**WOMEN POLITICAL PARTICIPATION : GOVERNANCE/POITY**

**NEWS:** What factors influence women's political participation?

**WHAT'S IN THE NEWS?**

Rajeshwari Deshpande's study examines the political participation of women in India, highlighting issues like their limited involvement beyond voting, gender stereotypes in welfare programs, and regional voting patterns. It also emphasizes the impact of socio-economic factors and the importance of women's agency in shaping political outcomes.

**Major Highlights of the Study:**

- **Voting Behavior & Agency**:

  - In Indian elections, the political participation of women has been often underestimated, with political parties treating women voters as a homogeneous group. Their voting patterns are frequently analyzed without considering the diversity within women's experiences. Women are not a monolithic group, and their political decisions are shaped by various factors like caste, class, religion, and socio-economic status. Political strategies that do not take these differences into account may fail to address the real concerns of women voters. This homogenization of women as a voting bloc may lead to policies that do not represent the full spectrum of women's issues, potentially undermining their political agency.

  - Deshpande highlights that political parties often fail to recognize women as active political agents. They typically view women through the lens of their gender and consider them passive voters, disregarding the complexities of their social identities and their agency in making voting decisions.

- **Welfare Programs and Gender Stereotyping**:

  - Women are often portrayed as passive beneficiaries of welfare programs such as the Ujjwala Yojana (for LPG connections) and Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (for housing), among others. This narrative frames women as dependent on government assistance rather than recognizing them as independent, active participants in the economy and society. By portraying women in such a light, political parties risk reinforcing a stereotype that limits their participation in more proactive aspects of politics, such as leadership, decision-making, and policy advocacy.

  - These welfare initiatives are often used to secure women's votes, but they do not empower women to become active political participants. The policies targeted at women are presented as tools of paternalism rather than avenues for enabling women's autonomy and political engagement. Such an approach limits the scope for women to assert their political agency beyond receiving state assistance.

- **Voting vs Political Power**:

- While women's voter turnout has increased significantly over the years, their political participation beyond voting remains limited. Although women make up a significant portion of the electorate, their involvement in other political activities such as campaigning, attending rallies, and influencing policy decisions is still much lower than men. Women's political power is often constrained to the act of voting during elections, without much engagement in other forms of political participation.

- The structural barriers to women's full political engagement are rooted in social norms and gendered expectations. Women face challenges such as patriarchal control over family decisions, limited access to political networks, and a lack of financial resources to engage in political campaigning or advocacy. These barriers often restrict women's roles to passive voting rather than active involvement in shaping the political discourse.

- **Impact of Male Migration on Women's Voter Turnout**:

  - In many regions of India, male migration for employment has had a significant impact on women's voter turnout. In areas where large-scale male migration occurs, especially in rural and economically backward regions, women's voter turnout has been observed to increase. This phenomenon can be attributed to the shifting of household and community responsibilities to women in the absence of men, leading to greater political engagement.

  - Women who may have previously been restricted by gender roles within the household are increasingly taking on more public roles, including voting, due to the migration of men for work. These women are often more aware of political issues, as they must make decisions related to the welfare of their families and communities, and voting becomes one of the ways in which they assert their political voice.

- **State-Specific Voting Patterns**:

  - Deshpande's study suggests that women's voting behavior varies significantly across different states in India, influenced by regional political dynamics. In states with strong regional political movements, such as Tamil Nadu and Kerala, women's voting preferences tend to align more with local issues and regional parties rather than national gender-based trends.

  - This divergence is primarily due to the prominence of regional parties that emphasize state-specific concerns, including regional identity, language, culture, and local development. As a result, women in these regions are more likely to support parties that advocate for their local interests and focus on issues such as social welfare, employment, and educational reforms. In contrast, women in states dominated by national parties may be more likely to follow national political trends, though this trend is also shifting.

## Country wise data on women representation*

Women representation in parliament varies across different democracies

**Moving forward:** Trinamool Congress MPs take selfies at the Parliament House complex during the first session of the 18th Lok Sabha, on June 25. PTI

| Country | % of elected women | Quota in Parliament | Quota in political parties |
|---|---|---|---|
| Sweden | 46% | No | Yes |
| South Africa | 45% | No | Yes |
| Australia | 38% | No | Yes |
| France | 38% | No | Yes |
| Germany | 35% | No | Yes |
| U.K. | 40% | No | Yes |
| U.S. | 29% | No | No |
| Pakistan | 16% | Yes | No |
| Bangladesh | 20% | Yes | No |

*(as of September 2023) | Source: PRS legislative research

**Women's Political Participation in India:**

- **Shift in Participation Patterns**:

  - India experienced a significant shift in women's political participation in the 2010s, unlike many other countries where this gap began to narrow in the 1990s. The change in India's context can be attributed to increasing literacy rates, greater political awareness among women, and targeted outreach efforts by political parties. These efforts have helped in mobilizing women as active voters and, in some cases, as political candidates and leaders.

  - The increasing political awareness among women is particularly visible in rural areas where women are becoming more involved in village-level decision-making, social movements, and local governance. This shift is indicative of women becoming more politically conscious and active, driven by educational and economic changes as well as changing societal attitudes towards women's participation in public life.

- **Female Voter Turnout Trends**:

  - In the 2019 general elections, female voter turnout slightly exceeded that of male voters, with women constituting 49.5% of the electorate. This represented a significant milestone, as it marked the first time women's participation in voting was on par with or exceeded that of men in India.

  - In the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, women had a higher voting percentage (65.8%) compared to men (65.6%), indicating that the trend of increasing female political participation has continued. The rise in female voter turnout

reflects the growing importance of women's voices in shaping electoral outcomes and political discourse in India.

- **Increased Political Consciousness**:

  - Women, particularly in rural areas, are becoming more politically aware, with many now participating actively in village-level decision-making. This growing involvement can be attributed to factors such as improved access to education, greater access to media, and the rise of women's social movements that promote women's rights and political engagement.

  - In rural settings, women are increasingly taking on roles in local governance bodies, such as Panchayats, and becoming vocal participants in community decision-making. These developments represent a shift from traditional roles where women's participation in politics was limited to family and domestic matters.

## Global Goals:

- **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**:

  - Women's equal participation in politics is seen as a key driver for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 5, which focuses on gender equality and women's empowerment. The goal of achieving gender equality in political participation and leadership is central to achieving broader development outcomes, including poverty reduction, education, and health improvements.

  - Ensuring that women participate equally in political processes contributes to the achievement of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, which calls for gender parity in decision-making and political leadership at all levels. This balanced participation is not only essential for promoting gender equality but also for making governance more inclusive and representative.

## Factors Influencing Women's Political Participation:

- **Socio-Cultural Norms**:

  - Traditional gender norms and cultural expectations often limit women's participation in public and political life. In many parts of India, women are expected to fulfill domestic roles, and their public presence, particularly in politics, is often frowned upon. These norms restrict women's access to political power and decision-making spaces, even when they have the capability and interest to participate actively in politics.

  - The patriarchal nature of Indian society often dictates that women should focus on family and household responsibilities, which limits their freedom to engage in political activism or leadership roles. Breaking these cultural barriers requires significant shifts in social attitudes and education.

- **Education and Literacy**:

  - Higher literacy rates and educational attainment have been shown to correlate with greater political participation among women. Educated women are more likely to be politically aware, understand their rights, and actively participate in elections and public life.

  - Educational empowerment enables women to critically assess political platforms, understand the political system, and make informed decisions when voting. It also empowers women to become leaders and advocates for their communities.

- **Economic Independence**:

  - Economic independence is a significant factor that enables women to engage more actively in politics. When women have access to financial resources and the ability to support themselves, they are more likely to participate in political activities, campaign for policies that benefit them, and take on leadership roles in political organizations.

  - Women's economic participation in the workforce can also serve as a platform for political activism, as they become more aware of the need for policies that address economic inequality, job opportunities, and women's rights in the workplace.

- **Caste, Class, and Religion**:

  - Women's political behavior is often influenced by their caste, class, and religious identity. These identities shape how women perceive political issues and which political parties they support. Women from marginalized communities, for example, may prioritize issues like affirmative action, land rights, and social justice in their voting choices.

  - Political parties must consider the diverse needs of women from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds in order to craft policies that resonate with their unique concerns. This means moving beyond the traditional narrative of women as a single voting bloc and recognizing the complex intersectionality of their identities.

- **Political Party Strategies**:

  - Political parties play a significant role in shaping women's political participation by offering targeted policies and welfare schemes aimed at women. The way parties engage with women—whether through representation, empowerment programs, or addressing women's issues—can significantly affect women's political behavior.

  - Women's involvement in party politics, including running for office or campaigning, depends on how inclusive and supportive political parties are

towards women candidates. When parties actively recruit and support women in leadership roles, it encourages broader participation from women in politics.
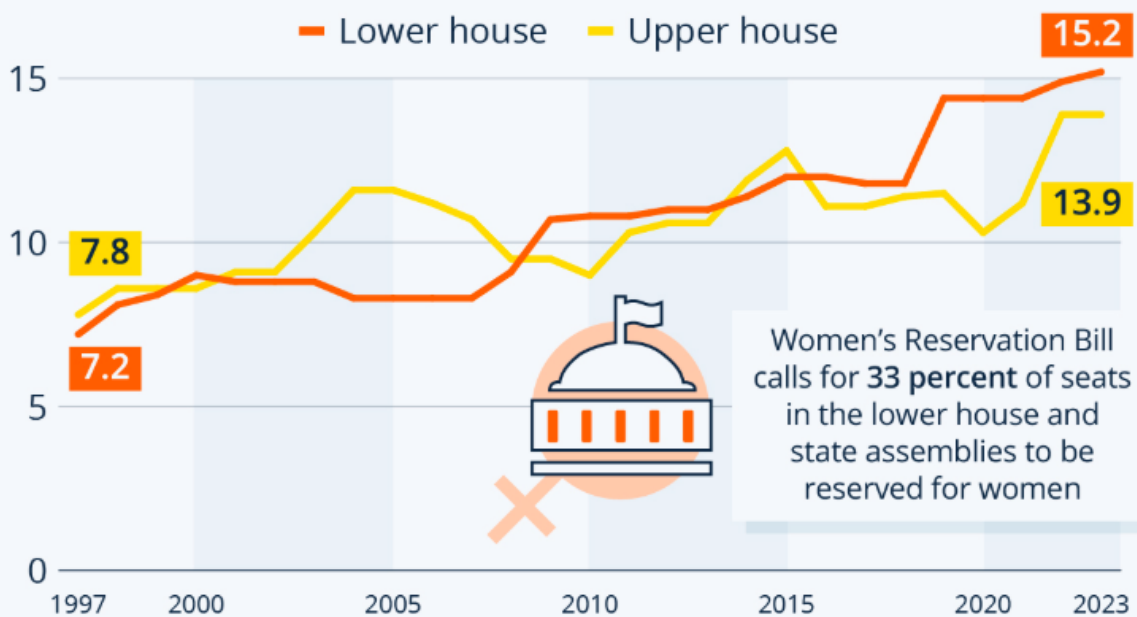
- **Social Movements**:

  - Women's involvement in social movements has been a powerful catalyst for increased political participation. Women's rights movements, labor movements, and environmental activism have provided women with platforms to engage in political discourse, mobilize for change, and influence public policy.

  - Social movements offer women a sense of solidarity and collective action, which can help overcome traditional barriers to political participation. By organizing and advocating for their rights, women become more empowered to participate in formal political processes, such as elections and policy-making.

- **Regional and State-Specific Factors**:

  - The political landscape in different states of India plays a significant role in shaping women's political behavior. In states with strong regional parties, women's voting preferences are more likely to align with local movements and parties that focus on regional issues rather than national gender-based issues.

  - Regional political contexts, such as the presence of powerful regional leaders, local governance models, and state-specific challenges, influence how women engage with politics. This emphasizes the need for political strategies that are tailored to the unique concerns and dynamics of each region.

**India's Path Towards Greater Gender Equity in Parliament**

% of women in India's lower house and upper house between September 1997-2023*

Lower house — Upper house

15.2

7.8

7.2

13.9

Women's Reservation Bill calls for **33 percent** of seats in the lower house and state assemblies to be reserved for women

1997  2000  2005  2010  2015  2020  2023

**Conclusion:**

- **Decentralization of Governance**:

    - The decentralization of governance over the past two decades has significantly increased the importance of measuring women's participation in decision-making processes. Local governance reforms have empowered women at the grassroots level, allowing them to contribute to local policy-making and community development. This shift highlights the need for inclusive governance that recognizes women's voices in shaping political outcomes.

- **Gender Budgeting for Inclusive Growth**:

    - Gender budgeting has become a vital tool to ensure that women's needs are accounted for in economic planning and resource allocation. By focusing on inclusive growth, gender budgeting ensures that public resources are directed toward programs that benefit women, particularly in areas like health, education, and economic empowerment.

- **Responsive Data and Gender Equal Society**:

- Better data on women's political participation is crucial for creating more responsive policies and gender-budgeting initiatives. By collecting accurate data on women's engagement in politics, the government can design policies that promote women's empowerment and work towards a more gender-equal society where women are active participants in political and public life.

**Source: https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/what-factors-influence-womens-political-participation/article69345520.ece**