

Tracing Gender Norms in the Political Sphere: A Study on the Nizamabad (Urban) Assembly Constituency of Telangana

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Abstract

This paper seeks to analyze the political representation of women in India in the present times. Females, who account for 48.46% of India's population (2011 Census), are quite under-represented in the Indian Parliament, although their representation in both the Houses of the Parliament, as well as in ministerial positions, has been increasing gradually. There is a significant prevalence of Sarpanch Pati, and husbands overriding the power of elected wives, in the political sphere. This paper seeks to understand the behavior and opinion of respondents regarding this issue, with the help of qualitative interviews that were conducted in the Nizamabad Urban Assembly Constituency of Telangana. The open-ended questions resulted in the descriptive opinion of the respondents. The study highlighted the fact that the mindset of the voters is still against the active role of women in politics. The research found that 57% of the respondents feel that in politics, there is a need for male assistance for women. This implies the existence of gender inequality and patriarchal gender norms in the political sphere. Nonetheless, it is hoped that the new women's reservation bill can shatter the prevailing glass ceiling, in the political arena.

Keywords: Women's Representation, Sarpanch Pati, Political Glass Ceiling.

Introduction

Women in the Indian sub-continent, have been reaching greater heights in the 21st century. India's President is a woman, while in the states of Telangana, Uttar Pradesh and Manipur, the Governor is a woman, and even India's Finance Minister is also a woman. But the representation of women is not in proportion to their population. This research keenly observes respondents' views of Telangana's Nizamabad Urban Assembly Constituency regarding women's participation and representation in Politics. Telangana's polls are scheduled on the 30th of November 2023. Female representation is meager in the Nizamabad Parliament constituency. The daughter of the current Chief Minister was elected as an MP from this constituency in 2014, but she lost in the 2019 elections. In this context, it is worthwhile to remember that Coleman (1960), in his comparative study of the political systems of 75 countries observed that national politics is essentially urban politics. Out of 7 assembly constituencies, Nizamabad Urban is exclusively an urban constituency. Hence, this study focuses on the Nizamabad urban assembly constituency in Telangana, to comprehend gender norms that govern voting behavior.

Women are seen to be severely under-represented in the polls. It is evident from the electoral data that only one woman, i.e., Kalvakuntla Kavitha (daughter of Chief Minister K Chandrashekhar Rao), has won the Parliament seat of Nizamabad, since its first election. The same was the situation in the Nizamabad Urban and Rural Assembly elections. Since 1952, i.e., the first election, only woman representative, Akula Lalitha, has been elected.

The major issues regarding the prevailing gender inequality in the electoral domain may be summarized in the following three points:

- 1) Fewer women are contesting in elections
- 2) Very few women are elected as representatives
- 3) Even after being elected, they are acting as mere rubber stamps

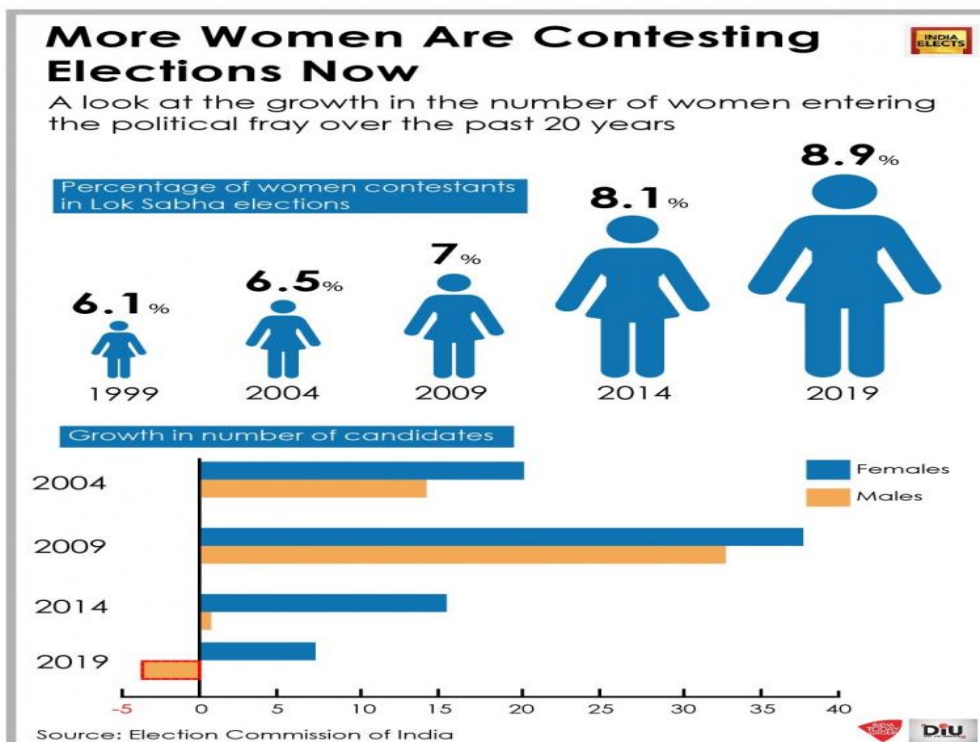
This calls for a detailed analysis of each of the above factors.

1) Less number of women are contesting in elections

There is very little awareness amongst women about choosing politics as a career. Neither are they encouraged by their family, nor are they self-motivated enough to enter the political fray. Recently, there has been an apparent increase in the trend of more women participating in the elections. This is because of the 50% reservations given to women in local bodies in many states. In state assembly and parliament elections, their numbers are still low. There is the existence of political glass ceiling where the number of women in the political sphere is not improving, until there is a law or bill being passed.

Nevertheless, according to India Today's Data Intelligence Unit (DIU), there is an improvement in the number of women candidates contesting in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections.

Figure 1.1 Growth in the number of women contesting elections



Source: India Today

2) Very few women are elected as representatives

Apart from the seats reserved for women in local bodies, there are very few seats, where women contest and win elections. Most of the women are being voted for by considering the party they are representing. Very few women are elected based on their personal charisma or political acumen, rather than their identification with a party or an influential family. Thus, despite the fact that as per the 2011 census, 48% of the Indian population is female, women's representation in the Lok Sabha is less than 12%.

3) Even after the election, they act as rubber stamps

The concept of *Sarpanch-Pati* is more evident in the local bodies. When a woman is elected, it is her husband who actually wields the power associated with the elected seat. This lowers the confidence or trust of the voters. In August 2022, it has been reported that husbands of elected women in the Gaisabad Panchayat of Damoh district of Madhya Pradesh had allegedly taken oath with the elected women sitting aside. Such practices have become common in India.

Review of Literature

Most of the decline occurred in political empowerment, where India regressed considerably, with a significant drop in the number of women ministers in recent years — from 23.1% in 2019, to 9.1% in 2021. It is inferred from a survey that sought to trace the difficulties of women in getting into politics is that politics is the profession of men, and women are not encouraged to enter into in this field. Women are designated with roles that require care and compassion, that are in tandem with their motherly roles. Politics is not a feminine profession. Female candidates are often made to contest in local body elections for namesake, where the original power lies with the husband.

The reasons for the low representation of women in Indian politics are

1. Socio-historic forces inherited from nationalist movements
2. Lack of reservation of seats for women in the parliament and state legislatures
3. The lack of national consensus and willingness among political parties to give more tickets to women
4. Perpetuation of a patriarchal political structure together with class, caste, and gender subordination
5. Lack of awareness and knowledge of electoral politics
6. Even during the allotment of ministries, primarily women are allotted with feminine ministers such as women and child welfare, information and culture, social welfare, etc. (Ramakrishnan (2022))

Leaders invest more in infrastructure that is directly relevant to the needs of their own genders. Women invest more in infrastructure that is directly relevant to the needs of rural women such as water, fuel, and roads. Women are more likely to participate in the policy-making process if the leader of their village council is a woman. (Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2004)

There are women who turned to politics to address their problems after realising that their needs could not be met by conventional political organisations. Women in politics dealt with issues of access to water, sanitation, and fuel, among other things. They were totally helpless to deal with matters that posed a threat to male authority. There are shortcomings of the panchayats, there is continuation of rural power structures, and patterns of inequality and dominance. All-women panchayats are different from other

panchayats in that there is no corruption, and, the programmes they choose to implement help both men and women grow. (Datta, 1998)

In modern societies, the sexual division of labour separates production according to gender and spheres are termed as “public” and “private.” The private sphere is mostly regarded as the duty of women. Men have privileged access to public life. The public sphere includes education, employment, politics, etc. Women have very rare access to this sphere. It has been argued that if women enter in the public sphere, then it is even more burdening for her, as she shall be left responsible for her private sphere too i.e., cooking, rearing of children, household chores etc. (Habermas, 2015). However, this public/private dichotomy has been severely criticised by feminists.

Caste and Surnames: The Field View

Usually, politicians are identified by their full names. The full names include their surname and caste (surnames and caste might be identical or different, depending on different parts of India). This is useful for familial and dynastic politics. The successors of a famous politician are identified with their surnames. This happens with the wife too. Whenever there is a reserved seat for women, the woman is identified with the family or political dynasty.

Prasanna, a student, explained, "Usually, men want to contest in elections. Nevertheless, they let their wives contest the elections when the reservations are applicable. I think the surname and caste play an important role in this process. Most politicians shall use their full name, including a surname at the beginning and a caste name at the end. Even if their wives contest in the elections, their names shall be so recognizable that the voters think they are voting for the same family. For example, a famous politician in our colony is Panhareddy Srinivas Reddy. He is supposed to contest for ward member. Yet, due to reservations, his wife was contesting, and she won. Because her name is visible in the EVMs as Panhareddy Lavanya Reddy, this made the voters think they were voting for the same family and that Mr. Srinivas was there to take care of the colony."

One more pattern has been observed in politics regarding surname and caste name. Change of surname to husband's surname and caste is commonly practiced in most parts of India. Still, it is up to the individual's choice whether to change or not change their names. But, the phenomenon of not changing their names after marriage when they belong to an influential family is also widely observed. For example, the daughter of Kalvakuntla Chandrashekhar Rao is Kalvakuntla Kavitha, who has not changed her surname after marriage. The same is kept in the case of Y.S. Sharmila, daughter of Y.S. Rajashekhar Reddy, former Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh. According to the respondents, it is due to the popularity and fame of the surnames.

Women politicians attaching their husbands' names are also observed. For example, a former Mayor's name is Akula Sujatha, and her husband's is Akula Srisailam. But during the elections, her name was identified as Akula Sujatha Srisailam. This is done for a more evident identification of their ties.

Data was collected for the study in the Nizamabad (Urban) Assembly constituency in March and April, 2023. One hundred responses were collected based on stratified random sampling. Forty-five female respondents and 55 male respondents were interviewed. The proportion of religion in the sample is as follows: 5% Christians, 35% Muslims, and 60% Hindus (representing the constituency's diversified population.)

The respondents were asked what they think about women politicians in local bodies and Sarpanch-Patis, why men assist women in politics, and their opinion regarding whether women can handle politics and political decisions by themselves was also documented. Based on their responses, the following conclusions were drawn regarding the prevailing mindset about women in politics.

Table 1.1: The sex and religion of respondents and their opinion on Sarpanch-Patis and men assisting women in politics

Sex & Religion	Woman can handle politics	Woman need assistance of men in politics	Women are in politics only because of reservations	There is male domination or show-off in politics	There is lack of political knowledge amongst women	No idea
Christian female	1	2	0	1	0	0
Christian male	1	0	1	0	1	0
Hindu female	9	16	4	7	11	1
Hindu male	6	16	10	8	12	1
Muslim female	0	7	1	1	5	0
Muslim male	3	16	3	3	6	3

Source: Data collected during fieldwork

1) “Women need assistance from men in politics”

Among all the rows mentioned above in Table 1.1, it is evident that women who need assistance from men have got the highest responses. Most of the respondents think that women need assistance from men in politics. It accounts for 57% of the respondents. Though few respondents said there is a need for minimum assistance, it accounts for the viewpoint of people where a woman is dependent on family members. There is a significantly less share of respondents who said that women can handle politics and political decisions independently, which is 20%. Respondents from both the sexes of Hindu and Muslim communities have opined that assistance is required for women, and women lack political knowledge. Surprisingly, none of the female respondents from the Muslim community said that women could handle politics and political decisions all by themselves.

2) “Women contest elections because of reservations, and win because of their husband’s popularity”

Many respondents opined that women contest in elections because of reservations and they win the elections because of their husband’s popularity. According to Raju, " women contest in elections because of reservations, but she wins because of her husband's popularity. The husband spends all the money to

win the elections. So, after winning, it is natural for him to take power because the money and popularity belong to him."

Anand, another respondent, whose opinion reflected those of Raju, said, "It is due to male domination. It is also for taking back the investment made by her husband; if there were no reservations, his wife would not have been contesting. Though women can handle politics, minimum assistance is required."

Rajesh, a respondent, further added, "People might not listen to women. They listen primarily to men. That is why the husband starts interfering and assisting. To some extent, this problem is less in cities but more in villages. A woman needs the assistance of men, especially in villages. Hence, Pati-panchayats still exist."

3) "Women are not social enough to interact in a male dominated world"

Few other respondents expressed that women are not social; it is difficult for them to interact in the male dominated world. Supriya, a 21-year-old student added, "Women are uncomfortable outside. If they participate in politics, they should perform much work. They cannot go to all the places and do every work. So, what is wrong with taking a man's support? Women require men's assistance."

Hari, a shopkeeper, further added, "Men command women. Men are more into politics and remain among the public. The public prefers to vote for men. Women can handle only up to a maximum of 50%, and the remaining 50% they cannot manage. They have few acquaintances and cannot spend more time with the public."

Swetha, a homemaker, responded, "Women always think of what to cook, what to wear only. They are not interested in political news. Instead, they watch daily serials a lot. So they lack political knowledge. Hence it is better if men assist them in politics."

A 63-year-old tailor, Soundarya, analysed, "Male assistance is required in politics because women do not go outside. She should be able to handle politics. For example, only if I can stitch good clothes shall I be called a tailor. Likewise, only those women who can handle politics should be allowed to contest in the elections."

4) "It is okay for women to be subservient to men"

Few respondents also noted that it is okay for women to be submissive to men; it shall be accounted as women respecting men. They also pointed that without the help of a man, a woman cannot do anything.

Vijay, a respondent, elaborated, "It is common that men overarch women. It is the system. Though women win and are responsible for their offices, they would rest most of the time. They are present only for signatures. It is common everywhere that women are submissive to men. In our family system, as women respect men, they should and will listen to men, and their decision-making capability is lesser than that of men."

Parvathi, a respondent observed, "Women do not have much political knowledge, and few sympathy votes are gained if a woman is contesting elections. These days everyone is equal. Still at least some minimal support and assistance is required by women. Without the support of her husband, a woman cannot do anything. Women should handle both inside and outside the home. With the help of a husband, a woman can excel more."

Wahida, a respondent, said, "It is good that women are sitting at home and helping their husbands and making them win and deal with the political affairs."

Anita, a graduate respondent, opined, "Without a husband's support, a woman cannot do anything. It is a male-dominated society. Women are more sensitive and softer. Indira Gandhi has become the Prime Minister of India because of her family background. It is difficult for a woman to start her political journey from the ground level and become a successful politician."

According to a 65-year-old respondent Sukanya, "Women are not good with their behaviour. They do not value people. Men are comparatively better. Women are very cunning. Men are fearful of women (while in the public sphere) and do listen and work for them."

5) Few respondents felt the need to question male dominance in politics

Very few respondents felt the need that this practice of male dominance in politics should end. Raghava, a respondent explained, "All these happen because nobody questions. Voters should question the audacity of their husbands to benefit from women's reservation or election. Instead, the voters are looking upon those husbands as heroes. For example, a male Sarpanch (village headman) questioned a female MLA. Women can handle politics and political decisions."

Except a few, most of the respondents' statements clearly state that women cannot and are not supposed to participate in political affairs. They think that women cannot handle politics and cannot make political decisions all by themselves. Most of them feel that women cannot do all such activities because they lack political knowledge.

Firstly, from their childhood onwards, during their primary socialization phase, women are told to be submissive, respect men, cook and serve food for their brothers and cousins, and are asked to take care of them. Even if she goes out somewhere, she is asked to take any male member with her; even a 4 or a 5 year old child can be considered a male protector for a 13/14 year old girl. Because of all these gender stereotypes, the male child feels superior to females, while the female child feels inferior to her male counterpart.

The Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam

It is commonly referred to as the women's reservation bill. After several attempts across decades, this bill has been passed by both the houses of the Parliament in India, in a special session. This bill provides 33% reservation for women in the Lok Sabha, State Legislative Assemblies, and the National Capital Territory of Delhi. The seats reserved for women will be rotated after each delimitation exercise.

There is a prolonged delay in the application of this quota as the reservation has been linked to the delimitation. The last delimitation order of the delimitation commission was issued in 2008, which fixed the issues of all boundaries. The decadal census which was scheduled for 2021 did not take place due to the Covid-19 pandemic. In 2002, Article 82 was amended to the effect that it shall not be necessary to readjust the allocation of Lok Sabha Constituencies state-wise, and the division of each state into constituencies, until the figures of the first Census held after 2026 were available. The Central Government has announced that the census and delimitation shall take place after the 2024 General Elections.

The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts laid the foundation for the introduction of not less than one-third reservation for women in Panchayats and Urban local bodies. It took nearly 30 years for the women's reservation in Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies to come into effect. The linkage to census and delimitation made it unapplicable to 2024 Lok Sabha Elections, but shall be applicable from 2029 General Elections.

An Account of Women Candidates Contesting Elections in Telangana

A total of 140 women contested in the 2018 elections. Out of 140 women candidates who contested in the 2018 Assembly elections, only six of them had won. This accounts for 5.04% of total number of assembly seats. Whereas, the same accounts for 4.29% of total women candidates who contested in the elections. 122 women candidates lost contests alongwith forfeiting the deposit.

There are 2,290 candidates contesting in the November, 2023 elections. Out of them, 2,068 are male, 1 is a transgender and 221 are women running for office in the Assembly, which is 81 more female candidates than in the previous election. The Bharat Rashtira Samithi (BRS) has fielded 8 women candidates, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-Jansena has fielded 14 and Congress has fielded 11 women candidates. Thirteen women candidates from the BJP and twelve from the Congress have received tickets. In addition, the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) has fielded nine candidates, and more candidates are running as independents. These are the number of women candidates contesting from major political parties. The BJP has been conservative in providing tickets to female candidates. This is in contrast to its attempts to claim credit for the adoption of the much-anticipated Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam law, which reserves 33% seats for women in the Lok Sabha and legislative assembly. The Congress has also attempted to claim credit for attempting to enact the measure while the UPA was in power. Kalvakuntla Kavitha, daughter of BRS Supremo KCR, also claims that it is the constant demand and pressure from their party that led to the passage of the bill.

Discussions and Conclusions

Most of the respondents in the study, irrespective of gender, believe that men are more social and outgoing, so they concluded that men have more political knowledge. Thus, while comparing parents, all the respondents said that the father is more knowledgeable in politics, in comparison to the mother. The husband influences the wife in most decisions, especially political decisions and voting behaviour. More than the father, the husband's influence is more on a woman because women are getting married within the attainment of the legal age to marry, i.e., 18 years. Even if they marry late, they are not applying for voter identity cards as they must change their address after the marriage, since the Indian society is a patrilocal and patrilineal society.

Most respondents said that women do not have political knowledge; they contest elections because of their reservations. Few of them, especially women respondents, are entirely okay with being subordinate to men. Even in this 21st century, respondents expressed that women need the assistance of men in politics because women have less political knowledge. It might be valid to some extent that women do not have much political understanding, as stated by the respondents, because they watch daily soaps more than the news. But this cannot be generalized for all the women, as one of the respondents stated that even all men are not into politics. Hence it all depends on individual capability rather than gender stereotypes. Many female respondents have also responded in the same way that women need assistance in political matters. It is likely due to the conditioning since childhood that girls are taught to stay at home and watch daily serials, whereas a boy is expected to go out of the house, meet new people, and build social capital.

The response by many respondents regarding whether a woman is free to vote or shall be influenced by her family is that even though there is influence, she can vote whomsoever she wants to in the polling booth, as the influencers cannot see whom she is actually voting for, thanks to the secret ballot system. This implies that the influence and suggestions shall be there, but it is ultimately the choice of the

woman to vote according to her own political preferences, or give in to the suggestions and pressures of the male members of her family.

When asked about whether people vote under the influence of others, most men said that they vote of their own volition. However, women expressed the view that they vote under the influence of their family members, to be precise, a male member. Furthermore, the responses clearly reveal that male respondents try to influence others by expressing their views, while female respondents are unlikely to influence others. It is evident from the data collected that women are merely acting as the agents of patriarchy by helping to continue the subjugation of women under the control of men.

With regard to the places where people prefer to discuss political matters, 84% of the respondents have said that they discuss politics in family and family gatherings. The majority of the male respondents observed that they shall discuss politics at family functions. Female respondents also responded that family functions are a place of discussion of politics. However, while male respondents acknowledged that they actively put forth their views and arguments in such discussions, the female respondents, in contrast, agreed that they were more of passive participants, who merely listen to the topics that men discussed. This may be attributed to the fact that while men are expected to drink and eat, women are expected to cook and make other people eat, be it at home on a daily basis, or even in family gatherings. The vote is often not personal. For a woman, it is the influence and advise of men that help in formulating her voting behavior. A man always advises a woman, be it as a father, brother, or a husband. Women consistently receive advice from men. Men also get advice from older men in their homes, like a father or a knowledgeable person, etc.

Furthermore, very few women are educated as well as employed. Even though many female respondents are educated, they are not engaged with work outside home; they are only involved in domestic chores of the house itself. This might be due to the individual's choice or societal pressure, including that of her family members, who might ask her not to seek employment.

According to Prof. Amartya Sen (2001), there are seven gender inequalities in India. They are mortality inequality, natality inequality, employment inequality, ownership inequality, special opportunity inequality, basic - facility inequality, and household inequality. Based on the findings of the study, this research paper is keen on adding one more inequality to these seven types. It is political and electoral inequality. It is the inequality where women are treated as incapable of dealing with politics and political decisions. Advice in a family regarding political decisions is taken mainly from a male member. Again, even most political parties give very few tickets to women politicians to contest the elections.

A Constitutional Amendment bill has been introduced in the Lok Sabha i.e., the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam to reserve one third of the seats of the Lok Sabha and State legislative assemblies for women. This shall ensure more women's participation and representation in the Parliament. But the bill shall become a law only after delimitation of constituencies takes place in 2026, and the census needs to be conducted for more recent data on the population. This census could not be conducted in 2021, due to Covid 19. Meanwhile the upcoming election shall be conducted without any reservations for women. Very few women candidates were fielded by the major political parties in the Telangana Assembly polls 2023. Instead of waiting for the bill to become a law, the political parties themselves can allot 33% of party tickets to women in the General elections to be held in 2024. A holistic approach to overcome this gender inequality in the political sphere is the need of the hour. Education and primary socialization should include more egalitarian and equality-oriented interaction, where stereotypes regarding occupations and capabilities are not encouraged. The role of educated and empowered women in

supporting and uplifting their fellow women, cannot be overemphasized in this exercise. This along with constant efforts from civil society organizations in spreading awareness regarding the political rights of women, can go a long way in ensuring gender equality in the political sphere, thereby making the largest democracy in the world come alive in nature and spirit.

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