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to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly
entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and
peace for the twenty-first century”**

Statement submitted by Centre for Social Research, and Women Power Connect, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

Women in power and decision-making

Women in power and decision-making was identified as one of the 12 critical areas of concern in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. Women constitute nearly half of the entire population of a country; yet globally, they remain underrepresented at most levels of government. The global average of women in national assemblies is only 24.5 per cent (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2018). Although women make up almost half of the electorate and have emerged as independent voters in nearly all countries, they are underrepresented in key areas of policy, such as law, health, education, peacebuilding, and environment. As a result, women have failed to make a significant impact in policies and decisions on several key issues.

Women are often discouraged from seeking political office by discriminatory attitudes and practices, family and childcare responsibilities, and the high cost of seeking and holding public office. Noting the inequality that exists between men and women in sharing of power and decision-making at all levels, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action required State parties to establish gender balance in government bodies, committees, and public administrative entities and the judiciary. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action requires State parties to take measures to encourage political parties to integrate women in elective and non-elective public positions in the same proportion as men.

In the course of the past 25 years, several State parties have seen advancements in terms of women's political representation. For example, Rwanda's parliament has the highest percentage of women, currently at 65 per cent for the Lower House and 38.5 per cent for the Upper House (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2018). Women in India constitute 49 per cent of the total population, but in the national political realm, they represent a mere 14.36 per cent of the Lok Sabha (78 out of 542 Members of Parliament) and 11 per cent of the Rajya Sabha (27 out of 245 members). This lack of female representation in policy decision-making spheres is alarming. Indian electoral politics is exclusionary in terms of providing spaces for women to participate at national and state-level elections.

Some gains have been made in India as a result of concerted efforts and advocacy by women's groups across the country. The seventeenth Lok Sabha has the highest-ever number of women parliamentarians, standing at 78 (14.36 per cent). A total of 716 women candidates contested, logging a success rate of just over 14 per cent. It is important to note that while 14 per cent is a small representation of female political participation at the national level, this number was significantly lower (11 per cent) in 2014.

Further, as a result of advocacy by women's groups in India, the government of West Bengal (Trinamool Congress) and Odisha (Biju Janata Dal) fielded 41 per cent and 33 per cent women, respectively, for Lok Sabha seats in the 2019 elections. However, other political parties have not yet given adequate space for women candidates to contest elections.

While the number of women in Indian parliament and state assemblies remain dismal, the number is rising. However, the pace of increase is disappointing and further, not all women Members of Parliament engage with women's rights issues. In order for women parliamentarians to take up women's rights issues seriously, we need a substantial number of women in Parliament who can counter the patriarchal voices.

The Women's Reservation Bill, i.e. the Constitution (108th Amendment) Bill, 2008, is the longest-pending bill in the history of the Indian Republic. The bill

proposes to reserve a minimum of 33 per cent of seats for women in Parliament and in State Legislative Assemblies. The bill offers an important instrument to improve India's performance on the Sustainable Development Goals, including Goal 5: gender equality, by promoting women's political participation and leadership. The bill was passed by the Upper House (Rajya Sabha) of Parliament on 9 March 2010, but its passage in Lok Sabha has remained stalled due to lack of political will and lack of consensus among political parties. In its 2019 party manifesto, the Bharatiya Janata Party states it is "committed to 33 per cent reservation in Parliament and State Assemblies through a constitutional amendment". Despite the commitment, there has been no progress on the Women's Reservation Bill to reserve a third of the seats in Lok Sabha and the State Legislative Assemblies for women, though introduced a decade ago. While various bills and decisions have been passed by the present government on issues that concern women (including the budget, Triple Talaq, and the Transgender Bill), there has been no attempt made by the Lok Sabha to pass the Women's Reservation Bill.

The National Alliance for Passage of the Women's Reservation Bill, which has over a thousand members, has engaged with recording the voices of the public for passage of the bill through a signature campaign. To date, the campaign has received over 60,000 endorsement forms and is receiving more endorsements every day.

Members of the National Alliance for Passage of the Women's Reservation Bill have held meetings and consultations all over India to spread awareness about the bill and push for its passage. State-level meetings have been organized in Jammu, Kashmir, Rajasthan, Delhi, Haryana, West Bengal, Maharashtra, Chennai, Chhattisgarh, Bihar, and Madhya Pradesh.

In an attempt to foreground women's concerns to decision-makers, prior to the 2019 elections, members of the National Alliance for Passage of the Women's Reservation Bill spearheaded drafting of a "Womanifesto", consisting of 11 advocacy points on issues concerning women's health, education, legal reforms, violence against women, women in politics and decision-making, women and economic empowerment, the girl child, and women and peace, which was circulated to all major political parties before the elections. Some political parties drew from the Womanifesto and included points made in it in their own manifestos.

Finally, members of the National Alliance for Passage of the Women's Reservation Bill have taken meetings with sitting Members of Parliament, the Election Commission, leaders of the opposition, and the Honourable President of India, Shri Ram Nath Kovind. All these leaders and decision-makers supported the bill and assured us they would push for its passage. However, the passage of the bill remains elusive.

Unless women achieve leadership positions in important institutions of governance, all our efforts over the past 25 years for women's advancement will have minimal effect. It is of critical importance to dedicate the next decade to empowering women towards becoming leaders and decision makers, and for all State parties to work on increasing the representation of women in politics and governance.

About us:

Centre for Social Research is a non-profit organization based in New Delhi, aimed at empowering women and girls in India. Founded in 1983, the organization is working at the local, regional, and national levels to create an equitable society through programmes that focus on women and education, political leadership, skill development, and the environment. Centre for Social Research is a leading partner of the National Women's Alliance for the Women's Reservation Bill.

Women Power Connect was born out of the realization that, despite substantial grassroots efforts, women's organizations and groups in India lacked the necessary coordination needed for translating their efforts into legislative and policy outcomes necessary for real progress. Women Power Connect was conceived as a unified voice representing the varied number of women's organizations.

The Centre for Social Research and Women Power Connect, jointly and as members of the National Alliance for Passage of the Women's Reservation Bill, advocate for and conduct programmes at various levels to raise awareness about the Women's Reservation Bill.
