

MAKING NATIONAL LEGISLATURES MORE GENDER-BALANCED

Relevant for: Indian Polity | Topic: Parliament - structure, functioning, conduct of business, powers & privileges and issues arising out of these

Gender signs on scales. Balance, equality between men's and a female. Isometry.3D. A vector illustration in flat style.

The Global Gender Gap report for 2018 said that the widest gender disparity is in the field of political empowerment. To cite the Inter-Parliamentary Union 2018 report, women legislators account for barely 24% of all MPs across the world.

However, the experience of the top-ranked countries in the IPU list does give an indication of how women's presence in political spaces took an upward turn in those nations.

Rwanda, a landlocked nation with a population of 11.2 million, tops the list, with 61.3% seats in the Lower House and 38.5% in the Upper House occupied by women. Since 2003, the country has implemented a legislated quota of 30% in all elected positions, which has enabled a steady inflow of women parliamentarians after successive elections. Its Constitution has also set a quota of 30% in all elected offices. However, some believe that the higher representation of women in the country cannot be attributed solely to quotas — women were thrust into the political limelight due to the huge vacuum that emerged in the aftermath of the 1994 genocide, which resulted in a large chunk of the country's male population getting killed.

Cuba, the largest Caribbean island nation with a population of about 11.1 million, holds the second rank, with 53.2 % seats of its 605-member single House being occupied by women representatives. The Communist dispensation in Cuba did not opt for legislated gender quotas, but does follow a practice akin to voluntary quota systems. However, Cuban women are less represented at the local level, where candidates are selected by the local communities that often overlook women candidates.

Sweden, the fifth-rank holder in the IPU, has a professedly feminist government and has maintained a women's parliamentary representation of at least 40% since 90s. The 349-member single House, Swedish Parliament, now has 161 women with 46.1% representation. Sweden does not have any constitutional clause or electoral law earmarking representation for women in elected bodies. The issue of compulsory gender quota didn't find favour in Sweden as it was believed that such a quota will create reverse discrimination and violate the principles of equal opportunities. Almost all political parties there have adopted measures to ensure a fair representation for women at all levels. In 1993, the Social Democratic Party adopted the 'zipper system', described as "a gender quota system whereby women and men are placed alternately on all party lists." This further boosted women's seat share.

Closer home, Nepal occupies the 36th position in the IPU and its 275-member Lower House has 90 women, about 32.7% of the total strength. The Nepal Constitution stole a march over many others in the South Asia by earmarking 33% seats for women in all state institutions, including the legislature.

India, at 149 among the 192 countries in the IPU list, had barely 11.8% women's representation in the 16th Lok Sabha, which improved to 14.5% in the current Lower House. At least seven out of the 29 States have not sent a single woman MP. The 108th Constitutional Amendment Bill

stipulating 33% quota for women in the Parliament and in State Assemblies remains in political cold storage. The system of voluntary party quotas, which has worked well in many countries, is not likely to cut much ice in India's deeply embedded patriarchal society. As has happened in the case of panchayats and municipalities, only a legally mandated quota could perhaps ensure a large-scale entry of Indian women into the higher echelons of political power.

The writer is a former Indian Information Service Officer and media educationist

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