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Women In Politics: A Comparative Analysis Of Gender Quotas In India

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Abstract:

This research paper offers a comprehensive analysis of gender quotas in Indian politics, focusing on their role in enhancing women's political representation and participation. It explores the historical evolution of gender-based reservations, beginning with the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, which mandated one-third reservation for women in local governance, and culminating in the landmark 2023 Women's Reservation Bill. This bill, now a constitutional amendment, reserves one-third of seats in the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies for women, aiming to bridge the gender gap in political leadership. The paper evaluates the outcomes of existing quotas, highlighting successes such as increased female visibility and improved governance in local bodies. It also addresses persistent challenges, including delayed implementation, proxy representation, and the marginalization of lower caste women. A comparative lens is used to assess how India's approach aligns with international practices in countries like Rwanda and Sweden. The paper concludes with policy recommendations for ensuring that gender quotas not only increase numbers but also empower women substantively and inclusively in the political domain.

Keywords:

Gender quotas, women's political representation, India, Women's Reservation Bill, political participation, comparative analysis etc.

Introduction:

The participation of women in political decision-making is a cornerstone of an inclusive and representative democracy. Despite constituting women are nearly half of the global population, women continue to be underrepresented in political institutions worldwide. In India, a country with a complex socio-political

landscape and deep-rooted gender norms, the journey toward gender parity in politics has been both significant and challenging. Although Indian women have historically played influential roles in freedom movements and governance—epitomized by figures such as Indira Gandhi—their representation in legislative bodies remains disproportionately low.

To address this disparity, India has adopted gender quotas as a mechanism to promote women's political inclusion. These began at the grassroots level with the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, which mandated the reservation of one-third of seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions and urban local bodies. Building on these reforms, the Parliament passed the Constitution (One Hundred and Sixth Amendment) Act in 2023, popularly known as the Women's Reservation Bill, to extend similar reservations to state legislatures and the Lok Sabha. This paper examines the historical trajectory, effectiveness, and socio-political implications of gender quotas in India, while also offering a comparative perspective with global practices. The aim is to evaluate whether such legislative measures genuinely empower women or merely offer symbolic representation.

Historical Context of Gender Quotas in India:

India's pursuit of gender equality in political representation has evolved gradually, rooted in the constitutional ideals of justice, equality, and inclusivity. A landmark moment in this journey came with the passage of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments in 1992 and 1993. These amendments institutionalized a system of decentralized governance and mandated that one-third of the seats in Panchayati Raj Institutions (village-level councils) and urban local bodies be reserved for women, including those from Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs). These reforms aimed to correct historical gender imbalances and enable women's active participation in grassroots decision-making, where real democratic engagement often begins.

The impact of these amendments was transformative: millions of women entered politics for the first time, many from rural and marginalized backgrounds, thereby creating a new cadre of female leaders. These women not only brought fresh perspectives to governance but also began to challenge entrenched patriarchal norms. Their presence contributed to improved public service delivery, particularly in sectors such as education, health, and sanitation. However, this bottom-up success was not mirrored in the upper echelons of political power. In the national Parliament, the representation of women remained strikingly low—rising from just 5% in the first Lok Sabha in 1952 to only about 14% in the 17th Lok Sabha in 2019.

To address this persistent disparity, the Women's Reservation Bill was introduced in 1996, proposing a 33% reservation for women in the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies. The bill marked a bold step toward rectifying the gender imbalance at higher levels of political authority. However, its journey was fraught with challenges. Despite being reintroduced multiple times over the years, it faced stiff resistance from several political quarters. Concerns were raised about the lack of sub-quotas for OBC and minority women, and fears of disrupting established political hierarchies stalled progress. The bill became a symbolic touchstone for gender justice but remained in legislative limbo for nearly three decades.

Nonetheless, the passage of the bill in 2023 reignited hope and reaffirmed India's commitment to inclusive democracy. The historical trajectory of gender quotas underscores not only the challenges but also the resilience of efforts aimed at enhancing women's political empowerment in India.

The Women's Reservation Bill, 2023:

In September 2023, the Indian Parliament passed the Constitution (One Hundred and Sixth Amendment) Act, 2023, popularly known as the Women's Reservation Bill. This historic legislation mandates the reservation of one-third of all seats for women in the Lok Sabha (the lower house of Parliament) and in all state legislative assemblies. The bill marks a watershed moment in India's democratic journey, addressing a long-standing demand for greater gender parity in political representation. The bill had been introduced and reintroduced multiple times since 1996 but was repeatedly stalled due to political disagreements, especially around the demand for sub-quotas for women from Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and minority communities. Its eventual passage in 2023 reflected a rare moment of bipartisan consensus and overwhelming support across party lines, underscoring the importance of women's representation in shaping national and state-level policies.

Under the provisions of the bill, the reserved seats for women will be rotated among different constituencies after each delimitation exercise to ensure a fair and equitable distribution. Additionally, the reservation will remain in effect for 15 years from its commencement, though there is a possibility of extension by constitutional amendment. Despite the celebratory tone following the bill's passage, implementation is not immediate. The bill stipulates that it will come into effect only after the next delimitation process, which is scheduled post-2026 following the decennial census. This delay has led to concerns among gender rights activists and scholars, who argue that postponing implementation undermines the urgency of addressing gender disparity in governance.

Nonetheless, the bill is seen as a critical step in reshaping India's political landscape. By institutionalizing women's participation in legislative decision-making, it holds the potential to transform political discourse, bring attention to issues affecting women, and foster a more inclusive democracy.

The bill received overwhelming support, with 454 votes in favour and only two against in the Lok Sabha, and unanimous approval in the Rajya Sabha. President Droupadi Murmu signed the bill into law on September 28, 2023. However, its implementation is contingent upon the completion of the next census and delimitation exercise, expected after 2026, with the reservation likely to be effective from the 2029 general elections.

Impact of Gender Quotas at the Local Level:

The implementation of gender quotas through the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments has had a transformative, albeit complex, impact on local governance in India. By mandating the reservation of one-third of seats in Panchayati Raj Institutions and urban local bodies for women, the amendments sought to democratize access to political power and encourage women's participation at the grassroots level.

Empirical research supports the idea that women leaders have positively influenced developmental outcomes in their communities. For instance, studies by SAGE Journals and the University of Rochester (2020) reveal that village councils led by women invested more in essential public services such as clean drinking water, primary education, and infrastructure like roads. These priorities often reflect women's practical needs and their closer engagement with community-level issues. Moreover, the visibility of female leadership has been shown to alter societal perceptions. According to a study highlighted in *WIRED* (2012), the presence of elected women leaders reduced gender bias and increased aspirations among girls, particularly in terms of education and career choices. Female political participation thus fosters broader social change by challenging entrenched patriarchal norms and offering tangible role models for the next generation.

However, the effectiveness of these quotas is sometimes undermined by systemic barriers. A key concern is the phenomenon of "proxy politics," where male relatives—often referred to as “Sarpanch Pati”—exercise real authority behind the scenes, thereby limiting women's decision-making autonomy (Stanford University, 2024). Additionally, women from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and other marginalized groups often face greater socio-cultural and institutional barriers to political participation, limiting the inclusivity of the quota system. In many cases, reservations have disproportionately benefited women from dominant or more privileged castes, reducing the impact of quotas on intersectional equality.

Unintended Consequences of Gender Quotas:

While gender quotas aim to enhance women's representation, they can inadvertently marginalize other disadvantaged groups. A study in Delhi found that constituencies reserved for women were less likely to elect members from lower caste groups, particularly the Other Backward Classes (OBCs), and more likely to elect candidates from upper castes (University of Rochester, 2020). This highlights the complexity of implementing single-dimension quotas in a society with intersecting social hierarchies. Additionally, the phenomenon of "proxy candidates," where women are elected but male relatives wield actual power, raises concerns about the effectiveness of quotas in truly empowering women (Stanford University, 2024). These issues underscore the need for comprehensive strategies that address multiple forms of discrimination and ensure genuine representation.

Comparative Analysis: India's Approach vs. International Practices:

Globally, various countries have implemented gender quotas with varying degrees of success. For instance, Rwanda mandates a 30% quota for women in all decision-making bodies, resulting in women holding over 60% of parliamentary seats. In contrast, India's women's representation in the Lok Sabha stands at approximately 14%, below the global average of 25%. While India's recent constitutional amendment is a significant step forward, its delayed implementation and potential unintended consequences highlight the challenges of translating legislative measures into effective representation. Comparatively, countries that have combined quotas with capacity-building initiatives, public awareness campaigns, and support systems for female politicians have seen more substantial and sustainable progress.

Challenges and Recommendations:

To maximize the effectiveness of gender quotas in India, several challenges must be addressed:

1. Delayed Implementation: The reservation's activation post-2026 census and delimitation may hinder immediate progress.

Recommendation: Expedite the necessary administrative processes to implement the reservation promptly.

2. Intersectionality: Quotas may inadvertently favour women from dominant social groups, neglecting those from marginalized communities.

Recommendation: Incorporate sub-quotas for women from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and OBCs to ensure inclusive representation.

3. Proxy Representation: The influence of male relatives over elected female representatives undermines the purpose of quotas.

Recommendation: Implement training programs and support networks to empower women leaders and reduce reliance on male intermediaries.

4. Societal Attitudes: Deep-rooted patriarchal norms can impede women's political participation.

Recommendation: Conduct public awareness campaigns to challenge gender stereotypes and promote the acceptance of women in leadership roles.

Conclusion

India's adoption of the Women's Reservation Bill represents a pivotal moment in the pursuit of gender equality in politics. While the legislation holds promise, its success depends on timely implementation, inclusive policies, and societal transformation. By learning from both domestic experiences and international practices, India can develop a comprehensive approach that not only increases women's numerical representation but also ensures their meaningful participation and empowerment in the political arena.

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