

# Gender and Economic Policy Discussion Forum

## Gender Concerns & Representation of Women in General Elections

FORUM XXX | 8 AUGUST 2019

BRIEFING NOTE 30

### HIGHLIGHTS / KEY POINTS

- The emergence of women in politics through a focussed engagement by the political parties has picked up pace only a decade ago. It is a good beginning and there is a huge distance travelled in empowering and encouraging women. However there is still a long way to go.
- Another narrative around women's representation in politics states that women on their own have started taking greater interest in politics as compared to the past. There are more women contesting elections and parties too are taking more proactive steps to give ticket for contesting to women, with specific reference to BJD and Trinamool. This has also resulted into more women getting elected to the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies as well. 78 women getting elected to 2019 parliament is the highest number of women who managed to get elected women representatives to the Indian parliament.
- There is a strange paradox about women political participation in India which is that on one hand, you have no dearth of women political leaders in history. In 70 years of post-independence history, there have been a number of extremely powerful women politicians. So, there is definitely a history of powerful (female) role models in high politics. There has also been a revolution going on since the early 90s with the introduction of women quotas in the local bodies-for instance panchayats, municipalities. And today India counts roughly 3.2 million elected representatives at local level and nearly half, 48-49% of them are women. So at the local level and high level, there are important narratives of women's representation to be accounted for, however it is this 'in-between' space in elected representation assemblies where women have been largely absent and thus the paradox.
- There is a slightly higher vote share for those women candidates who belong to political families. This can be evidenced if we divide women MPs between those who belong to political families and those who don't belong to political families and one finds that the vote share of women MPs belonging to political families is slightly higher because of the legacy of the family to which they belong.

Between the First Lok Sabha (1952) and the Sixteenth Lok Sabha (2014) women's representation has increased from 4.4 per cent to 11.9 percent. A similar trend is also observed in the Rajya Sabha (Upper House) during the entire period of post-independence era. Women's representation in Rajya Sabha has increased from 6.9 percent in 1952 to 11.4 percent in 2014. These figures are substantially lower as compared to the global average of 22.9 per cent and Asian average of 16.3 per cent of women representatives in Upper House. Considering the share of women (49.5 percent) in the total population of India, their representation in Parliament represents a skewed statistic, which is not befitting to the world's largest democracy. The 17th Lok Sabha elections of 2019 saw 715 women candidates contesting against 7334 males. This acuteness of women in the mainstream politics is reflected in India's current Lok Sabha women members which is 12.6% of 524 seats, much below the world average of 24.3%. In World Ranking, Rwanda stands at the forefront with 40 women representatives of 80 seats whereas India ranks at 149 with only 66 women representatives over 524 seats. The Economic Survey 2017-18 also point to low political participation of women despite their population being 49.5% in the country. The forum thus contemplated these concerns in the light of women's representation in past and the contemporary and what motivations and challenges guide women's presence and engagement in elections and parliamentary politics. The speakers for the forum were Gilles Verniers (Co-Director, Trivedi Centre for Political Data, Ashoka University) and Tara Krishnaswamy (Co-Founder, Shakti). The discussion was chaired and moderated by Sanjay Kumar (Director, Centre for Study of Developing Societies).

## Data versus Myths on Women's representation in electoral politics

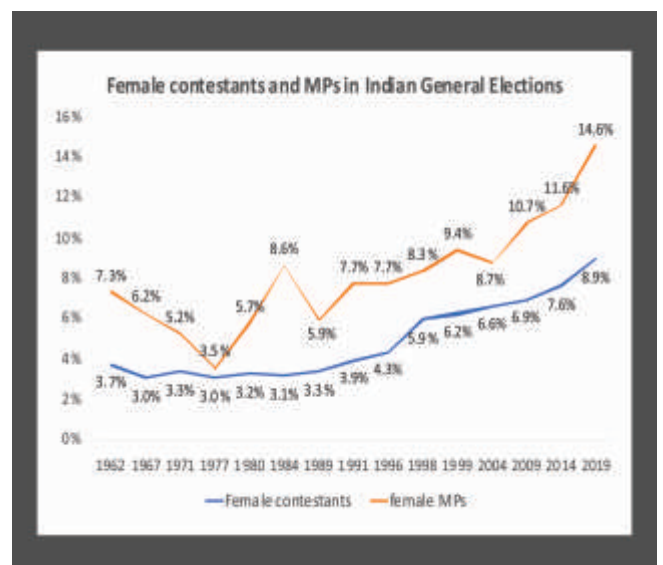
Literature says that under-representation of women and female marginalisation in the political scene, stems mainly from political parties which discriminate not only in allocation of seats but also in party rank, file and chain of command, attributing this to the competition within the party. This is further characterized by inherent male dominance and a patriarchal mindset that excludes women from the electoral process.

Verniers<sup>1</sup> began by evidencing a fact that is often not considered especially when talking about women representation in the country, more so in the state assemblies. Haryana apparently has the highest number of women MLA's in the country which stands a bit counter-intuitive, owing to the fact that the state has the worst sex-ratio in the country. Verniers emphasizes that this is the strange situation in India, that where states have the worst women related statistics, be it education, literacy, sex ratio, women participation in workforce tend to have more women in politics contrary to the states that are better on development indicators. So, higher HDI states tend to have much fewer women in politics. Kerala is one of the worst offenders, Karnataka being another one, and the entire North east with not a single woman MLA.

However Verniers<sup>2</sup> emphasized that there has been a revolution in the way citizens in India now vote, stating the fact that women voters are no longer lagging behind male voters. So, if one looks from early 1960s, there is a gap of 20% in terms of comparative turnout of men and women which is compounded by the fact that we always had fewer women in the electorate from the beginning itself because of sex ratio. However from 2009, women have been 'catching up', and even though there has existed a differentiated ratio of voter registration, a very wide gap in participation which had been there earlier, has now closed down. This is a phenomenon that has been observed across all states. In fact the states where the gap was wider, women participation has increased faster than in the other states. And in the last general elections, women outvoted men in 13 states and in the last

round of state elections since 2014 women have outvoted men in 7 states. The term 'outvoted' means that the ratio of women participating is higher than the ratio of men participating. It doesn't necessarily mean that more women are voting than men. However this factor is being used by political parties to integrate the idea of women's increased participation, which is getting reflected into party manifestos, campaign promises, policies, specifically pro-women policies and the fairly extraordinary decisions of the BJD and Trinamool to announce a high percentage of women representation among their candidates.

However, Verniers<sup>3</sup> emphasizes that even though there were 14.4% of women MP's in 2019 elections, however this number doesn't make more than 9% of total women candidates. So, the main obstacle to women representation has always been and remains- political parties, who apply a number of selection biases against women candidates and have maintained this low nomination of women as candidates. Even though national parties are doing marginally better than state based or local parties but there are very few women running as independents given the cost of entering to politics.



Source: Gilles Verniers, XXX GEP Discussion Forum, August 2019

Verniers<sup>4</sup> presents that there is an overall long trend of increase of women representation from 6% in early 90s to a rounded off 15% in 2019. But

at the same time one can see that the rate of progression of candidates has remained low. There is a jump of candidates in late 90s, but that is also due to the eruption of BJP at the national stage as the second National party. However largely, one can observe that the growth rate of women candidates has remained fairly low.

Verniers<sup>5</sup> talks about the work that he has been doing at the Trivedi Centre for Political data. The centre has been trying to understand the barriers of entry for women placed by political parties. Verniers talks about the six myths or prejudices rather, that their research shows, that play a fundamental role in keeping women out of the political scene. So the six myths are the usual justifications or arguments that political parties give for not fielding more women. The first is that women make weaker candidates. Political parties are rational- organisations that seek to maximize seats. As long as they perceive that fielding women constitutes is some sort of risk, they are not going to feel incentivised to give more tickets to women. Women are less experienced is another myth that Verniers mentions. This is the usual circular argument which continues to not give opportunities to women to gain experience, rather makes them suffer from the lack of it. Further another myth says that only elite women candidates can perform. This is the usual argument which some of the regional parties have begun to give to oppose the women's reservation bill. There is a prevailing belief that women's reservation is going to bring "a bunch of upper caste, elite, short head women to the Parliament and increasing women reservation would actually be harmful to backward categories, backward classes". Another common misconception is that women cannot be effective representatives. The job of an elected representative is primarily to provide what's called the constituency service. The legislative affairs represents minimal path or a small portion of the job of a representative but basically providing service to constituents which involves arm twisting local Pradhans, local bureaucrats or leading on the local authorities to get things done, which is still largely perceived as men's job compounded by the fact that politics is very masculine environment. So, there is this perception that the job is too hard for

women to be 'effective representatives'. Another misconception is that women politicians are the voiceless phenomenon of something called the 'sarpanch-pati' (voiceless proxy of either husband or some male relative). And the last myth is that nominating more women is a need but women cannot be found because they do not show up for tickets.

Verniers<sup>6</sup> further talks about the consequences of the cumulative effect of these misconceptions. One of which is low nomination. Second is the risk aversion by political parties that tend to field women in relatively safer seats. This is evidenced by the fact that women in Lok Sabha historically tend to be more educated and more upper caste than their male counterparts. However this is the common mistake made here, that what shapes the sociological composition of women in parliament is derived from the selection bias in political parties and then this skewed representation of women is used to justify low nomination. Verniers talks about data that found 42% of women candidates belonging to political families in 2019 against 15% of men. So he insists that to question these misconceptions, we need to mobilize data to assess the veracity of these claims. He suggests that we use performance measures to understand this- one is the comparative vote share of women candidates within their own parties, then the comparative vote share of women winners within their own parties and further the comparative victory margins within their own parties.

BJP & INC women victory margin in three general elections

		Women median VS	Male median VS	Overall median VS	Difference	Women MPs
BJP	2009	11.94	8.60	8.97	2.97	13
	2014	21.35	17.65	18.05	3.30	30
	2019	20.93	20.05	20.17	0.76	41
INC	2009	12.38	9.27	9.62	2.77	23
	2014	14.74	7.32	8.00	6.74	4
	2019	15.92	10.68	11.28	4.63	6

Source: Gilles Verniers, XXX GEP Discussion Forum, August 2019

Verniers<sup>7</sup> argued that by comparing the performance of men and women within their own parties and then aggregate that into a single number or a single index, gives us basically an indication whether women overperform, underperform or whether the performance is undifferentiated. So, one could interpret that performance of women is marginally superior than that of men. But the important notion is that those values are positive. So that says there is no empirical ground to claim that women candidates present any form of risk in terms of performance for political parties. However the problem of yielding statistic with such small number is that small variations can make large variations in terms of percentages.

Verniers<sup>8</sup> talks about the fact that there are fewer states where the women have underperformed compared to those where parties have overperformed. Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar and Delhi are the states where women candidates didn't do well as compared to the men. But the fact that there is greater variation state wise than party wise, says that the state story might be more important than the party stories. So, variation between states or specificities about states might be more important to the issue than variations between political parties. Talking about explanations, Verniers talks about the hypothesis, that there are necessarily multiple factors that intervene in the variations. The places where women stand for posts, the characteristics of constituency definitely matters. There is this perception that there is less risk to field women in safe seats and for BJP that means more urban seats, for instance. Another trend is to field more women in reserve seats than general seats. Verniers however also argues that there is very limited representation of women from the intermediary caste, OBC category and almost no representation of Muslim women. In that sense the sociological profile, caste, class and political family does matter. However, at the same time even though it is found that in North-east for instance, the women candidates tend to be elite and also belong to political families, or are wives of MPs or daughters

of former chief ministers but yet they tend to lose. So, the elite explanation may work in certain states, UP, Rajasthan, Haryana, but doesn't work in North East at all. It also doesn't work in Karnataka where a large number of women also belong to political families and yet get lost. In fact in the North East, even with a matrilineal society, the political class does not give any space to women in politics. In Nagaland for instance, an MLA proposed that the state should implement women in local bodies for which a dispensation already existed. But there were riots and violent protests against this proposal.

Verniers<sup>9</sup> contends that what makes a candidate winnable is the strength of the ticket before candidate characteristics. In that sense the strength of the party ticket definitely matters, which party and its ability or probability to win a seat. The stronger the party effect, the more it erases the sociological differences between candidates. So, party tickets act as equalizers contrary to whether a lot of parties and politicians say. Underperformance may be also more voter induced than party induced because in states where there is lower representation, there tends to be lower rate of nomination and thus fewer women contesting in the North East. But even when there are a large number of women contesting in Karnataka yet they still lose. And even where women run, we see that they often tend to underperform which is an indication that beyond party selection biases, there also are voter induced selection biases.

Verniers further argues that at the ground level, the diversity of the situation and profile varies hugely. There is not 'one' profile of the woman politician. With the research that is being conducted at their centre, Verniers contends that there is actually much greater diversity on ground and there is a lot of simplification that circulates in the name of the women politician. There are a number of women candidates who come with local experience. There are more women mayors contesting, though a small number but more than previously seen. There is not a glass ceiling but definitely a concrete barrier between local bodies

representation and that of MLAs and MPs. But there is evidence of women who started their careers in Panchayat or Municipalities contesting for assembly or even Lok Sabha election. And it's true that very often they come to higher politics not so much through their local experience but through their political family linkages. But the fact is that whether at all it helps them to become candidates, become somewhat irrelevant when it comes to actually contesting for Lok Sabha or State elections.

Verniers<sup>10</sup> further contemplates, on the fact that there is this frequent confusion in parties, between what constitutes winnability and what constitutes selectability. Because what constitutes a strong candidate and in the perspective of the party or the voter, is not one and the same thing. Their research in Himachal Pradesh shows that one half of the candidates belonged either to the prominent political or former princely families and other half included grassroot leaders, journalists, activists and the performance of both remained the same. So in that sense, being elite helps getting the ticket but it doesn't necessarily help perform better than a non-elite women candidate. Verniers closes by making a call for the work that needs to be done to understand the question of self-selection and the political ambitions that drive men and women.

### **Difference between 'Data' and 'Narrative' in the women representation scene**

Krishnaswamy<sup>11</sup> pointed to the critique of the narrative behind women's representation in Indian politics. She says that one needs to look at the DNA- Data, Narrative and Action, to understand the whole story of women's representation. What gets presented as data, what gets interpreted and then what gets implemented are all different narratives and one needs to critically look at these. The narrative says that not enough women are interested in politics or want to be a part of politics. But if one examines closely many women today have graduated from the Panchayats in the past two and half decades. However the irony remains

that a woman Mayor from Aurangabad and is the women's wing chief of the BJP, was denied a ticket not because of lack of interest in politics but because the seat was given to Shiv Sena, the alliance partner of BJP. Thus narrative that needs to set is that women 'are' interested in politics.

Krishnaswamy then asks, why do women don't stand as independents? There is truth in the fact that a lot of money and resources goes into running as independents and only 0.49% of independents have won since 1952. However the point that she makes is that it's not that women are not interested in politics but parties are not interested in women in electoral politics, even when they have crores of women as members. So, the narrative needs to change to one that is a combination of surfeit and greed of men in political parties that needs to be tackled.

Citing an example, in Andhra Pradesh for instance, in the 2019 general elections there was 27.04% vote deficit, it was one of the places where women didn't perform as well, probably the worst. But the data didn't recognise the 4 YCP women who won, none of those seats were won by YCP in the last 2 previous elections. In fact, Kakinada, which is one of the seats has never been won by YCP. So, these women didn't perform as well as other women in other states did, but these women did a foray for YCP. They won a seat for YCP that is hitherto never been won by YCP, which is a major achievement. This is how data without interpretation can be unfavourable to women.

Krishnaswamy<sup>12</sup> contends that this is the biggest and the most insidious myth that is propagated on women in politics claiming that women are not winnable. If one looks at just party tickets, including independents, party women have won at an even greater rate than party men did. The data is true, but the interpretation of this data is really quite convenient, that claims that women are more dynastic than men. However it is a known fact that women are not selecting themselves, men are selecting them. They are not selecting the men either. They have no influence in candidate selection because they don't hold party positions.

They aren't treasurers, or general secretaries, or vice presidents, or even district and state in charges. They are token women, in manifesto committees. They don't head up the manifesto committee either. So, the decision-making authority of women in political parties of India is nil. They may be even candidates, or finance ministers, defence ministers, but they don't head party positions or make decisions for party strategy. Krishnaswamy<sup>13</sup> then pushes the question in this light, of who is more dynastic in selecting candidates?

The second issue is the issue of counting. A huge number of male MP's and MLA's do not get counted as belonging to political class and families, but when women belong to one, she is immediately the focus. And this increases the conception of more women being dynastic because only women get counted as belonging to such families. In that sense, political parties are a reflection of the patriarchal society that we are part of. And it actually tells the story of the limited presence of women thus, when the benefits of patriarchy and dynastic politics actually benefit the men. Because the benefits of fielding the wife are not being used by the women, so how can we call women as dynastic, asks Krishnaswamy.

Literature shows that the complications of gender in the politics do not end with winning elections but continue even in their tenure. In her paper "The Politics of Access: Narratives of Women MPs in the Indian Parliament", Shirin M Rai, while interviewing the senior MPs at their homes as they have attached offices in their homes, observes that these offices blur the spatial politics. They also show that in some cases the strength of patriarchal social mores delay the participation of women in the political life and even inhibits them in developing a strong public profile.

Krishnaswamy<sup>14</sup> talks about her organization, 'Shakti' and the work that they have been doing, in pushing the agenda of women's representation in politics. Shakti is not an NGO but rather a grassroots citizen's movement. It is a varied range of people that are associated with Shakti. There are women farmers from Maharashtra, rape survivors

from Uttar Pradesh, abandoned women from Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. There are also people from IT, bankers, lawyers and students from all over the country who participate in Shakti's campaigns. Shakti's goal is to push for women's representation at the level of MLA's and MP's. The idea is to reach a level of threshold of representation for a critical mass of women to reach the Parliament, for things to change at a drastic level. Shakti also works with political parties in negotiating with them, so that they give more tickets to women. They also work with women candidates regardless of parties, so that they get access to their fair and rightful share. Shakti believes that women are subject to all kinds of unfair bars that needs to be countered and balanced against. They also work with voters in resetting biases, advancing the cause of women in politics and in particular work with MP's and the Government of India around the women's reservation bill. Shakti has been involved in the conversation on why there are so few women in politics and it is firmly committed to getting all parties (Right or Left) engaged on this issue.

Krishnaswamy<sup>15</sup> posits the quantity problem as more graver than the quality problem. She gives the example of the mid-day meal scheme, when introduced got the children to school and addressed the enrolment issue. And this is how she believes that the numbers of women representatives holds importance before we aim for the quality of their political representation.

Another fundamental point that Krishnaswamy raised was that women's economic development, education and political representation are all connected. Because if there is no money to run for a seat, then there is no possibility of having a political voice. So in that sense it is all linked. Further talking about the significance of election campaigns, she contends that women's campaigns are significantly different, where women in campaign teams take decisions about whose votes are needed, who to approach and who they think matters and forms the electorate. It's crucial because that's the difference between victory and defeat and that's when people are

closer to making up their mind about whom they are going to vote. This is why Shakti works with women's candidates as well on running their election campaigns, which means that if they can convince a set of people to show up at a rally and to convince them to show up to vote for these candidates. So then, there is a direct connection between becoming a candidate and their election campaigns. So, the more women that participate in campaigns, the more women that stand for elections, the more we are likely to see women in parliament.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

The under-representation of women in the electoral process is also partly the responsibility of the voters. If voters think that women candidates would not make good politicians or will not be able to take strong and bold decisions for their constituencies, they will not vote for them. This was seen in a Harvard University study of local polls in West Bengal where the villagers ended up rating women candidates below male ones. (Gender bias in Indian elections, Sudipta Sarangi & Chandan K Jha). Kumar<sup>16</sup> also affirms this bias on part of voters, where in opinion the voters might admit to having women representatives but in practice and

behavior the vote only goes to either the party or the male representatives. In addition to that, the women voters are also guided by what and whom their husbands and families vote for.

- Working rigorously with women candidates through their election campaigns is the key to undoing the patriarchal biases that exist for women's representation as well to reach the maximum voter base. An efficiently run and well strategized campaign for women candidates goes a long way for women in their decision making capacities and the relationship they build with the voters.
- Electoral politics is a male bastion but the stereotypes and misconceptions around women candidates which hinder women's representation need to be critically looked at, to understand their absence rather than perpetuating these myths to keep women away from the political scene.
- It is fundamental to understand how the data is interpreted in a way that tends favor the patriarchal mindset of the society and how we need to set up different/alternate narratives that support women's representation in Indian politics.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Gilles Verniers, XXX GEP Discussion Forum, August 2019

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Gilles Verniers, XXX GEP Discussion Forum, August 2019

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Gilles Verniers, XXX GEP Discussion Forum, August 2019

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Gilles Verniers, XXX GEP Discussion Forum, August 2019

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Gilles Verniers, XXX GEP Discussion Forum, August 2019

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Tara Krishnaswamy, XXX GEP Discussion Forum, August 2019

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Tara Krishnaswamy, XXX GEP Discussion Forum, August 2019

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Sanjay Kumar, XXX GEP Discussion Forum: August 2019

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Gender bias in Indian elections, Sudipta Sarangi, Chandan K Jha  
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## Speakers at the Forum

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**Tara Krishnaswamy** (Co- Founder, Shakti)

## Chairperson

**Sanjay Kumar** (Director, Centre for Study of Developing Societies)

# Gender and Economic Policy Discussion Forum

presented by



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