

MISSING VOICES, MISSING VOTES

The Intersectional Paradox of Women's Electoral Participation in India.

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1) Abstract

Although India is a democratic nation, it has almost 48% women as voters, but the electoral numbers show a paradoxical situation that women are vastly underrepresented as candidates and elected representatives. Using the data of the Election Commission of India (ECI), the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) and the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), this paper critically examines electoral participation of women in India as a voter and as a political actor. The 2024 Lok Sabha elections marked an historic achievement in terms of female participation (65.78%) to the extent that it slightly outpaced the overall voter turnout (65.55%) by the male voters, but women had a mere 13.63% of parliamentary seats and 9.56% of candidates. Using the lenses of intersectionality (Crenshaw) and capability approach (Sen), the paper highlights five research gaps – the absence of intersectional analysis, high socio-economic development is weak evidence of representation, blocked panchayat pipeline, entrenched party-internal gatekeeping, and near absence of data on the participation of the third genders. The country's comparative score of 143 out of 183 countries, far lower than the IPU average of 26.9%, places India in the bottom half of the rankings, and a new Policy Recommendations section features six evidence-based policy reforms. The paper contends that increased voter participation, as such, is not likely to narrow the gender gap in India's democracy unless there are changes in the structure of parties and legislation.

Keywords- Women's Electoral Participation, Political Representation , Intersectionality ,Gender Gap , Lok Sabha Elections , Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam.

2) Introduction

The rule of government “of the people, by the people, and for the people” is the core of democracy. But this promise has yet to be fulfilled in India where women make up almost half of the population, but are still under-represented in political decision making institutions. India is a paradox in terms of democracy, as women's electoral participation has been on a rise in the past years, but this has not seen proportional representation in politics. At the 18th Lok Sabha (2024)¹, only 74 women (13.63%) were elected as Members of Parliament which is lower than the 14.39% representation in the 17th Lok Sabha. The percentage of women in Parliament in India is also less than the world average of 26.9% and significantly less than that of South Africa, Sweden and the United Kingdom². The situation is the same in State Legislative Assemblies, where the percentage of women is about 9-10% even though they have been better represented in the Panchayati Raj institutions due to reservation quotas. This paper explores the structural and systemic barriers that hinder the representation of women in politics in India and how they can be addressed. It examines the interplay between caste, class, religion and regional differences using an intersectional approach that explores how these factors influence women's political participation and opportunities in the context of patriarchy. This paper aims to answer the main research question – why the increase in women's participation in the electoral process in India does not lead to proportional political representation, and how do intersecting social identities affect that gap?

3) Research Questions and Hypothesis

Research Questions:

- Why is it that although the number of members of the population in India who vote in elections is increasing steadily, the number of women in the legislature is not commensurate with that?
- What impact does caste, patriarchy, religion, class inequality, regionalism and party gate keeping have on women political candidatures and representation?

¹ Election Commission of India. (2024). Statistical report on general elections to the 18th Lok Sabha. <https://eci.gov.in>

² Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2024). Women in national parliaments: World classification. <https://www.ipu.org>

- Does socio-economic development necessarily lead to greater political empowerment of women in India?
- How are the experiences of political participation of women different in Kerala and Bihar?

Hypotheses:

- Women's participation does not guarantee gender equality in legislative bodies, as it is hampered by structural and institutional barriers.
- Women's political power is severely limited due to patriarchal social norms, caste hierarchy and political party gatekeeping.
- Socio-economic development is not enough to ensure women's substantive political empowerment.
- Higher literacy and development rates can be found in states which do not show gender gaps in political representation, indicating that development and representation do not always go hand-in-hand.

4) Legal and Constitutional Framework

Both the fundamental rights and democratic principles in the Indian Constitution guarantee equality of women, and their political participation. The right to equality before the law and to equal protection of laws is guaranteed in Article 14, and discrimination on the basis of sex is prohibited in Article 15(1) and special measures are allowed for women and children in Article 15(3). Article 16 provides for equality of opportunity in public employment. Articles 325 and 326 of the Constitution also provide protection for political equality in that they guarantee universal adult franchise and that the electoral rolls are not discriminatory based on religion, caste or sex. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment, 1992, which mandated reservation of one-third seats in Panchayats and Urban Local Bodies, respectively, for women at the grassroots, was a significant measure taken towards increasing women's participation. The Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, 2023 or Constitution (106th Amendment) Act, 2023 was passed recently with a provision of 33% reservation for women in the House of the People and State Assemblies (SLAs), to be subject to delimitation and census process. These constitutional and legislative

guarantees establish the formal architecture of women's political inclusion; the literature reviewed below, however, shows that this formal architecture has not translated evenly into substantive representation once caste, religion, class and region are taken into account.

5) Literature Review

The involvement of women in politics in India has been extensively studied in the domain of democratic theory, feminist studies and development research. Researchers have investigated the influence of social, economic and cultural factors on the participation of women in political power. Nandini Deo (2015) pointed to religious identity as a factor that can affect women's political participation, as religious politics can constrain women's political autonomy, particularly of Muslim women.³ Likewise, in *Unequal Citizens*, Zoya Hasan and Ritu Menon (2004) noted that structural factors like economic dependence, traditional notions about women, inequality among caste and class groups⁴, limit women's political participation. *A Field of One's Own* (1994) by Bina Agarwal has firmly connected the three concepts of women's property rights, economic empowerment and political empowerment.⁵ Her conclusions show that a woman's access to resources improves her involvement in the public sphere and in politics. More recent cross-national scholarship situates the Indian case within a wider global stagnation: International IDEA (2023) finds that the average annual increase in women's parliamentary representation worldwide slowed markedly in the early 2020s, while Bjarnegård and Zetterberg (2022) argue, on comparative Asian evidence, that party gatekeeping rather than voter demand is now the binding constraint on women's candidacies -- a claim this paper tests directly against Indian party-level candidacy data. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments (1993) made major strides in policy making to enhance women's representation in local governance through the introduction of reservation for women in the Panchayati Raj Institutions and urban local bodies. This principle was expanded by the Constitution (106th Amendment) Act, 2023 to the Parliament and State Assemblies. But, the literature which is available deals with women in a general way without considering their differences on the basis of caste, class, religion and region. Furthermore, the link between socio-economic development and political representation is

³ Deo, N. (2015). Hindutva education: RSS pedagogical projects as preparation for politics. *Qualitative Sociology*, 38(2), 137–156 . <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-015-9302-5>

⁴ Hasan, Z., & Menon, R. (2004). *Unequal citizens: A study of Muslim women in India*. Oxford University Press.

⁵ Agarwal, B. (1994). *A field of one's own: Gender and land rights in South Asia*. Cambridge University Press.

poorly understood, such as in Kerala, where high socio-economic development is associated with fairly low levels of political representation of women.

Read critically, this body of work is more descriptive than analytical: it documents the barriers women face without adequately theorising why formally equal legal rights fail to convert into substantive representation, and it rarely interrogates the implicit assumption, carried over from modernisation-inflected accounts, that socio-economic advancement should mechanically produce political inclusion. Much of the literature also treats "women" as an undifferentiated category, and even where caste, religion or class are acknowledged, they are seldom examined as compounding rather than merely additive disadvantages. This paper addresses that gap by combining an explicitly intersectional lens with a comparative state-level design.

6) Theoretical Framework

This paper draws on three complementary theoretical traditions to construct its analytical framework:

1. Intersectionality Theory (Crenshaw, 1989)

This paper builds off the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw, whose intersectionality theory was formulated to examine the intersection of discrimination against Black women in the American legal system.⁶ Crenshaw says single-axis analysis, which does not consider gender or race/caste, leaves people who occupy a space at the intersection of multiple marginalised groups out and creates a system that works against them. If we apply this to India, we need to consider the participation of women in the electoral process as a multifaceted experience rather than a monolithic process, where gender is both an individual and a social factor, in addition to caste (SC/ST/OBC/General), religion (Hindu/Muslim/Christian/Sikh), class and geography. The framework anticipates — and the Indian evidence shows — that Dalit women, Muslim women, tribal women are disadvantaged, and their disadvantage is distinct and compounded compared to that of upper-caste women, and that the figure of women's participation in democracy is an aggregate and can thus only be used as an indicator of general participation by women.

⁶ Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1989(1), 139–167.

2. Amartya Sen's Capability Approach

A second theoretical basis is the Capability Approach (1999) by Amartya Sen which was elaborated by Martha Nussbaum⁷. Sen makes the distinction between substantive freedoms (the actual ability to exercise the rights to vote and stand for election) and formal freedoms (the legal right to vote and stand for election).⁸ The Indian Constitution affords women complete formal electoral rights, however their ability to actually exercise these rights to register to vote, be nominated, campaign and win is intensely unequal among women of different social locations. The methodology focuses analytical efforts on the 'conversion factors' that help or hinder the realization of formal rights into real capabilities: access to education, mobility, financial resources, social networks, freedom from violence, access to information. This paper uses the capability framework to assess not merely whether women vote, but whether they can exercise genuine political agency.

3. Modernisation Theory and Its Critique

Modernisation theory (Lipset, 1959; Inglehart & Norris, 2003) suggests that as societies become more socio-economically developed, with increased income, education and urbanisation, they tend to become more democratic, including a greater extent of women's political inclusion.⁹ This paper critically engages with and questions this thesis on an empirical state-level data basis.¹⁰ The Kerala paradox (highest HDI, lowest women's representation in Lok Sabha 2024) directly invalidates the development-participation assumption and requires a more politically informed explanation that highlights the party structures that women face as a factor separate from the development indicators. One of the main original contributions of the paper is the critique of modernisation theory.

⁷ Nussbaum, M. C. (2000). *Women and human development: The capabilities approach*. Cambridge University Press.

⁸ Sen, A. (1999). *Development as freedom*. Oxford University Press.

⁹ Lipset, S. M. (1959). Some social requisites of democracy: Economic development and political legitimacy. *American Political Science Review*, 53(1), 69–105. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1951731>

¹⁰ Inglehart, R., & Norris, P. (2003). *Rising tide: Gender equality and cultural change around the world*. Cambridge University Press.

7) Research Gap

Gap 1: Absence of Intersectional Analysis

The five gaps identified below are the central contribution of this paper: existing scholarship on women's political participation in India has touched on each in passing, but has not treated them as a connected analytical problem. Addressing them -- rather than simply re-confirming that a representation gap exists -- is the specific justification for this study, and each gap maps directly onto the research questions, objectives and policy recommendations that follow.

Women are currently regarded as a political unit in election studies. The ECI data has no disaggregation for the participation of caste, religion, class or regional identity – it masks the vastly different experiences of, say, an upper caste urban woman in Maharashtra and a Dalit tribal woman in rural Chhattisgarh. This is made worse by the lack of a caste census since 1931, which results in a lack of statistical precision to measure the participation of OBC, SC, ST and religious minority women at the national level. Though landmark legislation, the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam (2023) has been faulted for failing to include horizontal sub-reservations for marginalised women, which could have the effect of reinforcing intra-gender inequalities. Drawing on the intersectionality framework of Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), measures to improve the lives of women in general could result in benefiting only those women who already have social and economic capital.

Gap 2: The Development-Participation Paradox

The modernisation thesis, namely that greater socioeconomic development automatically brings about greater women's political participation is accepted without question in existing literature. Indian evidence, however, will tell us the exact opposite of this. Kerala, which has a high HDI of 0.97, 94% of women as literate and a high sex ratio had no women to represent them in Lok Sabha during 2024 elections and in the 2026 Assembly elections only 11 women MLAs (7.85%). In 2024, women voted almost 6 percentage points more than men in Bihar, which is the lowest HDI in India. The paradox is not sufficiently theorised. Research should differentiate between

two types of political empowerment: voter mobilization and substantive political empowerment, and take institutional barriers to political participation in political parties as an independent variable other than socioeconomic development.

Gap 3: The Missing Panchayat Pipeline

While the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments brought in an excess of 44% women PRI representatives (MoSPI, 2023), there have been no systematic studies that follow up to see if the experience of being a grassroots woman candidate translates into candidates at state or national level. These choke points are not known and have never been studied in the theory of these pipelines.

Gap 4: The Digital Divide as Electoral Exclusion

The Indian electoral system is fast evolving and is increasingly digital, ranging from e-roll registration to Digital Voter IDs and social media campaigning, a new dimension of exclusion has set in. According to NSS 2021 data, only one-third of women in the rural areas use the internet regularly while 57% of the men do so regularly. The political dependence of SC and ST women in remote constituencies is also of paramount importance as they need to rely on male intermediaries for information related to elections. Knowledge on the systematic limitations of women's informed political participation through this digital divide is still extremely limited.

8) Research Objectives

This paper follows the research agendas given below, which aim to fill gaps identified above and provide a systematic, data-informed study of women's electoral involvement in India:

Firstly, it charts the women's electoral journey over the years as voters and candidates in all Lok Sabha elections since 1952, using ECI statistics.

Second, it opens up a focused debate on the perennial gender disparity in voter participation and representation by both men and women in the national legislative assemblies, highlighting the structural, institutional and socio-cultural barriers that perpetuate the democratic deficit.

Third, it applies an intersectional lens, disaggregating women's participation by caste, religion and class from data from ECI, NFHS-5, Census 2011 and NCRB to map differential participation.

Fourth, it probes the relationship between development and participation that is assumed, by examining the contrasting cases of low participation in Bihar despite its low HDI and high participation in Kerala despite its high HDI.

Fifth, India's performance on the table is gauged by global averages and similar large democracies in the world as measured by the Inter-Parliamentary Union statistics.

Sixth, it assesses the real impact of important legislations such as the 73rd and the 74th Constitutional Amendment and the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam in providing for true political empowerment.

Together, these goals throw off two dominant scholarly misconceptions: analytical homogenisation and structural optimism, painting a more politically realistic picture of democracy's relation to women's electoral voice in India.

9) Research Methodology

This research is a mixed methods approach with qualitative and quantitative methods, which is based on secondary data analysis. Primary datasets include:

- Election Commission of India (ECI): Statistical Reports on General Elections (1952-2024), including details on voter turnout at the constituency level, details on the gender of candidates, and an analysis of the winners.
- Ministry of Health and Sanitation (MHS): State Statistics on health. Ministry of Education and Technical Training (MoETT): State Statistics on education and technical training.
- National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2019-21): Gender ratio, indicators of autonomy of women, education status by states.

- Data on sex ratios and Dalit women's vulnerability indicators were accessed from the following sources: Census of India (2011) and the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB).¹¹
- PRS Legislative Research and Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR): Candidate background analysis and electoral performance data.¹²

The methodology involves trend analysis over last 70 years of Lok Sabha elections, comparative state level analysis to explore the development-participation paradox and framework of intersectional analysis to explore the role of compounding identity markers. The paper does not carry out primary fieldwork, but meticulously analyses government data and secondary research published by other scientists. To ensure analytical coherence, the datasets are integrated through a layered triangulation approach: ECI electoral statistics form the quantitative backbone for trend analysis and candidacy patterns; NFHS-5 data supplements these with state-level gender autonomy and socio-economic indicators; Census 2011 and NCRB records are cross-referenced to map caste- and religion-based vulnerability patterns; and ADR candidate disclosures are used to assess asset disparities and party-level gatekeeping. This multi-source integration enables cross-validation of findings across datasets, strengthening the robustness of the intersectional analysis.

10) Case Study Framework

Two case study frameworks guide this paper's analytical approach, chosen because they instantiate the theoretical claims set out in Section 6. Kerala tests the limits of Sen's capability approach by showing that formal freedoms and high human development do not automatically convert into substantive political capability, while Bihar illustrates Crenshaw's argument that a single-axis reading of "women's participation" as voter turnout alone conceals compounded, class- and region-specific barriers to candidacy. Together, the two cases form the empirical basis for this paper's critique of modernisation theory:

¹¹ Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India. (2011). Census of India 2011: Primary census abstract. Government of India. <https://censusindia.gov.in>

¹² Association for Democratic Reforms. (2024). Analysis of criminal background, financial, education, gender and other details of candidates of 18th Lok Sabha elections 2024. <https://adrindia.org>

Case Study I: The Kerala Paradox — Development Without Representation

Kerala has maintained its position at the peak of the Human Development Index consistently, has the highest literacy rate, a favourable sex ratio of 1084 females per 1000 males (Census 2011) and near-universal school enrolment. The ECI's 2024 data reveals that Kerala has a higher number of female voters (1.39 crore) compared to male voters (1.32 crore) on the electoral roll. However, in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, not a single woman MP from Kerala had won from 20 Lok Sabha seats. In the 2026 Kerala State Assembly elections, just 11 women candidates gained seats out of the 140 (7.85%). This paradox highlights that indices of development are not enough to break patriarchal gatekeeping in political parties.

Case Study II: Bihar — Low Development, Yet Women Outvote Men

Bihar has an inverted paradox. The voter turnout in Bihar Lok Sabha elections 2024 was 59.39% female and 53.28% male (ECI 2024), which is much higher than the other states in India with lowest HDI score of 0.57. Women voters of Bihar showed high electoral agency despite the harsh socio-economic conditions, some of which were created by the politics of welfare programs (MGNREGA, PM Awas Yojana, Lohia Swachh Bihar Abhiyan). But there has been no proportional representation as far as legislatures go, as women have less than 5% of the seats in Bihar's elected assemblies.

11) Key Findings

The findings below are reported descriptively, as patterns observed in ECI, MoSPI and NFHS-5 data. Their theoretical and political significance is developed separately in Section 13 (Discussion and Critical Analysis), so that description of trends is kept distinct from interpretation of their causes.

Finding 1: Historic Voter Turnout Convergence

The gender gap in voting is now much smaller after 70 years. The gap between the number of women and men voting in the first general elections (1952) was 8 to 10 percentage points. This deficit has now been bridged by 2024 when the percentage of women voters (65.78%) just beat

the men voters (65.55%) for the first time in Indian electoral history (ECI, 2024). The registered voter's gender ratio has shifted from 926 females per 1000 males in 2019 to 948 in 2024.

Table 1: Women in Lok Sabha — Historical Trend (ECI Data)

Lok Sabha Year	Women Elected	MPs	Total Seats	% Women MPs
1952	22		499	4.41%
1962	34		494	6.88%
1971	22		518	4.25%
1984	44		514	8.56%
1996	40		543	7.37%
2004	45		543	8.29%
2009	59		543	10.86%
2014	64		543	11.79%
2019	78		542	14.39%
2024	74		543	13.63%

Table 2: Gender-wise Voter Turnout in Lok Sabha Elections (ECI Data)

Election Year	Female Voter Turnout	Male Voter Turnout	Gender Gap
2009	55.82%	56.11%	+0.29% (F)
2014	65.63%	67.09%	+1.46% (M)

Election Year	Female Voter Turnout	Male Voter Turnout	Gender Gap
2019	67.18%	67.01%	+0.17% (F)
2024	65.78%	65.55%	+0.23% (F)

Finding 2: The Candidacy Bottleneck

Voters are voting more, but the pool of candidates is still very imbalanced. While 797 women polled in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, the ECI's previous record of women in the Lok Sabha elections is never above 1,000 (ECI, 2024). In comparison, the BJP had 69 women candidates among the 446 total positions it had and Congress had 45 women candidates out of 328 total. Most importantly, the study by PRS Legislative Research shows that women are assigned ‘harder’ and less winnable constituencies, thus having their actual win rate suppressed.

Table 3: Women Candidates and Winners — Lok Sabha Elections (ECI Data, 1957–2024)

Year	Women Candidates	Total Candidates	% Women in Fray	Women Winners	Women Win Rate
1957	45	1,519	2.96%	17	37.78%
1980	142	4,629	3.07%	28	19.72%
1999	284	4,648	6.11%	49	17.25%
2009	556	7,810	7.12%	59	10.61%
2014	668	8,251	8.09%	64	9.58%
2019	726	8,049	9.02%	78	10.74%
2024	797	8,337	9.56%	74	9.28%

Finding 3: The Sub-National Variation

The participation of women in elections is extremely variable across states and cannot be explained solely by economic development. West Bengal had the highest number of women MPs with 11, compared to other states. Uttar Pradesh, which has 80 seats, has only 7 female MPs less than 9%. In 2024, Kerala did not send any women to Lok Sabha. However, Gujarat had a large gender difference in voter turnout (56.56% female voters compared to 63.52% male).

12) Data Overview — Intersectional & Global Analysis

A central premise of this study is that women are not a homogenous group — their electoral participation is profoundly shaped by intersecting axes of caste, class, religion, and geography.

State-level data Reveals striking paradoxes. Kerala combines the highest sex ratio in India, the highest HDI, and only 7.85% women MLAs -- the country's starkest instance of high development coinciding with low representation. In comparison, Bihar, which has an HDI of 0.57, saw more women than men participating in the voting process (59.39% women vs. 53.28% men) and has about 5% of its seats held by women. High turnout alongside such representation is possible as is seen in West Bengal where 93.8% turnout and 12.62% women MLAs participated. Although Gujarat has the medium-high HDI of 0.72, there is a huge difference between the gender turnout as women are 56.56% and men are 63.52%. Read descriptively, these figures show no consistent state-level relationship between development indicators and women's representation; the analytical implications of this pattern are taken up in Section 13.

Intersectional analysis Reinforces the trend of compound disadvantage. The general caste women represent around 15% of women members of parliament and they have an advantage due to their economic capital and literacy, which is further augmented by dynastic politics. The women from the OBC community enjoy panchayat reservation but they are less than 8% of MPs at the national level. The "triple burden" of gender marginalisation, caste marginalisation and class marginalisation is a problem faced by Dalit women, with the NCRB recording rapes of about 10 Dalit women every day, which definitely affects their political mobility. Geographic isolation and reliance on male intermediaries for access to political information is a problem for

ST women. Muslim women are under-represented and the first woman of the IUML to be elected as an MLA was elected in Kerala Assembly elections in 2026.

Globally, India's level of representation of women in the parliament is far behind the global average of 26.9% in the IPU 2024. Rwanda has 61.3% at the constitutional level, Sweden has 46.4% at party level and Nepal has 33.5% at the constitutional level. India is one of the weakest performers in similar large democracies with a low score and thus there is a need for structural intervention.

13) Discussion and Critical Analysis

This study aims to shed light on a great paradox of Indian electoral system. The participation of female voters in Lok Sabha election has made a significant improvement and even surpassed the male in some cases in 2024 election, however, there is still no proportional representation in political arena. The results indicate that voting is not necessarily associated with political empowerment. Women remain at a disadvantage in representation in decision making institutions due to structural and institutional disadvantages. Political parties often fail to consider women as candidates for leadership positions but rather look to women as their electorate and this results in unequal ticket distribution and fewer women nominees in winnable legislatures. The study also questions the modernization theory that with the progress of socio-economic development women have certain political inclusion in it. This is false; as seen in Kerala where high literacy rates and a good Human Development Index has not translated to better representation of women in politics. Bihar, on the other hand, demonstrates how welfare politics and electoral mobilization can enhance the participation of women in an electoral process in a low-development state, but with no impact on representation.

The study also emphasizes the fact that women are not uniformed and women are not all alike. Women belonging to the Dalit, tribal, Muslim and the economically weaker communities are facing a combination of disadvantages because of caste discrimination, poverty, limited mobility and social exclusion. The absence of women in politics is, therefore, a structural issue which is rooted in a patriarchal society, socio-economic inequalities and institutional barriers.

14) Policy Recommendations

This paper suggests the following seven evidence-based policy recommendations to push for greater and more democratic women's electoral involvement in India based on the above analysis:

First, The Constitution (106th Amendment) Act, 2023 (Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam) should include horizontal reservation for SC, ST and OBC women under the proposed 33% reservation for women. If not, the advantages of reservation can be skewed to favor upper castes, and perpetuate the caste order in political representation. Hence, it is essential to conduct a national caste census for producing disaggregated data that would enable fair allocation of these reservations. This is not a hypothetical risk: MoSPI (2023) data on the 73rd and 74th Amendment reservations already show general-category women disproportionately occupying reserved panchayat seats relative to their share of the female population, precisely the skew that a purely gender-based 33% quota risks reproducing at the national level.

Second, Election Commission of India (ECI) needs to introduce a rule that no less than 33% of all political parties' candidates are women. There should be consequences for political parties that do not meet the standards, such as lower public funding, or electoral incentives. Decades of voluntary agreements by political parties have not yet succeeded in making a substantial difference in the representation of women. This paper's own candidacy data illustrate the point: the BJP and Congress fielded women in only 69/446 (15.5%) and 45/328 (13.7%) of their contested seats respectively in 2024 (ADR, 2024), well short of any meaningful threshold despite decades of internal party pledges.

Third, the government should create a National Women's Political Finance Fund, as in South Africa and Canada. This fund should be allocated to support women candidates, particularly SC, ST, OBC and minority communities with financial assistance, train them for campaigns and offer support for logistics. Previous studies show that women candidates, on average, have less financial resources than men candidates, which poses a significant hurdle towards their participation in elections. ADR's (2024) asset disclosures for the 2024 Lok Sabha elections corroborate this: the median declared assets of women candidates trail those of male candidates

across every major party, a gap that widens further for SC, ST and OBC women candidates specifically.

Fourth, electoral information should be systematically disaggregated by gender, caste and religion in regard to ECI elections. A robust evidence base is likely to emerge through necessary amendments to the Representation of the People Act, 1950, in tandem with coordination with the Office of the Registrar General, which could also further inform future policy interventions and intersectional research.

Fifth, digital literacy and political awareness should be given top priority in the Digital India Mission for the rural and semi-urban women. The digital exclusion of women is a new political marginalisation as more and more elections and political engagement is being transferred to digital platforms. It is possible to use SHGs with their wide network across the country to play a pivotal role in outreach and training.

Sixth, a National Anti-Harassment Framework for Women in Politics must be established in a collaborative manner by the Ministries of Women and Child Development and Electronics and Information Technology. This framework must cover online and offline harassment and include provisions for expedited elections harassment cases and hold social media platforms accountable for gender-based abuse..

The six recommendations offered here together help to overcome the six barriers to supply and demand, and are direct answers to the five research gaps identified in this paper. Reform 1: intersectional sub-reservations addresses Gap 1: lack of intersectional analysis and Reform 7: third gender data addresses the invisibility of third genders. Reform 2 (party-level quotas) and Reform 3 (political finance fund) aim at addressing Gap 4 (party-internal gatekeeping) and structural exclusion of marginalised women from candidacy. Gap 1 is directly addressed by Reform 4 (ECI data disaggregation) which allows for the evidence base for future intersectional research. The inclusion of a digital inclusion Reform (5) to address the digital divide as electoral exclusion (Gap 4) and an anti-harassment framework (Reform 6) to combat institutional violence that prevents women from achieving political mobility across all gaps. Structural logics of Reforms 1-3 are also held by the development-participation paradox (Gap 2) and the missing

panchayat pipeline (Gap 3) all of which aim to separate the two functions of political representation and socio-economic development and provide legitimate avenues between the local and national governance.

15) Conclusion

Returning directly to the four research questions set out in Section 3: first, women's voter participation is rising because turnout is driven by welfare access and mobilisation, while representation lags because candidate selection remains under the control of party gatekeepers who continue to favour male candidates for winnable seats. Second, caste, patriarchy, religion, class and regionalism interact to produce compounded rather than uniform disadvantage -- Dalit, tribal and Muslim women face the sharpest constraints, as the intersectional evidence in Sections 7 and 12 shows. Third, socio-economic development does not necessarily translate into political empowerment: Kerala's high HDI coexists with among the lowest levels of women's representation in the country, confirming that party structures, not development indicators, are the binding constraint. Fourth, Kerala and Bihar represent inverse experiences of this gap -- high development with low representation in the former, low development with high voter agency but equally low representation in the latter -- demonstrating that voter-side and candidate-side empowerment are analytically distinct processes.

The Indian electoral system is a contradiction that despite the fact that the participation rate of women has been increasing, their representation in the elected bodies is quite low. The gender gap in political participation and political power is reflected in the percentage of women elected to the Lok Sabha in the 2024 Lok Sabha Elections, which stood at 13.63%. Women's marginalisation in the electoral process is driven by the intersection of structural constraints (patriarchy, caste, class, religion, economic disparities, digital divide and political violence), according to this study. The paper illustrates intersectionality, capability approach and challenges to modernization theory, highlighting the different political experiences of women in social and regional settings. The difficulties they have to deal with differ markedly for Dalit women, Muslim women and the upper caste women, and women are not a homogeneous group. The study also reveals that political empowerment is not the result of social development; women's underrepresentation is still maintained by patriarchal party structures. Thus inclusive policy changes and structural adjustments are necessary for real democratic equality.

16). References

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