systematic Voters' Education and Electoral Participation (SVEEP) programme have explicitly targeted women voters, particularly first-time voters and those in rural areas. Government-led literacy missions, combined with targeted voter education programmes, have familiarised women with registration procedures, voting rights, and the secrecy of the ballot. The turnout trends demonstrate that these combined institutional and societal efforts have

resulted in a sustained rise in women's electoral participation, establishing women as a decisive and increasingly influential segment of the Indian electorate.

- **Targeted Women Centric Welfare Schemes** A slew of welfare schemes centred around women have also affirmed their electoral agency. The schemes like, The Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana, which opened over 53 crore bank accounts in which 55% account holders are women. Such Financial inclusion initiatives have made a huge impact on Women's self-help groups (SHGs), which have emerged as crucial intermediaries between political parties and female voters, with parties promising increased support through Government schemes for these groups.
- Direct benefit transfers represent another area where women's concerns have shaped policy. Programs like the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana providing free LPG connections to specifically target the household management needs of women and their preference for cleaner cooking fuels. Such direct benefit schemes for women have not only been an enabler of economic advancement but also increased their financial independence and autonomy to vote according to their own choices.

Women Voters as Electoral Game-Changers – A socio-political analysis of Bihar Assembly Elections 2025

In the run-up to the 2025 Bihar Legislative Assembly election, which comprises 243 seats, a total of 3.92 crore male voters and 3.50 crore female voters were eligible to cast their votes. In percentage terms, men constituted 52.7% of the electorate, while women accounted for 47.1%. The overall voter turnout was approximately 67.2%, with male turnout at 62.8% and female turnout notably higher at 71.8%. Women voters significantly outnumbered men in participation, marking the **highest-ever female turnout** in Bihar's electoral history. The NDA clinched the majority mark and surpassed it achieving 202 out of 243 seats.

This historic win was attributed to the Women Electorate by media and few political analysts. The direct benefit schemes implemented by the incumbent govt and announced by the NDA during election campaign promises to elevate the status of women both socially and economically providing them financial freedom which enabled them to come out of the constraints of patriarchal norms. One of the key initiatives, the Mukhyamantri Mahila Rojgar Yojana, offered direct financial support of ₹10,000 to more than 1.1 crore women to encourage self-employment and small business activities. These funds were transferred directly into beneficiaries' bank accounts. This cash assistance became a major element of the NDA's engagement with women voters, complementing other welfare efforts and long-running programmes aimed at strengthening women's economic independence.

The continued emphasis on boosting women's economic opportunities, through both direct financial aid and improved access to livelihoods, was seen as reinforcing support for the ruling alliance, highlighting a clear connection between targeted welfare policies and voting preferences. Another such Women centric scheme named Lakhpati Didi Yojana aimed to economically empower women by enabling members of self-help groups to increase annual incomes to

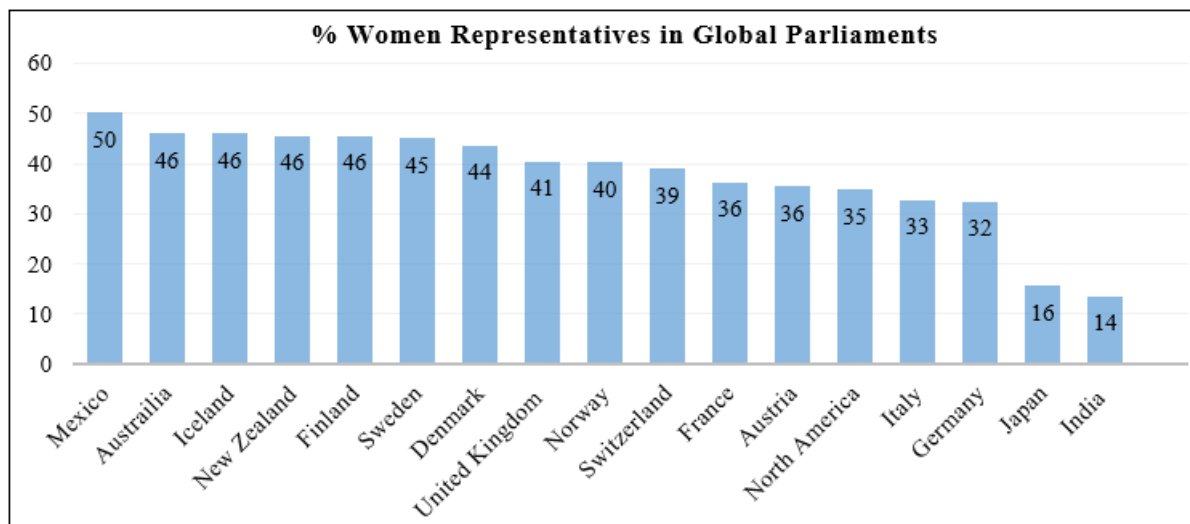
over one lakh rupees through skills training, financial support, and enterprise development, directly benefiting millions of women across the state. In addition, Bihar's long-standing prohibition policy introduced under prior terms of the Nitish Kumar government has been credited with reducing alcohol-related social harms, a factor that historically strengthened his support base among women voters concerned about household welfare and safety. Analysts and post-poll assessments suggest these combined policy measures helped increase women's turnout and align significant segments of the female electorate with the NDA, contributing to its decisive mandate.

The Bihar experience thus demonstrates how women's electoral agency, when combined with gender-responsive governance, can decisively influence democratic outcomes over time. Despite a record high women voter turnout, there still exists a glaring gap between Women participation and Women representation. In the 2025 Assembly elections, 29 women were elected out of a total of 243 MLAs, constituting about 12 per cent of the House. This marked a modest increase from the 2020 Assembly, which had 26 women MLAs (around 10.7 per cent). Despite consistently high voter

turnout among women and their growing role in shaping electoral outcomes, their presence in the state legislature continues to be disproportionately low. The gap highlights a persistent contradiction in Bihar's politics. Nevertheless, women have become an influential voting bloc, their translation into political representation and decision-making power within the Assembly remains constrained.

Women's representation in the global scenario

Women's representation in national parliaments has been increasing globally but remains below parity. As of UN Women Report 2026, women hold about 27.5 % of seats in national parliaments worldwide, is a **very small increase from 27.2% in 2025** reflecting slow and stagnating progress toward gender equality. Some countries now have particularly high levels of female parliamentary representation. In 2026, only 28 countries are led by a woman Head of State or Government, while 101 countries have never had a woman leader, according to the latest data released by Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and UN Women. The chart below shows the percentage of women in the Parliament of various countries.



Graph 1

Source: <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/share-of-women-in-parliament>

Women's representation in parliaments, as seen in Graph 1 above, differs greatly around the world. Mexico stands out with just over 50%, showing that gender balance is achievable. Countries such as Australia, Iceland, and New Zealand also perform strongly, with women making up around the 40% to 45% of their legislatures.

Across Europe, nations like Finland, Sweden, Denmark, and the United Kingdom maintain solid representation, generally between 40% and 45%. Meanwhile, countries including France, Italy, Austria, North America and Germany lie between 32% to 39% range, suggesting a forward moving stance.

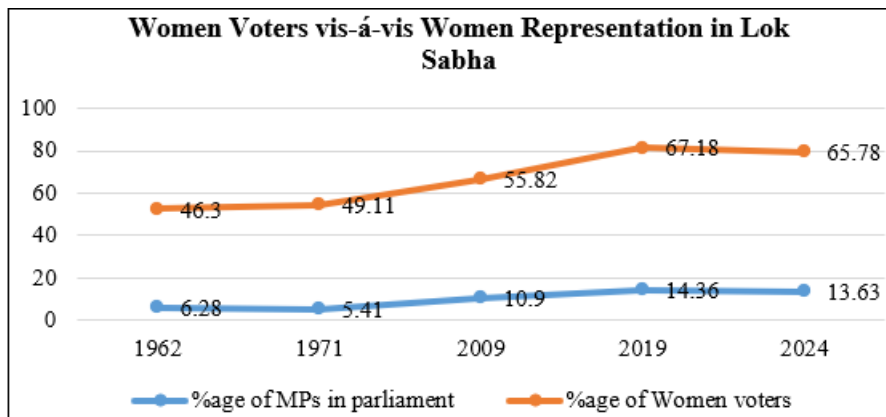
At the lower end, Japan and India have 16% and 14% of women representation, respectively which is significantly lesser than the representation of women in parliament in other countries.

The UN Women Report also focuses on representation of Women in ministerial portfolios. At the executive level, women make up 22.4 per cent of cabinet ministers globally. It highlights that while women's representation in government is gradually increasing, the pace of progress remains slow and uneven, indicating a near-stagnation. It notes that women are disproportionately appointed to ministries and departments considered less central to core state function, such as social welfare, culture, or gender affairs, rather than high-influence areas like finance, defence, or foreign policy. As a result, women continue to have lower representation in key ministerial portfolios, limiting their impact on major policy decisions and reiterating structural inequalities in political leadership.

Women Representation in Indian Parliament

Women's representation in the Indian Parliament has remained relatively low but gradually increased over the decades. In the First Lok Sabha (1952), women constituted

only about 4.4 % of members, with 22 women elected to the 489 member House.



Graph2

As seen the Graph 2 above, the women's representation share hovered at low single-digit percentages, rarely exceeding 10 % until the 2009. By the 15th Lok Sabha (2009), women crossed the 10 % mark more consistently, and in the 17th Lok Sabha (2019), women reached their highest share to date at approximately 14.4 % with 78 women members. In the 18th Lok Sabha (2024), 74 women were elected, constituting about 13.6 % of the 543 seats. Despite strong voter participation, 67.18% in 2019 and 65.78% in 2024, women are still underrepresented among elected Members of Parliament (MPs). In the 2024 Lok Sabha, only 74 out of 543 MPs were women (about 13.6 %), which shows that while women vote in large numbers, translating that into equal representation remains a challenge. This gap exists due to several societal reasons, such as traditional beliefs that politics is a male-dominated field, fewer opportunities given to women by political parties, and other patriarchal constraints. As a result, women's voices are strong at the voting level but still limited in leadership positions.

The Way Forward

Women's electoral participation not only strengthens the legitimacy of democratic institutions but also ensures that issues such as welfare, education, health, and social justice receive greater political attention. Thus, women's voting are not merely an aspect of electoral equality but a vital foundation for an inclusive and participatory constitutional democracy.

The need of the hour is clear: enabling women to transition from being a decisive voting bloc to equal participants in leadership, thereby strengthening democratic institutions and delivering more equitable outcomes for all. With the passage of Women Reservation Act, 2023 also known as Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, 2023, which aims to allocate 1/3rd seats to women in Parliament, State Legislative assemblies (including Delhi Legislative assembly), the representation gap will narrow down. The implementation of Act is tied to the Delimitation exercise, which will make way for the guaranteed seats of women legislature, in the elections to be held 2034. The wait though long but still paints a future positive picture of an inclusive democracy in action. The road ahead demands patience, but the trajectory is promising. In the coming years, India is poised to witness a powerful transformation, where women, recognized as influential

voters, increasingly emerge as influential leaders shaping the nation's future.

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