

Political Empowerment and Participation of Women in Legislature

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Abstract:

Political empowerment of women refers to the power, skill, ability, critical thinking, and a sense of group identity to make decisions and take action needed to make a difference in a political system. A goal was set by all the international bodies in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action to have a balanced political participation and power-sharing between women and men in the decision-making process. It is evident in the local politics at the Panchayat level that women's leadership and their increasing participation in the political decision-making process improves their condition in the society. This paper tries to find out the status and position of women in the Legislature. It tries to examine the political empowerment and participation of women at the global and national level. This paper also analyzes the participation of women as contestants, as member of Lok Sabha and member in the Indian Parliament. It explains the reason for such underrepresentation and also suggests possible solution for improving conditions

Keywords: Participation, Parliament, Empowerment, Legislature, Political Rights

Introduction:

Ours is the largest democracy in the world where the womenfolk constitute almost half the population. The Indian Constitutional provisions of equality gave women political rights by legitimizing their roles for participation in public life, within the formal and legal framework. Unfortunately, India's track record of female political leaders is unimpressive and falls far short of what the country's population deserves. Despite the political rights and provisions of equality given to all citizens, relatively a few women have been able to reach top executive posts or decision-making positions in legislature. Empowerment is a process that enables women to gain access to and control of material and intellectual human resources. As a part of the general empowerment process, political empowerment of women is vital for political participation of women. Political participation is a major avenue for women in the true sense of the term. In the other broad sense, participation in politics goes far beyond electoral politics: voting and election to public office.

When it comes to decision-making or ministerial positions within legislative bodies, women are a distinct minority. Indeed, their role in public life is limited to casting votes during elections. They are denied opportunities to participate in the decision-making process. Even when the decisions are to affect their wellbeing, they are only passive observers. So, the biggest challenge for women today is to get more involved in the decision-making process in a way that they understand and act on. According to a study on the status of women in India, commissioned by the UN development agencies based in India, women have little or no say in decision-making at all levels of society.

Women are excluded from decision making at every stage of life, from childhood to adulthood. If women are left behind in decision-making processes, it will be difficult to initiate the democratic process in a true sense. A balanced participation of men and women in decision-making is a fundamental requirement of democracy, and a positive development for society as decisions are made based on the needs and interests of the entire population. In order to have a balanced participation of men and women in decision-making process gender equality is needed. Gender equality is not only in the interest of men and women, but it is also a necessary condition for a functioning democracy. However, for many years, women members of parliament (MPs) were primarily responsible for protecting women's rights and gender equality within parliaments. We have now moved this responsibility onto parliaments, which represent the interests of every citizen. As a result, many parliaments have shifted their focus from a predominantly male membership to a more inclusive one. While attempts are made to create a more inclusive parliament and have a balanced participation of both men and women in the decision-making process, it is important to see the status and position of women in the parliament, the obstacles they face and finally some strategies to overcome it.

Women in Parliament: A Global Scenario

According to the latest data released by IPU (Inter-Parliamentary Union) for the first time in history, every functioning parliament in the world has at least a woman representative in it. But progress towards gender equality remains very slow. With New Zealand's joining the club, there are six countries worldwide now have gender parity in their parliaments. Rwanda holds the top spot followed by Cuba, Nicaragua, Mexico, New Zealand and United Arab Emirates. In Rwanda in case of the Upper Chamber, women still occupy 34.6 per cent of seats.

Table 1 Top six rankings of the percentage of women in National Parliaments (Ranking as of 1st January 2023)

Rank	Country	Lower or single House				Upper Chamber			
		Elections	Seats	Women	% W	Elections	Seats	Women	% W
1	Rwanda	09.2018	80	49	61.3	09.2019	26	9	34.6
2	Cuba	03.2018	586	313	53.4	-	-	-	-
3	Nicaragua	11.2021	91	47	51.7	-	-	-	-
4	Mexico	06.2021	500	250	50.0	07.2018	127	64	50.4
5	New Zealand	10.2020	120	60	50.0	09.2019	-	-	-
6	United Arab Emirates	10.2019	40	20	50.0	-	-	-	-

- The data in this table have been collected from the Inter-Parliamentary Union on the basis of information provided by national parliaments.
- *The figures correspond to the number of seats filled in parliament at the given time.

Rwanda is in the lead with more than 60% of its seats held by women, making it the first nation to achieve a female-majority parliament in 2008. In Nicaragua women outweigh men (53%), as well as in Cuba (53%). While Iceland, Costa Rica, Sweden, and South Africa are not far behind. Only New Zealand,

Mexico, and the United Arab Emirates have an equal gender distribution. Prior to 2006, there were no women in the Federal National Council of the United Arab Emirates; however, a presidential decree in 2019 resulted in gender parity.

Despite this positive change, it has been noticed that there is smallest increase (0.4 per cent) in women's participation in last six years. Now the global share of women in parliamentary office is 26.5 per cent which is not very satisfactory. According to Martin Chungong, IPU Secretary General, at this rate, it will take another 80 years to reach gender parity in parliament. As per the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) data, around one fourth lawmakers worldwide are women which is little better than 2011 i.e., one in five. There are countries which doing very badly and some others are going backward also. Yemen has just one woman in the upper house and none in the lower house. For the first time since 2008, Vanuatu's parliament welcomed a single female legislator in 2017. In more than 20 nations, including Nigeria (3.6%), Qatar (4.4%), and Iran (5.6%), women hold fewer than 10% of seats. Although Sri Lanka had the first female prime minister in the world in 1960, the country has lagged behind with women making up only 5% of parliament during the past 25 years. Despite a record number of women being elected in Japan in 2022, they still only hold 10% of seats in the lower chamber, far less than other major countries. Similar to Algeria, Tunisian women claim that modifications to the electoral process have made it more difficult for females to run for office and win. Since taking over the nation in 2021, the Taliban Islamist party has eliminated women from public life in Afghanistan. Women had occupied 27% of the seats in the now-defunct National Assembly prior to the coup. Now many ex-MPs who are women have left the nation.

Women occupy one fourth of the ministerial positions in the governments around the world, and they frequently hold portfolios with an emphasis on health, education, social welfare, environment and family. Spain, Albania, Colombia, Rwanda, Canada, and France are among the nations that have appointed cabinets with a majority of women or equal numbers of men and women.

However, the IPU claimed that technological and procedural change in parliaments brought on by the pandemic would make women feel more welcome, even those who were finding it difficult to balance parenthood and politics earlier. According to the IPU, the implementation of gender quotas is a significant contributor to recent achievements in many nations. More than two out of three nations that have exceeded the 40% threshold impose quotas of some kind.

In 2022 around 47 countries have held elections. Out of which seven countries have elected or appointed to at least 40% of the seats in Lower, Upper or single Chamber- Costa Rica, Sweden, Senegal, Denmark, Slovenia, Australia and Barbados. Australia's Senate created history by securing 56.6% of seats won by women which is highest share of any Upper Chamber in the world so far. Individually, it is a great achievement for a country. But worldwide, women's overall share of seats increased only by 0.4 percent i.e., 26.5%, which is the lowest growth in six years. When it comes to Lower and Single Chambers the greatest gains were in Slovenia, up by 15%, Malta 13%, Equatorial Guinea 11%, Colombia 10% and Australia 7.9%. Increased awareness of gender-based violence and discrimination was a factor in Colombia's improvement. By the end of 2022, women held at least 30% of seats in 64 nations, up from 61 nations the year before.

Women in Government Executives Positions:

To achieve the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030, women must have equal access to political power and leadership roles. Data, however, indicate that women are underrepresented in decision-making at all levels globally and that reaching gender parity in political life is still a long way off. The UN Women

calculation based on information provided by Permanent Missions to the United Nations, as of January 1, 2023, there are 34 women serving as heads of state or governments in 31 different nations. If things continue as they are, it will take another 130 years to achieve gender equality in the highest levels of authority. There are only 17 countries that have a woman Head of State, and 19 countries with a woman Head of Government. As of January 1, 2023, women make up 22.8% of Cabinet members who are ministers or otherwise in charge of a policy area, according to newly collated data by UN Women. There are just 13 nations where women occupy at least 50% of Cabinet Minister roles overseeing major policy areas. Women and gender equality are among the five portfolios handled by female Cabinet Ministers most frequently.

Status of Women in National Parliaments:

Women constitute only 26.5 per cent of the parliamentarians in the single or lower houses which is up by 11 per cent in 1995. There are 50 per cent or more women in single or lower houses in just six countries: Rwanda with 61%, Cuba with 53%, Nicaragua with 52%, Mexico with 50%, New Zealand with 50% and United Arab Emirates 50%.

At least 23 more countries, including 13 in Europe, six in Africa, three in Latin America & The Caribbean and one in Asia, have reached or crossed the 40 % threshold. By contrast, there are 22 countries around the world where women make up less than 10 per cent of parliamentarians in single or lower chambers, including one chamber with no woman at all. Women make up 36 percent of Latin America and Caribbean parliamentarians and 32 percent of parliamentarians in Europe and North America. Sub-Saharan Africa accounts for 26 percent of women in parliament, followed by east and Southeast Asia (22 percent), Oceania (20 percent), Central and South Asia (19 percent), and North Africa and West Asia (18 percent).

Women in Indian Parliament:

The realization that real development cannot take roots if it bypasses women, who represent nearly half the country, has been the guiding principle in the formulation of our plans from the very beginning. The government has made concerted efforts towards removing various gender biases in order to ensure equal status for women in the real sense as enshrined in the constitution of India.

The liberated atmosphere created for them by providing special Constitutional provisions is essentially to create more consciousness in them. This concept has been explained by the late prime minister, in the words of Mrs. Indira Gandhi, "To be liberated, women should feel free to be herself not in rivalry to man but in the context of her own capacity. Women should be more alive and more active in the affairs of society not because they are women but because they constitute half the human race". Since societies are composed of both men and women, they should equally represent their interests at the decision-making levels.

Women Legislators in Lok Sabha:

In the first Lok Sabha (1952-57) out of 446 seats, 23 were won by women members making a 4.9 percent of the total. The first cabinet minister to hold the health portfolio was Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur, while the first deputy minister was Maragatham Chandrasekhar. During this Lok Sabha, G. Durgabai, Ammu Swaminandhan, Renu Chakravarty, Smt. B. Khongmen and Sushma Sen on the panel of Chairmen. The second Lok Sabha (1957-1962) had 24 women members out of the total 474 seats making a 5 percent of the total. There was no woman with the rank of Cabinet Minister of State. There were three female Deputy

Ministers. The External Affairs Deputy Minister was LN Menon, the Home Affairs Deputy Minister was Violet Alva, and the Finance Ministry Deputy Minister was Tarakeshwari Sinha. In the 3rd Lok Sabha (62-67) of 500 seats, 37 female candidates were elected. The percentage of women members increased to 7.4 percent as well as the number of women ministers in the council of ministers increased substantially. Indira Gandhi, who was initially Cabinet Minister for Information and Broadcasting, also became the first prime minister in 1966. She was also in-charge of various important ministries like Atomic Energy, Home Affairs, etc. in the category of state ministers; The Ministry of External Affairs was headed by Lakshmi N. Menon. The Ministry of Health and Family Planning was headed by Dr Sushila Nayar. As a deputy minister, Maragatham Chandrasekhar took care of the Ministry of Home Affairs and Department of Social Welfare. Other Deputy Minister was Jahanara Jaipal Singh, Soundaram Ramachandran and Nandini Satpathy, Tarkeshwari Sinha was once again the Deputy Minister of Finance Renu Chakravarthy and Sarojini Mahishi also served on the panel of vice-Chairman. The fourth Lok Sabha (1967-70) had only 31 women members out of 505 total seats making it to 6.3 percent of the total members.

Also, during this period, the number of women members in the Council of Ministers decreased from 8 in the third Lok Sabha to only 5 in the fourth. In addition to Indira Gandhi who was the prime minister of India, there was one minister of state for social welfare and three deputy ministers. Phulrenu Guha was Minister of State for Social Welfare and Law, Nandini Satpathy was the Deputy Minister of Information and Broadcasting, Jeharana Jaipal Singh was holding the portfolio of Tourism and Civil Aviation, Sorojini Mahishi, who was until then parliamentary secretary become a deputy minister. Inside the house, T. Lakshmi Kanthamma, Tarakeshwari Sinha, Sushila Rohtagi and Jaben Shah were members on the panel of chairman. In the Fifth Lok Sabha (1971-77) the number of women members declined from 32 in the fourth Lok Sabha to 26 only in the fifth making it to a mere 5 percent of the total 510 seats. Only 4 women got ministerial berths including the Prime Minister in the Council of Ministers. Indira Gandhi as a Prime Minister also held all important portfolios such as Atomic Energy, Home, Defense and Finance. Sarojini Mahishi was the Deputy Minister of Tourism and Civil Aviation and Manorama Pandey was the Deputy Minister of Information and Broadcasting and Home. Also, Sheila Kaul was nominated to the Panel of Chairman. The Sixth Lok Sabha (1977-79), the number of women candidates dropped sharply to only 18 members out of a total number of 533 seats making it to a mere 3.3 percent. The sixth Lok Sabha had only one-woman cabinet minister Satyavani Muthu in the Ministry of Social Welfare. The other women ministers were Renuka Devi Barakataki, Minister of state of Education, Social Welfare and Culture, Abha Mati, Minister of State of Industry and Rashida Haque Choudary, Minister of State of Education, Social Welfare and Culture. Also, Abha Mati, Sushila Nayar and Parvathi Krishna were the members of the Panel of Chairman.

In the Seventh Lok Sabha (1980-84) there were 32 women members, 5.8 percent of the total membership of 551 in the House. Indira Gandhi once became the Prime Minister. She also held the portfolios of Atomic Energy, Defense, External Affairs, Industry, Electronics, Space and Science and Technology. Beside her, 6 women members became Ministers. Mohshina Kidwai was the Minister of State of Labour and Rehabilitation and Health and Family. Sheela Kaul was the Minister of State of Education, Culture and Social Welfare, and Ram Dulari Sinha was the Minister of State of Information & Broadcasting, Home Affairs and Steel & Mines. In the category of Deputy Ministers Kumudben Joshi became the minister of Information & Broadcasting, Health & Family Welfare and Kamala Kumari of Education, Rajendra Kumari Bajpai was member and Chairman in the Seventh Lok Sabha.

During the Eighth Lok Sabha (1984-89) there were 46 women members in that House constituting 8.5 percent of the total membership of 538. Out of these 10 women members were able to take part in the process of decision making. Mohshina Kidwai was a cabinet minister for Health and Family Welfare. She later took over the portfolio of the Ministry of Transport and Urban Development. At the time of taking over the portfolio, Ms. Chandrasekhar was an independent charge holder in the Women and Social Welfare Ministry. Rejendra Kumari Bajpai held independent charge of the Ministry of Welfare. Margret Alva was the Ministry of Human Resource Development (Youth Affairs and Sports).

Minister of State (Parliamentary Affairs) Sheela Dikshit, Minister of State for State (Agriculture), Saroj Charaparde Deputy Minister of State (Health and Family Welfare), Saroj Chandrasekhar Khaparde Secretary of State (Ministry of Textiles), Sumati Oraon Tribal leader and former Deputy Minister of State (Welfare) On the other hand, Sushila Rohatagi and Krishna Sahi were Minister of State in the Ministry of Human Resource Development looking after the Department of Education and Culture at two different points at a time during this Lok Sabha. Ram Dulari Sinha was the Minister of State for Steel and Mines and Basava Rajeswari served on the Panel of Chairman.

The ninth Lok Sabha (1989-91) the number of women members declined considerably to 29, with 5.4 percent of the total number of 529 seats. There were only 2 women Ministers at State in the Ministry of Environment and forests and Usha Singh as Deputy Minister in the Ministry of Welfare, Vijaya Raje Scindia and Geeta Mikharjee was the members' panel of Chairman.

Participation of Women in the tenth Lok Sabha increased considerably from the previous Lok Sabha. It has 39 women members. Out of the 39, five became members of the Union Council of Ministers. While Sheela Kaul was Cabinet Minister for Urban development, Selija was Deputy Minister of Human Resource Development. The three Ministers of state were Krishna Sahi, Department of Industrial development in the Ministry of Industry, Sukhbans Kaur, Department of Tourism and Basava Rajeshwari, Development of Women and Child Development in the Ministry. In the Eleventh Lok Sabha (1998-99), out of 545 seats, there were 40 women members making a 7.3 percent of the total. Under the thirteen days B.J.P. Government there was a single woman Minister, Sushma Swaraj, who held the portfolio of Information and Broadcasting.

In the Twelfth Lok Sabha (1998-99), out of 545 seats, 44 were won by women, with 8 percent. In the United Front Government 4 women members became Ministers. Kanti Singh with Deputy Minister's cadre took part in decision-making process. In addition to Swaraj, who held the portfolio of Information and Broadcasting, Menaka Gandhi held the portfolio of the Ministry of Forests, Kanti Singh the portfolio of the Health Ministry, and Sumitra Mahajan was looking after the Department of Women & Child Development under the Ministry of Human Resources Development. In the Thirteen Lok Sabha (1999-2004) out of 545 seats, 48 women candidates were elected, with an average percentage of 8.8 out of them, 10 were given minister ship. Mamata Banerjee was a Cabinet rank Minister. In the fourteenth Lok Sabha (2004-2009) 45 out of 545 women candidates were elected, with an average percentage of 8.29.

In the fifteenth Lok Sabha (2009-2014), 59 out of 545 women have been elected with an average percentage of 10.87 per cent. Out of them 23 are from the Congress and 13 from the main opposition Bhartiya Janata Party. A record 59 women have been elected Member of Parliament (MP) in the fifteenth Lok Sabha (2014-2019) the highest since Independence, and 17 of them are less than 40 years. In the Sixteenth Lok Sabha (2014-2019), 66 out of 545 women have been elected with an average percentage of 12.15 per cent. In the Seventeenth Lok Sabha (2019-2024), 78 out of 543 women have been elected with an average percentage of 14 per cent.

Table-2 Representation of Women in Lok Sabha Elections

Sl. No.	Year	Number of women MPs	Percentage of Women MPs
1	1951	23	4.50%
2	1957	24	4.45%
3	1962	31	6.28%
4	1967	32	5.58%
5	1971	26	5.41%
6	1977	18	3.51%
7	1980	32	5.29%
8	1984	46	7.95%
9	1989	29	5.48%
10	1991	39	7.30%
11	1996	40	7.37%
12	1998	44	7.92%
13	1999	48	9.02%
14	2004	45	8.29%
15	2009	59	10.87%
16	2014	66	12.15%
17	2019	78	14%

Source: Election Commission of India

According to a study conducted by the Inter-parliamentary Union (IPU), in January 2022, India is ranked 146th among 193 countries when it comes to female representation in the Parliament's lower house. It is unwarrantable that in a country where women account for half of the population, they have an abysmally low 14% representation in the Lok Sabha and 11% in the Rajya Sabha.

Of course, it is better at the Union level in India, where women's representation has climbed from 12.15 percent in the 2014 Lok Sabha to 14 percent in the 2019 Lok Sabha and 11% in Rajya Sabha. Out of 543 MPs (Lok Sabha) 78 are women and half of them come from four States. In the 15th, 14th and 13th Lok Sabha, 52 women candidates won (each time). In the 12th Lok Sabha, 44 women candidates won, in 11th Lok Sabha, 40 women candidates won. There were 42 female candidates who emerged victorious in the 10th Lok Sabha. In 10th Lok Sabha, 42 women candidates won. There were 45 women in 8th Lok Sabha, while the 9th Lok Sabha had 28 women MPs. Before that, 3rd Lok Sabha had the maximum of 37 women MPs. In both the first and second Lok Sabha, there were 24 women MPs.

In 2019, there were 715 women candidates against 7,334 male candidates contesting for seats across the country, with the Congress fielding the highest number of women (54), closely followed by the BJP (53). The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) had 24 women candidates, the All-India Trinamool Congress (AITC) had 23, the CPI(M) had 10, and the CPI had 4, while the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) had only one. Out of 8,049 candidates, there were around 222 women candidates contesting in the election independently. Women make up only 9% of elected candidates in State Legislative Assemblies, which is significantly lower at the state level.

Women Contestants in Lok Sabha Elections

Analysis of the above data shows that the number of women MPs is increasing gradually. Not only the number of women MPs are increasing the number of women voters as well as women candidates are also increasing. More and more women are coming forward to participate in the political process by contesting elections along with and against male candidates. They are getting tickets from different political parties to contest elections and finally winning the seats also for which they contest. The popular perception is that few women show interest for participating in politics. But the number of women contestants give a different picture altogether. The record shows that between 1957 and 2015, the total number of women candidates have increased from 45 to 668. There is a 15fold increase in the number of women contesting in elections. If we observe the data of male contestants for the same time period, we will find that the number has increased from 1474 to 7583, a five-fold increase. The 15-fold rise in female candidates implies that there is a growing desire among women to get involved in politics and be involved in policy-making as well.

Table - 3 Women & Men Contestants in Lok Sabha Elections from 1957 to 2019

Sl. No	Year of Election	No. of Women Contestants	No. of Men Contestants
1	1957	45	1474
2	1962	66	1919
3	1967	67	2303
4	1971	83	2701
5	1977	70	2369
6	1980	143	4486
7	1984	171	5321
8	1989	198	5962
9	1991	330	8419
10	1996	599	13353
11	1098	274	4476
12	1999	284	4364
13	2004	355	5080
14	2009	556	7514
15	2014	667	7584
16	2019	715	7334

Source: Election Commission of India

Table – 4 Success rate of Male and Female Contestants

Sl. No	Year of Election	No. of Women Contestants	No. of Men Contestants
1	1957	49%	32%
2	1962	47%	24%
3	1967	43%	21%

4	1971	34%	18%
5	1977	27%	22%
6	1980	20%	11%
7	1984	25%	9%
8	1989	15%	8%
9	1991	12%	6%
10	1996	7%	4%
11	1098	16%	11%
12	1999	17%	11%
13	2004	13%	19%
14	2009	11%	6%
15	2014	10%	6%
16	2019	11%	6.3%

Source: Election Commission of India

Success rate of Male and Female Contestants:

Another interesting fact that emerges from the figures over the years is the relative success of the women contestants as compared to the men contestants. Women have consistently had a higher success rate over the years as compared to men. In every single election, women have had a better success rate than men. And in some years, it has been quite clear. For example, in 1971, the men's success rate was 18% whereas the women's success rate was 34%, which is nearly twice as high as the men's. For the present Lok Sabha, men's success rate is 6.3%, while women's success rate is 11%. This could mean that either women had a higher chance of winning the seats from which they stood, or tickets were given to women with a higher chance of success. This could also mean that there is a growing acceptability of women politicians (parliamentarians) by the society. The number of women is increasing is a good omen to prepare the ground for increased female political participation. With the emergence of new political parties that do not depend on family patronage, party structures and more importantly, money and muscle power, more women entering the political arena can only be a good omen for decision-making for a section that makes up half of the population. If that were to be accompanied by a constitutional mandate to allocate 33% seats to women, then we would be heading towards more gender equality in politics.

Conclusion and Suggestions:

Although the number of females elected representatives in parliaments is on the rise, equality is still far from being achieved and progress is too slow. The majority of parliaments remain male-dominated and some parliaments have no female Members of Parliament at all. Women candidates face a range of challenges—from tackling discrimination or cultural biases that restrict women's participation in society, to balancing family, professional and political life, to securing political party support and campaign funding. They may also experience violence, harassment and bullying. Some women may be discouraged from running for political office, leaving male incumbents in place. But change can happen if there is political will and the right legal and political structures in place to ensure gender equality.

Many parliaments are shifting from a predominantly male-dominated membership to a more inclusive one. The process of making this shift often begins with a critical analysis of the institution, the recognition of invisible barriers that prevent women from participating, limit their participation, or impede progress

towards gender parity, and then decisive action to overcome these barriers. Parliaments should be run and structured in a way that reflects the needs of women and men, where women can not only work but want to work, where families are prioritized, and where both men and women feel that their work-life balance is respected, and where sexist language and behavior are not overlooked.

In order to improve women's representation in decision-making, long-term strategies are needed. These strategies must be systematic and challenge existing structures. There are many barriers to participation that need to be addressed. There is a need for new approaches and mechanisms to empower women in decision-making positions within various political structures. Some mechanisms may be established by the government, such as quotas. Others may be created through women's collective action. Some examples of such strategies include:

Women representatives should form into a 'critical mass' so as to act as a pressure group in the legislature. A critical mass of women in politics can bring to the agenda issues of crucial concern to women which are often otherwise neglected or reflected to second place, such as contraception, abortion, violence against women, gender discrimination, maternity leave, child care etc., for, women legislators are more responsive than men to the needs of all persons in society.

Create, launch and manage public awareness campaigns to communicate the value and benefits of gender balance in decision-making for the benefit of society as a whole.

Women should form their own political parties such as those existing in Canada, Germany, Iceland, Nigeria, the Philippines, Russia and Spain. Women's support groups should be formed throughout the country to work as lobbying groups in conjunction with political parties. Their goals should include increasing female political representation at all levels of the political system and encouraging female candidates to run for political office.

Women should organize and establish networks at different levels to influence the decision-making process. There is a great need to increase solidarity among women's groups for the cause of women.

Expansion of educational opportunities for women, greater recognition of their unpaid work, wider representation in electoral politics, legislative and legal mechanisms to safeguard their rights and equal opportunities for participation in the decision-making process are some other things which would strengthen the process of empowerment.

Lesia Vasylenko, President of the IPU Bureau of Women MPs, said that every woman elected, "brings parliaments one step closer to becoming more inclusive and representative and it's great to see much more diversity. There is an urgent need to change this, to strengthen democracy everywhere."

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