

Why India need a critical mass of women in assemblies and parliament? : Empirical study findings from Kerala, India

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Abstract

21st century calls for active participation and agency of women in every sphere of life. Globally women are underrepresented in the sphere of politics, and their percentage in national parliaments is abysmally low. Reservation for women in Local Self Government Institutions in India has given women an opportunity to prove their excellence. But passing the Women Reservation Bill for 33% reservation in assemblies and parliament of India is still pending for the last two decades. An empirical study was conducted on 56 women politicians from the Wayanad district of Kerala. The study pointed out the lack of adequate support from the family and the political parties to be the most significant reasons for the lack of women in active politics. The discrimination they face from the political party during elections was exposed, and the women demanded the immediate passing of the Reservation Bill. At a time when the reshaping of India with gender-responsive policies is to be done in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, there is a critical need for a critical mass of women parliamentarians in the largest democracy of the world.

KEYWORDS: Women Parliamentarians, Women Reservation Bill, Panchayati Raj System, LSGI, Women in Politics

1. INTRODUCTION

It is widely accepted that full participation of both men and women is critical for ensuring sustainable development. Therefore, scholars agree that without the equal inclusion and agency of women in development, women would not be able to benefit or contribute to the development of the country. The changing political discourses have contributed to the recognition that women must play a greater role in political affairs. Even after 25 years of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, which set the international target for reaching gender balance in political decision-making, women are underrepresented across all levels of power.

Globally, women are underrepresented in politics, and their percentage in national parliaments is only 25.5 % (UN Women, 2021). The 'Women in politics: 2021' map, created by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and UN Women, presents global rankings for women in executive, government, and parliamentary positions as of 1 January 2020. It shows all-time highs for the number of countries with women Heads of State and/or Heads of Government and the global share of women ministers, parliamentary speakers, and parliamentarians (IPU, 2021). Women constitute half of the population of every country in the world. In more than 193 countries of

the world, a woman is the head of government in only 13. Women are 15% of ambassadors to the United Nations and 17% of the world's cabinet ministers. But women's participation in politics has increased dramatically over the past 100 years. In 1890, women did not have the right to vote anywhere in the world.

The trend in women's access to parliaments over the past decades has been one of gradual but steady processes. In 1975, at the time of the First world conference on women held in Mexico City, women accounted for 11% of MPs worldwide. In 2021, more than four decades later, women's share of parliamentary seats has more than doubled, at just around 25.5%. There is a need for involving women in significant roles in the affairs of the state by participating in decision making and contributing to solving the problems of national development. At present, 75% of countries have at least 10% women in their national legislatures. Several countries are led by females. Some countries, such as Finland, which in 1907 became the first country to elect a female member to its parliament, also have a cabinet dominated by women. Currently, women make up over 50% of the national legislature in four countries. The first country to reach 10% women in its national legislature was the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1946. There are also significant variations in women's political representation across countries. In some countries such as Sweden, Argentina, Rwanda and UAE, women have made remarkable progress in their political representation, while in some populations, religions and governments remain openly hostile to the notion of women in politics.

Does women's leadership make any difference?

Several studies around the globe highlight the need and advantage of more women in political leadership. As per the latest development indicators like GEM, the level of women's political participation, their representation and share in decision making bodies are important determinants of the status of women in any society. Higher the level of participation, more are the possibilities of initiation and implementation of policies in favour of women, thus further raising their status and contributing to gender equality. Women in leadership positions can change the aspirations of girls through two main channels: first, by undertaking policies that make it easier for women to succeed, thus changing beliefs on what is possible for girls, and second by providing a role model of a successful woman. According to decades of data from around the world, women govern differently than men in some important ways. They tend to be more collaborative and focus more on policies meant to support women, children, and social welfare, addressing education, health, and poverty (Miller, 2016). In a US-based study by Anzia and Berry (2011), the authors argue that the women elected to office perform better on average than their male counterparts and sponsor and co-sponsor more bills than men do bring 9% more federal money to their districts. Researchers from the US also report women to be significantly more likely than men to sponsor bills in areas like civil rights, health and education. Men were more likely to sponsor bills in agriculture, energy and macroeconomics.

Moreland and Watson (2016), through an analysis of capital punishment laws in 125 countries, establish that women are less likely to vote for war or the death penalty and that women's representation in legislatures is significantly correlated with the abolition of capital punishment. Koch and Fulton (2011), after examining the defence spending and conflict behaviour of 22 established democracies between 1970 and 2000, arguing that increases in women's legislative representation decrease conflict behaviour and defence spending. Based on their India based study, Beaman et al. (2012) report that female leadership influences adolescent girls' career aspirations

and educational attainment. The gender gap in adolescent educational attainment is erased, and girls spent less time on household chores. In their study in West Bengal, the authors found no evidence of changes in young women's labour market opportunities, suggesting that the impact of women leaders primarily reflects a role model effect. Murrell (2018) believes that women in leadership will also serve as a catalyst for younger generations of diverse individuals to consider, seek, and succeed in attaining leadership roles in the future. The complete transformation of gender equity in leadership occurs when the numbers change and diversity and inclusion at the top of the organisational ladder are treated as a top priority in business, higher education, and governance.

'Why should we care about the lack of women in politics' is a commonly asked question. First, politics is an important arena for decision making. Individuals who hold official positions in government get to decide resource allocation to various aspects of development. Politicians make decisions that may help some people at the expense of others. Decisions by politicians even affect people's individual choices by encouraging some behaviours and outlawing others. Second, political power is a valuable good. Politicians hold power over other social institutions, such as the family or education, and are able to codify particular practices into law. Politicians have the power to enforce their decisions, at times with force. Third, to hold a political position is to maintain a position of authority. Looking at the makeup of political figures in a country highlights who is legitimated to make society-wide decisions in that country. However, feminist political theorists have argued that the appearance of neutrality towards gender or equality between men and women in government actually hides a substantial inequality. Gender neutral language is often used in principle but in practice, only men appear in politics, whereby women are not equal but rather invisible.

Women's political participation in India

The term political participation has a broad meaning. It is related to right to vote and simultaneously relates to participation in the decision-making process, political activism, political consciousness, etc. Women in India participate in voting, run for public offices and participate in the marches and meetings of political parties at local levels more than men. The Constitution of India attempts to remove gender inequalities by banning discrimination based on sex and class, prohibiting human trafficking and forced labour, and reserving elected positions for women in the Local Self Government Institutions, otherwise termed the Panchayati Raj system. The landmark 73rd and 74th amendments to the Constitution of India have empowered women in terms of numbers from the minuscule figure of 2-4 percent to 33-40 percent in most of the Indian states, which brought large masses of rural women to the sphere of decision making process (Singla, 2007). The women have been politically empowered to have a space in local government/governance activities. Still, casteism, patriarchy, exclusive practices and belittling by the so-called political big brothers affect the autonomy of the female functionaries in the Indian Panchayati Raj Institutions.

When it comes to the more powerful elected positions in Assemblies and Parliament, the reservation faces stiff resistance. Those who stand for women's equal participation in decision making argue that more women in parliament mean better, stronger and more representative democracies that work for all the people. Despite being the largest democracy in the world, the number of women in the Indian parliament has consistently remained low. The newly elected 17th Lok Sabha (May 2019) has the highest number of women (78 out of 545) MPs in the history of the Indian Republic, still women hold a mere 14% of seats only. While it is very convenient to celebrate the symbolic value of electing the world's first woman prime minister or electing a

woman as speaker of Lok Sabha, it is more crucial to address the gross under-representation of women in parliament and within its different bodies and structures.

The Women Reservation Bill in India [The Constitution (108th Amendment) Bill]

The Committee on the Status of Women in India prepared its report titled 'Towards Equality' in 1974. This report stated that even after 27 years of independence, women were performing the traditional roles and were also categorised under illiteracy, poor health, marginalised, unemployed, subjects of violence, and had no role to play in the decision-making process in any sphere of life. After 45 years of the report, the condition of women in India has not changed much except with regard to advancements in education. In the sphere of Politics, they are confined to the women's wing of political parties. No steps are being taken to ensure their representation in the legislature. Every man who advocates for women's freedom in the public domain is silent about equality when the opportunity arises. The best example of this is the reservation bill, which is still in limbo. Patriarchal norms and financial instability are prominent issues facing any woman seeking political entry. Studies reveal that the reservation bill is an excellent remedy for such things.

The Women Reservation Bill that proposes to reserve 33% seats in the national and state legislatures for women has been tabled several times in the Indian Parliament since May 2008. There have been national debates on the merits and demerits of reserving seats for women in the central and state legislative assemblies.

Highlights of the Bill

As per the Ministry of Law and Justice (2008), the highlights of the women reservation bill are the following:

- The Constitution (108th Amendment) Bill, 2008 seeks to reserve one-third of all seats for women in the Lok Sabha and the state legislative assemblies.
- One-third of the total number of seats reserved for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes shall be reserved for women of those groups in the Lok Sabha and the legislative assemblies.
- Reserved seats may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in the state or union territory.
- Reservation of seats for women shall cease to exist 15 years after the commencement of the Amendment Act.

There are divergent views on the reservation policy. Proponents stress the necessity of affirmative action to improve the condition of women. Some recent studies on panchayats have shown the positive effect of reservation on women's empowerment and allocation of resources. Opponents argue that it would perpetuate the unequal status of women since they would not be perceived to be competing on merit. They also contend that this policy diverts attention from the larger issues of electoral reforms such as the criminalisation of politics and inner-party democracy. Reservation of seats in parliament restricts choice of voters to women candidates. Therefore, some experts have suggested alternate methods such as reservation in political parties and dual member constituencies. Rotation of reserved constituencies in every election may reduce the incentive for an MP to work for his/her constituency as he/she may be ineligible to seek re-election from that constituency. The report examining the 1996 Women's Reservation Bill recommended that reservation be provided for women of Other Backward Classes (OBCs) once the

Constitution was amended to allow for reservation for OBCs. It also recommended that reservation be extended to the Rajya Sabha and the Legislative Councils. Neither of these recommendations has been incorporated into the Bill.

Women in Recent Kerala LSGI Election

In Kerala, in the recent LSGI (Local Self Government Institutions) election in December, there has been a good increase in the number of female candidates compared to the previous years. Out of the fourteen district panchayats, eight are governed by women. Out of the six municipal corporations in Kerala, 3 are led by women. At present Kerala has become a model of women empowerment by representing ten women MLAs in the legislative assembly and three of them being ministers. According to Mandal (2003), the participation of women in Panchayat processes has allowed them to emerge as effective leaders and act as catalytic agents by infusing confidence, assertiveness and providing stimulus for social change among other women. The present study was conceived in this context to analyse the perceptions of women political leaders regarding the current status of women's membership in Assemblies and Parliament, the reasons for the lesser number and the need for increasing women's participation in the higher echelons of political leadership.

II. DATA AND METHODS

The present study was descriptive in nature and done with an analytical approach. The sample consisted of 56 local women political leaders, 14 each from the four major political parties in Kerala, India. The study was undertaken in the Wayanad district. In the recent LSGI election, among the total 413 men and women candidates, 224 women candidates were elected to 23 panchayats in the Wayanad district. The sample for the study was selected using a convenient sampling method. Those women who are either LSGI members at present or previously and are involved in active politics alone were included in the study as they have overcome the structurally imposed inhibitions and will be in a better position to analyse the reasons for the lesser number of women in the state assemblies and parliaments and the need for having a critical mass of women in political leadership.

Women leaders being actively engaged in politics, it was difficult to meet and get the women leaders for the interview, especially during the lockdown periods. Even after getting appointments, interviews with some of them had to be cancelled at the last minute owing to their unexpected assignments and meetings. The data was collected using unstructured interviews, and to make the work more scientific, an interview guide was prepared based on the dimensions such as perceptions on present status, reasons for lesser number and the need for a critical mass of women in assemblies and parliament. A few of the sample were met at their residences and offices, while others were interviewed over the phone. All women members offered their co-operation with the interview. The major benefit of the survey was that 95% of the sample shared their experiences as a woman rather than as a member of a particular political party.

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The major findings of the study are given below:

A. Perceptions on the current status of women in assemblies and parliament

The data on the perceptions of the local political leaders belonging to the four major political parties in Kerala was analysed. 73% out of the total sample opined that on the political front, women are always neglected that they do not get expected support for political leadership. All the women in the sample argued that 33% reservation is necessary and should be raised to a higher

level of 50%. In addition, majority opined that in politics, women never lag behind themselves even though there are problems like character assassination and so on. The results are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Perceptions of women politicians on the current status of women's membership

Sl.No.	Criteria of Current Status	Agreeableness %
1	Women lack adequate membership at present	96
2	Women are being ignored in political leadership	73
3	Political parties support the leadership of women in politics	25
4	33% reservation for women is necessary	100

Source: Primary data

B. Reasons for lesser number of women in political leadership

The reasons given by the sample of women political leaders for the lesser number of women in political leadership is summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. Reasons for lesser number of women in political leadership

Sl.No.	Reasons	% of Responses
1	Lack of family support	71
2	Men are not ready to share leadership with women	57
3	Lack of economic independence	53
4	Ignorance of women about political affairs	37
5	Family responsibilities	42
6	Health issues of women	30
7	Fear of character assassination	8

Source: Primary data

The majority of women leaders pointed out the lack of adequate support from the family as the major reason for the lesser number of women in political leadership. Women in countries like that of India are conditioned to give more importance to the better functioning of their family as they have internalised the patriarchal notion that the primary space of women is within the family. The gender division of labour that entrusts the family chores as the responsibility of women adds to the

guilty feelings of women in Indian society if they fail to fulfil all assigned domestic roles. It is also to be noted that family members often are not willing to share equal responsibility in household activities. Rushing to panchayat after finishing household chores is a common incident for women political leaders.

Almost 50% of the sample from all political parties agreed that men are reluctant to share their state of captaincy with women. There were several instances women quit their party affiliations for not getting a seat to contest during the assembly elections in Kerala in April 2021.

It was also shared by 53% of the women politicians that economic freedom in the family stands as a major challenge to women's political leadership which necessitates women to find a better source of income. The viewpoints of 37% of political leaders that women are ignorant of the political happenings are to be specifically noted. A few of the participants responded that character assassination is a challenge in this regard. According to them, health issues can be a problem to a small extent, but they could be easily resolved. 'I am a kidney donor, but that doesn't deter any of my activities, it depends upon the sincerity'-says a Panchayat President. Only one woman opined that political leadership is not a woman's cup of tea.

C. Perceptions on the need for increasing women's political leadership

Out of the 56 participants, 85% insist upon the fact that women representatives are inevitable to understand and represent the issues of women. They added that reservation and the higher number of women in LSGIs have played a great role in transforming the lives of women at the local levels in a better way. More than 80% shared the view that women from all castes/classes could come forward with the help of reservation in LSGI. All women leaders remarked that the leadership experience in LSGIs had enhanced women's decision-making power. The perceptions regarding the need for increasing women's political leadership were analysed, and the findings are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Need for critical mass of women in parliament

Sl.No	Perceptions of women politicians	% of Responses
1	Women are required to represent women's issues.	85
2	Positive changes could be effected as in LSGI with improved decision making power of women	100
3	Women from all castes/classes could come into leaders	83
4	Least corruption with more women in governance	67

Source: Primary data

DISCUSSION

The majority of the sample were trying to glorify their own political party in the public sphere. There were a few participants in the study who support, yet the majority oppose male captaincy. Women leaders claim that 33% reservation is necessary and should be raised to higher levels of 50%. In addition, the majority opined that in Politics, women never lag behind even though there are problems like character assassination and reluctance of male colleagues to share leadership positions. Perhaps their successful experiences in the LSGIs might have added to their confidence

and motivated them to aspire for higher positions. Women representatives from almost all parties point out that lack of adequate support from the family, the political parties and burden of family responsibilities as the most significant reasons for the lack of critical mass of women in active politics. It is evident that women lag in political leadership due to the societal interference in their lives. Economic freedom in the family stands as a major challenge for women that necessitates women to find a better source of income. Unlike men political leaders, women have no control or command over the family income or resources.

Women political leaders were found to substantiate the need for more women representatives in Assemblies and Parliament who according to them will be in a better position to understand the needs, interests and issues of women and thereby transform their lives in a better way.

All women in the sample representing four different political parties unanimously declared that in reality no party agenda fully favours women's leadership, especially in state assemblies and the Indian parliament. Yet they all were optimistic of getting the 33% reservation Bill passed in the parliament at the earliest. Hence, it seems logical that more is the representation of women in the parliament, higher will be their acceptance by the society, in the same light as people look at the men who have maintained their monopoly over Indian politics.

Lots of apprehensions are raised against the reservation policies of the government in all the above categories. Here comes the testimony of how the women of the country proved their efficiency when 33% and later 50% reservation was guaranteed to women in LSGI. Unless and until opportunities are ensured through reservation, the women power will not get an exposure in the highly patriarchal society of India. On one side, the helplessness and powerlessness is so deeply instilled in girls and women that they lack the confidence and initiative to come up to the top levels of leadership and decision making. Along with this the glass ceiling existing in our institutions and the push and pull by the male chauvinists curtail the space for women with few exceptions where women have god fathers to support them. Definitely there are very few women who are destined to adore the higher echelons by virtue of their exceptional talents and hardwork. Citing the case of this minority and opposing/limiting the reservation policies can take us nowhere near gender equality. Reservation should not be viewed as a cure for the weakness of women but it must be taken as the rightful compensation due to women for the centuries of discrimination faced by them. Those who believe in gender equity as the means to gender equality and sustainable development will always argue for the reservation and positive discrimination in favour of women.

IV. CONCLUSION

The findings of the study reveal that majority of women political leaders oppose male captancy and demand not 33% but 50% reservation for women as essential in State assemblies and parliament. The reservation bill is expected to bring the number of women to a critical level that will allow them to make a real difference in political decisions. In fact, it is the first step the government can logically take to make women come forward and unleash their creative power. The words of Hillary Clinton after losing the elections to Barack Obama in 2008, 'Although we weren't able to shatter that highest, hardest glass ceiling this time, thanks to you, it's got about 18 million cracks in it' (Keanally, 2016) points to the kind of glass ceiling that exists in the field of Politics. Reservation for women in political leadership, especially in national parliaments is essentially the most potent dimension of gender mainstreaming to attain the targets of women empowerment and sustainable development (George & Kuruvilla, 2020). Once women use their

power, the society and generations get empowered. Gender responsive policies are called forth in reshaping India from its gruelling pandemic experiences. A critical mass of women parliamentarians should be there at the helm of decision making to ensure recovery strategies to be done based on the principles of gender mainstreaming.

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