

# Women's Reservation Bill for Gender Equality: An Analysis

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## ABSTRACT

The reservation of seats for women in the institutions of local self-government marks an important step towards promotion gender inclusivity in the India. Reservation of seats for women in parliament empowers the women in society and encourages women to participate in political and parliament issues. Women in Indian politics have come a long way, but they still face many challenges. The Women's Reservation Bill proposes to reserve 33% of seats in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies for women. Reservations are the exact opposite of development and equality. The government has been successful in hugely transforming Indian women's lives. Paper focuses the promotion of women's sense of self-worth, their ability to determine their own choices and their right to influence social change.

**Key words:** Reservation, promotion, society, empowerment, emancipation, transformation and representation

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## INTRODUCTION

Women represent more than half of the world's population and just less than half of the global electorate. Nevertheless, women constitute a marginal proportion of representatives in the world's legislative bodies. In 2008, the average rate of female representation in national parliaments stood at a meager 18 percent. India has of yet managed notably limited success in rectifying these imbalances, with women currently holding only 8 percent of parliamentary seats. Although India was one of the first democratic nations to grant women the vote, women are neither represented in the legislative spaces nor contributing towards the formation of national laws.

After 12 years of the Women's Reservation Bill lying in limbo amid intermittent and embarrassingly hot-headed scenes in the House, it was finally introduced in the Rajya Sabha during the Budget Session in 2008. As it is a Constitutional Amendment Bill, it must now acquire a two-thirds majority to be passed in the Parliament. And, in May 2010, this controversial yet historic 'Women's Reservation Bill, ensuring 33 percent reservation to women in Parliament and state legislative bodies, was passed in the Rajya Sabha following two days of high drama and disruption.

Some of the main arguments in favour of women's reservation can be listed as follows:

- 1) Women represent half of the population of a country and therefore have the right to half of the seats, since decisions made in parliament have a direct impact on their lives.
- 2) Women have different social and biological experiences which should be represented in institutions of governance.
- 3) Women and men have partly conflicting interests.
- 4) Women in positions of power can inspire more women to place themselves in influential and decision-making roles.

While other political parties have acted more or less the same way, Communist parties the world over have been the worst offenders. They have been ingenious in devising ways for using women as foot soldiers, but have maintained their politburos as bastions of male dominance. And if women have occupied important positions at the top, they have come into those positions through the family, as the wife, daughter, daughter-in-law or niece of a political heavyweight. Exceptions

such as Mayawati and Mamata Banerjee, who have made it to the top without the prop of the family, stand out because of their rarity and these women should not be quoted as examples for the women in general. Their achievements have little to do with their castes Mayawati is a Dalit while Banerjee is a Brahmin. “Women were substantially involved in the Indian independence movement in the early 20th century and advocated for independence from Britain. Independence brought gender equality in the form of constitutional rights, but historically women's political participation has remained low” (Praveen, Rai 2011:47 )

To eliminate gender discrimination and promote female empowerment, women’s decision-making capacity must therefore be enhanced within the household, the workplace and the political sphere. Increased political influence should have reverberations for women's equality in the other two realms, which will in turn have implications for India’s performance against all milestones for social progress. “Madras was the first to grant women’s suffrage in 1921, but only to those men and women who owned land property according to British administration's records” (Mithra, H.N. 2009 )

Reservation of seats is a basic, consistent and logical step towards both women’s emancipation and inclusive development particularly for a government which promised that the “equal access to participation and decision making of women in the social, political and economic life of the nation” would be at the heart of its agenda (National Policy for the Empowerment of Women 2001).

There is a majority of experts who believe that the party, not the state, should take the lead in enlarging the role of women in politics. Unless political parties change their modes of recruitment and operation, no change of lasting importance can come about in the role of women in political life. “Voter turnout for national elections in the past 50 years has remained stagnant with turnout ranging between 50 and 60%. State elections have seen a growing trend in women's participation, and in some cases women's turnout is exceeding male turnout” (Rukmini, S 2013).

But they have, until now, shown little initiative in this regard. Deep-rooted inertia leads every party to shift the burden of improving the position of women on to the state. And when state takes the initiative it is sacrificed at the altar of the political parties itself a rare situation to fight about! Experts opine that quotas for women can bring only cosmetic changes in their influence on the political process. There are apprehensions also about the kind of women who will be given tickets to contest reserved seats. And this apprehension does not seem baseless. India is not only a deeply caste-divided society but it is a deeply class-divided society, too. A fundamental change in the character and composition of the political party can only ensure that tickets will be given to women on merit, and not because of family connections. A political system/tradition in which parties have done little to build women’s political capabilities from the bottom upwards; it will be only natural for the vacuum at the top to be filled by wives and daughters leaving almost no space for women from modest backgrounds to get the top job in the parties.

Indian women have borne the heavy burden of hierarchy. In the past they were kept in control, by what students of Hindu law have called ‘perpetual tutelage’. They faced obstacles wherever they tried to move up in public institutions and found it hard to cope with those obstacles unless they had the support of the family. For a long time, that support was provided in a niggardly way, and hence only women of exceptional ability and determination could make a mark through their achievements in education and employment. This is an everyday story in India even today.

Resistance to women’s advancement in the last 70 years has eased slowly but steadily. The middle class family has become more supportive of the education of its daughters and their ambitions for professional employment. But this change has been very slow and it has benefited only a small proportion of women, mainly in the educated middle class and that too in metropolitan cities. Women from this class have achieved remarkable success in a variety of professions on their own initiative, with hardly any more support from the family than it would give to its male members. Here the point should be noted that this happened due to active support coming from the family and the society at large may be the state played the passive role. “The Government of India requires reservation of seats for Dalits and Scheduled Castes, but women suffer from abuse and discrimination when serving as elected officials. Dalit women experience harassment by being denied information, ignored or silenced in meetings, and in some cases petitioned to be removed from their elected position” (Mangubhai, Jayshree 2009)

More than 70 years after independence, it is simply not true that the odds against women are still so high that they cannot achieve any success in public life without the support of quotas. Leaders of the political parties need to take a serious and long-term interest in the advancement of women, instead of treating them as pawn in the politics of power and patronage; otherwise democracy will play only a small part in the transformation of Indian society. “Reservation is a system of affirmative action in India created during the British rule. Based on provisions in the Indian Constitution, it allows the Union Government and the States and Territories of India to set a percentage of reserved quotas or seats, in higher

education admissions, employment, political bodies, etc., for "socially and economically backward citizens" (Rajagopal, Krishnadas 2016 )

We must see our political parties as the reflections of our society at large. The view of majority in the society gets reflected in the workings of the political parties. What is needed is for Indians to have a reformed outlook about women in society itself and the same being reflected in the attitudes and mindsets of all political parties, assemblies and the Parliament. "Seats reserved for women are rotated for assurance that each seat has an equal chance of being reserved. After the establishment of women's reservations, political participation went from 4-5% to 25-40% among women, and gave millions of women the opportunity to serve as leaders in local government" (Kaul, Shashi; Shradha Sahni 2009:29)

Basically, the effective way to promote the lot and situation of women would be to start from the very unit of the family. It is only when families start promoting their daughters; sisters and daughters-in-law that the condition and fate of Indian women will improve in fact individual instances have already suggested the same. Basically, this upliftment of women at the individual level -beginning with the family unit will serve as a symbol of general social approval by the public at large and it will have a miraculous impact on the overall upliftment of women in Indian society. However, this is easier said and the hurdles are aplenty. "Martial concerning political participation stated, "Because literacy is connected in general with the ability to move outside the home and to stand on one's own outside of it, it is also connected to the ability of women to meet and collaborate with other women."(Nussbaum, Martha C. 2004:355)

First, society needs to change its psyche when it comes to the girl child (i.e, the birth of a daughter is not an unwanted burden upon the family). Here too the government can play a significant role by rewarding those couples that give birth to a girl (vis-a-vis a boy) and offer an equally harsh punishment for those who opt for amniocentesis in their preference for a boy-child. Whilst the prevalent measures in this direction are in place, they have failed to bring about the desired results (dominant forces/sections of the society simply negate these steps).

How then can a society, which considers its future female population unwanted citizens, even hope to prosper? It is preposterous to think that women make for good mothers but not daughters! Awareness ought to be created about this glaring paradox of Indian society. Women especially should come forward to help improve their lot beginning with the patrilineal system and the lacunae therein.

## CONCLUSION

The real test of democracy is the creation of equality of opportunity for the hitherto deprived sections of society - in this case, Indian women. This would require both a favourable social atmosphere as well as political will. Come to think, if the so-called backward and fundamentalist society like Pakistan can grant 33 percent reservation to women in its senate then why should India, the largest democracy in the world, lag behind? The world's largest democracy has a democratic deficit, as women are grossly underrepresented in Indian politics. The women's reservation bill is designed at enabling greater participation of women in policy-making at the state and national levels.

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