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Mapping the Low Legislative Representation of Women in North East India: A Gender Comparative Analysis

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Abstract: Women's representation in politics remains strikingly low, and their substantive participation in political processes is equally limited. This global pattern receives little focused attention or corrective action. Although politics is a sphere of power sharing (Who Gets What, Where and When) that shapes collective life, decision-making has long been conceptualized to be a masculine activity, reinforcing the belief that men are naturally suited for political leadership to take and execute decisions at the public level.

Positions within political institutions provide critical opportunities to formulate, influence, and implement public decisions. However, women have historically been excluded from these arenas which creates a detachment from the democratic principles of political equality and freedom that are central to a democratic polity. This exclusion manifests in the persistently low number of women present across national, state, and grassroots levels of institutionalized public policymaking.

This paper investigates the underrepresentation of women from the northeastern states of India in both the National Parliament and state legislative assemblies, with a comparative analysis of their male counterparts to highlight gender disparities in political participation.

IndexTerms - North east India, Decision Making, Women's Representation in Legislative Bodies, Gender Disparity in Representation

I. INTRODUCTION

Policy making and its effective implementation is a skill that are not inherently natural; rather, they are techniques learned through layers of experience and sustained public exposure. Put simply, these are gender-neutral crafts—unrelated to biology and grounded in rationality. In the realm of public policy, a democratic polity is one in which every individual is an equal stakeholder, irrespective of background or identity. From this standpoint, an identity determined by one's biological sex should not become a barrier to political equality. The reality speaks other way around.

Globally women are a scanty lot in politics. According to the 2025 Inter Parliamentary Union, 'Women in Politics' map, women hold 27.2 percent of seats in national parliaments. This is just a modest increase (0.3 percentage points) over the previous year (Inter Parliamentary Union Report, 2025). Women in Parliamentary positions like Speaker and Deputy speakers is also not satisfactory. However, a slight improvement is noticed over the years. According to the 2025 IPU-UN Women Women in Politics map, women now hold 23.7 percent of Parliamentary Speaker positions and 32.6 percent of Deputy Speaker positions (UN Women). Women in ministerial roles likewise low: only 22.9 percent of cabinet ministers globally are women, and in many cases, they are assigned to socially softer portfolios rather than high power areas like finance, defence or foreign affairs (IPU, 2025)

In India, true democratic political representation remains elusive, particularly with regard to the quantitative and qualitative divide between male and female representatives. When half the electorate is formed of the female voters, their participation in the active politics—as candidates in elections, member of Legislative Assemblies, Parliament or as ministers has ever remained depressive let alone in positions of head of state or government. The 18th Lok Sabha (the election for which was held in 2024), has only 74 female members which is 13.6 percent of the 543 seat House. This is a slight dip from the 78 female MPs in the previous Lok Sabha which was roughly 15 percent of the total members of the House ([Digital Sansad](#)). Share of women parliamentarians has never exceeds 15 percent in the past general elections (The Hindu, 2023). Women in state politics specially in the legislative assemblies as members or as ministers is again an abysmal low. A report by the NITI Ayog in 2021 reveals that the average women's representation in state legislative assemblies is just 8.46 percent (NITI Ayog report, 104). At the state level, the average share of women in legislative assemblies remain under 10 percent, according to data retrieved from PRS India. Indeed, no state crosses 20 percent female representation—Chhattisgarh, with about 18 percent, has the highest (PRS Legislative Research, 2025).

II. A POLITICAL TOUR OF NORTH EAST INDIA:

India's north east is a conglomerate of seven states popularly known as the Seven Sisters—Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Manipur, Nagaland and Tripura. Although Sikkim is geographically separated from this cluster, it is often grouped with the region due to its membership in the North Eastern Council (NEC). The region is connected to the mainland India through a narrow land corridor in West Bengal, which at its slimmest point in Siliguri measures barely twenty kilometers. The narrowness gives it the moniker the 'chickens neck'. Historically, much of the North-East was once part of *Bor Axom* (Greater Assam). Several present-day states were carved out of Assam over time. The region was once known as *bor Axom* (greater Assam) as some of the present full-fledged states were part of it. Of these, Arunachal Pradesh (former NEFA –North East Frontier Agency), Mizoram (former Lusai Hills district of Assam), Meghalaya (former Khasi, Jaintia and Garo hills district of Assam) and Nagaland (former Naga hills district of Assam) were parts of the greater Assam. Balkanization of the greater Assam occurred after the formation of four new full-fledged states Arunachal Pradesh (20th February, 1987), Mizoram (20th February, 1987), Meghalaya (21st January, 1972) and Nagaland (1st December, 1963) under the North Eastern Areas Reorganization Act, 1971. With statehood came the establishment of separate legislative assemblies as well as representation in both Houses of the Indian Parliament. The following table outlines the distribution of seats among these North-Eastern states in their respective state assemblies, the Lok Sabha, and the Rajya Sabha.

Table 1: Seats allotted to the North-eastern states in the Legislative Assemblies, Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha

States	Total Assembly seats	Total Lok Sabha seats	Total Rajya Sabha seats
Assam	126	14	07
Arunachal Pradesh	60	02	01
Meghalaya	60	02	01
Mizoram	40	01	01
Nagaland	60	01	01
Manipur	60	02	01
Tripura	60	02	01

Source: Election Commission of India

III. Mapping the Legislative Representation of Women in North East India

The mapping of the political power position in the North eastern region of India shows a huge representational gap between male and female members. The Legislative and Parliamentary map of the region is dotted with male legislators and ministers while women representatives occupy a gloomy marginal standing. From the first general Election to the Parliament till the latest one, only 22 women were elected to the Lok Sabha—the lower house of the Indian Parliament. This number is self-explanatory to the north eastern states only (independently or as a collective) as bigger states of India has far more seats in the Parliament. The following table shows the distribution of women legislators of the states of the North east in the three legislative bodies:

Table 2: Women legislators of North eastern states in the State assemblies, Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha

States	Total elected women to the legislative assembly from the 1 st assembly election to the latest one	Total elected women to the Lok Sabha from the 1 st General election to the latest one	Total women nominated to the Rajya Sabha by the state legislative assemblies
Assam	96	19	12
Arunachal Pradesh	0	13	01
Meghalaya	20	02	0
Mizoram	04	04	0
Nagaland	02	02	01
Manipur	13	01	01
Tripura	32	02	02

Source: Election Commission of India

An analysis of the seats shared by women representatives in the Lok Sabha, Rajya Sabha and State legislative assemblies compared to their male counterparts is given hereunder:

In the Parliamentary and assembly election results, Assam has the largest share of women representatives among her regional counterparts. However, compared to the male legislators, the number of female legislators in the state is extremely dismal. The state has been through the Lok Sabha and assembly elections for 15 times since 1952. The election result data of these elections in the state shows that only 19 women till date could make through the Parliamentary elections to become MPs in the lower House of the Parliament while 12 became Rajya Sabha members. Women candidates failed to win any seat in the 1980, 1985, 1991 and 2004 elections to the Lok Sabha. In the latest general election held in 2019 only one woman got elected to the House as against 13 men (Medhi & Goswami, 2023). The result of the Assembly elections also presents a very gloomy picture. Only 96 women to date have become MLAs as against 1795 male MLAs.

In Arunachal Pradesh the first General Election to the Lok Sabha was held in the year 1977. The state has two seats in the Lok Sabha. Since 1977 till the latest elections held in 2019 no women are elected to the Lok Sabha from the state. So far 13 women have been elected to the state Legislative Assembly from 1978 till 2019. Elections in Arunachal Pradesh has always remained a men's activity. This is evident from the above fact as well as from the number of women contestants compared to male contestants. No women contested for the two Lok Sabha seats except for the 2019 election when only one woman contested alongside eleven male

contestants. The same data for the Legislative Assembly election is also very dismal as compared to the male contestants which has always remained more than hundred while women contestants has constantly remained in single digit except for the latest election when it rose to 11 as against 173 male contestants. In the Rajya Sabha, only once a woman was nominated from the state. Meghalaya has two Lok Sabha seats and 60 seats in its Legislative Assembly. Till date the state has send only two MPs to the Lok Sabha and both the times Agatha Sangma, daughter of former Lok Sabha Speaker Purno A. Sangma won the election (in 2009 and 2019). Since the first General election in the state which was held in 1977 no women contested elections until 1998 when one woman for the first time contested. Bonily Knongmen from the Reserved Autonomous District Constituency (Shillong), a part of the then greater Assam became the first woman MP from the North East by winning the seat in the first General Election of the country in 1952. She defeated Mr. Wilson Reed, the Khasi-Jaintia Darbar's candidate. In the state Assembly too women's presence is very dismal. Since statehood in 1972 only 20 women MLAs are elected to the Assembly compared to a total 638 male MLAs. However, this number is far better than Nagaland and Mizoram as both the states since statehood till date has elected only 2 and 4 women MLAs respectively.

For the first time in the 60 years history of Nagaland legislative assembly only two women got it through the assembly election in the latest election held in 2023. Mizoram on the other hand in its first assembly election after statehood which was held in 1987 got two women MLAs while in the latest one held in 2023 it got 3 women legislators. In between in all the seven assembly elections no women could get through it to victory. In the Lok Sabha Nagaland has elected only one-woman MP in the year 1977 while only two women contested elections for Lok Sabha till date. Mrs. Rano Shaiza, niece of the Naga National Council (NNC) founder Angami Zapu Phizo became the first and the only woman MP from the state. The credit she earned as a woman candidate was that she defeated the sitting Chief Minister Mr Hokishe Sema, a powerful Naga leader of the Indian National Congress. She will also be remembered for creating a record of sorts by being the first woman president of a political party—the United Democratic Party (UDP) (Pisharoti, 2017). The state has nominated till date only one woman to the Rajya Sabha, Ms. S. Phangnon Konyak who also got the opportunity to be the first woman from Nagaland to preside over Rajya Sabha. Naga women have played a limited role in institutional politics. However, women have remained active participants in the electoral process since statehood (Nagaland State Human Development Report, 2004)

Mizoram is another state which like Arunachal Pradesh has not send a single woman representative to the Lok Sabha. Women contested twice (one in each time) for the only Lok Sabha seat allotted to the state—first in 1977 and then in the latest election in 2019. The assemblies of Mizoram, Manipur and Meghalaya have not yet nominated any female member to the Rajya Sabha. M.C. Mary Kom, the famous world boxing champion from Manipur was nominated to Rajya Sabha by the President. Tripura has nominated two members to the Upper House till date. Since statehood Manipur and Tripura got 13 and 32 women legislators respectively in their assemblies.

The total number of female MLAs elected to the legislative assembly of Manipur till date is very insignificant compared to the male MLAs elected till date. Only 13 women got through the assembly election till date as against 701 male MLAs. The latest assembly got the highest number of female MLAs (total 5) elected till date to the assembly. Till date 13 women contested from Manipur for the Lok Sabha membership, and only one got elected in 1998. Kim Gangte, a Kuki human rights activists became the first woman MP from Manipur. She was elected only for a short period as the Atal Bihari Bajpayee led government got dissolved in 1999.

Tripura stands second after Assam regarding the number of women representatives elected to the state assembly. Though the number is satisfactory compared to the other five states yet compared to the male assembly representatives it is quite dismal. As against 628 male MLAs only 32 women became MLAs as a whole in all the assembly elections held in the state after statehood. This is roughly 4.8 percent for female MLAs and 95.1 Percent for male MLAs pointing clearly to a huge gender chasm between male and female representatives. In the Lok Sabha Tripura has two seats and only two women since the first to the latest general election in the state could make it to the Lok Sabha. Bibhu Kumari Devi in 1991 from Indian National Congress and Pratima Bhowmik of BJP in the last election held in 2019 were elected to the lower House of the Indian Parliament. In the Rajya Sabha too, Tripura assembly nominated only two women to date.

IV. CONCLUSION

Over the years, women's voter turnout in the Northeast has shown a steady rise, yet this increased electoral participation has not translated into a corresponding increase in women's representation in legislative bodies. This persistent mismatch has become a defining trend across most Northeastern states, presenting a political paradox that warrants deeper scholarly attention.

Despite structural and sociopolitical challenges, women voters have become increasingly aware and engaged, as reflected in their consistently high turnout rates and the gradual rise in the number of independent female candidates contesting elections. In several recent Assembly and Lok Sabha elections, women have even outpaced men in voter participation. For instance, in the 2016 Assam Assembly election, women's turnout (84.81%) surpassed that of men (84.64%) by 0.17 percentage points. Although the 2021 Assam Assembly election showed a marginal reversal—with women's turnout just 0.1 percentage points lower than men—the overall participation remained nearly equal. A similar pattern is observed in Tripura, where in the 2023 Assembly election, women's turnout exceeded men's by 3.05 percentage points (Tripura Times, 2023). Other Northeastern states have reflected comparable trends over the years.

However, the evidence clearly demonstrates that higher voter turnout among women does not automatically lead to greater female representation in legislative institutions. While growing participation strengthens the supportive, participatory dimension of democracy, it must be accompanied by structural, institutional, and cultural shifts to effectively narrow the gender gap in political leadership. Nevertheless, the rising engagement of women voters helps create an enabling environment for broader political mobilization and may gradually contribute to improved gender equality in the political sphere in the years to come.

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