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# Gender Inequality in Assam: Factors Affecting Women's Political Participation in Electoral Politics

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> **Abstract**---Democracy may be seen as a critical component of human development in its broadest sense. It is a need for human advancement. Democracy contributes to the achievement of the broader objectives of society's growth. In a democratic society, everyone, including men and women, is encouraged to take an active role in the free and fair election of their representatives. Everyone in the world benefits from democracy because it ensures that everyone has the same opportunities for success, equal rights, and the opportunity to participate in government activities, as well as a society that is free from prejudice. Contrast to this fundamental concept of democracy, women are more obviously barred from participation in politics and from many aspects of everyday life in a nation like India. Women in India are dissatisfied with national, state, and even municipal politics, despite the fact that over half of the country's women are still barred from participating in policy and decisionmaking. Similarly, Assam, India's north-eastern state, is not an exception in this respect. Accordingly, in this article an attempt has been made here to explore the extent of participation of women in political activities as well as the factors influencing participating of women in politics.

*Keywords*---Assam, elections, factors, inequality, political participation, women.

## Introduction

Participation in politics has been defined in a number of different ways. A person's participation in politics includes more than simply exercising one's right to vote; it also includes actively engaging in the decision-making process at all levels of government. In terms of human growth, it is very essential. It refers to people's active participation in initiatives or activities that benefit society as a whole. Individuals that take an active role in the process have access to a greater variety of choices (Rinartha et al., 2018). The right to freely engage in the development and execution of policies and programs by different governments for the benefit of society is often referred to as participation rights. Political participation encompasses a broader variety of actions such as voting in elections, belonging to different political parties, running for office, and other similar activities. Participation provides an individual with the opportunity to achieve while also connecting him or her to the political system. It is a key component of democratic government's ability to function effectively (Nagaraja, 2013; Rai, 2011). It ensures that citizens have adequate chances to participate actively in governing duties and accept responsibility for the failure of the government to act and commission. According to the International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences, political participation is the main method of granting or withdrawing permission in a democratic society. Voting, obtaining information, and becoming more involved in the nation's decision-making processes are examples of processes that fall under this category. Women, on the other hand, are not treated similarly to men in our nation. When it comes to engaging in government issues, they are subject to several restrictions (Lestari, 2021; Hadpagdee et al., 2021).

## Women's political participation in Assam

Women's role is extremely unpleasant in the context of political participation in the state of Assam. Although the Indian Government and the Assam Government have adopted several steps to enhance women's involvement in the decisionmaking process, the results are unsatisfactory (Shettar & Rajeshwari, 2015; McClosky & Brill, 1983). Studies of accessible literature have shown that the representation of women in the Assam Legislative Assembly is extremely low. They can't take a good place in the decision-making process and lead the party politics of Assam state. They are constantly apart from the mainstream of politics. It has also been observed that the number of female candidates in all the parliamentary elections and all the elections at Lok Sabha in Assam since 1952 has been far lower than the number of male candidates. There is a significant division between the number of elected men and women. Even though some women attempt to engage in politics, they do not have the opportunity to participate in a political activity due to male domination over political parties. There are fewer women in the political arena in the state of Assam who occupy important roles (Solórzano et al., 2020; Nawi et al., 2021).

Women's political participation is likewise extremely rare at the local level of governance in Assam. Although there were panchayats in Assam, some of the women who competed were elected, but their function was extremely minimal. Most of them do not know the government's operations since they were usually limited to home activities. It was also discovered that, even though government

reservation facilities have increased women's engagement at the grassroots level, such involvement is not voluntary, but is seen as a replacement for their male counterparts by most women elected representatives. The male members of their families regulate their choices and involvement. Women are severely underrepresented in various decision-making areas in the state of Assam, apart from political parties (Boopathy, 2000; Wang et al., 2015).

# Gender, politics and political participation

The concept of 'gender' is vital to understanding the position of women in society and essentially it is 'not an attribute of individuals but a social relationship, historically varying, and encompassing elements of labor, power, emotion, and language; it crosses individual subjectivities, institutions, culture, and language (Rai, 2005; Saxena, 1999). Structural and psychological barriers do exist for women to participate in the public sphere and more specifically in the political 'Structural or opportunity-based arguments' have focused 'conventional gender norms which tend to assign passive, and psychological or role theory approach argue about the relatively low levels of political motivation among women contribute to correspondingly low rates of elite-level participation.' Indeed, understanding the relationship between gender, politics, and political participation is much more complex because of the multiple variables involved that determines the issues of empowerment and status of women in a given society. While 'explanations of why women and men differ in voting and political participation typically refer back to a socialization hypothesis: women and men were treated and raised differently as children; therefore they have learned to be different as adults', it ignores the broader issue of power equations in society (Vecchione & Caprara, 2009; Hyun & Kim, 2015). Despite political gains in terms of procedural equality, compared to men, women have very little control over resources and coupled with low political knowledge or interest in politics may be less involved in activities which "rock the boat" and 'most women may still be trapped by a culture that sees politics as a man's world and keeps women's political self-esteem low.' Gender-based differences in society is more than just an issue of the socialization process, rather it reflects the way power and resources have been distributed and owned by a particular sex. "Gender and Development" (GAD) is a constructivist approach that does not place "women" at the center of its analysis, but questions the assumption that "women" are a homogeneous social category. Furthermore, other categories of domination, such as their ethnic and cultural origin, their sexual orientation, and age are also important factors that will shape the position of women. The GAD focus criticizes the hegemonic logic that economic change alone will empower women, rather it argues strongly that gender-differentiated policies are needed to reduce poverty (Neudecker, 1992; Cowell, 2000).

A study by Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer, 'The gendered effects of electoral institutions: Political engagement and participation' (2012) demonstrates that the electoral system has an important gendered effect on political engagement. In particular, they find that more proportional electoral systems are associated with smaller gender gaps in psychological engagement with politics. Since engagement with politics is strongly linked to political participation, it raises the possibility that this gendered impact of the electoral system may also reduce gender gaps in

political activities such as participating in an electoral campaign or engaging in political persuasion (Saelens & Epstein, 1996; Burger, 2002).

The number of women in a legislative body may be an important indicator of women's position in the public sphere, additionally, stated that female legislators are much more likely to make laws beneficial to females' interests (Das, 2013; Iwanaga, 2008). But research also reveals that the 'numbers of women in representative politics are not the best indicator of the extent and intensity of women's political participation because there is no necessary relationship between the two' rather women's participation in political and civic associations may be a better indicator of position of women in society. Traditional explanations of gender gaps in political participation, such as differences in political resources and engagement with politics, may interact with political institutions to lead to different gaps in different political contexts. But radical steps towards change will not be easy "where the infrastructural power' of the state is weak, the implementation of directives can become hostage to random factors outside the control of the state." Indeed a "demonstration effect" is not enough, where women in parliament will inspire more women to join politics or be politically active, rather 'economic, institutional or policy incentives are needed to stimulate the entry of new women into the political arena and more widespread participation of women as voters.' Institutionalized barriers' may further hamper women belonging to minority communities. This research is not an end in itself, rather there is substantial scope for further interpretation of relations between gender and politics as 'there is a substantial gap in the research literature' (Saikia et al., 2003; Goswami et al., 1999).

## Political participation of women in Lok Sabha elections of Assam

Despite having a long and illustrious history, women in Assam have been unable to hold a prominent place in the decision-making process and electoral politics (). Apart from that, they have made significant strides as voters in the last year. Assamese women have shown their commitment to Indian democratic values.

Table 1
Participation of women in Lok Sabha elections of Assam from 1952 to 2019

Year of Election	1951	1957	1962	1967	1971	1977	1980	1985	1989	1991	1996	1998	1999	2004	2009	2014	2019
Contest	2	2	3	2	3	3	2	4	0	8	9	3	9	6	11	16	14
ants																	
Total	12/0	12/2	12/2	14/1	14/	14/2	14/0	14/0	14/0	14/0	14/1	14/1	14/2	14/0	14/2	14/2	14/1
Seats					1												
/Winne																	
rs																	
Percent	0	16.	16.	7.	7.	14.	0	0	0	0	7.	7.	14.	0 %	14.	14.	7.
age	%	67%	67%	14%	14%	29%	%	%	%	%	14%	14%	29%		29%	29%	14%
Source	Source: Election Commission of India																

Table 1 shows the percentage of Assamese women in Lok Sabha in relation to the total number of seats in Assam. Following are the major observations:

- From 1951–1962, in Assam Lok Sabha Elections, there were 10 and 12 Lok Sabha constituencies and seats respectively. Likewise, from 1967-2019, there were 14 Lok Sabha constituencies and 14 seats.
- In the 1951 election, a total of 2 contestants were defeated. But in the 1957 and 1962 Lok Sabha elections, 2 of each women candidates won which represents 16.67 %.
- In the 1967 and 1971 elections, only one women candidate won from each, representing a lower percentage than earlier, i.e, 7.14 %. But in the 1977 election two women candidates won with a percentage of 14.29 %.
- Between 1951-1980 the percentage of contestants of Assamese women in Lok Sabha elections remained almost the same. After 1980, the percentage of women candidates contested in Lok Sabha elections is increasing. From 1951-2019, the highest number of female candidates contested in the 2014 Lok Sabha election with a number of 16.
- Interestingly from 1980 to 1989, not a single female candidate forwarded their candidature. Again, in the 1991 election the number of women candidates increased up to 8 but no one got elected. In 1996, 1 out of 9 contestants won. In 1999, the corresponding figure was 2 out of 9.
- In 2004, only six candidates forwarded their candidature but none could win. Women's representation increased in the 2009 general election, where 11 were female candidates and 2 could manage to win the election.
- In the next election 2014, out of 16 candidates, only 2 female candidates won and in 2019 the candidature of female contestants was 14 but only 1 could win the seat. The feeling of gender inequality in the Lok Sabha elections was ever faced in the state.
- From 1951-2019 not more than 2(16.67%) women candidates were able to occupy the Lok Sabha seats from Assam which shows a very low percentage of women in comparison to male representation.

# Political participation of women in Assam legislative assembly elections

Assam has 126 constituencies, but the participation of women in state legislature compared to its male counterpart is very low.

Table 2 Participation of women in Assam legislative assembly elections from 1951 to 2021

Year of Election	1951	1957	1962	1967	1972	1978	1983	1985	1991	1996	2001	2006	2011	2016	2021
Total Contestants	458	307	409	493	478	938	471	1133	1657	1228	916	997	981	1190	946
Male Contestants	457	301	405	486	466	916	468	1104	1607	1183	861	927	896	1099	870
Female	1	6	4	7	12	22	3	29	50	45	55	70	85	91	76
Contestants															
Total No. of	94/	94/	105/	126/	114/	126/	126/	126/	126/	126/	126/	126/	126/	126/	126/
Seats/ Total No.	108	108	105	126	114	126	126	126	126	126	126	126	126	126	126
of Representatives															
No. of Female	1	5	4	5	8	1	2	5	5	7	10+1	13	15	8	5
Winners											=11*				
% of Female	0.93	4.63	3.81	3.97	7.02	0.79	1.59	3.97	3.97	5.56	8.73	10.32	11.90	6.35	3.97
Winners	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%

Source: Election Commission of India. (\*By-Election was conducted for Moran Constituency which was won by women candidate with effect from  $16^{th}$  October 2004)

Table 2 shows the percentage of women participants in State Assembly Elections in relation to the total number of seats. Following are the major observations:

- While the percentage of female elected representatives was only 0.93% in the first Legislative Assembly Election of 1951, it increased to 11.90% in 2011. In the 2011 Election highest number of women were elected after independence. The number of female contestants has also increased greatly from 1 in 1951 to 91 in 2016.
- While the percentage of female elected representatives was 7.02% in 1972, it suddenly dropped to 0.79% in 1978. The later years witnessed a gradual increase in the percentage of female elected representatives.
- In the Assembly Election of 2016, out of 1190 candidates, the total number of male candidates were 1099 (92.35 %) where the number of women candidates was only 91 (7.65 %), which is the highest ever in the long history of the State Assembly Elections among them only 8 (6.35%) could manage to win the election.
- In the last Assembly Election of 2021, out of 946 candidates, the total number of male candidates were 870 whereas the number of women candidates was only 76, and only 5 (3.97%) could manage to win the election which is very low in comparison to 2011 and 2016 Assembly Elections. This table shows a very less number of female candidates in comparison to male contestants of State Assembly Elections.

# Obstacles of women's political participation in Assam

There are many reasons which create hurdles in the participation of women in the politics of Assam such as patriarchal context, the existing societal value system, the private-public divide in terms of domain identification, and male preponderance in political institutions (Schlozman et al., 2012; Stockemer, 2007). For conducting any activities they have to depend upon the male members of their family. Besides, that women do not get adequate financial support from the political parties to contest the elections. Due to unequal distribution of resources, they do not occupy a strong position in politics as well as are also unable to avail sufficient political training (Chafetz, 2006; Ghani et al., 2013). Societal and cultural norms and customs also prevent them from participating in politics. Similarly, poverty is another hurdle in the realization of women's involvement in politics. It has also been found in the study of available literature that the lack of political wills is also one of the important reasons for the non-participation of women in politics (Singh & Gupta, 2013; Bathla et al., 2012; Zani & Barrett, 2012). A similar condition is found in the case of those Hindu women elected representatives who did not attend the meetings. Their health status is also a major constraint in women's participation. From the study of Mamata Narzary's "Women's Marginal Role in Politics with Special Reference to Assam", it has been depicted that the cause of low representation of women in politics is the good tradition of nature of their domestic responsibility and workload of women. It made it extremely hard for them to spare more time for politics. Thus women are left behind from getting all the information that men pick up easily from casual gossip with all kinds of people. These result in the non-participation of women in the politics of Assam as well as in India (Uslaner & Conway, 1985; Bhattacharjee, 2020).

## Factors influencing electoral participation

Political participation depends on a variety of factors some of them are socioeconomic (status, education, religion, sex, etc.); some psychological (differences in drives and capacities); whereas others are influenced by the political environment (political structures and institutions, party system, etc.) But all these factors are closely interconnected (Beauregard, 2014; Cornwall & Goetz, 2005). The extent to which citizens participate in politics and how they do are influenced significantly by their social circumstances. These circumstances include how individuals live, where they live, the kind of education they have, their occupation and how much they earn, and the opportunities they have for improving their lives. Social circumstances affect the level of resources available for political participation and serve to foster or inhibit the development of attitudes and beliefs that underlie various types of participation. Indicators of social circumstances include such characteristics as age, race, education, caste, region, place of residence, marital status, etc. The five-nation study Verba and Nie focus on the strong relationship between education and political activities; especially in region campaigning activity and communal activity. Life experiences, which are partly determined by social circumstances, also influence a person's political behavior. The difference in life experiences is not constant over time as life experience changes with changing social and economic conditions that effects citizen's political views and citizen's mobilization for political activity also change (Bhalotra et al., 2013; Burrell, 2004).

Political participation also influences the psychological orientation of the citizens. Group consciousness is another important factor that mobilizes political participation. Class or group consciousness may produce high levels of organizational involvement and political participation. The group or class consciousness of people binds them through some common interest, the serving of which induces them to involve in organization's/organized behavior and ultimately this mobilized their political participation. The political environment also plays an important role in motivating or discouraging participation. The electoral system, fundraising techniques, campaigning support of political parties or other organizations may promote and facilitate political participation. In democratic countries, the scope of political participation is greater than in others the success of democracy depends on the very nature, and intensity of political participation is a matter of counting dispute. It must be recognized as a key element in the political environment (Bashevkin, 1985; Baker, 1983; Baruah, 2012). The expansion of radio, television coverage, newspaper, print media, and the overall revolution in information has a significant impact on citizens in the perception of government, politicians, and the political process. In most of the contemporary modern period system, there is a section of people who despite being given ample scope for political participation remain shy of it. To this, we can account that there are many factors apart from the directly political ones that influence political participation. Thus, a lot of interacting factors influence the nature and degree of political participation (Rae Atkeson & Rapoport, 2003).

## **Findings**

The key points emerging from the observation and field data may be stated as follows:

- Political participation means participation in the exercise of power, the power to effectively influence decision-making processes and policies, to reverse the existing situation wherever they are disadvantageous, and to bring about necessary social changes.
- It is untenable to argue that a substantial increase in the representation of women will automatically lead to the greater promotion of women's interest.
- Women's interest can be promoted only when factors like sexual division of labour, exclusion of women from certain positions and levels of power, and their poor representation at decision-making machinery are done away with.
- The political parties generally consider women capable as flag bearers, but they are not considered capable of fighting elections.
- The political parties seem to seize upon the 'deceased leader's wife syndrome to nominate women candidates regardless of their assessment of candidates in the usual run of things.
- The political parties are to come out of the narrow grooves of treating women's problems as merely welfare-related measures.
- The women themselves have to increase their awareness as a distinctive constituency as women.
- There are various factors, which are responsible for the low participation of women in politics. The causes behind less participation of women in politics include poor educational level, poor economic condition, shyness, less support from guardians, family as well as society.

#### Recommendations

As the low participation of women has become a global issue, it is the duty of every alert citizen of modern democracy to think about it and must try to find out some measures to tackle the problem. As it is not a very easy task there must be a collective effort from the individual person, the social organisation, the media, the political parties, the judiciary, and the state machinery. It requires some measures for the final solution of the problem (Aguinaga et al., 2013).

• The reservation of seats is a very significant way of enhancing women's involvement in politics. It is the main institutional vehicle for increasing women's political involvement. Reservation is a technique in which a specific proportion of legislative seats are reserved for a certain segment of society left behind in the socio-economic growth and social and political modernization process. Although the 73rd amendment to the Constitution provided for 33 percent reservation of seats to women in local governments, women's participation in the national and state legislatures remains very little. The 81st Amendment Bill (1996), which is also known as the Reserve Bill, intended to retain a majority of women's seats in parliament and national legislatures by 33%. Although democracy demands the appropriate representation of all segments of society, women remain generally under-

represented in reality and their interests are seldom taken into account. That is why it is the greatest necessity of the day to guarantee the representation of women in the legislative elections by reserving specific seats for them. Legislation must be passed which states that one-third of the seats, elected or nominated to legislative bodies, including state legislative assemblies, must be reserved for women. The duty rests with civil society and the media, so that the policymaker and the implementation apparatus may consider the problem more seriously and re-animate the subject of reservation.

- Money plays a major role in politics nowadays. Nobody can take a single step in the contemporary political arena without money. Because of the lack of funds, many ambitious women are unable to participate in the political process. That is why. some kinds of measures have to be created to provide the willing ladies with funding.
- In this respect, Judiciary may play a very important role. It should take certain measures. There are many other kinds of anti-social elements and electoral politics activities that also delay a significant number of ambitious women from joining politics. In such a scenario, the court must play a proactive role in avoiding these forces and ensuring an environment of non-violence during elections. It may also take tough actions against those political workers and candidates who want, with the aid of money and physical force, to guarantee their success. The court may also debase candidates who have histories of violence against women in the competing elections. The Election Commission may also withdraw the candidates who have an indulgence record in any anti-social activity.
- Educated women are indeed more conscious of their democratic rights. Thus another essential step in increasing women's political involvement is to educate women in a meaningful way. Education has the most important function in securing employment opportunities, which in turn helps people preserve economic independence. Economic liberty contributes to the development of freedom of choice and the development of a strong personality. That is why women must be educated. The State Government needs to take the required steps to reserve more and more places for females in general and professional education so that they may qualify for various positions. Economic autonomy will enable them to build self-confidence.
- The Government should guarantee women's reservation in government employment as part of affirmative action initiatives. Special programs for women's job creation should be adopted. The government may also implement a policy of 'positive discrimination' in favor of women being able to work in different professions at its discretion. Economic freedom will allow them to exceed conventional bondage and pave the path for social integration.

## Conclusion

Based on the data shown above, it can be stated that, although women's participation in politics is increasing, it is still not at a pace that the majority of the public finds acceptable. Women's empowerment, according to the results of the study, maybe accomplished by including them at all levels of political spheres

and institutions. To achieve social development objectives, women's political participation and educational levels must be increased to be as per with their male counterparts. Any commandment on the intended subject would be useless unless and until it is adapted to the people's unique circumstances.

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