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POLICY PAPER ON THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN LEGISLATORS IN INDIA

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Background

India's governance structure operates on a three-tier model, encompassing the Central Government, State Governments, and Local Government Bodies such as Municipal Corporations (as Urban Local Bodies) or Gram Panchayats (as Rural Local Bodies). Numerous research studies have been conducted on women's representation in parliament and gram panchayats and municipalities (by the 73rd & 74th constitutional amendments). However, there is a lacuna in research on the actual representation of women in state assemblies and thus this paper gains relevance in this context. This paper perhaps will explore the relevance of the Women's Reservation Act, 2023, and study the intersection of socio-political practices and women in politics.

Literature Review

Historical View

The topic of political reservation for women in India traces its origins to the era of the Indian National Movement. In 1931, notable figures such as Sarojini Naidu and Begum Shah Nawaz penned a letter to the British Prime Minister of the time, championing the cause of complete political equality for Indian women ("The Long Journey," 2024). Throughout history, women have faced both suppression and adversity. After India gained independence, several laws were enacted to create a more dignified social culture and protect vulnerable populations. Despite these efforts, true empowerment of women remains an aspiration, often existing more in theory than in practice.

If we look at the first constituent assembly, out of the 389 members only 15 were women (Mahotsav, n.d.). Ironically, The Indian Constitution, in its Preamble, pledged to ensure "justice: social, economic, and political" for all citizens, along with equality regarding status and opportunity. (Basu, 1991). It is the beginning of where the laws of the country have strived to give equal opportunity however, the Indian political and social scenario has never acclimatized to recognize the importance of women's political participation.

Constitutional Provisions

When we look at the provisions of the Constitution of India we find a legit intention of the drafters to bring women to the mainstream through special provisions however, the law fails in its intentions because the people are slow to adapt to the progress that the law wants for its people in reality. Constitutional provisions in India, while emphasizing principles of equality and non-discrimination, have not adequately translated into equal representation for women in politics. Despite the existence of the constitutional provisions of Article 14, ensuring equality before law for all, and Article 15, which prohibits prejudice on various grounds, including sex, women still encounter substantial barriers to their participation and representation in politics.

One key issue is the limited impact of reservation policies outlined in Article 15(3) and Articles 243D and 243T. While these provisions mandate women's seat reservations in panchayats and Municipalities, respectively, the reserved seats often form only a fraction of the total seats available, limiting the overall impact on women's representation. Additionally, reservations did not extend to higher levels of government such as state legislatures or the national parliament, where women remain significantly underrepresented.

Furthermore, socio-political norms and patriarchal attitudes within political parties and society at large also act as significant barriers, perpetuating gender stereotypes and biases that undermine women's credibility and electability as political leaders. Moreover, while constitutional provisions such as Articles 42 and 46 emphasize the promotion of women's interests and the welfare of marginalized communities, implementation remains a challenge. Inadequate enforcement mechanisms, lack of political will, and societal resistance to gender equality contribute to the persistence of unequal representation of women within the political sphere.

Women's Reservation Act 2023

The Women's Reservation Act (WRA) emerged as a significant discourse when the country realized how underrepresented were the women in India. However, society was still skeptical in supporting the notion of how to empower women as Indian society has always been orthodoxical about women and their role in society (Government of India, 1974). Considering the predominance of patriarchal behaviors and widespread sexism within political organizations and parties, establishing a conventional process to guarantee women's representation in legislation becomes imperative (Khan, 29 C.E.). It's crucial to understand the context in which the Women's Reservation Act gained relevance against this backdrop of societal norms and beliefs.

This legislation has a long history of unsuccessful attempts since its introduction in 1996, facing obstacles such as the dissolution of the Lok Sabha and lack of political consensus. Despite initial efforts under H. D. Deve Gowda's government in 1996, subsequent attempts in 1998, 1999, 2002, 2003, and 2008 failed to secure the required majority. The Bill gained momentum during the Manmohan Singh-led UPA government in 2008, with the Rajya Sabha passing the Bill in 2010. However, it never progressed in the Lok Sabha.

In a historic development, the Narendra Modi-led BJP government successfully introduced and passed the WRB on 19 September 2023 in the Lok Sabha, just before the 2024 general elections. In addition, on September 21, 2023, the Rajya Sabha passed the Bill, and on September 28, 2023, President Smt. Droupadi Murmu gave it her assent. The Act, effective after the 2026 census, will endure for 15 years with the possibility of extension through parliamentary action. Notably, seat rotation is implemented to provide women with a fair chance to represent different constituencies. The Act aims to empower women in politics, fostering a more participative and equitable democracy.

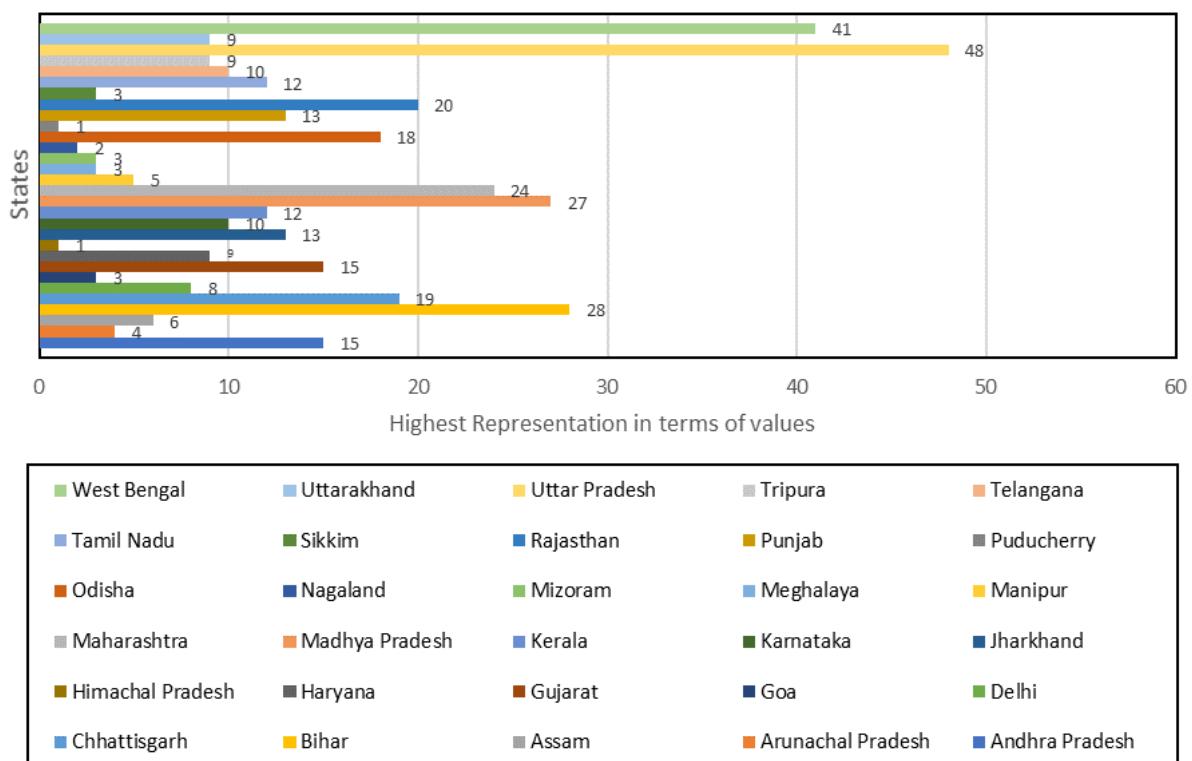
Present Scenario of Representation of Women in State Assemblies

There are currently 542 members in the Lok Sabha, with 78 of them being female. In a similar trend, 24 of the 224 members of the current Rajya Sabha are women. As of 2024, there are 102 female lawmakers in office. Given that less than 15% of the members of the Lok Sabha are women it is evident that they are underrepresented as MPs (Women in Parliament: Information Regarding Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI) and Gender Inequality Index (GII), n.d.). The gender gap is also more pronounced in state legislatures as per the PRS Legislative research as the overall representation of women falls below 10%.

The following Bar-graph illustrates the State-Wise Representation of Female MLAs:

The representation of female MLAs in Indian states varies widely. This disparity underscores regional differences in political representation for women. Urbanized states tend to have more female MLAs, possibly due to factors like higher education and awareness. The dominance of certain political parties in each state also influences female representation, with parties supportive of gender equality more likely to field female candidates. Socio-cultural factors such as traditional gender roles and societal norms also impact female political participation, with states embracing more conservative attitudes showing lower levels of female MLAs.

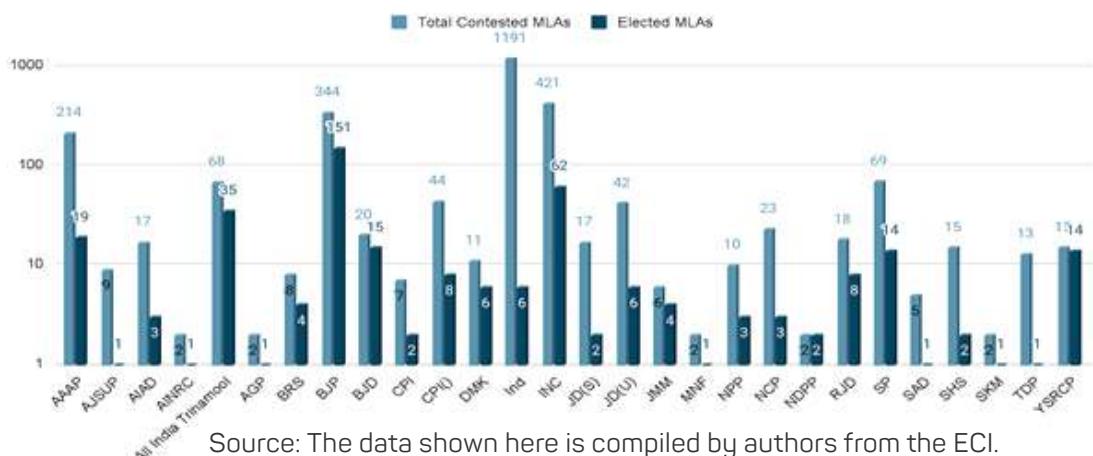
STATE-WISE REPRESENTATION OF FEMALE MLAs



Restrictions on Women's Entry into Politics

The participation of women in politics faces several challenges and can be categorized into two firstly, socio-political norms, and secondly institutional barriers. Socio-political norms have an important influence on how women engage in politics. Gender stereotypes deeply ingrained in society often confine women to domestic roles, diminishing their opportunities for leadership positions. Traditional expectations regarding gender roles, including family duties and caregiving responsibilities, may dissuade women from entering politics. Moreover, persistent perceptions of women's capabilities in decision-making and leadership roles further hinder their political aspirations. Women's access to and advancement in political realms are restricted by these cultural norms and stereotypes perpetuating gender inequality in governance and decision-making processes.

Partywise Tickets Allocation Vs Winners



Source: The data shown here is compiled by authors from the ECI.

Furthermore, male-dominated party structures present obstacles to women's entry into leadership positions within political parties. Biased electoral processes and campaign dynamics further disadvantage women candidates, making it difficult for them to compete on equal footing with their male counterparts. Additionally, women frequently face threats, violence, and harassment during political campaigns, especially online campaigning, creating a hostile environment that discourages their active participation and exacerbates the gender disparity in political representation (India: Women Politicians Face Shocking Scale of Abuse on Twitter - New Research, 2020).

A comprehensive approach is required to eliminate structural impediments and advance gender equality in politics. Addressing these barriers requires concerted efforts, including legal reforms, awareness campaigns, and promoting women's leadership. Empowering women in politics benefits society as a whole.

Research Methodology

(A) Data Collection:

In this study, for the collection of quantitative data, secondary sources were extensively employed. The PRS Legislative Research served as a valuable resource for obtaining comprehensive statistics on the total number of female MLAs, as well as their demographic attributes, educational backgrounds, age distribution, party-wise representation, and state-wise representation.

With a qualitative approach, the information was obtained through primary sources, particularly structured interviews conducted during the first National Legislators' Conference Bharat (NLC Bharat) in Mumbai. A total of 41 female MLAs were chosen with random sampling to ensure unbiased representation. These interviews provided a qualitative dimension to the research, capturing the lived experiences, perspectives, and challenges faced by women legislators in India. The structured nature of the interviews ensured consistency in data collection, allowing for the identification of common themes and variations across different regions and political parties. This methodology was selected to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the diverse elements impacting the involvement of women in legislative assemblies. The qualitative nature of data aimed to enrich the overall analysis by offering an improved understanding of the institutional, social, and cultural elements influencing women's representation in legislatures.

(B) Data Analysis:

In this section, we analyze the collected data through qualitative lenses. We delve into qualitative analysis, extracting themes from structured interviews with women legislators. These inputs provide a comprehensive understanding of women's representation in India's legislative bodies.

Based on the information provided from the interviews conducted during the NLC Bharat event in Mumbai in 2023, here are some thematic patterns observed in the representation of women legislators in India:

- Educational Attributes**

Interestingly, the PRS Legislative data reveals compelling insights about the education among female MLAs in India. A significant portion, i.e. 34% of female MLAs, have educational qualifications at the Inter/Higher Secondary level while 27% of female MLAs hold postgraduate degrees, and 32% have completed undergraduate education. Doctorate and professional graduate degrees are relatively less common, each representing 1.79% of female MLAs. Additionally, there is a small percentage (2.31%) where educational information is not available. This data highlights the varied educational profiles of female MLAs, reflecting the informed decision-making process and the intersection of education, gender, and politics.

The interviews of Women MLAs also revealed a significant insight: educated women tend to feel more empowered when entering politics. Empowered MLAs are more likely to engage actively in legislative debates, champion causes they believe in and challenge the status quo. They often demonstrate a better understanding of the fundamentals of governance and are more adept at creating supportive networks around themselves.

For women considering a career in politics, the primary challenge lies in gaining acceptance into leadership roles by the public. And particularly when they don't have any other resources including political family background or lack of education, then election campaigning becomes difficult, on the other hand, an educated professional can seek income for self-funding through her professional income. However, many of these women claim to have overcome this obstacle through their commendable work and dedication to their constituents. This underscores the importance of education, networking, and tangible achievements in breaking down barriers for women in politics.

- **Women and Dynastic Politics**

Many of the women legislators come from political families, indicating a trend of political dynasties in Indian politics. Their political ideologies and role models often align with those of their family members or influential leaders within their parties. The narratives also shed light on the significance of political lineage and networks in shaping women's political careers. The entry into politics by certain interviewees through familial ties underscores the entrenched nature of dynastic politics, wherein access to power often hinges on one's lineage rather than merit. While such networks can provide a launchpad for women entering politics, they also perpetuate a cycle of elitism and exclusion, limiting opportunities for those outside established political families.

Witnessing relatives or family members engaged in politics can inspire young women to pursue a similar path and break into what might otherwise seem like a male-dominated field. Also, political families often have financial resources that can be instrumental in supporting a woman's political ambitions. Funding for campaigns, access to influential donors, and resources for organizing events and outreach efforts can all be more readily available to women with family ties to politics. Women from political families may face expectations or encouragement from family members to enter politics. This can be both a source of pressure and motivation, as familial support can bolster a woman's confidence and determination to pursue a political career. Political families often have access to opportunities within political parties and thereby facilitate a woman's entry into politics.

Furthermore, the absence of a level playing field is starkly evident in the stories of women like Dr. Pradnya Rajeev Satav and Smt. Mamta Rakesh assumed political office following the demise of their male relatives. While their ascension to power reflects resilience in the face of adversity, it also exposes the structural inequities that deny women independent pathways to leadership positions.

- **Challenges as Women in Politics**

While specific challenges are not explicitly mentioned for several legislators, it's implied that they encounter obstacles typical for politicians in India, including managing constituency affairs, navigating party politics, and addressing the needs of their families. Some narratives also underscore the intersectionality of gender with other axes of marginalization, such as caste, class, and education. Women like Smt. Latika Pradhan and Smt. Renu Devi navigates multiple identities, challenging not only gender norms but also caste hierarchies entrenched within political structures. Their stories underscore the need for an intersectional feminist approach that acknowledges and addresses the intersecting forms of oppression faced by marginalized women.

Several legislators have a history of starting from local governance positions, such as corporators or members of Zilla Parishads, before contesting and winning assembly or council elections. This suggests a typical career trajectory for aspiring politicians, particularly for women entering politics.

The narratives reveal a spectrum of experiences, from those navigating traditional patriarchal structures to those breaking barriers with resilience and determination. Take, for instance, Smt. Shalley Chaudhary, an MLA from Haryana, whose political journey began later in life, defied societal norms that often dictate the roles and responsibilities of women.

Similarly, the story of Smt. Yamini Jadhav mirrors the dual roles shouldered by women in politics – as both caregivers and leaders. Her transition from local governance to state-level politics illustrates the incremental progress made by women in claiming their rightful space in decision-making arenas. Yet, it also underscores the persisting challenges of balancing family responsibilities with political aspirations, a burden disproportionately borne by women.

In addition to this, the data shows that the challenges such as limited resources, lack of infrastructure for campaigning, and reduced visibility for independent candidates were prominent when compared to party-affiliated candidates. Therefore, only a handful of women candidates got elected out of many independent candidates.

- **Importance of Youth in Politics**

According to PRS Legislative data, there is a correlation between the number of female MLAs and demographic details such as age. While there are substantial candidates from the middle-aged demographic, particularly in the 45-64 age range, there are less number of candidates among early groups. This correlation could reflect broader societal trends, including barriers to entry or advancement for younger women in politics, as well as generational shifts in political participation. Furthermore, it underscores the importance of addressing age-related factors in efforts to enhance the representation of women in politics, ensuring inclusivity for young aspirants.

The MLAs interviewed also strongly advocate for the active participation of the country's youth in politics. According to Smt. Seema Trikha "The country, the state, and the community in which the youth and women are empowered and enlightened will not falter". The women interviewees collectively emphasize the importance of youth gaining firsthand experience to comprehend the intricacies of governance. From an external perspective, it is often facile to criticize and label politicians as universally corrupt. However, such judgments can be misguided. Smt. Reena Devi asserts her view that the reality in politics is such that without actually proving the worth in the position held, representing one's community, contesting and succeeding in the next general election in any constituency may appear to be an insurmountable challenge. So being a politician is but a responsibility that makes you a leader or shows you the way out. Reflecting on the matter, Smt. Vijayadharani, MLA, also affirms, "An initiation by any youth to come out to know what is going on in this country will prepare them for leadership roles in the country".

Observations and Recommendations

1. Along with fielding women candidates in unreserved seats in the elections, the political parties should also consider internal reforms by way of giving equal opportunity to equals in their organizational structure thus promoting gender balance.
2. The Election Commission of India (ECI) should encourage women's participation in politics by way of waiving forfeiture of deposits of Independent Women Candidates who by and large do not have financial support mechanisms, fostering a more equitable playing field.

3. Addressing gender stereotypes is another crucial aspect of these efforts. Implementing strict penal measures to combat harassment and violence in politics will foster safer environments.

Conclusion

Policies should address these intersections. Empowering women in politics is not just about equality; it is a catalyst for positive change and inclusive governance. Women's participation is essential for a vibrant democracy and a more equitable society. The study has brought out the fact that women have made their way into politics however they still face discrimination based on their gender. Hence, it is necessary to create a favorable environment for young political aspirants; merely the Women Reservation Act 2023 is not going to help. Rather, there has to be a change in the socio-political mindset of the society first, followed by the patriarchal political setup of our country.

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Annexure

The following questions were asked in the interview with MLAs at NLC Bharat.

1. Can you share your experience running for office for the first time? What motivated you to enter politics?
2. What are the most pressing challenges or issues faced by your constituents, and how do you plan to address them?
3. What is your political ideal?
4. What is your philosophy or guiding principles in life, and how does it influence your role as an MLA?
5. Maintaining a work-life balance can be challenging in politics. How do you manage your professional responsibilities as an MLA with your personal life?
6. In your opinion, what are the key strengths or best features of the Indian democratic system?
7. What advice would you give to young individuals who are interested in pursuing a career in politics?

