

**Political Parties and Women's Representation in India and Iceland**  
A Comparative Study

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# Abstract

In 1975, India and Iceland had approximately 5% women's representation in their parliaments. Almost half a century later, India has 14% and Iceland has 48% women's representation. It is the highest in respective countries. The journeys taken by both countries are different, and how different actors contributed towards the change also varies significantly. India and Iceland are political party-driven democracies which historically saw coalition governments involving more than one party in the ruling governments and splits and mergers among political parties extensively. Through manifestoes, internal quotas and other measures, political parties shaped gender equality agendas. This study compares and analyses measures and actions taken by political parties in Iceland and India during 1975-2022 towards improving women's political participation and representation. The study intends to generate a comparative understanding that can be contextualised and adopted by politicians, parties, nonprofits and advocacy groups in both countries. The study adopts mixed-method data collection involving both primary and secondary research. Political parties' websites, documents, manifestos, and other relevant information are reviewed. Additionally, in-depth interviews and survey responses with 10 political party representatives and 6 Key informant interviews were conducted with historians, political scientists, and researchers who studied the modern political history of Iceland to comprehensively understand the status of gender equality in Iceland's politics. The existing literature, data collected, and insights generated through my work as the Director of Centre for Gender And Politics (CGAP), India was leveraged to draw similar findings and analysis in the context of Indian politics.

# Introduction

In 1975, two countries – one in South Asia and another in the Nordic region had less than 5% women's representation in their parliaments. Almost half a century later, India, at 14.36%, remains among the lowest in South Asia when it comes to women's representation in the parliaments. In contrast, Iceland tops at 47.36% women in parliament among the Nordic countries and globally. Having said that, like Iceland, India is at its historic high, given the previous years' percentages.

As per World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2022, Iceland is at the top of gender equality rankings, including in political participation and representation of women. It ranks 1st in the political empowerment sub-index, while India ranks 48th (World Economic Forum, 2022). The sub-index measures women in parliament, ministerial positions, and the number of years with a woman head of the state in the last 50 years. Apart from these, to understand women's political empowerment, one needs to look at the indicator of the number of women candidates contesting elections. Over the years, the number of women contesting and winning elections at all levels has increased in Iceland and India. Between 2003 and 2021, the number of women candidates almost doubled in elections to Althingi<sup>1</sup>. Between 2004 and 2014 Lok Sabha<sup>2</sup> elections in India, the number of women candidates almost doubled, however the percentage of women candidates remained low. This is where the role of political parties becomes more prominent because they nominate and decide candidates who contest elections.

In a representative democracy where elections happen, women becoming candidates is the most crucial step before getting elected to become a parliamentarian, minister, or the head of the state. During this step, political parties hold a lot of influence and power. In most countries, political parties are instrumental in candidates' recruitment, nomination, and election (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2021). Research suggests that in representative democracies, descriptive representation<sup>3</sup> of women makes legislatures more responsive to women's concerns (Schwindt-Bayer & Mishler, 2005). Political

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<sup>1</sup> Althingi is the name of the national parliament in Iceland.

<sup>2</sup> Lok Sabha is the lower house of Indian parliament to which members of parliament are directly elected.

<sup>3</sup> Descriptive representation refers to the compositional similarity between representatives and the represented.



parties design systems that enable or disable women's descriptive representation and for women to enter and navigate politics, rise to leadership within parties and contest elections. The political recruitment model discussed in Krook and Norris (2014) highlights three transition moments for a woman in politics: from eligible to aspirant, from aspirant to candidate, and from candidate to elected. Political parties are heavily involved in the second transition, where a woman aspirant can become the electoral candidate and, to a limited extent, in the other transition moments (Krook & Norris, 2014a). Other than voluntary or mandatory quotas, political parties have designed many ways to encourage women to participate in politics and contest elections, including raising awareness, recruitment initiatives, capacity building, institutionalising women's wings, and campaign funding (Krook & Norris, 2014b). Therefore, it is essential to investigate the role of political parties in furthering the status of women in politics. The role of parties is even more critical in multiparty democracies.

Iceland and India are democracies where political parties play a critical role in improving women's political representation, with and beyond quotas. As opposed to a one-party system such as China or a two-party system such as United States of America, multiparty systems have several major political parties competing in elections and forming governments. India and Iceland are multiparty systems. There have always been coalition governments in Iceland that involve more than one party coming together to form governments at the national level. India has often seen coalition governments, especially in the last 50 years. A large part of national agendas and policy direction were influenced by political parties and the coalitions they make. This includes gender equality agendas. Through manifestoes, internal quotas and other measures, political parties played a critical role in shaping these journeys of reaching the highest women's representation in respective countries and increasing the number of women candidates, although they took different approaches. However, there are some similarities between these measures the political parties take. The period during which similar actions were implemented varied significantly. For example, Iceland's politics saw the emergence of internal party quotas in the 1980s. In contrast, Indian politics witnessed such measures as recently as in the last decade.

Hence, by understanding how political parties influence the journey of gender equality in politics, the study will provide an opportunity to find strategies that could be contextualised and adopted in both countries to positively impact the gender equality agenda in politics. In

this study, I aim to compare and contrast the approaches undertaken by political parties in influencing gender equality in Icelandic and Indian politics to find opportunities for political parties in both countries to further the gender equality agenda in politics.

The first section of this paper describes the scope of comparison, followed by the background and history of Iceland and India in political parties and gender equality. Then, the study methodology is explained in detail, followed by the findings. In the analysis section, I examined the similarities and differences in approaches followed by political parties in the two countries. Finally, there is a conclusion and discussion section which includes recommendations for further study and how stakeholders on gender and politics in both countries can initiate dialogues to contextualise some of the findings from this study and adapt them to respective contexts.

## Comparison and Scope of the Study

The scope of this comparative study requires elaboration on two fronts – first, the chosen time period, and second, aspects of the comparison itself. The study covers the events from 1975 to 2022 to draw a comparison between the two countries. The first reason to choose this period is that both countries had less than 5% women in their parliaments during 1975, providing a baseline for comparison. The second reason is the significance of social and political events that took place in direct relevance to this study, elaborated in the following paragraphs.

The year 1975 is itself significant in the context of both countries and across the world. It was the UN's International Women's Year (IWY) when the World's First Conference on the Status of Women was convened in Mexico. The Conference set goals for all UN member countries to achieve over the next ten years to advance women's rights. The UN further designated the decade from 1976-1985 as the United Nations Decade for Women (United Nations, 1976).

In preparation for marking IWY, the Indian government's Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) published its report titled "Towards Equality" in 1974, considered an important document that laid the foundations for the women's movement in Independent India (Bagchi, 2013). This report exposed the grave gender inequality present in Indian society, including in politics. Chapter 7 of the report discusses the political status of women

and acknowledges the lack of equal political status for women at all levels of politics and governance. The report, in its recommendations, urges political parties to adopt a definite policy regarding the percentage of women candidates to be sponsored by them for elections to Parliament and State Assemblies. CSWI also noted that this policy could begin with a 15% quota for women and increase gradually until women's representation reaches a proportion similar to men's. In addition to the above, another major event changed India's political system from one party majority system to a multiparty one. On June 25 1975, National Emergency<sup>4</sup> was imposed following political unrest that enabled new political fronts to emerge. Therefore, the relationship between political parties and their influence on policy matters, including women's representation, became more substantial after the emergency that lasted until early 1977.

While the CSWI Report re-opened the women's question for India and the country was undergoing political uncertainty, on United Nations Day – October 24 1975, in Iceland, 90% of women took their day off from work to gather in Reykjavik. They protested gender inequality to demonstrate the importance of women's contribution to society (Kvennafrí, 2018). This event is popularly remembered as "Women's Day Off". It spurred debate around gender and subsequently acted as an important contribution to Iceland's journey towards gender equality. Iceland's first democratically elected woman President Vigdís Finnbogadóttir termed this day a watershed moment for women's emancipation in Iceland (Brewer, 2015). On several occasions, Vigdís talked about the positive impact of Women's Day off on her becoming the President. The October 24 event of 1975, followed by the election of Vigdís five years later and other developments in the early 80s, led to more emphasis on women's political participation in the country.

Although both countries are culturally different and political issues are different, political parties greatly influence policymaking because they form governments and coalitions that further influence each other's party agendas and internal party culture and policies. Given that both Iceland and India are multiparty systems, a detailed look at the formation of governments shows the extent to which political parties have forged coalitions to establish governments. India has seen 12 governments after 1975, of which 7 involved more than one

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<sup>4</sup> *National Emergency* is a constitutional provision that can be applied during a war, external aggression or armed rebellion. It was imposed by the President of India upon the advice of then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and lasted for 21 months. Events of political unrest and arrests occurred during this period.

party. In the same period, Iceland has seen 14 governments, all of which have been coalition governments. Not only in terms of government formations, parties have also played a crucial role in shaping the constituents of political systems. India and Iceland have extensively seen splits and mergers among political parties in the last 50 years. From Indian National Congress in India, several smaller political parties emerged. Nationalist Congress Party, All India Trinamool Congress and YSR Congress Party are some of the major ones. They also now have a considerable presence in the Indian parliament. In Iceland, the Women's Alliance and left parties merged with Social Democratic Alliance, and members who disapproved of the merger formed Left-Greens Movement. Other prominent parties, such as Progressive Party, have also seen factions and new emergent parties.

As described in the Introduction section, political parties have responded to women's issues and shaped gender equality agendas through election manifestoes, campaign promises and enacting legislations. The Women's Alliance's decision to contest Iceland's parliamentary elections in 1983 influenced other mainstream parties to discuss gender issues. A party called Janata Dal (United) in India had promised the prohibition of alcohol to win women's votes by responding to their campaign against alcohol consumption and gender-based violence (Krishna, 2016). Several such actions by political parties impacting gender equality and women in politics are detailed in the findings section. This comparative study intends to generate a cross-cultural understanding of how political parties contribute to gender-inclusive politics and the same can be contextualised and adopted by politicians and parties. The nonprofits and advocacy groups in both countries can gain insights into practices followed in the other country to include in their advocacy agendas and capacity-building efforts.

## Methodology

The study follows a qualitative research design and adopts mixed-method data collection involving primary and secondary research. As part of secondary data collection, political parties' websites, documents, and manifestoes were reviewed in the context of both countries. Several of these documents in Iceland were in the Icelandic language. While online translation tools were used to make sense of these materials, six key informant interviews were conducted with historians, political scientists, and researchers to understand the essence of these documents where required. These interviews helped to understand the

context better and build knowledge of the modern political history of Iceland to comprehensively understand the status of gender equality in Iceland's politics. The interviews were semi-structured and conducted in English. These were in-person interviews recorded in Reykjavík, Iceland. The knowledge acquired through these interviews further helped develop a questionnaire for political party representatives who could comment on measures taken by their respective parties to improve women's representation. Additionally, ten boxes of private archives on the Women's Alliance from the collection 'KSS 11', Women's History Archives at the National and University Library of Iceland were reviewed. For quantitative data on the status of women in politics, election statistics from the online reports of Election Commission of India and National Statistical Institute of Iceland were downloaded and presented.

The literature on gender and politics in Iceland in English was reviewed thoroughly before conducting interviews with key informants and political party representatives and sending out the online survey. Two questionnaires were used, one for key informant interviews and another for political party representatives. The latter was also created as an online survey. The questionnaire for key informants included questions on women's journey within parties, political parties' engagement with women, measures they took towards improving women's representation, internal quotas and women's movements within parties. The questionnaire for political party representatives has closed and open-ended questions designed to learn about practices such as temporary special measures, internal party quotas and capacity-building initiatives by political parties to improve women's political representation in Iceland. Due to the paucity of time, an online survey was designed with this questionnaire and sent to respondents. The online form also provided space for the party representatives to input links to any policies or documents they would like me to review to understand their measures towards gender equality.

Snowball sampling was used to select these key informants and political party representatives for interviews. The websites of respective political parties and the parliament were used to shortlist the names and email addresses of political party representatives to whom the online survey was sent. For the data collected from political party representatives, three in-person interviews were conducted with two former parliament members and one political party staff member belonging to Left Greens Movement and Women's Alliance. The same questionnaire was also sent as an online survey to other participants across major political parties in Iceland. The online survey was sent to 63 email addresses of current and

former party staff, parliamentary party staff members, members of parliament and party board members in the Left-Greens Movement, Social Democratic Alliance, Independence Party, People's Party and Progressive Party. Of these, 8 participants from 5 parties, Left Greens Movement, Independence Party, Social Democratic Alliance, Progressive Party, Liberal Reform Party and Pirate Party submitted responses that are used for analysis in the study.

In the case of India, existing literature on political party measures towards improving women's representation was reviewed. Additionally, data collected, and insights generated through my work as the Director of Centre for Gender And Politics, India, were leveraged to draw similar findings and analysis in the context of Indian politics. The insights were also informed by numerous engagements with political parties, leaders, government departments, academicians, activists, development practitioners in the field of gender and politics and policy professionals in India in the last five years of my work in India. For analysis, inductive comparison method is used to highlight similarities and differences among different types of measures taken by political parties in India and Iceland alongside providing the relevant context and discussing the potential for adapting.

## Limitations

In the case of in-depth interviews with participants who are political party representatives, it is natural for a participant to try to control the narrative and speak according to what they think we want to hear instead of the actual circumstances. Due to the paucity of time, an online survey was conducted to record the responses of most political party representatives. This meant the researcher was not physically present to ask follow-up questions to their answers, which may have brought more nuances into data collection. Many key informants pointed out that much of the literature on the topic exists in the Icelandic language. Due to language barriers, they could not be reviewed; hence, the rich insights those documents may have provided in the local language are not included in the study. However, it is hoped that this study can be used for furthering such research.

# Background and History

## Women in Iceland's Politics

This section describes the trends in women as elected representatives, candidates, and voters in Iceland.

### Women as Representatives:

Women attained the right to vote and hold local office in 1908, and four women got elected to Reykjavik Municipal Council in the same year. The percentage of women represented in local councils in 1958 was only 1%. In 1982, the percentage increased from 4% to 13% in the country, further increased to around 25% in 1994 and, by 2022, reached one-third. By 2018, women had constituted 47% of all local council members in the country (Directorate of Equality, Iceland, 2021).

In 1915, women aged above 40 gained the right to vote and hold national elected office. By 1920, all women got these rights. After Iceland became a republic, the percentage of women in the national parliament remained low until 1983. Women constituted only 5% of the parliament by the time of the 1979 elections. With the decision of the Women's Alliance to run for parliamentary elections, the percentage jumped to 15%. In the 1995 elections, it reached 25% and increased to 35% in 1999. In the current parliament after the 2021 elections, women hold 47% of seats and 41% of the national cabinet, which is led by a woman Prime Minister, Katrín Jakobsdóttir.

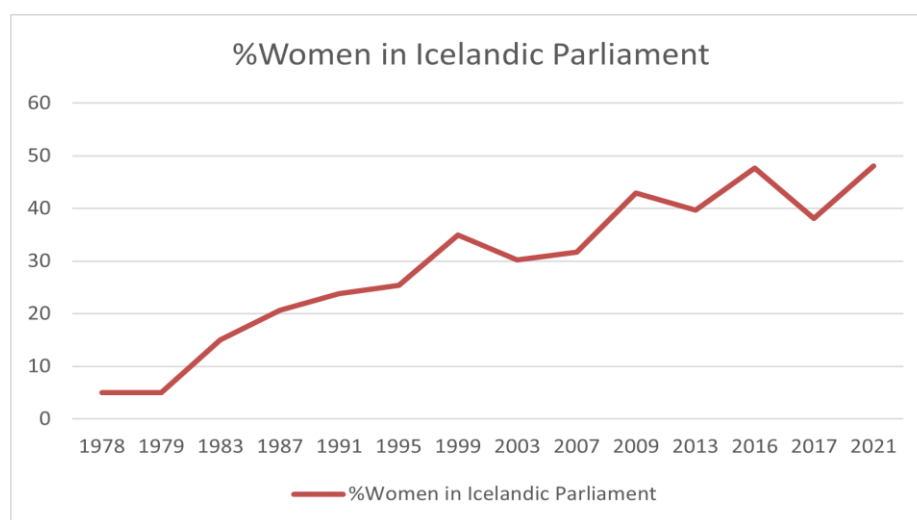


Figure 1 Percentage of women in Iceland's Parliament

*Data compiled from the National Statistical Institute of Iceland  
(<https://www.statice.is/>); The scale on Y-axis is adjusted to 60 for better visibility.*

## Women as Candidates:

The percentage of women candidates on political party lists increased rapidly between 1974 and 1987. From there on, it stayed between 40 and 50%. By now, almost all political parties in Iceland have mechanisms to address the underrepresentation of women candidates in election lists<sup>5</sup> by the respective parties.

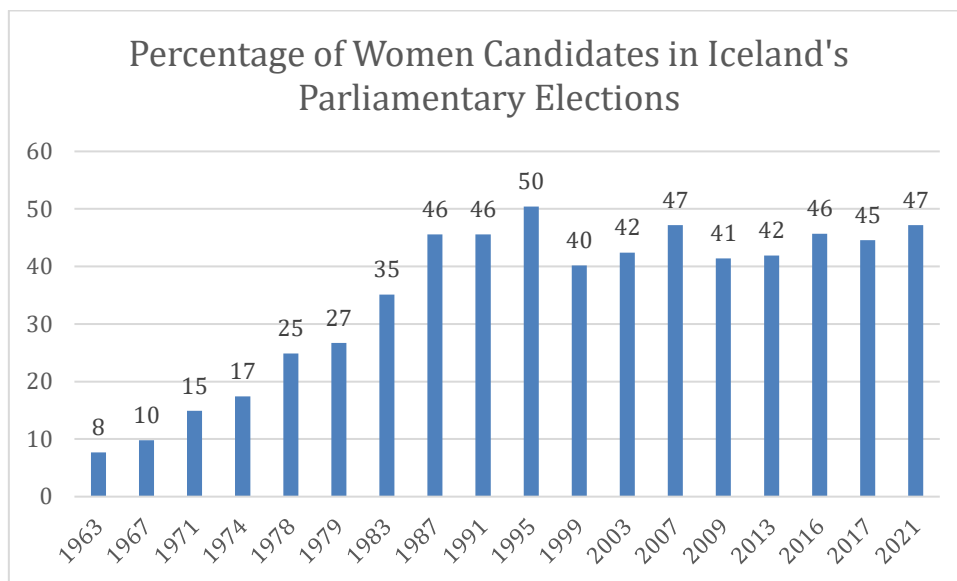


Figure 2 Percentage of women candidates in Iceland's parliamentary elections since 1963

*Data compiled from the National Statistical Institute of Iceland  
(<https://www.statice.is/>); The scale on the Y-axis is adjusted to 60 for better visibility.*

<sup>5</sup> In a List Proportional Representation System such as in Iceland, each political party puts forward a list of candidates where voters choose the party they prefer. The number of seats each party receives is proportional to the number of votes they receive. Winning candidates are taken from the lists in order of their position on the lists.



## Women as Voters:

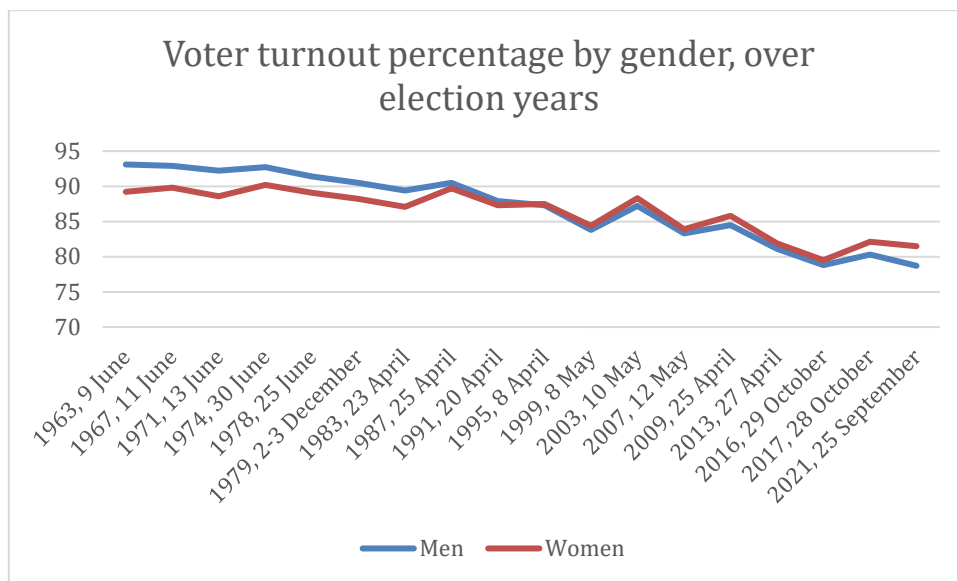


Figure 3 Voter turnout percentage by gender since 1963 parliamentary elections in Iceland.

Data compiled from the National Statistical Institute of Iceland (<https://www.statice.is/>)

Unlike many other democracies, including India, Iceland never had a significant gender voting gap. Although women were voting slightly less than men until the 1987 elections, women have either voted in equal percentages or more than men for several elections after that.

## Major Milestones:

According to the author and researcher, Auður Styrkársdóttir, Icelandic women have caught world attention on four occasions, all directly connected to this study. The first was Women's Day Off in 1975. Secondly, it is the election of Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, the world's first democratically elected woman head of the state. Vigdís served for four terms before stepping down in 1996, and she became the role model of many Icelanders. The third such occasion was the success of a women's party in the general election of 1983 that significantly improved the percentage of women representatives in the parliament. Lastly, the election of Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir as Iceland's first woman and the world's first openly lesbian Prime Minister in 2009. Jóhanna's cabinet is the first Icelandic government with an equal number of men and women (Centre for Gender Equality, n.d.-a)

## Political Parties:

Political parties in Iceland have always played a critical role in improving women's representation and driving gender equality agendas in politics. Eight parties are currently represented in parliament (Alþingi, 2023). Progressive Party and Independence Party are the oldest political parties in the country that were founded before Iceland became a republic. Other major parties include Social Democratic Alliance, Left Greens Movement, People's Party, Pirate Party, Centre Party and Liberal Reform Party. Some other smaller parties are active but not represented in the parliament. The country has seen several new and smaller parties emerge and die over the last 50 years. Splits and mergers among the political parties are common too.

In the context of this study, the Women's List that evolved as Women's Alliance cannot be ignored. It was an active political party from 1982 until it merged with other left parties, Social Democratic Party and People's Alliance to form Social Democratic Alliance in 2000. Women's Alliance's main agendas were women's liberation and the increased representation of women in politics (Centre for Gender Equality, n.d.-b). It worked inside and outside the parliament and has successfully influenced the political agendas and forced traditional parties to turn their attention towards women's issues (Marinósdóttir & Erlingsdóttir, 2020).

Of the eight political parties represented in Althingi, women lead four, and they are Liberal Reform Party, Social Democratic Alliance, People's Party and Left-Green Movement. One of them, known as the Pirate Party, does not believe in having a Chairperson or leadership for the party and is governed by the principles of direct democracy. Women's movements or organisations within parties are present and active in Independence Party, Progressive Party and The Social Democratic Alliance. They are critical in advocating for gender equality and improving women's representation within the respective parties.

Left Greens Movement, one of the parties in the current ruling coalition government, led by Prime Minister Katrín Jakobsdóttir, explicitly states that they are a feminist party. Their English website mentions 'Women's Liberation and Feminism' and 'Queer Iceland' as one of their core policies. They do not have a women's organisation.

## Women in Indian Politics

This section describes the trends in women as elected representatives, candidates, and voters in Iceland.

### Women as Representatives:

India stands 142nd out of 186 in the world ranking for women in parliamentary positions, with a mere 15.1% of women in the Lok Sabha (the lower house) and 13.8% in the Rajya Sabha (the upper house) (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2023). Members of Parliament come to Lok Sabha through direct elections. In the last half a century, women in the Lok Sabha rose from 4% in 1975 to 14%, the highest ever by the 2019 elections. At the local governance level, however, the 73rd constitutional amendment in 1992 has provided a minimum of one-third reservation for women in the village-level Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). In most Indian states, this reservation has now been elevated to 50 per cent. With this, women constitute 45.6 percent of total elected representatives in the PRIs, i.e., approximately 1.4 million Elected Women Representatives (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2020).

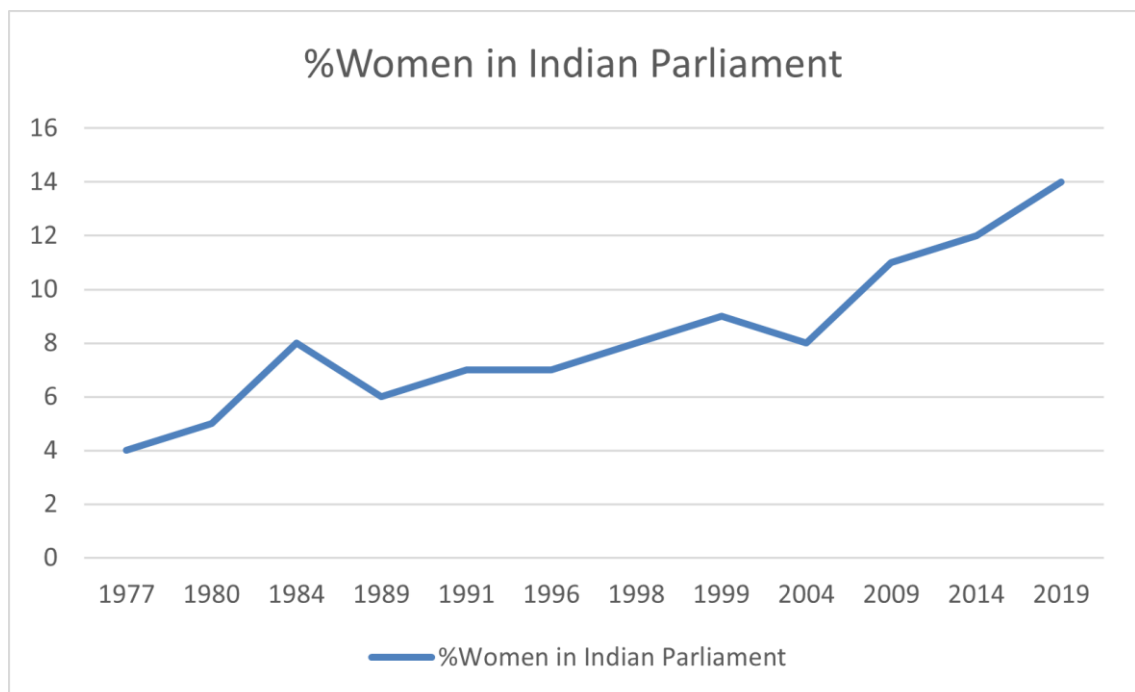


Figure 4 Percentage of women elected to Lok Sabha, the lower house of Indian parliament, since 1977 general elections  
*Data compiled from the statistical reports of the Election Commission of India; Scale adjusted to 16 on the Y axis for better visibility.*

Women in the Council of Ministers also paint a similar and dismal picture. Currently, it is about 7% women in the Council. The data over the years shows that many women among the Council of Ministers were given the Minister of State rank lower than the Cabinet rank. Almost half of the women who ever served in the Indian Council of Ministers since the first elections served as Ministers of State.

### Women as Candidates:

In recent years, there has been a gradual increase in the number of women candidates contesting elections. In the 2019 general elections, out of a total of 8,049 candidates, 724 were women, which is around 9% of the total candidates. While this represents an improvement compared to the past, the proportion of women candidates is still relatively low. There have been calls for political parties to field more women candidates and for policies that promote greater gender equality in politics.

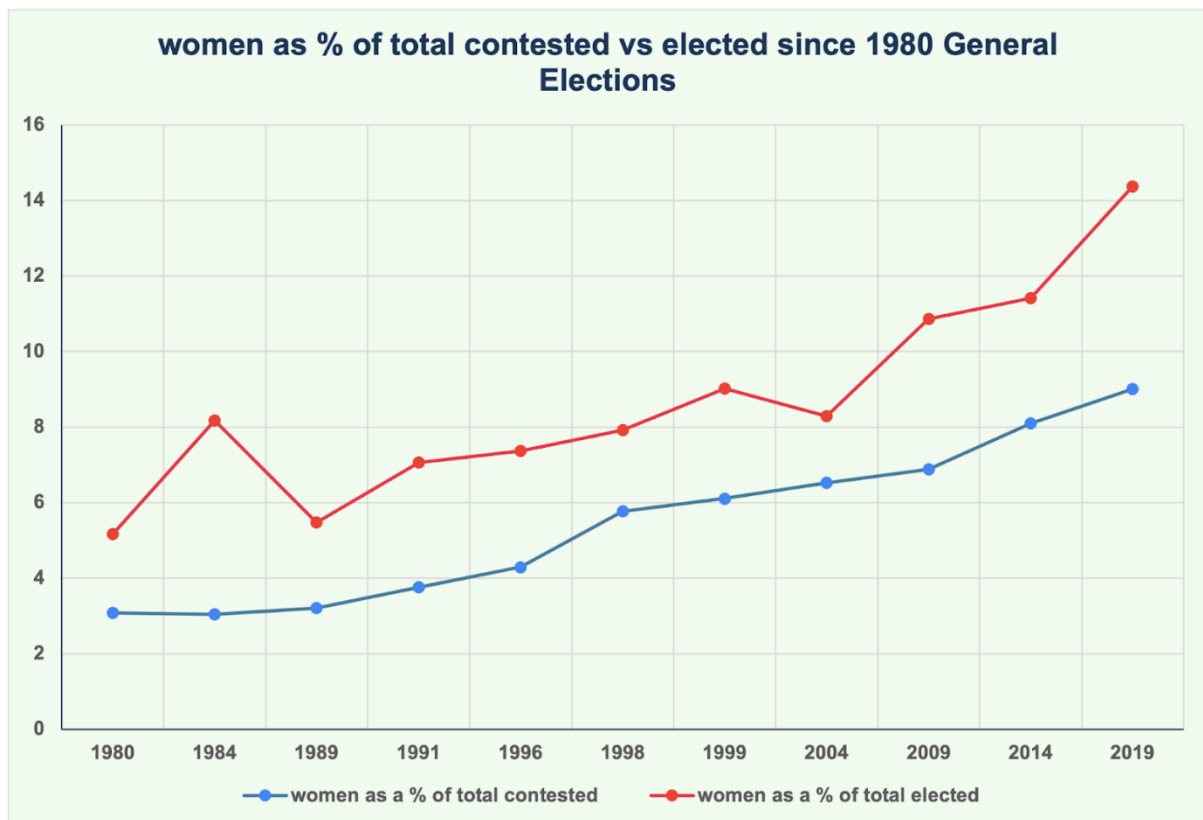


Figure 5 Women as a percentage of total candidates and total elected in Lok Sabha elections in India since 1980.

*Source: Data compiled from the Election Commission of India website. Note: The scale of the Y-axis is adjusted to 16 to provide better visibility of the trend.*

Over the last 40 years, the percentage of women among total contestants has risen from 3% in the 1980 Lok Sabha elections to 9% in the 2019 elections. During the same period, the percentage of women in Lok Sabha increased from 5.17% to 14.36%. While the percentage difference between voter turnout of women and men narrowed down over the election years, the journey of women as representatives, candidates and in the council of ministers has not been linear. However, political parties have actively picked up the discourse around women's representation in the last decade. This is attributed to increasing women's voter turnout. The 2015 report on the status of women in India highlights the inverted relationship between the levels of political participation and the extent of women's participation. As the level goes up, from local to national politics and the cabinet, the number of women decreases. (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2015).

### Women as Voters:

In the latest national elections held in 2019, the percentage of women's voter turnout was almost the same as that of men, signifying the close of the gender gap in voting. This results from the growing number of women voters turning out to vote over the past several elections. In several state elections, more women are turning out on polling day to vote than men. It has pressured the political parties to turn to women's issues and include them in their election agendas and manifestos. Year after year, many political parties develop electoral manifestoes with schemes targeted at women. Although the common ideology across political parties is to see women as beneficiaries, many electoral promises revolve around welfare schemes for women. Free public transport for women, subsidised cooking gas cylinders and basic monthly income are some of the commonly advertised schemes by political parties across many states in India during elections.

Voter turnout across years in Lok Sabha

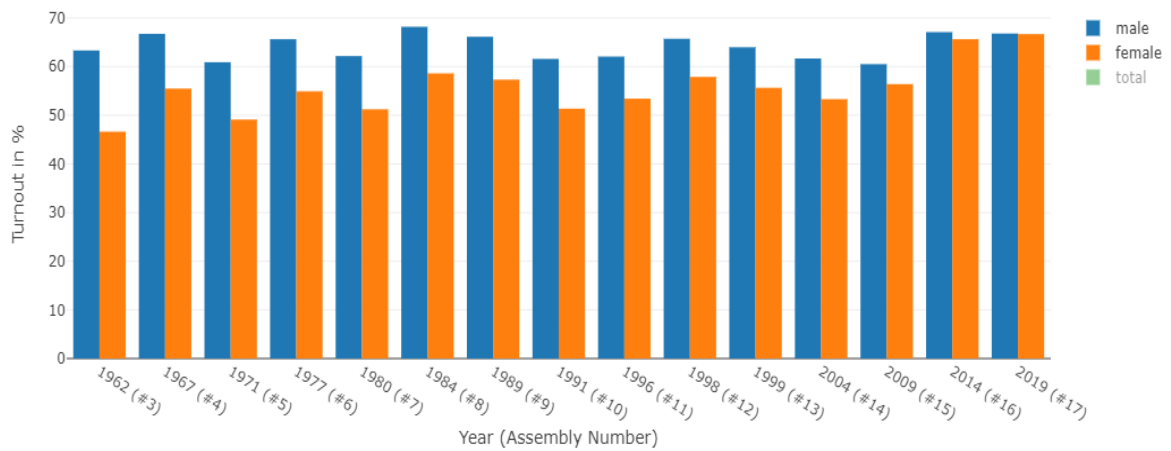


Figure 6 Percentage (%) Voter turnout of men and women from 1962 to 2019 Lok Sabha elections in India.

Data from TCPD-IED: TCPD Indian Elections Dataset (Trivedi Center for Political Data, 2021).

Note: The scale is adjusted to 70 on the Y-axis for better visibility.

### Major Milestones:

One of the first women Prime Ministers globally is from India. Indira Gandhi became the first woman Prime Minister of India in 1966 and she served in the post until 1977 and got re-elected in 1980. Although, no other woman became Prime Minister after Indira Gandhi, several prominent women leaders emerged over the next few decades, led political parties and states, and influenced national politics in India. The 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments in 1993 were significant in improving women’s political representation in local governments through quotas. Thanks to these quotas, there are over 1.4 million elected women representatives at various levels of local governments.

### Political Parties:

Political parties are important institutions that shape Indian democracy and inform policy debates. In recent times, many political parties have been embedding women-centric promises in their election manifestos. These promises have been mainly around girl child education, women's health, welfare and prevention of violence against women. In line with these, a few political parties have also promised liquor bans pitching them as a measure to curb violence against women. The increased focus on issues related to gender is also because of a significant closing of the gender gap among voters. By 2019, the percentage voting gap

between men and women became negligible. While political parties have constructively contributed to increasing the number of women voters by joining efforts with governments and the Election Commission, they have a huge potential to contribute to improving women's representation at *Vidhan Sabhas* (state assemblies) and in both houses of the parliament.

Reply to the information sought from the Election Commission of India (ECI) under the Right to Information (RTI) Act dated March 16, 2021, clarified that ECI recognises eight political parties as national parties. They are All India Trinamool Congress (AITC), Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Communist Party of India (CPI), Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPIM), Indian National Congress (INC), Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) and National People's Party (NPP). Midway into the study, three parties in the above list lost their national party status. However, for the analysis of this study, the data as of RTI reply is considered. Together, these parties occupy 73.25% of seats in the current Lok Sabha. They also field candidates and contest across many states either in alliance with smaller regional parties or on their own. Therefore, the power these parties hold to influence a positive change for gender equality in Indian politics is enormous. Of these national parties, AITC and BSP are two women-led parties. INC has a history of being led by a woman for the most prolonged period. Sonia Gandhi was its President until recently, and she has served for 22 years. All political parties except BSP have a women's wing. Indian parliament, even after 25 years of its first introduction, is struggling to strike a consensus among political parties in passing the women's reservation bill to reserve at least 33% of seats for women in legislative assemblies and parliamentary elections. With the lack of any temporary special measures in state and national elections, the role of political parties becomes vital in improving women's representation.

## Findings

### Iceland

#### Women as Electoral Candidates and Party Leaders:

Women's Alliance (WA) was a landmark moment in the history of Iceland's women's political representation. Women's Alliance was Women's List when it contested Reykjavik and Akureyri Municipal elections in 1982. This directly contributed to an increase in women's representation in local governance. Women's representation increased from 4% to 13% of all

council members in the country. A year later, the Women's Alliance contested the parliamentary elections in 1983. It won 3 seats in Althingi, Iceland's parliament and resulted in increasing women's representation from 5 to 15% in Althingi. During the 1983 elections to Althingi, Social Democratic Party (SDP), Progressive Party, and People's Alliance (PA) adopted quotas, influencing other parties to take up similar initiatives that increased the number of women candidates.

In 1987, a new party called National Party experimented with the zipper list. The zipper list is a system in proportion representation electoral systems where parties alternate between women and men on their candidate lists, meaning that 50% of the candidates are women and 50% are men. The same experiment was again seen in the 1995 elections by the People's Movement (PM) led by Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir. PM was a splitter party formed out of Social Democratic Party and had won 4 seats across the country, of which 3 were women (Styrkárssdóttir, 2013a). This zipper lists system is now followed by a few major political parties. Jóhanna merged PM with the left parties and joined Social Democratic Alliance, and later became the Prime Minister in 2009.

In 1999, all left parties – SDP, PA, PM, and WA merged to form Social Democratic Alliance (SDA). Those who opposed the merger started LGM. As of today, the survey data shows that all four major political parties studied, Social Democratic Alliance, Left Greens Movement, Progressive Party and Independence Party, have rules or bylaws on ensuring gender equality within their parties and (or) elections. Organisational Rules of the Independence Party (IP) states in Article 2 that "Gender equality is one of the core values of the Independence Party. When elected to boards and appointed to confidential positions of party institutions, whether in committees, councils or boards, equal proportions of the sexes shall always be ensured" (translated using Google Translate) (Independence Party, 2022). IP does not have quotas for election lists. Ideologically, IP does not favour quota mechanisms and has often argued against them. In the survey response from Independence Party, the party staff highlighted several major milestones for their party women in politics and said, "Our party has a strong gender equality policy. We have come very far without any special quotas." Two of the interview respondents also recalled instances where Independence Party acted in favour of women representation through seemingly invisible quotas and leadership measures. The Pirate party, which also opposes quota ideologically has a similar stance as the Independence Party. A Member of Parliament from the Pirate Party said, "Pirates is an equal



party and we have been working for a long time to increase the number of women as registered members, candidates for the party and those as elected representatives. We have done it without setting any rules or quotas on the number of gender seats” (translated the response from Icelandic to English using Google translate).

Article 3 of the party laws that govern the Left Greens Movement (LGM) states, "When candidates are chosen for positions at all levels in the party structure, as well as for electoral lists, gender equality shall be observed" (Vinstrihreyfingin - grænt framboð, 2023). LGM adopts zipper lists if needed to ensure women's representation, as mentioned by one of the former party board members who filled out the survey. For Social Democratic Alliance, Party statutes say, "At electoral lists, the main rule is to strive towards gender equality. In all elected bodies within the party, each sex should be represented with no less than 40 percent. If, among the candidates, one sex is represented by less than 40 percent, these candidates will be nominated without a vote (Party statutes 1999, article 2:10.) (International IDEA, n.d.). For Progressive Party, the bylaws 15.8. states – "When appointing to positions of trust and responsibility within the party, as well as when selecting its candidate list, the share of either gender shall not be lower than 40%, except when there are transparent and obvious reasons to prevent it. The Equality Committee and LFK shall, as necessary, provide advice on how to achieve this goal”.

All major parties conduct primaries<sup>6</sup> to finalise candidates for the elections. Scholars and political scientists have argued that the primaries became barriers to women's political representation. However, with the changing society, parties adopted several measures to correct the final lists if they are not gender equal. One key informant said voters also penalise parties for not having enough women on their party lists when they go to elections. Attempts were not made to collect and analyse such data as that is outside the scope of this study. However, this hints at the mainstreaming of having women's representation at all levels of party leadership and during elections by political parties.

## Women's Organisations within Parties

Women within political parties have played a critical role in turning their attention toward women's representation and many other issues that concern women. In the 1930s and 40s,

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<sup>6</sup> In Iceland, most political parties use primary elections to choose their candidates for an upcoming election.

women organised themselves into women's groups and movements within political parties. While they acted as pressure groups within parties, they seem to support the party line more than anything in recent years (Styrkársdóttir, 2013b).

Of major parties, except LGM, almost all major political parties today have women's movements within parties. Some have it in the party rules that formalise these women's movements. The heads of women's movements in three parties, Independence Party, Social Democratic Alliance and Progressive Party, also sit on the respective party boards, extending the influence on the party's stance towards general policy matters, specifically women's issues. Pirate Party does not have a women's organisation in the traditional sense, but an organisation called Feminist Pirates to drive issues related to gender equality. A Member of Parliament from the Pirate Party said, "There's a feminist group in Pirate Party, consisting of men, women and non-binary people."

## Gender Agendas and Policies

Gender equality has become a mainstream policy issue within Iceland in recent years. The country has been consistently ranked number 1 by the World Economic Forum for 13 years and has been hailed for closing the gender gap more than any other country has ever done (Government of Iceland, 2019).

Political parties turned their attention towards women's issues and gender equality as a policy agenda more prominently when Women's Alliance (WA) entered the political scene. Many parties responded by putting forward election manifestoes targeted at women in the 1983 elections. In the 1970s, select parties used to mention in their manifestoes with more generic language and terms such as ensuring equality. However, in 1983, parties directly addressed specific issues in their manifestoes. Independence Party and Social Democratic Party mentioned daycare centres and flexible working hours for both parents in their manifestoes. Progressive Party and Social Democratic Party mentioned parental leave. People's Alliance and SDP mentioned wage parity (Styrkársdóttir, 2013c). These were all the major issues raised by WA when they contested elections.

Parties also raised the issue of women's representation in the parliament. A woman MP from PP raised the issue of stagnation of women's representation in 1998, and the parliament agreed on a proposal by MPs from all parties to set up a committee to map ways to improve the situation. This action widely sparked debates and discussions around the topic

(Styrkárzdóttir, 2013d). Today, LGM mentions queer issues actively in their political discourses and claims to be a feminist party. The English website of Liberal Reform Party also mentions, “We reject all manner of gender-based discrimination” as one of the founding principles. Other major political parties also actively support women's empowerment and queer issues. The wage gap remained a major political issue for almost all parties over several years.

## Capacity building initiatives

Political parties in Iceland also leveraged capacity-building mechanisms to encourage women's representation in politics. Women's movements within parties have often taken the responsibility to do these initiatives. One key respondent said that political parties in Iceland conducted women-only seminars, media trainings and workshops to build the capacities of their women members. However, as per this informant, they have become less prominent in the recent decade. The key informant pointed out the general sentiment that women might feel insulted by these because they think the trainings imply that they lack knowledge or skills. As part of this study, the survey responses from IP, PP and SDA revealed that they had conducted capacity-building initiatives targeted at women and are driven by respective women's movements. A representative from Independence Party said, “We have a women's organisation in the party, and they have had multiple training sessions throughout the years. Also, they have a support net of women that other women who want to take part in politics can seek advice and help from.”

## India

### Election Agendas and Distribution of Party Tickets during Elections:

Women voters cannot be seen as a single bloc. The priorities for women voters vary significantly by different factors - region, religion, caste, employment and education. Among the heavily rural, agrarian populations, political parties tend to include manifesto promises directed at providing welfare, where women are seen as dependents and beneficiaries who need help and support. Several post-poll surveys conducted across Indian states attributed a positive relationship between the increase in favourability of women voters to a political party to their welfare programs targeted at women. India's largest and the current ruling party

Bharatiya Janata Party, through its women's unit, planned a survey to reach out to women and enrol them in welfare schemes (Ramachandran, 2023). I argue that this trend indicates a significant step forward for mainstreaming electoral attention towards women's issues and matters in politics.

There are ongoing demands to introduce a quota system to improve the number of women elected at national and state levels (PRS Legislative, 2021). However, India does not have a law that mandates any measures to be taken by political parties towards gender equality. Historically, several political parties in several countries have adopted temporary special measures to increase the number of women candidates in elections. Although there is no law, since last two national elections, some Indian political parties are seen adopting voluntary quotas to distribute more tickets to women candidates.

During the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, Biju Janata Dal (BJD) of Odisha gave 33% of tickets to women (Sanyal, 2019). Another political party, All India Trinamool Congress (AITC), distributed 40% of tickets to women (Scroll, 2019). In the state assembly elections of Uttar Pradesh in 2022, Indian National Congress (INC) distributed 40% of tickets to women. These measures contributed to more women candidates during respective elections and brought the discussion on women's leadership to the forefront of respective political contexts and agendas (Press Trust of India, 2021).

## Organisational Structures and Party Committees

Of the eight political parties discussed in this study, only two parties, All India Trinamool Congress and Bahujan Samaj Party, are led by women. All political parties, including those led by women, have male-dominant apex decision-making and leadership bodies. BJP has a provision of 33% of positions reserved for women in its Constitution; however, the analysis by CGAP showed that the quota was never adhered to in its Parliamentary board, its highest decision-making body. Indian National Congress announced some measures towards improving women's representation in party posts in its recent high-level plenary held in February 2023. Women's wings within party structures are commonplace in India. They play an essential role in advocating for women's agendas within the parties. All major political parties in India, including national and regional parties, have fully functional women's wings that mobilise women voters and raise women's issues on behalf of respective parties. They are integral to party structures and day-to-day functioning. Women's wings have their own

organisational structures, having district, state, and national units. In addition to the women's wing, Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) has an LGBTQ Cell becoming the first and only political party in India to work on issues related to the community, and a transwoman became the head of the LGBTQ cell (Deshpande, 2020). A transwoman became the general secretary of the Congress Party's women's wing in 2019, unprecedented until then (Rajan, 2019). Women's wings are often viewed as mechanisms to identify political issues important to women voters. However, the role of women's wings in decision-making and mainstream activities of the parties is limited (Kaur, 2018; Chary, 2012). Despite of this, senior women leaders view women's wings as potential platforms for encouraging women in politics and within their parties (Women for Politics, 2021).

## Capacity Building Initiatives

News reports show that almost all major political parties run training programmes for their women cadre. These training sessions range from creating awareness of women's political careers to awareness of government schemes and party policies. In recent times, these trainings are also conducted online. Very often, women's wings of the parties lead these capacity-building sessions. Beyond the traditional training models, political parties and leaders are also exploring newer models, such as internships and fellowships, to encourage women in politics. Telugu Professionals, a frontal organisation under Telugu Desam Party (TDP), ran women-only political internships in May 2022. They collaborated with a nonprofit for training on research methodology and data analysis, report writing, and understanding women voter trends. A Member of Parliament from a regional party, Shiv Sena in March 2022, launched a fellowship programme in which internships with a policy think tank and women parliamentarians were organised along with training sessions from a nonprofit partner.

## Analysis

Political parties in Iceland and India have adopted similar kind of measures to advance gender equality in politics. As discussed in the findings, these include voluntary party quotas for party leadership positions and elections, institutionalising women's wings within parties and capacity building of their women cadres. However, the timelines for the emergence of such measures by parties in both countries vary significantly. While referring to similarities and

differences within each political party action, the relevant literature and context and the scope for adaptability are discussed.

## Quotas in elections:

In political science, feminist analysis of political parties has uncovered the concept of “secret garden” where voters have limited to zero knowledge of how electoral candidates are chosen. Often, the recruitment of candidates was alleged to happen through ‘old boy networks’ and by those groups of people who hold influence (Dahlerup, 2017, Political parties as gatekeepers section). Iceland and India do not have legislative quotas mandated by law to encourage women's representation in national politics. The role of political parties becomes essential in deciding on the composition and promotion of electoral candidates. Despite a lack of temporary special measures by law, findings show that political parties in both countries have been adopting voluntary quotas to ensure women's representation. While the electoral quotas in Iceland first emerged in the 1980s, it is a recent phenomenon in India. However, the reasons leading to adopting voluntary quotas by political parties are different in both contexts. While the Women’s Alliance’s entry prompted Icelandic parties to adopt electoral quotas, the closing voter gender gap in India is prompting parties to enhance women’s representation. As noted earlier, the percentage voting gap between women and men in the recent parliamentary elections in India is almost bridged, and women voters have been outnumbering men in several state elections in recent times.

Over the last four decades in Iceland, voluntary party quotas and other measures, such as zipper lists, have become deeply entrenched in certain major political parties. While quotas are encouraging in Iceland, it is important to underscore the existence of primaries that parties choose to select candidates for electoral lists. Scholars argued that open primaries conducted by political parties unintentionally demotivate women from entering the election scene as one requires capital to fight such primaries. Iceland still has persisting gender pay gap and more women are employed in low paying jobs (National Statistical Institute of Iceland, 2022) This means, political parties in Iceland have potential to further improve internal mechanisms that may be discriminatory to women.

Findings revealed that some have it in their party bylaws and rules, making them formal and binding. However, in India, the parties that adopted voluntary quotas did so

sporadically across different parliamentary and state assembly elections. In contrast to formal party rules in Iceland, the decisions on quotas in India have been driven by the respective party leadership in every case. Although quotas are a recent phenomenon, there have been no visible attempts to formalise such voluntary quotas in India's case. Quotas sparked debate and discussion among political parties and wider sections of society; formalising these quotas by the parties may continue the emphasis on women's political empowerment in India. In connection with this, it is important to note the historical context where parties have not been able to arrive at a consensus to pass the legislative quota act for the last 25 years. More nominations of women meant more opportunities for women in parliament. Therefore, such quotas adopted by parties prove to be an excellent opportunity to improve gender balance in parliament. For India, there is potential for political parties that follow voluntary electoral quotas to formalise them in their party rules and constitutions like some parties in Iceland follow.

Another important point to note is that Indian society is heterogeneous and diverse. How gender intersects with religion, caste, literacy, class, and other backgrounds demands careful attention. India has existing quotas for electoral candidates from marginalised castes. The point of contention on introducing women's quota is if quota should be introduced within the existing quota for marginalised and backward castes. On the other hand, Icelandic society is largely homogenous. However, the data shows that Iceland is becoming more diverse due to immigration. The percentage of the population with no foreign background now stands at 74.8%, compared to 93.7% in 1996 (National Statistical Institute of Iceland, 2022b). To deal with increasing diversity among voter groups, including women, Iceland may look towards political parties in India taking measures to cater to the needs of women from diverse backgrounds.

## Women in party leadership:

Gender-equal participation and representation in political parties could mean an enabling environment for women, scope for seeing more role models and improved women's participation. A comparative analysis across 24 democracies revealed that having more women in the party's parliamentary delegations and leadership positions contribute to more emphasis on adopting gender quotas (Kittilson, 2011).

Major political parties in Iceland have provisions in their party rules and bylaws that specify either internal party quotas or principles on ensuring equal representation of women in its party committees, board and other internal leadership positions. In India, such provisions are absent among the national political parties, except in the case of the largest and the ruling party, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Its party constitution mandates having at least 33% women at all levels. However, the party's highest decision-making body, the party's parliamentary board, does not fulfil that provision. Indian National Congress, on the other hand, in its recent plenary held in February 2023, promised to amend its party constitution to reserve 50% of party positions for women and youth. This signals the trend where major parties in India are taking steps towards ensuring women's representation in party organisational structures.

India and Iceland have seen political parties led by women with strong leadership. In Iceland, Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir became the first woman to establish and lead a political party, People's Movement and adopted the zipper list method aiming to improve women's representation. Indira Gandhi led Indian National Congress from starting late 1960s until the mid-1980s. Today, four out of seven parties represented in the Icelandic parliament are women-led. In comparison, only 2 out of 8 national parties discussed here are represented by women in India. Despite India having a woman-led party much earlier, compared to Iceland, there have not been many women-led parties that emerged. The first woman Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi, Former Chief Ministers Jayalalitha and Mayawati, and Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee are some of the women who emerged as prominent leaders in Indian politics and have led political parties. The election process and appointment of heads of political parties in India are not clearly defined, and any mechanisms and processes that may deny equal opportunity to political party leaders for leading respective parties are detrimental. However, in the current global political context, it is tough to advocate for political reforms that make changes to the governance of political parties.

## Women's organisations within political parties

Political parties establish women's organisations as a mechanism to promote women's participation and representation within the party. They also help engage with women's and gender equality issues and mobilise women voters for elections. Women's organisations, also



called women's movements in Iceland and women's wings in India, are critical in advancing gender equality agendas by respective parties. Barring a few exceptions, all major political parties in both countries have women's organisations, but the influence of such mechanisms on advancing women's representation varies significantly. Women in Iceland organised themselves into women's sections within the parties early in the 1930s, and elected women representatives thanked women's sections for their election (Styrkársdóttir, 2013e). One key informant said that these women groups in Iceland's parties have often struggled and fought to formalise their units within party structures and to get seats at the party boards. The Independence Party, Progressive Party and Social Democratic Alliance have formal women's movements. They are represented in the main party boards.

On the other hand, in India's case, women's wings of parties take up women's issues and drive policy agendas related to gender equality and women. However, the activities by the women's wings are majorly reactionary in nature and often less planned and formal. "Every political party has a women's wing, but it is mere tokenism", says the Executive Summary Report on the Status of Women in India done by the national government.

When it came to enhancing women's political representation, scholars and reports noted that these women's wings have historically rooted for the party's agendas rather than confronting parties about women's representation barring a few exceptions. The only exception is the capacity building of women in politics which women's wings in both countries have worked on. The most prominent reason that can explain this is that these wings are not formally integrated into party structures with defined roles and responsibilities. There is potential for parties in both countries to formalise their roles to inform party functions and policies about gender perspectives.

## Experiment: Women-only parties

The strength of collective action is proven in various social and political movements. Similarly, in politics, collective action and advocacy have impacted the process and policies of political parties. While Iceland has seen several new and smaller political parties emerge in the last half a century, India has mostly seen newer parties that are breakaway factions from existing larger parties. The experiment of a women's party was a success in Iceland. Women's Alliance not only directly impacted in improving the numbers, but also indirectly forced other parties

to nominate more women on their lists (Styrkársdóttir, 2013f). Their election successes are widely covered in the international media. It is Women's Alliance that brought certain issues such as violence against women, parental leave, gender pay gap into mainstream policy discussions. Not just these, their policy documents (manifestos) from 1983 and 1987 parliamentary elections discussed their views on environment, peace and disarmament, fishing, healthcare, and other policy matters. A key informant said, "When the Women's Alliance entered parliament in 1983, the percentage of women representation is lesser than the widely popular critical mass<sup>7</sup>, yet they were able to bring significant attention to gender issues and improve women's representation." Private archival material in 'KSS 11' Collection of Women's History Archives shows that Women's Alliance representatives were invited widely by women's movements and activists across Europe and North America to deliver lectures and share learnings on the success of WA's political journey. While Europe has seen more than 30 women's political parties since 1987 (Evans & Kenny, 2019), such women-only parties that sprung up several times did not make a dent among the larger established parties in India.

Between 2001 and 2015, an analysis showed that there were at least 14 registered political parties, and five of them had contested elections at national and state levels (Chaturvedi et al., 2015). All these parties have had extremely low success rates, yet new such parties emerged after 2015 as well. One common theme was providing a platform for women and increasing their political representation. This was true in the case of the Women's Alliance as well in Iceland. Such parties in both Iceland and India were discredited for lacking agendas on policy issues outside of gender equality and women empowerment.

## Conclusion and Discussion

Scholars have cited the importance of doing cross-national studies of political processes and institutions with a gender lens to engender the field of comparative politics (Krook, 2011; Schwindt-Bayer, 2010). Such comparisons can result in generalisable theories in the field of gender and politics. This study intends to contribute towards such efforts.

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<sup>7</sup> Critical mass theory suggests that when women must make up a significant percentage to have a meaningful and lasting impact on decision making. Scholars on gender and politics often cited that the significant percentage is 33%.

Since 1975, political parties in India and Iceland have made significant contributions towards improving the status of women in politics. This study attempted to understand similarities and differences in measures and approaches taken by political parties in Iceland and India. They included internal party quotas for party leadership and elections, capacity building for women, party manifesto promises and increased emphasis on gender equality. Following a vigorous women's movement in the 1970s, many of these political party actions gained traction in Iceland in the 1980s. In contrast, in India, the recent decade has seen more of such initiatives by parties. Such changes could lead to India's position significantly improving when it comes to women's political representation. Political parties have a major role to play and accelerate the change. This is in alignment with Target 5.5 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Agenda 2030.

Iceland, although at the top of gender equality rankings, has the potential to further concretise its commitment to gender equality in politics. As the gender pay gap persists along with more women employed in low paying jobs in Iceland, political parties in Iceland must constantly engage in discussions to further ease the playing field for women, especially when capital is required to fight primaries that scholars argued as unintentional hindrance for women. Iceland as I have stressed, is also becoming more diverse with an increasing immigrant population. Truly heterogeneous and diverse countries, such as India, can offer lessons to political parties in Iceland on how to include various sections of society including women from various backgrounds. To ground this comparative study in the current context of increased cross-national engagement on gender equality efforts, dialogues between stakeholders in India and Iceland may be promoted to facilitate contextual cross-learning and engagement. The existing platforms such India-Nordic Summit and Reykjavik Global Forum can be leveraged to increase the bilateral cooperation in the field of gender equality, particularly in relation to improving women's representation in political leadership.

Along with political parties, many other stakeholder groups such as nonprofits, activists, women's movements, and academia have contributed to improving women's status in Iceland and India's politics. Their impact and contributions can be studied further, and emphasis may be paid to how these stakeholders interacted with each other to generate more insights into the gender equality journey in political spaces in the two countries.

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