Women's Political Participation in India

Mains: *GS II – Governance| Elections*

Why in News?

Women's participation in electoral politics in India has undergone a remarkable transformation over the past six decades, and however, this progress in electoral participation has not translated proportionately into representation in legislative bodies or into greater political power.

How is the journey of women's participation as voters in India?

- **After independence** – In the decades following Independence, women's participation in elections was significantly lower than that of men.
- Although women were formally included in the electoral process, various structural and social barriers limited their participation.
- In the 1967 Lok Sabha election, male voter turnout stood at 66.7 %, while female turnout was 55.5 %, resulting in a gap of 11.2 percentage points.
- **During the 1970s** – In the 1971 election, the gender gap widened slightly to 11.8 percentage points.
- Several factors contributed to this disparity, including:
  - Lower levels of female literacy
  - Restricted mobility
  - Domestic responsibilities
  - Limited political outreach to women
- **1980s** – From the 1980s onward, the gender gap in turnout began to narrow steadily.
- By 2009, it had reduced to 4.4 percentage points.
- **A major shift** – In 2014, the gap dropped to 1.5 percentage points, and in the 2019 and 2024 Lok Sabha elections, women voted at nearly the same rate as men.
- A similar trend is visible in State Assembly elections between 1990 and 2025.
- In the early 1990s, women's turnout was on average 4–5 percentage points lower than that of men.
- **Positive years** – The gap steadily narrowed through the 2000s and turned positive after 2011, meaning women began voting at slightly higher rates than men.
- Between 2015 and 2016, the gender turnout advantage reached 2.82 percentage points.
- Although the margin moderated later, women's turnout remained higher than men's by about 1.6 percentage points during 2020–25.
- Overall, the long-term trend demonstrates convergence in turnout followed by a modest but sustained advantage for women voters.

- **Electoral participation beyond voting –** While voter turnout has reached near parity, women's participation in campaign-level political activities remains significantly lower than that of men.
- Across Lok Sabha elections from 2009 to 2024, men consistently reported higher involvement in public political activities.
- Women's participation in campaign activities has increased gradually but continues to lag behind.
- **For example:**
- Attendance at election meetings and rallies increased among women from 9 % in 2009 to about 16 % in recent elections, whereas male participation remained roughly double.
- Participation in processions and door-to-door canvassing rose from 5–6% to around 11 %, yet remained lower than male participation.
- These trends indicate that although women are increasingly visible in the electoral process, their involvement in campaign mobilization and grassroots political activity remains limited.

The Indian experience reflects a paradox: "**High electoral participation by women but limited political representation and autonomy**."

- **Success rates of women candidates –** Historical data indicate that women candidates often perform as well as, or even better than, men when given the opportunity to contest elections.
- **For example**:
  - **1957 –** 49 % of women candidates won compared to 33 percent of men.
  - **1962 –** Women's success rate was 47 % versus 25 % for men.
  - **2019 –** 11 % of women candidates won compared to 6 percent of men.
  - **2024 –** Women's success rate was 9 % compared to 6 % for men.
- These figures suggest that the primary challenge lies not in electability but in access to party tickets and political opportunities.

What are the factors of limited political engagement of women?

- **Social constraints and family influence –** One important factor limiting women's public political engagement is the need for family approval.
- The Lokniti–CSDS Survey on Women and Politics (2019**)** found that a majority of women require permission from family members to participate in political activities such as:
  - Attending election rallies
  - Meeting candidates
  - Participating in campaign work
- These constraints highlight that gender gaps in political participation are shaped not only by individual interest or capability but also by deeply embedded social and familial norms.
- **From participation to representation –** Despite achieving parity as voters, women remain significantly underrepresented in legislative institutions.

- In the first Lok Sabha in 1952, only 22 women were elected.
- For several decades, women's representation remained modest and inconsistent.
    - **For instance**, in 1977, the number of women Members of Parliament fell to 19.
- A noticeable increase occurred only in the 21st century:
    - **2009 –** 59 women MPs
    - **2014 –** 62 women MPs
    - **2019 –** 78 women MPs (highest ever)
    - **2024 –** 74 women MPs
- Even at its peak, women constituted only about 14 % of the Lok Sabha, far below their nearly 50 % share of the electorate.
- **The nomination bottleneck –** The gap in representation becomes clearer when examining the number of women contesting elections.
    - **1957 –** Only 45 women candidates contested parliamentary elections.
    - **1996 –** The number increased sharply to 599.
    - **2014 –** 668 women candidates.
    - **2019 –** 726 women candidates.
    - **2024 –** 800 women candidates.
- Although the number of female candidates has increased steadily, men still constitute the overwhelming majority of contestants.
- This reflects a major bottleneck in party nominations and candidate selection.
- Political parties often justify this disparity by arguing that women are less "electable."
- However, available data challenges this assumption.
- **Autonomy and political socialisation –** Women's underrepresentation is also linked to limited political autonomy and socialisation.
- Although women vote in large numbers, their voting decisions are not always independent.
- In 2014, about 51 %of women reported voting without external advice, a figure that slightly declined to 50 percent in 2024.
- **Family influence** – A majority of women—around 52 percent—believe that sharing the same political views as family members is important.
- This suggests that political preferences are often shaped within the family context rather than through independent political engagement.
- Structural Barriers in the Political System – Women also face institutional and systemic barriers within the political system.
- According to the Lokniti–CSDS survey, many women perceive unequal access to political opportunities:
    - 58% believe that women from political families find it easier to enter politics.
    - 57% think that women from economically stronger backgrounds have an advantage.
    - 44% feel that political parties prefer men when allocating tickets.
    - A similar proportion believe that voters themselves prefer male candidates.
- These perceptions reflect the structural disadvantages women face within party structures and electoral politics.
- **Structural and social barriers –** Women identify several structural and social challenges that restrict their participation in politics:
    - **Patriarchal social structures** – Cited by 22% of women
    - **Household responsibilities** – 13 %

    - **Lack of confidence, awareness, or experience** – 12 %
    - **Cultural norms** – 7 %
    - **Financial and structural constraints** – 6 %
- These barriers highlight the intersection of social norms, economic limitations, and institutional obstacles that limit women's political advancement.

What lies ahead?

- Women in India have made significant progress in electoral participation, with voter turnout reaching near parity with men and even surpassing it in some State elections.
- However, this expansion in participation has not translated into equivalent representation in legislatures or decision-making institutions.
- Bridging this gap requires addressing the nomination bottleneck, institutional biases, and social constraints that continue to limit women's political empowerment.
- The passage of the Women's Reservation Bill provides a potential structural mechanism to improve representation.
- However, meaningful political empowerment will depend not only on increased representation but also on ensuring that women exercise real authority, autonomy, and influence in political decision-making.

Reference

[The Hindu| Political Participation of Women in India]

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