

# **CHAI PAR CHARCHA – REPORT**

## ***INTRODUCTION***

Women in rural India are at the heart of their families, villages, and communities, playing critical roles as caregivers, farmers, and homemakers. However, beyond these roles, they possess a powerful but often underutilized responsibility - the role of a citizen. As citizens, their voices and votes hold the potential to bring about transformative change, shaping the future of their families, communities, and the country as a whole.

Chai Par Charcha is a series of discussions conducted with individuals, more specifically women in the rural areas of Haryana to propel active citizenship and participation in democracy. The initiative is an effort to empower women and raise political awareness to encourage rural participation in voting. Statements like “I don’t even know who my MLA is, no one has ever told us what they do or why we should care,” expressed a woman. This sentiment reflects a broader issue across rural India, where, despite being the major voting bloc, women’s voices are frequently muted, either through direct societal pressures or by the neglect of the political machinery to engage with them meaningfully.

## ***METHODOLOGY***

Chai par Charcha was conducted with a focus on young female voters in rural Haryana to better understand their perspectives, needs, and challenges within the context of the upcoming Haryana Assembly Election 2024 on 5<sup>th</sup> October 2024. The research was carried out at three rural sites, Dundahera, Sadhrana and Gharaunda in Haryana, engaging a total of 100 participants (n=100).

Besides discussions, a structured questionnaire was also designed to guide the study, allowing participants to express their concerns on key issues, while also providing quantifiable data for analysis. The questionnaire covered topics such as their awareness of the electoral process, expectations from local political leaders, and the most pressing issues they face in their daily lives. The use of a questionnaire was instrumental in gathering a range of responses. In addition to the quantitative data, qualitative inputs were gathered through conversations and interviews with the participants. This dual approach was adopted to ensure that the women's voices were authentically represented, providing a deeper understanding of their political behavior, needs, and challenges. The insights gained from these discussions helped contextualize the data, offering a richer narrative on the rural female electorate.

## ***General Challenges Faced by Rural Women in India***

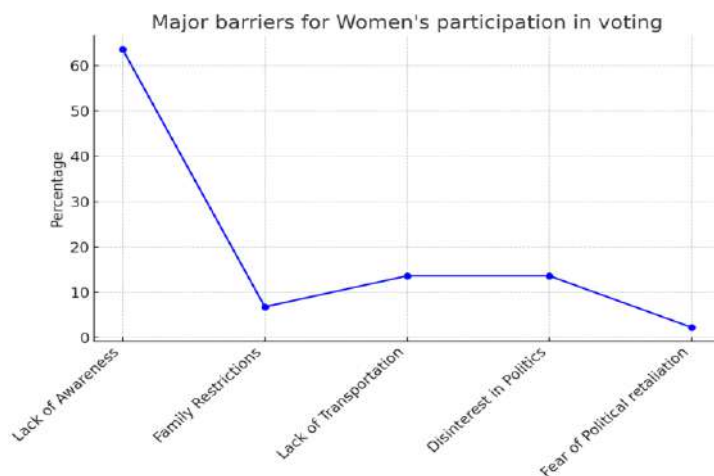
Rural women in India face a lot of challenges in their daily lives like sanitation, freedom of speech, employment etc. which are often exacerbated by systemic barriers in social, economic, and political spheres. Despite representing nearly half of the country's population, women are frequently sidelined in decision-making processes that directly impact their communities. Rural women, in particular, face unique obstacles including limited access to education, domestic violence, patriarchy, healthcare, and employment opportunities. Furthermore, issues related to sanitation, transportation, and infrastructure disproportionately affect them, preventing them from achieving full participation in society. These challenges are further intensified when it comes to political participation, especially during elections, where rural women's voices remain underrepresented.

A study shows that low literacy rates, patriarchal societal norms, and a lack of political awareness significantly restrict rural women from fully exercising their voting rights. Despite government-led efforts such as the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (Save the Daughter, Educate the Daughter) scheme, rural women's empowerment continues to lag behind due to insufficient infrastructure and societal barriers (Bhuker, 2023). These issues become even more critical during elections when the lack of access to voting information and resources limits their ability to make informed decisions.

### ***Barriers to Women's Participation in Voting***

Our survey of women voters in rural Haryana provides crucial insights into the barriers they face when participating in the electoral process. As reflected, the most significant obstacle, reported by 63% of the respondents, is a lack of awareness about elections and their local representatives. Many rural women do not know who their local MLA is, and they are often unfamiliar with the policies and manifestos of different political parties. Also, the fact that even if they are aware they feel like these policies are for name's sake without reaching the final beneficiary. This lack of information prevents them from making informed choices at the ballot box. The Election Commission of India has made strides in improving voter education, but more targeted efforts are needed to reach rural women, especially those with low literacy rates (Bureau, 2024).

Another major barrier is the lack of transportation facilities, as reported by 13% of the women surveyed. In rural Haryana, polling stations are often located far from villages, making it

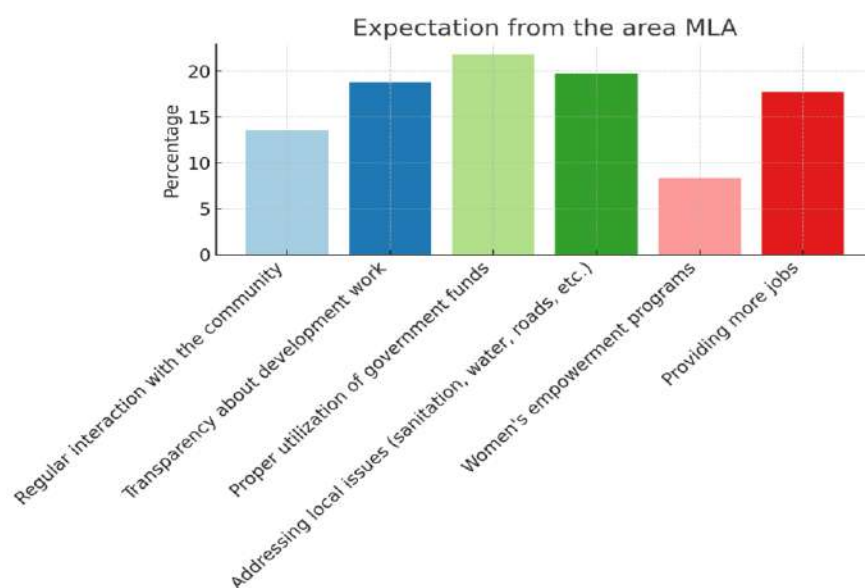


difficult for women, especially those without access to private vehicles, to cast their votes. Another significant challenge is that many women do not work in their city of origin, resulting in voter registration in one constituency while residing in another. Due to financial constraints, they find it difficult to travel solely for the purpose of voting, often perceiving that a single vote will not have a meaningful impact. This belief further discourages their participation in the electoral process. This issue is increased by poor road infrastructure and inadequate public transportation systems, leading to low voter turnout among rural women. The heavy rainfall in the region further aggravates this problem, with women expressing concerns about flooded and unclean roads that hinder their mobility.

A further 13% of women expressed disinterest in politics. This attitude can be attributed to the perception that politics is a male-dominated space where women's voices are not heard or valued. The male authority in rural areas works as the decision maker of the entire family, resulting in making their own choice. In many cases, rural women are discouraged from participating in political discussions, reinforcing the idea that voting is not relevant to their lives. Without increased engagement and awareness campaigns targeting women, this sense of disengagement is likely to persist.

### ***Awareness of Government Policies and Schemes***

Interestingly, our survey shows that while women are aware of certain government policies and schemes, they believe that these initiatives are not being adequately implemented. Many women voiced concerns about the lack of proper infrastructure in their communities, particularly in terms of sanitation and drainage systems. Recent heavy rainfall in Haryana has exacerbated these issues, with women highlighting the flooding of roads and the inadequacy of drainage systems. This is a direct result of mismanagement and insufficient government attention, despite the existence of policies aimed at improving local infrastructure.



Women's expectations from their local MLA reflect these concerns, with a strong demand for better utilization of government funds. About 21% of women indicated that they want their elected representatives to ensure proper allocation and use of government resources, particularly for issues such as road repairs, water supply, and sanitation. An additional 19% of respondents emphasized the need for their MLA to address local issues directly, focusing on immediate concerns like domestic violence, sanitation, clean drinking water, and transportation.

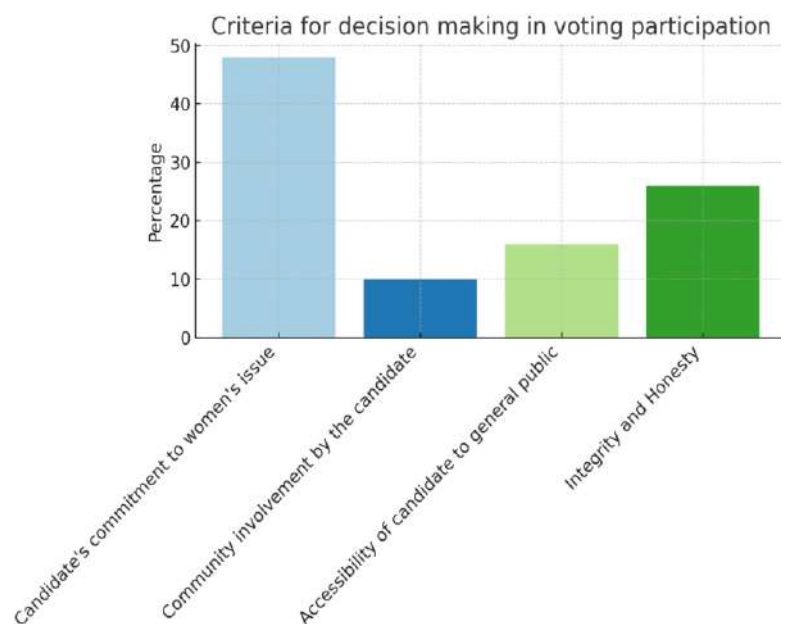
### ***Lack of Information About Political Parties and Manifestos***

A significant concern raised during our survey is the lack of awareness among rural women about the manifestos and agendas of political parties. Many voters are more familiar with the political party's name than the individual candidates running in their constituencies. They rely heavily on party affiliation or family traditions in voting rather than understanding the specific policies and promises of candidates. This shows a critical gap in voter education and the need for political parties to better communicate their manifestos to rural populations, particularly women.

This lack of awareness prevents women from making informed decisions based on the policies that will most benefit them. For example, issues like healthcare, women safety, employment, and education, which are critical to the well-being of rural women, often take a back seat in campaign discourse, leaving these concerns unaddressed during elections.

### ***Decision-Making Criteria for Voting***

When asked about the most important criteria for selecting a candidate, 48% of rural women respondents stated that they expect candidates to prioritize women's issues once in power. Issues like maternal healthcare, sanitation, and women's safety were highlighted as key concerns. These findings align with broader research that indicates that when women vote, they tend to prioritize policies that directly impact their families and communities. As the majority of rural women in Haryana are involved in farming or informal employment, they also expect candidates to focus on policies that support their economic empowerment and provide better employment opportunities where some participants said that their children remain unemployed even graduating from a college.



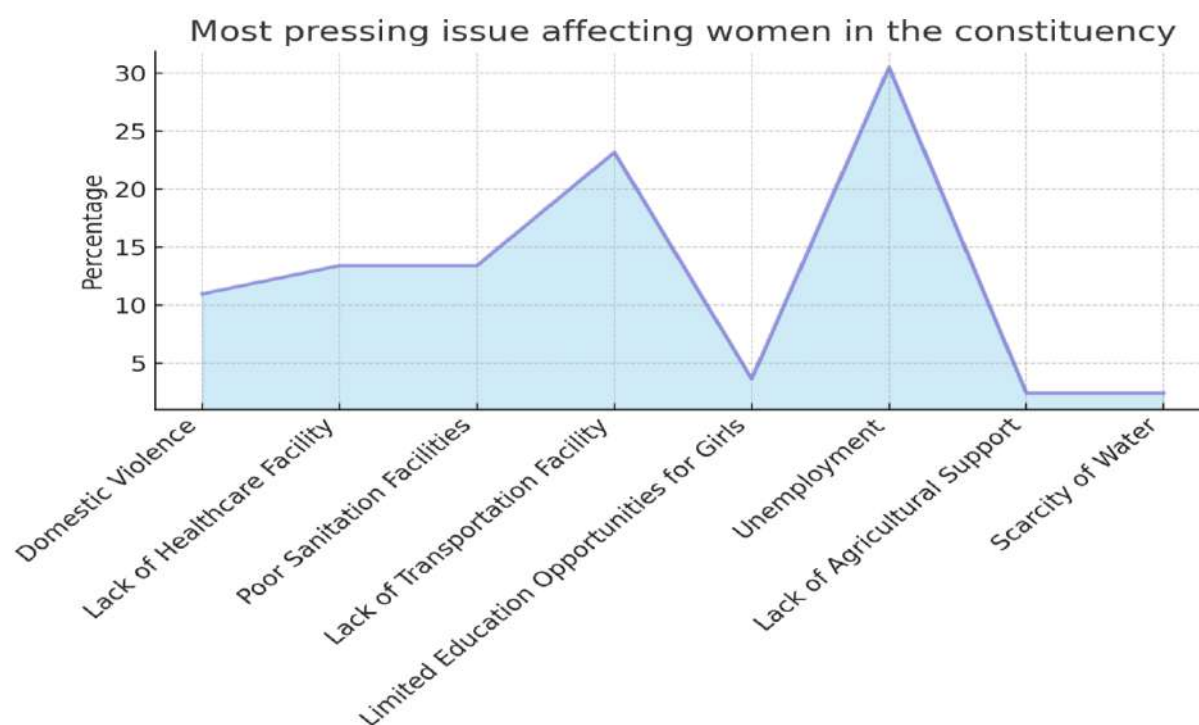
Another 26% of respondents indicated that they value honesty and integrity in their representatives. Women voters are keen to support candidates who they believe will fulfill their promises and work transparently for the development of their communities. This finding is crucial as it points to a growing political maturity among rural women voters, who are beginning to recognize the importance of accountability in their elected leaders.

### ***Infrastructure and Sanitation Issues***

One of the most frequently mentioned issues during our survey was the lack of public washrooms and sanitary facilities for women. This problem is especially acute in government schools, where the absence of clean and usable washrooms discourages girls from attending school regularly. Poor sanitation also increases health risks for women, particularly during menstruation (Chandha, 2022). Several women voiced their frustration with the lack of access to sanitary pads and other essential hygiene products, indicating a failure in the implementation of government schemes aimed at improving women's health and sanitation.

### ***Pressing Issues for Rural Women***

When asked about the most pressing issues they face, 30% of the women identified unemployment as their biggest concern. Many rural women are either unemployed or engaged in low-paying, informal work, leaving them financially dependent on their families. They expressed a strong desire for government initiatives that provide job opportunities, particularly in agriculture, handicrafts, and small-scale industries, where rural women can utilize their skills and become more economically independent (Biswas & Banu, 2022).

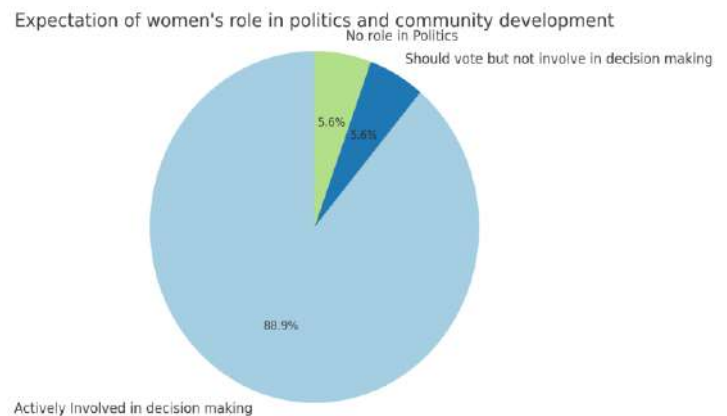


Transportation emerged as another critical issue, with 23% of women reporting that they do not have adequate transportation facilities to access essential services like healthcare and education. Poor transportation infrastructure not only limits their mobility but also prevents them from participating fully in public life, including voting.

Sanitation and healthcare were also major concerns, with both issues being cited by 13% of the women surveyed. The lack of adequate healthcare facilities in rural areas disproportionately affects women, particularly in terms of maternal health services. Additionally, poor sanitation contributes to the spread of diseases, which further limits women's ability to work and participate in public life.

### ***Involvement in Decision-Making***

Despite the many barriers they face, rural women are eager to be involved in decision-making processes that affect their communities. A remarkable 88.9% of women expressed a desire to be actively involved in local politics and community development. This finding explores the importance of empowering women to take on leadership roles and participate in democratic processes. By involving women in decision-making, communities can ensure that policies and programs are more inclusive and reflective of the needs of all citizens (Singh & Paul, 2024).



### ***CONCLUSION***

The findings from "Chai Par Charcha" have shown the stark reality of Haryana's rural women's political participation: they are willing but limited, positive but disillusioned. According to common belief, rural women are not uninterested or apathetic toward politics, according to the stories we collected. Instead, they are routinely ignored—denied the information, means, and independence required to properly engage in the democratic process.

One striking theme that emerged from the conversations is the overwhelming desire among these women to have a direct say in how their communities are governed. Women spoke repeatedly about local issues that remain unresolved: inadequate sanitation, poor healthcare services, lack of job opportunities, and insufficient transportation infrastructure. These are not just isolated concerns but are intricately tied to their inability to access the political process effectively. Despite

these barriers, the women we spoke to expressed a strong desire for change in their safety, independent decision-making power, and employment.

It is evident that, when provided with the tools and information, rural women are discerning voters who prioritize not only their immediate needs but also long-term, community-oriented development. Women want their voices to matter, not just in the casting of a vote but in the shaping of policies that directly affect their lives. Their participation is not just a right; it is essential for the healthy functioning of democracy. With the right support, awareness, and empowerment, rural women can transform the political landscape - not just in Haryana but across India.

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