



Women's Underrepresentation in Politics

This editorial is based on [“In politics and bureaucracy, women are severely under-represented”](#) which was published in the Indian Express on 13/02/2023. It discusses the Issue of Representation of Women in Politics and ways to address the same.

For Prelims: International Monetary Fund, Election Commission of India, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises

For Mains: Issue of Under-representation of Women in Bureaucracy, Issues Related to Women, Women's Issues, Inclusive Growth, Human Resource, Government Policies & Interventions

India is expected to be the third-largest economy in the world by 2030, after the US and China. According to the [International Monetary Fund \(IMF\)](#), India's economy will grow by 6.8% compared to the US's 1.6%. Despite its economic growth, **women's participation in the country's economy, polity and society has not kept pace.**

Elections in India have witnessed a striking contrast in recent times. The female voter turnout has increased in the country as the seven out of eight states that went to the polls in 2022 saw a jump in female voter turnout.

Though this sounds promising, **the increasing proportion of women voters seen in local, state and general elections** has not translated into more women contesting elections.

So, the need of the hour is to **address the roadblocks in the representation of women** in politics. In order to achieve gender equality and ensure that women have equal opportunities to participate in politics, policymakers, civil society organizations, and the general public will have to work together.

What is the State of Women in Politics and Bureaucracy?

▪ In Politics:

- As per data compiled by the **Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU)**, in India, women make up 14.44% of the **17th Lok Sabha**.
- As per the latest available report of the [Election Commission of India \(ECI\)](#), **women represent 10.5% of all Members of Parliament as of October 2021.**
 - For all the state assemblies, female MLAs' representation stands at an average of 9%.
 - India's ranking in this regard has fallen over the last few years. It is currently behind Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal.

▪ In Bureaucracy:

- Women's participation is **low enough for several public services jobs** at the Centre and states to facilitate free applications for women candidates.
- Despite this, as per Indian Administrative Services (IAS) data and the central government's employment census of 2011, **less than 11% of its total employees were women**, which reached 13% in 2020.
- Further, only 14% of Secretaries in the IAS were women in 2022.
 - There are only three women chief secretaries across Indian states and union territories.
- India has never had a woman cabinet secretary. There have been no women Secretaries of Home, Finance, Defence and Personnel, either.
- **Other Sectors:**
 - **Only 20.37% of [Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises \(MSMEs\)](#) owners are women**, 10% of [start-ups](#) are founded by females, and 23.3% of women are in the labour force.

Why are Women Underrepresented in Politics and Bureaucracy?

- **Patriarchal Mindset:**
 - India is a **deeply patriarchal society**, and women are often considered inferior to men.
 - This **mindset is deeply ingrained in society and affects the way people perceive women's abilities** to lead and participate in politics.
- **Social Norms and Stereotypes:**
 - Women in India are **often expected to conform to traditional gender roles and are discouraged from pursuing careers in politics**. Social norms and stereotypes dictate that women should prioritize their roles as wives and mothers, and politics is often considered a man's domain.
- **Lack of Access to Education:**
 - Women in India have **historically had limited access to education**, which has hindered their ability to participate in politics. Even though there have been improvements in recent years, many women still lack the necessary education and skills to run for political office.
 - According to the [Annual Status of Education Report \(ASER\) 2020](#), 5.5% of children between the ages of 6-10 were not enrolled in school, and 15.9% of children between the ages of 11-14 were not enrolled in school.
- **Limited Representation in Political Parties:**
 - Women are **often underrepresented in political parties**, making it difficult for them to rise through the ranks and secure party nominations for elections.
 - This lack of representation can be attributed to gender bias within political parties and the perception that women are not as electable as men.
- **Violence and Harassment:**
 - Women in **politics are often subjected to violence and harassment, both physical and online**, which can deter them from entering politics or speaking out on issues. The lack of safe and inclusive spaces in politics is a significant barrier to women's participation.
- **Unequal Opportunities:**
 - Women in politics often **face unequal opportunities, such as lower salaries, less access to resources**, and limited networking opportunities. This inequality can make it challenging for women to compete with male candidates and succeed in politics.
- **Structural Impediments:**
 - **Structural impediments to women's empowerment, in general, are the primary issues** that make it difficult for them to be a part of the services.
 - Service conditions involving postings in distant cadres, patriarchal conditioning and balancing family commitments along with the requirements of this job are some of the social factors that lead women to opt out of the civil services.
 - Furthermore, there is a general perception that women should be preferred for "soft" ministries like Social Welfare, Culture, Women and Child Development.

How can Women be more Effectively Represented in Politics?

- **Reservation of Seats:**
 - One of the most effective ways to increase women's representation in politics is to reserve seats for women in legislative bodies.

- This has been implemented in some states like Bihar, Odisha, and West Bengal, where a certain percentage of seats are reserved for women in local bodies.
- **Political Parties should ensure Women Representation:**
 - Political parties **should ensure that women are given adequate representation in candidate selection for elections.**
 - They should make an effort to recruit women candidates and give them priority in winnable seats.
- **Education and Training:**
 - **Education and training programs can be conducted to empower women to participate in politics.**
 - This will help women to build their confidence and skill set, and understand the complexities of politics.
- **Encourage Participation from Local Women Leaders:**
 - Women's representation in politics **can be increased by encouraging and supporting local women leaders.** This can be achieved through **mentorship programs** and other support initiatives.
- **Address Violence against Women in Politics:**
 - Violence against women in politics is **a significant barrier to their effective representation.** Steps such as raising awareness, creating safe environment etc, should be taken to address this issue and ensure the safety and security of women in politics.
- **Address Social and Cultural Barriers:**
 - Women's effective representation in politics can be **hindered by social and cultural barriers such as patriarchy and gender norms.** These issues should be addressed through campaigns, education and awareness programs, and social reform initiatives like Beti Bachao [Beti Padhao Scheme](#), **Sukanya Samridhi Yojana.**
- **Provide Support for Work-Life Balance:**
 - Many women face **challenges in balancing their political responsibilities with their family and personal lives.** Providing support for work-life balance, such as flexible schedules, childcare, and parental leave, can help to address this issue.
 - Recently, Kerala government announced to grant menstrual leave for female students in all state universities under the Department of Higher Education.
- **Increase Visibility and Recognition:**
 - Women in politics **should be given greater visibility and recognition for their accomplishments.**
 - This can help to inspire other women to get involved in politics and to create a culture of greater gender equality in politics.

[Drishti Mains Question](#)

What are the major challenges hindering women's representation in politics in India and what measures can be taken to overcome them?

UPSC Civil Services Examination Previous Year Question

Q.1 What are the continued challenges for Women in India against time and space? (2019)

Q.2 Discuss the desirability of greater representation to women in the higher judiciary to ensure diversity, equity and inclusiveness. (2021)