

Contrasting Visions for Women Empowerment in India's 2024 Lok Sabha Elections

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In light of the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, the political landscape in India is brimming with promises of women's empowerment and "Nari Shakti" from both the BJP and Congress. However, it's imperative to scrutinise the government's efforts towards women's empowerment over the past decade and understand what lies ahead.

In 2014, the BJP's manifesto emphasised the role of women as 'nation builders' and stated that it recognised the important role of women (Nari Shakti) in societal development and national growth. It pledged to give high priority to women's empowerment and welfare by focusing on reducing high crime rates against women, increasing female education and employment levels, and introducing a constitutional amendment for 33% reservation in parliamentary and state assemblies.

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While among the significant schemes focused on women's empowerment, the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY) stands out. Launched in 2016, its goal was to provide LPG connections to women from Below Poverty Line (BPL) families. While there are claims of

near-universal (99%) access to LPG connections, the ground reality suggests otherwise. LPG consumption among PMUY beneficiaries has remained low, except for a spike during the COVID-19 relief package in 2020-21, which offered free refills.

Data from the financial year 2021-22 reveals disparities in cylinder refills between PMUY and non-PMUY consumers, indicating issues in the scheme's effectiveness. Delays of more than 10 days (ranging up to 664 days) were noticed in the delivery of 36.62 lakh LPG refills against the stipulated delivery period of seven days, further underscoring operational challenges.

The Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP) scheme exemplifies a similar pattern. In the fiscal year 2017-18, its audit report underscored the underutilisation of funds and disproportionate allocation towards media and advocacy. Field surveys and stakeholder interviews illuminated a lack of clarity among grassroots personnel, hindering effective resource allocation. In response to stakeholder feedback and audit findings, significant revisions were introduced in the scheme's implementation strategy starting in 2022.

Another such scheme is the Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana, introduced in 2017 aimed at providing maternity benefits. Official data revealed that the modest progress achieved under the scheme by the close of 2019 was significantly eroded during the COVID-19 pandemic. The number of women benefiting from the scheme plummeted from 96 lakh in 2019-20 to 75 lakh in 2020-21 and further declined to 61 lakh in 2021-22, marking a nearly 40% decrease over the span of two years.

In the context of the ongoing election, it's evident that despite the enactment of the women's reservation law last September, political parties are still falling short in actively promoting female representation in the Lok Sabha. The BJP, for instance, fielded just one woman candidate for every six, while the Congress had a ratio of one woman for every seven candidates. These numbers underscore a significant gap in efforts to boost gender parity in parliamentary representation, despite both parties heavily emphasising women's empowerment in their manifestos.



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The BJP's manifesto introduces the 'Subhadra Yojana', a promising initiative offering a cash voucher of Rs 50,000 to every woman if the party comes to power. Additionally, it pledges to expand the Lakhpati Didi self-help group initiative for rural women and bolster Shakti desks in police stations to strengthen emergency response systems. Recognising the importance of infrastructure, the BJP promises to develop women's hostels and creches to facilitate greater participation of women in the workforce. Furthermore, it aims to empower women

Self-Help Groups (SHGs) by providing them with skills and tools in key service sectors such as IT, healthcare, education, retail, and tourism, thereby increasing their income and market access.

In contrast, the Congress manifesto outlines the 'Mahalakshmi guarantee', promising Rs 1 lakh to one woman in each of the poorest families, directly transferring the amount to the bank account of the oldest woman of the household.

Furthermore, the Congress manifesto pledges to increase the representation of women in high positions across various sectors, review and amend laws to eliminate gender discrimination, enforce equal wages for equal work, double the contribution of the Central government to the pay of frontline health workers (such as ASHA, Anganwadi, Mid-Day Meal cooks, etc.), and substantially increase institutional credit extended to women.

While political manifestos abound with promises of women's empowerment and progress, the ground reality often paints a starkly different picture. From the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana to the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao initiative and the Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana, numerous schemes have faced hurdles ranging from operational inefficiencies to inadequate resource allocation.

The disparity between lofty promises and tangible outcomes underscores the need for greater accountability, transparency, and sustained efforts to bridge the gap between rhetoric and reality. As the nation prepares for the Lok Sabha Elections 2024, it's imperative to heed the lessons of the past decade and commit to meaningful action that translates into tangible improvements in the lives of women across India.

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