

## WOMEN IN POWER WITH REFERENCE TO THE BEIJING PLATFORM FOR ACTION: ACHIEVEMENTS AND CHALLENGES SINCE 1995 IN INDIA

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**Abstract:** In any political system, right from the developed to the developing countries, presence of women is very low compared to men. The omission of women from positions of power seriously affects the ability to challenge the subordination of women in all its manifestation. Political participation means not only exercising the right to vote, but also power-sharing, co-decision making, co-policy making at all levels of the governance of the state. Political participation of women apart from casting votes essentially means to include them in influencing the decision-making process and allowing them to hold positions of power at the Parliamentary level in order to make key policy decisions for the country. With this understanding of political participation, the evidence shows that India has a long way to go in terms of female representation in the Parliament. Women constitute 10.6% of members of Parliament in India presently, while globally this number is double at 20.4%. The present paper tries to analyse why India has failed to overcome the challenges in female representation in the Parliament of India. It also tries to briefly analyse how well have the special initiatives for women adopted by the Government been successful in its operation. Finally, it briefly enumerates the measures which can ensure the successful implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action in terms of ensuring the adequate female representation in the Indian Parliament.

In 1990, the United Nation's Economic and Social Council endorsed the implementation of measures to reach a target of 30% women in national legislatures by 1995. Nearly 20 years later, women occupy only 18% of parliamentary seats around the world, and at the current rate of progress it has been estimated that gender parity in parliaments will not be achieved until the turn of the twenty-second century. More countries are therefore deciding to implement a "fast track" route to tackling structural discrimination and increasing female participation. During the last 15 years, nearly 50 countries have introduced legal quotas for women, which guarantee a minimum representation of women in their highest decision making bodies. Percentage of women representatives in Parliament: Nordic countries-41.4%, Americas-21.8%, Europe (excluding Nordic countries)-19.1%, Asia-17.4%, Sub-Saharan Africa-17.2%, Pacific-13.4% and Arab states-9.6%.

Less than one-in-five parliamentarians in the world today are women. It is a worrying statistic at this point of human development and a sustained political will is required to change this present scenario in terms of gender gap in the governance of the developed and developing countries. In India there is a huge gap between men and women in politics and low level of women's representation in Parliament because of social norms and deeply entrenched patriarchal mindsets and lack of safe political environment which acts as a hindrance for their political participation. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), the worldwide average of female representatives in national parliaments is 19.3 percent, which places India at the lower end of the scale. India is ranked 92 worldwide when it comes to participation of women in politics in recent time. The

country's rank puts it far behind its neighbor, Pakistan, in the rankings developed by the IPU.

**Constitutional and Governmental Provisions for Women:** For about 190 years (1757-1947) India had been under the colonial rule. It is only after several years of freedom movement under different leaders that the nation achieved its independence on the 15<sup>th</sup> day of August, 1947. On the 26<sup>th</sup> day of January, 1950 the Constitution of India has come into force and more than six decades have passed since then. The Constitution in its Preamble resolved to secure to all its citizens: Liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship, equality of status, opportunity, and to promote among them all and fraternity assuring the dignity of the individual and integrity of the Nation. Article 14 of the Constitution affirms that 'the state shall not deny to any person equality before the law or the equal protection of the laws within the territory of India. Article 15 prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth. Article 16 provides equality of opportunities in matters of public employment. All these provisions constitute the fundamental right of a citizen and it empowers them to approach the court when these rights are denied to them. Gandhiji during his life time supported participation of women in politics. They were also welcomed to join the resistance movement against the British rule. However, their political participation was encouraged only in so far as they supported the traditional gender hierarchy. As long as they did not sacrifice their traditional duties such as wives, daughter and sister their participation in the political life was not restricted. But as soon as they cross their limit their activism was discouraged. The true fact is that the de jure equality granted by the Indian Constitution had not

been translated into reality and large masses of women had remained unaffected by the rights granted to them.

According to studies, women enjoyed equal status and rights during the early Vedic period. However, in approximately 500 B.C., the status of women began to decline with the Smritis, and with the Islamic invasion of Babur and the Mughal Empire and Christianity later curtailing women's freedom and rights. In addition to the above mentioned articles which make efforts to treat women equally with men, the Indian Constitution allows special provisions to be made by the State in favor of women and children (Article 15 (3)), renounces practices derogatory to the dignity of women (Article 51 (A) (e)), and also allows for provisions to be made by the State for securing just and humane conditions of work and for maternity relief (Article 42).

The Government of India declared 2001 as the Year of Women's Empowerment. The National Policy for the Empowerment of Women came was passed in 2001. In 2010 March 9, one day after International Women's day, Rajya Sabha passed the Women's Reservation Bill requiring that 33% of seats in India's Parliament and State Legislative bodies be reserved for women. Through the Panchayat Raj institutions, over a million women have actively entered political life in India. As per the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment Acts, all local elected bodies reserve one-third of their seats for women. Also some states have reserved 50% seats for women.

**Women's Movement and the Issue of Women Representation in India:** As quoted by B.R. Ambedkar, 'I measure the progress of a community by the degree of progress which women have achieved'. The demand for greater representation of women in political institutions in India was not taken up in a systematic way until the setting up of the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) which published its report in 1976. Before this the focus of the growing women's movement had been on improving women's socio-economic position. The CSWI report suggested that women's representation in political institutions, especially at the grass-roots level, is needed to be increased through a policy of reservation of seats for women.

Taking measures to enhance the status and visibility of women is critical for sustainable progress against the range of human development indicators, both because women are particularly vulnerable to social and economic marginalization when resources are scarce, and because women are critical agents in the development processes. According to various international reports, development in India is being severely hampered by the breadth of the gender gap and limited female participation in traditionally male dominated institutions and social strata. Another

major area of concern is that India has the largest number of maternal deaths in the world and shocking rates of female malnutrition, and a woman in India has the lesser chance of survival than in all but 2 of 128 countries. The oft-discussed imbalance in the sex ratio can be attributed- not only to female infanticide, as is often assumed-but to sustained neglect from infancy of female health, nutrition and well being. A girl child is up to 3 times more likely to be malnourished than her brother (UN), and is also significantly more likely to drop out of school before completing a full eight years of education. As well as passive neglect, violence against women and girl children is on the rise: the number of rapes per day has increased by nearly 700 per cent since 1971, and thousands of dowry deaths occur each year (National Crime Records Bureau).

There are countless studies to demonstrate the effectiveness of women's empowerment as a tool for development. For example, Kerala and Manipur have experienced rapid progress in improving health and reducing mortality and fertility rates- the benefits of which affect men as well as women- and in these states women also play a vital social and economic role. This correlation should not be surprising, given that nutrition and child health generally fall within the remit of the women's household decisions. Ultimately, healthy, educated and empowered women are more likely to raise healthy, educated and confident children and engage positively with the life of the community (UNICEF).

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.

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 as it was clearly mentioned in the National Policy for the Empowerment of Women, 2001.

**Lawful Representation:** The Constitution of India is a progressive document that guarantees equal rights for both sexes, and entitles women to enjoy economic, social, cultural and political rights on an equal footing with men (Article 325). It proceeds to consider the appropriate use of legislation to redress inequality and prevent the further infringement of women's fundamental democratic freedoms and

human rights. Under Article 15(3), the State is thereby empowered to make “special provisions”, legislative or otherwise, to secure women’s socio-political advancement. Indian case law has already interpreted the Equal Protection provisions to allow for affirmative action for women. In addition, India is a signatory to a number of international agreements that support proactive state measures for women’s political development namely –

1. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was ratified by India in 1993. Article 3 discusses appropriate measures, including legislation, to ensure the full advancement of women. Beyond this, Article 7 affirms that signatories should take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the political and public life of the country. It recognizes that, unless countries take active steps to promote this integration, women will never be able to fully enjoy the basic human rights guaranteed in international law.

2. The Inter Parliamentary Union (IPU) Universal Declaration on Democracy (1997) asserted that “the achievement of genuine democracy presupposes a genuine partnership between men and women in the conduct of the affairs of society in which they work in equality and complementarily, drawing mutual enrichment from their differences.”

3. The Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA), 1995 affirmed that women’s persistent exclusion from decision making was substantially hampering the achievement of democratic transformation, women’s empowerment and achieving the goals of sustainable development. The BPFA therefore endorses affirmative action for women in the political spheres. Under the Constitution and other national and international commitments, the State is thereby under an obligation to protect and promote the human rights of women, including the right to political equality, without any discrimination on the basis of sex.

**Women in Indian Parliament:** There are only about 10 most popular women leaders today as examples to 600 million women in India at the national level. Majority of these are there because of their father, husband or another relative. So women are considered marginalized section in India. India’s first Parliament had roughly 4.4 percent women in the lower house. Despite 16 General elections, the number in India is much lower. Even 66 years after India’s independence from British colonialist, India the world’s largest democracy ranks 105<sup>th</sup> in the world for women representation in politics, with only 61 women lawmakers in the 544 member Lok Sabha ( as on September 09, 2013) and 28 women MP’s out of a total of 243 ( as on September 09, 2013) members in

Rajya Sabha. India lags behind other nations, including Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal, in terms of women’s political participation, data released by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) shows. Female representation in the Indian Parliament ranks 105<sup>th</sup> in the world in comparison, China ranks 60<sup>th</sup> in the world and Bangladesh took the 65<sup>th</sup> spot. Nepal came in 20<sup>th</sup> and Pakistan 52<sup>nd</sup> of India’s neighboring nations, only Sri-Lanka and Myanmar rank lower on the list, at 129<sup>th</sup> and 134<sup>th</sup> respectively. India has much to celebrate with over one million elected women representatives in local self-governments, but the number of women in Parliament is lower than the global average.

As per 2009 Lok Sabha and 2010 Rajya Sabha election, India represents only 10.8 and 10.3 per cent ( respectively) women legislatures in the Parliament. The table 1 below indicates the declining scenario of women representation in the Rajya Sabha whereas a slight increasing is noticed in the Lok Sabha. In 1991, the number of women Parliamentarian in Rajya Sabha was 38 out of 245 seats. It is 15.51 percent of total number and was the highest representation in the history of Indian Parliament. In 2004, it was 11.4 per cent. But it reduced to 10.3 per cent in 2010. Table also indicates a very slow growth of women Parliamentarian in Lok Sabha. Starting from 3.49 percent of women representation (1977) the House never crossed the limit of 10.8 percent. This is a matter of great concern for a nation like India with the record of being largest existing democracy. Even after having provisions concerning equality of opportunities irrespective of gender or sex in the Constitution and various laws, the nation is lagging behind.

According to a recent paper by Carole Spary, a professor at the UK- based University of York, political parties in India tend to see women as less likely to win elections than men, and therefore prefer not to take risks with seats they could conceivably win. According to data available for 2014 from the Geneva-based Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), Pakistan has 67 women in a house of 323 (20.7%), Bangladesh has 67 members out of a total of 347 (19.3%), while Nepal has a total of 172 women in a house of 575 (29.9%). The Rajya Sabha does not fare much better, with 27 women members comprising 11.5 percent of the total membership in 2013, far below the world average of 19.6 percent. Analyst say women’s representation in Parliament is imperative not only on the grounds of social justice and legitimacy of the political system, but also because a higher number of women in public office, articulating interests and seen to be wielding power, will strike at the roots of gender hierarchy in public life.

**Table 1:** Year wise membership of women in the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha

Year	Total members ( Lok Sabha)	Female	Percent	Total members ( Rajya Sabha )	Female	Percent
1952	499	22	4.41	219	16	7.31
1957	500	27	5.40	237	18	7.59
1962	503	34	6.76	238	18	7.56
1967	523	31	5.93	240	20	8.33
1971	521	22	4.22	243	17	7.00
1977	544	19	3.49	244	25	10.25
1980	544	28	5.15	244	24	9.84
1984	544	44	8.09	244	28	11.48
1989	517	27	5.22	245	24	9.80
1991	554	39	7.17	245	38	15.51
1996	543	39	7.18	223	19	8.52
1998	543	43	7.92	245	15	6.12
1999	543	49	9.0	245	19	7.8
2004	539	44	8.2	245	28	11.4
2009	543	59	10.8	242	25	10.3( 2010)

Source: The Indian Election Commission Report, 2009

A recent report by Oxfam International found that female-led Panchayat's perform better in the long run than male-led Panchayats on an index of eight services- drinking water, toilets, gutters, schools, ration shops, self-help groups, implementation of welfare schemes and reducing male alcoholism. In the medium-term, states the study, the introduction of the Women's Reservation Bill at the local level also leads to a significant increase in the reporting of crimes.

A 2012 working paper released by India's premier research institution, the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER), found that higher political representation among women could also empower women to spend fewer hours on household chores, assert their reproductive choices and control their own resources. Other experts, like Lakhshmi Iyer, an associate professor at the Harvard Business School, say that electing more women to political office leads to improvements in women's education and reductions in infant mortality, among other issues.

The fact that women make up nearly 25 percent of the newly sworn-in cabinet augurs well for the women's movement. This is the first time India has had seven women ministers, with six of them landing on heavy weighted cabinet posts. The recent development is sparking hopes that the country will take bigger steps towards correcting its gender imbalance in politics.

**Women's Reservation Bill:** The Women's Reservation Bill, or the Constitution 108<sup>th</sup> Amendment Bill, proposes 33% reservation for women in the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies for 15 years. The Bill was introduced in the Parliament in 1996, and subsequently in 1999, 2003, 2005, 2008 and 2010. It was finally passed by the Rajya Sabha in 2010,

but is still in the Lok Sabha. The introduction of the Bill will increase women's participation and lead to women's empowerment. However, the Bill has still not been passed. Opposition to the Bill includes fears of marginalization of men by elitist women and of socially and economically backward classes.

**Women Voters:** Registered women voters in India have increased from 45% in the 1951 elections to 47.6% in the 2014 elections, that is, by a pitiful 2.7%. The general trend has been an increase in the total number of voters each year, but the percentage of men and women voting has remained almost constant, with men forming more than 52% of the electorate. This means that in 2014, in absolute numbers, there are 38,740, 183 more men than women in the electorate. This gap is only magnified if we look at the actual percentage of votes polled by women. The trend for all the past years shows that this is less than the percentage of registered women voters. In 2009, 47.7% registered women voters accounted for 45.8% of the total votes polled.

Moreover, the electoral data from 2014 shows that the percentage of new women voters in the 18-19 years age category is only 41.4%. Fifteen states and Union Territories fall below the national average in this age group, with Haryana having the lowest percentage at 28.8%. Only Nagaland has more female electors than male among the new electorate, at 50.4%.

**Role of Women Representatives:** It has been a difficult task for the scholars to explain the role of our representatives on the basis of gender. Many a time our traditional patriarchal values influence our judgment and mislead us. The issue of gender only becomes an issue for the woman politician; failure for the male politician is rarely attributed to gender. The male leadership behavior is not interpreted the same as female leadership behavior, in part due to the

institutionalization of hegemonic masculine behavior as the behavioral norm.

However, it is also true that female leader's style of governance in India is not softer, less autocratic or more equal than that of male leaders nor is necessarily more democratic or less confrontational than that of male leaders. Further, it seems that there is little difference between men's and women's style of political activities. It appears that the increasing number of women politicians may also make only a little difference to the political culture of the nation. Many a time the decisions of the women leaders are influenced by their patriarchal society. Due to their dominance in the family male members frequently influences the decisions of the women leaders. The spirit of the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional amendment is further challenged by the fact that most of the time only those women are elected who are either backed by their male counterparts or by their husbands. This is where we need to look into.

However, the role played by the woman leaders like Sonia Gandhi (President, INC), Pratibha Singh Patel (former President of India), Uma Bharti, Mamata Banerjee and Meira Kumar cannot be ignored. The roles played by these politicians are commendable and they are presently working in the national as well as state politics, influences the decision making process of the Parliament.

**Policy Recommendations for Change in the Status of Women in India:** In order to change the status of women in politics some changes are important. Some of them may be as follows –

1. Changing the legal framework- Special laws can be enacted in order to protect their interests (the social, economic and also political) in the line of 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment.
2. Effective implementation – To receive a fruitful result of those provisions and laws an effective implementation is of great importance. For that both men as well as women are needed to be aware of their rights. To this end awareness

campaign may be organized by various government and non-governmental organizations.

3. A Strong Political Will: A strong political will is required in order to make or unmake any law concerning the development of the women. India, since its independence has shown only her weak political will. This is evident from the repeated failure of women reservation bill in Indian Parliament.
4. Agendas of Women Representation and Development- Keeping in mind the poor women representation by various political parties both at regional and national level, it is desirable that political parties in India come with agendas of women development, inclusion and their equal representation.

**Conclusion:** To conclude, it may be stated that the representation of women in decision making bodies, which is very important for the success of Indian democracy is not up to the mark. Hence, a sound legal framework and strong political will may lead a long way in proportionate representation of women and ultimately to the success of Indian democracy. But it is meaningless to bring any changes in the existing system unless and until women in India are educated and made aware of their legitimate rights. There are certain policy recommendations that have been suggested to rectify the situation in India and if these recommendations are followed then women would be more successful in subverting the boundaries of gender and in operating in a very aggressive male-dominated sphere. We need to give up the social norms and deeply entrenched patriarchal mindsets which are backing women from entering politics. More diverse participation in politics is not only good for women but is key for society and a strong democracy. Institutions and programs are needed but men leaders have to give a chance to women and put them on top it will take much longer to have up stream flow of women leaders from grassroots to the top.

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