



Gendering the Agenda:

A Look at Indian Election Manifestos by Different 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 research focuses on analysing gender issues within Indian political party manifestos, specifically examining the reinforcement of traditional gender roles, challenges to women's empowerment, and the pursuit of gender equality. By studying the manifestos, the research aims to uncover trends, inconsistencies, and areas for improvement in addressing women's issues, tracking policy evolution, and assessing the impact of these changes on women's empowerment. The study seeks to address underrepresentation, evaluate policy effectiveness and understand community impacts, highlighting the need for gender-sensitive policies, inclusivity and the challenge of traditional norms to advance women's rights and achieve genuine gender equality in the Indian political landscape.

The analysis reveals a concerning trend of manifestos framing women's issues within the domestic sphere, perpetuating patriarchal notions and hindering progress towards gender equality. Despite recent policy initiatives addressing gender-based violence, reproductive health, political representation and migrant women's rights, a persistent lack of gender inclusivity remains. The research emphasises the importance of comprehensive and transformative approaches, including challenging traditional gender norms, prioritising systemic reforms and promoting women's active participation in politics, as essential steps towards achieving true gender parity in India.

KEYWORDS AND DEFINITIONS

1. **Gender Roles:** The socially constructed norms, behaviours, activities and attributes that a society considers appropriate for individuals based on their biological sex.
 2. **Manifestos:** Documents outlining political parties' policies, priorities and promises during election campaigns.
 3. **Gender-specific policies:** Policies and initiatives outlined in the election manifestos that specifically address issues related to gender equality and women's empowerment.
 4. **Gender-based violence:** Any act of violence that is directed against a person based on their gender, including physical, sexual, psychological and economic forms of violence.
 5. **Reproductive health:** The state of complete physical, mental and social well-being in all matters related to the reproductive system, its functions and processes.
 6. **Political representation:** The presence and participation of women in political decision-making processes, such as in elected bodies, government positions and leadership roles.
 7. **Workplace diversity:** The inclusion and representation of individuals with diverse gender identities, backgrounds and experiences within the workforce.
 8. **Migrant women workers:** Women who have moved from their place of origin to another location, often for employment or economic opportunities and face unique challenges and vulnerabilities.
 9. **Patriarchal Notions:** Beliefs and practices prioritising male authority, control and dominance in society.
 10. **Intersectional Approach:** An analytical framework that examines how various social identities, such as gender, race, class and sexuality, intersect and create unique experiences of discrimination and privilege.
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INTRODUCTION

The pursuit of gender equality and women's empowerment in Indian politics remains a pressing issue, with women's representation in legislative bodies posing a significant challenge. Despite government efforts to promote gender parity, women encounter obstacles in accessing leadership roles and political decision-making positions. The persistent gender gap in political representation underscores the necessity for a detailed examination of recent election manifestos of major national political parties in India through a gender-focused lens¹

Political parties have previously made efforts to address gender-specific issues in their election manifestos. For instance, the Indian National Congress proposed the Mahalakshmi scheme, aiming to provide annual financial assistance to the oldest female account holder in a household². In contrast, the Bharatiya Janata Party pledged to empower women's self-help groups and create three crore women millionaires³. The Shiv Sena (UBT) and Nationalist Congress Party advocated for a 50% quota for women in central government jobs.

Election manifestos in Indian politics serve as a crucial window into party ideologies and priorities, reflecting the evolution of political discourse over time. The analysis of manifestos can unveil shifts in the articulation of women's issues within parties, such as the Bharatiya Janata Party's transition from 'Matri Shakti' to 'Nari Shakti'. However, the underrepresentation of women in the Indian Party system raises questions about whether their mere presence translates into meaningful empowerment within parties.

Recent developments indicate a growing acknowledgement of gender equality in political discourse. The emergence of a gender manifesto ahead of the 2024 elections signifies a shift towards addressing

women's aspirations and demands for equity and dignified life. India's ranking of 127th out of 146 countries on gender parity in the Global Gender Gap Report 2023 underscores the urgent need for substantial progress in promoting gender equality and women's rights (*ibid*).

In the past decade, much research has focused on the persistent gender gap in political representation and the challenges women face in accessing leadership roles.

Prior studies often focus on women's representation as a standalone issue, neglecting the intersectionality of gender with other identities. While some research touches on the impact of gender-related policies in manifestos, there is a lack of comprehensive analysis on the long-term effectiveness of these policies post-election. Mostly the existing studies offer insights into individual elections or specific parties.

However, this study aims to delve deeper into how political parties conceptualise and prioritise gender issues within their electoral agendas, going beyond just quantitative representation. By analysing the nuances and underlying assumptions within the manifestos, it seeks to uncover the extent to which they reinforce or challenge traditional gender norms. Our research endeavours to delve into the actual implementation and outcomes of gender-specific promises made by political parties. By conducting a comparative analysis over multiple election cycles, our research tries to track the evolution of gender-related policies in manifestos, identifying trends, inconsistencies and areas of improvement². We also try to understand how different communities perceive and are impacted by gender-related policies.

- **Hypothesis**

The Indian general election manifestos reinforce traditional gender roles, hindering the advancement of women's rights and gender equality.

- **Primary Research Questions:**

1. To what extent do the election manifestos of major Indian political parties reinforce traditional gender roles?
2. Do Indian election manifestos intend to empower or strengthen traditional gender roles?

- **Secondary Research Questions**

1. How do the gender-specific policy proposals and commitments in the manifestos differ across political parties?
2. To what extent do the manifestos support policies that promote gender inclusivity and recognition of diverse gender identities?
3. How do these gender-specific policies in the election manifestos of major national political parties in India address issues like gender-based violence, reproductive health, political representation, workplace diversity and migrant women workers?
4. What has been the impact of gender-related policies in manifestos over the years? And, has that resulted in actual benign transferring from top to bottom?

METHODOLOGY

Research Type	Description
Primary Research	<p>This research project aims to compare the latest election manifestos of major Indian political parties like the BJP and INC, focusing on gender-specific policies, commitments, and goals. The manifestos will undergo detailed content analysis, coding relevant sections to evaluate gender-specific content. An evaluation framework will be developed to assess the quality and potential impact of this content. The study will also compare gender-specific content across manifestos over the years, identifying similarities, differences, and evolutionary trends in addressing women's issues and gender equality.</p>

Research Type	Description
Secondary Research	<p>The research will conduct a comprehensive review and content analysis of existing literature on the representation of women in Indian politics. It will utilise government data and data compiled by PRS, exploring scholarly works on women's representation, challenges they face, and political parties' efforts to address gender-related issues. This includes studies on the inclusion of women's issues in election manifestos and the implementation of gender-related promises post-election. Through this review, the research aims to identify gaps, utilise relevant theoretical and analytical approaches, and position its findings within the broader scholarly discourse on gender and electoral politics in India.</p>

LITERATURE REVIEW

Kapoor and Ravi's (2012) study titled "Women Voters in Indian Democracy: A Silent Revolution" on women's political engagement in India highlights a significant reduction in gender bias in voting patterns and a growing participation of women in elections since the 1990s. Their research emphasises the increasing influence of women voters on electoral outcomes.⁴

Analysing political manifestos reveals parties' commitments to women's rights and gender equality. The article "Ahead of 2024 polls, a gender manifesto" in The Indian Express emphasises the growing aspirations and concerns of women voters, calling for comprehensive gender policies and targeted initiatives to address diverse challenges faced by women, especially from marginalised communities.⁵

Research by Anuradha Chadha (2014) examines the historical and contemporary challenges to women's political participation, including

patriarchal attitudes, violence and unequal access to resources. The study underscores the need for comprehensive efforts to address gender disparities and create an inclusive environment for women in politics.⁶

Regarding migrant women's political participation, the article "Making space for migrants in manifestos" in *The Hindu* highlights the growing recognition of the need to address the concerns of this vulnerable population segment. Both the BJP and Congress party manifestos have acknowledged the challenges faced by migrant workers, including women, for the first time. However, the article points out that the promises lack specificity and fail to address the multifaceted challenges faced by this population.⁷

The coverage of gender-related issues in the manifestos of major political parties in India has been a topic of discussion in the media. *The Hindustan Times* reported on the BJP's manifesto, which included promises to empower women through initiatives like increasing representation in government jobs and providing financial assistance to female-headed households.⁸

The Hindu analysed the Congress party's manifesto, highlighting its commitments to address gender-based violence, improve access to healthcare for women and enhance women's political representation.⁹

DATA ANALYSIS

The analysis of Indian political party manifestos from 2004 to 2024 reveals a concerning trend of reinforcing traditional gender roles rather than addressing systemic challenges to women's empowerment and gender equality. Manifestos have consistently framed women's issues within the domestic sphere, emphasising their roles as caregivers and homemakers, overlooking the diverse experiences and

aspirations of women in the public sphere. This narrow framing perpetuates the patriarchal notion of women's primary responsibilities lying within the family, hindering progress towards gender equality. Despite recent policies addressing gender-based violence, reproductive health, political representation, workplace diversity and the rights of migrant women workers, there remains a persistent lack of gender inclusivity in political manifestos.

The BJP's manifestos historically emphasised women's roles within the family, reinforcing traditional gender norms. Initiatives like the "Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao" program focused on education and family welfare, aligning with the party's conservative stance on gender roles. In contrast, the INC prioritises education and employment opportunities for women, promising increased representation in government jobs and financial assistance through schemes like the Mahalakshmi scheme. The CPI focused on gender-based violence and reproductive health, reflecting a more comprehensive understanding of women's rights and needs. However, these policies often lacked an intersectional approach, failing to address the diverse challenges faced by women from different backgrounds.

Recent data highlights the need for gender-sensitive policies to empower women and address their unique concerns. The Women's Reservation Bill passed in Parliament, aims to enhance women's political representation. Rwanda's quota system serves as a successful model for gender equality in politics. Despite legislative progress, challenges persist, including delayed implementation of gender quotas and democratic erosion. The BJP and Congress manifestos promise workplace diversity, safe public spaces for women and legislation to combat gender-based violence. The CPI(M) focuses on healthcare and reproductive rights. The implementation of these policies is crucial for tangible benefits for women at all levels of society.

Gender inclusivity remains a critical issue, with manifestos often

overlooking the experiences of transgender and non-binary individuals. The marginalisation of the LGBTQIA+ community in political discourse reflects a broader reluctance to address their challenges. The need for comprehensive and transformative approaches to gender equality is evident, requiring a shift in how women's issues are framed and addressed. Challenging traditional gender norms, prioritising systemic reforms like the Women's Reservation Bill and promoting women's active participation in politics are essential steps towards achieving true gender equality in India.

Hence, while progress has been made in addressing gender disparities through policy initiatives, a more holistic and intersectional approach is needed to empower women and challenge entrenched patriarchal norms. The commitment of political parties to gender equality, allocation of tickets to women candidates and implementation of gender-sensitive policies are crucial for advancing women's rights and achieving genuine gender equality in India.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

The findings suggest that the BJP's manifestos have consistently framed women's issues within the domestic sphere, emphasising their roles as caregivers and homemakers. This reinforces traditional gender norms and hinders progress towards gender equality. In contrast, the INC and CPI manifestos have taken a more comprehensive approach, addressing issues like education, employment and reproductive health.

This research has addressed the critical issue of gender representation in Indian political party manifestos, revealing a concerning trend of reinforcing traditional gender roles and perpetuating patriarchal notions. The key arguments presented demonstrate how manifestos

consistently frame women's issues within the domestic sphere, overlooking their diverse experiences and aspirations in the public domain. Despite recent policy initiatives, a persistent lack of gender inclusivity underscores the necessity for comprehensive and transformative approaches to achieve genuine gender equality.

The overall findings of this study suggest that political parties in India must shift their framing of women's issues, moving beyond the confines of the household and recognizing the multifaceted challenges and aspirations of women across various spheres. The key takeaways emphasise the urgent need to challenge entrenched gender norms, prioritise systemic reforms like the Women's Reservation Bill and actively promote women's participation in the political process.

The broader implications of this research underscore the critical importance of gender-sensitive policies, inclusive representation and a fundamental shift in how gender issues are addressed in the political landscape. To circle back to the initial problem statement, this study argues for the adoption of a holistic, intersectional approach that empowers women, challenges traditional gender roles and fosters a more equitable and representative political system in India.

LIMITATIONS

Limitations of this study include the reliance on manifestos as primary sources, which may not fully capture the parties' actual policy implementations. Future research could delve into the efficacy of gender-sensitive policies, the impact of political party commitments on gender equality outcomes and the intersectional dimensions of women's empowerment in the Indian political landscape.

Further research is needed to monitor the long-term impact of gender-related policies and ensure their effective translation into tangible benefits for women at all levels of society.

ENDNOTES

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