

Higher Women Political Representation: The Impact in Reality

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Abstract

Women have always been the oppressed section of the society in all fields. The parliament in the political realm of society is no exception to this. With less than 20% women holding political power worldwide, gender disparity can be concluded as a global perspective. The question, however, that arises is whether higher women political representation will lead to empowerment and better standards of living for the rest of the women in the country through supportive and favorable laws. To analyze this question, the paper aims to compare the political structure of two countries, India and Rwanda. These countries have been specifically chosen because in the former, the women have been severely discriminated against for centuries while the latter has recently become the country to have the highest percentage of women representatives in the parliament. In the first half of the paper, both the countries' political structure and reasons for less or more women representatives is stated. In the second half, the paper attempts to understand the effect of such higher political representation while establishing laws through the Maternity Leaves Act of the respective countries. Finally, the paper states the conclusion derived from the comparison as well as the limitation and result should not be generalized because there can be certain laws where higher women political representation may have played a crucial role.

Keywords: women, oppressed section, India, Rwanda, Higher political representation, Maternity Leaves Act

1. Introduction

It is a known fact that women in the world have always been put on a lower pedestal in all walks of life. They have, worldwide, been stereotyped to be a gender that should excel in household chores while the men are classified as the gender responsible for earning money and providing a livelihood to their families. The women lose their right to represent their community in different male dominated fields like politics, economics or law.

As stated above, the parliament that is an organ under the political field of a country is an institution where the women representation is extremely low. Most of the countries of the world have had a male dominant parliament for all these years. Even now, when women have begun representing the people in the parliament, their percentage of the total number of members remains 17% on an average across the countries of the world. ("Women in Parliaments: World and Regional Averages", 2019)

The aim of this paper is to understand whether there is a positive impact on the provisions of the proposed bills in the parliament when there is a higher women representation.

Being the oppressed section of the society, the way women perceive politics and understand the need for evolution of ideas is very different from the ways men understand the same. Cross-national researches in the earlier years have revealed that women have lower political representation and differ from men in their ruling or governance strategies in four areas i.e. political and social structures and ideological variables. (Paxton & Kunovich, 2003)

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The social variables explain that there is low women political representation because the structural barriers lead to political instability in gender representation. This can also be explained by supply-demand concept i.e. there is low representation of women because there is low supply and demand for female candidates.(Norris, 1997)

The structural factors establish the supply of candidates. The political power holders are preferred from highly educated class or certain professions like the law as it is linked closely with the political structure of a country.(Norris, 1997) Therefore, if a woman does not have access to higher education or professional opportunities, the supply pool of potential women reduces.

Various political institutions, on the other hand, determine the demand for the women candidates. The political and social structures collide at this point. The methods of election to the parliament effect women representation. There are two main methods through which elections take place i.e. the single constituency method in which the votes are counted through plurality and majority. The second method is proportional representation method in which the voters' vote for the list of candidates put before them. Parties are able to nominate only a single candidate in a single-member district system but the proportional representation system allows multiple nominations.(Matland, 1998)

This social variability leads to a different strategy of governance by a woman. When a woman is elected to power, she has a different strategy of governance as compared to a man because she comes from the inferior society. She attempts to integrate her experiences into policies to make the situation better of the other people who might be on the verge of experiencing similar situations. Politically, if a party supports a woman candidate, she is able to gather more votes from the voters because of the social reasons explained above. Furthermore, a woman is seen as a more emotional woman than the male and therefore the voters think that she will relate and be sympathetic to their miseries and issues.

The ideology differences also leads to low representation of women in the political institutions. Political theorists like Thomas Hobbes, Avicenna, Aristotle and John Locke believed that women should be kept away from politics because they lack the sense of rationality needed to take such decisions. Though women gain suffrage, some theorists were still skeptical of their rational mind.(Campbell, 1980)This ideological difference leads to lesser women being able to reach these positions of power as to begin their struggle for power itself becomes challenging.

This factor leads to different governing strategy because women are characterized by motherhood and marriage. When she attains a powerful position in politics, she not only proves that she can balance home and work like men do, she is also able to make an attempt to change this general notion and provide newer opportunities to the women of the society.

2. Objective of the Study

1. To understand the parliamentary representation of women in India and Rwanda
2. To understand the impact of higher women representation in context of the Maternity Leaves Acts of both the countries.

3. Methodology

The paper is a qualitative research that relies on certain facts and data. It has attempted to lay down the parliamentary structure of the two countries i.e. India and Rwanda. Within this structure, the paper has compared the women representation in the parliament. To further narrow down the comparative analysis between the two countries, the paper focuses on the Maternity Leaves Acts of both the countries to understand whether any better provisions have been added to the Rwanda's Act as it has more number of women political representation.

4. Result

Both the parliaments are bicameral with the only difference in the number of members in each house. While the Indian Act was introduced in the parliament that had only 28 out of 244 female members by a male member ("Women Members", 2018), the Rwandan Act was introduced in a parliament that had both women President and Secretary General. ("Women Members", 2018) In the practical sense, while the Maternity Benefits (Amendment) Act, 2016 has not been implemented due to pending confirmation from the RajyaSabha; the Rwandan Maternity Leaves Act 2016 has been passed by the legislature. However, analyzing the provisions of the acts in the theoretical sense, the Indian Bill trumps the benefits given to mothers by the Rwandan Act.

The Indian Bill provides for more number of maternity leaves in addition to many other facilities that will ease the lives of the new mothers in the labor market. One advantage that the Rwandan Act has over the Indian Bill is that for better implementation of the Act, the RSSB is sharing the burden of payment that is being made to the women being given maternity leaves.

The sole burden of payment of salary on the employer in India reduces his/her incentive to hire another woman in the company.

5. Discussion

In India, the parliament is a bicameral form of parliament in a democratic rule. It comprises of the Lok Sabha, which is the lower house consisting of 545 members and the Rajya Sabha, the upper house which comprises of 244 members. The percentage of women in both the houses has always been fluctuating with subsequent elections. For example, the 1991 election results showed 5.2% and 9.8% of women membership in the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha respectively, which was lesser than the preceding 1989 parliament. (Swarup, Sinha, Ghosh & Rajput, 1994) The 1996 election results depicted a further fall in the number of women representatives. However, the 1999 elections witnessed an increase in percentage of women political representatives to 8.8%.

Women, being an oppressed and unheard section of the society in India have been refused opportunities that could allow them to hold powerful positions. The demand for greater representation of women in politics has been in play for a long time but was systematically taken for the first time only when the Committee on the Status of Women in India was incorporated. This committee submitted its report in 1976. (Rai, 2002) This report suggested that due to social and hierarchical reality, the number of women in the parliament could only be increased, especially at the most base level, if a policy of reservation for women was established. To incorporate this policy, a 30% reservation quota was proposed by the National Perspective Plan for Women in 1988 for women in all elective bodies at all levels. The women's movements concurred with this proposal and demanded a reservation policy solely for the Panchayat setup, which is the base level of politics. A consensus was reached on this demand. This led to the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Constitution of India in 1993. Government of India Publication, 1974)

The need for quotas was raised again in 1995 but this time the focus shifted from Panchayats to parliament of the country. When this concern was initially raised, all political parties believed and agreed with the proposal. However, they began having their doubts when the bill relating to this issue was actually tabled in the Eleventh Parliament in 1997. It has been 20 years since the introduction of the bill in the parliament, yet it hasn't been passed. The current government led by the Bharatiya Janata Party has been determined to table a new bill for the quotas for women in the parliament.

The Maternity Benefits (Amendment) Bill, 2016 was proposed in the Rajya Sabha by the Minister of Labour and Employment, Mr. Bandaru Dattatreya on 11th August 2016. ("The Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Bill, 2016", 2018) The Bill extends the period of the maternity leaves to 26 weeks, which was initially 12 weeks in the Act. However, women with two or more children were being ensured only 12 weeks of maternity leave. Their respective employers will pay for these leaves. The Bill adds the new provision of giving maternity leave of up to 12 weeks for women who have adopted a child less than 3 months or a commissioning mother. Furthermore, a workplace, which has 50 or more workers in the establishment, should have a crèche facility within the reach of the woman. The range of the woman should be such that she is able to visit her child four times a day in the crèche. The Bill also introduces a provision where the employer should give the option of work from home to the woman if the nature of the employment permits the same. Lastly, the Bill mandates the employer to disclose all the rights a woman has under these provisions at the time of hiring through electronic and written modes of communication. Though the Rajya Sabha has passed this Bill, it awaits confirmation from the Lok Sabha.

Rwanda, on the other hand, has not only had the highest percentage of women representation in the world but also has the only parliament that has a gender split functionality i.e. 48.75%. (Devlin & Elgie, 2008) This country has been the place of severe and gruesome genocide between April and July 1994. During this violence, women though were victims of various offences, but men were first looked at for extermination. Furthermore, when this genocide was taking place, many women presumed the leading roles in politics and economy but unlike other post-conflict situations (Handrahan, 2004), these women did not discharge these positions when the genocide settled down. This became an inspiration for many women to rise up and be able to acquire these positions and hence the women representation in the parliament also eventually increased.

There exists minimal literature to observe or understand the impact of higher proportion of women representation in Chamber of Deputies of Rwanda. Elizabeth Powley, in her research, states that in the initial increase of women representation in the legislature, they achieved great success in establishing gender equality in the country. The women deputies have been able to revoke the laws that prohibited the women community from inheriting properties. (Jad, 1999)

She has also contributed her findings to a research that displays the impact of higher women political representation in creating gender based violence laws.(Powley& Pearson, 2007)

Rwanda's first parliament was established in 1994 that contained 70 seats. Out of these 70 seats, women held only 8 seats i.e. 11.4%. (Quoted from an interview with Deputy AnastaseMukandora, 26 June 2006) The consequent parliaments observed an increase in the percentage of women political representation. The 1997 parliament had 17.1% women in the Chamber of Deputies, which further increased to 25.7% in 2000. A Constitution was drafted and established which created an at least 30 percent quota for the women(The Constitution of Rwanda, 2018) to hold seats in the decision making organs. In pursuance of this new Constitution, in 2003, the elections observed an increase in the number of seats held by women i.e. women held 39 out of 80 seats (48.75%) in the chamber. Currently, Rwanda has 49 out of 80 i.e. 61.25% elected women in the parliament.(Union, 2019)

The Rwandan Maternity Leaves Act was passed in 2016. The Act creates a provision for fully paid 12 weeks maternity leaves for the mother. It also states that every employer in Rwanda will pay the salary of the month within 15 days of the next month. For example, the salary of January 2019 should be paid by 15th February 2019. The Rwanda Social Security Board(RSSB), being the custodians of the entire scheme and guardians of the women, will be paying the benefits starting from the seventh week while the employer will pay for the first six weeks. The reason for the enactment of this Act was to allow the women to balance their reproductive and productive lives in a better way. The RSSB has further stated that 0.6% of the employee's gross salary will be contributed towards this scheme and the employer and employee together will contribute 0.35% to the scheme. The main purpose of the provisions for maternity protection is to ensure elimination of discrimination against women in the labor market, which is reinforced by gender inequality. (ILO, 2016)

6. Conclusion

Through the analysis and comparison of both the laws in the countries, it can be observed that higher women proportion in the parliament did not make any significant impact in the quality of the bill being proposed in the parliament for the empowerment of women. Though the Indian Bill has not yet been passed by the Lok Sabha, it can theoretically state that the provisions in the Indian Bill are practically much better for the empowerment and better status of women in the society. This Indian Bill was introduced by a man in a male dominated parliament and therefore, in the scope of this paper, higher women representation in the political arena does not necessarily imply gender equality and assurance of non-discrimination of women on the basis of gender in the country.

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