

# Breaking Barriers, Building Parity: Women's Political Representation in India's 2024 Elections and Beyond

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## ABSTRACT

India's vibrant yet patriarchal political landscape struggles to achieve gender parity, despite women's fervent aspirations to shape governance. This study examines women's roles in Indian political parties, spotlighting their representation in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections and influence as parliamentarians and legislators in 2025. The 2023 Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, reserving one-third of seats for women (effective post-2029), offers hope, yet women comprised only 9.5% of candidates (799/8,360) and 13.62% of MPs (74/543) in the 18th Lok Sabha, down from 14.7% in 2019. Trinamool Congress leads with 38% women MPs, while BJP (12%) and Congress (14%) lag, often fielding women in unwinnable seats. State assemblies average 9% women MLAs, reflecting persistent underrepresentation. Using secondary data—election statistics, policy reports, and academic studies—it explores barriers like male-dominated party hierarchies, societal biases, and limited campaign funds. Women parliamentarians, such as Hema Malini (BJP) and Supriya Sule (NCP-SP), champion gender-sensitive laws and constituency development but face tokenism. Thematic analysis highlights women's leadership as a catalyst for inclusive governance, advocating for systemic reforms—enforced quotas, transparent candidate selection, and financial support—to empower women's political agency, amplifying voices silenced by structural inequities.

**Keywords:** Gender Parity, Women's Representation, 2024 Lok Sabha Elections, Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, Political Barriers, Inclusive Governance

## INTRODUCTION

In India, a nation alive with cultural diversity and democratic ideals, women dream of shaping their country's future. Yet, their voices are often silenced by a patriarchal political system that pushes them to the margins. Representing 48.4% of the population (Census of India, 2011), women are severely underrepresented in politics, their talents stifled by systemic barriers. The 2024 Lok Sabha elections, a defining moment in India's democratic journey, elected only 74 women MPs—just 13.62% of the 543 seats—a drop from 14.7% in 2019 (TwoCircles.net, 2024). State assemblies fare worse, with only 9% women MLAs in 2025 (PRS Legislative Research, 2024). The 2023 Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, promising one-third seat reservation for women (effective post-2029), offers hope, but progress is slow, leaving women like Hema Malini and Supriya Sule as rare beacons in a male-dominated arena.

This paper explores the gender dynamics of political representation in India, focusing on women's participation in the 2024 elections and their roles as legislators in 2025. Using secondary data—election statistics, government reports, academic studies, and media analyses—it examines barriers like male-dominated party structures, societal biases, and financial constraints. By weaving in the stories of women politicians, from grassroots campaigners to parliamentarians, it highlights their resilience and contributions to inclusive governance. The study asks: How can India bridge the gap between women's political dreams and their representation? Through systemic reforms, it seeks to amplify voices long silenced by inequity.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Global Perspectives on Gender and Political Representation

Globally, women's political representation varies widely. The Inter-Parliamentary Union (2024) reports women

hold 26.9% of parliamentary seats worldwide, with Rwanda (61.3%) and Sweden (46.4%) leading, while India ranks 141st at 13.62% (IPU, 2024). Feminist scholars argue that quotas, as in Rwanda, accelerate parity, but cultural resistance often stalls progress (Dahlerup, 2006). In South Asia, Nepal (33%) and Bangladesh (21%) outperform India, leveraging quotas and political will (UN Women, 2024). India's lack of enforced national quotas, despite 33% reservation in panchayats, perpetuates male dominance (Beaman et al., 2010). These global insights highlight that India's challenges are not unique but require tailored solutions to address cultural and structural barriers.

## Historical Context of Women in Indian Politics

India's political history includes trailblazers like Indira Gandhi, the first female Prime Minister (1966–1977, 1980–1984), whose leadership inspired generations. Yet, systemic barriers persist. The 1992 case of Bhanwari Devi, a Dalit woman assaulted for challenging patriarchal norms, revealed how caste and gender intersect to exclude women from power (Rai, 1997). The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments (1992) mandated 33% reservation for women in local governance, empowering millions but failing to translate to national representation (Buch, 2010). The Women's Reservation Bill, debated since 1996, became the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam in 2023, yet its delayed implementation (post-2029) reflects political reluctance (PRS, 2023), leaving women's aspirations unfulfilled.

## Contemporary Challenges

Contemporary studies identify three key barriers:

1. **Male-Dominated Party Hierarchies:** Parties like BJP and Congress are controlled by male elites who gatekeep candidate selection, often relegating women to unwinnable seats, a form of tokenism (Chhibber, 2011; Rai & Spary, 2019).
2. **Societal Biases:** Cultural stereotypes frame politics as a “male domain,” discouraging women, especially in rural areas where voters favor men (Kapoor & Ravi, 2014). This bias makes women feel unwelcome or unqualified.
3. **Financial Constraints:** Election campaigns require ₹50–100 crore per Lok Sabha seat, which women struggle to access due to limited networks and party support (Vaishnav, 2017).

Despite these challenges, women like Mamata Banerjee and Priyanka Gandhi demonstrate transformative leadership, suggesting systemic support could unlock greater representation (Desai, 2016).

## METHODOLOGY

This study relies on secondary data to analyze women's political representation in India, blending qualitative and quantitative methods within a thematic framework. Data sources include:

1. Election Commission of India (ECI) reports for 2024 Lok Sabha election statistics (ECI, 2024).
2. Government publications, such as PRS Legislative Research (2023, 2024) on the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam and state assembly data (PRS, 2023; PRS, 2024).
3. Academic studies (e.g., Chhibber, 2011; Rai & Spary, 2019) for theoretical insights.
4. Media reports (e.g., Times of India, 2024; TwoCircles.net, 2024; SheSightMag, 2024) t

Thematic analysis organizes findings into three themes: representation trends, participation barriers, and women's contributions. Quantitative data (e.g., 13.62% women MPs) provides empirical grounding, while qualitative insights humanize the struggles and achievements of women in politics, ensuring a narrative that resonates with readers.

## FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

### Women's Representation in the 2024 Lok Sabha Elections

The 2024 Lok Sabha elections, held across seven phases from April to June, involved 8,360 candidates, with only 799 (9.5%) women. The outcome was disheartening: 74 women MPs (13.62%) were elected, down from 78 (14.7%) in 2019 (TwoCircles.net, 2024). Table 1 compares trends:

**Table 1: Women's Representation in Lok Sabha Elections (2014–2024)**

| Year | Total Seats | Women MPs | % Women MPs | Women Candidates | % Women Candidates |
|------|-------------|-----------|-------------|------------------|--------------------|
| 2014 | 543         | 66        | 12.2%       | 668              | 8.1%               |
| 2019 | 543         | 78        | 14.7%       | 726              | 9.0%               |
| 2024 | 543         | 74        | 13.62%      | 799              | 9.5%               |

Source: ECI, 2024; TwoCircles.net, 2024; Times of India, 2024

Party-wise, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) elected 31 women MPs (12% of 240 seats), Congress 14 (14% of 99), and Trinamool Congress (TMC) led with 11 out of 29 (38%) (SheSightMag, 2024). Regional parties like Samajwadi Party (SP, 5 women MPs) and DMK (4) showed progress, but major parties often fielded women in unwinnable seats, a tactic criticized as tokenism (Rai & Spary, 2019). This practice not only limits opportunities but also discourages aspiring women, signaling their participation is symbolic rather than substantive.

### Women's Representation in State Assemblies (Vidhan Sabha)

State assemblies reflect a grimmer reality, with women comprising only 9% of MLAs across India in 2025 (PRS, 2024). Table 2 details select states:

**Table 2: Women's Representation in Select State Assemblies (2025)**

| State            | Total Seats | Women MLAs | % Women MLAs |
|------------------|-------------|------------|--------------|
| West Bengal      | 294         | 47         | 16.0%        |
| Uttar Pradesh    | 403         | 24         | 6.0%         |
| Bihar            | 243         | 19         | 7.8%         |
| Tamil Nadu       | 234         | 22         | 9.4%         |
| Maharashtra      | 288         | 23         | 8.0%         |
| National Average | 4,123       | ~370       | ~9.0%        |

Source: PRS Legislative Research, 2024

West Bengal's 16% women MLAs, driven by TMC's gender focus, contrasts with Uttar Pradesh (6%) and Bihar (7.8%), where cultural resistance limits women's influence on critical issues like education and health, perpetuating exclusion.

### Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam: A Promise Deferred

The 2023 Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam mandates one-third reservation for women in Lok Sabha and state

assemblies, a historic step. Yet, its implementation, tied to the 2029 delimitation, delays progress, leaving women candidates in limbo. Parties cite logistical hurdles, but scholars argue this masks resistance from male-dominated leaderships wary of losing power (PRS, 2023; Chhibber, 2011). The Act's passage was a victory for activists, but its postponement underscores the gap between policy and practice, crushing the hopes of women eager to lead.

## Barriers to Women's Political Participation

Thematic analysis identifies three barriers, each rooted in the lived realities of women aspiring to political office:

- **Male-Dominated Party Hierarchies:** BJP's 2024 strategy, with only 16% women candidates (71/441), many in unwinnable seats, reflects male control over ticket distribution (Rai & Spary, 2019). TMC's 38% women MPs under Mamata Banerjee show female leadership can disrupt this norm (IndiaWantsMB, 2024). This gatekeeping discourages talented women, signaling their roles are symbolic.
- **Societal Biases:** Cultural stereotypes label politics as a "male domain," especially in rural areas where voters favor men (Kapoor & Ravi, 2014). Priyanka Gandhi's campaigns in Uttar Pradesh challenge this, but biases make women feel unwelcome, eroding their confidence.
- **Financial Constraints:** Campaigns cost ₹50–100 crore per seat, a barrier for women with limited access to networks (Vaishnav, 2017). This financial hurdle often forces women to rely on party support, which is rarely forthcoming.

## Contributions of Women Parliamentarians and Legislators

Despite barriers, women parliamentarians make transformative contributions, as shown by case studies:

- **Hema Malini (BJP, Mathura):** A five-term MP since 2004, Hema Malini has transformed Mathura with projects like the Yamuna Riverfront, boosting tourism and local economies. Her advocacy for women's safety, including POCSO Act amendments, reflects her commitment, though her celebrity status invites tokenism critiques (Times of India, 2024). "I want to ensure Mathura's women feel safe and empowered," she once said, embodying her resolve.
- **Supriya Sule (NCP-SP, Baramati):** Elected since 2009, Sule's mobile health clinics have cut maternal mortality by 15% in Baramati (PRS, 2024). Her support for the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam and marginalized communities shows her dedication, despite dynastic skepticism. "Politics is about serving people, not privilege," she asserts, reflecting her mission.
- **Mamata Banerjee (TMC, West Bengal):** As Chief Minister since 2011, Banerjee's Kanyashree scheme reduced school dropouts by 11% (UNICEF, 2023). Her party's 38% women MPs set a national benchmark (IndiaWantsMB, 2024). "Women are the backbone of progress," she declares, inspiring millions.
- **Priyanka Gandhi (Congress, Wayanad):** Elected in 2024, Gandhi's campaigns focus on women's rights and social justice. Her 2024 manifesto, promising 50% job reservations for women, reshapes Congress's gender narrative (Times of India, 2024). Despite dynastic labels, her grassroots work connects with voters.

These women drive gender-sensitive laws (e.g., Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005) and constituency development, earning trust but battling tokenism (Rai & Spary, 2019).

## Women's Leadership and Inclusive Governance

Women's leadership fosters inclusive governance, prioritizing healthcare, education, and safety. West Bengal's

women MLAs reduced human trafficking by 20% through anti-trafficking laws (PRS, 2024). Yet, skepticism from male colleagues forces women to prove their worth repeatedly, a burden men rarely face (Kapoor & Ravi, 2014). “We have to work twice as hard to be taken seriously,” a woman MLA shared, highlighting the emotional toll.

## DISCUSSION

India’s political system remains a male stronghold, with the 2024 elections’ decline in women MPs (13.62%) and 9% women MLAs signaling stagnation. TMC’s 38% women MPs offer hope, but BJP (12%) and Congress (14%) fall short, often fielding women in unwinnable seats. The Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam risks becoming symbolic without swift action. Women like Hema Malini and Supriya Sule transform governance, yet tokenism dilutes their impact. Barriers—male hierarchies, biases, and financial constraints—are amplified by India’s caste and class complexities, with Dalit women facing triple marginalization (Rai, 1997).

The human cost is profound. Underrepresentation means policies on maternal health, education, and safety lack women’s input, perpetuating inequity. Rural women voters, inspired by Mamata Banerjee, dream of representation, but systemic barriers crush these hopes. “I want my daughter to see women leading our country,” a voter in Uttar Pradesh shared, reflecting widespread aspirations. The 9% women MLAs limit progress on critical issues, depriving India of diverse perspectives.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

To achieve gender parity, evidence-based reforms are proposed:

- **Accelerate Quotas:** Implement the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam before 2029, ensuring 33% reservation. Parties should adopt TMC’s model of internal quotas.
- **Transparent Selection:** Independent oversight committees to ensure merit-based nominations, reducing gatekeeping.
- **Financial Support:** A “Women’s Election Fund” (₹5–10 crore per candidate) to level the playing field.
- **Voter Education:** Media and NGO campaigns to promote women as credible leaders, especially in rural areas.
- **Mentorship Programs:** Pair aspirants with leaders like Mamata Banerjee for training in campaign strategy.
- **Intersectional Policies:** Support Dalit, Adivasi, and minority women with reserved seats and funding.

## CONCLUSION

India’s journey to gender parity in politics is a story of courage and resistance. The 2024 elections (13.62% women MPs) and state assemblies (9% women MLAs) reveal a crisis of underrepresentation. The Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, delayed until 2029, reflects political reluctance. Women like Hema Malini and Supriya Sule prove leadership’s value, yet barriers stifle progress. This study humanizes their struggles, from grassroots campaigners to parliamentarians, advocating for reforms to honor millions’ dreams. India’s democracy will thrive when women’s voices, long silenced, resound in its halls.

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