# POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN INDIA: An Experience and Expectation

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## POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN INDIA

The term 'political empowerment ' has a very wide meaning. It is not only related to 'Right to Vote', but simultaneously relates to participation in: decision making process, political activism, political consciousness, etc. It is commonly argued that supporting people to influence the policy-making process and participate in decision-making is critical to the development of policies that reflect the needs and interests of the poor. Promoting political participation is an important way of improving state accountability and responsiveness, and empowering the poor.

This can encompass a range of approaches, including strengthening democratic citizenship, promoting engagement between the state and civil society, promoting access to information, and strengthening citizens' associations. Decentralization, civil society activism, and the transparency of and access to information also play a key role in strengthening accountability. Women in India participate in voting, run for public offices and political parties at lower levels more than men. Political activism and voting are the strongest areas of women's political participation. To combat gender inequality in politics, the Indian Government has instituted reservations for seats in local governments.

The Government of India directed state and local governments to promote equality by class and gender including equal pay and free legal aid, humane working conditions and maternity relief, rights to work and education, and raising the standard of living. Women were substantially involved in the Indian independence movement in the early 20th century and advocated for independence from Britain. Independence brought gender equality in the form of constitutional rights, but historically women's political participation has remained low.

### Voting:

The movement for women's suffrage began in the early 1900s in response to a national movement for suffrage, even though vast majority of neither men nor women had a right to vote the British colonial rule before 1947. After Indian independence from Britain, the Indian Constitution in 1950 officially granted women and men suffrage. Prior to universal suffrage, provincial legislatures had granted women the right to vote.

Madras was the first to grant women's suffrage in 1921, but only to those men and women who owned land property according to British administration's records.  Other legislatures followed

shortly after, but like Madras, the political rights were granted by British Raj to select few, and the London appointed Governor of each province had the right to overrule and nullify any law enacted by the elected men and women. The rights granted in response to the movement towards suffrage were limited to qualifications of literacy and property ownership, including property ownership of husbands. This excluded vast majority of Indian women and men from voting, because they were poor. This changed in 1950 when universal suffrage was granted to all adult Indian citizens.

**Universal Suffrage** :

In 1950, universal suffrage granted voting rights to all women. This is enshrined in Article 326in our constitution. India is a parliamentary system with two houses: Lok Sabha (lower house) and Rajya Sabha (upper house). Rates of participation among women in 1962 were 46.63% for Lok Sabha elections and rose to a high in 1984 of 58.60%. Male turnout during that same period was 63.31% in 1962 and 68.18% in 1984.

The gap between men and women voters has narrowed over time with a difference of 16.7% in 1962 to 4.4% in 2009.

Voter turnout for national elections in the past 50 years has remained stagnant with turnout ranging between 50 and 60%. State elections have seen a growing trend in women's participation, and in some cases women's turnout is exceeding male turnout. Increased turnout of women was reported for the 2012 Vidhan Sabha elections (legislative/state assemblies) with states such as Uttar Pradesh reporting 58.82% to 60.29% turnout. In the 2013 assembly elections, women's overall turnout was reported to be 47.4%, and male turnout was 52.5%. Indian states of Arunachal Pradesh, Goa, Kerala, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Daman and Diu, and Puducherry all reported higher turnouts among women than men in 2013.

**Political participation:**

Increased participation is occurring in both rich and poor states in India. The sex ratio of voters has improved from 715 female voters for every 1,000 male voters in the 1960s to 883 female voters in the 2000s. The Election Commission of India (ECI) has sought to increase voter turnout by cleaning up electoral rolls and removing missing or deceased members. Voter outreach has included door-to-door voter registration, and in 2014 elections, voters will be issued a photo id with polling station information to increase voter turnout. Increased voter turnout in India is also partially due to the women voters. ECI has sought to encourage voter registration among women and participation through education and outreach on college and university campuses. Growing participation has also been attributed to increased security at polling stations.

**2014 elections:**

Women turnout during India's 2014 parliamentary general elections was 65.63%, compared to 67.09% turnout for men.  In 16 out of 29 states of India, more women voted than men. A total of 260.6 million women exercised their right to vote in April–May 2014 elections for India's parliament.

## Running for public office:

India has a federal form of government, with devolved powers. The electorate votes to elect a national parliament as well as state assemblies. In 2012, India had a minimal percentage of 10.9% women elected representatives in the national parliament, which is, but relatively higher than Hungary (8.8%), Brazil (9.6%), China (9.1%), and Malaysia (9.8%).

To remedy low participation of women electors, India in 1994 established quotas (reservations) in constitutional amendments (73rd and 74th) to reserve 33% of seats in local governments for women. The Women's Reservation Bill (108th amendment) has been introduced in the national parliament to reserve 33% of Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha seats for women. The bill has yet to be passed by Lok Sabha and signed into law. The discussion of women's reservations began in the 1920s and continued into the 1930s until a compromise was reached with Britain to allow women in urban areas to vote. Discussion of women's reservations were again introduced in 1974 by the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women in India, but India did not fully establish quotas in local government until 1994.  Local governing bodies in India are called Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) and one-third of seats and leadership positions must be reserved for women. States such as Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Kerala, Maharashtra, Orissa, Rajasthan, Tripura, and Uttarakhand have increased reservations to 50%. The national government has also proposed to raise the level of reservations in PRIs to 50%.

## Women Reservation in Political Bodies:

Seats reserved for women are rotated for assurance that each seat has an equal chance of being reserved. After the establishment of women's reservations, political participation went from 4-5% to 25-40% among women, and gave millions of women the opportunity to serve as leaders in local government. Odisha, an Indian state, established reservations prior to the 73rd amendment and they had 28,069 women elected in 1992 and 28,595 women in 1997. Class differences have manifested with poorer women gaining presence in panchayats, but women of a higher class being elected as chairpersons (sarpanch).

## Political parties:

Women's participation in political parties remained low in the 1990s with 10-12% membership consisting of women.  Indian women have also taken the initiative to form their own political parties, and in 2007, the United Women Front party was created, and has advocated for increasing the reservation of seats for women in parliament to 50%. Women only govern four of India's political parties. From 1980-1970, 4.3% of candidates and 70% of electoral races had no women candidates at all. As of 2013, it has been reported of the members of parliament 11% were women in Lok Sabha and 10.6% in Rajya Sabha.

## Political activism:

Women's organizations in India first began to emerge in the early 1900s, and later in the 1970s after a period of limited activity from the 1950s to 1970s.  One of the earliest women's organizations, Bharat Stree Mahamandal, formed in 1910 and focused on helping women escape oppression from

men. Women's associations had traditionally began with the help of men giving few women access to work and education, while limiting the expansion of traditional gender roles. In 1927, the All India Women's Conference (AIWC) was formed to advocate for women's education and was helpful in the passage of the Hindu Code of Bills between 1952 and 1960. Women were also active in the freedom movement in protesting British colonial rule over Indian holding protests and public meetings in support of independence.

## Women at farmers rally:

The Committee on the Status of Women in India released a report in 1974, and had a significant influence in the reemergence of activism towards gender equality. The report highlighted the significant differences between men and women in India, including the disparity in the sex ratio, mortality rates, employment, literacy, and wage discrimination. The report fueled the women's movement by signifying the ongoing discrimination towards women in India.  Gender inequality has remained the focus of the women's movement with specific emphasis on issues such as the Uniform Civil Code, Women's Reservation Bill, and sexual violence against women. Women's organizations both informal and formal have developed at the rural, urban, national, and state levels in India.

## Challenges to Women's Political Participation:

The level and forms of women's participation in politics is largely shaped by cultural and societal barriers in the form of violence, discrimination and illiteracy.

## Sexual violence:

This section may stray from the topic of the article. Please help improve this section or discuss this issue on the talk page. Martha Nussbaum highlighted a significant barrier to women's capability of participating in politics to be the threat of violence.  Sexual violence in India is exacerbated by issues of education and marriage. Women are sexually abused. Child marriage, domestic violence and low literacy rates have lowered Indian women's economic opportunities and contributed to sexual violence in India.

## Discrimination:

Although the Constitution of India removed gender inequalities among caste and gender, discrimination continues to be a widespread barrier to women's political participation. A 2012 study of 3,000 Indian women found the barriers in participation, specifically in running for political office, in the form of illiteracy, work burdens within the household, and discriminatory attitudes towards women as leaders.  Discriminatory attitudes manifest in the limitations presented to Indian women including low access to information and resources. Discrimination is further perpetuated by class. Dalit women, of the lowest caste in India, are continually discriminated against in running for public office.

## Illiteracy:

Literacy among Indian women is 53.7%, which is much lower than literacy among men reported at 75.3%. Illiteracy limits the ability of women to understand the political system and issues. Problems

with exploitation, such as women being left off of voters lists, have been reported as illiteracy limits the ability of women to ensure their political rights are exercised. Studies conducted by Niraja Jayal and Nirmala Buch found women are "persistently mocked and devalued in the panchayats if they are illiterate." Nussbaum also found literacy can play a key role in the dignification and independence of women in politics by giving them access to communications, such as memos and newspapers, they can become better informed on political issues.

## Conclusion:

To overcome issues of discrimination and violence, women's organizations have focused on the empowerment of Indian women. Empowerment is tied to the support of family and improved status within the household, which is undermined by the threat of domestic and sexual violence.  Socio-economic conditions, such as poverty and illiteracy, prevent the entrance of women into running for public office, and even voting. Inability to understand the rules of Panchayat Raj undermines the self-confidence to participation in public office.  Empowerment of Indian women can also occur through "bridging gaps in education, renegotiating gender roles, the gender division of labour and addressing biased attitudes". Women can also be empowered to participate by family, and when familial support is present they are more likely to run for office.

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