

SPATIO-TEMPORAL ANALYSIS OF THE CHANGING ELECTORAL CULTURE OF WOMEN IN BIHAR

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Abstract: It is argued that women need to be empowered in the realm of political decision-making to facilitate their real empowerment. The growing participation of women in elections is a subtle manifestation of women's empowerment. The process of this empowerment has been gradual and not an abrupt phenomenon. Bihar is an economically backward region and male out-migration is a common phenomenon. This factor gives females in Bihar a responsibility to look after themselves and their families in the absence of male members. There is a rising trend in the voting behaviour of women in the study area but their representation is still very low. Variations in women's participation have been observed when compared between the rural and urban areas. There is a rising trend in the voting participation of women in the study area due to several pro-women policies implemented by the ruling regime. The paper analyses the spatial variations and temporal changes in women's electoral culture based on the findings of State Legislative Assembly Elections of 2005, 2010, 2015, and 2020. The paper is based on the qualitative research approach utilizing field survey-based narratives and secondary data available from the Election Commission of India, newspapers and reports.

Keywords: Electoral culture, Spatio-Temporal Analysis, Female Empowerment, Political, Elections and Voting.

ANÁLISE ESPACIAL-TEMPORAL DA MUDANÇA NA CULTURA ELEITORAL DAS MULHERES EM BIHAR/ÍNDIA

Resumo: Neste texto, argumenta-se que as mulheres precisam ser empoderadas no âmbito da tomada de decisões políticas para que seu empoderamento seja efetivo. O crescente envolvimento das mulheres nas eleições é uma manifestação sutil desse empoderamento. No entanto, esse processo tem sido gradual e não um fenômeno abrupto. Bihar é uma região economicamente desfavorecida, onde a migração masculina é um fenômeno comum. Esse fator impõe às mulheres a responsabilidade de cuidar de si mesmas e de suas famílias na ausência dos membros masculinos. Observa-se uma tendência crescente na participação eleitoral das mulheres na área de estudo, embora sua representação ainda seja muito baixa. Também foram identificadas variações na participação feminina quando comparadas as áreas rurais e urbanas.

O aumento da participação eleitoral das mulheres na área estudada pode ser atribuído a diversas políticas pró-mulheres implementadas pelo governo vigente. O artigo analisa as variações espaciais e as mudanças temporais na cultura eleitoral feminina, com base nos resultados das eleições para a Assembleia Legislativa Estadual de 2005, 2010, 2015 e 2020. O estudo adota uma abordagem de pesquisa qualitativa, utilizando narrativas de levantamentos de campo e dados secundários disponibilizados pela Comissão Eleitoral da Índia, jornais e relatórios.

Palavras-chave: Cultura eleitoral, Análise espaço-temporal, Empoderamento feminino, Política, Eleições e Voto.

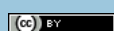
ANALYSE SPATIO-TEMPORELLE DU CHANGEMENT DE CULTURE AU BIHAR/EN INDE

Résumé: Il est soutenu que les femmes doivent être autonomisées dans le domaine de la prise de décision politique afin de faciliter leur véritable émancipation. La participation croissante des femmes aux élections est une manifestation subtile de cet empowerment. Cependant, ce processus a été progressif et non un phénomène soudain. Le Bihar est une région économiquement défavorisée où la migration masculine est un phénomène courant. Ce facteur confère aux femmes du Bihar la responsabilité de prendre soin d'elles-mêmes et de leur famille en l'absence des membres masculins. Une tendance à la hausse du comportement électoral des femmes a été observée dans la zone d'étude, bien que leur représentation reste encore très faible. Des variations dans la participation des femmes ont été constatées entre les zones rurales et urbaines. L'augmentation de la participation électorale des femmes dans la zone étudiée peut être attribuée à plusieurs politiques favorables aux femmes mises en place par le gouvernement en place. Cet article analyse les variations spatiales et les évolutions temporelles de la culture électorale féminine, sur la base des résultats des élections à l'Assemblée législative de l'État en 2005, 2010, 2015 et 2020. L'étude repose sur une approche de recherche qualitative, s'appuyant sur des récits issus d'enquêtes de terrain ainsi que sur des données secondaires provenant de la Commission électorale de l'Inde, de journaux et de rapports.

Mots-clés: Culture électorale, Analyse spatio-temporelle, Autonomisation des femmes, Politique, Élections et Vote.

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Introduction

Indian democracy is the largest and most prosperous because more than 50 crore voters participate in the election of their representatives. (Soroka and Wlezien, 2010). In Bihar, there was a time when many women could not vote as they refused to disclose their names in electoral rolls. But in the past few decades, the gender gap between male and female voter turnout in the elections in Bihar has been gradually shrinking. Every election reignites the conflict between personal political preferences and collective interests, reshaping communities along (or against) class, race and gender lines across the nation (Banita and Pohlmann, 2015). There is a cultural change in women's electoral participation in the study area as women are casting their vote in great numbers which have been higher than men. This is a remarkable turn of events in a deeply patriarchal, conservative society (Vaishnav, 2018) which needs to be understood and highlighted. Part XV of the Constitution of India is related to the elections in India. The Election Commission of India is an autonomous constitutional authority responsible for administering Union and State election processes in India. The body administers elections to the Lok Sabha, Rajya Sabha, and State Legislative Assemblies in India, and the offices of the President and Vice President in the country. For the last three consecutive Legislative Assembly Elections (2010, 2015 and 2020), women have been outnumbered. There is an increase in women voters, however, women's participation is still marginal in political representation. Out of the total 243 Legislative Assembly Constituency seats in Bihar, 28 women were elected to the Member of Legislative Assembly in 2015 whereas only 26 women were elected in the 2020 Legislative Assembly Election. However, the overall number of women contesting increased from 8% to 10% in the 2020 Bihar Legislative Assembly Election (Verniers and Hooda, 2020). Women's participation in elections is closely related to their level of empowerment. Female empowerment is closely related to the equal status of women, providing them equal opportunity, and freedom for their development. The focus of women's empowerment is in the process of decision-making. A few decades back women would rarely participate in the electoral process and those who participated were guided by the men of the family.

In the past decade the scenario is changing, on voting day, women are going to voting booths in groups for voting (Field Observations, Patna Assembly Constituency, 2020). In recent years, political parties have considered women-centric issues in their election manifesto such as liquor ban etc. The government is also playing a vital role in the empowerment of women by inaugurating various schemes such as Anganwadi schemes in which women are engaged in teaching and social services, Mukhyamantri Balika Bicycle Scheme, reservation of 50% women in Panchayati Raj Institutions and 35% reservation in government jobs, Women-led self-help groups under Jeevika etc. are examples of empowering girls and women as well.

There have been existing studies on the geography of elections, voting behaviour, and political consciousness of voters in different parts of India (Rai, 2011; Rai, 2017; Fadia, 2014; Spary, 2020). The study is timely to understand the importance of the caste-neutral political constituency around development issues- women voters in a caste-ridden electoral arithmetic of Bihar.

Research Objectives

1. To study the temporal pattern of women voter turnout in successive Legislative Assembly Elections since 1951, emphasising the 2010, 2015 and 2020 elections being the present study.
2. To analyse the spatial pattern of women voter turnout in the 2010, 2015 and 2020 Legislative Assembly Elections.

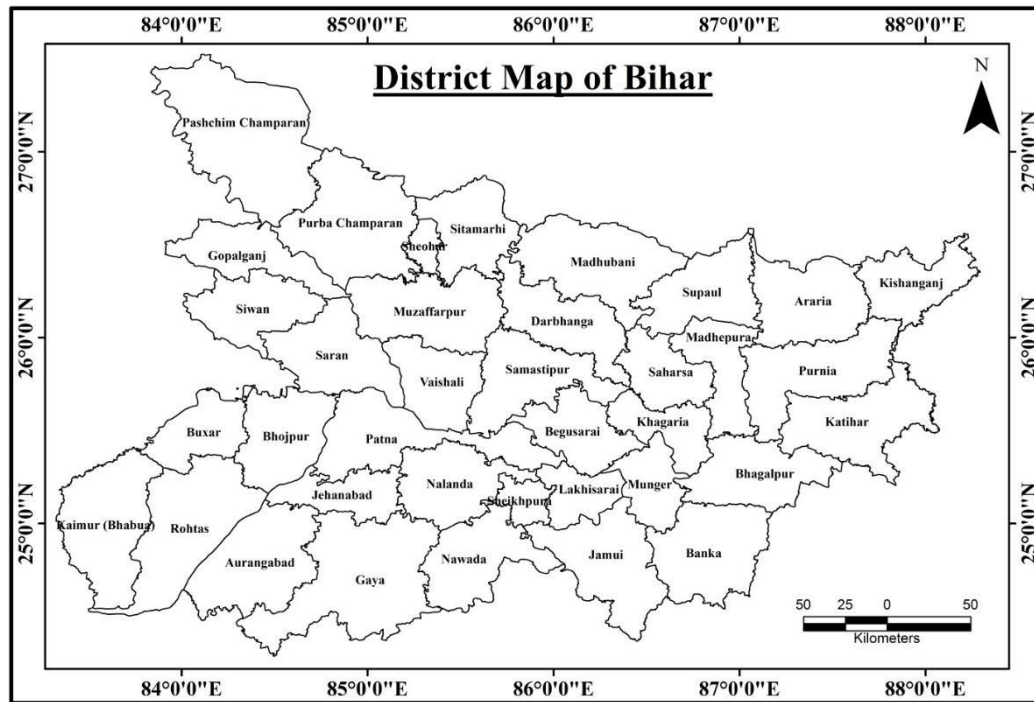
Methodology

The main objective of the present study is to analyse the voting pattern of women in Bihar. For analysis, an aggregate data analysis approach has been taken. For the identification of voting patterns, the electoral participation of women is taken as an indicator. In the electoral participation, the percentage of women voters polled has been taken for the purpose. Districts have been divided into four categories based on women voter's turnout percentage to examine the regional variations of electoral participation in Bihar. i.e., *very high women voters' turnout, high women voters' turnout, moderate women voter turnout and low women voters' turnout*. Cartographic techniques including bar graphs, line graphs and choropleth shades have been used to portray various electoral phenomena. The determination of the spatio-temporal pattern of voter participation probability has been done through content analysis of different newspapers reporting on women voter's participation in 2015 and 2020 Legislative Assembly Elections.

Geographical Profile of the Study Area

Bihar is situated between 24°20'N to 27° 31' N latitude and 83°20' E to 88° 28'E longitude in the eastern part of India. The landscape of Bihar is almost flat and comprises fertile plain of Ganga and its major tributaries such as Gandak, Bagmati, Kosi. On 15 November 2000, the state of Jharkhand was carved out of Bihar. Bihar is divided into 38 districts under 9 divisions with 101 sub-divisions and 534 Blocks. The state has 40 parliamentary constituencies and 243 assembly constituencies. Bihar has a predominately agriculture-based economy. More than 2/3rd of the population of the state is involved in agricultural activities. In the Legislative Assembly Election of 2010, the total number of electors was 55,120,656, out of which 25,464,746 were women electors and the total number of voters was 29,034,705 in which number of women voters was 13,87,5175. The total polling percentage was 52.67%. The polling percentage of men was 51.10% whereas the polling percentage of women was 54.49%. In the Legislative Assembly Election of 2015, the total number of electors was 67,056,820 out of which the number of male electors was 35,782,181 and the number of female electors was 31,272,523. The total number of voters in the Legislative Assembly Election 2015 was 37,993,173 out of which the number of male voters was 19,078,453 and the number of women voters was 18,914,687. The total polling percentage in the Legislative Assembly Election of 2020 was 56.6%. The polling percentage for men was only 53.32% whereas the polling percentage for women was 60.48%.

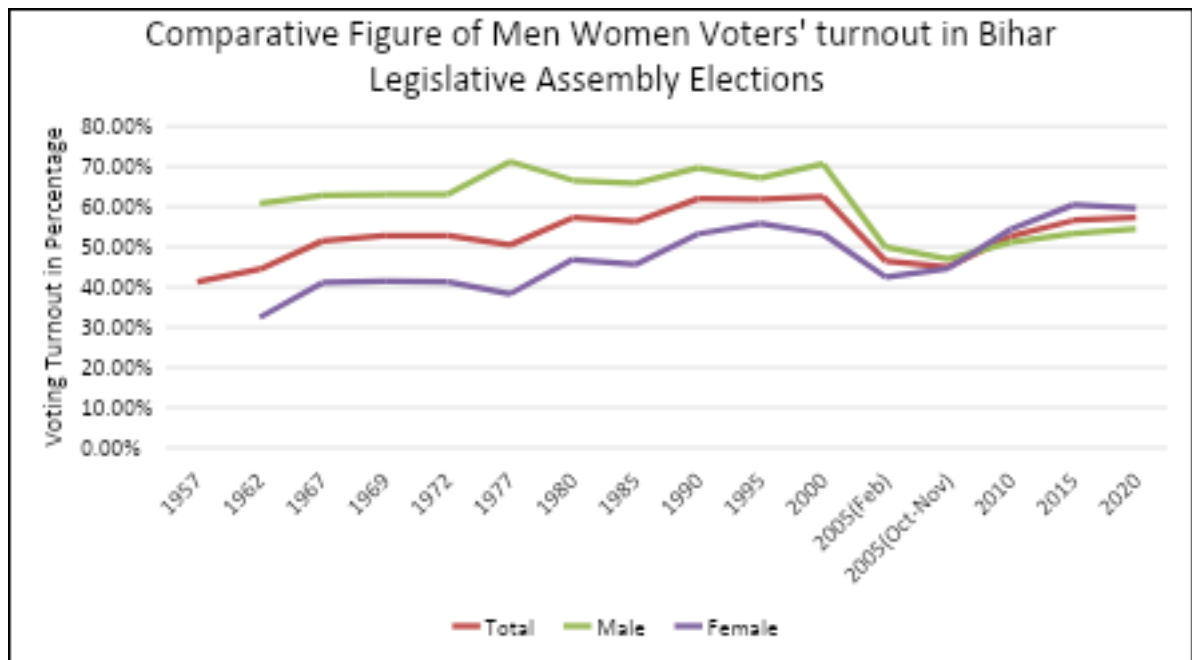
Figure 1 - Map of the Study Area



Temporal Analyses of Women Voter's Turnout in Bihar

Voting is the most common and important act of political participation. Increasing awareness among women voters about their rights began to influence the political scene (Fadia, 2014). Electoral participation is a process in which the electorate participate in choosing their representatives. Voter turnout has been measured as the percentage of registered votes in each constituency who have cast their votes. The increasing trend of women voters' participation has had concrete political effects and ultimately, the notion that the political sphere is inherently masculine (Rosenberg, 2021). Bihar is one of the states that have shown progress in women's political empowerment over the last decade. Women's turnout was more than men's turnout in the previous three consecutive Bihar Legislative Assembly Elections of 2010, 2015 and 2020. Recently, India went for General Lok Sabha Elections in 2024. According to the Election Commission of India, women voters had higher turnout (59.39%) than men voters (53.58%) during the 2024 Lok Sabha Elections in Parliamentary Constituencies located in Bihar. The Parliamentary constituencies which registered highest female turnout were Katihar (72.37%) Supaul (71.64%), Kishanganj (70.37%), Araria (69.39%) Purnea (68.15%), Begusarai (67.13%), Samastipur (66.74), Vaishali (66.62%) and Ujiarpur (65.12%).

Figure 2 - Comparative Figure of Men- Women Voters' Turnout in Bihar



It is clear from Figure 2 that there is a gradual increase in the participation of women. However, in all Legislative Assembly Elections before 2010, the turnout among men was always higher than turnout among the women. The trend changed in the 2010 election, and women voted more than men. The women's turnout in the 2010 election was 54.5% whereas the men's turnout was 51.1%. In the 2015 Legislative Assembly Election, the women voter's turnout was 60.48% whereas men voter's turnout was 53.32%. In the 2020 Legislative Assembly Election, the women voter's turnout was 59.69% and men voter's turnout was 54.54%. There is a slight decrease in the voting participation of female voters due to the threat of COVID-19 (Mahmood Z, 2022). The gender gap in voters' turnout was around 20% till the year 2000. The basic reasons were safety issues, lawlessness, booth capturing, and violence during the elections etc.

The gender gap in voter turnout reduced for the first time in the 2005 Legislative Assembly Elections. In 2010 Legislative Assembly Election women voter turnout was more than men's voter turnout for the first time in elections. Improved law and order situation, violence free election and empowerment of women (such as 50% reservation in local bodies), distribution of free bicycle for school going girls were some factors which influenced women's electoral participation in the state (Banerjee, A., Banerjee, S., Hankla, C., Singh, K., & Thomas, A, 2021).

The party manifestos of major political parties of state mentioned specific provisions for women's welfare. This included a 5 lakhs grant along with an interest free loan to women starting new venture, to enable one crore women to become self-sufficient, to install solar lights in the streets of village for safety of women and to provide cash assistance to unmarried girls when they graduate from school and universities (Singh, 2020).

Spatial Pattern of Women Voters Turnout in Legislative Assembly Elections 2015 and 2020

Geographers and researchers have considered electoral geography as the study of human behaviour towards voting patterns of elections in the context to a particular area and time (Thakur

and Singh, 2021). The Legislative Assembly Elections of 2015 and 2020 recorded variation in voting turnout across the state. Spatial variation is found from one district to another district as well as from one assembly constituency to another constituency. It is the most common and probably the most important component of an individual's participation in the political process (Biswas, 2023). To outline the regional variation of electoral participation of women in Bihar, the districts and assembly units have been divided into the following four categories based on women voter turnout percentage:

- i. High Women Voters' Turnout - Where participation of women was between 60% and 70%.
- ii. Moderate Women Voters' Turnout- Where participation of women was between 50% and 60%.
- iii. Low Women's Voters Turnout- Where participation was below 50%.

High voting among women was observed during the 2020 Legislative Assembly Election in only two districts of Bihar- Kishanganj and Katihar. In 2015 Legislative Assembly Election Supaul, Araria, Kishanganj, Purnea, Katihar, Madhepura, Muzaffarpur, Samastipur, Begusarai, and Khagaria recorded high voter turnout.

In 2015, West Champaran, Sitamarhi, Madhubani, Supaul, Araria, Purnia, Madhepura, Saharsa, Darbhanga, Muzaffarpur, Vaishali, Samastipur, Begusarai, Khagaria, Bhagalpur, Banka have registered high women voters' turnout.

The districts with moderate women's turnout were Pashchim Champaran, Purba Champaran, Sheohar, Sitamarhi, Madhubani, Saharsa, Darbhanga, Gopalganj, Siwan, Saran, Banka, Vaishali, Buxar, Kaimur and Gaya. In 2020 Legislative Assembly Election the districts with moderate women voters' turnout are Purba Champaran, Sheohar, Saran, Munger, Lakhisarai, Shekhpura and Nalanda, Patna, Bojpur, Kaimur, Rohtas, Arwal, Jahanabad, Aurangabad and Gaya.

There were twelve districts in 2015 which have recorded less than 50% voting among women. These districts were Jamui, Nawada, Aurangabad, Jahanabad, Arwal, Rohtas, Kaimur, Bojpur, Patna, Nalanda, Lakhisarai, Munger, Bhagalpur whereas there is no district having less than 50% of voting among women in the Legislative Assembly Election of 2015. This shows that there is an increasing trend of voting pattern in the districts of Bihar.

In 2015 the turnout was highest in Thakurganj assembly constituency (70.4%) of Kishanganj district and the lowest in Sahebpur Kamal assembly constituency (43.2%) of Begusarai district. Whereas in 2020 the turnout was highest in Pranpur assembly constituency (75.7%) of Katihar district and lowest in Barhara (47.5%) in Bhojpur district.

On the whole, the overall level of electoral participation of 54% was quite low in 2015 Legislative Assembly Election. About 53% of the assembly constituencies recorded a turnout below the average. Just 28% of assembly constituencies recorded a fairly high turnout of over 60%. In 2020 there was increase in the average turnout. Only 6 assembly constituencies had less than 50% turnout. These districts were Bhagalpur, Danapur, Paligang, Barhara, Jagdishpur and Gaya Town.

There were 19 assembly constituency in which turnout was more than 70%. These were Motihari, Dhaka, Nirmali, Chhatapur, Sikti, Thakurganj, Kishanganj, Kochadhaman, Baisi, Kasba, Pranpur, Barari, Korha, Minapur, Sakra and Masauri. In the 2015 Legislative Assembly Election, 45% of total assembly constituencies had women voters' turnout between 60% and 70%, whereas 36% of total assembly constituencies had women voter turnout between 50% and 60%. From these results, it is clear that women are moving ahead of their male counterparts in terms of participation in the electoral process (Ojha, 2014).

Figure 3 - District wise comparative chart of women voters

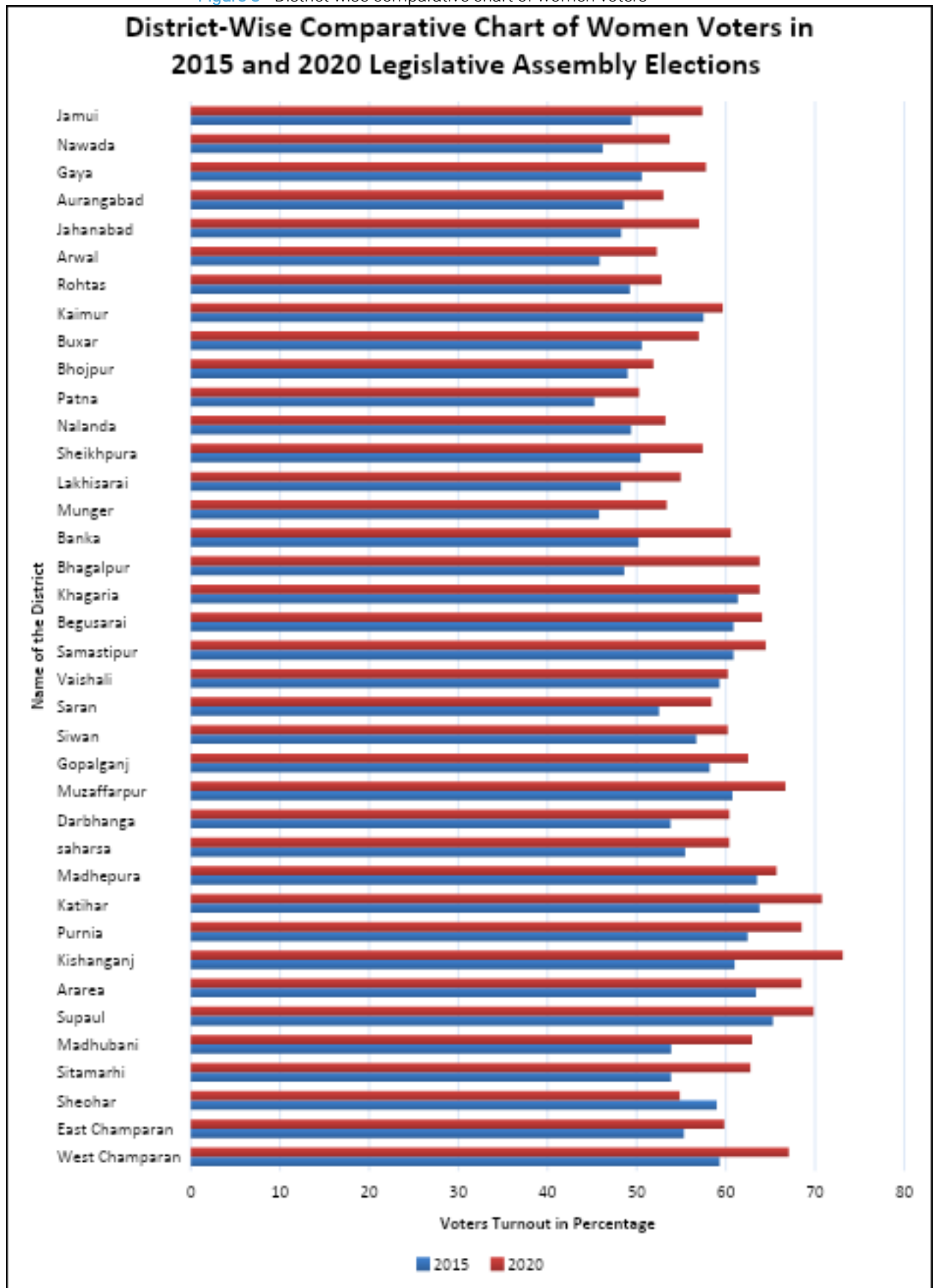


Figure 4 - Spatial Pattern of Women Voters' turnout in Bihar Legislative Assembly Election, 2010

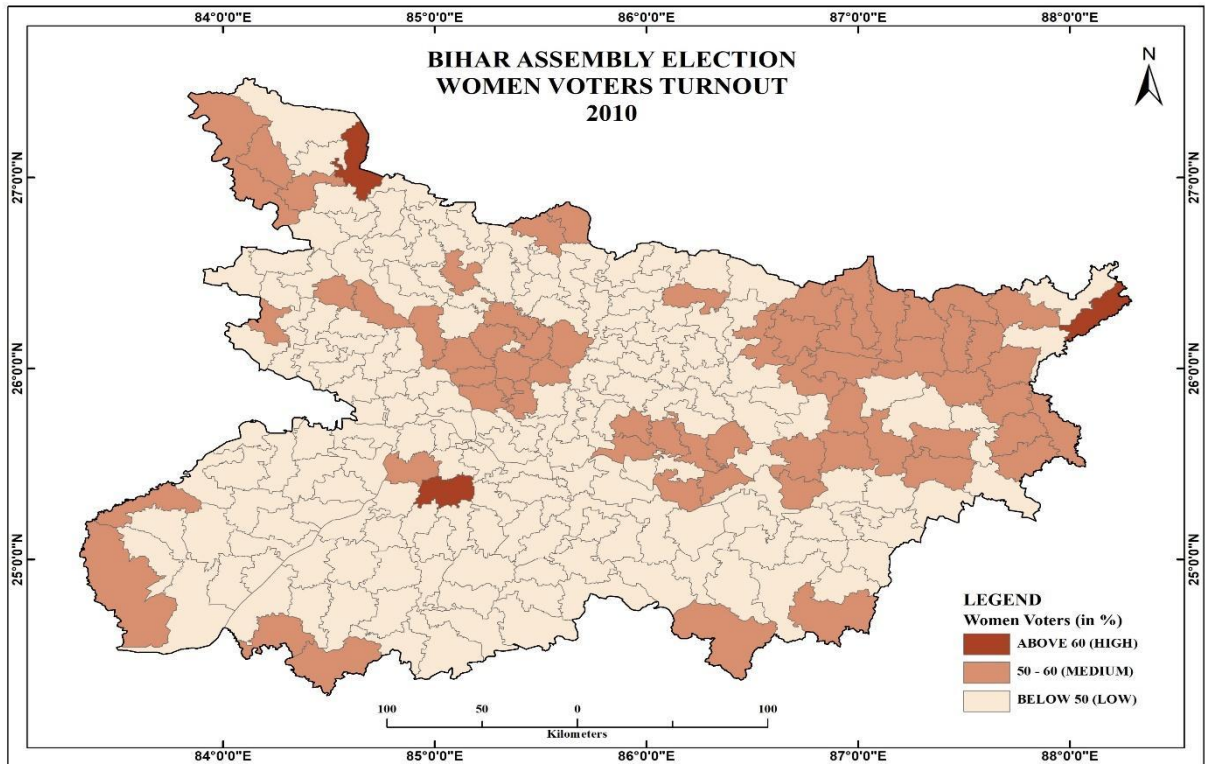


Figure 5 - Spatial Pattern of Women Voters' turnout in Bihar Legislative Assembly Election, 2015

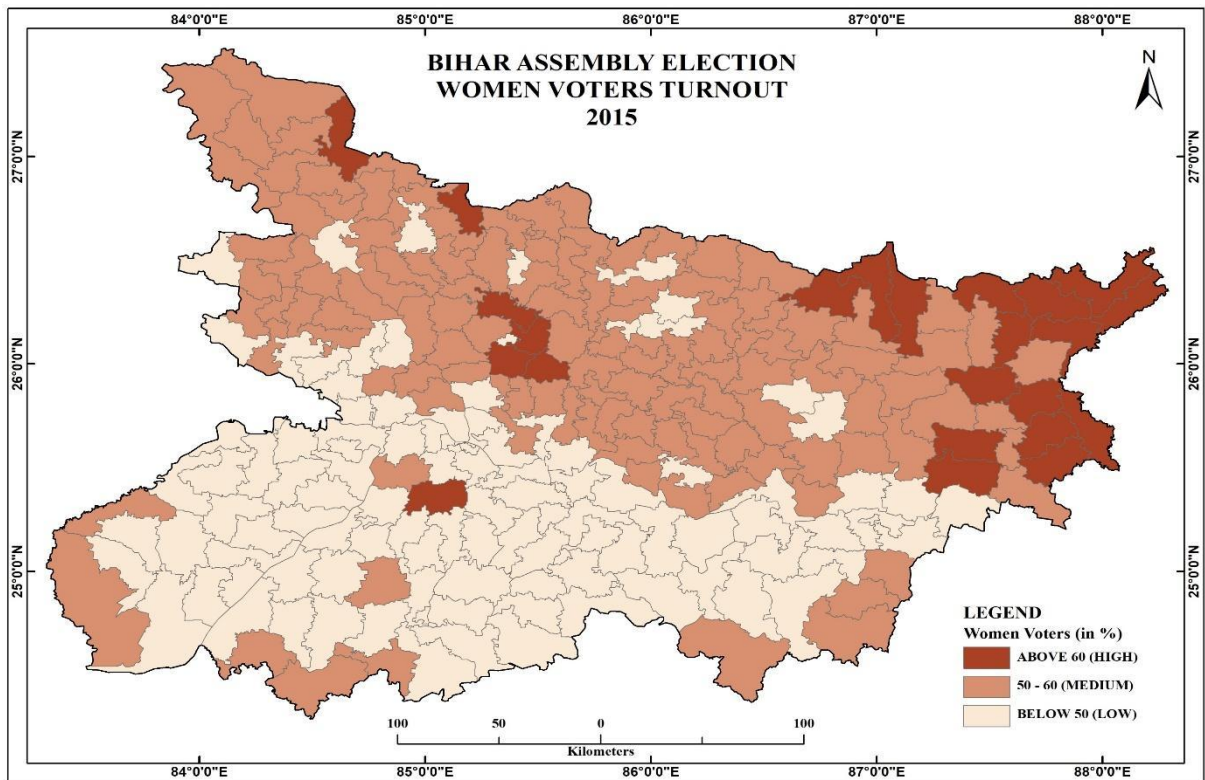
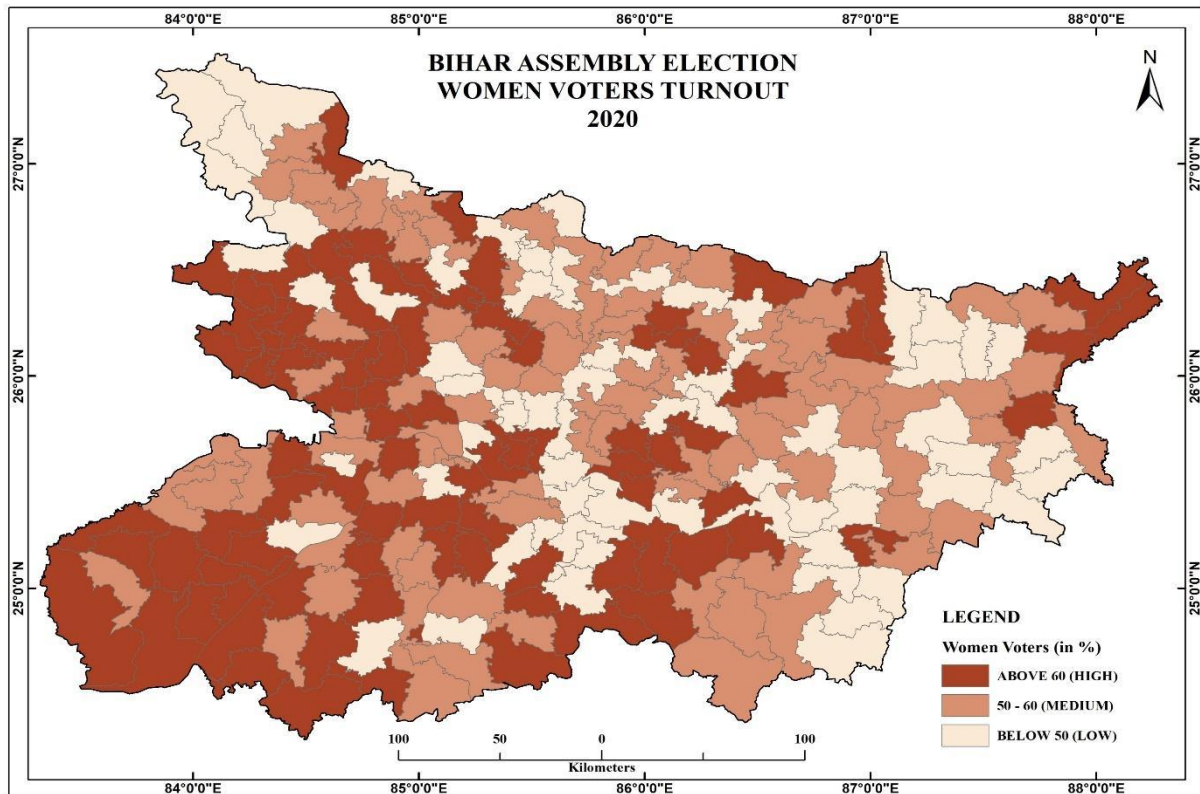


Figure 6 - Spatial Pattern of Women Voters' turnout in Bihar Legislative Assembly Election, 2020



Challenges of electoral empowerment of women

One of the difficulties faced by women candidates is how to present themselves as women to the electorate. Campaigning, as well as governing, is regarded as stereotypically male; hence, women candidates at least perceive that the presentation of their gender role during a campaign is problematic (Pierce, 1989). Bihar is the least literate state in the country (Census of India, 2011). The literacy rate among the women is 53.3%. The level of awareness among electors is closely associated with the level of education (Dahlerup, 2005). Despite the topic of gender inequality in the realm of political representation having increased visibility in many parts of world (Dalton, 2019), Bihar may be considered as still having a patriarchal society, where women are often seen as subordinate and inferior to men. This is highlighted by a big gap in the registration of women in the electoral roll, which is potentially reflective of a lack of priority given to female enrolment caused by a perception of females as having a lower status in society, and cultural inhibition. Enrolment of women is not given priority due to the lower status of women in the society. Election. Cultural inhibition is also included in the challenges of women's electoral empowerment.

Conclusion

The 2015 Legislative Assembly Elections in Bihar witnessed the remarkable rise in women's voting across the state following the 2010 Legislative Assembly Election. However, there is almost the same participation in the Legislative Assembly Election of 2020 by women. In 2010 the women's turnout was 54.5% and in the 2015 Legislative Assembly Election it was about 60% and in 2020 it was

59.69%. Regional disparity is observed in electoral population in the state. Government policies for women empowerment, reservation in jobs, admission in engineering colleges and 50% quota in Panchayati Raj institutions have contributed to better women turnout at polling booths. Jeevika Didis (Self-help group of women) have also played a key role in creating awareness among the women about their voting rights. Overall, there is a changing electoral culture in Bihar in which women are much more aware of their voting rights and pro-women policies of government, as evidenced by the changing geography of participation in recent contests.

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