



# ANALYZING PERFORMANCE OF WOMEN REPRESENTATIVES IN THE INDIAN PARLIAMENT

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**Abstract:** The parliamentary form of government works on the principle of representation. Members are elected from respective constituencies to be a voice of the people. Through the fora of Parliament, members raise pertinent issues and provide a road map for development. Women MPs face dual responsibility i.e., besides representing their respective constituency they also represent women's cause at large. Women parliamentarians in the legislature must provide constructive insights on national issues thus bringing about a balance of thought in our otherwise male-dominated policy-making structures. This research paper deals with the expected role of women representatives and critically analyzes their performance in the Indian Parliament in the recent past. Which issues do they raise? How do they address women's concerns in Parliament? Does their performance resonate with the 'other' half of the population? How far they are successful in creating a gender-egalitarian parliamentary institution, where women have equal voice compared to men? The focus of this research paper will be the present Lok Sabha – 17<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha (2019-24).

**Keywords-** Parliamentary Performance, Performance, Role, Women MP, 17<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha, Debates.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Literally, in our society women have always been considered as the 'weaker sex', and thereby deprived of better livelihood, education, autonomy over their bodies. Tentacles of patriarchy keep them rooted to a low place in our societies. Reflection of the same in their political status is natural, as institutions mimic the norms, power relations, vulnerabilities of the underlying societal structure.

Immediately after the independence, the constituent assembly which was tasked with drafting a constitution for independent India had only fifteen women members. Literate and belonging to upper classes, their political stature made them dream of a 'New India' where women were equal stakeholders in the decision-making process. Women leaders like G Durgabai (Madras), Begum Aizaz Rasul (United Provinces), and Renuka Ray (West Bengal) were deeply involved in the deliberations concerning equality, freedom, and citizenship in independent India.<sup>1</sup> Ironic is the fact that women, comprises almost 50% population and the women representatives occupying a mere 14% seats (maximum so far) in present Lok Sabha (2019-24) are still trying to place issues of women's rights and welfare, even after seven decades since the formation of the constituent assembly. This exposes the marginality of women in Indian society and politics at large. In their representational role, women appear vulnerable as they lack institutional support, party support, and support base of their own family.

## II. PARLIAMENTARY PERFORMANCE

Performance of Members in Parliament includes those activities which help them influence the legislative process.<sup>2</sup> Parliamentary performance is determined through attendance, the number of debates participated, questions raised and private member's bill introduced by the respective MP.

Lok Sabha debate is an occasion for deliberation in the lower house by members on urgent matters of public interest. Debates emerge as a platform to showcase one's command over the chosen language and knowledge on current issues. It is a tool to connect with the people at large and fulfills the primary function of a lawmaker i.e., raising important issues in the house. Overall, a debating speech can make or break the career of an MP.

## III. ROLE OF WOMEN IN PARLIAMENT VIS-A-VIS LIMITATIONS

Our political establishments are seen as 'male spaces', where men appear to have a sense of 'entitlement' due to their numerical supremacy.<sup>3</sup> Women MP's are treated as intruders, unwanted, and having limited access to power. Women being in minority are often coerced to adhere to group norms, which are formulated by men and favor them explicitly. Challenging the traditions of patriarchy these women emerge as an eyesore for men.<sup>4</sup>

Basic knowledge of the working of legislature and acquisition of requisite skills like communication and oratory help women become effective parliamentarians. Training sessions, mentoring by senior leaders, and political socialization are some of the tools to achieve the above objective.<sup>5</sup> Women coming from legal, administrative, and academic fields present their cause more advantageously and vociferously in parliament because they are equipped with the required training and confidence due to their affluent /career background. Therefore, it becomes easy for them to challenge the gender norms of society and become vocal in public life.

The role played by women representatives in Lok Sabha debates incorporates the content of the issues they speak on, their grace in the style of debating, how they present themselves, tackle interventions, deal with obnoxious sexist remarks, time management, etc.

Political dynasties are eternal truth. The woman coming from political dynasties have a stronger hold as compared to fellow women MP. Destined for a political career, campaigning, interacting with media, maintaining their public image is something which they are taught since their early days. A lot of these women more often than not appear to be political surrogates, replacing their deceased or defunct male relatives at crucial times and providing a door to keep power within the family. A grave drawback of women from political lineages is their political affinity. They raise only those issues which are compliant with their political equations. Since the woman population of various cast and creeds, seldom constitute a homogeneous vote bank their issues are sidelined across by all political parties.

At 14 percent, women's representation in Lok Sabha is just perfunctory ('tokens').<sup>6</sup> Thus, the performance of minorities is more visible and watched out for due to their fewer numbers. These factors put pressure on women to perform. Against this backdrop, it becomes increasingly difficult for the chosen few women to play the function of representation emphatically and meaningfully.

The above reasoning applies even to the subject of women's reservation in Parliament. More women in Parliament will burst patriarchal political caucus, as real issues related to women will be highlighted and political interests may get affected. Very few women from celebrity background could participate usefully in debates, bringing light to the fact that their Charisma and popularity is limited only to roadshows and campaigns, while within parliament they are a no help for ordinary women plagued with ordinary life situations (gender discrimination), but for mere lip service.

To actively represent 'woman' in politics, women MPs must have a deep understanding of women's issues and what's women's take on them. But to public dismay, women MPs are conditioned to think it's a privilege to speak in the house, rather than their right as an elected representative. Moreover, highly educated women MPs generally follow the party lines and seldom promote women's viewpoints. Again, it is important to recognize sexist speech, call it out in front of the house and learn skills to crush it as and when necessary.<sup>7</sup>

#### IV. PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN PARLIAMENTARIANS IN DEBATES

The tendency of every political party to be seen in debates inside Parliament leads to a formal speaking system. Each party is allotted time-based on its numbers in the house. Deliberations within the party help decide who will speak and on what issues. Finally, the Speaker selects members for discussion, out of the names submitted to him from the respective party.<sup>8</sup> Generally senior party members (quite often its men, due to their numerical strength) are given priority over others. Women who do get the opportunity to speak, have relevant expertise be it law, administration or academics. The time allotted to the party is in totality. Many times, senior party members consume the maximum amount of time for their speeches leaving very little for the women MPs, who then have no alternative but to table their speech. Thus, it is legitimate to say that a fewer number of women MPs with nominal time duration participate in debates as compared to men. A tentative list of woman MPs who actively participated in Parliamentary debate during the period from 01/06/2019 to 22/12/2021 is presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Participation of woman MPs in Parliamentary debate during the period from 01/06/2019 to 22/12/2021 \*  
 (\*Analysis of data obtained from PRS Legislative research by the author<sup>9</sup>)

Sr. No	Name of MP	Political Party	Term	No. of Debates	Issues
1.	Supriya Sule	Nationalist Congress Party (NCP)	Third	159	Health, Water, Farmers, GST, Reservation, Women's safety, Inflation
2.	Rama Devi	Bharatiya Janata Party	Fourth	60	Roads, Railways, Health, floods.
3.	Rekha Verma	Bharatiya Janata Party	Second	60	Roads, Railways, Health, floods.
4.	Raksha Nikhil Khadse	Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)	Second	56	Roads, Railways, Pandemic, Maratha Reservation, Farmers
5.	Navnit Ravi Rana	Independent	First	52	Health, Women empowerment, Women's safety, Pandemic
6.	Pratima Mondal	All India Trinamool Congress (AITC)	Second	50	Railways, Health environment, Mental health
7.	Kanimozhi Karunanidhi	Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK)	First	50	Women's reservation, Pandemic, Rape, Backward class
8.	Vanga Geethaviswanatham	Yuvajana Sramika Rythu Congress Party	First	49	MNREGA, Disha bill, Railways, Mental health of women
9.	Heena Vijaykumar Gavit	Bharatiya Janata Party	Second	48	Electricity, Water, Scheduled areas, Roads
10.	Jaskaur Meena	Bharatiya Janata Party	Second	47	Roads, Drinking Water, Schools, Railways
11.	Beesetti Venkata Satyvathi	Yuvajana Sramika Rythu Congress Party	First	47	Roads, Health, Pandemic, Industry
12.	Aparupa Poddar	All India Trinamool Congress (AITC)	Second	44	Railways, Pandemic, Women's security, Women's reservation
13.	Sanghamitra Maurya	Bharatiya Janata Party	First	38	Roads, Railways, Rape, Women empowerment, Tourism

For this study, we have taken in nominal five Lok Sabha debates (2019-24) as a case study to analyze the performance of Women MPs inside Parliament. They are,

**4.1 Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Bill, 2019<sup>10</sup>:** The objective of the bill was to provide uniformity in civil laws (marriage) to Muslim women. But the necessities of the vote bank made women MPs of opposition change the goalpost to other hypothetical concerns. Less number of women MPs participated in this debate. The only women MP from the minority community chose not to voice her concerns on the bill.

**4.2 Submission by Members Re: Brutal atrocities against womenfolk across the country<sup>11</sup>:** In this debate, clear-cut politics was seen over the sensitive issue of 'rape'. Fewer female MPs spoke on this woman-centric issue.

**4.3 Short Duration Discussion Regarding the Empowerment of Women<sup>12</sup>:** On the occasion of international women's day, a short duration discussion regarding the Empowerment of Women was held. A minuscule number of women MPs spoke exclusively but the frequent interruption by male members of the opposition led to the discussion being cut short and it smacked of mere symbolism.

**4.4 The Jammu and Kashmir Reorganization Bill, 2019, and The Jammu and Kashmir Reservation (Second Amendment) Bill, 2019, (both passed by Rajya Sabha)<sup>13</sup>:** Very few women members spoke on this bill, indicating the fact that their participation in debates on national issues is minimal.

**4.5 General Discussion on Union Budget 2021-22<sup>14</sup>:** While having a general discussion on Union Budget (2021-22) women MPs stressed an increase in allocation of funds on education, health, infrastructure, and other development work in their respective constituency, etc. The maximum number of women MPs participated in this discussion as compared to other debates.

Women MPs recognize the gravity of their responsibility as representatives of Indian women but the intersectionality of caste, class, race, and religion makes them subdue their ascriptive role of being a voice for women. Their assertiveness while putting their views forward during debates appears to be a symbolic gesture at times, for they fail to address women's specific issues like equal pay, sexual harassment, crèche facilities at the workplace, specific problems of women in unorganized sectors, gender-neutral policies, etc. It was observed that women MPs who oppose progressive bills on women's issues, always identify themselves as a feminist. Recently the Prohibition of Child Marriage (Amendment) Bill, 2021 dealing with increasing the minimum age of marriage for girls was introduced by the Ministry of Women and Child Development. At the introduction stage itself, the bill was opposed by two renowned women MPs without even considering the merits of the case. The bill was then referred to the Standing committee comprising of 31 members. Surprisingly, in this committee, lone women MP could find her place.<sup>15</sup>

A few women MPs are expert orators, presenting documentary evidence as and when required and giving point-to-point rebuttal when confronted by other MPs. They seldom interrupt other MPs, that too when they have a specific point to make. Women MPs raise constituency-specific matters of day-to-day life like drinking water, hospitals, roads, schools, industrial development, irrigation, tourism, etc., in debates. Very few women MPs raise the issue of women's security and a crime against women. Special mention was used during pandemic times to get information on various Covid-19 related issues like mental health, the digital divide in times of online education, number of doctors and hospital beds, vaccination, etc.<sup>16</sup>

## V. CONCLUSION

Overall, through this research paper, we could not find any distinctive style of debating used by women MPs, though empathy emerged as a prominent method to gain the attention of the house on important matters. Issues of infrastructure and development find regular mentions during the debates. Sadly, women-centric issues are sidelined most of the time. It takes a big incident to capture the imagination of our women MP to become more proactive towards women's security.<sup>17</sup> They tackle interventions confidently, not yielding to the gender pressures in the house. Sexist speech if and when identified is called out for in every forum of parliament by eminent women leaders irrespective of party affiliations.<sup>18</sup> As they are always plagued by the problem of less time, women MPs do keep their speeches concise and to the point but sometimes this sacrifices quality.

Being in the position of a minority, women in Lok Sabha do not raise women's questions to the optimum. A major reason is allegiance to party position to protect the respective interests. But the larger point to ponder over is if they constitute 'critical mass' in the Parliament one day? Will there be any real change in the kinds of issues they raise and deliberate on? If women indulge in a different kind of politics, why there is a lack of consensus, political will, and cooperation on women's question<sup>19</sup>.

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