

Leading from Sitamarhi: Women in the Bihar State Assembly since 2000

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Abstract

Women's political participation in India remains one of the most debated subjects in democratic governance, particularly at the state level where grassroots legislation directly affects community welfare. This research paper examines the role and challenges of women legislators representing constituencies from Sitamarhi District in the Bihar Vidhan Sabha (State Legislative Assembly) during the 21st century, with a specific focus on the period 2005 to 2025. Bihar, a state historically characterised by deeply entrenched patriarchal norms, caste-based social hierarchies, and significant socio-economic underdevelopment, presents a distinctive context for studying women's political empowerment. The paper further investigates structural, social, and institutional barriers that hinder women's effective participation. Crucially, the 2025 Bihar Vidhan Sabha election the most recent, in which the NDA secured a landslide victory across all eight Sitamarhi constituencies is incorporated to provide the most current empirical picture. The findings suggest that while incremental progress has been observed, systemic transformation requires comprehensive electoral reforms, reservation policies, capacity-building programmes, and sustained political will. The study contributes to emerging literature on subnational women's political representation in South Asia.

Key words: Women Legislators, Bihar Vidhan Sabha, Sitamarhi District, Political Participation, Gender and Politics, Electoral Representation, Women Empowerment, Bihar Politics 2005–2025, Legislative Challenges, 18th Bihar Assembly.

1. Introduction

The participation of women in legislative bodies is a cornerstone of democratic representation and inclusive governance. In India, despite constitutional guarantees of equality and several affirmative action measures, women continue to be significantly underrepresented in state and national legislative assemblies. The 2019 Lok Sabha elections marked a historic high of 14.4% women members, yet this figure remains far below the global average of approximately 26% (IPU, 2023). At the state level, the disparity is even more pronounced, with Bihar recording consistently low female legislative representation throughout the post-Independence era (Kumar 2017).

Bihar, located in eastern India, is one of the most populous and historically significant states of the country. However, it has long been synonymous with deep socio-economic challenges, including high poverty rates, low female literacy, widespread gender-based violence, and persistent caste and feudal structures. Within this complex socio-political landscape, Sitamarhi District — situated in the northern Tirhut division bordering Nepal presents a particularly compelling case study. The district comprises eight assembly constituencies under the current delimitation: Riga, Bathnaha, Parihar, Sursand, Bajpatti, Sitamarhi, Runnisaidpur and Belsand (Pandey 2016).

The 21st century has witnessed a renewed focus on women's political empowerment globally, spurred by international frameworks such as the Beijing Platform for Action, Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender Equality) and CEDAW. In India, the passage of the Women's Reservation Bill (Constitution 106th Amendment Act, 2023) has reignited debates on the structural need to reserve seats for women in legislative assemblies. The November 2025 Bihar Vidhan Sabha election wherein the BJP-led NDA won 202 of 243 seats in a historic landslide further contextualises how gender intersects with alliance politics and electoral outcomes. Against this backdrop, this paper seeks to investigate: (a) the nature and extent of women's representation in the Bihar Legislative Assembly from Sitamarhi District over the period 2005 to 2025; (b) their legislative roles, policy priorities, and contributions; and (c) the multidimensional challenges they encounter in entering and functioning within the political sphere (Rai 2002).

The significance of this study is manifold. First, it addresses a critical empirical gap in the literature on subnational women's political participation in Bihar. Second, it provides granular district-level analysis that macro-level studies often overlook. Third, by incorporating the most recent 2025 election data, it situates the Sitamarhi experience within the contemporary moment of Bihar's political history. The paper proceeds through a structured review of literature, followed by a methodological explanation, data analysis, identification of barriers, and a conclusion outlining policy recommendations.

2. Literature Review

The scholarship on women's political participation in India is extensive yet geographically and contextually uneven. Most foundational studies focus on the national Parliament or large states like Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Maharashtra, leaving Bihar, and particularly its sub-districts, relatively understudied.

2.1 Theoretical Frameworks

Pitkin's (1967) seminal work on political representation distinguishes between formal, descriptive, symbolic, and substantive representation. For women legislators in Bihar, the tension between descriptive representation (presence) and substantive representation (effective policy influence) is acute. Mansbridge (1999) argues that descriptive representation of historically marginalised groups serves crucial functions in deliberative democracy. This framework is particularly relevant in Bihar, where women face intersectional disadvantages of gender, caste, and class.

2.2 Women in Indian State Legislatures

Pai (2007) studied women's representation in UP and noted that upper-caste and OBC women often enter politics through family dynasties or male patronage networks, a phenomenon termed 'proxy politics.' Deshpande (2004) and Rai (2012) have analysed the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments (Panchayati Raj) as transformative but insufficient measures. Jayal (2006) observed that women Panchayat representatives in Bihar frequently defer to male family members in decision-making. At the state assembly level, Kumar (2015) documented that Bihar had very few women MLAs between 2005 and 2015. Sharma and Sinha (2018) found that social capital, marital status, and family political backgrounds significantly determined electoral success for women candidates in Bihar. More recently, Singh (2022) highlighted that welfare schemes have enhanced women's visibility but not necessarily their political agency. The 2025 Bihar elections resulting in 29 women MLAs (12%) in the 18th Assembly, up from 26 in 2020 represent a modest but notable gain (ADR, 2025).

2.3 Sitamarhi District: Contextual Studies

District-specific literature on Sitamarhi is sparse. Jha (2014) examined the socio-economic profile of Sitamarhi and noted its high dependence on agriculture, significant seasonal migration patterns, and relatively poor educational infrastructure, all of which compound barriers to women's political participation. The National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2019-21) data for Sitamarhi reveal that female literacy stands at approximately 52%. The 2025 election in Sitamarhi was noteworthy: the NDA swept all eight constituencies, with Gayatri Devi (BJP) winning Parihar as the lone woman victor from the district, illustrating the persistent rarity of women's electoral success in the region. The literature collectively underscores that while formal barriers have reduced over time, informal socio-cultural barriers remain powerful. This paper builds on these findings to offer a focused empirical and analytical account of Sitamarhi's women legislators across 2005–2025.

3. Methodology

This research adopts a mixed-methods qualitative and descriptive-quantitative approach, suited to the complexity of political participation as a social phenomenon.

3.1 Research Design

A case study design focusing on Sitamarhi District has been employed. The unit of analysis is women MLAs and candidates in Bihar Vidhan Sabha elections from Sitamarhi constituencies between 2005 and 2025, spanning the 14th to 18th Bihar Legislative Assembly terms.

3.2 Data Sources

Primary secondary data were obtained from: (a) Election Commission of India (ECI) official publications, including Statistical Reports on General Elections to Bihar Vidhan Sabha (2005, 2010, 2015, 2020, 2025) (b) Bihar Vidhan Sabha official records and member profiles; (c) Government of Bihar, District Statistical Handbooks for Sitamarhi (d) NFHS-4 and NFHS-5 district-level data. (e) published academic research, reports of organisations such as PRS Legislative Research, Lokniti-CSDS, and ADR (Association for Democratic Reforms) including ADR's winner analysis of Bihar 2025 and (f) newspaper archives from Dainik Jagran, Hindustan, Republic World, and The Times of India.

3.3 Analytical Approach

Quantitative data on election results, vote shares, and candidate profiles were compiled and analysed descriptively using frequency distributions and trend analysis across the five assembly elections spanning 2005 to 2025. Qualitative content analysis was applied to legislative records speeches, and published interviews of women MLAs. The paper deliberately avoids primary field interviews to maintain methodological rigour within the constraints of this study, while acknowledging this as a limitation and direction for future research.

3.4 Limitations

The study is limited by the absence of primary interview data, which could have enriched understanding of lived experiences of women legislators. Additionally, the 2025 constituency composition of Sitamarhi District (eight seats after delimitation) differs slightly from earlier configurations, introducing minor complications in longitudinal comparison. These limitations are acknowledged but do not substantially undermine the validity of the analysis.

4. Data Analysis

4.1 Electoral Representation: An Overview (2005–2025)

An analysis of Bihar Vidhan Sabha election data from 2005 to 2025 reveals a consistently low level of women's electoral representation from Sitamarhi District constituencies. Table 1 presents the number of women candidates and winners from Sitamarhi in successive state assembly elections across this twenty-year period. The 2025 election held on 6 and 11 November 2025 with results declared on 14 November 2025 is included as the most recent data point.

Table 1: Women Candidates and Elected MLAs from Sitamarhi District (Bihar Vidhan Sabha, 2005–2025)

Election Year	Total Seats	Total Candidates	Women Candidates	Women %	Women Elected
Feb 2005 (14th Assembly)	8	31	2	6.5%	0
Oct 2005 (14th Assembly)	8	30	2	6.7%	0
2010 (15th Assembly)	8	28	3	10.7%	1
2015 (16th Assembly)	8	35	5	14.3%	2
2020 (17th Assembly)	8	33	4	12.1%	1
2025 (18th Assembly)	8	29	3	10.3%	1

Source: Election Commission of India, Statistical Reports 2005–2025; ADR Bihar Reports 2025; Republic World Election Coverage, November 2025; compiled by author.

Note: Constituency count reflects post-delimitation Sitamarhi District (8 seats). In 2025, Gayatri Devi (BJP) won Parihar as the sole woman elected from Sitamarhi district. All 8 seats were won by NDA candidates in 2025.

The data in Table 1 illustrates that women's candidacy from Sitamarhi has remained a small fraction of total contestations throughout the 2005–2025 period, ranging from 6.5% to 14.3%. Electoral success has been modest and fluctuating: a peak of 2 women simultaneously elected in 2015, followed by a decline to 1 each in 2020 and 2025. The 2025 results in which only 1 woman was elected out of 3 who contested, despite the NDA's historic sweep underline that even within a dominant-party wave, women remain structurally marginalised in ticket

allocation and electoral success. At the state level, Bihar's 18th Assembly (2025) has 29 women MLAs (12%) a marginal increase from 26 (11%) in 2020 confirming that overall progress is incremental (ADR, 2025).

4.2 Party Affiliation and Ticket Allocation

An analysis of political party affiliations of women candidates from Sitamarhi reveals that the Janata Dal (United) Rashtriya Janata Dal, and Bharatiya Janata Party have fielded the largest number of women candidates across elections. In 2025 the BJP fielded Gayatri Devi from Parihar who won as the only woman from a major NDA party in Sitamarhi district. The absence of women candidates from JD(U) RJD, and LJP(RV) in most Sitamarhi seats in 2025 reflects the continued practice of restricting women to a narrow band of constituencies. Table 2 provides a summary of party wise ticket allocation to women in 2015, 2020 and 2025.

Table 2: Party-wise Women Candidates from Sitamarhi District (2015, 2020 & 2025 Assembly Elections)

Political Party	Women Candidates (2015)	Women Candidates (2020)	Women Candidates (2025)
Janata Dal (United)	2	1	0
Rashtriya Janata Dal	1	1	0
Bharatiya Janata Party	1	1	1*
Indian National Congress	0	0	0
Lok Jan Shakti Party	1	1	0
Rashtriya Lok Morcha	0	0	1
Jan Suraj Party	0	0	1
Independent / Others	0	0	0
Total	5	4	3

Source: ECI Statistical Reports; ADR Bihar Reports 2015, 2020, 2025; Republic World November 2025. (*) Gayatri Devi (BJP) won Parihar constituency.

4.3 Socio-Demographic Profile of Women MLAs

Women MLAs elected from Sitamarhi constituencies over 2005–2025 have predominantly been from upper and dominant backward castes, reflecting the intersection of caste privilege with gender in electoral success. Age profiles reveal that most elected women were between 35 and 55 years at the time of election. Educational qualifications range from graduation to post-graduation. A significant proportion have family ties to established political figures, corroborating findings of 'dynastic politics' in existing literature. The 2025 winner Gayatri Devi from Parihar follows this pattern a BJP-affiliated candidate from a politically connected background in a constituency where the BJP had established stronghold.

4.4 Legislative Role and Participation

An examination of Bihar Vidhan Sabha records and PRS Legislative Research reports indicates that women MLAs from Sitamarhi constituencies have raised questions predominantly related to women's welfare, education, water and sanitation, rural infrastructure, and maternal health. Their participation in broader legislative debates has been relatively limited, reflecting the marginalised position of women within party hierarchies. Women legislators from Sitamarhi have been advocates for the Mukhyamantri Kanya Utthan Yojana and programmes under the Jal-Jeevan-Hariyali Mission. Their interventions on flood relief critical for the district's riverine communities have contributed to policy responsiveness. The 2025 election context, dominated by NDA's welfare narrative and high women's voter turnout (71.8% statewide, the highest in Bihar's history) paradoxically coincided with a decline in women candidates from the district, confirming the 'representation gap' identified in scholarly literature. (Kumar 2005)

5. Barriers and Challenges

Despite incremental gains across the 2005–2025 period, women aspiring to and serving in legislative roles from Sitamarhi face formidable and multidimensional barriers. These can be categorised into structural, social and cultural, institutional, and economic dimensions.

5.1 Patriarchal Social Norms and Gender Stereotyping

Sitamarhi's social fabric is deeply shaped by patriarchal traditions, wherein public life and political authority are traditionally conceived as male domains. Women who enter politics often face social stigma, questioning of their character, and resistance from within their own families and communities. The concept of 'maryada' (social honour) tied to women's seclusion from public life acts as a powerful informal constraint. Women politicians frequently report being judged by appearance, marital status, and personal conduct rather than political competence.

5.2 Caste-Based Exclusion

Caste remains the primary organising principle of electoral politics in Bihar. Women from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Most Backward Classes face compounded disadvantages. Even where reservations exist at the local government level, their absence in state assembly elections leaves women from marginalised communities largely dependent on dominant-caste gatekeepers. The 2025 data from Sitamarhi reflects this, with the lone elected woman Gayatri Devi coming from a politically established caste background in the BJP camp.

5.3 Financial Constraints and Election Expenditure

Electoral campaigning in Bihar entails substantial financial investment. Women candidates, who typically have less access to independent economic resources and fewer established fundraising networks, are severely disadvantaged. The ADR Bihar report (2025) noted that women candidates on average declared lower assets than their male counterparts and spent less on campaigns, which correlates with lower win rates. The informal economy of electoral 'muscle and money' disproportionately excludes women.

5.4 Lack of Institutional Support With in Political Parties

Political parties in Bihar, while publicly endorsing women's empowerment, have been reluctant to allocate safe seats or leadership roles to women. In 2025, the sharp decline in women candidates from Sitamarhi from 4 in 2020 to 3 in 2025, with zero fielded by JD(U) or RJD in the district exemplifies this structural marginalization. The

ADR analysis of Bihar 2025 noted that statewide women candidates in 2025 reached their lowest level in 15 years, despite record women's voter turnout.

5.5 Low Female Literacy and Political Awareness

With female literacy at approximately 52% in Sitamarhi (NFHS-5), many women voters and potential candidates lack access to political information and civic education. Low literacy translates into reduced political consciousness, diminished voter mobilisation capacity, and limited ability to navigate bureaucratic and legislative processes. The gender gap in education is reflected in the political sphere, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of marginalisation.

5.6 Security Concerns and Political Violence

Bihar has a documented history of political violence, especially during elections. Women candidates face threats, intimidation, and violence including gender-specific intimidation at a higher rate than their male counterparts. The prevalence of criminal elements in electoral politics, combined with weak law enforcement in remote rural constituencies, creates a hostile environment. In the 2025 Bihar election, 53% of all winning candidates had declared criminal cases (ADR, 2025) underscoring the criminalisation of politics that particularly disadvantages women.

5.7 Dual Burden of Domestic and Political Responsibilities

Women legislators in Sitamarhi bear a dual burden of managing domestic and family responsibilities alongside legislative duties. The absence of adequate support systems childcare, household assistance, elder care means women often sacrifice legislative effectiveness for familial obligations. This structural inequality in social reproduction work undermines women's full participation in political life and is rarely addressed in legislative workplace policies. (pandey 2016)

6. Conclusion

This research paper has examined the role and challenges of women in the Bihar State Legislative Assembly from Sitamarhi District over the period 2005 to 2025. The analysis reveals a complex and contradictory reality: while the formal democratic framework provides equal opportunity for women's political participation, deep-rooted structural, social, and institutional barriers continue to limit women's effective representation and legislative agency. The quantitative data spanning five successive assembly elections (2005–2025) indicate that women's candidacy and electoral success from Sitamarhi constituencies have remained far below representative levels. The 2025 Bihar election in which only 1 woman was elected from the district despite the NDA's historic 202-seat victory and record women's voter turnout starkly illustrates the disconnect between women's electoral mobilisation and their legislative representation. At the state level, Bihar's 18th Assembly marginally improved women's share to 12% (29 MLAs), yet the statewide number of women candidates was the lowest in 15 years, marking a troubling regression in party-level commitment to women's political inclusion. Qualitative analysis suggests that women MLAs, despite limited numbers, have contributed meaningfully to legislative debates on welfare, health, education, and disaster relief areas of immediate relevance to Sitamarhi's flood-prone and agrarian constituents. However their marginalisation from broader legislative and party hierarchies constrains their overall policy impact. The barriers identified patriarchal norms, caste exclusion, financial constraints, inadequate party support, low female literacy, security threats, and dual domestic burdens are not unique to Sitamarhi but are amplified by the district's socio-economic underdevelopment. Addressing these requires a multi-pronged policy response. First, the implementation of the Women's Reservation Bill (2023) must be expedited with delimitation carried out

transparently. Second, political parties must adopt internal democracy measures. Third, state capacity-building programmes targeting women political aspirants must be institutionalised. Fourth, addressing social determinants improving female literacy, reducing child marriage, strengthening gender-based violence enforcement is essential for long-term change. Fifth, civil society organisations, media, and academic institutions must continue advocacy around women's political rights. In conclusion, the story of women in the Bihar Vidhan Sabha from Sitamarhi across 2005–2025 is one of resilience against formidable odds. The incremental progress observed, while insufficient, provides a foundation for more transformative change if accompanied by structural reforms and genuine political commitment. Future research should prioritise primary qualitative fieldwork with women MLAs candidates, and voters from the district to deepen understanding of lived experiences

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