



POLITICAL REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN THE INDIAN PARLIAMENT

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Relative to their share in the population, women are under-represented in all political positions. In January 2019, women represented 24.3% of all parliament members in the world, up from 9% in 1987. Compared to economic opportunities, education, and legal rights, political representation is the area in which the gap between men and women has narrowed the least between 1995 and 2000 (Norris and Inglehart (2000)).

In India too, women's political representation has been very low since independence though they had played a vital role for getting independence for the country. Lack of political will by (political) parties is not giving way to pave the way for change. History reveals that women have had no space in the political arena and even in the political parties as decision-making partners. Further, it also shows that other formal institutions have not validated or recognised the participation or contribution of women. Women's role in the sphere of decision-making has so far been insignificant to have any kind of multiplier effect. Their numbers in formal decision-making bodies have not increased noticeably over the years. Statistical records show that there has been only a marginal increase in the last few decades in the number of women candidates fielded during the elections. The number of women parliamentarians has never exceeded 16 per cent of all seats. At the state level, their membership in the legislatures is abysmally low, lower than their numbers in the parliament.

Articles 325 and 326 of the Indian Constitution guarantee political equality to all, yet women have not benefited from this right. The political climate as it exists today continues to be male-centered and is therefore perceived to be conducive to male participation. Women are not treated as a political entity in their own right. They have been treated by political parties and other power groups as a means to further their own interests and gains. This is evinced by the declining number of women candidates fielded during the elections, despite promises made by political parties in their manifestoes to provide reservation of seats for women. Across parties, the trend is to treat women as decorative pieces, relegated to women's wings, with not much importance given to them in mainstream activities. Even the few women who are elected are sidelined and often allotted 'soft portfolios' such as, welfare, education etc. In both cases women lack access and control over apex bodies where decisions and policies are formulated.

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Participation of Women in the Parliament – Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha

Women are poorly represented at higher leadership levels. Even historically, it is observed that women's participation in positions of power in both houses of the Parliament has never exceeded 16 per cent of all seats. Table below presents the participation of women in the two houses of the Parliament.

Table-2 : Participation of Women in the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha

Year	Members in Lok Sabha			Members in Rajya Sabha		
	No. of Seats	No. of Women	%	No. of Seats	No. of Women	%
1952-57	499	22	4.4	219	16	7.3
1957-62	500	27	5.4	237	18	7.6
1962-67	503	34	6.7	238	18	7.6
1967-71	523	31	5.9	240	20	8.3
1971-76	521	22	4.2	243	17	7
1977-80	544	19	3.4	244	25	10.2
1980-84	544	28	5.1	244	24	9.8
1985-90	544	44	8.1	245	28	11.4
1990-91	529	28	5.3	245	24	9.7
1991-96	509	36	7.1	245	38	15.5
1996-97	537	34	6.3	245	20	8.2
1997-98	545	40	7.3	245	19	7.8
1998-99	545	44	8.1	245	19	7.8
1999-2004	545	48	8.8	245	20	8.2
2004-2009	545	51	9.5	245	24	9.8
2009-2014	545	58	10.6	245	26	10.6
2014-2019	545	61	11.2	245	31	12.8
2019-till dt	545	78	14.3	245	25	10.2

Source : Election Commission of India

Table-2 : Women Contesting Elections in Parliament and Assembly Elections

Year	Males	%	Females	%	Total
1952	1831	97.71	43	2.29	1874
1980	4478	96.93	142	3.07	4620
1984	5149	96.91	164	3.09	5313
1991	8374	96.26	325	3.4	8699
1996	13353	95.71	599	4.29	13952
1998	4708	94.56	271	5.44	4979

Source :

- Women in India— A Statistical Profile, 1997, Department of Women and Child Development, New Delhi.
- Election Commission of India

Lack of Critical Mass of Women in Political Institutions :

Not having a critical mass within the political institutions makes it difficult for women to center-stage and push their agenda forward. For instance —

- 0 — women among 24 deputy chairpersons of the Planning Commission (similar situation in the NITI aayog)
- 1 — woman among 17 Chief Election Commissioners so far in India
- 0 — women among 22 Governors of the Reserve Bank of India so far
- 0 — women among 13 Attorneys General so far in India
- 52 — women among the 608 High Court judges in India
- 1 — woman among 29 Supreme Court judges, including the —

Chief Justice 0 — women among 38 Chief Justices of India.

Lack of an active and articulate critical mass further disadvantages women. Even where women are articulate and assertive, they are deliberately marginalised through a process of exclusion by the dominant and powerful sections in these political institutions. This is compounded by the fact that elected women representatives do not have a critical mass as an organised electorate, in the form of women's collectives, NGOs and an informed and politically conscious women's constituency to support them.

Though women have been entering the political arena, they are denied positions of power. Even when a few women have been given decision-making positions they do not have political allies in key positions to support

them. Also those in power are invariably given 'soft portfolios' which are an extension of women's stereotypical images. These portfolios rarely have the resources or decision-making powers to back women and therefore relegate them again to the backseat. With reference to the portfolios assigned to them that are classified under the soft category are information and broadcasting, social justice and empowerment, health and family welfare, tourism and culture, water resources and human resource development. However, this is in itself an improvement as in the past, women ministers exclusively held the women and child development, information and culture and sports portfolios. But more recently women have been given other portfolios, but these again are not key portfolios that continue to be retained by men.

Despite the State initiative to induct women into local political governance, the enabling environment facilitating their participation is still lacking. There is a dearth of strong women's collectives, NGOs working towards women's political empowerment, as well as a strong civil society to encourage and strengthen women's political participation. The choice of 33 per cent as the figure for political representation of women is again questioned widely for precisely the reason that it would deprive them from having a voting majority. One major reason why it has been argued that women should constitute 50 per cent of the total number of seats in the PRIs is that while making resolutions and during the voting process when women raise an issue they can be easily out-numbered by men. This is because they never constitute 50 per cent of the vote. Hence, all women's issues can easily

be side tracked because of the simple lack of a voting majority. Second, for all other groups (SC, ST and so on) reservation is in proportion to their population while for women this is not the case. Women constitute a little less than 50 per cent of the population while the quota of seats reserved for them is only a third.

Reservation policies clearly have a strong impact on women's representation. Studies suggest that reservation affects policy choices. In particular, it affects policy decisions in ways that seem to better reflect women's preferences. In other words, a politician's gender does influence policy decisions. More generally, they provide new evidence on the political process. In particular, they provide strong evidence that the identity of a decision maker does influence policy decisions.

Many countries are amending their political systems to set aside positions to groups, such as women and racial or religious minorities that are perceived as being disadvantaged. Several countries have introduced procedures (either explicit quotas or forms of gerrymandering) to ensure political representation of disadvantaged groups, such as women or ethnic minorities. In 2001, quotas for women in parliaments were in force in over 30 countries. The following comparative table shows how women of some other countries have fared in their respective parliament in context of political representation with and without quota for women —

Table-3 : Country Data on Political Representation of Women

Name of Countries	% of elected Women	Quota in Parliament	Quota in Political Parties*
Sweden	47 (2006)	No	Yes
Argentina	40 (2007)	Yes	Yes
Norway	36 (2005)	No	Yes
Canada	24 (2006)	No	Yes
Pakistan	21 (2008)	Yes	No
UK	20 (2005)	No	Yes
France	18 (2007)	No	Yes
USA	17 (2006)	No	No
Sri Lanka	6 (2004)	No	No

Sources :

- Global Database of Quotas for Women, International IDEA and Stockholm University and Inter Parliamentary Union (<http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>).

* In several countries, there is no law mandating quotas for women but some political parties reserve seats for women.

In India, seats are reserved for historically disadvantaged groups (Scheduled Castes, or SC, and Scheduled Tribes, or ST) in the federal or state level legislative assemblies and for both historically disadvantaged groups and women at all levels of the Panchayat system, the system of decentralized decision-making.

On the basis on evidence accumulated about the Indian experience, following are the case for reservation —

1. Preferences over public goods differ
2. Leader's group identity affects public goods allocation
3. Without reservations, weaker groups are not represented

There seems to be a significant cultural barrier to women being recognized as competent policy makers. This may explain why there are so few elected women at each level in India (despite the existence of a few charismatic female leaders at the top), and thus provides a strong argument for reservation.

The Women's Reservation Bill

The question of reservation for women had surfaced even before Independence because women from the elite classes of that period - who wanted to play some role in public life, realised the hurdles in their way. This view was again reflected during the review of the Committee on the Status of Women in India, (CSWI) in 1974. The Committee observed that "the rights guaranteed by the Constitution have helped to build an illusion of equality and power which is frequently used as an argument to resist protective and accelerating measures to enable women to achieve their just and equal position in society". Social scientists also who undertook

studies on the Committee's request came back with a uniform finding that while women's participation as voters had been increasing at a faster rate than men's, their representation as candidates - successful or unsuccessful - registered in fact an opposite trend.

The final version of the Government's NPP (National Perspective Plan) recommended reservation for women in panchayats and municipalities, to be filled in by elections. This version was then incorporated in the 64th Constitutional Bill of 1989. The late 1980s and the early 1990s witnessed three changes of government at the national level, with two general elections in 1989 and 1991. The Panchayati Raj Amendment Bill went through successive revisions, and finally emerged as the 73rd and 74th (Constitutional) Amendments in 1992. The response of women to these two measures in the elections that followed in several states, and the political dynamism demonstrated by them persuaded women's organisations into putting forward a joint demand for one-third reservation in state assemblies and Parliament. The plan too like the CSWI did not raise the issue of women's reservation in Parliament and State Assemblies. The demand was accepted and almost all pre-election party manifestos contained promises to implement 33 per cent reservations for women as well as The Common Minimum Programme. The coalition government of the United Front which introduced the 81st (Constitutional) Amendment also known as the Women's Reservation Bill. In September 1996, a private member's bill was moved, introducing reservations for women, a day before the closing of the monsoon session. However it was this move that subsequently led to the introduction of the present Reservation Bill.

The 81st Constitutional Amendment Bill 1996, seeking to reserve one-third seats for women (including within the two already reserved categories - for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes) has become a highly debated issue. It is worth noting that none of the arguments that have been brought up against the 81st Amendment Bill came up during the passage of the 73rd and 74th Amendments (1989-92).

The 81st, 84th and 85th Constitutional Amendment Bills providing for reservation for women in Parliament and State Legislatures has not been passed for not having reservations within reservation for women on the basis of caste. The Bill was referred to the Joint Select Committee, headed by the late Geeta Mukherjee, who presented their report to the House on December 9, 1996. The Joint Select Committee accepted two provisions of the 81st Amendment Bill. They are: one third of the seats in the Lok Sabha and Legislative Assemblies must be reserved for women; and there will be no reservation for States with less than three seats for the Lok Sabha for a period of fifteen years (for three elections). Amendments that were not accepted included reservation for women of other backward classes (OBC). This committee also recommended the following: the Bill be passed without delay; the OBC reservation for women be considered by the government; and a modus operandi for reservation of seats for women in the Rajya Sabha and Legislative Councils be introduced.

In the discussion with the Select Committee of Parliament, the delegation of the national women's organisations countered all charges of elitism for not recommending reservations for women of 'other backward classes', they point out that

(a) they had requested the quota within the sections which already enjoyed reservation within the Constitution; and (b) they saw the need for a Constitutional amendment to force all political parties to undertake the much needed reforms within their own structures. This is because little had been achieved in more than two decades since the CSWI's recommendations to the political parties and resolutions made by many political parties themselves. The women's delegation emphasised the crisis facing India's democracy with increasing political instability and growth of irresponsibility, fragmentation and criminalisation. Despite their efforts, the Bill was not passed due to the lack of a majority in the parliament, and strong opposition from members across parties. In this context, the lapse of the women's reservation bill, seeking one-third of the parliamentary and legislative seats is extremely distressing.

The most recent dialogue regarding reservation for women is now suggesting an amendment to the People's Representation Act. The new formula suggested seeks to reserve 33 per cent tickets for women. This could be achieved by an amendment to the People's Representation Act, enjoining political parties to allocate 33 per cent tickets to women candidates.

The current position is that the WRB (108th Constitutional Amendment) was initiated strategically in the Rajya Sabha and was passed therein 2010, but as of now, the Lok Sabha has not yet voted on the bill.

Statement of Concern

Even after more than 65 years of democratic governance, it is distressing that the government and the policy makers are lulled into complacency, by not translating

de jure rights to de facto rights, to effect changes in the society.

Women's participation in political processes is impeded due to various social, economic, historical, geographical, political and cultural factors, thereby resulting in their minimal participation and even their exclusion. Illiteracy, women's triple burden, patriarchal values, lack of access and control over income and other resources, restrictions to public spaces and insensitive legal systems continue to impair their effective political participation. This is compounded by the absence/inadequate availability of infrastructural facilities and support services to facilitate their participation.

There are no specific laws or policies so far, that can strengthen the grounds for political and economic empowerment of women. The Government has attempted to empower women politically through affirmative action by providing for one-third reservation for women in local bodies, to ensure their participation at the local and district levels of governance. While these initiatives have created the political space for women, they have not been able to guarantee a non-discriminative or conducive environment for women to participate. However, even this legislative intervention in higher political bodies i.e., State Assemblies and parliament is absent.

The mechanisms to facilitate and protect women in political participation are not in place, such as a strong supportive constituency particularly for women, increased awareness of their rights and responsibilities as elected members, training and information dissemination on governance processes, gender sensitisation of the male elected

members, and so on. In the absence of these mechanisms, women would become subject to negative experiences like no-confidence motions moved against women presidents and at times coercion. In the process, women may experience a backlash, which may act as an overall deterrent to their future career prospects and re-entry into politics.

The effectiveness of women's participation continues to be evaluated against indicators that have been defined by men from a male dominant perspective that is non-gendered. While disadvantages continue to impede women's participation, the disparities between the sexes get widened because of the manner in which women's participation is perceived. For example, while the women's agenda prioritises issues like health, education, safe drinking water, etc., which have long-term benefits and returns, the men's agenda primarily comprises of issues related to infrastructure that have immediate and tangible returns. Further, the resources that men give importance to are mostly financial in nature while women, because of their inability to mobilise financial resources often resort to human (women) resource mobilisation. Thus, while women may have participated in the political field their participation often remains invisible. This comes out clearly in the analysis of the available gender insensitive data on political participation of women.

The 33 per cent reservation quota provided for women in the local self-governing bodies have enabled several women, who had never been in power and even those illiterate, to enter politics. Historically Indian women, who have risen to power, have done so as a result of familial or other elite connections and rarely because of the voting decision

or power of a female constituency. As such these women have typically been more accountable to those who helped them get into power, i.e. their families, caste, or political party connections rather than to their constituencies.

Thirty three per cent as a number denies them their voting majority on issues of concern to women and leaves them without the power to make the changes expected of them. This would mean that even after an historic democratic experiment of such magnitude, a million women would not necessarily have the majority in any given decision making body to actually make a difference. They need to gain the confidence and capabilities for contesting elections to the local bodies against the unreserved categories, thus increasing their overall representation. However, at the levels of the higher political bodies, the absence of reservation of seats for women has led to an increase in their powerlessness due to their representation being very low.

There is another concern also. If we see the background of those women who are finally successful to be elected, most of them are relatives of some established politician. In other words, it is very difficult for a common woman, who has no political linkage, to get elected in present scenario. There are many reasons for it. Political dynasty is a unique feature of the Indian politics which makes things easier for the concerned person. She has easy access to the resources of the established politician. She gets favour in cash/kind easily from party, workers and people. She does not have to start from scratch, rather she inherits or takes advantage of already made base by the established politician. She shoots into fame readily, and

hence easy campaigning. Also, people find it difficult to demonstrate faith in the credibility of a common woman who is contesting an election first time. Moreover, there are elites in every section like OBC, SC, ST, Minority who once got power, endeavour to restrict and to perpetuate it in their family only.

Finally, there is a legitimate concern that electoral quotas do not really have a long-term solution. An environment should be created wherein women choose to come into power bereft of their men's support, but on their own right, on their own terms and in a position to build and sustain their constituencies.

Conclusion

If the status quo persists, women will continue to be under-represented, unheard and excluded from decision making processes. In the almost total absence of a conducive environment for women to enter into politics and lack of empathy by the larger society and the mainstream political culture, the government must take immediate action to ensure that the Bill be passed immediately.

Reservation significantly increases the access of disadvantaged groups to political decision making. While this brings or may bring to power a group of relatively inexperienced and less educated politicians, there is no evidence that this comes at the expense of the quality of decision making. The quality and quantity of public goods do not seem to be affected overall. There is also a significant re-allocation of the goods towards the preferred allocation of the group in power. A social welfare function would be necessary to determine whether this is on balance welfare-enhancing; but reservation clearly emerges as a powerful redistribution tool.

It is for the women's movement to demonstrate their political responsibility, not merely through the politics of protests, but also through direct intervention in the tasks of governance. And this is not possible unless larger numbers of women are present in all these bodies to collectively engender politics.

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