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**INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF
MULTIDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH & REVIEWS**

journal homepage: www.ijmrr.online/index.php/home

FROM REPRESENTATION TO LEADERSHIP: CHANGING POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

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How to Cite the Article: Narayan madhukar Rajurwar (2026). From Representation to Leadership: Changing Political Participation of Women in Contemporary India. International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Reviews, 5(4),477-489.



<https://doi.org/10.56815/ijmrr.v5i4.2026.477-489>

Keywords	Abstract
Women, Political Participation, Political Representation, Leadership, Elections, Panchayati Raj, Lok Sabha, Gender Equality, Women's Reservation, India.	Women's political participation is an essential dimension of democratic representation, social justice and inclusive governance. In India, the trajectory of women's political participation has undergone a significant transformation from limited electoral presence to wider participation as voters, candidates, elected representatives and political leaders. The present study examines this transition from representation to leadership in contemporary India, with particular attention to electoral participation, parliamentary representation, grassroots political leadership and institutional reforms. The study is based entirely on secondary data collected from the Election Commission of India (ECI), Parliament of India, Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Press Information Bureau (PIB), Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), UN Women and other authoritative institutional sources. The analysis uses descriptive and comparative methods to examine trends over time.¹ The 2024 Lok Sabha election provides important evidence of the growing electoral agency of women. According to the Election Commission of India, women constituted 48.62 per cent of registered electors, with 47.63 crore women electors. Female voter turnout was 65.78 per cent, marginally higher



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	than male turnout of 65.55 per cent. However, women's presence among candidates remained only 9.6 per cent, and 74 women were elected to the 18th Lok Sabha, representing 13.6 per cent of the House. At the grassroots level, the picture is substantially different: more than 14.5 lakh women serve as elected representatives in Panchayati Raj Institutions, constituting approximately 46 per cent of elected representatives. The study argues that Indian women are increasingly moving beyond the role of electoral participants towards political leadership and decision-making. Nevertheless, substantial gaps remain between numerical representation, substantive participation and effective political power. The Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, 2023, providing for one-third reservation for women in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies after the constitutionally specified census and delimitation process, represents an important institutional intervention. The paper concludes that the future of women's political empowerment depends not merely on increasing the number of women in elected institutions but also on strengthening their autonomy, political skills, access to party structures, resources and decision-making authority.
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1. Introduction

Political participation is one of the fundamental indicators of the health and inclusiveness of a democratic system. In a representative democracy, citizens participate not only through voting but also through political parties, electoral campaigns, public movements, legislative institutions, local government, policy-making and leadership positions. From this perspective, women's political participation cannot be understood simply as the number of women who vote or occupy elected positions. It also involves the extent to which women influence political agendas, participate in decision-making and exercise authority within political institutions. India presents an interesting case in this regard. The Constitution established universal adult franchise from the beginning of the Republic, providing women with equal political citizenship. Unlike several countries where women obtained voting rights only after prolonged political struggles, Indian women entered the democratic system with formal electoral equality. Nevertheless, formal equality did not immediately translate into equal political representation. For several decades, women remained significantly underrepresented in legislatures, political parties and higher levels of political leadership.

The situation has gradually changed. Women have increasingly emerged as active voters, campaign participants, political candidates, local representatives and political leaders. The 2024 Lok Sabha election illustrates this transformation particularly well. Women constituted 48.62 per cent of registered electors and female voter turnout reached 65.78 per cent, slightly exceeding male turnout of 65.55 per cent. The Election Commission noted that women outnumbered men in turnout for the second time in the history of Lok Sabha elections, following 2019.²



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This contrast raises an important political question: Why are women increasingly participating as voters while their representation in higher political institutions remains comparatively limited? The answer requires a broader understanding of political participation. The Indian experience demonstrates that the movement from participation to representation and from representation to leadership is neither automatic nor linear. Institutional reservations, education, urbanisation, political mobilisation, civil society initiatives, media visibility, self-help groups, local governance and changing social attitudes have contributed to the expansion of women's political agency. At the same time, patriarchal political structures, limited access to party nominations, campaign financing, political violence, family responsibilities and informal networks continue to constrain women's advancement.

2. Conceptualising Women's Political Participation

Women's political participation may be understood at four interconnected levels:

2.1 Electoral Participation

The first level is participation as voters. Voting gives women the opportunity to influence government formation and public policy. The growth in female voter registration and turnout demonstrates that women are increasingly exercising their electoral citizenship independently.

2.2 Political Representation

The second level involves women contesting elections and entering representative institutions. Representation is measured through the number and proportion of women among candidates, elected representatives, legislators and local government members.

2.3 Political Influence

Representation does not automatically produce influence. A woman may occupy an elected position but possess limited authority over policy decisions. Political influence therefore refers to the capacity to raise issues, shape agendas, influence budgets and participate meaningfully in deliberation.

2.4 Political Leadership

Leadership represents the highest level of political participation. It involves agenda-setting, mobilisation, negotiation, policy formulation, institutional decision-making and the ability to influence political outcomes. Thus, the transition from representation to leadership signifies a qualitative transformation in women's political participation.³

3. Historical Background of Women's Political Participation in India

The roots of women's political participation in India can be traced to the nationalist movement. Women participated in anti-colonial movements, public campaigns, social reform movements and constructive programmes. Leaders such as Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant, Aruna



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Asaf Ali and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay demonstrated that women could occupy important political roles. The Constitution of India subsequently institutionalised political equality. Articles relating to equality before law, non-discrimination and universal adult franchise created the formal foundation for women's political citizenship. However, social and economic inequalities continued to influence women's political participation. During the early decades after independence, women remained a small minority in Parliament. The increase in women's representation has been gradual rather than dramatic. Election Commission data show that women constituted only 5.6 per cent of elected members in 1971, increasing to 10.9 per cent in 2009, 11.4 per cent in 2014 and 14.4 per cent in 2019. In 2024, the proportion declined to 13.6 per cent.

The introduction of reservations in Panchayati Raj Institutions through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment and in urban local bodies through the 74th Constitutional Amendment represented a major turning point. At least one-third of seats were constitutionally reserved for women, while several states subsequently increased the reservation to 50 per cent. According to government data, more than 14.5 lakh women are elected representatives in Panchayati Raj Institutions, accounting for approximately 46 per cent of representatives. Thus, local government became a major institutional pathway through which women acquired political experience.

4. From Women as Voters to Women as Political Actors

The most visible transformation in contemporary Indian politics has occurred in women's electoral participation.

The 2024 Lok Sabha election registered approximately 47.63 crore women electors, representing 48.62 per cent of the total electorate. The number of female electors increased by 8.61 per cent compared with 2019. The female-to-male elector ratio also reached 946 women per 1,000 male electors, compared with 926 in 2019. These figures demonstrate that women are no longer a marginal electoral constituency. Political parties increasingly recognise women as a decisive electoral group and design campaigns and policy promises around issues such as welfare, food security, employment, health, education, social protection, household expenditure and women's safety.⁴

More importantly, the increase in female turnout suggests that women are exercising electoral choice at a level comparable with, and in some contexts higher than, men.

Table 1: Changing Electoral and Parliamentary Participation of Women in India

Election Year	Female Electors / Participation Indicator	Female Contesting Candidates	Women Elected to Lok Sabha	Women's Share of Lok Sabha
1999	—	284	49	9.0%
2004	—	355	45	8.3%
2009	—	556	59	10.9%
2014	—	668	62	11.4%



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2019	43.85 crore	726	78	14.4%
2024	47.63 crore	800	74	13.6%

Source: Compiled from Election Commission of India, *Atlas – Lok Sabha Elections 2024* and Government of India data.

The table reveals an important paradox. Female electoral participation has expanded substantially, but representation among elected members has not increased at the same rate. This indicates that the major challenge is no longer simply bringing women into the electorate; it is creating institutional pathways for women to become candidates, legislators and political decision-makers.

5. The 2024 Lok Sabha Election: A New Phase of Women's Electoral Participation

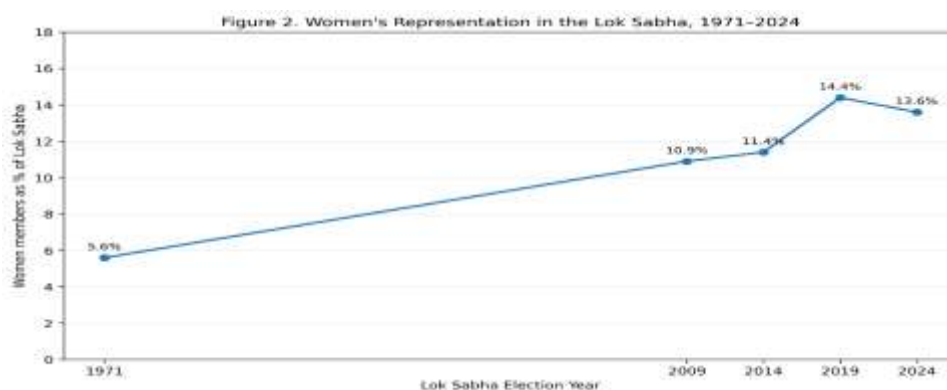
The 2024 Lok Sabha election is particularly important for understanding the changing political role of women.

The Election Commission of India recorded:

- 47,63,11,240 women electors.
- Women constituted 48.62 per cent of the total electorate.
- Female voter turnout was 65.78 per cent.
- Male voter turnout was 65.55 per cent.
- Female voter turnout exceeded male turnout by 0.23 percentage points.
- There were 800 female contesting candidates.
- Women won 74 Lok Sabha seats.
- Women constituted 13.6 per cent of the elected Lok Sabha.

The data indicate a clear distinction between electoral participation and political representation.

Women are increasingly willing to vote, but relatively fewer women receive party nominations or win parliamentary elections. In 2024, there were no female candidates in 152 of the 543 parliamentary constituencies. This suggests that the principal barriers to women's political participation are increasingly located inside political recruitment structures, rather than simply at the level of voter mobilisation.⁵



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6. Grassroots Democracy and the Expansion of Women's Leadership

The most successful experiment in women's political representation in India has occurred at the grassroots level. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment created a constitutional framework for reservation of seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions. The 74th Amendment extended the principle to urban local bodies. These reforms substantially increased the number of women entering politics.⁶

According to Government of India information, India has approximately 14.5 lakh elected women representatives in Panchayati Raj Institutions, constituting nearly 46 per cent of elected representatives. Furthermore, 21 States have provisions for 50 per cent reservation for women in PRIs.

The importance of grassroots representation extends beyond numerical representation. Panchayat leadership provides women with opportunities to acquire administrative knowledge, public speaking skills, negotiation abilities and experience in dealing with government departments.

Women representatives have also increasingly participated in issues related to:

- drinking water;
- sanitation;
- education;
- nutrition;
- health;
- local infrastructure;
- social welfare;
- women's safety;
- livelihood programmes; and
- community development.

Consequently, local government can be viewed as a political leadership laboratory for women.⁷

7. From Descriptive Representation to Substantive Representation

Political scientists distinguish between descriptive representation and substantive representation. Descriptive representation refers to the numerical presence of women in political institutions. Substantive representation concerns whether women representatives actually influence policy outcomes and articulate the interests of women and marginalised communities. India has made substantial progress in descriptive representation, especially at the grassroots level. However, the question of substantive representation remains more complicated.



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A woman may be elected because a seat is reserved for women, but this does not automatically guarantee independent political authority. Local political structures may continue to be influenced by male family members, party organisations or local elites. At the same time, it would be incorrect to assume that all women representatives are merely symbolic or controlled by others. Evidence from Panchayati Raj experiences demonstrates that many women gradually develop political autonomy and administrative competence after entering office. Therefore, the political significance of reservation should not be assessed solely in terms of immediate policy outcomes. It should also be evaluated in terms of political socialisation.

Women who enter local politics acquire:

1. political knowledge;
2. institutional experience;
3. public visibility;
4. administrative skills;
5. networks with officials;
6. confidence in public speaking;
7. experience in electoral competition; and
8. opportunities for subsequent political advancement.

This creates a possible pathway from local representation to higher political leadership.

8. Political Parties and Women's Leadership

Political parties constitute the most important gatekeepers of electoral representation. Although women may possess electoral support, they require party nominations, organisational resources and political networks to contest elections successfully. The relatively small number of women candidates in parliamentary elections demonstrates that political recruitment remains gendered. In 2024, women accounted for 800 of the 8,360 contesting candidates, or 9.6 per cent. The problem therefore cannot be understood simply as a lack of women's political interest. Rather, it involves the structure of political opportunity.⁸

Major barriers include:

- limited access to party decision-making positions;
- unequal distribution of party tickets;
- campaign financing constraints;
- dependence on political networks;
- patriarchal attitudes;



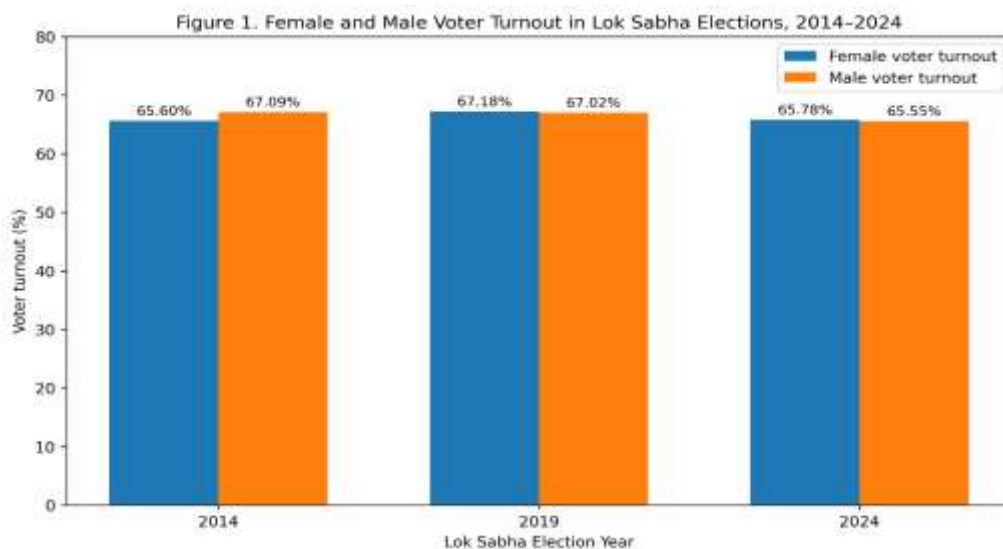
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- political violence and intimidation;
- media stereotyping;
- family responsibilities; and
- limited access to informal political networks.

Political parties therefore have a decisive role in converting women's electoral participation into political representation.

9. Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, 2023 and the Future of Representation

The Constitution (One Hundred and Sixth Amendment) Act, 2023, popularly known as the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, represents one of the most important institutional developments in the history of women's political representation in India. The legislation provides for reservation of approximately one-third of seats for women in the Lok Sabha, State Legislative Assemblies and the Legislative Assembly of the National Capital Territory of Delhi. The constitutional provisions specify that the reservation will take effect after publication of the relevant census figures and subsequent delimitation. The significance of the legislation extends beyond the numerical target of 33 per cent. It potentially changes the political recruitment structure by creating a constitutional mechanism for women's representation at the highest legislative levels.



The reform may contribute to:

- increasing the number of women legislators;
- normalising women's presence in political leadership;
- encouraging political parties to recruit more women;
- creating new political role models;

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- strengthening women's policy influence; and
- improving the legitimacy of women's leadership.

However, reservation alone cannot guarantee substantive equality. Its effectiveness will depend upon the quality of political participation, autonomy of elected women, party support, leadership training and access to political resources.

10. Women's Political Participation and the Transformation of Political Priorities

The rise of women as a significant electoral constituency has also contributed to changes in political priorities. Political parties increasingly recognise women as an independent electoral bloc. Welfare programmes, financial assistance, cooking fuel, housing, sanitation, water supply, health services, education and livelihood opportunities have acquired considerable political significance.

This transformation suggests that women's political participation can influence the policy agenda even when women remain underrepresented among legislators.

The political significance of women voters therefore extends beyond the act of voting. Their collective electoral preferences can influence party manifestos, campaign strategies and government policy priorities.⁹

11. Major Challenges to Women's Political Leadership

Despite considerable progress, several structural barriers continue to restrict women's political advancement.

11.1 Patriarchal Political Culture

Political institutions remain influenced by historically male-dominated organisational cultures. Women entering politics often have to overcome assumptions concerning leadership, authority and public visibility.

11.2 Unequal Political Resources

Election campaigns require financial resources, organisational networks and media access. Women frequently face greater constraints in acquiring these resources.

11.3 Family and Care Responsibilities

Women continue to carry a disproportionate share of unpaid household and care work. This can restrict the time available for political activities.

11.4 Political Violence and Harassment

Women politicians may face gender-based abuse, intimidation and online harassment. Such practices can discourage potential candidates and weaken women's public participation.

11.5 Limited Party Leadership



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Numerical representation among elected members does not necessarily translate into proportionate representation within party leadership structures.

11.6 Symbolic Representation

Reservation may increase the number of women representatives without necessarily eliminating informal male influence. Therefore, capacity building and institutional autonomy are essential.

12. Changing Nature of Women's Political Participation

The transformation of women's political participation can be summarised through three stages.

Dimension	Earlier Pattern	Contemporary Trend
Electoral role	Primarily viewed as dependent voters	Increasingly independent electoral constituency
Candidate participation	Very limited	Growing, although still below proportional representation
Local governance	Restricted presence	Large-scale representation through reservations
Parliamentary representation	Marginal	Gradually increasing but still below parity
Political leadership	Concentrated among a small number of women	Increasingly visible at local, state and national levels
Policy influence	Often indirect	Increasingly reflected in political agendas
Political identity	Mainly associated with family/political dynasties	Increasing emergence of independent women leaders
Institutional support	Limited affirmative mechanisms	Reservations, training and gender-focused programmes
Political communication	Conventional campaign structures	Greater use of digital and social media platforms
Leadership trajectory	Limited upward mobility	Potential pathway from local governance to higher office

Source: Author's analytical synthesis based on ECI, Ministry of Panchayati Raj, PIB, IPU and UN Women data.

13. Discussion

The available secondary data demonstrate that women's political participation in India has entered a qualitatively different phase.



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The first major transformation is electoral empowerment. The 2024 election demonstrates that women are no longer a peripheral component of the electorate. With nearly 48 per cent of registered electors and a turnout marginally higher than men, women constitute one of the most important political constituencies in contemporary India.

The second transformation is institutional representation. Reservations in local government have created an unprecedented scale of women's representation. The presence of approximately 14.5 lakh elected women representatives in PRIs demonstrates that women's political participation is not confined to metropolitan or parliamentary politics. The third transformation is leadership formation. Local government has created opportunities for women to develop political skills and public authority. Some women representatives subsequently develop political careers beyond the institution in which they initially entered politics.

The fourth transformation is institutional recognition at the national level. The Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam establishes a constitutional framework for increasing women's representation in Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies. Yet the data also reveal a significant contradiction. Women's voting participation is approaching parity with men, while their parliamentary representation remains much lower. In 2024, women constituted 48.62 per cent of electors but only 13.6 per cent of elected Lok Sabha members. This gap demonstrates that the central challenge has shifted from political mobilisation of women as voters to institutional democratisation of political leadership.¹⁰

14. Conclusion

Women's political participation in contemporary India is undergoing a significant transformation. The political role of women has gradually expanded from that of passive or mobilised voters to active electoral citizens, candidates, elected representatives and political leaders. The transformation is particularly visible in electoral participation and grassroots democracy.

The 2024 Lok Sabha election provides strong evidence of this change. Women accounted for 48.62 per cent of registered electors, and their voter turnout of 65.78 per cent slightly exceeded the male turnout of 65.55 per cent. At the same time, only 800 women contested the election and 74 women were elected to the Lok Sabha, representing 13.6 per cent of the House. This contrast between high participation and relatively low representation is the central feature of contemporary Indian women's politics. At the grassroots level, however, the experience is considerably more transformative. The presence of approximately 14.5 lakh elected women representatives in Panchayati Raj Institutions, representing around 46 per cent of elected representatives, demonstrates that institutional reservation can dramatically alter the gender composition of political institutions.

The next challenge is to convert numerical representation into substantive leadership. Women need not merely occupy seats; they must possess the authority, resources, skills and institutional support necessary to influence decisions. Political parties must therefore become more inclusive in



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candidate selection and leadership recruitment. Training, political education, campaign financing, digital literacy and institutional protection against harassment are equally important.

The Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, 2023 provides an important constitutional framework for the future expansion of women's legislative representation. However, the ultimate success of the reform will depend on whether it produces genuine political empowerment rather than merely numerical inclusion.

The study therefore concludes that the trajectory of women's political participation in India can best be understood as a movement:

from citizenship → participation → representation → influence → leadership.

The future of Indian democracy will depend significantly on whether this transition becomes deeper, broader and more substantive. Women's political empowerment is not merely a question of gender justice; it is also a question of democratic legitimacy, representative governance and the quality of public decision-making. The transition from representation to leadership therefore represents one of the most important dimensions of India's contemporary democratic transformation.

AUTHOR(S) CONTRIBUTION

The writers affirm that they have no connections to, or engagement with, any group or body that provides financial or non-financial assistance for the topics or resources covered in this manuscript.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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SOURCES OF FUNDING

The authors received no financial aid to support for the research.

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