



Research Article

# The Silent Backbenchers: Women in Northeast India's Electoral Politics

Chanda Medhi \*

Assistant Professor, Dept. of Sociology, Government Model College Borkhola, Assam, India

Corresponding Author: \*Chanda Medhi

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## Abstract

The turnout of women in the electoral processes in Northeast India is a paradox on its own: on the one hand, their role in local affairs is quite high; on the other hand, their participation in the market, social movements, and networks of peacebuilders among others is comparatively large; and on the other hand, among the formal political institutions, their representation is underrepresented. This paper discusses the sociocultural, structural and political causes of this underrepresentation. The study uses qualitative-dominant mixed-methods by drawing on the work underpinning the theoretical frameworks of feminist political sociology and intersectionality to examine the lived experiences of women, barriers to candidature, and differences in the states. The results indicate that the existing type of traditional clan systems, the patriarchal system of parties, the militarised political reality, economic limitations, and firmly established gender cultures all limit voting opportunities among women. Women are still restricted by institutional and cultural constraints that block their progress in politics, even in a matrilineal society like Meghalaya or one where activists are abundant, like in Manipur. A cross-state comparison of the Northeastern states, as it is evidenced by the case study, highlights that neither matriliney nor a strong women's movement ensures political representation. In summary, the research concludes that institutional measures such as performance, specifically to the gender aspect of party politics, inclusion in traditional institutions, capacity building programs, and the leverage on the level of safety are imperative in facilitating equal political participation. This study can help to gain a better insight into the phenomenon of gendered political exclusion in Northeast India by amplifying the voices of women and pinpointing policy gaps, as well as providing practical recommendations to make a transformative change.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Feminine political engagement is highly believed to be an imperative indicator of democratic inclusiveness and social growth. Women have achieved a lot in terms of education, working, and participation in civil societies all over India; however, in the formal electoral areas, women are still overrepresented (Chauhan, 2020). This contradiction is even stronger in Northeast India, the country where the ethnic diversity is highly valued, and governance systems are built on the community principle and comparably higher in the signifier of gendered equity in daily life (Baruah, 2019). In spite of their apparent presence in markets, in peace movements and in grassroots activism, women remain seated in the figurative backbench in the electoral politics present, conscious and active as they usually are, but hardly anywhere in the seat of political authority. The issue of the tension of the social agency and electoral invisibility is the core problem of the study.

Traditionally, the traditions of the Northeast consist of matrilineal and egalitarian, which provided women with a social presence that is stronger than in many other parts of India. Other states, like Meghalaya, are matrilineal in their heredity, whereas in Manipur and Nagaland, women control markets and the economic systems at the community level (Devi, 2017). However, these sociocultural strengths have failed to translate into political representation. There is a very low percentage among state legislators, and nearly all political parties are still largely male in the process of leadership, candidate selection, and there are campaign requirements (Kikon, 2021). This implies that being socioculturally empowered is not a certainty to access to political institutions; rather, the interplay and interaction of gender, tribe, ethnicity, class and regional conflict determine access to electoral politics. Long-term experience of insurgency, militarisation, and ethnic violence provided the Northeast with its gendered political framework, as well. Some studies suggest that the dynamics of conflicts are likely to strengthen patriarchal systems of making decisions, which places women in supportive roles in the community environment's history, other than becoming leaders in formal governance (Nongbri, 2020). Although women have been at the forefront of peace movements, like the Meira Paibi of Manipur, their actions have hardly ever led to electoral nomination or legislative authority. The use of political parties tends to make women sound as caretakers of the community, instead of people who are interested in policy-making, which narrows their political perspectives (Baruah, 2019).

Meanwhile, women voters in the Northeast are actively involved in elections, which frequently leads to a higher voter turnout of women than men (Election Commission of India, 2022). The power of voting does not, however, always develop into representational power. The dislocation between the high turnout and the low electoral turnout is more of a structural barriers, such as lack of finances, men-dominated party systems, gender norms, and the belief that the world of politics is a male domain (Chakraborty, 2018). These obstacles operate at the institutional and socio-psychological levels and affect the

political efficacy and visibility of women and their desire to challenge elections.

It is on this background that the idea of the silent backbenchers helps address the paradox of the female role in the world of politics in Northeast India: socially powerful but institutionally sidelined. This study examines the sociological aspects that lead to this silence and reproduce it. The proposed study, based on the framework of feminist sociology, intersectional sociology, and the political sociology approach, will examine the experience of women, structural constraints, and a socio-political context that limits the participation of women. The study finally points to effective institutional changes, inclusive party processes, and culturally grounded gender-sensitive policies as the way to improve better representation of women in the electoral politics of the region.

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Empirical studies of women's political participation in India have grown substantially in the last 20 years, and researchers have factored in gendered power structures, electoral influences and the cultural factors that dictate representation. However, little academic attention has been given to the specific socio-political situation of Northeast India, even though it is characterised by a relatively high level of ethnic diversity, community purposes, and conflict history. The review is based on the literature in feminist political sociology, regional studies, conflict studies, and electoral politics to put the underrepresentation of women in the legislative spaces in Northeast India in a context.

### 2.1 Feminist Sociology of Politics and Gendered Power Formations

Feminist political sociology emphasises that power and citizenship are gendered, that is, it is historically based on the male norms and barring practices (Connell, 2002). Liberal feminist theorists underline structural forms of inequality, especially discriminatory party systems, a shortage of resources, and political networks dominated by males (Phillips, 1995). Radical feminists, on the other hand, also consider political disenfranchisement a form of patriarchal domination that they believe is embedded in the institutions of the city (Firestone, 1970). Both of these methods apply to the Northeast, where political parties, in their leadership and nomination systems built on patronage, are extremely dominated by men (Kikon, 2021).

Intersectional feminism also offers more information about the complexity of this region. Crenshaw (1991) explains that gender intersects race, ethnicity, class and cultural identity to result in a complex exclusion. In the Northeast, women are subject to the influence of tribal identity, clan organisation, customary laws and regional conflict to dictate the extent of their political access. According to the scholar, tribal women tend to be limited by not only patriarchy but also ethnic divisions and clan-oriented decision-making (Nongbri, 2014). Therefore, intersectionality would be essential in providing the explanation of why sociocultural empowerment in everyday life may not directly lead to electoral agency.

## 2.2 Indian Electoral Politics of Women

The state legislatures and Parliament are still seen to be underrepresented by women nationally, even though the levels of literacy, awareness, and voter turnout among women are improving (Chakraborty, 2018). Some trends in the blockage are also mentioned by research: gendered stereotypes, economic challenges, party support, household obligations, and political violence (Lama-Rewal, 2020). Although women are likely to show the same or even higher politicking interest than men, limited opportunities to become a candidate by the political parties represent a serious form of gatekeeping (Pal, 2019).

It is also interesting that the high number of Indian women who went to vote is a stark contrast to their low representation, which can be seen in the Northeast. According to the Election Commission of India (2022), higher turnout of females has been recorded in a few or more Northeastern states. According to scholars, this difference suggests that voter turnout is socially acceptable, and candidacy poses a threat to the traditional patriarchal norms of the place of women (Basu, 2021). Research indicates that political activities continue to be structured with reference to male leadership, and women's involvement is as a supportive or auxiliary (Kumar, 2017).

## 2.3 Northeast Indian Sociocultural Dynamics

The culture and society of the Northeast may be characterised as more gender-acceptable than most of mainland India. Some states, like Meghalaya, observe matrilineal kinship and inheritance rules, and women are accorded more freedom and social insurance (Syiemlieh, 2016). In Manipur, likewise, women have traditionally been in control of marketplaces in organisations such as the Ima Keithel, and social and political movements through organisations such as the Meira Paibi (Devi, 2017). These are some examples of the high presence of women in the community and economic life.

Nevertheless, researchers warn that matriliney or a market hegemony should not be interpreted as the measure of political empowerment (Karlsson, 2020). Patriarchal systems of decision-making usually co-exist with matrilineal forms of organisation, especially those of political institutions. As an example, the gendered separation between social influence and political power, even in matrilineal Meghalaya, results in men having a preponderance in the membership of the clan councils and village courts (Nongbri, 2020). Ethnographic literature states that the ancient system can often place women in the role of cultural carriers but not political leaders, which also contributes to making it more difficult to require women to engage in elections (Baruah, 2019).

The customary laws also govern political participation, and in many areas like Nagaland, Mizoram, and Arunachal Pradesh, they do not allow women to participate in the decision-making bodies (Jamir, 2015). Although women are central to agriculture, living incumbently and contributing to the well-being of the community, they seldom apply to politics. This detachment gives an implication that sociocultural empowerment, as important as it is, is not enough in breaking institutionalised barriers of gender.

## 2.4 Political Space, Conflict and Militarisation

The history of insurgency, ethnic violence, and militarisation that the Northeast has experienced for a long time has also had an impact on gender relations and political participation. According to literature, conflict conditions are highly likely to be self-sustaining and strengthen the patriarchal order since women are pushed into the sphere of caregivers, peacekeepers, and community guardians instead of political actors (McDuie-Ra, 2015). Women-based movements, like the Meira Paibi in Manipur, have been leading in social protest in the state, but they are seldom translated into a legislative seat (Brara, 2018).

The effects of militarisation result in what researchers view as the so-called masculinised political spaces entailing the authority and leadership, as well as the security-based decision-making attributable to men (Dey, 2020). Political parties tend to give preference to candidates who seem to have the qualities of strongmen in conflict-ridden regions, leaving out women who may have a significant involvement in the peacebuilding process. Therefore, besides establishing physical insecurity, the war also restricts the political opportunities of women by strengthening gendered views of leadership.

## 2.5 Political Parties, Patronage and Electoral Barriers

Party politics are also very critical in the development of political participation among women. Researchers underline that election representation relies heavily on party nomination procedures, which are personalised and opaque, and they are usually shaped by local power brokers (Pal, 2019). Women in the Northeast, as the tribal networks are integrated in the party systems along with clan loyalties and regional elites, are under more pressure as they are brought together by the cultural factors and inaccessibility of political provision.

It has been observed that women are usually not appreciated in inner-party groups and cannot be given winnable seats even when they have great support in the community (Kikon, 2021). Financial limitations also limit the election contesting capacity of women, because in the Northeast, campaigns may be demanding in terms of terrain, fragmented geography, and competition on clientelism (Baruah, 2019). In addition to that, gender quotas are non-existent at state legislative organisation levels; hence, the representation of women depends largely on the goodwill of the party, which is not very much.

## 2.6 Women Narratives, Agency and Lived Experiences

The Northeast experience of qualitative studies throws light on contradictions in the experiences of women. Though there is usually an interest in the political sphere and community leadership, women claim to be stopped by the structure and psychological conditions to entering formal politics (Devi, 2017). Others highlight the load of domestic life, societal shaming and the internalised gender expectations that do not support a career in politics (Nongbri, 2020).

Experts claim that movements by women in the Northeast are very strong, but they are surrounded by moral or protective ideas instead of political leadership (McDuie-Ra, 2015). Consequently, the specific areas in which the agency is hailed become praiseworthy but limited, where they defy party lines.

## 2.7 Gaps in the Literature

However, in spite of increased research, there are a number of gaps. There has been a lack of comparative studies of the Northeastern states, and the majority of the research has been done on isolated case studies. Little attention is paid to analysing political parties in terms of the gender dimension, and personal experience of women in campaigning, political leadership, and electoral issues is a topic that has not been adequately studied. Likewise, there are very few works that subject intersectionality to systematic application in the political context of the region.

The paper fills these gaps by bringing together feminist theory and the intersectional analysis with qualitative inquiry to understand why such cannot be changed through electoral politics in the Northeast region of India, where women remain underrepresented.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

This paper has a qualitative-dominant mixed-method research design to examine the sociocultural, structural, and institutional issues that inform the underrepresentation of women in electoral politics in Northeast India. Since gender relations, ethnic diversity, and politics in the region are highly multifaceted, qualitative research, including interviews and focus groups, is crucial to capture such nuances and the context. Quantitative data, including electoral statistics and demographic indicators, are put in place in order to balance out the qualitative information and offer an empirical background.

### 3.1 Research Design

The study uses an exploratory and descriptive approach, which is informed by feminist political sociology and intersectionality theory. These models aid in the realisation of the various layers of discrimination and socio-political restraints against women. In the research, both primary and secondary data are used to have a comprehensive view of the phenomenon.

### 3.2 Sampling Strategy

The purposive sampling method is applicable in selecting the participants based on first-hand or related experience in the political processes. The sample includes:

- i. Women who have recently challenged elections (successful and unsuccessful candidates),
- ii. The women activists, the community, leaders, and members of civil society organisations,
- iii. Women party workers of leading political parties in the Northeast, and
- iv. Female electorate of different ethnic and tribal backgrounds.

Key states such as Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh are the target population to provide regional diversity. Qualitative data should be provided by about 40-50 participants, who are chosen till thematic saturation.

### 3.3 Data Collection Methods

Primary data will be gathered using:

- i. Semi-structured interviews (between 30 and 40 minutes each) based on individual political experiences, perception of barriers and expectation of the community.
- ii. Attitude to female leadership and electoral participation. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) will be carried out among women voters.
- iii. Key Informant Interviews of scholars and journalists, and political observers to provide background knowledge.
- iv. Among the secondary data, there are reports on elections, policy documents, scholarly articles and published case studies of parties.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

The thematic analysis is used to analyse the data in accordance with the six steps of familiarisation, coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting offered by Braun and Clarke (2006). The coding is done manually and using a qualitative data software (e.g. NVivo) to guarantee reliability. Thematic patterns are analysed based on feminist and intersectional theories to show how gender integrates with tribe, ethnicity, class, and conflict in order to determine political consequences.

### 3.5 Ethical Considerations

All participants are informed about their participation. Its anonymity is observed, in particular due to the politically sensitive backgrounds of the Northeast. The subjects will be assured that all information provided by them will be utilised in an academic context, and it will be stored safely.

## 5. Sociocultural Environment of Northeast India

Northeast India is currently one of the most heterogeneous regions of the country with a complicated network of ethnicities, tribal belonging, customary laws, as well as a sociopolitical past. All these greatly define gender roles, community relations, and political representation, especially for females. Even though the area is sometimes talked about as more gender-advanced than mainland India, with the presence of women being prominent in the markets, social groups, and the conflict-solving methods, these forms of agency do not always turn into formal political authority.

The sociocultural environment of the region owes a lot to its ethnic background. Every tribe has its own norms, beliefs, and traditions that govern the lives and the leadership of the populace. Although in certain parts of the country, including the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo of Meghalaya, the societies have matrilineal descent systems, most of the states, including Manipur, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, and Tripura, have patriarchal customary laws. It remains a paradox to human societies, even in matrilineal ones, with political power often being male-dominated and a clear deficiency of influence of women in social matters, despite their limited decision-making in the political institutions.

Northeastern women hold important places in the life of the community. Women lead markets like the Ima Keithel in Manipur, which is among the largest all-women markets in the world. The grassroots organisations such as the Meira Paibi, the Naga Mothers Association (NMA), Mizo Hmeichhe



Insuihkhawm Pawl (MHIP) has also been important in the peacebuilding, anti-drug campaigns, human rights activism, and community welfare. Nonetheless, the official participation of women in electoral politics is still limited even by these powerful functions, which implies that the respect of society does not correspond to each other with the sharing of political power.

The other dimension of the sociocultural context that is of paramount importance is the fact that the region has a long history of insurgency, ethnic strife, and militarisation. These situations give rise to some of the most masculinised politics ever, whereby security, clan loyalties, and strong men prevail. Prevalence rules the majority of the electoral debates.

Consequently, women are seen as strong morally but socially unfit for leadership roles that are deemed to be risky. The customary institutions, along with the village councils, which are still strong in Nagaland, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh, either have no women represented in any decision-making body.

In this way, it can be said that the sociocultural fabric of Northeast India has a paradox because women are socially visible, productive, and culture is respected, but underrepresented in legislatures. To know this contradiction, one has to be able to analyse the interaction between customary norms, gendered expectations, ethnic identities, and the politics of conflicts.

Figure 1: Sociocultural Context of Northeast India



Table 1: Key Sociocultural Characteristics Across Northeastern States

State	Kinship System	Women’s Community Role	Political Inclusion of Women
Meghalaya	Matrilineal	Strong economic and social leadership	Low representation in electoral politics
Manipur	Patriarchal	Dominant in markets, activism (Meira Paibi)	Very limited political representation
Nagaland	Patriarchal with strong customary laws	Active in peace efforts, mothers’ associations	Customary bodies often exclude women
Mizoram	Patriarchal	Influential women’s unions (MHIP)	Minimal legislative representation
Arunachal Pradesh	Patriarchal tribal systems	Active in agriculture and community work	Very low female candidature
Assam	Mixed ethnic systems	Strong civil society presence	Moderate but still unequal representation

6. Obstacles to Electoral Participation

In the Northeast part of India, women face a composite structure of obstacles restricting their involvement in electoral politics. These obstacles cut across structural, cultural, political, and psychological levels to provide a system of exclusion that continues despite the high representation of women in the life of communities. Knowing of these obstacles is critical to elucidating the reason women are underrepresented. In

legislative areas, despite their leading roles in social, economic, and peace-building processes.

Structural Barriers

The political parties in the region are predominantly male, which itself poses one of the greatest limitations. All the facets of the parties, nomination, and leadership are dominated by males, offering little hope to women of getting into electoral politics. The lack of affiliated gender quotas makes matters

worse, as the female candidates rely on the goodwill of voters. It is also affected by another challenge of financial constraint; elections in the Northeast can cost a lot of money, because of the rough terrain, geographically dispersed communities and intense competition. The disadvantage is that women who are generally not as easily accessible to financial resources and political sponsorship are at a disadvantage.

### Cultural Barriers

In tribal and clan societies, gender existence also limits the exposure of women in the political arenas. In most societies, the conservative demands place women as the carriers of culture and caregiving roles instead of decision-making. Women are often excluded from the clan and customary institutions, particularly in Nagaland, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh, from formal leadership positions. Women also become confined by marriage and kinship demands, which means that they do not have enough time and space to move around and campaign, or even go to political meetings.

### Political Barriers

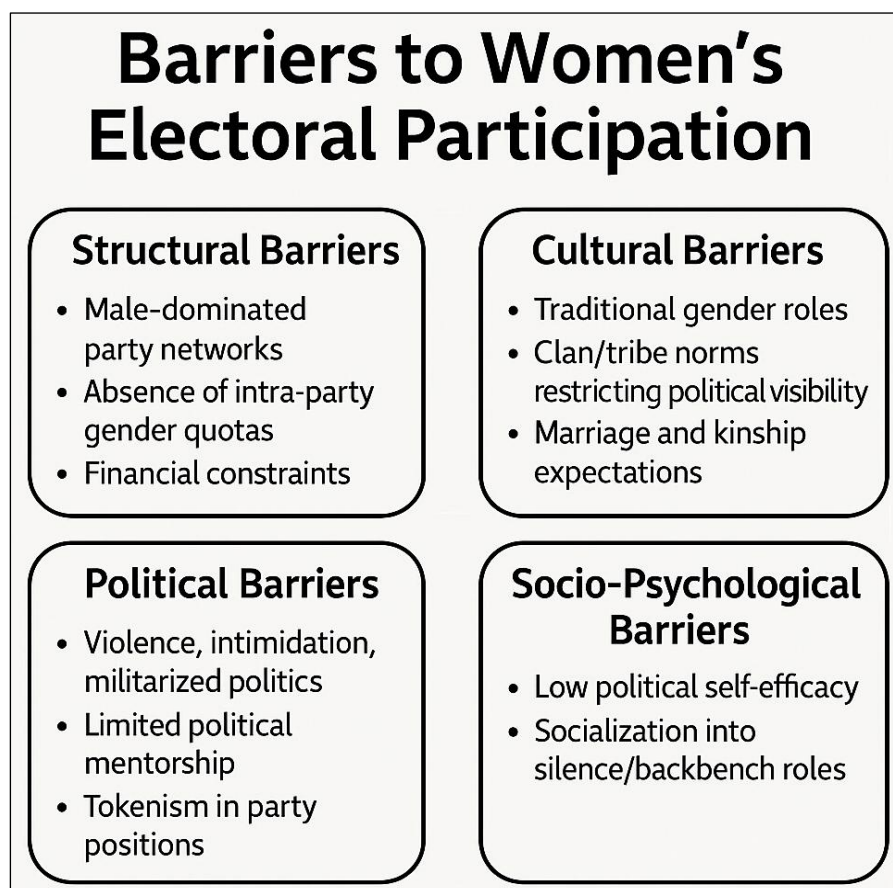
The Northeast Electoral politics is usually entangled with militarisation, insurgency and ethnic issues. This culture

promotes a masculinised culture of politics in which leadership is equated with physical prowess, willingness to risk, and bargaining with armed groups, all of which are stereotypically male characteristics. Women in the campaign have an increased risk of intimidation, violence, and harassment. Also, the absence of political mentorship and a tokenistic system in the party position denies women opportunities to develop as viable political leaders.

### Socio-Psychological Barriers

The society sends messages to women that politics is a male activity. Included are low political self-efficacy, exposure to leadership tendencies, and early socialisation interests to remain quiet, or silent, which are some factors that cause them to challenge elections. Even the most competent women can not be sure of being fit to participate in electoral politics since these psychological limitations may be embedded in their minds. Taken together, these obstacles develop into positive feedback of exclusion that perpetuates women to the periphery of the formal political authority, even when they become very active in social and community sectors.

Figure 2: Barriers to Women's Electoral Participation



**Table 2:** Summary of Barriers to Women's Electoral Participation

Category	Key Barriers
Structural	Male-dominated parties, no gender quotas, and financial constraints
Cultural	Traditional roles, clan norms, marriage/kinship restrictions
Political	Violence, militarised politics, limited mentorship, and tokenism
Socio-Psychological	Low confidence, internalised patriarchy, backbench socialisation

### 7. Women Who Contest: Narratives

The position of women who move into electoral politics in Northeast India through the perspective of juggling between social expectations, community activism and political ambition is one that is unique and challenging. Their accounts show an intricate interrelationship of resilience and structural resistance, as well as cultural negotiation and gender guidelines ingrained in various cultures. Although not a large number of women actually challenge an election, those who have done so have characterised the process as empowering and isolating.

One of the common things about their stories is resistance and agency. The decision to contest on its own throws many women candidates into the established norms of patriarchy. The fact of their candidacy itself declares the rebellion against the right of the traditional clan councils, maleness of the party formation, and customary limitations that traditionally marginalised women. Some of them say that the process of filing nomination papers, which is normally done when one faces criticism or when family bonds are strained, is their first political win.

Nevertheless, such women have two responsibilities to bear: that of leadership and home. Campaigning takes long hours, travelling, and active participation with citizens, and at home, they have social responsibilities that they are meant to perform as women. Most of the stories are about juggling between childcare, eldercare, and community. It is this bi-level workload that tends to be a detriment to continued political involvement.

The other important story is the symbolic representation. Women can several times found that within parties they were accepted as a fig leaf- they would not harm the image needed, but they would not be resourced or frequently allocated a seat they could win. They are invited to speak as cultural or welfare bodies, but curtailed when it comes to matters of security, government or economy, the long-held gendered ideas of expertise.

Nevertheless, the leadership paths of women are especially resilient despite these obstacles. Most of them start their tour as social workers, teachers, activists, or market union leaders. Community members, women's organisations and civil society organisations usually push them towards their electoral politics. Such women rely extensively on interpersonal relationships, moral power, and reputational sources of authority, which have taken years of grassroots activism.

Noteworthy, the influence of women's organisations is also depicted in the stories, including the Naga Mothers Association, the Meeri Paibi, and the MHIP, as the driving forces and the shields. These organisations support each other emotionally, They rally voters, and at other times they protect candidates

against threats of intimidation. Nevertheless, the collective Support is not always transformed into electoral success because of the existing structural and political obstacles.

All in all, the lived experience of women candidates in Northeast India demonstrates the tendency of perseverance despite limitations. Their stories attach importance to the obstructing nature of systems to be represented as well as the enhancing aspects of politically involved women when groups of people stick by them.

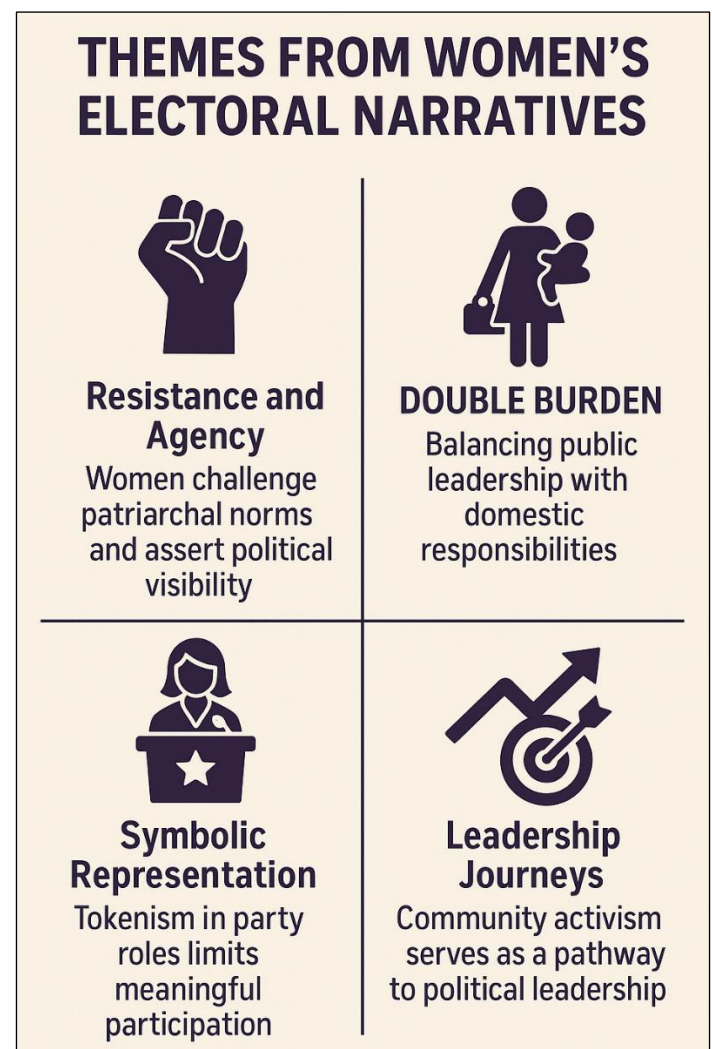
**Figure 3:** Themes from Women's Electoral Narratives

Figure 4: Role of Women’s Group in Electoral Politics





However, relatively more women have been represented in politics in Assam, with its cross-ethnic-cultural background, partly because of the larger party systems, more reinforced institutional structures, and increased exposure to national politics. Nonetheless, the distance between gender parity is still far. In general, comparative analysis shows that women's electoral representation is not influenced by one factor, but it is rather an amalgamation of customary norms, political

structures, and socio-economic environments. Strong female activism in states does not always translate to electoral power, although matrilineal states do not always ensure gender-inclusive politics. That is why specific institutional changes, gender-sensitive political practices of political parties, and mobilisation at the grassroots are needed in order to provide equal political representation in the region.

**Table 5:** Comparative Overview of Women's Electoral Participation Across Northeastern States

State	Kinship / Customary System	Women's Community Role	Electoral Representation
Meghalaya	Matrilineal	Strong social and economic presence	Very low
Manipur	Patriarchal	Strong activism (Ima Keithel, Meira Paibi)	Low
Nagaland	Patriarchal, strong customary laws	Active in peace movements	Very low
Mizoram	Patriarchal	Strong women's unions (MHIP)	Very low
Arunachal Pradesh	Patriarchal tribal systems	Agriculture & community work	Low to moderate (candidature high, wins low)
Assam	Mixed systems	Strong civil society roles	Moderate

## 9. Policy Gaps & Challenges

Although gender inequality in politics has been given a lot of attention, the resulting policy gaps still limit meaningful representation in the election scene in Northeast India by women. One of them is that there is no political representation of women at the level of the state legislature. Whereas most local body reservations have been contentious, especially in Nagaland, their implementation is still a patchy affair that is usually opposed by customary institutions. Unless there are compulsory quotas, women will be left at the mercy of the political parties, which can hardly give leads to women candidates.

The other policy gap is the absence of gender-sensitive reform in political parties. The majority of parties do not have any internal gender quota, leadership development programs, or gender-based discrimination mechanisms. Consequently, the women find it hard to get access to party resources, mentoring, and winnable constituencies.

Some customary laws in various states, particularly in the tribal areas, are also a challenge. Lots of these legal systems do not allow women to be part of the decision-making organs, and their

Visibility in politics is decreased, and the opportunities to be a part of formal government bodies are restricted.

Moreover, the area does not have sustainable capacity-building initiatives that are specific to the aspiring women leaders. Unless institutionalised, training and financial literacy, campaign management, and security-related assistance are rarely offered.

Lastly, unstable conditions that are caused by long-term militarisation and the violence of politics are not favourable to women candidates. Women remain at greater risk and locked out further by institutional omnipresence without specific protection and structural exclusion.

## 10. Recommendations

To make women in Northeast India more responsible in their electoral participation, a multi-level approach that can Accommodating structural, cultural and institutional obstacles needs to be strengthened. First, state legislatures ought to implement compulsory gender quotas, where women have a minimum percentage of seats or party nominations. This kind of affirmative action will disrupt established male dominance in the political institutions.

Gender reforms should also be executed at the internal level of political parties, such as quotas of women in leadership, openness of candidate selection, and sensitivity to gender. Creating a women's wing and providing them with actual power in making decisions would also help women who want to challenge elections.

The traditional institutions need to be embraced through dialogue, reform of the law and involvement of the community to ensure women are allowed to participate in the local decision-making bodies. To increase women's leadership opportunities, reform of discriminatory customary laws with respect to the autonomy of culture is necessary.

Capacity-building measures are to be reinforced. The NGOs, along with women groups and government agencies, should work together to offer training in political communication, campaign management methods, digital literacy and financial planning. Funding programs or subsidies can be provided to first-time women applicants to reduce their financial loads.

To secure the safety of women is also important. The women can be secure against intimidation and violence by special security cells, helplines, and, during election time, surveillance. And the last, last but not least, is grassroots mobilisation, which is pursued by women groups, youth networks, and civil society, should keep undermining patriarchal norms and raising social awareness of accepting women leaders. These strategies are combined to produce a more inclusive and gender-equal political environment in the region.

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## About the corresponding author



**Chanda Medhi** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology at Government Model College, Borkhola, Assam. Her academic interests include gender studies, social change, and rural development. She is actively involved in teaching, research, and community-oriented initiatives aimed at understanding societal issues in Northeast India.