



AN OVERVIEW OF WOMEN IN THE POLITICAL ARENA

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Abstract

This research paper focuses on women in the political arena particularly in India. For years women have been treated as second class citizens across the globe. Besides fighting for their basic rights, women have also had to fight for their political rights. Although, in India women have been politically active since the pre-independence period, their participation in the political sphere has been disproportionate. Historically, the Indian political system has been male dominated and women's representation has been low. Women may have been given the "Right to Vote" since the beginning but their electoral representation has been low for many years. Multiple factors including a patriarchal mind-set, illiteracy, lack of access to resources etc. have been at play even after independence for their poor representation. To bridge the gender gap and to overcome the hurdles of gender stereotyping and gender discrimination, equal participation of women in electoral politics is a must.

This paper essentially aims at analysing the current scenario in Indian politics with respect women's participation. It will also analyse the impact of reservation of seats for women in the local-self-governments and how this could be replicated in the State Assemblies as well as the Parliament.

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Introduction:

Women's participation in political and public life is imperative in order to achieve the goal of inclusive development. After years of being treated as the inferior gender and facing discrimination in every sphere of life, women have now started gaining prominence in the political arena across the globe. Their participation however is not statistically at par with men. A report published by the UN Women states the following:

Women in executive government positions and national parliaments

As of 1 January 2023, there are 31 countries where 34 women serve as Heads of State and/or Government. At the current rate, gender equality in the highest positions of power will not be reached for another 130 years.

Just 17 countries have a woman Head of State, and 19 countries have a woman Head of Government.

First-time compiled data by UN Women show that women represent 22.8 percent of Cabinet members heading Ministries, leading a policy area as of 1 January 2023. There are only 13 countries in which women hold 50 percent or more of the positions of Cabinet Ministers leading policy areas.

The five most commonly held portfolios by women Cabinet Ministers are Women and gender equality, followed by Family and children affairs, Social inclusion and development, Social protection and social security, and Indigenous and minority affairs. Only six countries have 50 per cent or more women in parliament in single or lower houses: Rwanda (61 per cent), Cuba (53 per cent), Nicaragua (52 per cent),



Mexico (50 per cent), New Zealand (50 per cent), and the United Arab Emirates (50 per cent).

Although, there has been a gradual growth, the participation of women in politics still remains low. In India, there have been initiatives that have encouraged women to be an active member in the political spheres, but the process has been extremely slow.

Objectives:

- To study women's participation in the Indian political arena
- To study the impact of reservation for women in the local self-government
- To understand the gendered perspective behind the Women's Reservation Bill not being passed in the parliament.

Methodology:

The paper used the secondary data and this data has been collected from Research articles, reports published by UN.

Why do we need Women in Indian Political Arena?

The Economic Survey 2022 reveals, the number of females per 1000 males was 1020 in India. This clearly indicates that India has a greater population of women than men, but this isn't really reflected in the Parliament. Women in Indian politics, are yet to break the glass ceiling and to bring about the required reforms. According a survey conducted by Reuters in 2018 of the member states of the United Nations, the 550 experts ranked India most dangerous in amongst the 193 members. It was ranked as the most dangerous on three issues: The risks women face from sexual violence and harassment, Cultural and traditional practices and human trafficking.

Women participating in politics is extremely significant for a country where the gender ratio favours women but on the other hand, women's safety is a major concern.

Why is there Gender disparity in Indian Politics?

Gender stereotypes and a patriarchal approach towards the process of election. Even though there have been female political leaders, most have not enjoyed the same notoriety nor have been put upon a pedestal as male politicians in similar positions have.

Lower Literacy rates have also been a significant barrier in bringing women to the forefront of the Indian political system. According to the World Bank, the literacy rate for women ages 15 and above in 2018 is 66 per cent. For men, the literacy rate is 82 per cent. This gap in literacy rates, is making women insignificant in the political arena.

Patriarchal bias to women participating in politics. In spite of the increase in political participation by women, it is seen that there hasn't been a paradigm shift in policy making for women. This is happening because most of the times women who are elected on reserved seats especially in the local self-governments, don't have a say. They are just nominal heads, most of the decisions are taken by the male members in the family.

The Reservation of Seats for Women in the Institution of Local Self-Government:

The 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments facilitated the large-scale participation of women in political institutions at the local and regional levels by introducing 33% reservation in rural and urban local bodies. Currently, around 1.4 million women are elected representatives in India.

How the reservation of seats for women in the institutions of LSGs plays an important role in the political empowerment of women:

With reservation in the local self governments, women have been actively shattering cultural and social myths. They have been more accessible than male Sarpanchs. They have substantially invested in public welfare like safe drinking water and have prioritised nutrition. They have changed the development agenda at the grassroots and have helped other women express themselves



better.

LSG institutions are a watershed in India's democratic history as they not only percolated democratic decentralization to the grass-root level but also made a giant leap in women empowerment by granting them 33% reservation restoring its faith in women leadership. The recent Economic Survey states that there were 13.72 lakh elected women representatives (EWRs) in LSGs, which constitute 44.2 percent of total elected representatives (ERs) as of December 2017. Women Sarpanchs accounted for 43 percent of total gram panchayats (GPs) across the country by December 2018.

They are bringing their experience in the governance of civil society making the state sensitive to the issues of poverty, inequality and gender injustice, thus influencing the decision-making process, planning, implementation and evaluation of various developmental programs at the local level. It also provided an opportunity to hitherto deprived low caste women to participate in the mainstream political processes. Its spiral effect boosted women's confidence in their abilities and encouraged them to seek a meaningful role in society.

What is the Women's Reservation Bill?

The Women's Reservation Bill proposes to reserve 33% of seats in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies for women. It was first introduced in the Lok Sabha as the 81st Amendment Bill in September 1996. The Bill failed to get the approval of the House and lapsed with the dissolution of the Lok Sabha. The Bill was reintroduced in 1998, 1999, 2002, 2003 and 200. However, the Bill failed to receive majority votes.

How many women are in Parliament?

Only about 14% of the members in Indian Parliament are women, the highest so far. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, India has a fewer percentage of women in the lower House than its neighbors such as

Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.

What is the proponents of the Bill say?

Affirmative action is imperative to better the condition of women since political parties are inherently patriarchal.

In spite of the hopes of the leaders of the national movement, women are still under-represented in the Parliament.

Reservations, proponents believe, will ensure that women form a strong lobby in Parliament to fight for issues that are often ignored.

What are the arguments against the bill?

People who are against the bill, argue that it runs counter to the ideas enshrined in the constitution.

Women, unlike the caste group is not homogeneous in nature. Therefore, the same arguments that are made for caste-based reservation cannot be made for gender based reservation.

Women's interests cannot be isolated from other social, economic and political strata.

Some argue that reservation of seats in Parliament would restrict the choice of voters to women candidates. This has led to suggestions of alternate methods including reservation for women in political parties and dual member constituencies (where constituencies will have two MPs, one of them being a woman).

Some insist that as men hold primary power as well as key positions in politics, some have even argued that bringing women into politics could destroy the "ideal family".

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