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Q14

Discuss the contribution of civil society groups for women's effective and meaningful participation and representation in state legislatures in India.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2023 · GS II · 15 marks · Development Processes and NGOs

Development processes and the development industry - the role of NGOs, SHGs, various groups and associations, donors, charities, institutional and other stakeholders.

Core demand of the question

- Discuss the contribution of civil society groups to women's effective and meaningful participation and representation in State legislatures in India

Revision summary

Civil society raises women's electoral participation through awareness, movements and legal literacy.

It trains local-body women as a pipeline and watches party ticket shares.

The reservation campaign helped create the climate for the 106th Amendment, which will apply to Assemblies after delimitation.

Representation in State legislatures remains limited because parties control nomination and Assembly reservation is not yet operational.

Contribution is therefore real on participation and indirect on seats.

Introduction

Participation is campaigning, voting, and being heard; representation is winning and holding a seat in the Legislative Assembly. Civil society groups have done more on the first than on the second, because State legislatures still lack the constitutional reservation that Panchayats have.

Body

What civil society has contributed to participation

- Women's organisations, from older bodies such as the All India Women's Conference to later groups such as **SEWA**, the National Federation of Indian Women, and issue-based NGOs, have run literacy, legal-literacy, and voter-awareness campaigns that raise turnout and candidate confidence.
- Movement groups on domestic violence, liquor, and wages (including the anti-arack movement and self-help-group federations) trained women to speak in public, which is the skill an Assembly campaign later needs.
- Election-watch and feminist research groups publish candidate lists, track tickets given to women, and name parties that keep women at the bottom of the list, which is public pressure on gatekeepers.

- Legal-aid and rights groups use the **National Commission for Women**, State commissions, and the 73rd Amendment experience to argue that local reservation should be a pipeline into Assemblies, not a ceiling.
- Media and campus groups have made safety, harassment, and care work election issues, so women's participation is not reduced to a single reserved ward.

What they have contributed to representation

- Advocacy for a women's reservation law in Parliament and Assemblies was a decades-long civil-society demand, carried by joint fronts of women's groups across party lines, and it shaped the political climate for the **Constitution (106th Amendment) Act, 2023**.
- Training programmes for women sarpanches and councillors, often run with State election departments or NGOs, create a pool of women who can seek Assembly tickets.
- Some groups support independent or party women candidates with funds, security advice, and affidavit help, which partly offsets the cost and violence of Assembly elections.
- Civil society cannot itself allot tickets; parties and male incumbents still control nomination, so representation in State legislatures remains far below local-body shares.

Limits

- Many NGOs are urban, donor-dependent, and weak in Assembly-seat booth work.
- Caste and religious fragmentation splits "women's vote" so that a single civil-society slate rarely wins.
- Without reservation in force in Assemblies, contribution stays at pressure, training, and issue-setting.

Recommendations

- Fund multi-year leadership schools that move women from Panchayat chairs to Assembly tickets, with parties required to publish the share of women candidates.
- Protect women candidates against booth violence and online abuse through **Election Commission** directions that civil-society monitors can feed.
- **Use State Commissions** for Women as statutory allies of Assembly ethics and petition committees, so participation continues after the oath.

Flow diagram

Civil society -> Voter literacy movements
 Civil society -> Training of local women leaders
 Civil society -> Demand for Assembly reservation
 Voter literacy movements -> Participation
 Training of local women leaders -> Participation
 Demand for Assembly reservation -> Representation in legislatures
 Party tickets tickets -> Representation in legislatures

Conclusion

Civil society has enlarged women's participation through literacy, movements, election-watch, and the long campaign for legislative reservation. Meaningful representation in State legislatures still depends on party tickets and on reservation coming into force, which NGOs can demand but cannot grant.

Facts & figures

Articles 243D and 243T

Constitutional reservation for women in Panchayats and municipalities, the main existing school of elected women.

National Commission for Women

Statutory body (1990 Act) that civil-society complaints and research often use as a public forum.

Constitution (106th Amendment) Act, 2023

Reserves seats for women in the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies after census and delimitation; a long civil-society demand.

SEWA

Self Employed Women's Association; organises informal women workers and has been a model of economic-to-political voice.

Election-watch groups

Civil-society monitors that publish data on women candidates, criminal records and campaign finance.

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