India – Contradictory Record

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Abstract

This chapter provides a review of the role of women in Indian politics, with a focus on female legislators. It begins with an account of the entry of women into politics in the early 20th century. Second, it looks at the gradual increase in the number of women MPs and the barriers they have faced. The third section presents the debate that resulted in quotas ('reservations') for women in local-level politics, but not in the more influential parliament and state assemblies. The final section is about some characteristics of women MPs. This review demonstrates some of the key barriers that keep women out of elected office in India, but also highlights the diversity of the women who have come to power despite these obstacles.

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India has a contradictory track record of women in politics. On the one hand, the country has had several prominent female political leaders, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi not least. India has also received considerable attention for reserving one-third of all political positions in local-level politics for women, thereby bringing millions of women to positions of power in political councils in Indian villages, sub-districts and districts. On the other hand, Indian politics remains a masculine arena, and the percentage of female legislators has increased at a painstakingly slow rate. In the federal parliament, the percentage of female members has gradually climbed, from 4.7 in 1952 to 11.4 in 2014. In India's important state assemblies, the percentage of women has consistently been even lower.

The personal histories of female politicians tell of some strong personalities who have broken gender stereotypes and exceeded expectations, but also of more passive political entrants who have been controlled by their families and parties. Women politicians in India repeatedly report of sexual harassment, belittling, and an aggressively male-chauvinistic political environment. A much-cited example of the misogyny among India's male politicians is how one of the longest-serving male members of parliament voted against a bill to criminalize stalking, arguing that it is only normal to stalk women: 'So what, we are all men after all!'[1]

This chapter focuses on women legislators in India, especially those elected to parliament. I begin with a brief account of the entry of women into politics in the early 20th century. The second section looks at the gradual increase in the number of women who have been elected to the Indian federal parliament and the barriers that they have faced. The third section presents the recent quota debate in India and how it has resulted in quotas for women in local-level politics, but not in the more influential parliament and state assemblies. In the final section I discuss some characteristics of women MPs. In this brief review, I seek to demonstrate some of the key barriers that keep women out of elected office in India, but also to highlight the diversity of the women who have come to power despite these obstacles.

1 India's first women politicians

The first official demands for the inclusion of women in Indian politics were made by women's groups in 1917 (Guha, 1974, p. 284). At that time,

[1] Quoted in an editorial in *Economic & Political Weekly* (2013).

women in India were generally illiterate, often married off to another family at a young age. Social reform – with a focus on abolishing child marriage and *sati*,[2] on allowing young widows to remarry, and on providing education for women – had been a major concern of the British colonizers and nationalist reform groups alike. As a result of efforts to educate and 'uplift' the female population of India, by the beginning of the 20th century a small group of well-educated women had started to form women's organizations in the cities (Forbes, 1999, ch. 3).

These first women's groups concentrated on social work, and seem to have had few political ambitions. Whether strategically or not, the spokeswomen for these organizations focused on how their aim was not social rebellion but to help the nationalist cause (Forbes, 1999, ch. 5). When the Indian National Congress (henceforth the Congress Party) – a key player in the independence movement and the dominant party in post-independence India – was formed in 1885, membership was made open to women. Ten women attended its annual meeting in 1889, although they were not allowed to speak or vote. Some writers report that the first woman spoke in a Congress meeting in 1890, while others put the date later (Basu, 1995, p. 97).

In 1917, the British Secretary of State for India, Edwin Montagu, announced plans for expanding the self-governing institutions in India that had been established in 1909, increasing the number of Indians to be elected to various legislative councils within British India. He and the Viceroy, Lord Chelmsford, would tour the country to listen to the views of individuals and groups on these reforms. On December 15, 1917, the Congress Party worker Sarojini Naidu led a group of women to meet with Chelmsford and Montagu, asking for equal rights for women in the self-governing institutions in British India (Forbes, 1999, p. 92).

Following this meeting, the women went on to mobilize support for female suffrage among the Indian political elite. Their claims were met with some skepticism, but in the course of 1918, the Congress Party, the India Home Rule League, and the Muslim League all approved resolutions supporting the franchise for women (Roy, 2005, ch. 4). However, the British rejected these demands, on the grounds that these elite women did not represent that majority of women in India, most of whom were not interested in voting, and that societal conditions in India made it 'premature' to give the vote to women (Simon, 1930, p. 29). In the end, the Government of India Act of

[2]The tradition of women throwing themselves into the funeral pyre of their husband.

1919 made the vote for women a 'domestic' (intra-Indian) matter, thereby leaving the choice of the female vote to the newly elected assemblies (Simon, 1930, p. 29).

At the time, much of the political mobilization in India focused on opposing British rule. After returning to India in 1915, Gandhi became a driving force for bringing women into the independence movement, calling on them to do whatever they could to contribute. He spoke of women as being even better than men at the type of peaceful resistance he wanted to lead, because of their life-long experience of self-sacrifice and endurance (Basu, 1995, p. 97). Thanks to Gandhi's broad political appeal and his ability to create a sense of confidence, many women responded to his call, and their family members supported them in this. From the 1920s onwards, women participated in large numbers in the independence movement, giving many women more confidence in their own strength as well as hands-on experience with political work.

Their active role in the independence movement provided women with strong arguments for demanding equal political rights. By 1930, all the provincial assemblies had recognized women's right to vote, although the requirements of wifehood, education, and property ownership meant that only a very small group of women were enfranchised (Guha, 1974, p. 284). Women also demanded, and were granted, the right to serve as legislators.

India's first woman legislator was Muthulakshmi Reddy, a renowned medical doctor and social worker who was appointed to the Madras Legislative Council in 1927, having been nominated by a women's organization (Forbes, 1999, p. 103). As very few women entered politics at this time – and usually from the women's organizations that focused on the social welfare of women and children – they were perceived as representatives mainly of 'women's issues.' In her autobiographies, Reddy told of how the men politicians on the Council welcomed her work to improve the medical welfare and educational attainment of women, but were skeptical of her efforts to obtain greater legal rights for women (quoted in Forbes, 1999, p. 105).

The 1930s and early 1940s saw heated debates on how self-governing institutions in India were to be designed. The overall demand of the independence movement was for the British to leave India, but within the ranks of the movement there was deep disagreement on many points. A main issue concerned political safeguards, such as quotas for religious minorities, for the former 'untouchables,' and also for women. Gandhi was strongly opposed to quotas of any kind, to the extent that he went on hunger strike against

quotas for the 'untouchables' in 1932.[3]

The main organizations for women were torn between their nationalist loyalties and their fight for women's rights. Should they focus on opposing the colonial rulers, or lobby those rulers for political safeguards for women – thereby going against Gandhi and other Congress Party leaders? Their official stance in the early 1930s was to ask for expansions in the female franchise – first for a franchise ratio of 1:5 and later for universal adult suffrage – but not quotas for women. However, several individual activists were outspoken about the need for some form of guarantee for the inclusion of women in elected positions (Forbes, 1999, p. 108–10). In the Government of India Act of 1935, the first 'draft constitution' of India, women – in addition to several other groups – were given reserved seats with separate electorates in both the upper and lower house of the Federal Legislature of British India (GOI, 1942, pp. 190–3). Seats were also reserved for women in the Provincial Legislative Assemblies, with sub-quotas for Sikhs, Muslims, Anglo-Indians and Christians (GOI, 1942, p. 214).

The 1935 reform granted the right to vote to women above 21 years of age who either had a certain level of education or were married to a man who paid more than some amount of taxes (the exact rules differed from province to province) (Singer, 2007, pp. 42-4). In the 1937 elections, more than four million women were enrolled to vote, and slightly under one million voted (Singer, 2007, p. 45). Women were also allowed to run for election, for the seats reserved for women and also for the non-reserved seats. These elections brought 56 women into the provincial assemblies and 30 into the federal assembly (Forbes, 1999, p. 195).

The onset of the World War II and the resignation of Congress ministries across India delayed further elections, and much of the country was under the Governor's rule. Then in 1946, new provincial elections were held using the same quota system as in the 1937 elections. These new provincial assemblies elected India's Constituent Assembly, which also became the provisional parliament of the country, 1950–52. Through these indirect elections, several women became members of the Constituent Assembly and were involved in drafting a national constitution (Agnihotri, 2012). Here they played an active and important role in the debates. However, following the line established by the Congress Party, several of them spoke out against quotas for women in independent India.

[3]See Jensenius (2015) for an overview of the history of quotas for the 'untouchables.'

Whereas the political work in the 1920s and early 1930s had united many of the politically active women of the time around common goals, electoral politics came to pit them against each other. Many of the women who had entered politics through organizational work were uncomfortable about having to compete for party nominations and plead for votes, and some mobilized to run uncontested in order to avoid having to campaign for election at all (Forbes, 1999, p. 193–4). Those who had been active in the independence movement expected their male colleagues to support their bids for office, also in seeking to run for non-reserved seats. But when the opposition movement started shifting gear for electoral competition, the parties proved conservative in their choice of candidates, fielding mostly land-owning upper-caste men (Sarkar, 1989, pp. 350–1). When the women's organizations took this up with Prime Minister Nehru, he responded that, although he himself would like to see more women in positions of power, he faced pressures from more traditional party workers, and so women would have to be prepared to fight for their own political inclusion (Forbes, 1999, p. 193).

2 Women in the Indian parliament

The women in the Constituent Assembly had asked for equal political rights, but no quotas or other safeguards to guarantee their political presence. The Congress leadership considered it important to include women because of the role they had played in the independence movement, and also because they were thought to be better at representing 'women's issues' and attracting women voters (Singer, 2007, p. 66). They were also concerned with having enough women and minorities among their candidates to show that the quotas they had worked so to oppose were not needed.[4]

Starting in 1957 and throughout the 1960s, the Congress Party operated with an informal 15 per cent internal party quota for nominating women candidates in elections (Katzenstein, 1978). However, as the nomination committees in different states complied with the internal quotas to varying degrees, the overall percentage of women among Congress candidates always remained well below 15 per cent at the national level (Singer, 2007, p. 68).[5]

[4]Studying the nomination process of Congress in the national election of 1966, Kochanek (1967, p. 293) found that the Central Election Committee 'urged the provincial election committees' to ensure 'adequate representation' of women and minorities.

[5]The proportion of women in the indirectly elected Rajya Sabha (the upper house of

The party-internal quota in the Congress Party was an unofficial continuation of the quota policy in the pre-independence elections. This was interpreted as specific seats being 'reserved' for specific communities, and efforts were made to find 'suitable' constituencies. Women were often fielded in urban constituencies, as these were home to the educated female voting population, but also so female candidates would not have to travel around in rural areas in order to campaign (Singer, 2007, p. 66). This top–down approach to nominations also meant that women were often nominated far from where they actually had a political base.

In these early elections, other parties than Congress did not nominate many women and, as shown in Figure 1, women constituted only about 3 per cent of all candidates; it was not until the 1990s that the figure rose above 4 per cent.[6]

Elections soon became competitive, as more and more candidates and parties started contesting. A main challenge for any aspiring candidate seeking party nomination was the need to demonstrate not only popular support, but also the financial capability to run an election campaign.

This proved harder for women than for men, as they were often economically dependent on male family members. According to the 1974 report by the Committee on the Status of Women in India, one of the key barriers that kept women out of politics was the fact that their families were not willing to pool enough money to support their candidacy (although they were willing to do so for male family members) (Guha, 1974, p. 291). Since then, the need for a solid financial background has probably grown even stronger, as Indian elections have increasingly become characterized by money and 'muscle' power (Michelutti, 2010, Vaishnav, 2017). Through self-declared asset reports that are made publicly available, it is now easy to see that many candidates running for election in India today are uncommonly wealthy.[7]

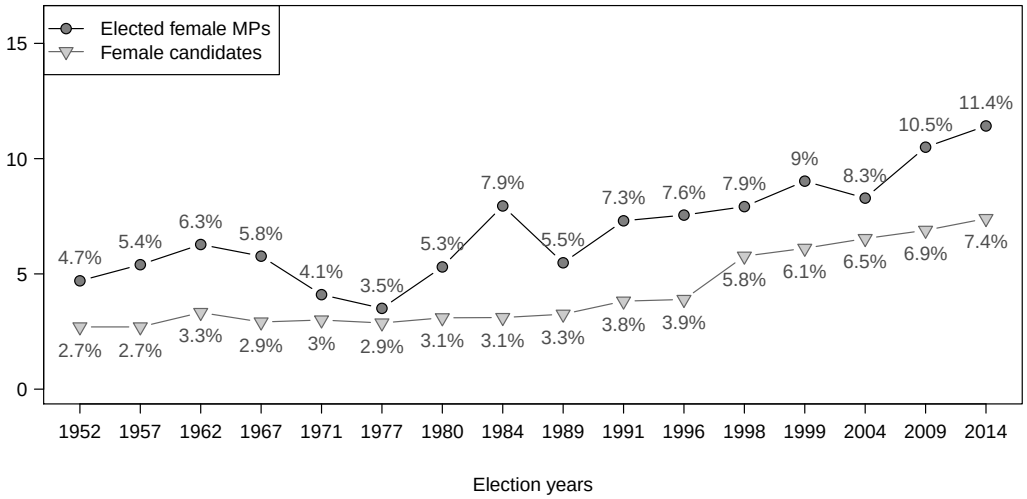
A second major barrier to women entering politics in India is the common expectation for women to be in charge of extensive household duties (Nath, 1996, 14). To be nominated for election, women have generally needed to demonstrate that their family supported their choice of entering a time-consuming profession that would leave them little time for household chores (Singer, 2007, p. 2011). Women politicians tell of their doubts about leaving

the Indian parliament) was closer to the 15 per cent level (see Dutoya, 2014, p. 173).

[6]In the elections to the state assemblies the numbers were even lower (Jensenius, 2016).

[7]See [URL] www.myneta.info/

Figure 1: Percentage of female candidates and elected Members of Parliament in India's federal parliamentary elections 1951–2014



Note: Figures for the first elections are from Jharta (1996, p. 64); the remainder are from the elections reports created by the Election Commission of India (collated in Jensenius 2016). In the report from 1971 the demarcation of male and female winners is incorrect, so the number of elected female MPs in 1971 has been taken from Guha (1974, p. 293). The figures on elected female MPs do not include all women MPs, as some entered due to replacements and nominations. A full list of India's MPs (including a separate list for women) can be found at the Lok Sabha website.

behind their responsibilities at home, and that family support was crucial in enabling them to run for office (see Kishwar, 1997, pp. 15–16). In fact, strong cultural expectations that women are to take care of the home and family are often mentioned in explaining why a large share of the women who have run for office have been unmarried or widowed (Singer, 2007, p. 202).

A third challenge for women in Indian politics is related to harassment and slander – often referred to as 'character assassination' (Guha, 1974, p. 291). In many parts of India, the dignity of the family has been linked to the control of women's sexuality, and spending time with men outside of the family has not been considered 'decent.' The most extreme cases are women who observe *purdah* [veiling and seclusion], but a certain degree of sex segregation is common practice throughout much of Indian society. Political work requires speaking alone to men, being actively involved in public gatherings, and often spending the night away from home: all of these are activities often deemed

inappropriate for women. Many women politicians opt to travel with a sizable entourage or a male family members for their 'safety,' mainly the safety of their reputation. For example, a former Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh, Uma Bharati, usually travels accompanied by her brother (Singer, 2007, p. 200). All the same, there have been rumors of her having an affair with a party member. In her words: 'Women rarely manage to come forward [for political positions] and when they try to do so, their own colleagues brand them as "loose-characters" ' (quoted in Nath, 1996, 9).

The proportion of female MPs fluctuated around 5 per cent until 1984, when an unprecedented number of female candidates from the Congress Party were elected (38 out of 42) following the assassination of Indira Gandhi right before the election (see Figure 1). In the next election, the number returned to normal, but since the early 1990s there has been a gradual increase. In the 2009 elections, the share of women in India's parliament crossed the 10 per cent mark for the first time, and in the 2014 elections 11.4 per cent of the elected MPs were women.

The percentage of elected women MPs has consistently been higher than the percentage of women candidates. This has sometimes been put forward as indicating that voters prefer women candidates. However, this is not evidence of women being more or less competitive in elections than men: it simply reflects the fact that women tend to be fielded in party strongholds. A study of nomination patterns in the 2009 parliamentary election in India found that parties are risk-averse in fielding women, nominating them in areas where they are fairly sure of winning (Spary, 2014). On the basis at data from all the state assembly elections held between 1974 and 2007, Jensenius (2017a) similarly shows that, when controlling for the constituency-level vote-share of parties in the previous election, the winning rates of men and women across Indian elections are very similar.

Before the 1990s, it was mainly the Congress Party that had been fielding women candidates. The change in the 1990s was a result of the other parties catching up. In particular, the BJP – India's main right-wing party – went from fielding very few women to fielding as many as the Congress Party in just a few years. This was partly because they started fielding more women in constituencies reserved for the former 'untouchables' (Scheduled Castes, or SCs) and tribal groups (Scheduled Tribes, or STs) (Jensenius, 2016). The increase in the nomination of SC and ST women in the 1990s has meant that there has actually been little increase in the nomination of other women in India over time, and that the inclusion of more women has mainly taken place

at the expense of SC and ST men. Jensenius (2016) argued that this pattern may be the result of parties resisting the pressures to include more women by nominating women at the cost of the least powerful male politicians, but that it can also be seen as evidence that SC and ST quotas have created a political space that is more accessible to women. Singer (2007, p. 191) quotes an interview indicating a more pessimistic interpretation of the same pattern: that facing pressures to include more women the party leaderships field more minority-group women because these they are expected to be the least likely to challenge the party hierarchy.

3 Re-ignition of the quota debate

The quotas for women in the 1937 and 1946 elections had brought many women into politics, but India's main women's organizations had been opposed to them, wanting to compete on an equal footing with men. Despite stagnant and even declining numbers of women in elected office this remained their official stance until the 1970s, and quotas for women were not on the political agenda (John, 2000, p. 3822).

The discussion about quotas for women re-emerged in 1974, when the Committee on the Status of Women presented a detailed report which concluded: 'large masses of women in this country have remained unaffected by the rights guaranteed to them by the Constitution' (Guha, 1974, preamble). Among other issues, the Committee considered quotas for women in India's legislative assemblies, but rejected the idea on the grounds that women are a category, not a community, and that they should continue to serve as representatives of all people, not only of women (Guha, 1974, p. 304). However, the Committee did propose the establishment of all-female elected councils at the village level, intended to manage and administer welfare and development programs for women and children. They also recommended that all political parties adopt internal party quotas for elections to the state assemblies and the federal parliament (Guha, 1974, p. 305).[8]

The recommendation of separate councils for women was not followed through, but various states started proposing reforms of local-level politics

[8]There was considerable disagreement within the Committee on these recommendations. Two members wrote notes of dissent arguing against any form of quotas; two members wrote a joint note of dissent arguing in favor of quotas in the legislatures (Guha, 1974, pp. 354–57).

that included reserved positions for women. Most states already had provisions for including a few women in village councils, but they were often nominated rather than elected, and the councils did not have much power (Singer, 2007, p. 166). In 1983, the government in the southern state of Karnataka started drafting a bill that would give local councils greater power and resources; this bill included reserving 25 per cent of the elected positions for women. A similar provision (but with 30 per cent reserved seats) was recommended for the whole country in the National Perspective Plan 1988–2000 (GoI, 1988, p. 164), and was followed up with the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Constitution (passed by the Indian parliament in 1992) providing for one-third reserved seats for women in all local-level elected bodies. The amendments encountered almost no political opposition (Kishwar, 1997, p. 9) and were hardly discussed in the legislature before they were passed (Tawa Lama-Rewal, 2005, p. 192), perhaps because these local-level quotas would not affect the power of national-level politicians.

The relatively easy passage of quotas for women at the local level inspired women's groups to press for quotas for women in higher-level politics as well (Krook, 2009, p. 91). In 1996, the 'Women's Reservation Bill' was introduced as the 81st Constitutional Amendment Bill; it proposed that a third of all seats in India's federal parliament and state assemblies be reserved for women (Menon, 2000, 3836). The Prime Minister called for its immediate passage by unanimous consent, but already in this first discussion two women from the same political party (Sushma Swaraj and Uma Bharti from the BJP) argued about the design of the proposed policy (Singer, 2007, p. 214).

Most women in parliament agreed that something would have to be done to increase the number of women in politics. Margaret Alva from the Congress Party said in an interview in 1996 that she and others had worked to get more women nominated by their parties, but to no avail: 'we [women] are neither in the selection panels nor are we represented in decision-making bodies. We give lists, we fight, we recommend, but they don't listen to us' (quoted in Nath, 1996, 8). Uma Bharati (BJP) was clear about being against quotas in principle, because she believed 'women should come forward on the basis of their own merit and hard work,' but also said she had changed her mind because: 'my 12 years of experience in politics has led me to believe that this does not happen' (quoted in Nath, 1996, p. 9). Similarly, Pramila Dandavate from the Janata Dal said she had begun to support quotas for women after she had seen how few women were nominated by her own party and that the party only wanted women to be 'decorative pieces.' She also

told of how male politicians felt threatened by the 'Women's bill' and were jokingly asking 'who will make our food?' (quoted in Nath, 1996, pp. 12-3).

The main argument against the bill was that it would result in only upper-class and caste women being elected, and that it would need to include sub-quotas for non-elite groups – the so-called Other Backward Classes (OBCs). The bill was also criticized for proposing that reserved seats be rotated, as this would undermine the ability of women to build a strong support base (Menon, 2000). However, many interpreted the discussions as an attempt by male politicians to stop the bill from being passed (Samujh, 2005, p. 265). According to Margaret Alva, male MPs engaged themselves in these debates about design because they worried about losing their positions: 'The greatest fear amongst male MPs is that they will lose their seats. They keep saying, "Do you want to leave your seat? If you vote for this bill your seat will go" ' (quoted in Nath, 1996, p. 9).

During the years following the proposal of the first women's reservation bill, several other ideas were mooted for increasing the number of elected women. One suggestion was to create multi-seat constituencies with one-third of the seats reserved for women (deSouza and Sridharan, 2006, pp. 374–5). But multi-member constituencies had already been tried for SCs and STs, and had been removed in 1961 because they were seen as unpractical and as creating tag-along politicians (Jensenius, 2017b, ch. 1). Members of the women's organization Manushi suggested introducing party quotas whereby parties would have to nominate one-third women among their candidates to be allowed to run for election. However, this was opposed by arguments that parties would be able to choose to field women only in areas where they do not expect to win. At the time of writing this chapter the debate has remained stalemated; although the bill was voted through the upper house of the Indian parliament in 2010 it has still not passed in the lower house.

4 Characteristics of India's women MPs

There are many stereotypes surrounding women's nature and consequent political contributions in India. Women are often assumed to be more economically dependent, less corrupt, less inclined to violence, and more caring. Such ideas have shaped how people have understood their actions and evaluated their performance (Spary, 2007).

The reality is that the women who have come to power in Indian politics

have exhibited great diversity in political perspectives, tactics, and strategies (Singer, 2007, p. 188). Some women have played an important role within the Congress Party; others have been at the center of left-wing grassroot activism across India (see, e.g., Nielsen and Waldrop, 2014); there have also been many women in the hindunationalist movement, some with quite extreme and 'anti-feminist' perspectives (see Bacchetta, 2004).

Looking at female politicians in the 1970s onwards, there were few systematic differences between male and female politicians in how they campaigned, the type of platforms they campaigned on, or how they acted in parliament (Singer, 2007, p. 166). In a study of the MPs that got elected in 1991, Rai (2002, p. 4) found that '[m]ost women MPs interviewed did not have women's issues high on their list of interests. Rather, they wanted to be on committees relating to economy, international relations and trade.' And although women MPs did take special interest in issues that clearly united women across class and region – such as violence, harassment and rape – they rarely went against the party whip when it came to voting (Rai, 2002, p. 5).

Work by Clots-Figueras (2011) showed that having more women in state assemblies was associated with more investment in primary education and health, but that only SC and ST women seemed to favor 'women-friendly' policies such as reform of inheritance laws. These findings indicate how women are politically divided by their class background and ideological position.

Writing in the early 1970s, the Committee on the Status of Women found that the majority of the female candidates came from 'well-to-do families, with a sprinkling of members of old princely houses' (Guha, 1974, p. 290). They also noted that a few of them were from families with long traditions of political participation, and were therefore 'highly articulate' with a 'sharp perspective of politics' (Guha, 1974, p. 290), but that most were new entrants with little experience. A study of women MPs who came to power in 1991 reported that they were 'mostly middle-class, professional women, with little or no link to the women's movement' (Rai, 1999, p. 95).

Data on the educational levels of women MPs from Northern India 1952–1999 show that they tended to have higher levels of formal education than their male colleagues (Dutoya, 2014, p. 189). They were also less likely to be farmers or business people and more likely to be professionals (Dutoya, 2014, p. 190). Similar patterns emerged in a study of all MPs elected in 2004, 2009 and 2014, which showed that women MPs on average were a little

younger than men, but with higher levels of education (Basu, 2016, p. 146).

There are also some differences between men and women politicians in terms of wealth, and corruption. Women MPs in India are on average wealthier than men (Basu, 2016), and several female political leaders have been notorious for blatant and excessive corruption. The five-times Chief Minister in Tamil Nadu, Jayalalitha, made headlines with her collection of 750 pairs of shoes and more than 10,000 sarees. The four-times Chief Minister in Uttar Pradesh, Mayawati, was known to have acquired enormous amounts of property during her time in office. However, studies of village-level politics have found that women politicians tend to be somewhat less corrupt than their male counterparts (Duflo and Topalova, 2004).

The propensity towards violence and criminality also seems to be somewhat lower among female politicians, although some are as ready to use 'muscle-power' in politics as men. Singer (2007, p. 166), for instance, tells of a female MP in Bihar who had the reputation of being 'a strong politician with the capability of using violence.' But the average is lower: whereas 35 per cent of the male MPs elected in 2014 had criminal records, the figure was 'only' 26 per cent among the female MPs.[9]

Women MPs are also more likely than male politicians to be dynastic – understood as someone preceded by a family member who was active in electoral politics. In the parliaments elected in 2004, 2009 and 2014, about two thirds of all female MPs were dynastic (in comparison to one fourth of the male politicians) (Chandra, 2016, Basu, 2016). The high prevalence of women from dynastic families is often criticized, as the women are thought to be 'proxy' candidates (Spary, 2007) or 'namesake' politicians (Buch, 2010): nominated and elected on the expectation that they will act as agents for some male family member. A famous example was the election of Rabri Devi, who took over power when the Chief Minister – her husband – was arrested because of a corruption scandal (Spary, 2007, p. 270). The election of female proxy candidates has also been reported in village-level politics after the quotas for women were implemented (Buch, 2010).

But not all women politicians who have come to power because of family connections are passive agents. Consider, for instance, Indira Gandhi – when she was elected as leader of the Congress Party in 1966, the party leadership assumed she would be pliant and follow their instructions, but she soon set about acting independently. This has been the case for many other female

[9]Figures are from [URL] http://www.myneta.info/ accessed January 31, 2016.

politicians as well: once in power, they do not necessarily follow the political line of the men who helped them get to power and, in fact, often challenge gender inequalities within the family (Basu, 2016, p. 133). Singer (2007, p. 166) argued that while wealth, fame and family connections can help you get into politics in India, they do not help you to stay there. In an interview, the Congress politician Margaret Alva expressed a similar sentiment: 'It's possible that I would not have been given an opportunity if I was not an Alva. But only those who are good enough will be able to sustain themselves' (quoted in Nath, 1996, 8).

One way of interpreting the high number of female politicians coming from political families is to recognize it as a way to overcome the barriers that keep most women out of politics. Women from dynastic families gain entry into politics because of name recognition and contacts, and are also allegedly less likely to face harassment and slander. Moreover, dynastic families are more accepting and supportive of women entering politics (Singer, 2007, p. 203). As noted by Chandra (2016, p. 47), the strong dynastic tendency in India can therefore paradoxically be understood to have increased the inclusiveness of Indian politics, as it has provided an entry point for women and other under-represented groups.

Whereas dynasticism among women politicians has received considerable public attention, we should also not forget that a third of the female MPs in India do not come from dynastic families. Some have been the protégé of a powerful male politician, but others have simply worked their way up the party hierarchy. Sushma Swaraj – seven times MP, the former Chief Minister of Delhi, and India's Minister of External Affairs at the time of writing this chapter – does not come from a political family, and has climbed the party ladder since she became politically active in the 1970s. She is a cultural conservative and has cultivated an image of an 'ideal Hindu wife' in dress and style, but has maintained a strong and independent political voice (Basu, 2016, p. 139).

Another important example is the current Chief Minister of West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee, who rose to power through student politics and then the Congress Party and was one of the youngest MPs ever when she was first elected in 1984. She is often described as emotional and feisty, and has several times been injured in protests and clashes (Nielsen, 2016, p. 94). Characteristically dressed in wrinkled cotton saris and sandals and living in a modest house close to one of Kolkata's red light districts, her political image is far from the stereotype of a protected upper-class woman being

manipulated by her family.

5 Conclusions

India started out with a relatively high number of women in elected office in the middle of the 20th century, but then began lagging behind as women became politically empowered in many parts of the world. The high cost of running for election, the cultural expectations of taking care of the home and family, harassment and slander, as well as the increasing criminalization of politics are reported as key barriers to women entering politics in greater numbers. Despite these challenges, India has had several prominent female leaders who have seized political power, have gained confidence and experience, and have exceeded expectations.

The quota debate in India in recent years has touched on many important points related to the inclusion of women in politics across the world: Is it really an advantage to be helped into elected office? Are women from dominant communities able to represent the interests of all women? The prevalence of high-class women in India's legislatures has been used as an argument against quotas for women in these assemblies, but experience from the application of village-level quotas indicates that this can also be an important argument in favor of it: whereas the women who have managed to fight their way into Indian politics without quotas have often been from privileged backgrounds, it is likely that having a quota for women can open the political space to women with more diverse backgrounds.

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