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The Crisis of Under-representation of Women in Parliament and Assemblies

BY OMKAR POOJARI MARCH 8, 2021



As the age-old theory of women surrendering to the wishes of the patriarchs of their family while exercising their democratic franchise gets a silent burial and different doles, schemes, freebies are designed by politicians and policy-makers to woo this “new vote-bank”, a pertinent question that needs to be asked is: More women are exercising their right to vote, but are more of them also becoming members of our law-making bodies at the state and national level? **OMKAR POOJARI** examines the numbers and explains the trends to find the answer.

ONE of the most heartening tales of India’s electoral democracy in recent

times has been the rise and rise of women’s turnout.

In the 1962 Lok Sabha polls, for which the Election Commission for the first time presented separate numbers for male and female voter turnout, women constituted a measly 46.7%. But by 2019, the share had shot up exponentially by nearly 20% to 67.18%. During the same period, men’s turnout grew by only 5%—from 62.1% in 1962 to 67.08% in 2019. The differential growth rate in voter turnout resulted in a watershed moment in India’s electoral history in 2019; for the first time, women’s turnout percentage in Lok Sabha elections was marginally higher than men’s.

Sex ratio of voters (SRV), the number of women voters to every 1,000 men voters, is an important metric for assessing the gender bias in electoral roles. It is quite like the population sex ratio (PSR). According to a study by Mudit Kapoor and Shamik Ravi, authors of *Women Voters in Indian Democracy: A Silent Revolution*, there has been a stunning increase in India’s SRV from 715 in the 1960s to 883 in the 2000s. By 2019, it had risen to 928.

A 2014 CSDS survey debunked a fallacious theory about women voters in India. As many as 70% of women surveyed said they never consulted their husbands on who to vote for. Given how differently and independently men and women vote, different levels of voting intentions between both are seen. This differential can be as high as 15 to 20% for a party.

Women’s turnout can impact a party’s prospects in myriad ways. For instance, the BJP’s support among women has been lower than among men. In 2014, the NDA’s lead over the UPA was 19% among men and just 9% among women, Prannoy Roy and Dorab S Sopariwala highlight in their book “The Verdict”. To understand how differently men and women voted, consider this—if only women and no men had voted in the 2014 polls, the NDA would have fallen short of the majority mark and won 265 seats instead of 336. Conversely, if only men and no women had voted, the NDA would have won an even bigger mandate by clinching 376 seats.

The results of Delhi and Bihar assembly elections held in 2020 reinforced the view that with rising turnout of women’s voters, no political party or leader can choose to ignore them. Women voters have emerged as a potent electoral force. In Bihar, the NDA managed to scrape through, winning a wafer-thin majority, courtesy the women voters who voted decisively for the Nitish Kumar-led alliance.

Interestingly, out of the 125 NDA wins, 99 came from assembly seats where the women’s turnout exceeded the male turnout. The Aam Aadmi Party’s landslide victory in the 2020 assembly elections was similarly powered by the women voters of Delhi. A Lokniti-CSDS post-poll survey revealed that women were more likely to have voted for AAP than their male counterparts—60% and 49% respectively. This massive gender gap gave the party an almost unassailable lead of 25% over the BJP among the women voters. The AAP’s lead over the BJP among men was merely 6%. As the age-old theory of women surrendering to the wishes of the patriarchs of their family while exercising their democratic franchise gets a silent burial and different doles, schemes, freebies are designed by politicians and policy-makers to woo this “new vote-bank”, a pertinent question needs to be asked: More women are exercising their right to vote but are more of them also becoming members of our law-making bodies at the state and national level?

While women voters’ turnout has grown by leaps and bounds in recent years, women’s representation in law making bodies, both at the state level and in the Lok Sabha, can only be described as a “national shame”.

Table ‘A’- Percentage of women MPs in the Lok Sabha over the years.

| Election years | Percentage of male MPs in Lok Sabha | Percentage of women MPs in Lok Sabha |
|----------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| | | |

| | | |
|--------------------------|-----|-----|
| Phase I (1952-1977) | 95% | 5% |
| Phase II (1977-2002) | 93% | 7% |
| Phase III (2002 onwards) | 90% | 10% |

(Note: The results of the 2019 elections have been added to the third phase. Candidate data for 1952 and 1971 has not been included as it has not been made available by the ECI. Source: Data from ECI and The Verdict by Prannoy Roy and Dorab Sopariwala.)

When India's first Lok Sabha was formed after the 1952 general elections, 5% of the members were female. Though the number was low—reflective of the deeply entrenched patriarchy in India's society—it is worth noting that India was ahead of western and seasoned democracies of the time like the US and the UK. Merely 3% of the UK's parliament and 2% of the US House of Representatives was female.

While the women voters turnout has grown by leaps and bounds in recent years, women's representation in the law making bodies -both at the state level and in the Lok Sabha can only be described as a 'national shame'. Despite the emergence of women voters as agents of change with the potential to swing elections, the representation of women in the lower house of the parliament, the Lok Sabha as well as the state legislative assemblies has been abysmally low.

Over the last few decades, the picture has changed dramatically but completely to the advantage of western democracies. While democracies around the globe are making rapid strides regarding women's representation in their elected bodies, the same cannot be said of India, where the progress has been at a snail's pace.

Even in the current and the best phase (2002-2019), the percentage of women MPs in the Lok Sabha continues to be appallingly low at 10%. With over 14% (78 MPs) female MPs, the current Lok Sabha has the highest number of women MPs since 1952. Despite this, India's women's representation record is anything but impressive. The situation is even worse in state assemblies—only 9% of 4,120 MLAs were women, according to an ADR report. While the turnout of women voters and

the SRV have risen exponentially, women continue to be grossly under-represented in the parliament as well as the state assemblies.

How does India compare with other countries in terms of women’s representation in law-making bodies?

Data collected by the [Inter-Parliamentary Union](#) proves that India is not only faring poorly in terms of women’s representation, but more importantly, its position has worsened in the last few years.

Table ‘B’- India’s rank over the years.

| Year | India’s rank |
|---------------|--------------|
| January 1998 | 95 |
| February 2008 | 144 |
| January 2021 | 148 |

By comparison, India’s neighbours—China at 86, Pakistan at 116, Bangladesh at 111 and Afghanistan at 71—rank fare better than India which occupies the 148th position as of January 2021.

So, is India’s dismal women’s representation record a consequence of political parties being reluctant to give tickets to women candidates? Or is the representation or lack of it linked to the oft-cited theory of women being “weak” candidates, i.e., despite being nominated to contest polls, women fail to win?

The answer to the first question is crystal clear; parties both at the national and regional level field very few women candidates. Nine out of ten candidates in the Lok Sabha elections have been men. The state of the state assemblies is even more abysmal. Even in the best phase for women candidates (2002-2019), only one in 12 candidates (8%) in assembly elections have been women.

Table ‘C’- Low Percentage of Women candidates in Lok Sabha elections

| Election years | Percentage of male candidates in Lok Sabha elections | Percentage of female candidates in Lok Sabha elections |
|----------------------|--|--|
| Phase I (1952-1977) | 97% | 3% |
| Phase II (1977-2002) | 96% | 4% |

| | | |
|--------------------------|-----|----|
| Phase III (2002 onwards) | 93% | 7% |
|--------------------------|-----|----|

(Source: Data from ECI and The Verdict by Prannoy Roy and Dorab Sopariwala.)

Table ‘D’- Low Percentage of Women candidates in assembly elections

| Election years | Percentage of male candidates in Vidhan Sabha elections | Percentage of female candidates in Vidhan Sabha elections |
|-----------------------|---|---|
| Phase I (1952-1977) | 98% | 2% |
| Phase II (1977-2002) | 96% | 4% |
| Phase III (2002-2019) | 92% | 8% |

(Source: Data from ECI and The Verdict by Prannoy Roy and Dorab Sopariwala.)

The hesitancy of political parties who miss no opportunity to harangue on women’s empowerment during campaigns is baffling because data contradicts the popular perception of women being “weak” candidates with low winning strike-rates. Historically, across the three different phases of India’s elections, women have had a proven higher winning strike-rate than their male counterparts—in the Lok Sabha as well as state assembly elections.

Table ‘E’-Winning strike-rate of men and women in Lok Sabha elections

| Election years | Percentage of men | Percentage of women |
|--------------------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| Phase I (1952-1977) | 25% | 46% |
| Phase II (1977-2002) | 8% | 14% |
| Phase III (2002 onwards) | 7% | 10% |

(Source: Data from ECI and The Verdict by Prannoy Roy and Dorab Sopariwala.)

Table ‘F’-Winning strike-rate of men and women in Vidhan Sabha/state assembly elections

| Election years | Percentage of men | Percentage of women |
|-----------------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| Phase I (1952-1977) | 21% | 34% |
| Phase II (1977-2002) | 11% | 14% |
| Phase III (2002-2019) | 9% | 10% |

(Source: Data from ECI and *The Verdict* by Prannoy Roy and Dorab Sopariwala.)

Ironically, despite women candidates having a better winning strike-rate than men, parties have been extremely conservative while distributing tickets to them. This crisis of under-representation of women, a consequence of serious discrimination against women in politics is not only a cause of concern but utterly disgraceful for the world's largest democracy.

The hesitancy of political parties who miss no opportunity to harangue on women's empowerment during campaigns is baffling because data contradicts the popular perception of women being 'weak' candidates with low winning strike-rates. Historically, across the three different phases of India's elections, women have had a proven higher winning strike-rate than their male counterparts-in Lok Sabha as well as state assembly elections.

The success achieved by reserving one-third of the seats in local government bodies like panchayats and municipalities is often cited as a model which can be emulated at the national level by reserving seats in the Lok Sabha and state legislatures. As of [February 2020](#), there were more than 2,50,000 local government bodies across India with nearly 3.1 million elected representatives and 1.3 million women representatives. While the 73rd and 74th amendments have eased the entry of women in politics and ensured their empowerment by including them in the policy and decision-making process, cunning male politicians have found nefarious ways to by-pass the system, resulting in the menace of proxy-representation and dummy candidates.

Opponents of the Women's Reservation Bill (108th Constitutional Amendment Bill), 2008—which was passed in the Rajya Sabha in March 2010 but is yet to be passed in the Lower House of Parliament after 11 years—often cite this to argue that if women's reservation is implemented, women MPs and MLAs will become rubber stamps or de-jure leaders even as the men in their families, the de-facto leaders, will

dictate terms. While there may be some merit in this argument, under no circumstances can the idea of affirmative action for women's participation in politics be dismissed on these grounds.

It is true that many times, the men in the family have called the shots, but in recent years, there have been instances of women representatives fighting back and asserting themselves. Especially in the initial years, due to lack of knowledge about their rights and powers, elected women representatives had to struggle. But studies have shown that in recent years, women representatives in local government bodies have come into their own delivering better local governance and even outperforming male representatives. The annual report cards released by [Praja Foundation](#)—an NGO which has been working since 1997 to transform urban governance across the country—corroborate the same. The report judges the corporators' performance in the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) every financial year.

Nitai Mehta, Managing Trustee, Praja Foundation, says, "When 50% reservations were brought in many states for the local self-governing institutions, there were some speculations on the impact that it might have on the quality of deliberations in the House. However, data emerging from our seven councillor report cards spread across three terms show that the women councillors are now outperforming their male counterparts consistently. The average scores of female and male councillors over the years bear a testimony to it: In 2011, female councillors scored 60.06%, while male councillors scored 58.77%; 2013, the female councillors scored 57.62% while male councillors scored 59.66%; 2014, the female councillors scored 59.41% while male councillors scored 59.40%; 2015, the female councillors scored 58% while male councillors scored 58.19%; 2016, the female councillors scored 62.80% while male councillors scored 61.11%; 2018, the female councillors scored 59.02% while male councillors scored 60.44%; and in 2019, the female councillors scored 60.28% while the male councillors scored 59.98%. We hope now that our political leaders take inspiration from the data and work towards ways to increase the number of women lawmakers."

However, lack of political awareness, exposure and expertise in matters relating to administration and policy-making; lack of knowledge about local governance acts, rules and regulations; unfavourable working conditions and the indifferent attitude of officials coupled with the patriarchy of the predominantly male administrative machinery does create hurdles for women representatives.

To address these issues, various NGOs, policy think-tanks have come up with different initiatives. For instance, Praja Foundation has organised several capacity building programmes and ER workshops for women councillors. The workshops are designed to fit the needs and expectations of newly elected women councillors.

Speaking about these efforts, Balwant Kirar, Programme Manager at Praja, says, "The limited representation of women in governance is reflective of deep-rooted socio-political norms. Praja understands the cross-cutting barriers that women councillors face due to intersectionality of gender, seniority in the political party and position in the house which could potentially hinder their performance as effective councillors. Therefore, in order to empower women councillors, Praja gives a special

emphasis on the capacity building of women elected representatives. The overall aim of the workshops is to empower women councillors for effective and accountable management of their wards. Women representatives have benefited immensely from these initiatives. Their success stories and their impact motivates us to keep doing our work.”

The success stories and the lessons learnt from the implementation of reservation for women in our local bodies in the last few decades makes a strong case for reviving the Women’s Reservation Bill, 2008. For the record, both the Congress and the BJP had promised in their 2019 (and 2014) manifestos to pass the bill, paving the way for women’s reservation in the parliament and state assemblies.

It is high time the political class reads the writing on the wall and walks the talk—ensuring better women’s participation in Indian politics. Reservation is no panacea which will completely end the deeply-rooted gender bias in India’s socio-political set-up, but it is necessary to at least make a start and passing the Women’s Reservation Bill, 2008 will be the ideal way to do so.

Link:- <https://www.theleaflet.in/the-crisis-of-under-representation-of-women-in-parliament-and-assemblies/#>