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India Needs More Women Parliamentarians

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(The editorial is based on the article “India needs more women parliamentarians” which appeared in Livemint for 18th February 2019. In this article we will discuss the concerns related to the low representation of women in the decision making processes in India.)

The 16th Lok Sabha ended its final session last week. Elections for the 17th Lok Sabha will probably be announced in early March and will span the months of April and May. The political buzz is all about vote shares, seats, coalitions and on who will be prime minister. **There is though, no attention being paid to the number of women in Parliament.**

India ranks 153 out of 190 nations in the percentage of women in the lower house of world parliaments.

Global Stats

- According to a list compiled by the Inter-Parliamentary Union, **Rwanda ranks first with 61% of its lower house representatives being women.**



- As a region, Nordic countries (relating to Scandinavia, Finland, Iceland, and the Faroe Islands) are leaders with an average of about 40%. **The UK and the US are relative laggards with 32% and 23%, respectively.**
- The United States' current tally, though still moderate, is upheld by a very strong showing by women in the recent congressional elections.

- **Even Pakistan with 20% participation from women is ahead of India.**



Indian Stats

- **India had 65 women out of 545 members of Parliament (MPs)** elected to the 16th Lok Sabha in May 2014, for a 12% representation.
- Only the 15th and 16th Lok Sabha changed a previously stagnant representation of under 9% recorded by Indian women MPs since Independence.
- Indian system has electoral representation to the Lok Sabha based on population. Thus, Uttar Pradesh with a population of over 200 million people has 80 MPs, Bihar with a population of 100 million has 40 seats and Maharashtra with a population of 114 million has 48.
- **Three north-eastern states—Nagaland, Mizoram, and Sikkim—have only one seat each.**
- Uttar Pradesh shows a better than national average representation of 17.5% (14 MPs) by women, while Maharashtra has the national average of 12.5% (6 seats) and Bihar is much below the national average at 7.9% (3 seats).
- While the allocation of total seats to states by population, the resultant **women's representation at 12% is far below the actual population of women.**
- The scenario for women Members of Legislative Assemblies (MLAs) across all state assemblies in India is even worse, with the national average being a pitiable 9%.

- **The best among them, Bihar, Rajasthan, and Haryana have 14% representation while the worst states are Pondicherry and Nagaland, which have no women MLAs at all.**

Challenges

- **Reservation for one-third of the seats for women** in the Lok Sabha has been tabled as a bill several times until as recently as 2008. **Each time the bill has lapsed.**
- **Illiteracy** is one of the main hurdles in making women as politically empowered.
- Because of a **lack of understanding**, they do not know about their basic and political rights. Gender disparities in terms of education, ownership of resources and continual biased attitudes still act as barriers for women leaders. Education influences the social mobility of women. Formal education such as provided at educational institutions created opportunities for leadership, and imparted leadership essential skills.
- **Work and family** - uneven distribution of household work between men and women also one of the important factors in this regards.
- **Uneven distribution of family care responsibilities** means that women spend far more time than men in the home- and child-care. It relates not just to the time, effort, and medical care of pregnancy and childbirth, but to the far greater maternal involvement necessary for breastfeeding, and to the persistent tendency of women to do a larger share of childcare as the child grows.
- **Lack of political networks** - The lack of openness in political decision-making and undemocratic internal processes pose a challenge for all newcomers, but particularly for women as they tend to lack insider knowledge or political networks.
- **Private-public divide in terms of domain identification** and male preponderance in political institutions. Because of their low proportion in the inner political party structure of India, women fail to gather resources and support for nurturing their political constituencies.
- **Lack of financial support** - Women do not get adequate financial support from the political parties to contest the elections.
- **Societal and cultural norms** imposed on women bar them from entering politics. They have to accept the dictates imposed on them and bear the burden of society. They also bear their deprivation and undermining status thinking it of as a culture of the society. Public attitudes not only determine how many female candidates win a general election but also directly and indirectly how many are considered and nominated for office.
- Overall **political parties' environment too is not women-friendly**, they have to struggle hard and face multi-dimensional issues to create space for them in the party.

Way Forward

- It is the **need of the hour in a country like India to have equal participation of women** in mainstream political activity.
- Society needs to **deconstruct the stereotype of women** as limited to household activities only.
- It is important for all institutions (state, family and community) to **respond to women's specific needs** such as bridging gaps in education, renegotiating gender roles, the gender division of labor and addressing biased attitudes.
- All **political parties have to arrive at a consensus and ensure the passage of Women's Reservation Bill**, which calls for reserving 33 percent of seats in Parliament and all state legislative assemblies for women.
- There is need to implement the proposal of the Election Commission of India (known as the Gill formula) to **make it mandatory for the recognized political parties to ensure putting of minimum agreed percentage for women** in State Assembly and Parliamentary elections, so as to allow them to retain the recognition with the Election Commission as political parties.
- Around the world, more countries follow the idea of reservation in political parties. **Sweden, Norway, Canada, the UK, and France are examples.**
- Occupation of seats in legislatures must be earned by women not only through a scheme of reservation but through a **positive enabling environment alive with gender equality** in terms of access and opportunities, distribution of resources and so on.
- **India should have an Election Commission-led effort to encourage reservation for women in political parties.** While this does not provide any assurance about the number of women parliamentarians, it does allow for a more meritocratic and less complex method of moving the ball forward.
- Reservation in political parties will also **require education, encouragement, and role-modeling for women to aspire to a political role** as it is in the party's interest to ensure that their candidate wins.
- India has had a long-serving woman prime minister and several women chief ministers and speakers of the House. **Yet, its record of women parliamentarians is woefully poor. For a balanced future for the country, it behoves us to debate and agree on how to change this.**
- As such, the **Government should provide for adequate enabling measures for improving the conditions of women socially, educationally and economically so that women stand up on their own, with their intrinsic strength.**

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