

Role of Women Elected Representatives in Local Area Development: A Case Study of Kolkata Municipal Corporation

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ABSTRACT

In a real democracy equal rights of men and women are imperative both in terms of electorates and representatives. In case of India, world's largest democracy a three-tier electoral system is in operation—constituting of Members of Parliament, Members of Assembly and Members of Urban Local Body or Panchayat depending on the level of urbanisation. But the representation of women in the seats of power has been abysmally low all through, for which 33 percent reservation in the lowest tier has been constitutionally approved. In the megacity of Kolkata, which is said to be the intellectual capital of the country, the situation is no different. The MPLADS, BEUP, Councillors' Fund are provided to the elected representatives to meet up the local demand of infrastructural improvement. The endeavour of the paper is to find out the role of the elected women representatives in serving the common people, their achievements and struggles. The discussion involves the expenditure pattern, level of fund utilization, perception of the public to get a fair bit of idea about the true position of the women representatives.

Keywords: democracy, Urban Local Body, MPLADS, BEUP, fund utilization

INTRODUCTION

The first-wave of feminist thought on gender and development emerged in the 1970s and became known as 'Women in Development' (WID). In looking at the position of women in developing countries, the WID perspective was based on the premise that women were being 'left behind', in comparison to men, because they were absent at all levels of development, from conception to implementation; they were neglected as beneficiaries and they were excluded from decision-making roles. Since then, efforts have been made to integrate women into areas where they had traditionally been excluded, including politics, to ensure women and men benefit equally from development initiatives.

Repertoires for representing women in politics to promote women have been implemented in more than one hundred countries, but exist at the statutory level in about half of them. There is no systematic pattern in terms of their adoption, as they appear in countries with varied institutional, social, economic, and cultural characteristics. These measures take three forms—reserved seats, party quotas, and legislative quotas.

Table1. Classification of Quotas

Nature of Reservation	Characteristics
Reserved Seats	A certain portion of seats are exclusively for female candidates according to convention
Party Quota	Discretionary power of a party to nominate a certain number of women candidates
Legislative Quota	A certain portion of seats are exclusively for female candidates according to constitutional sanction

Gender quotas are considered to be an effective way of increasing the number of female representatives in politics. Quotas have now been implemented in more than 100 countries, with impressive results: in countries with gender quotas, female representation, on average, stands at 22

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percent, in contrast with countries with no gender quota, where female representation stands at just 13 percent.

Capacity development is key in ensuring women have all of the necessary competencies to participate in politics; competencies which vary from being confident in their ability to partake in politics issues to having the skills to successfully carry out the role. Consequently, it is recommended that capacity development is provided to female candidates as well as women who have already been elected to national and local level politics.

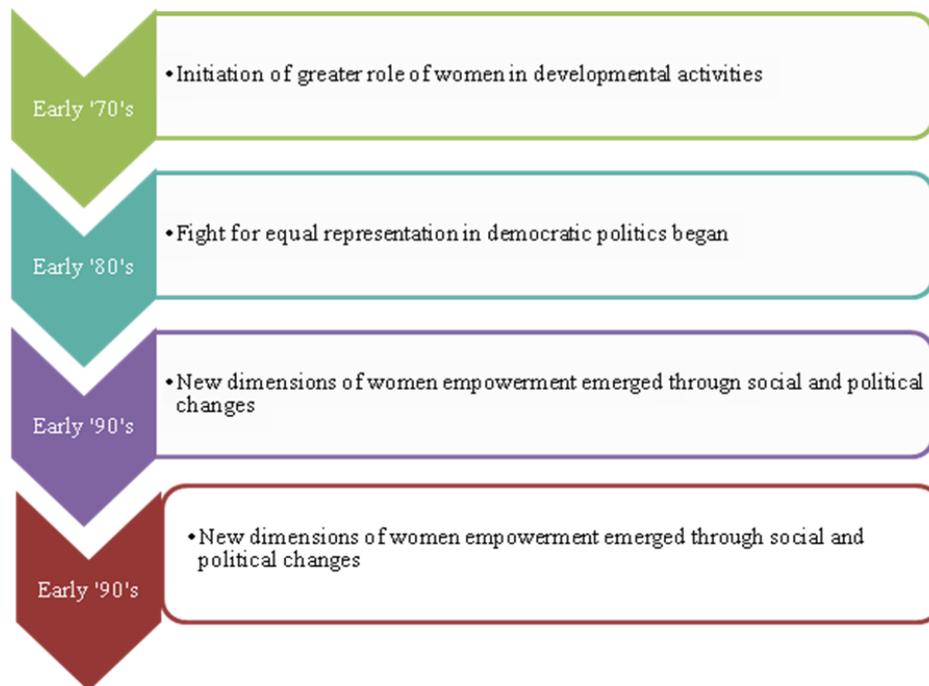


Fig1. Evolution of Women's Role in Political Society

Gender Responsive Governance (GRG) is a process that embodies measures, attitudes and practices of different stakeholders, both men and women, at different levels of governance with a clear purpose to impact issues that foster women's empowerment and promote gender equity and social justice. It is a process that promotes and sustains the ability of women to fully participate in the governance and development process, enhances their ability to raise critical questions about inequity and collectivise without fear and pressure, and ensures gains from services.

Historical Backdrop in Indian Context

Women play a dual role in politics – as voters and political representatives. On the voting front, though adult franchise was granted in 1937, it was the progressive spirit that pervaded the making of the constitution that made it a reality. The Constitution of India guarantees equal rights to men and women as voters and citizens. In all the elections held since independence, women had the voting rights but the political parties were reluctant to field women candidates.

Mahatma Gandhi viewed political and legal equality only as a starting point, "Women must have votes and an equal legal status. But the problem does not end there. It only commences at the point where women begin to affect the political deliberations of the nation".

India has witnessed the world's largest experiment in grassroots local democracy. In 1992, India's Parliament enacted two constitutional amendments that sought to democratize local governance and engender it through quota-based reservations for women. Following 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments in India which created a third tier of governance, one third of the seats in the Gram Panchayats/ Panchayati Raj Institutions (Village Councils) and municipalities/ Urban Local Bodies were reserved for women. Though most of the parliamentarians upheld the cause of imposing such quota for women citing the country's past heritage and present societal need; few called the bills 'children of political compulsion' as they saw the reservation for women is nothing more than a tactical manoeuvre by the higher castes, by the upper elites and by the vested interests and argued for reservation for women within the quotas for each class.

RESULTS

Presently, about one million women have entered into the local political institutions. However, empirical studies have indicated that women belonging to the elite class are more likely to enter local politics, and that they do not necessarily represent poor women's interests. In addition, it has been observed at least initially, that the husbands of the elected women members have significant influence in their running of the Panchayats. But more recent experiences across different states show that female members, when supported by women's organisations and NGOs, are gaining confidence to raise issues of liquor sale, use of development funds for schools, fuel and water sanitation issues prevalent in the locality. Several studies also suggest that training women in the functions of the Panchayats and Urban Local Bodies, their rights and obligations as elected members and education in political skills is helping them to participate in this new political space.

However, as violence, caste and class politics still rule the workings and participation by women is not fundamentally changing the power relations within the communities. In this sense, gender equity is still marginal to the women's participation in the local political system. Budgets also remain a constraint on the undertaking of creative and developmental activities as several Gram Panchayats and Urban Local Bodies are underfinanced. The notable exception being the state of Kerala, where 10% of the Panchayat budget is allocated as 'women's budget' and is used for women centred welfare activities.

The process of decentralization has provided representation but representation does not necessarily lead to participation. Women still face a number of challenges for their engagement in political spaces such as inadequate education, lack of financial independence, burden of productive and reproductive roles and opposition stemming from entrenched patriarchal views. Training, therefore, has emerged as a critical concern for facilitating their effective participation.

While representation is adequate (as per the norm of one-third of all seats) in the lowest level of democratic governance, participation is less than adequate. While it is relatively easy to legislate representation, it is more difficult to create conditions suitable for participation. Experience indicates that representation does not automatically lead to participation.

A number of factors limit the active engagement of women in the political sphere. First, deeply entrenched stereotypical norms relegate women to the domestic space, with severely restricted engagement in public affairs, an area largely dominated by men. Second, caste and class restrictions and the patriarchal system and mindset pervade the political space provided to women. Women are still not recognized as political entities and their perspective is seldom seen as integral to the design and delivery of services. The third factor is the lack of exposure of women themselves to politics and the absence of any experience in exercising their political responsibilities. For these factors many women are unable to comprehend the true spirit of decentralization and recognize the opportunities that it provides.

The women's quota (81st Constitutional Amendment) Bill providing for one-third reservation of women in the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies was hanging for some time, and has now been put in cold storage. This has raised a host of questions - relating to liberal democracy, egalitarianism and the under representation of women; interest-group politics and the political inclusion and exclusion of certain identifiable group interests; the notion of participatory democracy and the relationship between women's political representation and processes of further democratisation; the normative basis of demands for equality and social justice; the meaning of equal opportunity and the need for more vigorous advocacy and positive intervention on behalf of women. Feminist perspectives on the state, democracy and notions of political equality and participation have emphasised that without formal mechanisms for ensuring women's representation in political structures it will not be possible for women to cross formidable barriers to their entry into active electoral politics.

In the megacity of Kolkata, the representation of women in elective democracy is quite dismal. In case of Parliamentary and Assembly election, since there is no hard and fast quota for women the representation is really low. With the passage of time the scenario has not really improved and continues to maintain a status-quo irrespective of the party affiliation.

Role of Women Members of Parliament

Out of 12 seats for Members of Parliament taken into account from the period of study i.e. 2000-01 to 2013-14 for three terms only 2 members are women (i.e. around 17 percent), one from Kolkata South

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for three consecutive terms and the other of Jadavpur constituency for only one term from the same political party. With the passage of time representation of women has declined while the opposite would have been natural keeping in tune with modern times.

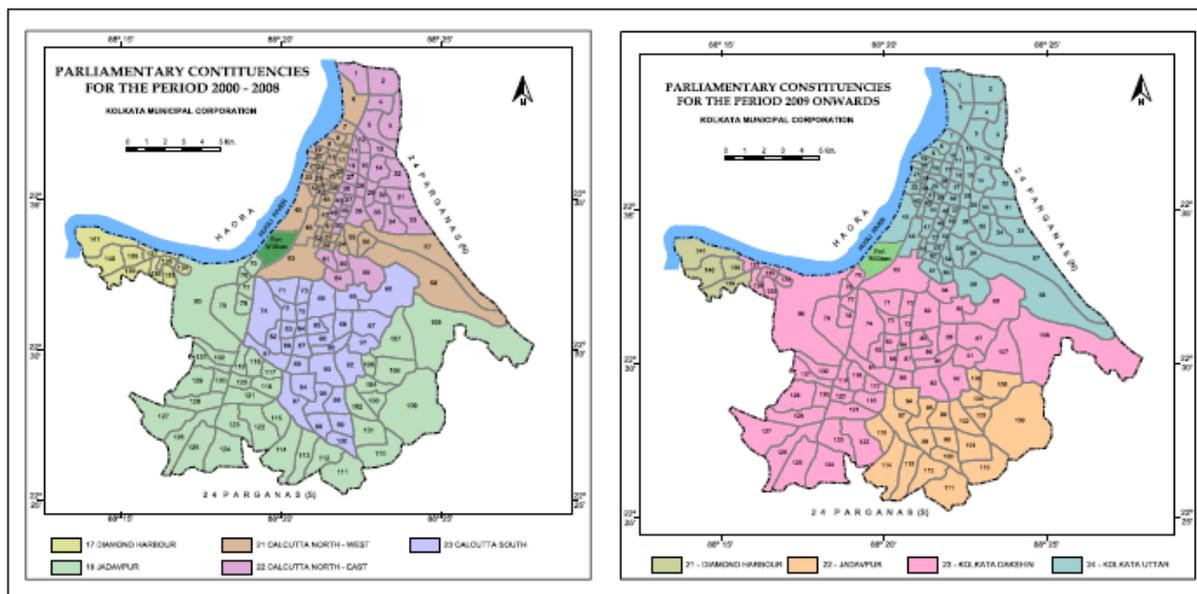


Fig2. Parliamentary Constituencies of Kolkata

The utilization percentage is above average i.e. above 80 percent in case of former but dismally low i.e. below 20 percent for the latter. But one cannot directly come to the conclusion regarding the efficiency of the elected candidates by simply considering the utilization rates as in case of Jadavpur constituency a large portion of it is beyond KMC area which does not fall within the purview of the study; at best it can said that the allocated amount is spent more in the suburban areas by the women elected member than in KMC area. So, it cannot be blatantly concluded that due to inefficiency of women MPs they have not been fielded often. But the case is not dismal only in Kolkata or West Bengal but it is for the country in general. The 15th Lok Sabha in India (2009) comprised 61 women members, representing only 11.2 percent of the total Lok Sabha membership. While it has increased from 9.02 percent in 1999; it is almost half of the world average of 22.2 percent. It comes as no surprise then that India is ranked 111th in the World Rankings of Women in national parliaments, compiled by the Inter-Parliamentary Union.

Table2. Nature of Expenditure

South Kolkata Lok Sabha Constituency (2000-12)	Percentage of Expenditure (with respect to total)	Jadavpur Lok Sabha Constituency (2000-2004)	Percentage of Expenditure (with respect to total)
Upgradation of Educational Institutions	23.06	Upgradation of Educational Institutions	31.48
Lighting Arrangements	20.27	Modernising Medical Facilities	20.89
Miscellaneous Infrastructure Refurbishment	8.38	Park and Square Upkeep	19.29
Modernising Medical Facilities	8.16	Miscellaneous Infrastructure Refurbishment	9.22
Heritage Site Preservation	7.56	Piped Water Expansion	8.94

When looked at the general scenario, it is clearly seen that with respect to the allocated amount lighting schemes lead the pack, followed by schemes in upgrading educational institutions, drainage maintenance, miscellaneous infrastructure refurbishment and augmentation of piped water supply. So, all the sectors involving service, infrastructure, and beautification are taken care of

Role of Women Members of Assembly

In the study period taken into account 2000-2014, 12 women representatives can be noted in 92 seats in totality at a mere 13 percent. But the heartening fact is that the representation is showing a positive

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trend over time and during the present phase of 15th Assembly Period (2011-16) the number of women representatives have reached a healthy level (5 out of 17 seats) hovering around 30 percent. If the 33 percent reservation endeavour is seen as a parameter then the democratic situation is inching towards equal representation.

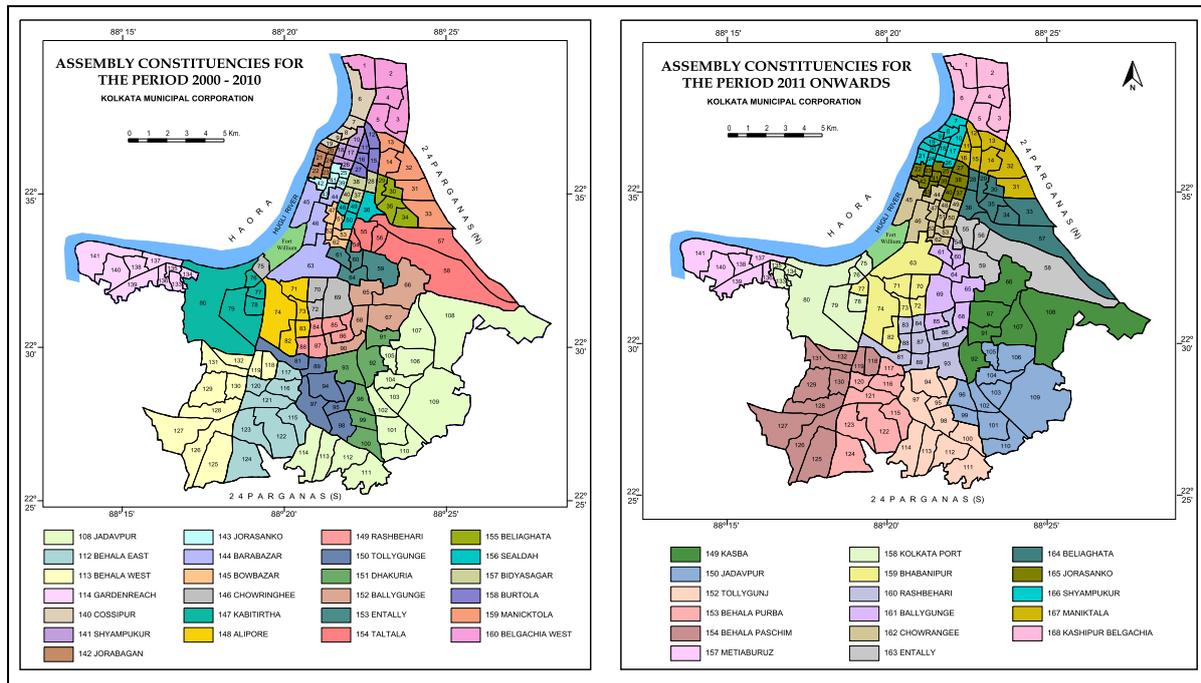


Fig3. Assembly Constituencies of Kolkata

What is more encouraging is that though there is no hard and fast regulations enforcing the parties to nominate female candidates, still the parties are fielding them. The reasons might be varied- the parties might consider the competence, social stature, acceptability of the candidate or the parties are trying to project them as liberal and open-minded by promoting the women leaders.

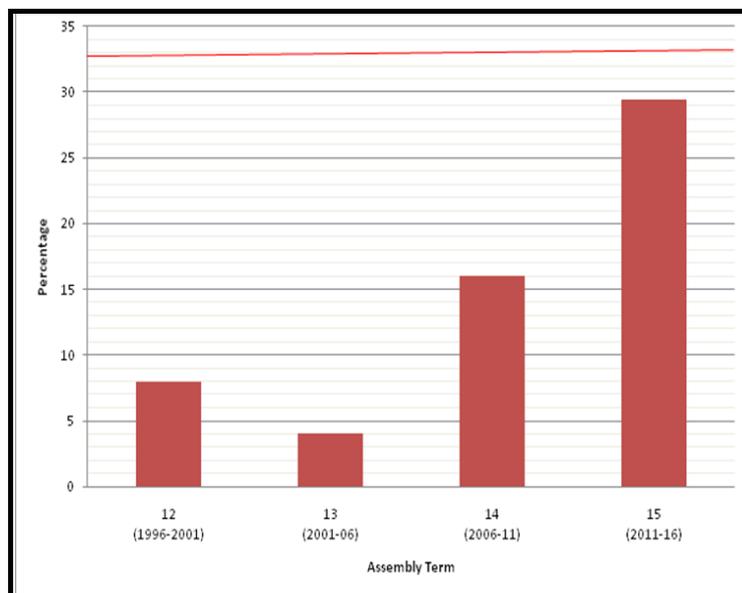


Fig4. Evolution of Women’s Role in Political Society

Out of the elected female representatives, only one from the Left from the Behala has managed to win in consecutive terms and the other from TMC managed to get nomination twice from two different seats; while the other 10 have served for a single term only. Out of the major political parties the one currently in power has fielded more women representatives than the other counterparts.

Considering the utilization aspect, on a general note it can be easily stated that the performances of the women representatives have been quite impressive. 63.50 percent is the average utilization rate for

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the male MLAs where that of the female counterpart is 69 percent. So, if one goes by the logic that higher utilization means greater efficiency and more efficient persons deserve to be in the post then women candidates must get more scope to get elected and serve. But going by the re-election trend it seems that the logic has been defined mostly.

Analysing the sectors in which the women representatives have focussed more indicate that rather than hard-core infrastructural development they have emphasised more on beautification and comfort aspect involving decorative lighting, bus-shades, up-keeping of parks and squares and have catered the youth more through allocation of money in educational institutes, local clubs etc.

Table3. Overall Emphasized Sectors

Bidhan Sabha Constituencies Headed by Women Representatives (2000-14)	Percentage of Expenditure (with respect to total)
Miscellaneous Infrastructure Refurbishment	15.56
Lighting Arrangements	13.65
Piped Water Expansion	12.60
Park and Square Upkeep	11.52
Upgradation of Educational Institutions	10.61

When the general picture of sector-wise fund utilization is observed then the variation is evident, breaking the myth that women in general think in the same line. In the process of catering to the local needs the representatives divide their allocation accordingly, some concentrate on selective sectors more intensely, while others tend to distribute among various sectors. The leading sectors being miscellaneous infrastructure refurbishment, lighting arrangement, piped water expansion, park and square upkeep, upgradation of educational institutions and lavatory provisions.

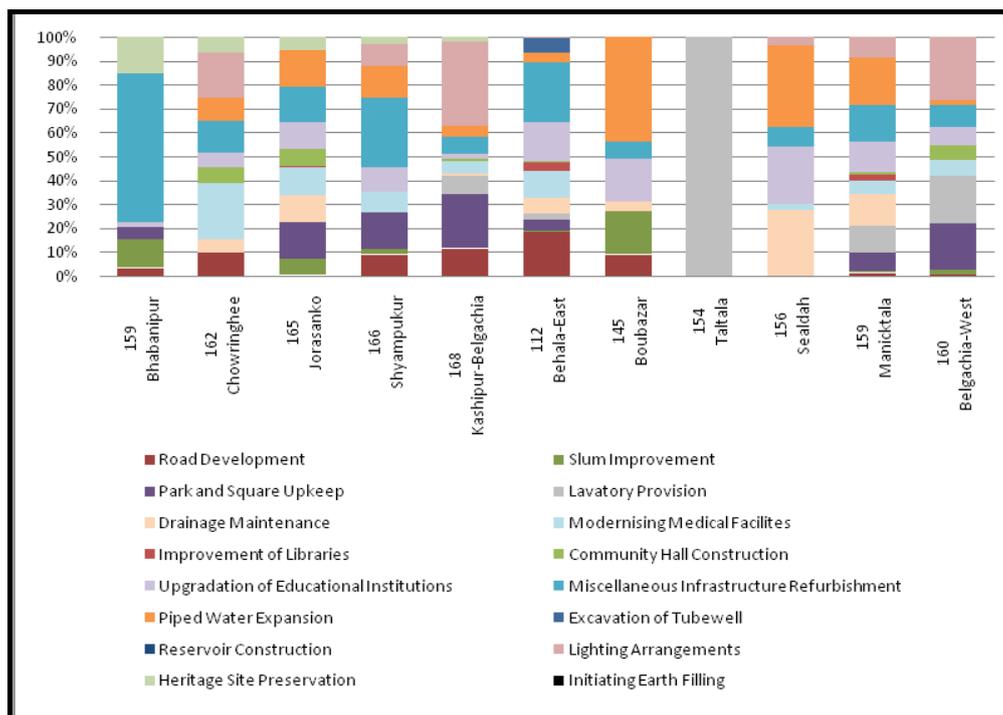


Fig5. Sector-wise Fund Utilization

Role of Women Councillors

The number of women representatives has certainly increased at the grassroots level; due to the constitutional reservation policy however, questions still remain regarding their decision-making power within the councils. The study indicates that the women councillors were very active and robust in program implementation and they were truly beneficial to the community. This has translated in the vote-banks too, the women leaders have been re-elected from their wards in spite of it being an open seat. The reason for the increase in women’s participation is correlated to two possible factors: first, women representatives exemplified new possibilities for change; and second, women leaders took up issues that would have a positive impact on the community as a whole.

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Table 4. Representation of Women Councillors

Year	2000	2005	2010
Actual number of women elected	59	63	69
Percentage of Women Councillors	40.97	43.75	47.92

The fund utilization percentages of the women councillors are very impressive, varying from 60 to 90 percent. Utilization rate below 50 percent are also quite rare. The distinction between first time and veteran women councillors quite pronounced, with experience and clear idea about the functioning of the system they have been able to utilize the funds more however, the utilization rate did not vary much even if the ward for the female candidate has changed. The highest utilization rate has been achieved by the councillor of ward 88 of south Kolkata, who has changed party colours to continue as the representative from her chosen ward.

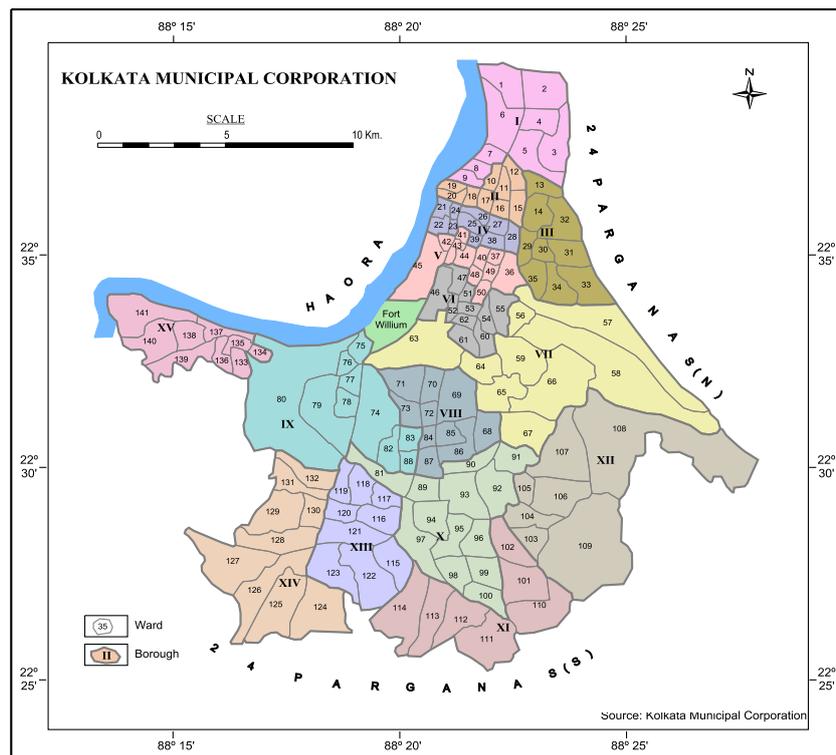


Fig6. Municipal Constituencies of Kolkata

DISCUSSION

Impact of Women Members of Parliament

But in case of women parliamentary representatives the prioritization of works varies a bit, there is a bit more emphasis on beautification-oriented works and service-oriented schemes involving medical and educational institutions. This can be derived from the amount allocation analysis. This does not mean that infrastructural advancement are completely ignored by the women representatives and only demonstrative schemes are predominant but is only indicative of their preference and also of local demand because since their re-election depends on the satisfaction level of the electorate too.

Impact of Women Members of Assembly MLA

The reason behind selection of the sectors apart from local demands is the need perceived by the representative herself. Being a woman the representative is more concerned about security of women and children and that is translated in the scheme outlines. They tend to take up lighting works for beautification, but the underlying cause is safety; if the roads and lanes are well lit then it is presumed that the security issues will crop up less as the miscreants will not muster the courage to act publicly. Keeping the same security and comfort in mind several bus-shades have been constructed. For the upliftment of local clubs and multi-gyms various schemes have been taken up with an underlying intent to keep the local youth engaged in healthy and fruitful activities. Similarly, the upkeep of parks

and squares are done to give the residents a breath of fresh air and to give the children and elderly a safe place to spend some quality time. Educational institutes are another cause of concern for the women MLAs, as they wish to give children a better and modernised study-environ. It is normally the duty of the woman in the family to procure potable drinking water and if the source is far-off or unsafe then they primarily face the problem most. So, the women representatives try to solve this problem through extension of pipelined water and tube well excavation.

It is striking to notice that women MLAs do spend less on road development, earth-filling, drainage-sewerage and slum development. The reasons might be that after taking up schemes for the priority sectors very less amount is left or the constituencies from where they are elected do not suffer from these problems or other agencies are already working in these fields.

Impact of Women Councillors

It is fact that the rate of successful women councillor is healthy, but another interesting aspect is that the mainstream political parties do field a handful of women candidates in general seats all of whom do not emerge as winners. But the sole cause behind such moves is not only to give equal opportunity to women but several political calculations are involved. In very few cases the women candidates are chosen solely based on their merit and competence; several other factors are taken into consideration like if the women candidate has won formidably in the prior election from the same ward even if it was a reserved seat then; or she is a member of assembly from the same area; or she has a very strong traditional political family backing. Wards in which female candidates have managed to maintain their strong hold are 15, 22, 44, 51, 83, 88, 113, 115, 119, and 140 where the same woman candidate has received nomination and managed to emerge victorious in three consecutive terms. Most of them are part of the party in power at state level now, whereas representation and sustained performance by other parties are very rare which also leads to the very obvious reason that the party with general majority will have more female candidates too.

But there have been many cases where the female contestant had to shift their ward time and again to fit in the reserved seat more as the party was not eager to field a winning lady contestant in a general seat. In most of the cases the women had to concede their seat to their own family members as they are treated as mere stop-gap arrangement in the wake of reserved seat. There have been instances that a women candidate has shifted her party allegiance to get hold of the ticket in the same ward like in ward 44, 88 the candidates had to do the same to get hold of ticket for three consecutive terms. In politics, there is pressure of performing and winning the hearts of people is the main concern; in case of women candidates there is greater pressure to prove that they are mere props but have their own competence and identity.

In KMC there are 15 Borough Committees one for each borough to look after the entire well being of the borough covering several wards and out of them only three (IV, V and VII) have women Chairpersons. So, it is evident that women are not really preferred to head the administrative functions as they are seen as a weaker player in the political field.

From Deep Within

Interacting with these women elected representatives one thing was very clear that they wanted to be leaders of the masses and were unanimous of the opinion that though attitudes about working women might be changing the attitudes regarding women as leaders still remain conservative. Women's broadening career paths have not led to a proportional increase in female leaders. Only aspiration to become a successful politician does not guarantee a lady's entry in political foray- political lineage, experience, competitive nature, socio-economic parameters are important parameters to overcome the inherent discrimination of the male-biased political system.

The women representatives who are part of a politically-active family have stated that their nomination and election does not only centre on their family's aspirations, rather it is based on personal interest and commitment to the community and development; though they did not deny that the family remains a key determinant of success and participation in the political process. They also expressed their aspiration to re-contest; a section of those who do, aspire for higher positions. But the picture is not that hunky-dory because substantial number of women councillors are clear that once their seats are de-reserved they will no longer be in contention of re-contesting and a male member of the family will take up the mantle.

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To bring out these nuances in-depth interview and focus group discussions were held of the selected elected representatives (MP, MLA and councillors) both women and men, office bearers and electorates. It came out that, unanimously all felt that women should be given their due importance in political sphere and that can only be possible through higher representation leading to higher visibility of women which will strengthen the position of women leaders in the minds of the electorate who will gradually treat them at par with their male counterpart.

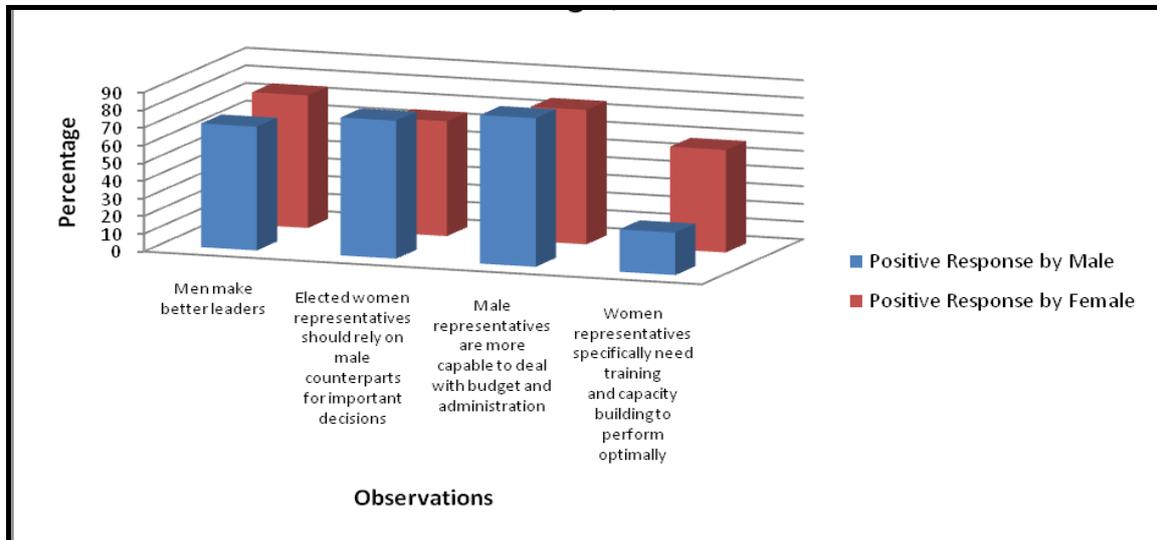


Fig4. Disturbing Questions

CONCLUSION

India the largest democracy of the world though achieved its independence only in 1947, has managed to make a mark as one of the most progressive democracies through its three-tier representation system, universal adult suffrage giving equal importance to women as voters and being gender sensitive. When the representation of the women as elected representatives did not reach the expected level then constitutional amendment was made for reservation for women in the grass root level. But that was not enough to bring politics out of the male clout as for the higher tiers i.e. in assemblies and parliament reservation bill couldnot be passed due to non-corporation from the majority of the politicians who cited various reasons. Still, the women has managed to trudge their way forward and today command a position of respect and gradually have claimed greater number of seats by being popularly elected. Kolkata and its women politicians have also not lagged behind and in all the three tiers they have proved their mettle and efficiency. Many firebrand women politicians from political family and even from humble backgroug are coming up, so, one can be hopeful that in the near future a handful of powerful women politicians will become the voice of the electorate.

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