

PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN RURAL GOVERNANCE- PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

R.VIDYA

Abstract: In modern times, women contribute immensely to the economic and social well-being of every society. Despite their contributions, their status in the society seems pitiable. Modern democracies cannot be successful if women are not given their due share of power and privileges in the society. Hence, political, social and economic empowerment of women is pre-requisites for the successful working of modern democracies. Despite such realisations, women in the rural areas still live a life of neglect and despair. They are denied their share in rural governance.

This paper tries to highlight the importance of political participation of women and how it has to be strengthened at the grass root level. Participation of women in rural governance would result in their issues being given priority. Despite these positive effects, women have only been sidelined in politics. Legislations at the national and international levels have not been able to do much about this situation of women. The paper also explains the Indian scenario and the factors that are responsible for the under-representation of women in politics. It highlights the importance of political empowerment of women in the context of Indian democracy. It points out the barriers that prevent their participation at the grass root level. Suggestions are also made to achieve not just quantitative participation but also qualitative participation in rural governance. The study is analytical in nature and secondary data has been employed. The basic data has been derived from books, journals and websites.

Keywords: Participation, political empowerment, rural governance, women.

Introduction: Women constitute more than half of the world's population. They make immense contribution to the social and economic development of their societies. Despite their immense contribution, the political participation of women in formal political structures and processes remain very insignificant. The commitment of the international community in bridging gender gaps in formal political arena through the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the Beijing Platform of Action has not given the desired results. According to the UNDP Report, 2005, there are only twelve countries in the world where women hold around 33% of the seats in the Parliament.

In the present scenario, women empowerment is considered to be a key element in measuring the development of a nation. Empowerment is a process that enables women to gain access to and control of, material, intellectual and human resources. It challenges patriarchal ideology and male domination. Political empowerment is a vital part of the overall process of women empowerment. It gives women a fair share in the decision-making process of the nation¹. The Indian constitution, through its various provisions, has always worked towards the empowerment of women. The Constitution declares women as legal citizens of the nation giving them an equal position with men. But it is only because of the male dominated society that women suffer immensely².

With increasing awareness among the international community of women's historic exclusion from political decision-making, a global commitment has been

made to redress gender imbalance in politics. The global debate on the participation of women in governance is based on two arguments. Firstly, women constitute half of the world's population and hence to be fair, they need to be given equal representation. Secondly, women have a different understanding of politics due to their gender roles and so their focus would be on evolving women-oriented developmental measures³. Thus being the positive impact of political participation of women, their role has greater importance in rural governance where majority suffer from discrimination, oppression and subjugation. Women can act as agents of change breaking the shackles of patriarchy and orthodoxy.

Political Participation of Women- The Indian Scenario: India, the largest working democracy in the world, where women constitute half the population, is ranked very low with regard to political participation of women. The Indian Constitution guarantees equal status to women and many legislations have promised the same, yet very few women hold political offices in the nation. The Constitution guarantees political equality to its citizens i.e the right to participate in the political activities of the nation and the right to vote. But however, the role of women is basically limited to casting their votes during elections. The right to equal participation of women in politics is still a distant dream. There is lack of space for women in the political arena and this has resulted in their presence in meagre numbers in the decision-making bodies.

However, it cannot be denied that reservations have facilitated women to become a part of local governance. But the policy of reservation is not an end in itself. It is just the first step taken in the task of political empowerment of women⁴. More efforts are to be taken to bring marginalized women into the mainstream because empowerment of rural women is very crucial for the development of rural India⁵. But the reality is that even in the case of issues that affect their lives, women only remain mute spectators⁶. Also, the very few women who have made it to the political offices are not real the decision-makers. They are made mere puppets endorsing the views and opinions of their male counterparts.

Importance of Participation of Women in Rural Governance in the Context of Indian Democracy:

The importance of local self government lies in the fact that they give true meaning and colour to Indian democracy. For the successful working of democracy, there needs to be a partnership accord between women and governance. Effective participation in policy formulation by rural women would not only result in successful implementation of developmental programmes but also create confidence in themselves, their abilities and capabilities⁷. But unfortunately, recent studies on the status of women reveal that Indian women have little or no say in decision-making in the political arena. When women are denied their share in decision-making, the very working of democracy is affected. Effective political participation of both men and women is a basic requirement of democracy as it ensures that the needs and aspirations of the entire population are taken into account. In developing nations like India, participation of women at the grassroot level is not just seen as a path to successful working of democracy but also as a medium of social change⁸. There are examples to prove that nations that have many women political leaders experience high standards of living. Their presence in politics ensures that the voices of the marginalized communities are heard. Their leadership at the local level is of great value because they are more sensitive to community concerns and more responsive to the local needs. Women also undertake the task of peace-building in their locality and are strong advocates of stabilisation and reconstruction⁹.

Realising the importance of participation of women in rural governance, the 73rd and the 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts ensured better representation for women in local governance. Also, recent legislations in Tamil Nadu have guaranteed 50% reservation to women at the Panchayati Raj Institutions. Despite all these legislations and stringent measures there is still inadequate political participation of women resulting in political parties giving less importance to the issues related to women. Also, male candidates have less access to the women electorate

and hence women are not exposed to political debates, resulting in women being denied political education¹⁰. However, in the case of democratic nations like India, political participation of women in rural governance need to be ensured as it lays the basic foundations for the successful working of democracy in the nation.

Obstacles and Challenges in Participation at the Grass Root Level:

It has been accepted nation-wide that political participation of women at the grass root level adds impetus to the process of women empowerment. But the following constraints faced by women prevent their active and effective participation in local governance. Women lack orientation and training in issues related to rural development and local administration. They also lack adequate knowledge related to panchayat acts, rules and regulations and also the various technical aspects related to the rural service delivery system. Moreover, political parties are also reluctant to put forward women candidates underestimating their necessity and efficiency. It is believed that men invoke more of popular support. Even in the case of seats reserved for women, men play a dominant role grabbing away the decision making authority from women, making them mere puppets. They just endorse the choice of the male members of the party¹¹. And even in the case of a few women who are truly strong and efficient, they are mostly divided on political lines which lead to them not being true representatives of women, voicing their grievances¹². The officials in rural governance also fail to give due respect and importance to women representatives and they are sidelined in crucial tasks related to planning and budgeting.

Women in villages also suffer due to financial dependency and find it difficult to bear the expenses related to elections. They fear mental harassment and embarrassment in the political arena that is mostly dominated by men as there are instances to prove that strong and efficient women are seen as a threat to patriarchy and they are targeted. Also the schemes targeting better participation of women have only a limited impact and many a times it fails to reach an average woman¹³. Criminalization of politics and the use of money and muscle power also further discourage the political participation of women. Family responsibilities also make it difficult for women to actively engage in politics¹⁴. Illiteracy and limited access to education and choice of professions, the dual burden of domestic tasks and professional obligations, lack of communication skills that affect their confidence, poor socio-economic background that prevents women from entering into mainstream politics and the patriarchal system resulting in subjugation and oppression of women are the important factors that discourage the qualitative participation of women in rural governance¹⁵.

Remedial Measures: It is understood that constitutional guarantees alone do not ensure effective participation of women. The government needs to adopt various strategies to enable women to gain entry into political institutions to share political power¹⁶. The balance of power between men and women at all levels of politics needs to be reviewed frequently¹⁷. Rural women need to be inducted into the mainstream of development and should not be denied the access to productive assets. A lot has to be done by the government in this regard. Basic infrastructure need to be provided in villages so that women have better access to education and health care. Safe drinking water, proper sanitation facilities, affordable cooking fuel and improved means of transportation directly improve the lives and health of rural women, giving them the motivation and desire to participate in rural governance¹⁸.

Government agencies and NGO's can devise mechanisms to accelerate qualitative participation of women giving them a chance to voice their issues and concerns. Any form of discrimination subordinating women in the society can be dealt with severely by the government. Removal of gender gaps and disparities should be the government's priority. Better educational facilities and skill development programmes can also cultivate confidence in women¹⁹. Stringent laws should be properly implemented to curb any form of violence against women. Efforts should be made to eliminate poverty and the government, NGO's and the civil society at large should work towards economic empowerment of women. Steps should be taken to promote peace in inter-personal relations at family, community, national and international levels²⁰. Media also has a significant role to play in this regard, enlightening the women about their rights and roles²¹. Most importantly, women need to

understand the importance of their participation and with great perseverance should exercise their political rights to the fullest.

Conclusion: Despite laws, legislations and stringent measures taken by the government, effective and adequate political participation of women in rural governance still remains a distant dream because of hindrances like illiteracy, burden of productive roles, lack of financial independence and most importantly the patriarchal mindset of the society²². Participation of women in local governance needs to be viewed from two angles- qualitative and quantitative. Reservations can only result in quantitative participation and not qualitative participation²³. Hence, strategies to encourage participation of women in rural governance should lay emphasis on issues relating to employment, sanitation, education, health and nutrition as they are the key elements that guarantee better living conditions for women thereby stimulating gender equality. It would provide opportunities for women to stand up with men, raise their voices against subjugation and oppression, seeing redressal of problems affecting their very existence and identity²⁴. Women should be both socially and economically empowered to enable them to exercise their political rights to the fullest. It is the responsibility of the government and the civil society to create an environment in which women would have easy access to basic minimum services enabling them to explore new avenues in politics. They should also be trained in income-generation activities to make them financially independent²⁵. Political participation of women at the grass root level is of utmost importance because it signifies the constitution of a democratic government not just at the top but also at the foundation level giving the rural masses a fair share in politics.

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R.Vidya/Assistant Professor/Department of Political Science/
Madras Christian College/Tambaram/Chennai- 600059/