

WOMEN'S POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT — MORE TALK, LESS ACTION

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A political meeting in Rajasthan. File | Photo Credit: ANI

In any country, the political empowerment of women is generally possible with two routes — the first is to reserve seats for women in legislature by means of legislation and the second is to have provision for quotas for women candidates within political parties while nominating candidates. There are examples for both that have been adopted in various countries, in turn helping women's political empowerment. Neighbouring Nepal, Bangladesh and Pakistan have opted for the legislative route and are faring better in terms of representation of women in their legislatures. For example, in Pakistan, 17% seats are reserved for women in its national assembly; Bangladesh has reserved 50 out of 350 seats in its Jatiya Sangsad and Nepal has reserved 33% of the total seats for women. Statistics show that there is an improvement in the number of women legislators being elected crossing the percentage of seats reserved for women which is a sign of women's political empowerment in one way or the other.

There are many countries where there are no laws mandating quotas for women, but political parties are required to give a certain percentage of tickets to women candidates. Australia (38%), Canada (31%), South Africa (45%), and Sweden (46%) have no legislatively-backed quotas in their Parliament, yet most of these countries have more than 30% women in their respective Parliaments. This is clear evidence that quota is not the only route for women's political representation. There is another route of reservation within parties while giving tickets, which is equally effective for women's political representation.

The debate about women's political representation has been going on in India for long; in fact the Bill reserving 33% seats for women was passed in the Upper House on March 9, 2010 but could not be passed in the Lower House as the United Progressive Alliance Government (UPA) was not in the majority. The Bharatiya Janata Party-led National Democratic Alliance government has chosen the quota route for the political empowerment of women by enacting the Constitution (One Hundred and Sixth Amendment) Act of 2023. It is considered a milestone in terms of women empowerment (reserving by law 33% seats in State Assemblies and Parliament). It is important to note that the Bill was passed in the Lok Sabha with a huge majority, only two Members opposing the Bill.

There is hardly any doubt that this is a welcome step in the direction of women's political empowerment, but the patterns of ticket distribution in the recently held Assembly election do

not indicate the same commitment for women's political empowerment as was shown by the leaders of various political parties in Parliament.

An analysis of the pattern of ticket distribution for these Assembly elections suggests that political parties have hardly made any effort to give more tickets to women candidates even as a sign of gesture. An analysis of the number of tickets given by both national and regional political parties to women candidates suggests that in Madhya Pradesh, for the House of 230 seats both the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Congress fielded 24 and 27 women candidates, respectively, in the 2018 election. After passing the reservation Bill just before the elections, they have fielded women in 28 and 30 seats, respectively. In Telangana, out of 119 seats, the Bharat Rashtra Samithi, formerly known as Telangana Rashtra Samiti, the Congress and the BJP have fielded 10, eight and four women candidates in the 2018 elections; in the current elections, the numbers were 10, 11 and 12, respectively. In all the five States, no political party has reached even the 15% mark in giving tickets to women candidates — far less than the mandated 33%. It is obvious that political parties are more interested in viewing women as voters than encouraging and empowering them as legislators.

In the 2022 Assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh, the Congress party had reserved 40% of seats for women which was a bold and innovative move in the Indian political arena. Had other political parties such as the BJP and the Samajwadi Party followed suit, the most populous State in India would have seen 40% women legislators on its floor, in turn setting an example for other States and even nations. In Assembly elections in Odisha (2019) and West Bengal (2021), the Biju Janata Dal (BJD) and the Trinamool Congress (TMC) fielded more female candidates and won the electoral battle. The TMC's tickets to 46 women candidates, resulted in 32 candidates winning.

The initiative of enacting the women reservation Act, 2023 is a commendable move by the parliamentarians of the day. But, due to its linkage with the new delimitation which will be done after 2026, we can say that the law looks good only on paper. In spite of not having any law, regional parties such as the TMC have fielded candidates successfully and won electoral battles. The question arises: what has hindered the national and other regional parties in showing commitment towards women empowerment by increasing the number of their women contestants during these Assembly elections? Not having an adequate number of tickets to women candidates even after a law has been enacted (though it will come into effect by 2029) does not send out a positive signal about political commitment to ensure women's political empowerment.

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