

Political Representation of Women in 21st Century: A Study of Bihar State Legislative Assembly

Md. Asaad Raza

Department of Public Administration, Arignar Anna Government Arts & Science College, Karaikal,
U.T. of Puducherry
Email: asaadraza@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper examines the political representation of women in the 21st century, using the Bihar State Legislative Assembly as a case study. Although India has witnessed a significant increase in women's participation as both voters and campaigners, their presence in legislative bodies—at both national and state levels—and within political party hierarchies remains critically low. Our analysis identifies distinct factors influencing women's involvement as voters versus their roles as campaigners. The findings underscore the necessity of targeted interventions to correct this imbalance. We argue for implementing proactive measures, such as reserving legislative seats for women and ensuring their greater inclusion in decision-making positions within political parties and the government. These steps are crucial for addressing a fundamental disparity in the country's political landscape.

Keywords: Women representation, Bihar State Legislative Assembly

1. Introduction: Status of women in Indian society

The position of women in Indian society has undergone a dramatic transformation over the centuries, marked by a complex interplay of cultural, social, and legal forces. From being venerated in ancient texts to confronting systemic discrimination in later periods, the contemporary context for women in India reflects both remarkable progress and enduring challenges. Even in the ancient Vedic period, women were held in high regard. Historical and religious scriptures indicate that they were educated, participated actively in philosophical discourse, and held prominent positions within their families and communities [1]. Intellectual leaders like Gargi and Maitreyi are celebrated examples of this era [1]. However, this status gradually declined during the medieval period. The rise of rigid patriarchal structures, a series of foreign invasions, and the entrenchment of restrictive social customs such as purdah, child marriage, and sati led to their increased marginalization.

The British colonial period saw the emergence of significant social reform movements. Visionaries like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, and Jyotirao Phule courageously campaigned against inhumane practices and championed the cause of women's education [2]. Furthermore, women played a pivotal role in the Indian freedom movement. Figures such as Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant, and Kasturba Gandhi actively participated in the struggle for independence, demonstrating their capabilities far beyond

traditional domestic roles [3]. Post-independence, the Indian Constitution guaranteed constitutional equality for women, notably through Article 14 and Article 15(3) [4]. A series of progressive laws have since been enacted to protect their rights, addressing issues such as dowry, domestic violence, and workplace harassment, and ensuring equal pay [5, 6]. Women's presence in education, politics, business, and the workforce has improved significantly. Today, women are taking on prominent roles in diverse fields, from sports and cinema to government and science.

Despite this notable progress, persistent gender disparities continue to affect millions of Indian women. Deeply entrenched social norms, particularly in rural and marginalized communities, contribute to ongoing issues such as gender-based violence, a preference for male children, and inequitable access to healthcare and education [7]. Women's representation in political and top corporate leadership positions, while improving, remains notably lower than that of their male counterparts. Moreover, societal attitudes toward women's freedom and autonomy are often contradictory. While educated women in urban areas may enjoy more opportunities and visibility, many still face restrictions in their personal and professional lives. Personal safety remains a significant concern, with crimes against women frequently making headlines and sparking national outrage. Thus, the status of women in India is a story of encouraging achievements tempered by serious, ongoing challenges. While the nation has made strides in recognizing the rights and capabilities of women, there is a continued need for inclusive growth, profound attitudinal shifts, and the stronger implementation of existing laws to ensure genuine gender equality. Empowering women is not only a matter of justice but is also a prerequisite for the overall development and prosperity of the nation.

The Status of Women in Bihar

The status of women in Bihar is a complex reflection of its unique historical legacy and socio-economic landscape. The state has made significant strides in recent years, particularly in areas like education and political participation. However, women in Bihar continue to face deeply entrenched challenges, and a substantial gap between legal rights and lived reality persists for many. Historically, women's roles in Bihar were largely circumscribed by patriarchal traditions, early marriages, and a lack of educational access. While social reform movements during the colonial period and after independence brought some awareness of women's rights, their impact was slow to reach the state's vast rural areas, which were often burdened by poverty and illiteracy.

In this context, one of the most encouraging areas of progress has been education. Government initiatives, such as the **Mukhyamantri Balika Cycle Yojana** and providing free uniforms, have been instrumental in boosting girls' school attendance [8]. While the female literacy rate in Bihar remains below the national average, it has been steadily rising. The 2011 Census reported a female literacy rate of approximately 53.3%, a figure that has since seen further improvement, especially in urban centers [9]. Political participation has also seen a major shift. Bihar was one of the first states to implement a 50% reservation for women in its Panchayati Raj Institutions [10]. This policy has enabled thousands of women to be elected to local leadership roles, advocating for better community services. However, a persistent challenge is that some of these elected women are perceived to be proxies for their male relatives, highlighting a need for deeper empowerment at the grassroots level.

In spite of these advancements, women in Bihar continue to confront serious issues. Gender-based violence, including domestic abuse, dowry-related deaths, and sexual harassment, remains a critical

concern, with many cases going unreported due to social stigma and a lack of legal awareness. Health indicators for women, particularly maternal mortality and access to reproductive healthcare, are also alarming, especially in remote regions. Further, economic participation of women is limited. A large number are employed in the informal sector or work as unpaid agricultural labourers. Social restrictions and a lack of vocational training often limit their opportunities to enter formal employment or pursue professional careers. Hence, the status of women in Bihar presents a paradox of progress and inequality. While state-led initiatives and policy reforms have generated positive change, much work remains. Achieving genuine gender equality in Bihar will require not only stronger laws and education but also a profound shift in societal attitudes and increased support for women's autonomy in all spheres of life.

2. Political awareness among women in Bihar

Bihar, a state with a rich history and a large population, has experienced considerable political evolution. Despite facing significant socio-economic adversity, the state has seen a noticeable increase in political consciousness among women, particularly evident in their voting patterns and local governance participation. This growing awareness is indicative of women's shifting influence on the state's democratic processes. Historically, the role of women in Bihar was largely confined to household duties with minimal public political involvement. While social movements, from the anti-colonial struggle to the JP Movement of the 1970s, did provide limited avenues for female participation, this involvement was often symbolic rather than a permanent fixture of the political system. The true turning point came with the enactment of the **73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments** in the early 1990s, which mandated reservations for women in *Panchayati Raj Institutions* (PRIs) [10]. This landmark change opened the door for a new generation of female politicians, many from rural and disadvantaged communities, to enter the political arena.

One of the most striking developments in Bihar's recent political history is the increasing electoral participation of women. In state elections over the last two decades, the voter turnout among women has not only risen consistently but has also, on occasion, surpassed that of men [12]. This trend has had a significant impact on political strategy in the state. Several factors have contributed to this increase in female voting:

- **Targeted Government Outreach:** Focused initiatives and public awareness campaigns by the government and the Election Commission have encouraged women to vote with greater independence.
- **Improved Accessibility:** Wider access to personal identification, mobile phones, and transportation on election-day has removed many logistical barriers that previously prevented women from reaching polling stations.
- **Issue-Based Voting:** Women, especially in rural areas, are increasingly casting their votes based on governance-related issues that directly affect their daily lives, such as road quality, access to healthcare, and personal safety.

This change in voting behaviour has compelled political parties to address women's concerns more seriously and to develop policies and welfare schemes that cater to their specific needs.

Further, the policy of reserving 50% of seats for women in Bihar's PRIs has been revolutionary [10]. It has not only provided women with formal positions of power but has also served as a crucial environment for nurturing political skills and awareness. Some of the key outcomes of this reservation include:

- **Greater Representation:** More than 1.5 lakh women have been elected to local bodies since the quota was established, fundamentally changing the composition of local leadership.
- **Skill Development and Empowerment:** Elected women have gained valuable experience in administrative procedures, budget management, and policy implementation.
- **Creation of Role Models:** The success of female leaders at the village and block levels inspires other women, demonstrating that effective governance is possible in spaces traditionally dominated by men.

However, the path has not been without obstacles. Major challenges to full participation include:

- **Proxy Politics:** A common issue is that female representatives are often influenced or controlled by male family members, an unofficial practice known as "mukhiyapati".
- **Limited Training and Education:** Many elected women, particularly those with less formal education, lack the administrative and governance training necessary to function with complete independence.
- **Social and Domestic Constraints:** Traditional gender roles and domestic responsibilities continue to limit their mobility and ability to fully dedicate themselves to their political duties.

Despite these hurdles, many women have shown resilience, gradually asserting their independence and developing a strong political voice. Key barriers to women's political leadership include:

- **Patriarchal Party Structures:** Political parties in Bihar are often dominated by male leaders, making it difficult for women to rise to positions of authority.
- **Financial Disadvantages:** The high cost of running an election campaign is a significant barrier for women, who often have less access to financial capital.
- **Violence and Intimidation:** The physically demanding and sometimes violent nature of politics in Bihar can deter women from seeking electoral office.

In this context, education has been a powerful driver of political awareness among women. However, Bihar's female literacy rate, at approximately 60%, remains a significant concern, with women in rural and impoverished areas being the most affected [9]. Despite this, a new generation of educated young women, particularly in urban areas, is becoming more politically vocal through social media, student activism, and public forums. In addition, the civil society and media have played a vital role to promote the political awareness among political women. Even, various NGOs and women organizations in Bihar are working in this direction through:

- **Leadership Development:** Conducting workshops and training programs for both PRI representatives and emerging female leaders.
- **Civic Education:** Running campaigns to inform women about their voting rights, legal protections, and public policy issues.
- **Enhanced Media Visibility:** Regional news outlets and digital platforms are increasingly providing coverage of women leaders and issues related to gender in politics, helping to normalize their presence in the public sphere.

Even, government policies also have been instrumental in fostering an environment conducive to women's political empowerment. Programs like *Jeevika* have mobilized millions of women into self-help groups, providing a pathway for many to enter local political roles [13]. Similarly, educational schemes such as the *Mukhyamantri Kanya Utthan Yojana* and the provision of bicycles for schoolgirls (*Mukhyamantri Balika Cycle Yojana*) have increased female school attendance, building long-term confidence and civic awareness [8, 14].

Summarily, the political consciousness of women in Bihar is a complex and evolving narrative. Their journey from being a largely passive electorate to becoming active local leaders is the result of constitutional reforms, dedicated efforts by civil society, and broader social change. However, persistent patriarchy, economic inequality, and educational disparities continue to impede their full participation. Ultimately, the political empowerment of women is not just a matter of social justice; it is a fundamental requirement for Bihar's continued development, as politically engaged women have the power to shape policy, strengthen communities, and build a more inclusive democracy.

3. Indian women in electoral process

The involvement of Indian women in the electoral process has been significantly influenced by constitutional rights and legal measures aimed at increasing their political representation and participation. The **73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments**, in particular, were instrumental in this change, by reserving a minimum of one-third of all seats in PRIs and municipal bodies for women [11]. Bihar pioneered a further step in 2006 by becoming the first state to implement a 50% reservation for women in its local governing bodies, a model subsequently adopted by many other states [10]. These legislative changes also mandated that at least one-third of the total number of chairperson positions in these local bodies be reserved for women, ensuring their presence in leadership roles.

The political engagement for women is more than just a democratic entitlement; it is a critical avenue for achieving gender equality and social empowerment. It encompasses various activities, from the act of voting and running for public office to joining political parties and influencing public policy. While women in India have been increasingly active in these areas, their overall political presence remains lower than that of men. A notable trend, however, is their growing power as voters. For instance, while women's voter turnout in the 2014 general elections was slightly lower than men's, this gap was closed in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, where female turnout marginally exceeded male turnout [12]. Despite this progress, women's political representation in national and state legislatures continues to be low due to enduring social norms and structural inequalities.

A number of deep-rooted barriers continue to impede women's full political participation. One significant obstacle is the pervasive threat of violence, a factor that scholars have identified as a major deterrent to women's civic engagement. Domestic and sexual violence, often linked to lower literacy and patriarchal social structures, undermines women's sense of safety and dignity, making them hesitant to engage in public and political life [7]. Discrimination also persists despite constitutional protections. Women frequently face challenges in their political journeys, including limited access to vital information, the burden of household responsibilities, and discriminatory attitudes that question their capabilities as

leaders. This is particularly acute for Dalit women, who, despite legal seat reservations, often encounter abuse and harassment in their roles as elected officials.

Illiteracy is another significant barrier. With a female literacy rate that is considerably lower than the male rate, many women lack the foundational knowledge to fully understand the political system and their rights. This can leave them vulnerable to exploitation and limit their ability to advocate for themselves. Financial constraints are also a major impediment, as many women, especially in rural areas, lack the personal funds required to run a campaign or even to travel to attend political meetings. This economic disadvantage restricts their ability to gain the necessary training and experience to advance in politics. To overcome these deeply entrenched barriers, a focus on women's empowerment has become crucial. This includes supporting women at the family level and improving their status within the household. The government of India has launched various initiatives to support these efforts. The **National Mission for Empowerment of Women (NMEW)** was created to consolidate programs aimed at boosting women's economic empowerment through skill development and vocational training [15]. Similarly, the **National Policy for the Empowerment of Women**, enacted in 2001, provides a framework to address gender inequality and violence, thereby creating a more equitable political environment for women [16].

4. Bihar State Legislative Assembly

The Bihar Legislative Assembly, officially known as the Bihar Vidhan Sabha, stands as the lower house of the state's bicameral legislature. This legislative body is integral to the governance of Bihar, responsible for enacting state laws and overseeing the executive branch. The state's first elections were held in 1952, marking the beginning of its journey as a modern democratic institution. The foundational structure for Bihar's legislature was established with the enactment of the **Government of India Act 1935** [17]. This Act introduced a bicameral legislative system, separating Bihar from Orissa and creating a two-house legislature for the state. The first iteration of this system was a legislative council established on July 22, 1936. The first joint session of both houses of the Bihar Assembly was convened on July 22, 1937, signifying a major milestone in the state's political history. Initially, the assembly's total strength was 331 members. However, following the state's partition, which led to the creation of Jharkhand in 2000, the number of seats was revised to its current total of 243 members [18].

The Bihar Legislative Assembly is not a perpetual body; its normal term is five years from its inaugural session, unless it is dissolved earlier. Its members are directly elected by the public through a universal adult franchise, ensuring direct representation for the state's population. The assembly conducts its business through a series of sessions held throughout the year, typically categorized as the budget, monsoon, and winter sessions. These sessions are crucial for legislative debate, policy formulation, and financial oversight. The assembly's proceedings are presided over by a Speaker, who is elected from among its members. The Speaker holds a pivotal role, maintaining order during debates, regulating the assembly's agenda, and possessing the exclusive authority to certify whether a bill is a money bill or an ordinary bill. The Speaker generally does not cast a vote except in the rare event of a tie, upholding the principle of impartiality. Assisting the Speaker and managing the administrative functions of the assembly is the Secretariat, a dedicated body of staff led by a Secretary. This Secretariat plays a vital role in the efficient operation of the legislative process.

The political structure of the state is intrinsically linked to the Assembly's composition. The leader of the political party or coalition that secures a majority of seats in the Legislative Assembly is invited by the Governor to form the government and is designated as the **Chief Minister**. The Chief Minister then forms a **Council of Ministers** from among the elected members. This Council is collectively responsible to the Assembly, meaning that the government remains in power only as long as it enjoys the confidence of the majority of its members. The Assembly thus acts as a crucial check on the executive, holding the government accountable for its actions and policies through debates, questions, and motions. The core function of the Assembly is the creation of state laws. This process begins with the introduction of a legislative proposal, known as a bill, by either a minister or a private member. The bill undergoes multiple stages of review and debate, including a first reading where it is introduced, followed by a detailed discussion where amendments can be proposed. After the final reading and a majority vote, the bill is passed by the Assembly and sent to the Governor for assent, upon which it becomes a law. This structured process ensures that all legislative decisions are the result of careful deliberation and democratic consensus.

Beyond its formal duties, the Legislative Assembly serves as the primary platform for political discourse and public policy formation in Bihar. It is the forum where the Opposition plays its role by scrutinizing government policies, raising public concerns, and offering alternative viewpoints. Debates within the Assembly on issues ranging from agricultural reforms to public health and education are closely watched by the media and the public, making it a powerful institution for shaping the state's political narrative. The Assembly, therefore, is not merely a legislative body but a vibrant center of democracy where the state's collective will is expressed and where accountability is maintained.

5. Women representation in Bihar State Legislative Assembly

Bihar state assembly election in 21st century was conducted in six times namely March 2000, March 2005, November 2005, November 2010, November 2015, November 2020 election. The total assembly seat was 324, 243, 243, 243, 243, 243 for the election March 2000, March 2005, November 2005, November 2010, November 2015, November 2020, respectively. As per Election Commission data the total contesting female candidates in compare to total contesting candidates is shown in figure 1. This figure indicates all six elections data. This can be seen from figure that contesting female candidates are 189, 234, 138, 307, 271, 370 against the total contesting candidates of the number of 3941, 3193, 2135, 3523, 3411, 3733 in the elections March 2000, March 2005, November 2005, November 2010, November 2015, November 2020, respectively. It indicates that in the election November 2005 the female contesting candidates are less in number in compare to the other five elections. Out of these contesting candidates the total elected female candidates in compare to total elected candidates is shown in figure 2. Figure 2 reveals that in these elections elected female are 19, 3, 25, 34, 28, 26 with respect to the total elected candidates 324, 243, 243, 243, 243, 243 in six elections respectively. This can be seen that in the election March 2000 the elected female candidates are in lowest number and it is the 1.23 % of the total elected candidate for the same year [19].

Further, the total elected female candidates on reserved assembly seats verses total elected female candidates for the elections held in March 2000, March 2005, November 2005, November 2010,

November 2015, November 2020 is given in figure 3. Here it can be seen that in these elections the total elected female candidates on reserved assembly seats are 7, 1, 3, 4, 7, 8 against the total elected female candidates 19, 3, 25, 34, 28, 26 in the respective elections. This exhibits that in March 2005 election the female candidates elected on reserved assembly seats are minimum number of 1, while in November 2020 election it is the highest in number. Although, this number of elected female candidates on reserved assembly seats are over the total number of reserved assembly seats in the state. Figure 4 presents the total reserved seat are 76, 39, 39, 34, 40, 40 in which female candidates are elected [18]. The percentage of elected female candidates against reserved seat are 9.21%, 2.56%, 7.69%, 11.76%, 17.50%, 20% in the March 2000, March 2005, November 2005, November 2010, November 2015, November 2020 elections, respectively [19].

However, the elected female candidates over total contested female candidates for these six elections in was not uniform. Figure 5 showing the variation of the elected female candidates over total contested female candidates in the elections. It can be observed from figure that elected female candidates were 19, 3, 25, 34, 28, 26 with respect to the contesting female candidates which are 189, 234, 138, 307, 271, 370 respectively in the corresponding elections held in March 2000, March 2005, November 2005, November 2010, November 2015, November 2020 [19]. Result reveals that except March 2005 and November 2010 elections, the female representation was similar in others elections. This is also remarkable that with respect to election contested female candidates, the contested female candidates on reserved seat are low. This can be seen in figure 6, where the election contested female candidates on reserved seat were 60, 42, 29, 67, 56, 77 over total contested female candidates were 189, 234, 138, 307, 271, 370 in the elections held in March 2000, March 2005, November 2005, November 2010, November 2015, November 2020, respectively [19].

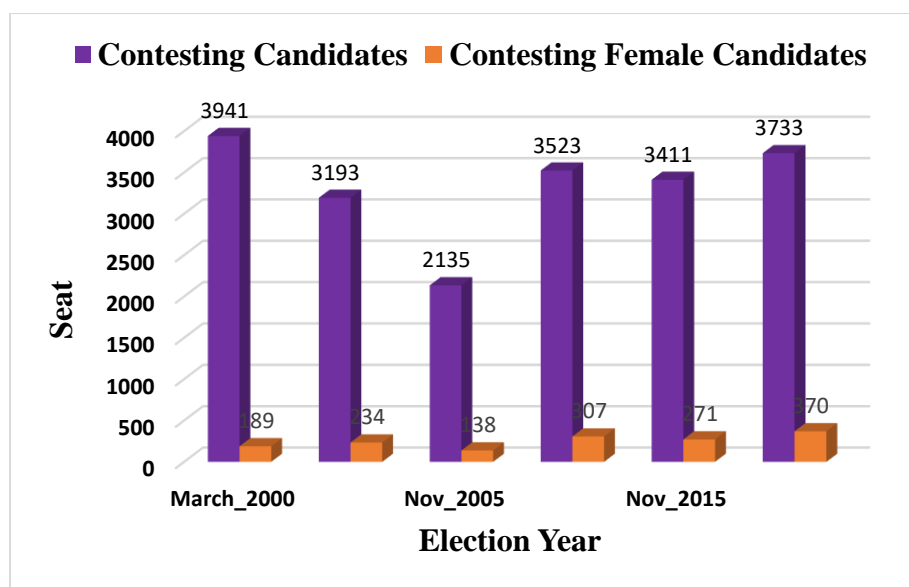


Figure 1. Election contesting candidates vs contesting female candidates response.

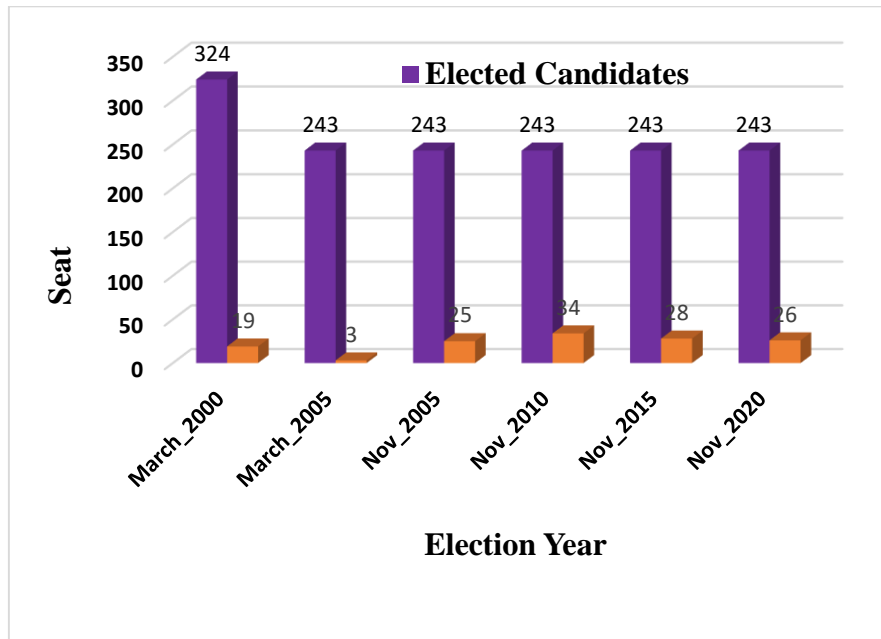


Figure 2. Elected candidates vs elected female candidates response.

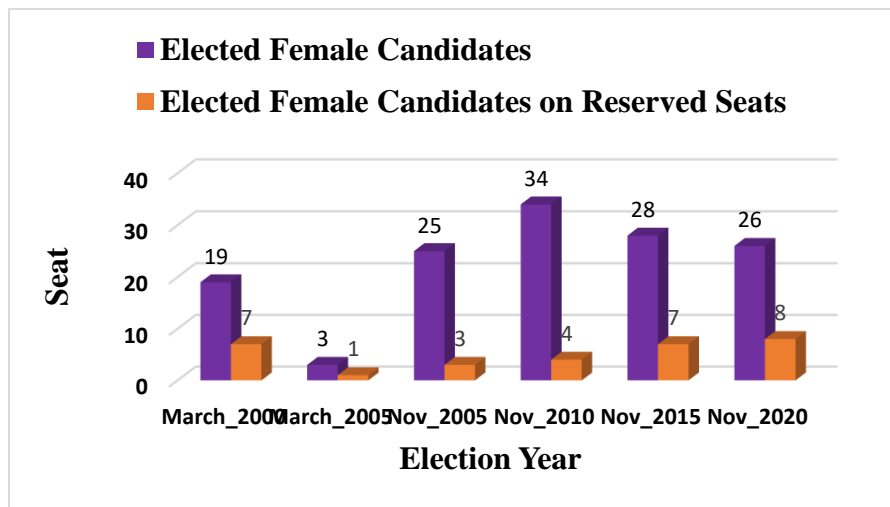


Figure 3. Response of elected female candidates vs elected female candidates on reserved seats.

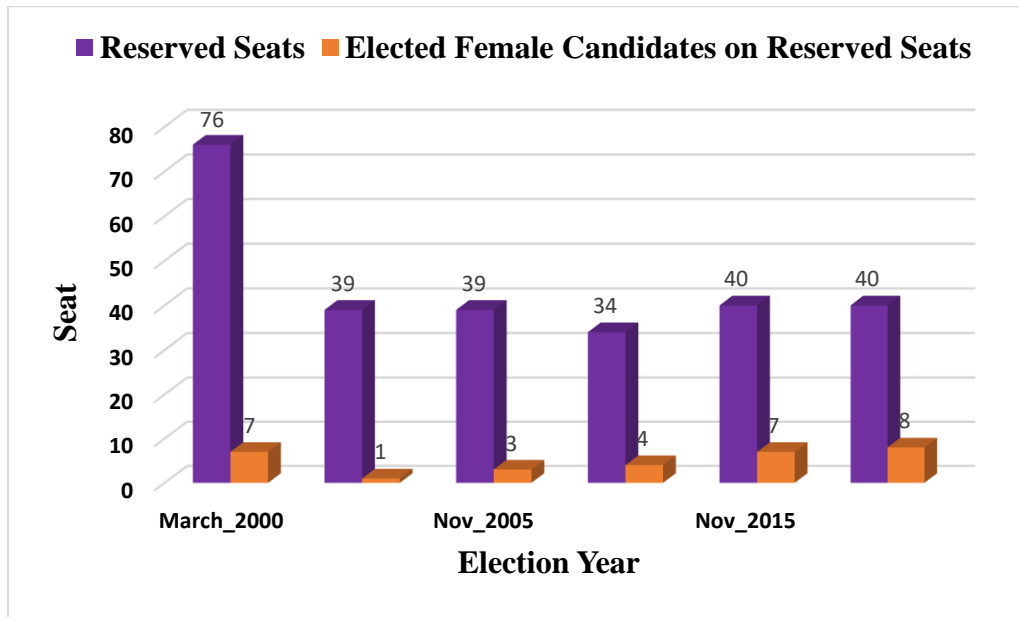


Figure 4. Total reserved assembly seat vs elected female candidates on reserved seats.

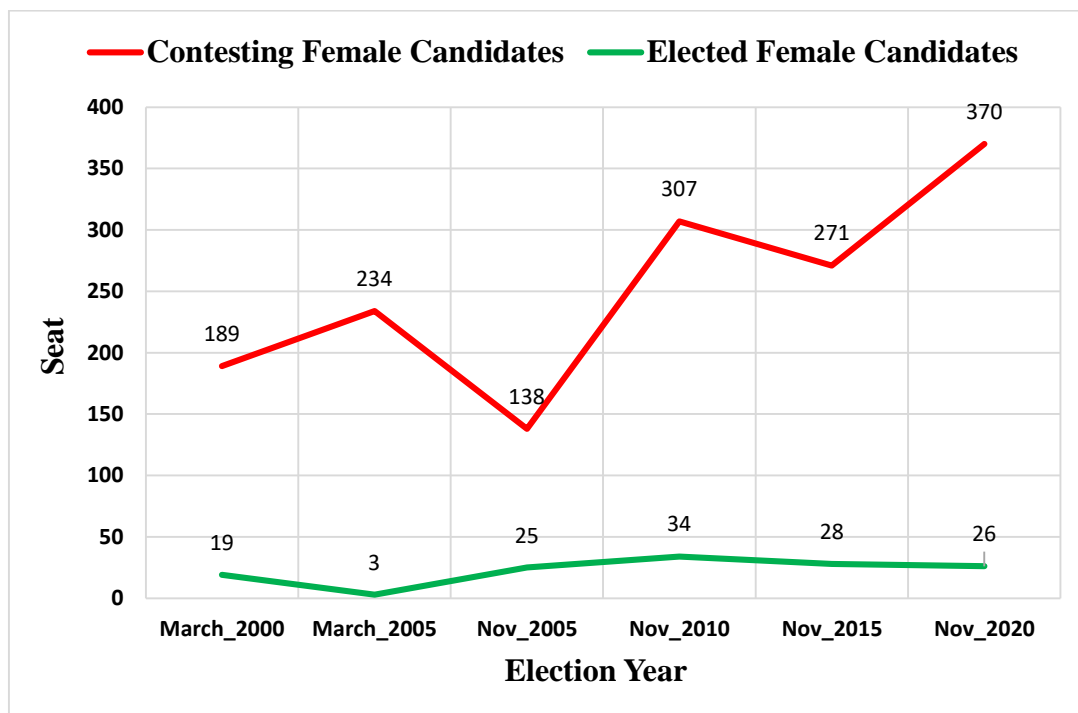


Figure 5. Election contesting female candidates vs elected female candidates response.

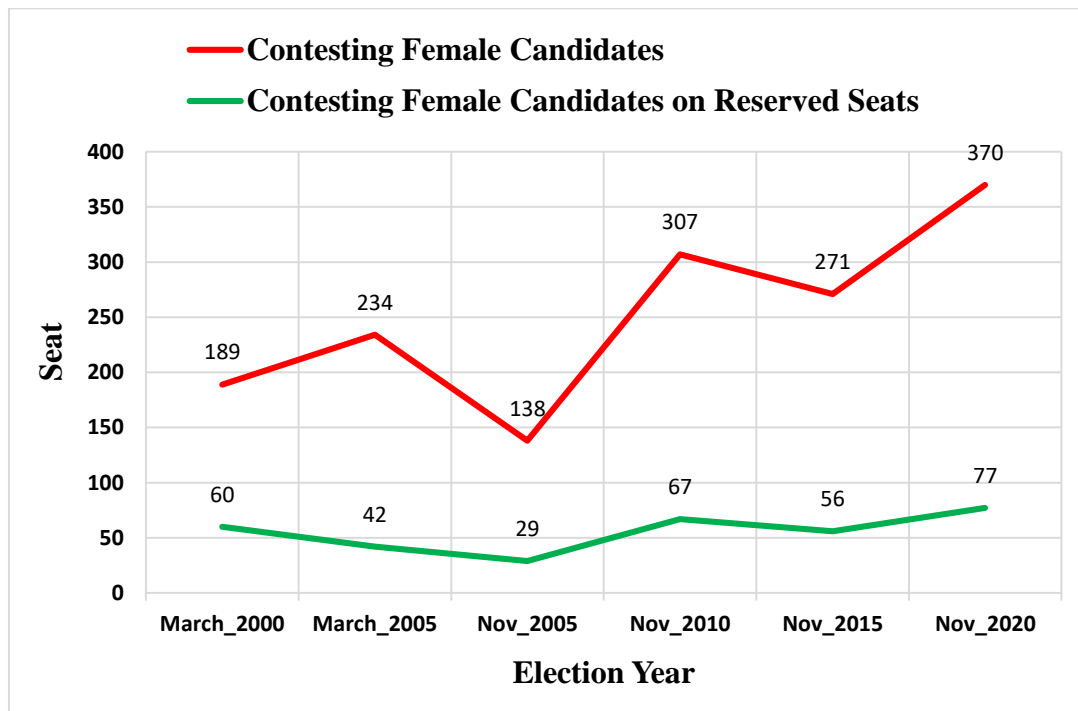


Figure 6. Response of contesting female candidate's vs contesting female candidates on reserved seats.

7. Conclusion and Suggestions

The electoral data from the Bihar State Legislative Assembly reveals a persistent trend of limited female representation throughout the 21st century. Despite a fluctuating number of women stepping forward as candidates, the proportion of those who are successfully elected remains low. This discrepancy between the number of women who contest and those who win highlights the considerable barriers that prevent female political ambition from translating into legislative power. While a slight increase in the number of women elected to reserved seats suggests that such provisions can be impactful, their overall effect on the assembly's gender balance remains modest.

To effectively address this ongoing imbalance, a comprehensive and strategic approach is required. It is essential to incentivize political parties to nominate a greater number of female candidates, both in reserved and general constituencies. A crucial legislative reform would be to introduce a mandatory reservation for women in the state legislature, mirroring the successful model implemented at the local level to ensure a consistent minimum level of female representation. Furthermore, providing robust financial and administrative support to female candidates is vital to help them overcome resource limitations and compete on a more equal footing.

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