

# Lugaai Ka Raaj<sup>1</sup>:

*Impact of Increasing Participation  
of Women on the Agenda of  
Political Parties*

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# NARISHAKTI@BALLOTBOX:

## WHAT AND WHY?

NariShakti@BallotBox is a unique series 3 of Research Briefs published by Mandonna Research Consultants on the key issues and challenges surrounding women and their participation in the Indian General Elections 2024.

India has been gloriously distinguished as the largest democracy in the world. With around 96 crore eligible voters set to decide the trajectory of our nation, it is crucial to acknowledge that the historic gap between male and female voters has significantly decreased over the years. An SBI Research Report (2024) has indicated that the number of female voters is on the rise and will reach the inflexion point by 2029. Projected trends indicate that by 2047, women may outnumber men as voters by 10% (SBI, 2024).



Women's participation in elections, either as voters or poll contestants, is crucial for the sustainable and equitable development of the country and achieving transformational economic and social changes. However, women continue to be marginalised in election activities, ranging from campaigns to popular perception and from representation to party manifestos.

To this end, the NariShakti@BallotBox series would aim to highlight some of the key aspects and issues at the intersection of the Lok Sabha elections of 2024 and women's issues. We envision empowering key stakeholders through data-backed research and analysis for further action.



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## ABSTRACT

This paper embarks on a crucial exploration to address a critical, yet largely overlooked question regarding the involvement of women in formal electoral politics in India and its potential correlation with the evolution of a more gender-sensitive political landscape. Compounded by biases of inadequacy and electability entrenched within predominantly male-dominated party structures, female political leaders often find themselves relegated to the periphery, unable to advocate effectively for gender inclusivity within their own parties. This research underscores that simply augmenting the presence of women in formal electoral politics does not guarantee the integration of women's issues into party agendas. Rather, it emphasizes the pivotal role played by the effectiveness of women's participation as both voters and candidates, as well as their representation as Members of Parliament (MPs), in shaping party priorities. The research underscores a pressing need for whistle-blowers from all segments of society to spotlight and address the structural and institutional deficiencies that hinder genuine representation and the creation of a gender-sensitive political space for women within the electoral sphere.

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# INTRODUCTION

India witnessed an electoral upsurge of women as voters in the 1990s and this trend has continued ever since. The gender gap in voter turnout completely vanished in 2019 as for the first time, women's poll participation exceeded men's. Additionally, in 1957, just 45 women candidates were contesting the Lok Sabha Elections and the figure rose to 726 in 2019. Thus, India has witnessed a remarkable increase in the participation of women in formal electoral politics over the past two decades. But the question remains, has this increased participation led to the incorporation of women-centric issues into the political agenda of parties?

- ***Hypothesis***

While women's participation in formal electoral politics is increasing, there remains a significant gap in the integration of women-centric issues within the political agenda of political parties.

- ***Participation of Women in Formal Electoral Politics***

This refers to female participation in formal electoral politics at the national, state and grassroots levels, however, in our research, it is limited to the participation of women in Lok Sabha Elections.

Women's role as voters and as candidates is used to estimate their participation in politics. As voters, their participation is estimated through voter turnout rates and as candidates the data on the number of women candidates contesting Lok Sabha elections is employed. This is supplemented by data on the percentage of women parliamentarians in the lower house.

- ***Women's issues***

Women face various challenges which pertain to persisting issues of institutional violence, financial inclusion, health and hygiene, and in

the context of ongoing elections the issue of unemployment and declining labour force participation.

- ***Political Agenda***

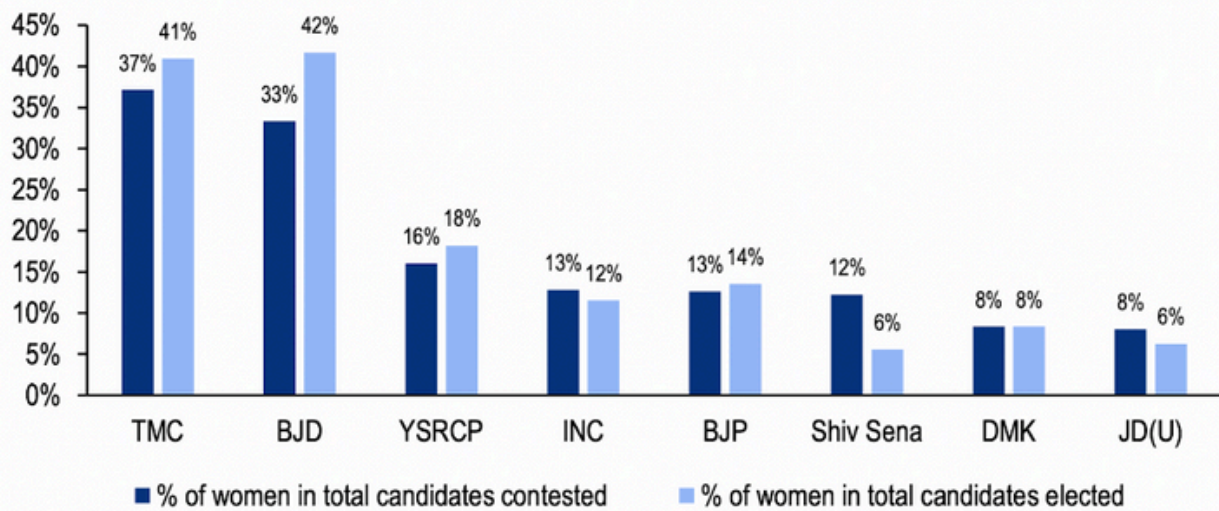
The political agenda is the set of issues that are the subject of decision-making and debate within a given political system at any one time (M. McCombs et al, 1981). In the context of our paper, it refers to the set of issues, policies, and priorities that political parties or candidates focus on during election campaigns or while in office.

The paper addresses the question raised above by analyzing how efficacious women's participation has been over the years. Does an increase in number necessarily indicate more meaningful political participation? (EPW, 2019). This research is crucial to gain a comprehensive understanding of the impact of increasing women's participation on the political agenda of parties specifically in the backdrop of the ongoing Lok Sabha elections.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

A central concept in research on women's political representation is the notion of "critical mass". It is frequently invoked to explain why women do not always appear to represent women once they are in political office. ( Childs et al, 2008 ) Women's representation in Lok Sabha currently stands at 15%, while a 30% critical mass for women's leadership is suggested by researchers<sup>2</sup>. Exclusionary trends persist in providing space for women to participate as candidates in national and state-level elections that casually stem from their marginalization within the party hierarchy and structure (Rai, 2004). The political decision to not allot seats to women by political parties has been attributed to the lack of winnability of women (Deshpande 2004) whose truthfulness has been contradicted by various researchers.

Percentage of women in total candidates contested and elected in the 2019 general election



Sources: Statistical Reports of General Election 2019, Election Commission of India; PRS.

Apart from the underrepresentation of women in higher strata of participation, the voting behaviour of women is also attributed to their ineffective participation as autonomous entities. The 1996 Election survey revealed that 86% of women heeded their families' advice when making polling decisions. This percentage has fallen to 61% in the 2014 election survey (Kumar, 2024). This shows that households coordinate their political participation and electoral support to maximize household welfare (Prillaman, 2017).

Political parties recognise these social norms and reinforce this coordination through the strategic mobilization of groups by political elites (Uhlener, 1989) and through family-centered clientelism. Thus, women's preferences are underrepresented in the political space leading to a lack of focus on women-centric issues by parties.

However, there is an increased recognition of women as "swing voters". Political parties across the spectrum have taken notice and made serious efforts to attract the female vote (Kumar, Carnegie, 2024). In addition to this, due to the prevalence of gendered norms of interaction, parties are also increasing their women representatives to

effectively communicate their agenda to them. This reflects a paradigm shift towards a more gender-sensitive political space and is explored in depth in our research.

## METHODOLOGY

This paper is an analytical study aided by secondary data collected primarily relying on relevant journals and articles on the subject. In particular, the research refers to the analysis of NES data by Rajeshwari Deshpande for the elections of 2004 and 2009 to gain insights into the voting behaviour of women.

## RESULTS & DISCUSSIONS

- ***Effective participation of women voters***

Voting behaviour is analyzed through active participation, political awareness and autonomy and independence exercised during voting.

### ***Do women vote as a gendered entity:***

The role of gender in women's lives binds them together as a uniform entity cutting across caste, class and other social demarcations. But, in India, gendered reality is a layered reality (Deshpande, 2004) Rajeshwari Deshpande's analysis of elections 2004 and 2009, shows that women across different social groups differ in their opinion over certain key socio-economic issues. She found that the opinions of men and women from the same social group are more identical than those of women from different groups, underlying how caste/community tend to override gender in women's identity.

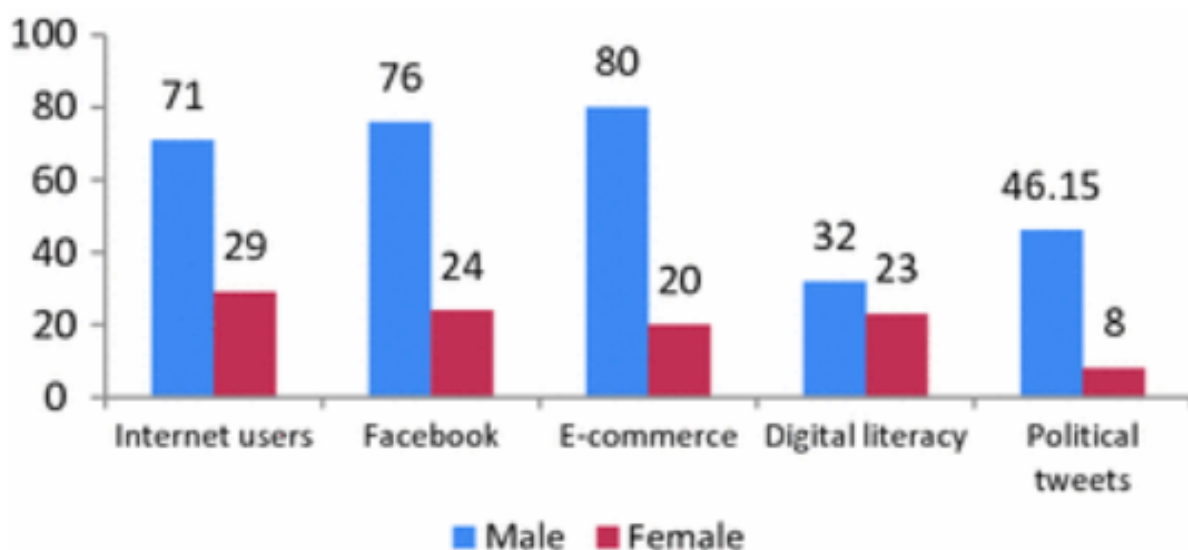
### ***Autonomy exercised by women while voting:***

Due to the presence of patrilocal institutions of marriage, constraints on mobility and the gender division of labour, women face steep constraints on mobility and social networks. (Prillaman,2017). According to a 2011-12 nationwide survey (IHDS-II, 2022), 78 % of



women in urban areas reported that they needed “permission” to visit a grocery store, and 94 % needed it to travel for a short distance by train or bus. Another dataset from the Indian human development survey pointed out that 86% of rural women reported asking for permission to travel a short distance by train or bus. Thus such seclusion norms force them to coordinate with their families and rely on their opinions to make voting decisions.

There exists gender asymmetry in access to information and due to the stark gendered digital divide present in India, women are unable to access such new means of communication like social media. As parties increasingly rely on such technology to further reach the voters, another fairly recent constraint women face is due to the digitalisation of election campaigns.



But, the situation is changing for the better. The 2014 election survey revealed that 61% of women heeded their families' advice to make polling decisions, a sharp fall from the reliance of 86% of women in 1996. A similar conclusion was highlighted in Scroll's “Half the Vote” report of 2019, wherein they noticed younger women growing more assertive and resisting familial pressure.

- ***Effective participation of women candidates***

While women candidates in parliamentary elections have increased over time, their proportion compared to male candidates remains low. This bias, however, has nothing to do with the winnability of women candidates. In the 2019 national election, about 14% of those elected to parliament were women but only 9% of the candidates who contested the election were women. This exhibits somewhat stronger chances of winning than men. (Iyer, CEPR, 2019)

In Indian society, there exists an inherent contradiction between culturally legitimized traits of leadership and socially sanctioned traits for women. Thus, many women (prospective) candidates have to tread a fine line as they navigate through the “double bind” between femininity and competence. (Jamieson 1995)

As they face these biases of incompetence and non-winnability from the male-dominated party structures, women political leaders are reduced to an ineffective minority within their parties unable to facilitate gender inclusiveness, while prospective women candidates find it difficult to obtain party nominations to fight elections. Women as candidates, thus face ineffectiveness in their participation due to being mere tokenistic representatives in their respective parties.

- ***Cumulative impact on the Political Agenda of Parties***

*“The four biggest castes for me are the poor, the youth, women, and farmers”*

*- Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi*

Although it becomes difficult (and undesirable) for political parties to mobilize women as a uniform entity due to variations in their political opinions across social groups and the limited autonomy over their voting rights, political parties are recognising their role as “swing voters”. Thus, nascent attempts have been made to mobilize women voters by the introduction of “pro-women” policies.

There are certain issues where women think alike and these are increasingly used to mobilize them. These include policies and schemes like unconditional cash transfers, free bus rides, gas cylinder subsidies and the women's reservation bill. Given that women disproportionately shoulder the burden of unpaid care work, spending 8 to 10 times more time than men, the challenges faced here become crucial.

Though parties do not mention caregivers they have promised cash transfers and amenities in their political agenda for elections 2024. (The Hindu)

Congress's election manifesto pledges to transfer ₹1 lakh annually to the bank accounts of the oldest female member in the house for households belonging to economically disadvantaged communities. BJP promises to expand the Lakhpati Didi scheme providing interest-free loans to women and offering training to enable women to earn an income. Other state parties have also assured monthly entitlement to women.

However, Tanya Rana, gender and governance scholar remarks that none of these policies are trying to change or challenge gendered norms of caregiving] at the societal level. Other scholars also mention that many of these schemes being touted as pro-women are premised on the idea of women as primary caregivers occupied by domestic opportunities who supposedly need to be protected.

Thus, what Rajeshwari Deshpande (2009) noticed about the elections of 2009 being a very routine, gender-non-sensitive exercise, with no attempt at political mobilization of women cannot be inferred about the current elections. Despite this comparatively increased mobilization and focus on women's issues, there still is a lack of substantive incorporation of feminist values in the political agenda of parties.

## CONCLUSION

The research's exploration of secondary data suggests that simply an increase in women's presence in formal electoral politics does not guarantee the integration of women's issues into the political agenda of parties. Instead what is actually a determinant in impacting the agenda of parties is how effective women's participation is as voters and candidates, supplemented by their representation as MPs.

Regardless of the complexities highlighted in the paper, women's growing electoral participation highlights their role as a decisive 'vote bank' necessitating their strategic mobilization by political parties to achieve electoral success.

A future trend that can be explored arising from this participation is the prospect of the "feminization" of grassroots party workers, with parties deploying female party workers to reach out to the women voters, as there still exists stringent social norms restricting interaction between genders.

The research lays the groundwork for future investigation into exploring the nature of pro-women policies introduced by various parties delving into the potentiality of a causal relationship between increased female electoral participation and the incorporation of feminist values in the political landscape of the country.

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# ENDNOTES

1. Lugaai ka Raaj, loosely translated, means wife's reign. The title is in reference to an extensive study carried by Scroll during elections of 2019, wherein men of the family refer to current rule as being women centric due to welfare schemes introduced by the NDA government.
2. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action recommended a 30% critical mass for women leadership. Since then it has been the most accepted norm for reservation of seats for women.

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