

# Women Empowerment - Political Sphere

The inclusion of all sections of the society in the public sphere is critically important for any democracy. India has a mixed track record when it comes to women's participation and representation in politics.

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### What are the political rights of women?

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• Women were given equal vote the day India became Independent, something that took the UK and the United States 100 and 144 years, respectively, to achieve.

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- India has also produced a number of powerful and consequential women politicians more than most democracies that have held, and still hold power, at the highest levels in state and national politics.
- The **73rd constitutional amendment ensures, by reserving seats for women in the panchayat system,** that at least a third of India's 3.2 million elected representatives are women (the 33% quota was raised to 50% in 2009).

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• Several states have since introduced gender parity in representation in municipal bodies.

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# Do these rights ensure gender parity?

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• The right to vote, in itself, is insufficient to guarantee gender parity in voting.

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• The EC survey revealed that **concern for personal security**, dependence on the approval of family elders, and lack of adequate toilet facilities were some of the reasons that kept many women away from voting.

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- During the first two decades after Independence, women's participation in elections lagged behind that of men's by nearly 20 points.
- In the recent years, women's participation has caught up with the average, to the point that in the last round of elections to state assemblies, women outvoted men in 17 states.

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#### What is the contribution of Election Commission?

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• The Election Commission (EC) has to be credited for a part of that success since it has improved the conduct of elections in ways that encourage women's participation.

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- The improvement of electoral rolls, provision of separate queues for women voters, and making the polling process secure after 1996 have gone a long way in making voting easier and safer for women.
- Since 2006, the EC has prohibited the publication of voters' photographs in the electoral rolls, barring a small stamp size photograph in the hard copy distributed to political parties.
- In Uttar Pradesh, during the 2012 elections, the EC decided to allow two women to proceed in the polling booth for every male voter who cast his vote. This was done to quicken the voting process for women.
- Voting conditions for women have also improved, notably by the compulsory presence of female polling staff members.
- Women police forces are also deployed with the view to encourage female voters.
- $\bullet$  The EC rolled out a comprehensive voter education drive to directly encourage women to vote.  $\ensuremath{\backslash} n$

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## What are the impacts?

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- There is gender parity in voter turnout in most states is remarkable.
- The fact that women outvote men in many states where their literacy rate is lower than the average must also be noted.
- In the 2014 general elections, women turnout rose from 55.82% to 65.63%, a jump of nearly ten percentage points.

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### Are Women adequately represented in elected assemblies?

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- $\bullet$  In spite of such progress, women's representation in elected assemblies remains  ${\bf abysmally\ low.}$   $\ensuremath{\backslash n}$
- In 1952, women comprised 6% of India's first Lok Sabha. Sixty two years later, the representation of women in the Lok Sabha in 2014 reached an all-time high of **12.15%**.

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- The situation is **worse at the state level,** where the average representation ratio of women is only 7.3%.
- Some states, Nagaland or Mizoram for example, have no women MLAs. The worst performers are Jammu and Kashmir (2.27%) Goa (2.5%) and Karnataka (2.65%).
- India's best performing state is Haryana (14.44%), followed by West Bengal (13.95%), Rajasthan (13.48%) and Bihar (11%).  $\$

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## What is the way ahead?

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- The greatest obstacle women face are the political parties, who refuse to field a fair number of women candidates.
- Their reservations like women make weaker, less winnable candidates could easily be addressed by passing the **Women's Reservation Bill**, which was introduced for the third time in 2008 and lapsed for the third time in 2014.

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• Changing prejudices and stereotypes in India will remain a herculean task for generations to come.

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 $\bullet$  The only way to address it in the short run is through a **bold legislation.**  $\ensuremath{^{\backslash n}}$ 

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**Source: The Indian Express** 

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