



Women's Reservation in Corporation: What Do Women's Lived Experiences Reflect?

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Introduction

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Today women constitute about 60 per cent of the total elected representatives in the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai (MCGM). It is interesting to note that it was in 1957 with Sulochana Modi's victory as Mayor of Mumbai that India had got its first woman mayor. To date, seven women corporators have received the credit of becoming the Mayors in MCGM. Drawing on the larger concerns of gender-inclusive political leadership, the paper is an attempt to discuss women's reservation in politics with fresh arguments put forth by women elected representatives. The paper reflects part of the major study, recently conducted with 50 women corporators in the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai (MCGM).¹ The narrative technique was used to collect data, which included in-depth interviews of women corporators across categories of age group, education, economic class, caste and religion.

The paper aims at providing fresh insights into the much-debated issue of women's reservation. The critical questions include—how important is the role of reservation in the political empowerment of women? Has it facilitated women's entry into 'truly equal political space' in the Corporation? The study endeavors to widen the understanding of politics in general, and gender and urban governance in particular, besides advancing the case for women's reservation at higher legislative bodies. Divided into four sections, the paper begins with briefly highlighting the historical milestones attained during the struggle for



women's political equality; the journey from against separate electorate to reservation; the role of various agencies in pushing the case for gender-equal political leadership; the second section provides brief details about the study. The third section builds arguments about reservation based on the tangible as well as intangible data collected from respondents and which provides a detailed understanding of women corporators' views on the reservation in politics. Finally, the last section sums up the findings with suggestions for necessary policy interventions.

Women's Struggle for Political Equality

The struggle for women's political rights in India started a century back with the establishment of the Women's Indian Association (WIA) on 8 May 1917 at Adayar, Madras. WIA was the first organisation that raised awareness among women about their political rights. Women for the very first time raised the issue about women's right to vote in the year 1917 under the leadership of Sarojini Naidu during the visit of Lord Edwin Montague to India. These women were members of WIA, Seva Sadan, and Indian Women's University, which is now known as SNDT Women's University. In the year 1922 for the very first time, many women were appointed in municipal councils and local government, and in the same year, Margaret Cousins became the first foreign woman to become a magistrate in India. Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy was appointed to the Madras Legislative Council in 1927 and got the credit of being the first woman to be a member of any legislature in India. She became the first woman in the world to become the Deputy President of the Legislature. She also became the first Alderwoman of the Madras Corporation (equivalent to Mayor position) (Rani 1994: 99).

Women in colonial India were against a separate electorate. They had rejected reservations as the route to their empowerment. However, Indian women's organisations were united in the struggle for a free independent nation, but they wanted free India in which women would have comprehensive political rights, right to vote regardless of marital status or literacy. They also wanted to run for political elected offices along with men, rather than in special seats reserved for women. This is evident from several accounts of women. For instance, Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddi repeatedly pre-empted any accusation of sexual antagonism on the part of women by opposing any measure that singled out women as a separate group. When an official member suggested an electorate for women, she protested:

We do not want to form a separate caste and thereby create a sex barrier, because in actuality men and women have to co-operate



in every detail of life. Unless men and women co-operate, there cannot be any progress either for the individual or for the nation. (ibid.)

During constituent assembly debates in 1946, Hansa Mehta (representing the constituency of Bombay: General) has unequivocally stated that:

We have never asked for reserved seats, for quotas, or separate electorates [...] What we have asked for is social justice, economic justice, and political justice. We have asked for that equality which can alone be the basis of mutual respect and understanding and without which, real co-operation is not possible between man and woman. (Mehta 1946: 138)

Likewise, Renuka Ray (representing the constituency of West Bengal: General) strongly denounced the reservation of seats for women in 1947:

We are particularly opposed to the reservation of seats for women. Ever since the start of the Women's movement in this country, women have been fundamentally opposed to special privileges and reservations [...] Before the 1935 Act came in, the representatives of India's women made it very clear that they were against the reservation of seats or any special privileges for women. They made this clear through the All India Women's Conference (AIWC) – that we did not want a reservation – but despite our protests, and in direct contravention to our desires, reservation of seats was brought into the 1935 Act [...] In the legislatures of India, we have some women, but few women have come from general constituencies. I think that the psychological factor comes into play when there is a reservation of seats for women. When there is a reservation of seats for women, the question of their consideration for general seats, however competent they may be, does not usually arise. We feel that women will get more chances in the future to come forward and work in free India if the consideration is of ability alone [...] Reservation of seats for women, which we consider to impede our growth and an insult to our very intelligence and capacity. (Ray 1947: 668-9)

Similarly, Dakshayani Velayudan (representing the constituency of Madras: General) was against a separate electorate or reservation for Harijans and Begum Aizaz Rasul (representing the constituency of United Provinces: Muslim) was against a separate electorate for minorities (Velayudan 1947: 263-4; Rasul 1949: 300-3).

However, a slight shift is witnessed in 1949, when Purnima Banerji (representing the constituency of United Provinces: General), while arguing for positive discrimination in favor of women in the constituent assembly, argued that:



[...] Since the entire basis of the State has changed and it is no longer a police state, certain social functions such as education and health now feature among the major items of the State's development. I feel, that not only is the association of women in the field of politics essential but it is indispensable, and therefore I feel that this indispensable section of the people should be amply represented in this House and therefore my amendment proposes that in the casual vacancies which will occur, women should at least be returned to the seats which they hold today, if not more. (Banerji 1949: 113)

Indeed, it was the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee, which recommended women's reservation through the medium of cooption of women in the Panchayati Raj Institutions in 1957. Later, the Committee on the Status of Women, constituted by the Government of India, published its report *Towards Equality* in 1974, and which talked about the quota for women elected representatives. Committee members, like Vina Mazumdar and Lotika Sarkar, made a persuasive case for women's reservation in local bodies. Subsequently, witnessing women's negligible presence in politics, a loud demand for women's reservation gathered momentum in the 1980s and the 1990s. Women realised that unless they have a critical mass in politics, they would not be able to influence the decision-making process and claim for gender equality in politics. During these decades, a lot of efforts were put in to raise awareness for women's political equality. Series of national and international developments also provided an impetus to the demand and struggle for women's equal political rights in India, i.e., all-women *Panchayat* (assembly), Nagarpalika Bill, provision for reservation of seats for Councilors belonging to Schedule Castes (SCs)², reservation of 30 per cent seats for women in local self-governments³, CEDAW document, etc. Worldwide, concerning the question of women's quota (reservation) in politics, there have been broadly two methods, which different countries follow and which have been quite effective towards making politics more gender-inclusive: i) women's quota provided through a constitutional amendment, and ii) women's quota provided by political parties. Gail Omvedt preferred the later and argued that parties should reserve a proportion of their tickets for women. However, she does not explicitly appear to endorse any role for the Election Commission in ensuring that parties do so (Omvedt 2000).

Her preference falls into place within the context of her general preference for mass politics over legal reform. (Menon 2009). Evidently, India provided reservation of one-third of the seats to women—including Schedule Castes (SCs) and Schedule Tribes (STs)—in local bodies through Seventy-Third and Seventy-Fourth⁴ Constitutional Amendment Acts in 1992. Omvedt saw this as a response to the collective challenge



offered by different 'drives of women for local political power' all over India. Thus, she sees legal reforms as a consequence of the pressure created by mass politics, not as the precondition for social transformation (Menon 2009). Currently, 14 Indian states grant a 50 per cent quota for women in local bodies. Indeed, the unique character of Indian women's struggle for their political rights and equality could evolve the notion of 'Political Women'¹⁵ in India (Kirkpatrick 1974; Shoukla 2020).

However, the deliberations on the question of representation and women's reservation in parliament in India brought forth a set of questions with no easy solutions. As Menon argued that if we consider women as a group rather than individual as the basis of representation, then we need to evolve a way of leaving open the potential for any group to choose in the future to define itself as one which requires reservation in parliament (Menon 2009). This would mean that rather than reasserting the need for 'political integration of citizens', we would need to push the possibilities of continuing 'pluralisation' (Habermas 1994: 134-5; Connolly 1995). If democracy remains unresponsive to the emergence of new configurations of identity, then once-emancipatory identities can entrench themselves into formations blocking further democratisation (Menon 2009).

About the Study

Set against the backdrop of nearly two and a half decades of women's political representation in urban governance (since the introduction of 33 per cent reservation for women in local bodies), the study is located at the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai (MCGM), Mumbai—one of the oldest and wealthiest Municipal Corporations in India. One of the major objectives of the study is, to review the effectiveness of women's reservation and its role in women's political empowerment. Out of a total of 227 municipal constituencies divided into 24 wards in MCGM, the study sample involved 50 constituencies led by women corporators in 21 wards. The study involved feminist research methodology, particularly the use of the feminist standpoint theory, critical theory and the use of oral history method in documenting and bringing women's voices from their standpoints is significant. Indeed, feminist standpoint scholars put emphasis on the importance of situating knowledge in women's experiences and also to explore lived worlds of women by collecting firsthand accounts of women (Naples 2014). The critical theory framework allows us to challenge the assumptions and practices that oppress and discriminate women. This way, it also helps change practices by challenging assumptions and biases that obscure difference and diversity through the development of power relations (Frost & Elichhoff 2014).



Therefore, in order to shift the standpoint to knowers whose vantage point has been ignored or discredited for producing knowledge, and to capture it, the study employed narrative technique (Naples 2014). Since the focus was on getting women's subjective insights. The oral history method of interviewing was used to preserve political women's voices, memories and perspectives. The feminist oral history as a method helps generating, preserving the original and documenting the history from below. Thus, it helped document the voices of political women, and that too, at the Corporation level (the lowest level in the hierarchy of the Indian Federal structure). The techniques included the audio-visual recording of in-depth interviews of respondents, using a semi-structured interview schedule. Non-probability purposing sampling method was used to select the required number of respondents.

Women's Reservation in Politics – Reflections from Women's Lived Experiences

Women's entry into politics has been facilitated primarily by two factors—one, women's reservation, and two, the political background of women. Indeed, it is because of reservation that women's representation has witnessed a steady progression in MCGM since the 1990s—from nearly 10 per cent women in the 1980s to over 59 per cent in 2017 (See Chart 1). The unique and extensive accounts of women elected representatives, including those, who won multiple terms, throw a different light on the issue of reservation.

Women reiterated the indispensability of women's reservation in politics. The study indicated that 82 per cent of women won on reserved seats. The majority of women (86 per cent) stood in favor of reservation and no one opposed it. They believed that reservation has increased the number of women entering politics and thereby creating space for them. Other responses came from ten per cent of women, who are not against reservation but feel that

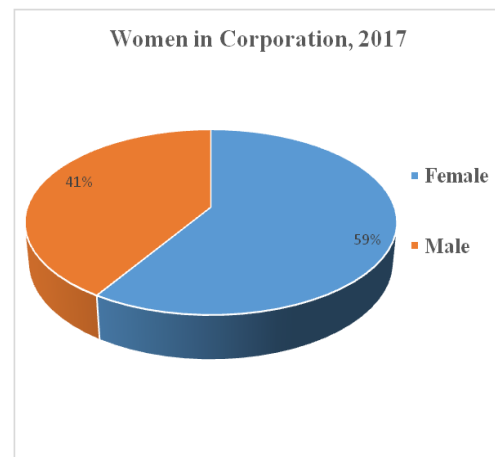


Chart 1: Women's Representation in MCGM 2017

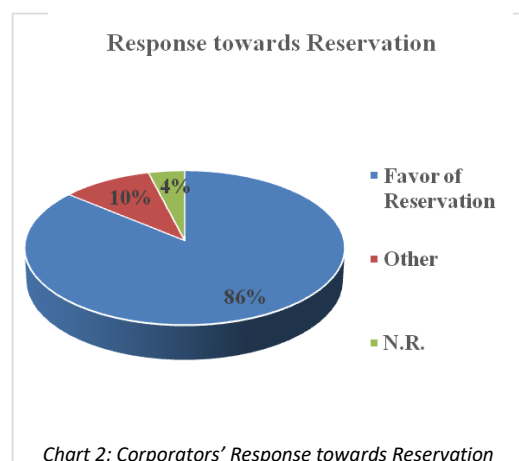


Chart 2: Corporators' Response towards Reservation



women are capable of contesting on open seats and that they have the confidence to win against anybody be it on an open or reserved seat. Four per cent of women did not respond (See Chart 2).

Revisiting Reservation and Women's Proxy Status

Indeed, women's ability as a politician has always been questioned and criticised. Reservation is looked upon as an instrument that promotes proxy women in politics, which implies that women do not have a political opinion and that their politics is determined by men in their families/political parties. This validates the belief about women being inefficient, incompetent, and apolitical by nature, and which further justifies their marginal representation in state assemblies and union parliament. The study is an attempt to address these points. Additionally, the relatively neglected world of urban municipal politics presents challenges and opportunities for all those concerned with the relationship of feminism and democracy to questions of politics and power (John 2007). In this regard, Das (2015) argues that marginalisation in terms of gender doubly disadvantages women in their access to urban public space. Indeed, earlier studies of urban governance emphasise what it means to be a woman corporator (Ghosh & Lama-Rewal 2005) and note that despite negative experiences, the hope of the possibility of entering a truly political community continues to glimmer (Devika & Thampi 2012: 187).

This is true that there are women who entered into politics for the very first time because of the provision of reservation and with support from their husbands, fathers, or brothers, as has been over-emphasised in the popular discourse on "proxy women". However, the study enlightens us on some of the important aspects of proxy status and the nuanced understanding of the complex interplay of many factors that influence and shape a woman's ability to develop and transform her leadership quotient. Indeed, it depends on many factors and their individual, overlapping, and composite influence upon women's performance. The study indicates that women's proxy status is dynamic and not static. It observes many cases where women entered with husband's (or other male relatives) support, but over the period they have actively thrown themselves to political learning and unlearning through political exposure and engagement, and that's how they tried to push themselves beyond 'proxy'. Thus, they did not keep the similar 'proxy status' and moved 'beyond'.

The core elements required to help women move out of 'proxy status', by and large, include education, exposure to working in the public domain, political training and experience, political network, financial



status, household support, gender sensitivity. Without paying attention to the role and intricate relationship and functioning of these elements, discussion on the proxy status is incomplete. However, some such women could perform in the subsequent election, and also those who could not perform in the election, but have shown tremendous improvement in their leadership quotient with improved confidence, skills, credibility as a leader. 'Winnability' in an election is again a very complex and multi-layered phenomenon, which is beyond the scope of this study. Thus, a woman cannot be considered as a proxy just because she entered into politics due to reservation/and on husband's seat unless she keeps on the same status, i.e. political indifference, passive attitude, dependent, showing no improvement and interest over the period in developing required political skills. The case studies of corporators, such as, Riddhi Khursange, Sneha Zagade, Qamarjahan Siddiqui, Shilpa Chowgale helped widen our understanding of the elements that seem to be crucial in facilitating women's political journey 'beyond their proxy status'.

Case Study 1

Riddhi Khursange, aged 33 years, entered politics in 2012 because the seat got reserved for women and her husband (then sitting corporator) decided to field her. She has obtained education till higher secondary. Her political journey after her election victory is remarkable, particularly in adding new dimensions to the concept of proxy women. She had prepared herself under the able mentorship of her husband, i.e. took consultations, sought support, and connected herself with the people, party workers, and women at the grassroots. She revealed how she was feeling scared in the beginning, while talking to people, meeting people. She was feeling hesitant while meeting party workers. In her own words:

Initially I had the fear of talking with the people as well as with the party workers. The party workers team was already set and then I entered, and I will remain his wife (former corporator's), so I felt that the party workers may not accept me but nothing of that sort happened. The party workers did accept me and even people felt that rather than an unknown person contesting they know me.

She elaborated further that: "If you care about the people around and cooperate with them, then you also get cooperation. I spent a lot of time with people, listening to them understanding their issues. Now people like me, and are good to me."

She added:



Now I am fully confident that I can do things. In whichever department of the BMC, I can ask questions, speak to them. Initially, I had doubts about how will I manage to go and speaking at the BMC—as to how should I speak? What should I say? So, first, I tried to understand the BMC functioning and then gradually learned how to speak with the people at different levels...and that one has to visit the site first to understand the situation and only then one can go and speak about it.

Thus, it is very much evident that during her first term, she worked hard to boost her confidence, to enhance her knowledge about the nature and functioning of the corporation. Her priority was to establish a dialogue with the people around her and listen to them. Later, she had not only gathered the courage to contest on the same but unreserved seat (this time) in the 2017 Municipal elections but was re-elected with a significant margin this time. It is important to note here that during this entire endeavor on her part, her husband was by her side throughout. He respected her decision to contest election on the unreserved seat. It is very clear that she had moved far ahead from the kind of representation she provided back in 2012 with her lack of confidence, limited political knowledge, and exposure and that with her constant efforts, she has brought in a positive shift in her representation style. Today, Riddhi is the Chairman of the Ward Committee and a role model for those who discredit women in politics in the name of being a proxy (based on the interview of Corporator Riddhi Khursange).

Meritorious Women and the Inevitability of Reservation

Several accounts of women reveal that despite being qualified in terms of possessing core elements necessary for entering into politics, they could not enter without a reservation. Thus, it is very clear that many educated, trained, experienced women could get a chance to enter into electoral politics only through reservation. They form a pool of untapped potential, definitely not proxies. Prof. Sneha Palnitkar (CEO and Member Secretary, All India Institute of Local Self Governance (AIILSG), Mumbai) emphasises this point:

50 per cent women could come because of reservation. If reservation would not have been there, I don't think so many women would have come into the political arena. They should be stronger as women leaders and that party should support it. If you take away reservations then I don't think any political party will give 50 per cent reservation for women. They will not. Are they giving for MLA? Are they giving for MP seats? They are not giving and there all parties are united. (Shoukla 2020)



The study reveals that the educational level of 76 per cent of women is higher secondary and above, and a majority of women among them are graduate and above (58 per cent). Moreover, 54 per cent of women have more than ten years of political experience and 28 per cent of women have more than twenty years of political training and experience. They are certainly not proxies. Thus, the argument that 'women become proxy and that reservation can only lead to inefficient women entering politics' is redundant. The study reveals that there are only 12 per cent women among the first-timers who have no political experience, training, or exposure to the work environment outside the home. Thus, a woman cannot be considered as a proxy just because she entered into electoral politics on a reserved seat.

Case Study 2

Dr. Anuradha Potdar, aged 50 years, had entered politics for the very first time in 2017. Her family had a predominance of teachers and educators, i.e. her mother, father, maternal and paternal grandfathers were teachers. Additionally, she comes from a family that would contribute towards social service and donate for social causes from their limited income. She has completed MA and Ph.D. in Marathi and worked as a professor at the university/college for 26 years. She had also worked for an NGO voluntarily. Her political career began in 2017 as she joined BJP; before that, she was not a part of any political party. Her merit as a political candidate came from her background in the social, educational field. The local MLA (BJP) identified her as a competent candidate to be fielded from the area as a corporator. It must be noted here that Dr. Potdar's candidature could be ascertained on the reserved seat only. She attributes the credit for her electoral success to the efforts of party workers. Her strength is her sensitivity towards sanitation, cleanliness, infrastructural issues of her area, BMC workers. Her sensitivity towards people's urgent needs and daily challenges stems from her down-to-earth approach and travel by public transport. Being an educated woman, she understands the difference between winning an election and active participation in the house, which requires one to be alert, swift, thoughtful, and thorough (based on the interview of Corporator Dr. Anuradha Potdar).

The former Mayor Snehal Ambekar, who got the credit of being the first Dalit woman mayor, stresses the indispensability of caste reservation as well, that

women's reservation is necessary. Not just women reservation but caste reservation is also necessary otherwise I coming from scheduled caste would not have got chance. Very few will be there who



would get chance because of merit but if there is reservation then it becomes compulsory (Shoukla 2020).

Indeed, electoral opportunities, awareness, people connect and constant commitment brought positive results over the years in favor of women, as are evident in cases of women who won in many terms. This category of senior women corporators included, Shubhada Gudekar, Jyotsna Dighe, Vishakha Raut, Rajul Patel, Shraddha Jadhav who have the credit of winning multiple terms. In this regard, former Mayor Vishakha Raut asserts that:

[...] If today women's reservation would not have been there men would not have allowed women to get ahead in politics. If a woman is a Mayor then it is because there is a reservation for women to become Mayor. Just take the recent case wherein this time the post of Mayor was either/or then was a woman allowed to become Mayor when the either/or condition was there. Unfortunately, at the Assembly level reservation has not yet come but if it comes then women will definitely take up that space. (ibid.)

Alternative Voices on Reservation

There are alternative voices on women's reservation as well. The study indicates that some (around ten per cent) women are not against reservation but feel that women are capable of contesting from open seats and that they have the confidence to win against anybody be it from an open or reserved seat. The study substantiates their point as 18 per cent of women won on open seats.

Women Won on Open Seats

Women in politics are showcasing new and strong leadership traits. In all political parties, women have superseded men and won the seats, which is an indicator that at the MCGM there is growing acceptance of women leaders. The fact that women are standing from open seats and winning them by defeating their male counterparts is an important step towards women's empowerment. The study highlighted that 18 per cent of women came on open seats, including 14 per cent from the general category and the rest from SC (open) and OBC (open). Women corporators, such as, Snehal Ambekar, Riddhi Khursange, Jyoti Alwani, Hetal Gala, Geeta Singham, Rajshree Shirwadkar, Alka Kerkar, Hemangi Worlikar, Rakhi Jadhav have won on open seat. This proves their potential, credibility (women are seen as leaders), and competency in politics and that given an opportunity and adequate exposure they can excel in a male-dominated field as well. Corporator Jyoti Alwani emphasised that:



[...] Although I am the wife of a husband who is active in politics and people may have a view that because the husband is in politics that's the reason I must have come, but I don't agree with this view. I am capable and had confidence in my capabilities and that's why I have entered the field of politics. I have done good work and the validation that I have done good work in my ward is the fact that my party now has given me a ticket from the open ward. So I am of the view that just because you are a wife, daughter, or sister of a person in politics that should not be the reason for contesting elections. Just as women's reservation is necessary it is equally important that the right candidate should contest and get elected. (ibid.)

Besides, many women have won against men on more than one occasion.

Sisterhood Concerns

There are women, who have proved their political credibility over the years, believe that instead of fighting women on reserved seats, they would prefer standing from an unreserved seat. This gesture of women's solidarity will go a long way in providing an opportunity to newer women to enter politics and thereby further enhancing women's strength in politics. Women corporators, like Jyotsna Dighe, Snehal Ambekar said that one should look above party politics and think in terms of women empowerment. Corporator Rupali Rawrane has also shared the same spirit towards newer women who wish to enter into politics.

Women are Capable

The study noted strong voices of women corporators like Hetal Gala (during 2017-21), Shilpa Chowgle (during 2012-17), Ujjwala Modak (Chairperson of Legal Committee, MCGM in 2016 and a third time corporator) who were assertive and exhibited relentless zeal to contest from any seat (open or reserved). For them, their work and people's connectivity speak for themselves. Corporator Hetal Gala says: 'I have no regret of being a woman rather I am proud of it. Every woman should think that she has to do something'. (ibid) Discussing the issue of women being guided by men (i.e. husbands), Shilpa Chowgle fires back: 'why will my husband teach me? A woman is no less capable.' (ibid) The study also observes the occurrence of 'one family many parties', where a woman no longer follows the ideology of her family (male) members. In several cases, women corporators and their family members (i.e. husband, son, brother, father-in-law) won elections from separate political parties (other than which women belong to). According to Shilpa Chowgle:



[...] Two years back my husband rejoined Shiv Sena (a political party), but I stood firmly in Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS—a political party) [...] It is my right to decide on which party I should stick to. My husband and my son both are in Shiv Sena and am alone from my family who is in MNS. (ibid.)

There are several ways of interpreting this trend:

- I). This has broken the perception about women being following their husbands/family's political ideology.
- II). It might be read as reflecting the role of women's reservation in determining party's candidate list for election and which in turn influencing the decision of candidate to join a particular party or vice versa, as per the best compromise and management between the two (political party and candidate).
- III). It also reflects the intricacy of caste dynamics, which plays a key role in deciding the eligible candidates for reserved seats.
- IV). It has boosted women's confidence as they master political skills faster while independently handling issues.

Towards Women's Political Empowerment

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Reservation has facilitated women's entry into politics. Indeed, reservation gave an initial impetus to women, which they could not have otherwise got, and which according to narratives, is empowering for them. As shared by corporator Manisha Patil:

[...] Women like me could get a chance to see outside world because of reservation and this is empowering [...] I got this opportunity due to reservation, otherwise who allows a middle school pass woman to work [...] Working as corporator is an empowering experience and over the time it has enhanced my self-image and confidence. (ibid.)

However, to sustain this initial fillip women need to pay attention to the additional areas, which can only enable them for their true political empowerment. In the opinion of corporator Ujjwala Modak:

[...] Reservation alone is not sufficient. This facilitation has its limits. Women should be willing to devote time and work tirelessly and selflessly for the party. Leadership comes from within. However, there have to be different training sessions where basic political orientation is provided to women.... Women should be seen as politicians and decision-makers in society. (ibid.)

For her, without ground-level training, affirmative action is an empty word. This point was elaborated further by Dr. Neelam Gorhe (Deputy



Speaker, Legislative Council, Government of Maharashtra) when she categorically said that:

[...] not a single woman will get empowered politically at the individual level. Empowerment is a collective process. So, within a broader perspective of sustainable development goals, which includes an agenda of gender equality by the year 2030, how this can be attained at both individually and collectively, needs to be worked out. (ibid.)

She stressed conducting special orientation sessions for corporators on two major issues: 1) functioning of the Municipal Act and 2) planning for the development of their ward. 'However, this should be an ongoing process and a standard operating procedure should be in place', she added. (ibid.)

However, broadly speaking, training is provided to the elected representatives at two levels—one by political party itself and the other by the government (Corporation, All India Institute of Local Self Governance (AIILSG)). AIILSG undertakes regular sessions with corporators across India. Notwithstanding, many women said that they have not undergone any training and that there is no training as such conducted for them, this includes most of the women who entered corporation for the very first time with no political experience to their credit. Narratives of women coming from different/no work background reflect the urgent need for formal and regular training and exposure in the fundamentals and functioning of corporation, awareness of their role, functions, duties as corporator, understanding of the issues of urban governance, community participation, legal/constitutional obligation, etc.

Conclusion

It has been more than a century now when for the first time, women in India officially demanded rights for their political equality. Indeed, Indian women's movements witnessed various shifts in articulating their demand for gender equality in politics. Finally, it was in the 1990s with the introduction of women's reservation in local bodies that women entered local governance in critical mass. The crucial role of reservation in women's entry into politics is very much evident from the statistics of women's representation in the corporation (MCGM) since the 1990s. Even today, the fact, as highlighted by the study that 82 per cent of women came on the reserved seats reflects the indispensability of reservation in politics.



The case studies of many women corporators also helped widen our understanding of the proxy status. A woman cannot be considered as a proxy just because she entered into politics due to reservation/and on husband's seat unless she keeps on the same status, i.e. political indifference, passive attitude, dependent, showing no improvement and interest over the period in developing required political skills. Women's political equality is something that needs to be valued on its merit and this can best be done by addressing the factors which are responsible for the maintenance of or departure from women's proxy status. The core factors include, education, exposure to working in the public domain, political training and experience, political network, financial status, household support, gender sensitivity. The point may be noted here as highlighted by several accounts of women corporators that despite being qualified in terms of possessing core elements necessary for entering into politics, they could not enter without a reservation. Thus, it is very clear that many educated, trained, experienced women could get a chance to enter into electoral politics only through reservation.

The women corporators' alternative voices on the reservation are equally encouraging. The fact that 18 per cent of women stood and won from open seats against men, is an indicator that at the MCGM there is growing acceptance of women leaders. It reflects that women in politics are showcasing new and strong leadership traits, which is an important step towards their political empowerment. Indeed, electoral opportunities, awareness, people connect and constant commitment brought positive results over the years in favor of women, as are evident in cases of women who have the credit of winning multiple terms.

To make an enabling atmosphere that equips each corporator with the knowledge necessary to carry out their work sensibly, effectively, and efficiently in the corporation, the study highlighted the incorporation of both individual as well as collective approaches. The former has been demonstrated by the case study of the Corporator Riddhi Khursange. Conversely, the corporation must ensure that the newly elected corporators undergo formal and regular training.

To replicate the model of women's political empowerment in urban governance at other levels of leadership, the study strongly recommends the extension of 50 per cent of women's reservation to higher bodies, i.e. state assemblies and union parliament. The study, further, urges the election commission that the constitutional validity of any political party be ascertained by the fact that it provided equal space to women/men in the list of electoral candidates (at all levels of elections).



Endnotes

¹ The study '*Revisiting Politics – Narratives of Women Leaders in Urban Governance*' was conducted by the author at the Research Centre for Women's Studies (RCWS), SNDT Women's University, Mumbai, with financial assistance from the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), New Delhi, during 2016-18. The study is based on the in-depth interviews of 75 respondents, including women corporators, senior leaders, social activists, area community representatives and male corporators. The study has also been transformed into a documentary film, *Arddhshakti – We the Political Women* (duration 28 min) by the author/researcher. Some of the interview excerpts included in this paper can be watched online as a part of this film. Arddhshakti 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uz2H6UjH_1k [retrieved 25.04.22]

² Vide Maharashtra Act No. XLII of 1976.

³ Including the no of seats reserved for women belonging to SCs. Vide Maharashtra Act No. XIII of 1990.

⁴ In pursuance of the Seventy-Fourth Amendment to the Constitution of India, vital amendments to the Maharashtra Municipal Corporation Act made by Maharashtra Act No. XLI of 1994, including reservation of the office of the Mayor of all Corporations in Maharashtra State, by rotation for the members belonging to the SCs/STs, Backward Class of Citizens and Women.

⁵ The concept 'political woman' was introduced by J. Kirkpatrick in 1974 in her book *Political Woman*. The concept was emphasised and elaborated in the Indian context in the research study by V. Shoukla.

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