



The Asia Foundation

WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA An Analytical Overview

Prepared by Reecha Upadhyay

General Overview

Women's empowerment in India is heavily dependent on many different variables that include geographical location (urban/rural), educational status, social status (caste and class), and age. Policies on women's empowerment exist at the national, state, and local (Panchayat) levels in many sectors, including health, education, economic opportunities, gender-based violence, and political participation. However, there are significant gaps between policy advancements and actual practice at the community level.

One key factor for the gap in implementation of laws and policies¹ to address discrimination, economic disadvantages, and violence against women at the community level is the largely patriarchal structure that governs the community and households in much of India. As such, women and girls have restricted mobility, access to education, access to health facilities, and lower decision-making power, and experience higher rates of violence. Political participation is also hindered at the Panchayat (local governing bodies) level and at the state and national levels, despite existing reservations for women.²

The impact of the patriarchal structure can be seen in rural and urban India, although women's empowerment in rural India is much less visible than in urban areas. This is of particular concern, since much of India is rural despite the high rate of urbanization and expansion of cities. Rural women, as opposed to women in urban settings, face inequality at much higher rates, and in all spheres of life. Urban women and, in particular, urban educated women enjoy relatively higher access to economic opportunities, health and education, and experience less domestic violence. Women (both urban and rural) who have some level of education have higher decision-making power in the household and the community. Furthermore, the level of women's education also has a direct implication on maternal mortality rates, and nutrition and health indicators among children.³

¹ Some key laws and policies include: Articles 14, 15, 16, 39(a), 39 (d), Domestic Violence Act (2005), Sati Prevention Act (1987), Dowry Prohibition Act and Rules (1985), the establishment of the Commission on the Status on Women, at the National and State levels.

² Reservations for women exist at the Panchayat level and there is a movement to reserve 33% seats for women in all the political parties, and all levels of national and state level political structures.

³ NFHS-3 Data analysis <http://www.measuredhs.com/>

Among rural women, there are further divisions that hinder women's empowerment. The most notable ones are education levels and caste and class divisions. Women from lower castes (the scheduled castes, other backward castes, and tribal communities) are particularly vulnerable to maternal mortality and infant mortality. They are often unable to access health and educational services, lack decision-making power, and face higher levels of violence. Among women of lower caste and class, some level of education has shown to have a positive impact on women's empowerment indicators.⁴

Social divisions among urban women also have a similar impact on empowerment indicators. Upper class and educated women have better access to health, education, and economic opportunities, whereas lower class, less educated women in urban settings enjoy these rights significantly less. Due to rapid urbanisation and lack of economic opportunities in other parts of the country, cities also house sprawling slum areas. Slums are informal sprawls, and most times lack basic services such as clean water, sanitation, and health facilities. Additionally, slum dwellers mostly work in unorganized and informal sectors, making them vulnerable to raids by the state, abuse by employers, and other forms of insecurity. Women and children in slums are among the most vulnerable to violence and abuse, and are deprived of their basic human rights.

As a result of a vibrant women's movement in the last 50 years, policies to advance human rights for women in India are substantial and forward-thinking, such as the Domestic Violence Act (2005), and the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution that provide reservations for women to enter politics at the Panchayat level. There are multiple national and state level governmental and non-governmental mechanisms such as the Women's Commission to advance these policies, and the implementation of these policies is decentralized to state and district-level authorities and organizations that include local non-governmental organizations.

The policy/practice gap in India cuts across all sectors and initiatives as a result of rampant corruption and lack of good governance practices. State-level governments claim a lack of resources, and the resources they do receive are highly susceptible to corruption. Financial corruption hinders the government's ability to invest in social capital, including initiatives to advance women's empowerment. Since the 1990's India has put in place processes and legislative acts such as the Right to Information Act (2005) for information disclosure to increase transparency and hold government officials accountable. Mistrust of political institutions and leaders remains high in the society with corruption and graft allegations often covering media headlines.⁵

In addition to corruption and inadequate resources for implementation of initiatives at the community level, women's empowerment in India is negatively impacted by the pervasive discrimination of women in the family and the community. Discrimination against women in most parts of India (particularly the north) emerges from the social and religious construct of women's role and their status. As such, in many parts of India, women are considered to be less than men, occupying a lower status in the family and community, which consequentially restricts equal opportunity in women and girls' access to education, economic possibilities, and mobility.

⁴ <http://www.measuredhs.com/pubs/pdf/FRIND3/14Chapter14.pdf>

⁵ <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/APCITY/UNPAN019103.pdf>

Discrimination also limits women's choices and freedom. These choices are further dependent on structural factors like caste and class.

Empowerment for women in India requires a crosscutting approach and one which addresses the diversity of social structures that govern women's lives. Identity politics in India is a very critical political instrument, which is both used and abused throughout political and social institutions. There are numerous social movements fighting for the rights of the marginalized, such as the Dalit rights movement, the tribal rights movement, etc. These movements have achieved many gains in assuring representation of the traditionally marginalized communities into mainstream society. Women's rights within these movements are largely unarticulated and thus reinforce inequalities within the very structures from which they are demanding inclusion. Empowerment approaches for women therefore is not only about providing services, but also about recognizing their lived realities of multiple layers of discrimination that hinder their access to services.

Similarly, access to education for girls in some of the northern states like Uttar Pradesh and Punjab does not only rely on proximity of schools. Access to education is part of a larger structural concern, including the practice of son preference, which creates inherent discriminatory practices. Education initiatives therefore cannot rely solely on building educational infrastructure, but also need to address some of the root causes of discrimination against women and girls which affect the decisions made by parents.

Women's security, decision-making power, and mobility are three indicators for women's empowerment. In India, and more so for rural and less educated women, these three indicators are significantly low. Data from the NFHS-3 survey on women's decision-making power shows that only about one third of the women interviewed took decisions on their own regarding household issues and their health. Decision-making power among employed urban women was higher than among rural and less educated women. The survey also found that older married women had more decision-making power than the younger married women. Younger women and girls experience an additional layer of discrimination as a result of their age.

Data on women's mobility in India indicates the lack of choices women have, and that urban and educated women have more mobility choices than rural women. The data shows that about half the women interviewed had the freedom to go to the market or a health facility alone. Seventy-nine percent of urban women from the highest education brackets and only about 40 percent of rural women without education were allowed to go to the market alone.

Mobility restrictions for women are dependent upon how the family and community view women's rights. They also, however, are intrinsically dependent on the prevailing levels of violence against women in the household and the community. Abuse and violence towards women is predominantly perpetrated within the household, and marital violence is among the most accepted by both men and women. Wife beating, slapping, rape, dowry related deaths, feudal violence towards tribal and lower caste women, trafficking, sexual abuse, and street violence permeate the Indian social fabric, and create one of the most serious obstacles in achieving women's empowerment.

The gap in policy and practice in women's empowerment is most visible when it comes to the level and kinds of violence women face in India. Despite the policies, laws⁶, and initiatives by civil society institutions, violence against women in India is widespread and the consequences for perpetrators rarely match the crime. Enforcement of laws and sentencing of perpetrators are long and arduous processes, and the gaps in these processes are further widened by corruption.

Another gap in implementing laws and policies on violence against women is the inaccessibility of information on victims' rights among rural and less educated women. Additionally, social stigma and the fear of abandonment by the family play a big role in women and girls' ability or inability to access laws and policies to address sexual and physical violence.

⁶ Domestic Violence Act (2005), Article 21 of the Constitution on women's bodily integrity, Sections 375 and 376 of the Indian Penal Code, etc.

WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND SECURITY IN INDIA Issue Brief

Prepared by Reecha Upadhyay

Women's Rights

Policies relating to women's rights have had a positive trajectory in the past few decades with the central government articulating many progressive measures to advance gender equality in social, economic, and political arenas. The Government of India (GoI) has two main bodies to advance gender equality: the Ministry of Women and Child Development and the National Commission for Women, which is an autonomous organization under the Ministry of Women and Child Development.⁷ Both bodies work on national- and state-level legal and social policies to advance gender equality. The Ministry has widely implemented local-level micro-finance schemes to advance economic opportunities for rural women. The National Commission for Women has been instrumental in creating legislative changes, and has set up Complaint and Investigate Cells at the state level. The Grievance Cells receive complaints of gender-based violence and are mandated to investigate, provide referrals and counselling, and ultimately report on such cases.⁸

With a vibrant women's rights movement in India, there are continuous demands for better laws, provisions, and accountability for implementation. Most recent examples include the change in India's rape laws, where in 2006 marital rape was recognized. Currently, women's rights activists are demanding better provisions in Sections 375 and 376 of the Indian Penal Code. Since then, there have been multiple challenges by the women's movement leading to small but significant amendments⁹. The 2005 Domestic Violence Act provides protection from violence in the household from not only male perpetrators, but also female perpetrators like mothers-in-law and other female members in extended families.

There also have been gains in women's inheritance rights, yet challenges remain in implementation. Social biases and lack of enforcement continue to hinder the full realization of Indian inheritance laws. Inheritance laws and property distribution fall under the Hindu and Muslim personal laws, both of which exempt agricultural land.¹⁰ For a country with a predominantly agro-based economy, women's inability to inherit agricultural land exacerbates feminization of poverty and neglects women's welfare.¹¹

Like all other spheres of social change in India, there is an undeniable gap between policy and practice. More notably, the deeply entrenched social hierarchies based on class, caste, ethnic, and

⁷ <http://wcd.nic.in/>

⁸ <http://ncw.nic.in/frmComplaintUnit.aspx>

⁹ <http://www.thehindu.com/fline/fl2023/stories/20031121003109700.htm>

¹⁰ Hindu, Sikhs, Jains and Buddhist come under the Hindu Law, whereas Christians and Muslims have their own interpretation of marriage and civil codes

¹¹ <http://www.popcouncil.org/pdfs/seeds/seeds21.pdf>

communal divisions leave many communities on the margins with little knowledge of their rights and even less protection from local, state, and national governmental policies.

Inequality between men and women runs across the board, including in education, economic opportunities, representation in governance, and other state and private institutions. Additionally, women in India face high rates of violence. Some recent statistics on women include:

- India ranks 18th among the highest maternal mortality rates in the world with 540 deaths for every 100,000 births¹²
- Only 48% of adult Indian women are literate¹³
- Among rural women, 36.1% have experienced physical violence in their adult lives¹⁴
- 66% of women who have experienced physical violence in their lifetimes are divorced, widowed, or deserted¹⁵
- Lower caste and tribal women are among those who experience the highest levels of physical violence
- 85.3% of women reporting violence claimed that their current husbands were the perpetrators¹⁶
- According to the most recent Demographic and Health Survey analysis, only 43% of currently married women (between ages 15-49) are employed as compared to 99% of men¹⁷

Women's Security

The multiple forms of violence experienced in the household, at the community level, and in some instances by the state, threaten women's security in India. In many parts of North India son preference is a widely practiced phenomenon. Son preference has direct linkages to sex-selective abortion (illegal across India; however, enforcement by both police and some doctors is still lacking), and discrimination of girl children in access to health, nutrition, and education. Research conducted by the International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW) found that, although not universal, particularly in households where there is more than one daughter there are significant differences in nutrition and health levels between male and female children.¹⁸

Additionally, at the household level, incest, rape and domestic violence continue to hinder women's development across India. Forty percent of all sexual abuse cases in India are incest, and 94% of the incest cases had a known member of the household as the perpetrator.¹⁹

Dowry related deaths, domestic violence, gang rape of lower caste women by upper caste men, and physical violence by the police towards tribal women all contribute to women's insecurity in

¹² See http://www.nationmaster.com/graph/hea_mat_mor-health-maternal-mortality

¹³ See <http://www.unifem.org.in/PDF/Progress%20of%20Women%20in%20South%20Asia%202007.pdf>

¹⁴ See <http://www.measuredhs.com/pubs/pdf/FRIND3/15Chapter15.pdf>

¹⁵ See <http://www.measuredhs.com/pubs/pdf/FRIND3/15Chapter15.pdf>

¹⁶ See <http://www.measuredhs.com/pubs/pdf/FRIND3/15Chapter15.pdf>

¹⁷ See <http://www.measuredhs.com/pubs/pdf/FRIND3/14Chapter14.pdf>

¹⁸ http://www.icrw.org/docs/2006_son-preference.pdf

¹⁹ <http://www.unifem.org.in/PDF/Key%20Gender.pdf>

India. The class and caste structure inadvertently put poor women from lower class and tribal communities at the most risk of violence. Class and caste divisions also create grave challenges to poor, lower caste, and tribal women in accessing justice and retribution as victims and survivors of violence.

Women and girls in urban India are also at high risk of gender-based violence. In Delhi, the country's capital, a scan of daily newspapers reveals shocking numbers of cases of violence against women. The National Crime Bureau claims that a woman is raped every 29 minutes in Delhi. Street violence in urban centres is a growing concern for young women and girls, who are increasingly moving away from rural areas for economic opportunities and higher education. Particularly women and girls from the northeast region of India living in urban centres such as Delhi have reported experiencing social discrimination and marginalization, and many times physical violence. In 2005, according to the North East Support Centre, among the 100,000 people from the northeast living in Delhi 86% had reported racial discrimination and 41% of cases were sexual abuse cases.²⁰

The northeast states of India are a volatile region, with a number of active insurgencies. The GoI has continuously deployed state troops to fight the insurgents, who predominantly follow the Maoist ideology. This region, because of its physical and cultural proximity to Myanmar, China, and Bhutan, has for the most part been ignored by the central government, thereby fuelling the insurgents' demand for development and autonomy. In the northeast (as in most conflict-ridden regions) women bear the brunt of war from both sides. There have been numerous instances of violence perpetrated by state security forces against local and tribal women.²¹

Trafficking of Women and Girls

India is both a source and destination for trafficked women and girls into prostitution and bonded labour. While exact numbers of trafficked women and girls are difficult to ascertain, there have been figures projected by various national and international NGOs.²² Anti-trafficking measures in India have increased with India's commitment to international human rights protocols, and through strict legal provisions at the national level. The Immoral Traffic Prevention Act 1956 (ITPA) is the widely used law to prosecute traffickers, but also is invoked to target prostitution.

Sex work is a debated subject in the women's movement in India. The anti-prostitution law is seen by many to criminalize and further marginalize women who are in the sex trade. Women's rights organizations, activists, and organizations such as the Durbar Mahila Samanway Committee²³ (a nationwide sex workers' collective) have long supported legalization of the sex trade in India. The debate over legalization of sex work continues today and sex-work supporters are lobbying to change the ITPA for better rehabilitation measures for those who have been rescued during brothel and street raids. The ITPA also does not give adequate measures for those

²⁰ <http://thesop.org/story/world/2010/01/06/crime-against-northeastern-women.php>

²¹ Monisha Behal *Women Suffer Most: Armed Conflict and Women's Rights in North East India* (North East Network)

²² See <http://nhrc.nic.in/Documents/ReportonTrafficking.pdf> (pg. 21-22) for data on trafficking collated from various sources

²³ <http://www.durbar.org/index.asp>

who are trafficked for purposes other than sex work²⁴, and disproportionately targets women, making them further vulnerable to poverty and exploitation.

²⁴ http://www.gaatw.org/Collateral%20Damage_Final/CollateralDamage_%20INDIA.pdf

WOMEN'S ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES IN INDIA

Issue Brief

Prepared by Reecha Upadhyay

India is one of the world's fastest growing economies, with women mainly from the middle class increasingly entering the workforce. Urban centres like Delhi and Bangalore have seen an influx of young women from semi-urban and rural parts of the country, living alone and redefining themselves.²⁵ However, the story of economic empowerment for women is not a singular narrative; rather it is located in a complex set of caste, class, religious, and ethnic identities.

The Global Gender Gap Report by the World Economic Forum in 2009 ranked India 114th out of 134 countries for inequality between men and women in the economy, politics, health, and education.²⁶ On equal economic opportunities and women's participation in the labour force, India ranked 127th and 122nd respectively.²⁷ The number of women in the workforce varies greatly from state to state: 21% in Delhi; 23% in Punjab; 65% in Manipur; 71% Chhattisgarh; 76% in Arunachal Pradesh.²⁸ The diversity of women's economic opportunities between states is due to the cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity of each state. Northern states like Delhi and Punjab lag far behind on gender equality measures, including the alarming sex ratio between men and women (due to son preference and sex-selective abortion), low female literacy levels, and high rates of gender-based violence.

In rural India, women's economic opportunities remain restricted by social, cultural, and religious barriers. Most notably inheritance laws embedded in Hindu and Shariat civil codes continue to marginalize women in the household and the larger community. Rural women, particularly of lower caste and class, have the lowest literacy rates, and therefore do not have the capacity to negotiate pay or contracts and most often engage in the unorganized sector, self-employment, or in small scale industry. Self-help groups (SHGs) are a widely practiced model for social and economic mobility by NGOs and the government. SHGs provide women with the opportunity to manage loans and savings that can be used by members for varying needs. SHGs also are used to promote social change among the members and the community at large. Members of SHGs have used their experiences as leverage to enter other local institutions such as the Panchayat Khap.²⁹

Rural, low caste, and tribal women also make up 70% of domestic workers in India, a sector which is largely unregulated and unorganized. India's growing economy has allowed for many upper and middle-class women to enter the workforce, and while poor rural women have little access to education and training, there is a high demand for domestic workers in urban hubs.

²⁵ See <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/23/world/asia/23iht-india.1.8451014.html> for a story of two young women living in Bangalore and negotiating their traditional responsibilities

²⁶ <http://www.weforum.org/pdf/gendergap2009/India.pdf>

²⁷ IBID

²⁸ <http://www.measuredhs.com/pubs/pdf/FRIND3/14Chapter14.pdf>

²⁹ <http://www.edarural.com/documents/SHG-Study/Executive-Summary.pdf>

Domestic workers are mostly illiterate, with little or no negotiating power for wage equity, and are highly vulnerable to exploitation and sexual and physical abuse.³⁰

There is a movement at the policy level to organize domestic workers and to create laws to regulate minimum wage, working hours, and other measures such as life and health insurance. Currently a national-level Taskforce on Domestic Workers has been formed that will present recommendations to the central government on better enforcement of rights for the many undocumented domestic workers in India.³¹

Women are also very visible in the construction sector in India, and like domestic workers are largely unorganized and rely on daily wagers. Women construction workers are mostly poor and illiterate and have little negotiating power. This sector is also unregulated and highly vulnerable to exploitation. Women workers also earn significantly less than men, although women are the ones who do most of the backbreaking work like carrying bricks and other heavy materials on site.³²

On the other end of the spectrum, while India has one of the highest percentages of professional women in the world, those who occupy managerial positions are under 3%.³³ Most women work in low administrative positions, and many of the young women migrating to urban centres mostly work in service and retail industries, although more and more women are entering the IT and other technical sectors.³⁴

Women's Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights

The movement to assure women's economic, social, and cultural rights (ESCR) as basic human rights is just emerging in India. The movement aims to locate women's rights within the larger human rights framework, and by doing so moves away from looking at women's issues only within the framework of violence against women and reproductive rights. ESCR attempts to look at the broader issues facing women, namely poverty, housing, unemployment, education, water, food security, trade, etc.

While the human rights movement on ESCR is largely contained at the international policy level, there are emerging social movements around the world. In the Indian context, projects like the Programme on Women's Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (PWESCR), for example, is creating linkages between the international human rights movement and the local articulation of women's rights. PWESCR aims to build a women's rights movement in India that creates equality in all spheres of women's lives. By empowering women economically and socially, ESCR provides for a broader discourse on rights that moves women's rights from a victim-centered approach to one that cuts across other fundamental human rights issues.

³⁰ <http://deshkalindia.com/unorganised-labour.htm#working>

³¹ <http://www.cathnewsindia.com/2010/04/27/govt-plans-policy-on-domestic-workers>

³² http://www.sewaresearch.org/pdf/researches/labouring_brick_by_brick.pdf

³³ <http://www.articlesbase.com/careers-articles/attitude-of-corporate-india-towards-working-women-1621984.html>

³⁴ http://mpira.ub.uni-muenchen.de/4873/1/MPRA_paper_4873.pdf

Women's economic opportunity in India is a rapidly changing landscape. Women are increasingly entering the workforce—particularly women professionals—and are creating change, but there remains a large number of invisible women workers in unorganized and volatile sectors. However, organizing at the local level, albeit small, is widespread. Implementation of national and state level policies lags behind in ensuring that women workers have equal pay and are free from exploitation.

WOMEN IN POLITICS IN INDIA Issue Brief

by Reecha Upadhyay

Historical Context

During the independence movement, women were visible and active as nationalists, and as symbols of “Mother India”. Gandhi, in particular, was instrumental in creating space for women through his non-violence (and some would argue feminized) mode of protest.³⁵ Gandhi’s legendary salt march³⁶ initially excluded women, but due to demands from women nationalists he later realized the power of women organizers at the local level. His inclusion of women, however, was not located within a gender equality framework, but was a means to achieving a stronger and unified Indian state. The inclusion of women in the nationalist movement was also to debunk the British colonial assertion of “needing to save the poor, vulnerable women” of pre-independence India.

As in many nationalist movements, women in India took part in the struggle, in turn propelling a women’s rights movement. And, as seen historically in many post-colonial countries, the nationalist women’s movement in India was confronted by the rebuilding of a patriarchal nationalist state. Women revolutionaries gave way to their male counterparts who (as a result of Partition politics) created a strong, male, and Hindu “New India”.

The first post-independence Lok Sabha (the People’s Council or the Parliament) had 4.4% women.³⁷ The period between the early 1940’s and late 1970’s saw an emergence of the Indian women’s movement, but it was not until the 1980s that the women’s movement gained real momentum.

Reservation at the Panchayat Level

In 1976 the Committee on the Status of Women in India was established and published a report recommending an increase in elected women at the grassroots level, which led to the introduction of the 33.3% reservation at the Panchayat level in 1988. It was only in 1993 that an amendment in the constitution made the proposed reservation at the Panchayat (village level governing councils) a reality.³⁸

³⁵ <http://www.onlinewomeninpolitics.org/india/indian.pdf>

³⁶ The salt march was a form of protest, lead by Gandhi through-out India to initiate the boycotting English made salt and to symbolize the move towards nationalizing India’s commodities and hence Independence from the colonial rule.

³⁷ <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/newloksabhawillhavemostwomenmpsever/465283/>

³⁸ Panchayats are local level councils, directly elected by the people. The council governs the village’s social, political and economic issues.

In the last two decades since the reservation for women in elected Panchayats was passed, many studies have been conducted to look at the impact of this policy. A survey conducted in 2008 yielded that women made up close to 50% of all the village councils across the India.³⁹ The number of women representatives has certainly increased at the grassroots level; however, questions still remain regarding their decision-making power within the councils. A study in West Bengal and Rajasthan by the Institute of Management Studies (Calcutta) and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) found that where women Panchayat members were active, there were more robust programs on water, irrigation, and infrastructure. The study conclusively states that in Panchayats where women were present policies were more beneficial to the community than in Panchayats where women were absent. A study by The Accountability Initiative also states that in Panchayats with female presidents, the participation of women in the larger council rose close to 3% in one year.⁴⁰ The reason for the increase in women's participation is correlated to two possible factors: first, women representatives exemplified new possibilities for change; and second, women leaders took up issues that would have a positive impact on the community as a whole.

Caste and Class Politics

The complexities of politics in India are embedded in class, caste, and religious identities. An analysis by International Idea of women in the Indian Parliament between 1991 and 1996 found that among the small number of women Parliamentarians, a disproportionate number represented the Brahmin caste (the higher caste in the Hindu caste system).⁴¹ Most local governments remain largely patriarchal and caste-based institutions, hindering inclusive governance.⁴² Furthermore, social mobility remains a privilege of members of higher classes and caste, although this is dramatically changing as a result of reservations for Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) in politics and education.

For women politicians, class, age, and caste all have significant impact in their political lives. India is one of the few countries in the world that has elected a woman leader. Indira Gandhi was among the very few women leaders in the world during her time in office. However, her role as the Prime Minister was not seen as a win for the women's movement in India. She was the granddaughter of Jawaharlal Nehru and represented the political dynasty of her family. Additionally, her controversial political moves during the declared period of Emergency (1975-1977) suppressed dissent, forcing many of the radical women's rights movements to go underground.⁴³ In 2007 India elected its first female President, Ms. Pratibha Patil. While the President holds a mostly ceremonial role in Indian politics, Ms. Patil's election was deemed a symbolic move towards a more equitable representation of women at the highest levels of government.

Although representation of women and members of the lower castes in Indian politics is rapidly changing, complexities of caste politics continue to govern representation. An interesting case

³⁹ <http://www.accountabilityindia.org/pdf/PanchayatBrief1.pdf>

⁴⁰ <http://www.accountabilityindia.org/pdf/PanchayatBrief1.pdf>

⁴¹ <http://archive.idea.int/women/parl/studies4a.htm>

⁴² IBID (MIT Study)

⁴³ <http://www.onlinewomeninpolitics.org/india/indian.pdf> (pg. 26)

study is that of Mayawati, the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh. Mayawati, a woman and a member of the Dalit caste, was the youngest Chief Minister when first elected, and the only woman Dalit to be elected as a Chief Minister. Although Mayawati represents transcendence of India's caste system, her political career is regrettably tainted with corruption charges, extravagant spending, and little positive impact on the realities of caste and class barriers for men and women in her State.

33% Reservation for Women

The Women's Bill in April 2010, which gives 33.3% reservation for women in all levels of Indian politics, took 14 years after its introduction to finally pass by the Rajya Sabha (the upper house of parliament). It is yet to be passed by the Lok Sabha (the lower house of parliament). The reservation bill will ensure 181 out of the 543 seats at the Parliament level, and 1,370 seats out of the 4,109 seats at the State Assembly level.⁴⁴ This is a historic move in the Indian political landscape, as currently women occupy less than 10% of seats in the national Parliament.⁴⁵

The Women's Bill will also significantly change the demographics of class and caste among women politicians in leadership positions in the Indian political structure. It will create a path for women from lower classes and castes (who are currently confined to local-level governance) to enter state and national level governments. In addition to the existing reservations for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, one third of the SC and ST candidates must be women. Other Backward Class (OBC) members are not included in the reservation due to the wide disagreement about who constitutes OBC and a lack of existing data on the OBC population.

The two main arguments against the bill are that it will only benefit elite women (particularly in national level politics) and that there should be reservations for Dalit, minorities (particularly Muslim women), and OBCs. However, supporters of the bill do not agree with creating quotas within the existing 33% women quota in parliament, as SC and ST quotas already exist.

The bill mandates that all political parties reserve one third of their electoral ticket for women, including in the already mandated reservations for SC and STs. This will inadvertently create spaces for lower caste and class women to enter state and national level politics. The passage and implementation of the Women's Bill, and its impact on the existing gender, class, and caste barriers, is yet to be realized, but one thing is clear: India's politics is moving closer to equitable inclusion than ever before.

⁴⁴ <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/5663003.cms>

⁴⁵ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8554895.stm>