

Women in National Parliaments: An Overview

Sourabh Ghosh*

Abstract

Post the ratification of the Beijing Platform for Action, globally, the share of women's membership in Parliaments doubled between 1995 and 2015. However, the growth in the share of women Parliamentarians across countries has been extremely uneven. As of 2015, only 22 per cent of the countries have achieved the Beijing Platform for Action target of 30 per cent of seats held by women Parliamentarians. Region-wise, the share of women Parliamentarians is highest in the Nordic countries, followed by the Americas and the European countries other than the Nordic countries. In light of the progress in women's political participation globally, this paper presents a snapshot of participation of women in electoral politics in India. The data presented in this paper clearly demonstrates that Indian electoral politics remains largely exclusionary in terms of participation of women particularly at the national and State levels.

Keywords: Parliament, Democracy, Representation of Women, India

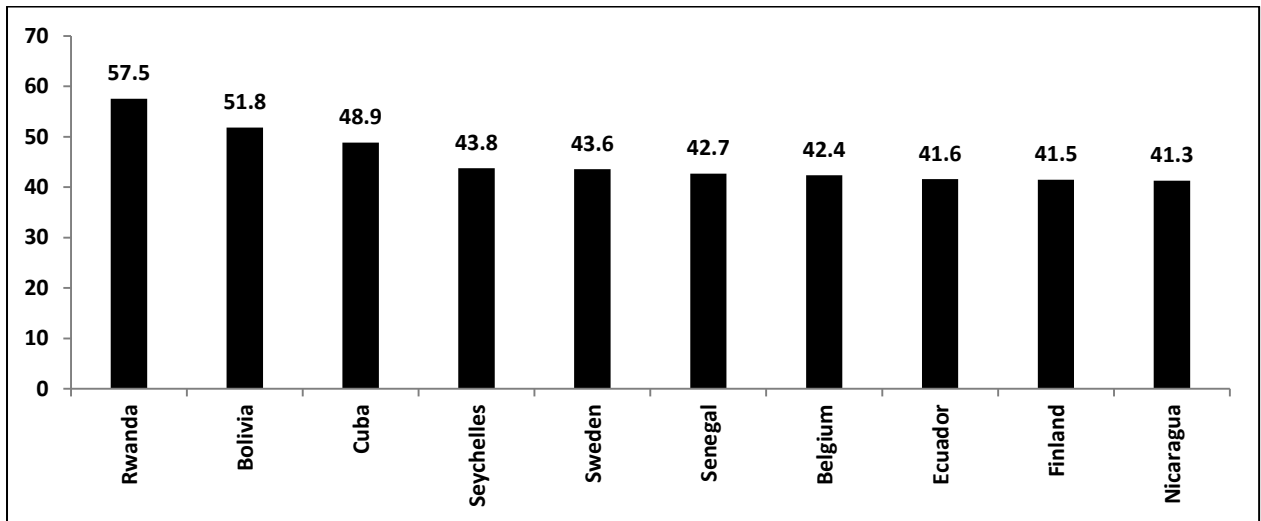
Global Scenario

The mission statement of the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995 called for the removal of all "obstacles to women's active participation in all spheres of public and private life". The Platform endorsed a target of 30 per cent for women in decision-making, to be accomplished through positive action, public debate, and training and mentoring for women as leaders (IPU 2015). Over a period of 20 years between 1995 and 2015, a number of countries have progressed towards achieving this 30 per cent target, with the world average (of proportion of women in national Parliaments) doubling from 11.3 per cent in 1995 to 22.6 per cent in 2015 (IPU 1995; 2016a). As of 2015, the proportion of women in national Parliaments is more than or equal to 30 per cent in only 42 countries (about 22 per cent) out of 191 countries. The vast majority of 149 countries (about 78 per cent) are still to achieve the 30 per cent target (of women Parliamentarians) with 30 countries (about 16 per cent) having less than 10 per cent of women in national Parliaments.

The top 10 countries in terms of proportion of women Parliamentarians (in both Houses combined) as of 2015, are not necessarily the most economically developed economies of the world. The list is headed by Rwanda where affirmative action has resulted in the proportion of women Parliamentarians going upto 57.5 per cent (see Figure 1). Incidentally, Rwanda is dismally ranked at 163 out of 188 countries in terms of the Human Development Index (HDI) of the United Nations in 2014 (UNDP 2015). Among the Nordic countries, Sweden and Finland feature in the top 10 list at fifth and ninth positions respectively. Sweden follows the Zipper System, whereby every other candidate in the electoral process has to be a woman (Mukherjee 2008).

* The author is Ph. D. Scholar, Centre for Economic and Social Studies (CESS), Hyderabad and works with the Economics Research Group of IDFC Bank, New Delhi
E-mail: writetosourabh@gmail.com

Figure 1: Top 10 Countries in terms of proportion of Women Parliamentarians in 2015 (in %)

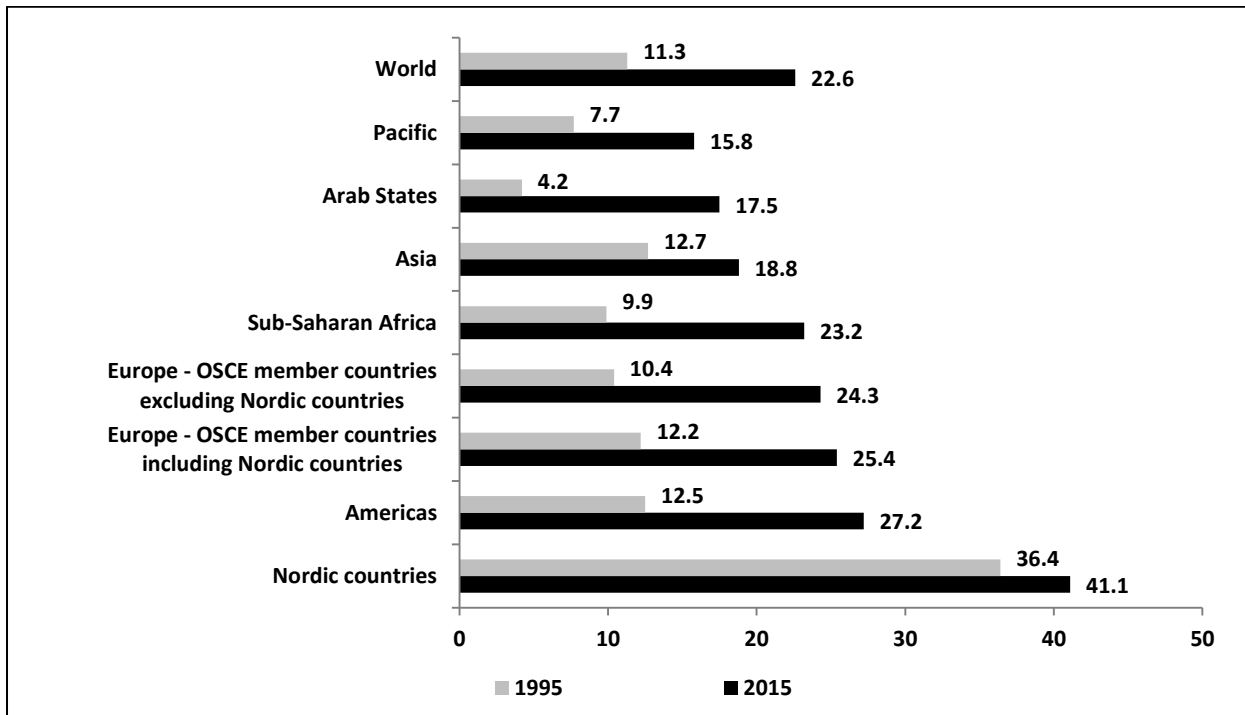


Source: IPU (2016b).

Regional Trends in Women’s Presence in National Parliaments

All regions of the world have witnessed significant growth in the proportion of women in national Parliaments between 1995 and 2015. In most regions, this proportion has doubled or tripled over the 20-year period (see Figure 2). The maximum increase in the proportion of women Parliamentarians has taken place in the Americas (by about 15 percentage points) followed by the European countries other than the Nordic countries (by about 14 percentage points).

Figure 2: Region-wise Proportion of Women in National Parliaments (Per Cent) (1995 & 2015)



Note: OSCE: Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

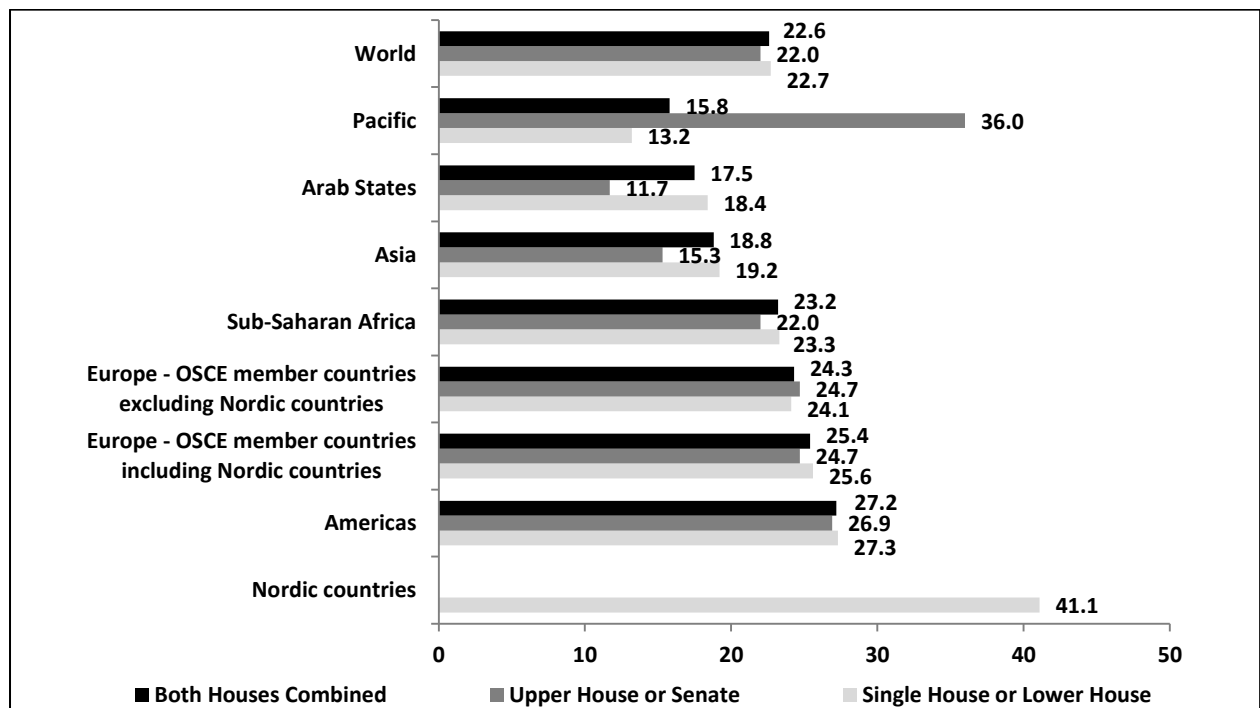
Source: IPU (1995, 2016a).

Women’s representation made significant progress in the Sub-Saharan Africa where the proportion of women Parliamentarians increased by more than 13 percentage points. The change in the proportion

of women Parliamentarians in the Arab States has been similar to that in Sub-Saharan Africa, but from a lower base in 1995. The Nordic countries experienced the lowest increase in the proportion of women Parliamentarians (by about 5 percentage points), but from an already high base of 36.4 per cent in 1995.

Figure 3 gives the regional averages of proportion of women Parliamentarians for 2015 across houses of Parliaments. It is clear from Figure 3 that Nordic countries have the maximum proportion of women Parliamentarians to the tune of 41.1 per cent followed by the Americas (27.2 per cent) and the European countries excluding the Nordic countries (24.3 per cent).

Figure 3: Region-wise Proportion of Women across Houses of National Parliaments (Per Cent) (2015)



Notes: OSCE: Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe. Nordic countries have unicameral Parliament.

Source: IPU (2016a).

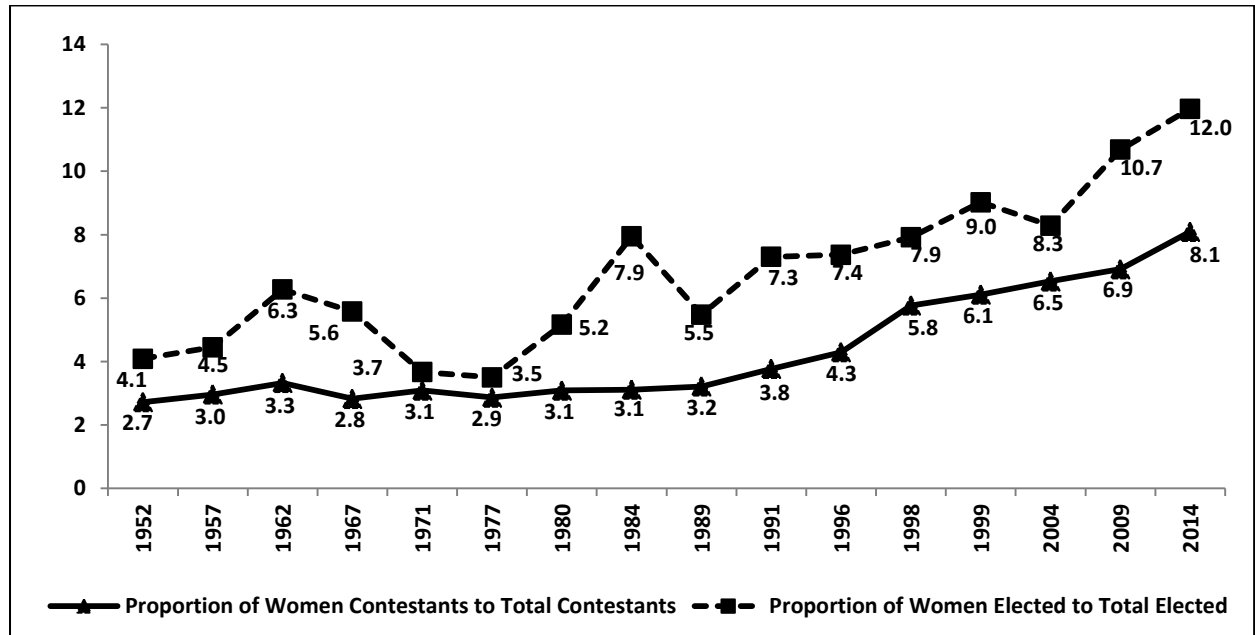
Women in Politics: The Indian Context

Indian electoral politics is exclusionary in terms of providing space to women to participate as candidates at the national and State-level elections. This arises from their marginalisation within the party structure and hierarchy (Rai 2011). As a result, women in India are still not well-represented in national and State-level politics as Members of Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies that would require them to be active in the public sphere (Chhibber 2002, Rai 2011).

The scenario in India vis-à-vis presence of women Parliamentarians is worse compared to the global average. Women's representation in the Lok Sabha (the lower house of the Indian Parliament) since the first general elections in 1952 till the latest round i.e., the 16th round of elections, in 2014 reveals that they continue to be excluded from electoral participation. The proportion of women elected to total elected varies from a low of 3.5 per cent in 1977 to 12 per cent in 2014 (see Figure 4). There was a significant rise in the number of women representatives elected to the 15th Lok Sabha in 2009 as compared to the 14th Lok Sabha in 2004. As a result, for the first time, the proportion of women in Parliament crossed the figure of 10 per cent in the elections to the 15th Lok Sabha in 2009. Although this had important symbolic implications for the future of women's politics, it did not have much to

do with effective political mobilisation of women in the Lok Sabha elections of 2009 (Deshpande 2009).

Figure 4: Participation and Performance of Women in Lok Sabha Elections (Per Cent) (1952 to 2014)



Source: Statistical Reports of General Election to Lok Sabha (various years).¹

The proportion of women elected to the Lok Sabha does not follow a particular trend till the ninth round in 1989. Thereafter, the proportion has been increasing till the latest round of elections with the exception being the 14th round of elections in 2004.

On the other hand, participation of women in the Lok Sabha elections has been very poor. The proportion of women contestants to total contestants has remained below 4 per cent mostly and crossed the 5 per cent mark for the first time in the 12th round of Lok Sabha elections. The latest elections to the 16th Lok Sabha in 2014 witnessed the maximum participation of women (see Figure 4).

The scenario vis-à-vis presence of women in Rajya Sabha i.e., the upper house of the Indian Parliament, is no less grim as compared to the Lok Sabha. Currently, the proportion of women Parliamentarians in Rajya Sabha stands at 11.1 per cent (Rajya Sabha 2016).

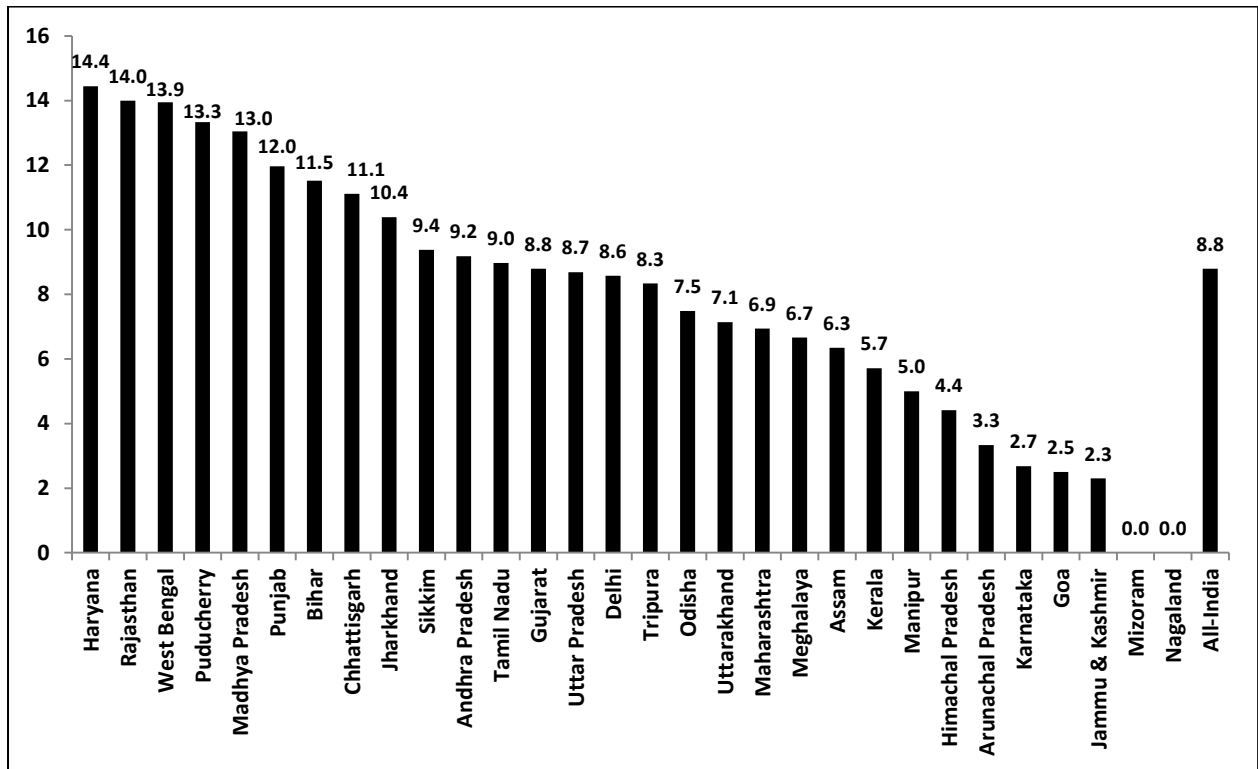
As far as contesting elections as candidates and representation in State Legislative Assemblies are concerned, female electoral participation is extremely lopsided vis-à-vis men (Rai 2011). The average proportion of women elected to the State Legislative Assemblies at the all-India level stands at a dismal 8.8 per cent.² Haryana has the maximum representation of women in the Legislative Assembly at 14.4 per cent followed by Rajasthan (14.0 per cent), West Bengal (13.9 per cent), Puducherry (13.3 per cent), and Madhya Pradesh (13 per cent) (see Figure 5).

The proportion of women elected to Legislative Assemblies is greater than or equal to 10 per cent in 9 States only. In 8 States, the proportion of women elected to Legislative Assemblies is less than or equal to 5 per cent. Mizoram and Nagaland do not have any women representative in their respective State Legislative Assemblies.

¹ See http://eci.nic.in/eci_main1/ElectionStatistics.aspx, accessed on 8 August 2016.

² This is as per data pertaining to Legislative Assembly election cycle prior to 2017.

Figure 5: Share of Women Representatives in State Legislative Assemblies (Per Cent)



Notes: Data for Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Punjab, Goa and Manipur pertain to the previous Legislative Assembly election cycle in 2012. Andhra Pradesh includes Telangana.

Source: Statistical Reports of General Election to State Legislative Assembly.³

Overall, the extent of political representation of women, both at the national and State level, can in no terms be said to be satisfactory. As per the latest estimates, share of women representatives in the Lok Sabha has improved by 1.3 percentage points (see Figure 4) from 10.7 per cent in 2009 (15th round of Lok Sabha elections) to 12 per cent in 2014 (the 16th and latest round of Lok Sabha elections). On the other hand, share of women representatives in Rajya Sabha has dropped by 1.7 percentage points from 12.8 per cent in 2014 (IPU 2016b) to 11.1 per cent in 2016 (Rajya Sabha 2016). At the State-level, share of women representatives in the Legislative Assemblies stands at 8.8 per cent which is lower than the national-level figures.

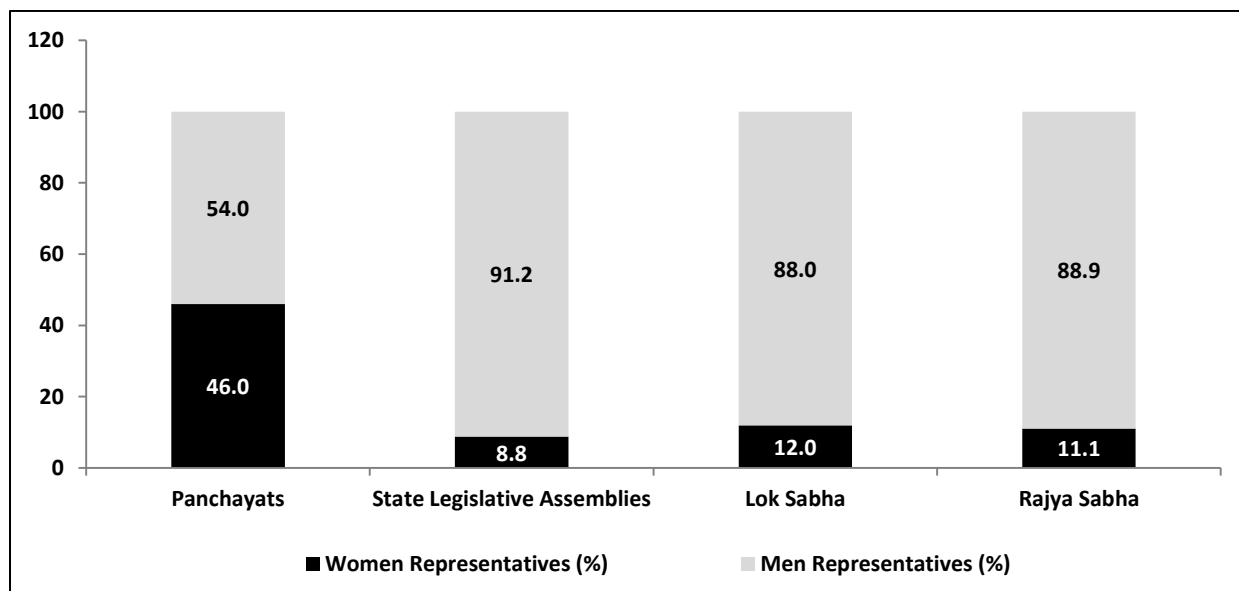
The national and State-level figures for women’s political representation are poor and in stark contrast to that of the Panchayat level albeit due to the one-third reservation of seats for women as mandated by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (CAA) (pertaining to Panchayats) and 74th CAA (pertaining to the urban local bodies). Several States, in recent years, have enhanced this provision to 50 per cent for Panchayats. As per latest estimates, the all-India average share of women representatives in Panchayats stands at a healthy 46 per cent (see Figure 6).

Bills to institute reservation of seats for women in the national parliament and State Legislatures have been introduced in every legislative session since 1996 but have made little progress (IPU 2016a). The 81st Constitutional Amendment Bill, also known as the Women’s Reservation Bill (WRB), was introduced in the Parliament in 1996. It draws upon the smooth passage of the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments that form the legislative basis for a decentralisation policy providing reservation of one-third of seats for women in every elected rural and urban local body (Lama-Rewal 2001). These amendments encouraged all major national political parties to commit themselves to extending support for one-third women’s quota to Parliament and all the State Legislatures

³ See http://eci.nic.in/eci_main1/ElectionStatistics.aspx, accessed on 8 August 2016.

(Nanivadekar 2005). The latest version of the Bill (108th Constitutional Amendment) was passed by the Rajya Sabha in March 2010. The Bill has lapsed with the dissolution of the 15th Lok Sabha in 2014.^{4 5} As a result, reservation of women in Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies continues to remain a distant reality inspite of the commitment affirmed by all major political parties towards the same (Nanivadekar 2003).

Figure 6: Share of Women Representatives in Political Positions (Per Cent)



Note: Data for State Legislative Assemblies pertain to Legislative Assembly election cycle prior to 2017.

Sources: IIPA (2014), Lok Sabha (2015), IPU (2016b), Rajya Sabha (2016).

Conclusions

Efforts to elect more women to Parliament, State Legislatures and other political bodies are based on claims that women bring new policy priorities, adopt a different style of interacting with constituents, and change the way politics is done by contributing to a more collaborative and constructive environment within and across parties. Participation of women (and men) in politics enhances the likelihood of responsiveness to the needs of all citizens (IPU 2015).

Reservation for women in political bodies would go a long way in removing impediments that impede their participation in elections and bridging the existing gap in the electoral and political set-ups. The key factors / issues that would enable women to move beyond representation to active participation in the electoral processes and governance need to be addressed on a priority basis. These enablers include more representation of women in political parties, including them in important deliberative bodies, and allotting them key ministerial berths in the government at the central and State levels (Rai 2011). Enhanced participation of women in the political domain would go much beyond protecting their political parity with men, and lead to their overall empowerment.

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⁴ See <http://www.prsindia.org/billtrack/constitutional-amendments/lapsed/>, accessed on 10 August 2016.

⁵ For details on the 108th Constitutional Amendment Bill, see <http://www.prsindia.org/billtrack/womens-reservation-bill-the-constitution-108th-amendment-bill-2008-45/>, accessed on 10 August 2016.

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