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.
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- 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.
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- 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.
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- 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.
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- 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.**
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- Voting conditions for women have also improved, notably by the **compulsory presence of female polling staff members**.
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- Women police forces are also deployed with the view to encourage female voters.
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- The EC rolled out a comprehensive voter education drive to directly encourage women to vote.
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What are the impacts?

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- There is gender parity in voter turnout in most states is remarkable.
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- The fact that women outvote men in many states where their literacy rate is lower than the average must also be noted.
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- 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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- In spite of such progress, women's representation in elected assemblies remains **abysmally low.**
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- 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%.
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- 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%).
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- 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.
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- 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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- The only way to address it in the short run is through a **bold legislation.**
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Source: The Indian Express

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