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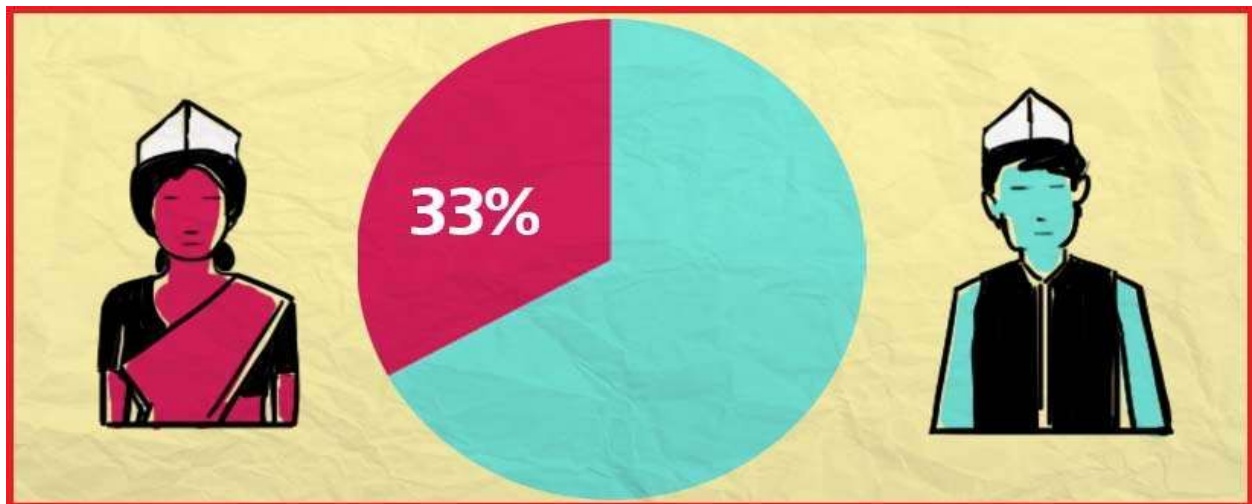
E-service delivery removes
discretion, ensures
accountability and delivers with
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INSIGHTS 3

A better approach to political
gender equality

A better approach to political gender equality

- Divyangana Choudhary



“For me a better democracy is a democracy where women do not only have the right to vote and to elect but to be elected” - Michelle Bachelet, head of UN Women, former president and Defence Minister, Chile.

‘Representation’ is an important concept of politics. There is strong evidence to indicate that, as women’s representation in Parliaments or state legislatures increases, there is a corollary increase in policy making that emphasizes the quality of life and

reflects priorities of families, women, ethnic and racial minorities.¹

According to the UN Women (Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women), global data on women parliamentarians in 2017 shows that only two countries in the world have a participation of more than 50% of women parliamentarians in the lower house, which are Rwanda (61.3%) and Bolivia (53.1%). The global average is 23.4% and India's is a mere 11.8%. At current levels, India would need to double its women Parliamentarians in the lower house to even reach the global average.

108th Constitutional Amendment Bill

To address the problem of under representation of women in India, the Women's Reservation Bill - the 108th Constitutional Amendment Bill was introduced in the Rajya Sabha by the United Progressive

Alliance (UPA) government in 2008 and was passed by Rajya Sabha in 2010. The Lok Sabha never voted on this bill despite the fact that the National Common Minimum Programme (CMP) of the UPA I government included reservation of 1/3rd seats in Parliament for women. When the UPA came back to power in 2009, the Lok Sabha did not vote on the bill in this term either. The Bill lapsed in 2014 after the dissolution of the 15th Lok Sabha. The major provisions include:

- One-third of all seats in the Lok Sabha and the Vidhan Sabhas shall be reserved for women
- Such reservation shall also apply in case of seats reserved for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs)
- There shall be rotation of seats so reserved for women
- Such rotation shall be determined by draw of lots, in such a manner that a seat shall be reserved only once in a block of three general elections

¹ Volden, Craig, Alan E. Wiseman and Dana E. Wittmer (2010) "The Legislative Effectiveness of Women in Congress," <http://polisci.osu.edu/faculty/cvolden/VWWWomenLEP.pdf>

Flaws in the Bill

This Bill is seriously flawed given that it mechanically provides for entry of women members to fill one-third of vacancies in Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabhas. Such mechanical reservation and rotation (of seats) suffer from serious defects:

- Mandatory reservation of 33% Parliamentary constituencies for women restricts the choice of the voters
- Rotation of reserved seats results in forcible unseating of rest of the incumbent members.

There are certain alternative and liberal models available, to ensure enhanced participation of women in politics without forcing the electorate to elect a woman parliamentarian due to reservation in a constituency, but by empowering them in a way that

ensures being elected with dignity and fair competition.

Alternative model for the Women's Reservation Bill:

A. Amending Representation of People's Act, 1951

One such proposal is that a law should be enacted by amending the Representation of the People Act (RPA), 1951, to make it mandatory for every political party to nominate women candidates for election in one-third of the constituencies. This would ensure that parties will be free to choose their female candidates and constituencies depending on local political and social factors. Parties will nurture women candidates where they can offer a good fight rather than in pre-fixed lottery based constituencies, where they may or may not have viable women candidates. Thus, there is flexibility and promotion of natural leadership. On the other hand, if seats are reserved exclusively for women in every election through territorial constituencies, voters in

such reserved constituencies would have no choice but to elect women only, thereby violating the basic principles of democratic representation.

B. Rotation of seats - inhibits growth of leadership



Next, there is the problem of rotation of reserved seats. Under this system, one-third of the constituencies are reserved and rotated in every general election. This rotation will automatically result in two-thirds of incumbent members being forcibly unseated in every general election which inhibits the growth of leadership. There will be no need for rotation if parties nominate women candidates in one-third of the constituencies through an amendment to RPA, 1951 as discussed earlier. Under such a scenario, women are allowed to contest against women/men rival candidates, thus serving the

purpose of fair democratic competition.

C. The problem of quotas within quotas

Another provision to ensure that there is equitable representation of women in all sections of the society is that, among seats reserved for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, one-third of the candidates nominated by recognised political parties, shall be women. This could tackle the problem of quota within quotas, wherein those who are concerned about Backward class representation need not settle merely for one-third reservation for BC women within the 33 percent women's quota. Parties will be able to nominate women from BCs, minorities, and other communities for elective office in areas where there is an electoral advantage to them.

Women-better performers

Next, there is a perception that if women are given an opportunity to represent a party in elections, they tend to perform badly. Due to this, the party leaders prefer giving the

party ticket to men over women. However, this perception is false and misplaced.

In India, though the number of women elected in Lok Sabha has not been very impressive, their success rate, i.e. the percentage of contestants getting elected, has always been higher than male aspirants (as shown below).

Percentage of success rate in general elections:

	2009	2014
Male	6.44	6.41
Female	10.61	15.42
Source: General Elections 2014, Handbook		

Therefore, it is evident that women tend to perform well in elections if given an opportunity to stand for elections.

Political will to make a change

The percentage of women candidates out of the total candidates fielded by each political party is an indicator of the will of the political party to ensure the

representation of women in their parties. Below is a table indicating the same for the preceding two general elections:

Women candidates by various Political Parties					
Year	BJP	INC	SP	BSP	JD(U)
2009 (% of women candidates)	9.7	10.1	7.7	5.6	5.45
2014 (% of women candidates)	8.8	12.9	37	5.3	13
BJP- Bharatiya Janata Party INC- Indian National Congress SP- Samajwadi Party BSP- Bahujan Samaj Party JD(U)- Janata Dal (United)					

Since the UPA government had included '1/3rd reservation for women in Parliament' in their 'National Common Minimum Programme' for the 2004 general elections, the expectation from the coalition party would have been to increase the number of women candidates proportional to the percentage of reservation demanded (33%).

However, as can be seen from the table, a meagre 10% (in 2009) of

the candidates were women. It is thus evident that political parties do not practice what they preach in their manifestos.

Conclusion

The intent of political representation is to give a voice to all sections of society in the democratic narrative of a nation, hence such a representation is the inherent right of every section of

the society. But to attain this, it is imperative to take the right approach of ensuring such a representation by providing the electorate with a choice. Just the mere act of reserving seats of certain constituencies, does more harm than good, wherein it uproots political leadership and will force the electorate from the reserved constituency to choose a woman parliamentarian. ▪