INTRODUCTION
France is considered pioneer all over the world for propounding the basic ideals of human rights in the form of Liberty, Equality, Fraternity and Sovereignty. The foundation of these ideals lay in the French revolution which marked a landmark not only in the history of France but of the whole world. One of the greatest achievements of the French revolution was the proclamation of individual rights and liberties through its ‘Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen’. This ideal prepared the base for later political philosophies all over the world. It established that men are born and should remain free and equal in rights and that every citizen has a right to participate personally, or through representatives, in the formation of law of the land. The French revolution abolished the special rights and established social, political, economic and cultural equality. The concept of liberty dawned for the first time in France which was interpreted as the freedom to practice any religion, freedom of movement as well as the freedom of speech and expression. French revolution strengthened the spirit of secularism which implied the beginning of an era of tolerance, in socio-cultural aspects, throughout the Europe. Later on the ideas of French revolution crossed the boundaries of Europe to spread all over the world and released a new force to initiate a new civilization.

In light of the above ideals which have their origin in the French revolution and present a model image of French society this paper seeks to study the concept of Equality in France and analyze the notion of equality between sexes. The basic principle of equality forms the essence of all values in the French social order. Within this context the study intends to examine the political equality between the sexes in France.

It must be understood that lives of women are always conditioned by their gendered experience; they live their lives in society and culture they share with men as inferior to them. Gender differences pattern the identities, attitudes, roles, relationships and resources more deeply and persistently than class, race or other social constructs. In all societies, including
our own, sex and gender are so tightly linked that we have great difficulty disassociating them. Gender roles perpetuated over time and space are normalized and they come to be seen as the natural order.

The French revolution saw for the first time in France the mass participation of women and they began to participate with enormous enthusiasm in revolutionary public life. Women threw themselves into the spirit of the times, taking the issues with which their husbands were grappling as their own. Women participated enthusiastically in revolutionary politics, producing pamphlets and petitions, and intervening in a variety of political gatherings. They demonstrated their assumption that they had just as much right as men to give their views on political issues, and have those views taken seriously.

The changes instituted in the French Revolution worked in different or even contradictory ways for the two sexes. As Joan Landes (1988), has pointed out, “The period celebrated for ‘enlightenment’ and ‘revolution’ might be considered one of anti-enlightenment and counter-revolution when evaluated from women’s perspective.”¹ As men gained political rights and saw the prospect of citizenship open before them, women were excluded and thus became less ‘equal’ than previously to men of their own social group. The women in the new regime that followed the revolution were to inhabit the ‘private’ sphere created specifically to contain them. The men, by contrast, were to inhabit the newly created ‘public’ sphere of citizenship.

As the revolution unfolded some women began to realize that the new social and political structures did not address women’s needs and that it actively discriminated against them. The French revolution claimed to make all Frenchmen equal before the law. But the property based suffrage introduced in the early nineteenth century gave the vote only to selected men. Here the division was between the franchised and un-enfranchised families and not between the sexes. Then came the extension of suffrage to all men in 1848. It marked a definite political moment for the women. It created a distinction in political rights based solely on sex and thus made the question of women’s rights in French society more prominent.

The world war years (1914 – 19 and 1939 – 45) saw women in large numbers coming to the front. The rural women took to farm activities as the responsibility for feeding the country lay

primarily with 3.2 million women, as their men had left for military service. Urban women faced a different situation in the absence of their fathers and husbands. Unlike rural women they could not provide for their own food so they needed an income to feed their families. Women, who comprised only a third of industrial labour force before the war, were the only workforce left in different factories. They worked in docks, in trains and buses, even in war and munitions industries. As General Joffre rightly acknowledged, “If women had left the war factories, France would have lost the war.”

The post war years saw the question of female suffrage on the topmost political agenda. France is a country with a strong human rights tradition, where women have a very high level of education, civil rights, and independence. It is a country in which women did not win the right to vote until 1944. This belated vote for women is puzzling in the light of the suffrage won more than fifty years earlier in the U.S. or the pioneering colonies such as New Zealand and Australia. Not only did universal suffrage come late in France, but levels of female representation in successive national assemblies had also been low. Women in France do not enjoy full equality under the law despite the fact that sexual equality was inscribed in the constitution. The back-seat given to women in the political sphere reflects men's resistance to losing their monopoly on political power.

The recent decades have seen an increasing women’s encroachment in the male domain of politics and economy although their gains are painfully slow and constantly contested. Notions of sexual difference and separate spheres still continue to influence general thinking in the twenty first century as well. A gradual change in the public opinion, though, can be inferred as it has become more receptive to women in public life and positions of power.

A TRANSFORMATION OR CONTINUITY

In order to study the political participation and the empowerment of women in France, the focus of the paper remains limited to the analysis of the lower house in the Bicameral French Parliament. This is done in order to draw a picture of general public attitude towards women political leaders as the elections to the National Assembly are conducted on the basis of Direct Universal Suffrage for a term of five years which is renewable.

Gender affects the lives of men and women in different ways. French society remains deeply gendered, with women undertaking most of the domestic work, including housework and

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2 Ibid
childcare. This leaves fewer opportunities with women to build their professional lives and engage in public and political life. Women compose about 18.9 percent of the French National Assembly (the lower house of the Parliament) as compared to 45 percent in Sweden, 32 percent in Germany, 36 percent in Spain and 20 percent in UK. The figure suggests a comparatively low level of political participation by French women even after more than five decades of their enfranchisement. In 1999, the French constitution was amended to require equal access for women and men to political life, and in 2000, Parliament passed a gender parity law, which required all political parties to field an equal number of male and female candidates. The law has brought to the notice the obstacles that women face when it comes to their participation in French politics. This parity law, it should be noted, is not based on the concept of quotas. The argument behind the law is, “since slightly more than 50% of all citizens are women and are to be found in every social group – religious, old, young, disadvantaged, poor – parity is not a quota and does not lead to more quota laws.”

Women still lag behind when it comes to leadership positions in the government, local or national. On the contrary, women are still predominantly responsible for domestic labour and childcare, this can be seen as continuity with the eighteenth century.

The parity has got a limited success in elections to the National Assembly and the Senate. Women have generally gained access in the offices less coveted by men. Besides, the parties at the national level have designed various techniques to minimize the impact of parity on the male monopoly on the Parliament. These include the placement of women candidates in unwinnable seats as the law does not include a placement mandate for legislative elections; the financial penalties are also too weak to act as a sufficient deterrent therefore political parties deliberately tend to sacrificing millions of euros in state subsidies and choose not to select enough women candidates in legislative elections.

However, since the parity law, representation of women in politics has risen at every election. Some of the cultural barriers to women’s representation in politics are also disappearing. The parity law itself has been revised on several occasions to introduce certain changes with time as well as to remove various loopholes. While women are not yet close to achieving political

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equality, they are showing progress and are gaining momentum in many aspects of political life. At present women constitute about 18.9 percent in French Parliament; although it is a positive development, France is still a long way from fulfilling its promise of equality.

The research in the field of French women in politics gained momentum during Presidential elections of 2007. Ségoléne Royal emerged as the Socialist candidate as the first woman candidate with a credible chance of being elected as President. Her emergence and her failure to get elected as President attracted a huge body of research scrutinizing and analyzing the role of gender in French politics. There has only been one female Prime minister in France – Edith Cresson, and France has never had a female President!

Now, I would like to present certain arguments by some noted scholars on the reasons behind such a limited presence of women when it comes to participation in politics at national level.

Social science scholar Sophie Rétif argues that men are more likely to hold leadership positions and are more confident in putting themselves forward. This is because, as she further says, women underestimate their abilities, which becomes both the cause and consequence of gendered roles within political organizations. Women are more likely to join campaigning groups and voluntary organizations, while men are more likely to get involved in political parties and trade unions.\(^7\)

Rainbow Murray builds her research upon Rétif’s work to study the nature of women’s participation in French politics. She argues that women tend to enter Parliament later than men, owing to limited resources at their disposal as well as limited political network. Their careers tend to be shorter, and the gendered division of labour is perpetuated in the National Assembly through the segregation of parliamentary committees. As a result, it is harder for women to progress in their political careers and to reach the political summit. Even if some women get elected to the Assembly, they find it difficult to get re-elected due to lack of networks.

Further, Murray argues that the age at which a deputy starts their political career is a strong indication of their overall political trajectory. She says that the age at which a deputy first enters the National Assembly is gendered and there are several reasons for that. One of the most important one is that women are more likely to be constrained by family commitments;

most have their children while in their twenties or thirties, and the demands of parliamentary life are not easily compatible with a family life. This can be substantiated with the help of following table showing representation of male and female deputies in the National Assembly on the basis of their ages.

Table: Percentage of Deputies in 2007 who have served government, by age of first entry to Parliament:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age of Entry</th>
<th>Male Deputies</th>
<th>Female Deputies</th>
<th>All Deputies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Up to 30</td>
<td>25% (4)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>25% (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31 – 40</td>
<td>20.4% (30)</td>
<td>20% (2)</td>
<td>20.4% (32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41 – 50</td>
<td>4.3% (9)</td>
<td>14.3% (5)</td>
<td>5.8% (14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51 – 60</td>
<td>3.4% (4)</td>
<td>4.8% (1)</td>
<td>3.6% (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61 – 70</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>10% (47)</td>
<td>7.3% (8)</td>
<td>9.5% (577)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


On the basis of the above table, it can be deduced that men are more heavily represented amongst the oldest age groups within the National Assembly, whereas women are more likely to be new or recent deputies. In 2002, the average age that deputies first entered parliament was 44 for men, as compared to 48 for women. In 2007, this gap had narrowed slightly, even then women were 3.5 years older than men on average when first entering parliament. Due to this factor, the prospects of advancement to senior ministerial office are significantly reduced. This helps us in understanding that traditional gender roles are still relevant and they act as barriers in a progressive career for women.

Maggie Allison and Sheila Perry look at the role of gender in participatory debates. They illustrate how women members are allocated a secondary role in public debates, which indicates that politics still is perceived as predominantly a male game, and access to political environment is still controlled by male dominated elites.
Mariette Sineau examines gender gap in voting behavior in her paper. She studied the Presidential elections of 2007 to derive her conclusion. In her study she found that Royal, the woman Presidential candidate, won over certain sections of the electorate, including young women. However, Sarkozy benefited from the presence of a gender-generation gap, with older women being more conservative. The numerical dominance of older women proved beneficial for Sarkozy. In the longer term, Sineau points, women candidates may benefit from generational change, even if they are currently disadvantaged by traditional attitudes amongst certain sections of the electorate.

It can be said that a positive attitude among the people is gradually making its way, although an evident change is still a long way dream as it will take generations to set the wheel in motion. Following table depicts that there is an increase in the number of female deputies in last four National Assemblies of France.

Table: Composition of Successive Legislative Assemblies in France

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Legislative Assembly</th>
<th>Number of male Deputies</th>
<th>Number of female Deputies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11th (1997-2002)</td>
<td>510</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12th (2002-2007)</td>
<td>496</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13th (2007-2012)</td>
<td>447</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14th (2012- --)</td>
<td>424</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: www.interieur.gouv.fr

The proportion of number of females in National Assembly is still much less than their proportion in the total French population. In order to bring forth a clearer picture another two tables here give a bifurcation of the total deputies in the fourteenth National Assembly (constituted in 2012) on the basis of their membership in different parliamentary committees according to their age and sex.
Table: Men’s representation on parliamentary standing committees, 2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Profile</th>
<th>Finance</th>
<th>Defense</th>
<th>Foreign Affairs</th>
<th>Law</th>
<th>Social Affairs</th>
<th>Economic Affairs</th>
<th>Education and Culture</th>
<th>Sustainable Development</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 30</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-40</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-50</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-60</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60-70</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70-80</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: www.interieur.gouv.fr

Table: Women’s representation on parliamentary standing committees, 2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Profile</th>
<th>Finance</th>
<th>Defense</th>
<th>Foreign Affairs</th>
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<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>30-40</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-50</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>50-60</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
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<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60-70</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>70-80</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: www.interieur.gouv.fr

A general analysis of the table above tells us Women are heavily under-represented in positions of power within the committees. Further, there is a trend of gender segregation between different standing committees. Finance and foreign Affairs (the two most prestigious committees) are heavily male dominated, while women are more prominently and very disproportionately concentrated in the committee dealing with ‘soft issues’ such as Social
Affairs, Sustainable Development, Education and Culture. Thus, it can be noted that more prestigious committees are more resistant to feminization, while women become more heavily over-represented in the less prestigious committees.

A key question that comes to our mind is why this gender segregation occurs? Green (2004) argues that the larger size of the committees on social affairs and education has made them the ‘Dumping ground’ of parliament for those who did not make their way in to the more senior positions. This may also be explained with the help of the fact that women tend to enter late in the Parliament and consequently are able to serve fewer terms, this may contribute to their concentration in less prestigious committees. Seniority, here seems to play an important role in gaining membership of a particular committee. There can be another reason for women’s concentration in soft issues. Women may be sitting on these committees out of choice, because they are more interesting and relevant to women concerned, as these issues are related to people’s daily lives.

Another scholar R. H. Davis further points out women are less likely to be appointed in reshuffles than immediately after elections, as it attracts lesser media focus. Besides, party competition and ultimately the number of parties become important in order to study the participation of women in politics. It is relevant here to mention that Leftist parties are known for their greater support to equality, including gender equality. A large leftist party which monopolizes the left may well be in a position to increase the number of women in the Parliament. However, if the party system contains smaller leftists, or even centrist parties, the main leftist party has to worry about losing support to these parties. Thus if these parties nominate more women, a process of ‘contagion’ may occur, leading to a broad increase in the number of women nominated.

Generally speaking, the more parties there are in the system, the more beneficial this usually is for women representation. But since only one person can win the seat, and since each party will nominate only one candidate, the competition is seen to favour males.

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8 Quoted in Murray, Rainbow (2010), “Linear Trajectories or Vicious Circles? The Causes and Consequences of Gendered Career Paths in the National Assembly” Modern and Contemporary France, Vol. 18, No. 4, p. 455
In terms of number of women in cabinet, Davis stresses upon generalist versus specialist recruitment norms.\(^\text{12}\) In a specialist system, ministers are selected because of their expertise in the particular policy area concerned. In such a system their political experience makes little difference, indeed many are selected from outside the ranks of Parliament. While in a generalist system, ministers come from a group of well experienced ones. The ‘generalist’ ministers can move from portfolio to portfolio. It is found that women are less likely to be selected for cabinet in generalist systems, this can be a result of lesser number of women present in the Parliament. Davis attributes this difference to many factors such as, women being less likely to participate in Parliamentary debates, women not tending to chair Parliamentary and party committees which are stepping stones to the cabinet, and the greater hierarchical attitudes in generalist systems. Davis further notes that more left oriented the cabinet at the centre is, the more likely it is to have women ministers. The Jospin government of France had a larger number of women in its cabinet, being leftist in nature.

After discussing different facets of women’s representation in French National Assembly, I have made an attempt to place the issue in a wider international perspective in order to study the nuances concerning women’s representation in politics.

**THE WAY OUT**

The question that arises here is do we need a quota system to guarantee women’s entry and representation in French Parliament? There are several scholars who argue that only women could better represent the interests of women hence there must be a system which guarantees adequate number of female participation in national politics. Anne Phillips argues for a quota system in Parliament, which ensures that political parties choose female candidates.\(^\text{13}\) She claims that there are certain issues and claims that are particular to women and can therefore be better addressed by women themselves. It is her contention that women’s interests cannot be sufficiently articulated through patriarchal political systems. This could be supported by the evidence of the difference existing between the political behaviour of the two sexes. It is important here to note that, we might not expect the interests of middle class, upper class and working women to coincide, but we might expect them to be different from middle class, upper class and working class men respectively.


This view, however, has been contradicted by other scholars. As Joan Scott points, “French theories on the Republic refuse any link between belonging to a group or having an identity, and political representation. Only individuals are represented, not as social agents but as abstract figures of the universal human subject.” The idea that women could represent women was further rejected by parity opponents. A senator during a debate in the National Assembly affirmed, “The representatives do not represent citizens from their constituency but the whole nation. They cannot represent only one part of it.”

To quote another senator as well as an intellectual, Robert Badinter, “The Republic is composed of citizens without any distinction among them….No race, no opinion, no religious beliefs…. All are citizens, only citizens.” The politicians themselves are opposed to any parity based reform, with regard to French Constitution; national sovereignty cannot be divided between male and female citizens. There is a strong political and institutional consensus about the idea that ethnic differences cannot be taken into account in constitutional law, as this would endanger the universality of citizenship. This idea was used as the basis to denounce the introduction of sex difference in the constitution. Therefore, centrality of Universalism in the French constitution raises the problem for the campaigners of equality (specifically gender equality).

It can be concluded that political careers of women are gendered at every stage, right from local level to the national level. Moreover, women politicians are treated differently at different levels and by different sections of society. Gender parity is still a long way dream to be achieved. Public debates have changed their focus to address the diversity rather than addressing on the issue of women’s representation. Women are still treated as ‘The Second Sex’ and this notion is getting perpetuated from one generation to another. Thus, there is a need to carefully identify the underlying roots of gender imbalances in politics and address the need for inclusion of women in the mainstream. Although women are making into the politics, they mostly come from elite backgrounds; that make them more like elite men than like most French women. Many women get tickets because they belong to dominant political families and thus they are used as a tool to promote party interests, which are mainly male dominated, rather than women’s interests.

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15 Ibid
16 Ibid
I, therefore strongly argue that it is still a distant dream before the playing field is leveled and women are entitled to compete on the same terms as men, as it requires a change in the thought process of people. Women’s quota although is not an end in itself, it can surely be a means to ensure an active and proportionate representation of women at higher political positions.

To quote an example, in developing countries like India, quota system has gone a long way in bringing women to the mainstream politics and increasing their political participation. Indian constitution guarantees 33 percent reservation to women in local government. Professor Zoya Hasan argues that it has brought about a ‘silent revolution’ as it has given opportunity to a large number of women to participate in local politics and gradually make their way into the national politics. She further says that political representation of women cannot increase without quota because ‘gender’ exists in the minds of people and it will take generations to change the mindsets of people. There is a need to bring a change in the structures of power, which is a long term process and women’s reservation can prove to be a stepping stone in that process. Thus, the model can easily serve as a precedent to the French parliamentary politics.

REFERENCES


