

RESERVING A SEAT AT THE TABLE: EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF THE WOMEN RESERVATION BILL

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ABSTRACT

The need of empowerment for women in politics is unquestionable, as it is essential for achieving true gender equality and creating inclusive societies. Women make up roughly half of the population, and their perspectives and experiences must be represented in decision-making processes. Empowering women in politics not only upholds democratic principles but also leads to more balanced and comprehensive policies. **As rightly said by Naila Kabeer “If women’s productive activities were better understood, policy could be designed to support rather than invisibilise their contributions” (LSE Research 2016)** When women have equal opportunities to participate in politics, it fosters diverse leadership, challenges gender stereotypes and addresses issues like gender based violence and discrimination effectively. By promoting women’s political empowerment, we take a significant step towards building fairer and more just societies where everyone’s voices are heard and valued. The condition of women in society has evolved significantly over last two decades with noticeable progress in many areas but persistent challenges in others. In various fields like education, workforce participation, political representation, legal reforms, technology and communication, reproductive rights, economic empowerment significant development and improvement has been seen. But women as a community still seem lacking somewhere a lot. This paper will try to find out that why reservation is needed for women in policy making decisions and what will be the impact of Reservation Bill on the women and what other people think about this bill. For this purpose 150 respondents from college were taken randomly to find out how this bill proves to break a glass ceiling (overcoming the barriers set to prevent access to advancement.) for the betterment of women in policy making issues.

Key words: Reservation, Impact, Women, Participation, Empowerment, Policy making

Introduction

The need of empowerment for women in politics is unquestionable, as it is essential for achieving true gender equality and creating inclusive societies. Women make up roughly half of the population, and their perspectives and experiences must be represented in decision-making processes. Empowering women in politics not only upholds democratic principles but also lead to more balanced and comprehensive policies. As rightly said by **Naila Kabeer** “If women’s productive activities were better understood, policy could be designed to support rather than invisibles their contributions” When women have equal opportunities to participate in politics, it fosters diverse leadership, challenges gender stereotypes and addresses issues like gender based violence and discrimination effectively. By promoting women’s political empowerment, we take a significant step towards building fairer and more just societies where everyone’s voices are heard and valued.

The condition of women in society has evolved significantly over last two decades with noticeable progress in many areas but persistent challenges in others. In various fields like education, workforce participation, political representation, legal reforms, technology and communication, reproductive rights, economic empowerment significant development and improvement has been seen. But women as a community still seems lacking somewhere a lot. Over the past 50 years, women’s participation in politics around the world has seen a noteworthy transformation. While in the early 1970s witnessed a relatively low representation of women in political roles, subsequent decades have witnessed a steady increase in the number of women in legislature, cabinets and leadership positions. Initiatives like gender quotas and affirmative action’s measures have been implemented in many countries to promote women’s political engagement.

Nevertheless, challenges such as gender bias, discrimination, and violence against women in politics persist in various regions. The progress made in the last five decades underscores the importance of continuing efforts to achieve gender parity and ensure that women’s voices are fully represented in political decision making processes on a scale.

Gender equality and women’s empowerment relates to the number of seats held by women in national parliaments. It moves the focus of empowerment into the arena of politics, and the struggle for participation and representation in decision making structures. Empowerment is a concept that denotes the process of enabling individuals or groups to gain control over their lives, make choices and asserted rights. It involves the enhancement of one’s self confidence, knowledge, and capabilities, allowing them to navigate

challenges and achieve their goals. Women empowerment is a multifaceted concept that encompasses various strategies aimed at increasing the social, political, economic and personal agency of women.

WHY RESERVATION NEEDED FOR WOMEN?

The need of women's reservation in Indian politics is crucial to address the glaring gender disparity in political representation. Women make up nearly half of India's population, yet their presence in elected officers remains disproportionately low. The issue of reservation for women in politics **can be traced back to the Indian national movement**. The **National Perspective Plan for Women** recommended in 1988 that reservation be provided to women right from the level of the **panchayat to that of Parliament**.

Reservation not only ensures equal participation but also promotes diverse perspectives, which is essential for crafting inclusive policies that address women's unique concerns. Women's reservation is not only justified on the grounds of women being historically disadvantaged but also on the grounds of their claim to representation in proportion to their numbers.

As Dr .B. R. Ambedkar said the only way of measuring the development and progress of a community in a country would be only the progress and growth of women in that community which is actually the real progress of country. Reservation of seats for women in parliament empowers the women in society and encourages women to participate in political and parliament issues .Women have equal rights to enter parliament as men and a sense of equality is maintained by creating such reservations for women. This type of equality sense creates a big impact on India's respect for women in global level. Reservation of seats for women can change the social structure of our country. Nine out of ten parliamentarians in India are men. Such dismal figures reveal the lasting grip of unfavourable social norms. Six decades have gone by since India's Independence brought hopes that democracy would make gender representation more equal. Since the 1990s, reservation has opened up access to local bodies for women. **Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar** said. Have things changed in the last 200 years or so? Women represent just 15 per cent of the Lok Sabha (78 out of 543) and 14 per cent in Rajya Sabha. Their representation in state legislative assemblies is shockingly low at 10 per cent.

India's decision to adopt a universal franchise was bold and historic. Some members of the Constituent Assembly had reservations and considered the right to vote for women "a

dangerous weapon” (**M Thirumula Rao**); a “monstrous experiment” (**Mahavir Tyagi**) and an “impractical endeavour” (**Biswanath Das**). And as per **Iswar Chander Vidya Sagar** that without women’s empowerment – their equality, freedom and rise, society and the nation cannot flourish.

Furthermore, women’s involvement in politics has been shown to lead to more comprehensive and balanced policy formulation. The empowerment of women, their representation in decision-making spaces, a greater focus on social issues affecting women as well as the larger community, reinforce the perception of female leaders as more responsible, honest and collaborative and lead to women politicians serving as role models for younger women.

They shift the burden on the women, to be better leaders than their male counterparts. Even as women are being given a seat at the table, the seat seemingly comes with its own set of terms and conditions. The varying cultural and social standards for men and women are built on the assumption that they are different — and that is where our problem lies. Women often bring a different set of experiences, priorities, and perspectives to the table. They tend to focus on issues such as healthcare, education, women’s rights, and child welfare with greater emphasis.

When a diverse range of voices is represented in the decision-making process, it results in more well-rounded and holistic policies that can address a broader spectrum of societal concerns. **BJP leader and then prime minister, Vajpayee**, himself referred to the "general insecurity of menfolk" and their vested interest in "perpetuating male supremacy." India's political culture tends to inhibit male politicians from openly questioning women's suitability for elective office. Even in the records of the Lok Sabha debates on the bill, directly expressed disapproval of women's participation in parliament is rare. The member from Nagaland who worried that, if the bill were passed as it stood, it was "going to interfere with our established social practices," was in this respect very unusual. (**Vicky Randall, 2009**). As it was discussed by many Lok sabha members that women are inexperienced and the country’s security was endangered if they constituted more than 10% Lok sabha members. This proves that many male members still don’t want that women should play a role of a policy maker.

The introduction of reservations for women in local governance through Panchayati Raj system in the 1990s was a pivotal moment, leading to greater participation of women in rural politics. Women have also held key ministerial positions at the national level. However, challenges such as patriarchal attitude, gender-based violence, and unequal access to

resources continue to hinder women’s full political empowerment. Nevertheless, the progress made underscores India’s commitment to promoting women’s political leadership and the importance of ongoing efforts to address gender inequity in the political arena.

While traditionally underrepresented, women’s participation in politics has gradually increased. The state has witnessed women leaders occupying significant positions in both local and state governments. Initiatives aimed at empowering women, such as the reservation for women in local panchayats and municipal bodies have contributed to this progress. Nevertheless, gender discrimination persists, and women in politics continue to face challenges related to social norms and access to resources. The evolving landscape in Himachal Pradesh reflects broader efforts to enhance women’s political participation and the ongoing need to address barriers to their full engagement in the political sphere.

WOMEN IN PARLIAMENT (GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE)

As of May 2023, the global average of female representation in national parliaments was 26.7 percent (see Table 1) The Americas, Europe, and Sub-Saharan Africa have women’s representation above the global average; and Asia, the Pacific region, and the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA) region, are below average (see Table 2) (IPU Parline,2023). Women’s representation within Asia also varies; with the South Asian countries faring worse than the others (see Table 2).

Table 1: Global Average of Women’s Representation in Parliament

Column1	Lower chamber and unicameral	Upper chamber	All chambers
Total MPs	37,398	6,959	44,357
Gender breakdown known for	37,255	6,959	44,214
Men	27,290	5,102	32,392
Women	9,965	1,857	11,822
Percentage of women	26.70%	26.70%	26.70%

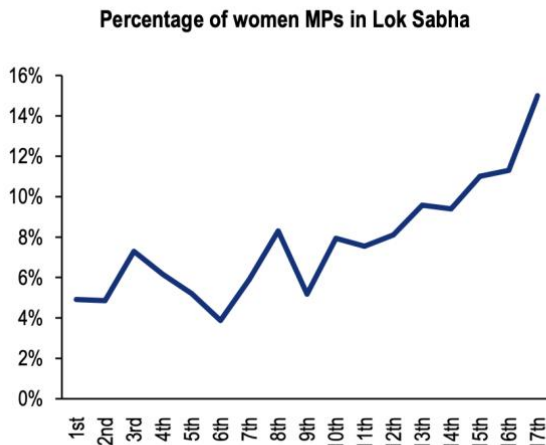
Source: IPU Parline: Global Data on National Parliament (as of May 2023)

	Single House or lower House	Upper House or Senate	Both Houses combined
Nordic countries	44.0%	---	-----
Americas	30.6%	31.5%	30.8%
Europe (Nordic countries included)	29.6%	28.5%	29.4%
Europe (Nordic countries not included)	28.1%	28.5%	28.2%
Sub-Saharan Africa	24.1%	23.9%	24.0%
Asia	20.1%	16.7%	19.7%
Middle East and North Africa	17.7%	10.7%	16.8%
Pacific	16.6%	43.8%	19.4%

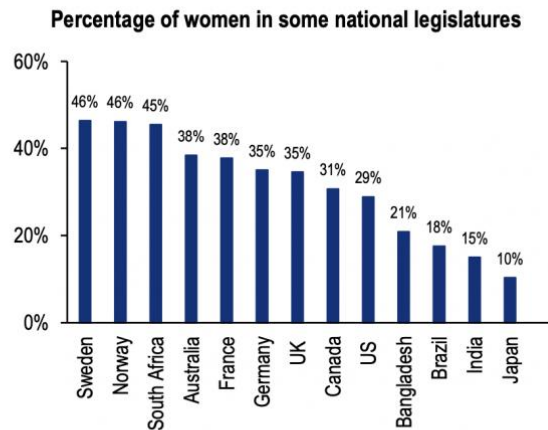
Source: IPU Parline: Global Data on National Parliament (as of May 2023)

IPU data of May 2022 showed that women’s representation in Nepal, for example, was 34 percent, in Bangladesh 21 percent, in Pakistan 20 percent, in Bhutan 17 percent and in Sri Lanka 5 percent. For India, women’s representation in the Lok Sabha (the Lower House) has remained slightly below 15 percent.

Slow rise in the representation of women in Lok Sabha



Sources: Gender-Wise Statistical List, Lok Sabha, 2019; PRS.



Sources: Inter-Parliamentary Union Website as accessed on September 19, 2023; PRS.

Women’s representation in Lok Sabha has increased from 5% in the first Lok Sabha to 15% in the current Lok Sabha.

- Scandinavian countries such as Sweden and Norway, and South Africa have more than 45% women representation in their national legislatures. Japan at 10%, lags behind India

WOMEN RESERVATION BILL [108th Constitutional Amendment]

The Constitution (One Hundred and Twenty-Eighth Amendment) Bill, 2023 was introduced in Lok Sabha on September 19, 2023. The Women’s Reservation Bill in India, a long debated piece of legislation, seeks to reserve 33% of seats in the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies for women.

Typically, achieving a critical mass of 30 per cent representation by women in Parliament is known to yield positive outcomes for women’s empowerment”, **Susan Ferguson, UN Women’s India Country Representative, said in a statement.**

At the time of the bill’s passage, about 14 per cent of Lok Sabha legislators were women. While that represents India’s highest proportion since its independence, it was far below the global average of 26.5 per cent, or the Central and Southern Asia average of 19 per cent.

Among the state legislative assemblies, Chhattisgarh has the highest level of women legislators, at 18 per cent, while Himachal Pradesh has just one woman legislator and Mizoram has none.

Similar legislation has been enacted in 64 other countries, ranging from Belgium to Rwanda. Rwanda's 2003 constitution set a 30 per cent quota for women in elected positions, and 10 years later the country became the world's leader for gender equality in politics, with women occupying 64 per cent of parliamentary seats.

The Women's Reservation Bill also has the potential to impact social dynamics within the country positively. By promoting women's participation in politics, it challenges traditional gender roles and stereotypes that have confined women to specific roles and responsibilities for generations. This can have a ripple effect throughout society, encouraging families and communities to embrace gender equality and reject discriminatory practices. Additionally, increased political representation for women can serve as a catalyst for improved women's rights and gender-sensitive legislation.

At its core, this bill represents a significant step towards gender equality and women's empowerment within the political landscape of India.

First and foremost, the bill addresses a long-standing and pervasive issue – the underrepresentation of women in Indian politics. Historically, women have been underrepresented in decision-making roles across the world, and India is no exception. This lack of representation not only deprives women of their rightful participation in governance but also hinders the country's progress by not utilizing the diverse perspectives and skills that women bring to the table. The Women's Reservation Bill aims to rectify this imbalance by providing women with a fair and equal opportunity to participate in the highest levels of policymaking.

Moreover, the passage of the bill can significantly influence societal perceptions and norms. It sends a strong message that women are not only capable but also deserving of leadership roles in politics. When women occupy positions of authority in the legislative process, it serves as a positive role model for future generations, encouraging more women to aspire to and actively engage in politics. This legislation can pave the way for gender diversity and inclusivity in various other sectors as well.

IS POLITICAL REPRESENTATION ENOUGH FOR WOMEN?

The Bill guarantees women's representation in politics, but the challenge lies in establishing institutional arrangements that enable women to act independently, avoiding tokenism and patriarchal patronage.

Societal norms still pose significant obstacles to women's effective participation, with barriers like limited access to education, lack of childcare support, and financial constraints.

It is important to set the political rhetoric aside and understand the implications of this bill to assess its impact on the nation in the years to come. In principle, the bill is in the right direction. It will address the concerns of women empowerment and gender bias in politics, national policy formulation and governance. After passing of this bill India's patriarchal societies in most parts of the country, the bill may counter this archaic (ancient) practice and overcome some of the social barriers that women face today in their march towards advancement.

While the Bill shifts demand-side barriers in favour of women candidates, ensuring effective participation with the newly created critical mass of women in parliament is a challenge, given the lack of political education among them.

The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) 2023 press release shows that women have high representation in portfolios like women and gender equality, family and children affairs, social inclusion and development, indigenous and minority affairs. However, critical policy areas such as economic, defence, justice, and home affairs are dominated by men.

Despite these challenges, a growing body of evidence shows that women representation makes a difference. Findings from the **Oxfam India Policy Brief No. 10, March 2014** "Why India Needs the Women's Reservation Bill" it was found that reservation for women is important and it was analyzed that Government systems to support female representatives at the local level should be reviewed and integrated into a new system of support. **Vidyasagar** was pioneer in woman empowerment who realized way back in 18th century that unless and until resurrection and empowerment of woman is done reform or renaissance was impossible to bear fruit in the society.

Another study done by **(Bharti Sehta, 2015)** looks Women's Reservation Bill (WRB) as evidence to more equitable and inclusive system of governance in India; it also highlights global experience of 'quota' for the broader agenda of 'inclusive democracy' and 'good governance'. This study attempts to examine the debate on Women Reservation Bill unleashing the contentious politics of 'power sharing' behind the false constructed arguments of political parties.

As mentioned by Nivedita Menon (2000) in her article that two very different (even opposed) sets of concerns - feminist and upper caste - have tied in at this particular conjuncture to produce the sudden general acceptability of women's reservations. Further, the debates around the Bill reveal a more fundamental set of questions about the issues of citizenship, representation, and the subject of feminist politics. It was stated that as soon as the debate on the reservation for women was started there were many arguments in favour or against this bill was started.

It was shown by (**Rosenthal 1998; Thomas 1991 and Flammang 1985**) that women legislators are more likely than their counterparts to conduct business in a manner that is egalitarian, cooperative and contextual.

Therefore increased representation of women will impact on the political agenda, political culture and public **policy (Dahlerup 1988, Norris 1996)**

There were various writers whose literature were reviewed to understand the issues of women reservation and after taken an insight from this literature current study were done.

The objective of this study is to understand the impact of Reservation bill on the general public and how this bill will affect the status of women in coming future. The researcher is trying to find out this by taken randomly a sample of total 150 respondents to understand that what their views about this bill are, are they aware about the bill and what they think that what will be the impact of reservation bill on the women and other people. The current sample was taken from college only, and I also involved my students in this research so that students should also understand the importance of research, how to take the sample and did the analysis part and it was convenient and easy also to taken the sample from the college.

The survey conducted among 150 college students and teachers on the passing of Women Reservation Bill in the parliament. They yielded valuable insights into the attitudes and perspectives of this bill .The majority of respondents expressed varying levels of awareness about the bill, with a notable divide in opinions. While a significant portion exhibited enthusiasm for increased women representation in politics, a noteworthy segment voiced concerns about the potential implications and challenges associated with the proposed legislation. This diversity of viewpoints emphasizes the need for targeted educational initiatives to ensure a well-informed discourse. A notable proportion of respondents expressed a keen interest in promoting gender diversity in political representation, while others raised concerns regarding potential challenges and the implementation of the bill. The feedback underscores the importance of engaging college staff in ongoing discussions and awareness campaigns to cultivate a more inclusive understanding of the issues at hand. As the backbone of the educational institution, the staff's perspectives contribute significantly to the broader societal dialogue on women's participation in politics. This survey thus serves as a valuable foundation for future initiatives aimed at fostering a more informed and supportive environment within the college. Many students and teachers suggested for special lectures or classes for more awareness about the women reservation bill. Create safe and secure environment so that women can come out of their houses without fear and participate more. By reaching out to the women of remote areas and making them aware about their own

rights.

So it was found that awareness regarding the bill was very much needed among the youngsters and to understand the importance of this bill and how this bill proves to be beneficial for the policy formation and development of the country and to understand the viewpoint of women also to make the things better for her and there are many women in rural areas now also who led a life which was not meant for her.

In conclusion, the Women's Reservation Bill is a crucial piece of legislation with the potential to transform the political and social landscape of India. It addresses gender inequality by providing women with equal opportunities in politics, challenging stereotypes, and fostering more inclusive governance. While it has faced resistance and criticism, it remains a symbol of hope for those advocating for gender equality and women's empowerment in India. Its passage would not only be a victory for women but for the nation as a whole, moving towards a more equitable and just society.

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