



Women's Reservation Bill

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This editorial is based on article **“Seriousness about Women’s Reservation Bill must show in electoral representation”** which appeared in “Indian express” on 18th April, 2019. This article is about why gender quotas need to be introduced and supplemented with capacity building.

According to a report **“Women In Politics” published by the United Nations in 2017**, India ranked at a lowly 148th position in ‘women in parliament’ category, and at 88th position in ‘women at ministerial position’ category. Our Parliament currently has 11.8% women representation, and state assemblies have only 9%, even though ‘women empowerment’ has become a catchphrase in every Government policy.

This anomaly calls for introduction for affirmative action for rightful representation of women in legislation.

Why is there a need for political representation?

Women’s political empowerment is premised on three fundamental and non-negotiable principles:

- The equality between women and men;
- Women’s right to a full development of their potential;
- Women’s right to self representation and self-determination;

In empowerment, the key indeed is 'power': it is power to 'access', 'control' and make 'informed choices'.

Political empowerment through the use of a mix of power, effectiveness, capability, force and influence can challenge and transform the structures and institutions of patriarchal ideology and existing power relations.

Can voluntary system of allocation change it?

Global experiences have shown that voluntary political party quota system hasn't improved the participation of women to a significant extent. On the contrary, fixed quota system systemically improves the representation of women, as political parties work towards capacity building to fill the required quota. For example, when Rwanda introduced quota system for women, nearly 50% women won, which subsequently rose to 64%, even when the stipulated quota was only 30%. On the contrary many developed countries of Europe are struggling with around 20% representation of women with the voluntary allocation system.

Do women face a glass ceiling in politics?

The glass ceiling is described as 'those artificial barriers based on attitudinal or organizational bias that prevent qualified individuals from advancing upward in their organization into management level positions'. The artificial barriers are stereotypes, media related issues, informal boundaries.

Studies have revealed that women candidates tend to receive fewer funds from donors when contesting against male candidates. Due to a entrenched patriarchy, women candidates are also considered to be less capable than their male counterparts by the voters. These combined factors result in unfulfillment of the end goal of greater representation for women.

Will providing reservation will break the glass ceiling?

In 1992, when the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments introduced local self-governance, it was an unparalleled step to consciously empower women as decision makers with 1/3rd of the seats reserved for women.

Reservation introduced by 73rd and 74th amendment was rotational in nature i.e. for a certain period of time, certain Panchayat /Municipality was reserved for women on rotational basis.

Today, 14 states have 50%-58% representation of women in Panchayat Raj Institutions. Jharkhand leads the way with 58%, closely followed by Rajasthan and Uttarakhand.

Does this led to empowerment?

- **According to a study by United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research (UNU-WIDER):**
 - Women legislators in India raised economic performance in their constituencies by about 1.8 percentage points per year more than male legislators;
 - Women legislators in India raise luminosity growth (measures of night-time lights visible from space) in their constituencies by about 15 percentage points

per annum more than male legislators;

- According to a study by **Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL)**, women representatives were more concerned about issues like water supply and road connectivity than men.
- Another survey conducted in Tamil Nadu indicated that nearly 30% of women opined that after the system of rotation will be over, they would contest from the same seat. Another 15% said that, they would enter mainstream politics if given a chance.

These findings indicate that how with the introduction of affirmative action women made incremental progress in the field of political empowerment. Yet these changes came in conflict with existing social structure developing some imbalance.

Women Reservation Bill: A timeline

- On September 12, 1996, when it was introduced in the Lok Sabha by the United Front government, it failed to get the approval of the house and was referred to a Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC).
- Again In 1998, NDA-I introduced the bill without any success. Thereafter, the Bill lapsed and was reintroduced – in 1999, in 2002 and 2003.
- In 2008, the UPA-I introduced the Women Reservation Bill in the Rajya Sabha and it was passed. But until now the Lok Sabha has not passed it.

Contrived Confusion of Representation

Even though India has managed to legislate representation, representation alone is inadequate until it is manifested as participation. This dichotomy between representation and participation created conditions in India which colloquially is known as **“Sarpanch Pati”**. Sarpanch Pati refers to the phenomena of elected women serving as proxies for their male relatives—exercising nominal power while the men retain the real work of governance. This manifests, that reservation intensifies the problem of gender inequality by giving it the veneer of a solution.

However, there are many examples like **Chhavi Rajawat of Rajasthan, Aarti Devi of Odisha or Bhatkti Sharma of Madhya Pradesh** who nullifies this notion. But what is ubiquitous in all these cases is presence of capacity. They are all educated, had support from family and experience.

Capacity Building

Capacity building to enable women in proactive participation will need institutional reform as well as dismantling existing power structures such as oppressive patriarchy, physical and emotional violence against women at home and in the public sphere.

Way Forward

In view of the international experiences it is imperative that affirmative action must be legislated for political empowerment of women. Also, the success stories of such leader should be highlighted and awareness must be created around such success. Only then the shackles of gender stereotype will break.

Conclusion

The political empowerment of women is necessary to attain a sustainable and inclusive society.

The Rwandan experience has shown that women reservation can bring sufficient change in process of empowerment. The systematic inequality that infuses every aspect of social expression can only be addressed through political empowerment of women, which will act as a catalyst in strengthening our socio-political systems.