

Empowerment of Women and Politics

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Abstract: Women's political empowerment, usually envisioned as political participation in elections and government, is necessary to give women a voice in the policies that affect their lives. It was realized that women play a critical role as leaders and community members in reducing poverty and providing good governance. Women in politics and in decision making positions in government and legislative bodies provide opportunities for 'transformative leadership' by redefining political priorities, placing, new items on the political agenda that reflect as well as address women's gender specific concerns, values and experiences besides providing new perspective on important issues. However prevailing social customs, religious practices, financial dependence, family and child care responsibilities are acting as limiting factors for women's participation in politics. This paper aims to highlight the limiting factors for women's participation in politics. It also aims to draw attention to the present position of women in Indian politics and to know developments in empowerment of women in politics. It also aims to suggest some recommendations for political empowerment of women.

Keywords: *Empowerment, Empowerment of Women, Political Empowerment. Economic Empowerment, Recommendations*

1. INTRODUCTION

Empowerment is a process of creating awareness about one's rights and responsibilities and socio, economic, educational and political opportunities. Women are not helpless in face of existing challenges. Around the world they are decision-makers for themselves, their families, villages, businesses, and governments. For societies where this is not the case, people speak of the need for women's empowerment.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Human Development Report identifies four basic forms of participation for empowerment of women.

1. Household Participation: Women's involvement in decision-making at home is the first step towards empowerment.
2. Economic Participation: Women's economic empowerment act as a base for political empowerment.
3. Social and cultural Participation: Women preserve the culture of land and their presence can lead to effective solution of problems.
4. Political Participation: Democracy becomes meaningful with effective participation of women in decision-making.

Women's political empowerment, usually envisioned as political participation in elections and government, is necessary to give women a voice in the policies that affect their lives. Women's economic empowerment, which entails that women have the authority to make their own decisions regarding use of their resources, leads to prosperity for

families and communities. Social empowerment, often achieved through public policy and education, liberates women from the mistreatment, exploitation, and oppression that inhibit women from reaching their full potential.

Economic empowerment can provide the clout for women to be empowered politically. Political empowerment allows women to take control of the policies that will benefit their economic standing. Social empowerment reinforces the ability to participate economically and politically, which in turn reinforces women's standing in society.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To highlight the limiting factors for women's participation in politics
2. To draw attention to the present position of women in Indian politics
3. To know developments in empowerment of women in politics
4. To suggest some recommendations for political empowerment of women

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The information has been collected from secondary sources like Journals, Government Reports and books and Internet

4. LIMITING FACTORS FOR WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS

Reasons for the marginalization of women in politics are not difficult to find. There are many obstacles to assimilation of women in the process of decision-making, operating at different levels.

- One of the arguments for the non-participation of women in the political process has been that women themselves are responsible for their political isolation.
- Due to the socialization process, reinforcing her subordinate position, private and public dichotomy results in lack of self-esteem and confidence in women and the internalization of these value systems. This is one of the biggest hurdles to their development and participation in public life and activities. The basic fact of the subordination of women in society acts as a structural constraint and stops women from participating in political activities
- Routine political work, regular visits to the constituency area, active participation in meetings and discussions, and preparedness to meet people any time are not consistent with a woman's life with her family. Such work clashes with her household roles. Moreover, speaking at public meetings, asserting her individuality and negotiating power bargains require training and experience, which are not easily accessible to women.

- Another important factor which has also to be considered is that much of the political participation today requires information, knowledge, exposure to various experiments, strategies, models etc. The understanding of political processes, strategies and actions requires training, education and constant interaction. Even men in a poor illiterate society find it difficult to fulfill this requirement. It is a much more challenging task for women.
- It is observed that women's participation in national level has considerably low when compared to the local level involvement. Many reasons are cited for this. Participation in local government is easier for women to balance with double burden of household responsibilities and governance. Also issues decided at local level are mostly educational and social service provisions which are easy for traditional women to understand and play an active role. On the otherhand in the prevailing social structure lower status of local political offices makes party leaders to support female candidates. The women also feel confident to face the local electorate and the expenditure involved for election process is also limited.
- The number of children a woman has does not have a direct impact on her right and ability to participate in political activities. But certain policies adopted by the state as a family planning measures has indirectly affected women's potential to participate in political activities. The number of children that a citizen can impede his/her participation in elections, By the time they stand for election they already have two or more children, and therefore are not qualified to contest elections.
- Literacy on the one hand is linked to women's socio-economic status and on the other hand, her status as a woman has an independent and equally strong implication for her access to this realm. Illiteracy can also act as a barrier towards getting elected. Lack of literacy skills affects women's confidence and impedes her effective participation in politics. Such women would not be able to enjoy their rights as elected representatives and demands for resources and participation in decision making.
- Women who have entered the political process are faced with a lot of resistance. There are many instances where they have been subjected to physical violence, threats and intimidation. This has especially occurred when elected women representatives aspired to be articulate, assertive and effective in discharging their responsibilities.
- Patriarchal values relegate women to the home. By the very nature of this value system, any woman bold enough to come out in the open and into politics is viewed with suspicion. It is natural that she is particularly targeted for slander and character assassination.

- There is lack of interaction between women at the State and National level politics and those holding positions at the lower levels of governance. The absence of elected women's interaction both horizontally and vertically reduces their unity in representing the women's agendas.
- 33% reservation has been provided to women in local self government. However, this reservation quota is misinterpreted to imply that women can contest only 33% seats and not against the general seats.

As a result of the factors mentioned above, the participation of women in politics becomes limited to voting, organizing processions and rallies and doing ancillary work in the party offices

5. POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN INDIA

In Indian Freedom Movement most outstanding women leaders and workers at all levels were visible Indian National Movement particularly under Gandhiji's leadership when they participated actively in the case against colonization for e.g. Civil Disobedience Movements and Salt Satyagraha. Smt. Sarojini Naidu, Sri. ArunAsaf Ali, Smt. Durgabai fall in this category. Unfortunately after independence many of the veteran women politicians were sidelined by the political parties or could not enter the parliament/assemblies. In spite of adopting universal franchise which offers voting rights to women from the very formation of Republic of India, its rank is 119 according to Inter Parliamentary Union whereas China's rank is 48. It has become necessary to have political patronage in the respective political parties to gain foothold in politics. Majority of the present day women politicians belong to the families of prominent politicians or have entered due social compulsions of the government for selecting candidates from weaker sections.

In India also we find no correlation between literacy and political representation or the social structure. In Kerala female literacy high rate and culturally more advanced due to matrilineal system but this did not translate into political participation of women. Manipur also has the tradition of women playing a dominant role in both family and community due to matrilineal heritage. However till 1990 there was not a single women legislator. On the other hand UP, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan with lowest female literacy rate elected more women MLAs and MPs.

Even after the Right to Vote became a reality for all women, their representation parliament, political parties and decision making bodies remained low even after independence and after the Indian Constitution came into force in 1950 (Suheela Kaushik 1993). A few attained positions as members of parliament and state legislature and as leaders of opposition mostly through family dynasties or through male political patronage.

According to the United Nations' report, it will take more than 50 years for countries like India to achieve gender balance in politics if the women's participation in Parliaments remains at the current pace,

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) report released this week offers six-point action plan that includes a whole range of structural changes in the electoral

Women Members in Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha and their percentage in total seats

Year	Lok Sabha No	Percentage %	Rajya Sabha No	Percentage %
1952	22	4.4	16	7.3
1957	27	5.4	18	7.5
1962	34	6.8	18	7.6
1967	31	5.9	20	8.3
1971	22	4.2	17	7.0
1977	19	3.4	25	10.2
1980	28	7.9	24	9.8
1984	44	8.1	28	11.4
1989	27	5.3	24	9.7
1991	39	7.17	38	15.5
1996	39	7.18	19	8.52
1998	43	7.9	15	6.1
1999	49	9.02	19	7.75
2004	45	9	28	11.4
2007	47	8.63	25	10
2009	49	8.99	21	8.97
2011	60	11.02	26	10.78

Source: www.parliamentofindia.com

politics to bridge the gender gap. It strongly pleads quota for women in Parliament

The action plan recommended by the report includes constitutional reforms, changes in the pattern of electoral campaign and its financing, provision of reservation of seats, change in party selection rules, capacity building on policy and programs and gender sensitive rules in elected bodies.

The UNDP report says ‘Gender Equality in Elected Office in Asia-Pacific: Six Actions to Expand Women’s Empowerment’, says that “globally, women hold slightly less than 20 per cent of seats in Parliament. In Asia-Pacific, just over 18 per cent of all members of national Parliaments are women.”

The UNDP report says “The leading countries in the region for women’s membership in Parliament are New Zealand and Nepal, where women are one-third of all members of Parliament. Women are more than one-quarter of parliamentarians in Afghanistan, Australia, Laos, Timor-Leste and Vietnam”.

The UNDP report also says Among the Asia-Pacific countries with the highest proportions of women in Parliament in 2010, most had constitutional, legal or party quotas. By contrast, among the 20 Asia-Pacific countries lagging behind in growth, none had implemented quotas,”

According to the UNDP report, globally there are 40,000 Parliament members, 19% women and 81% Men.

India is far below these countries with a rank of 105 and having 60 women members of Parliament out of 545 (11 percent) women in the Lower House. Despite frequent attempts to introduce a similar policy of reserved seats for the Lower House (Lok Sabha) of the national Parliament, these initiatives have repeatedly failed.

A glance at the composition of Indian Parliament from 1952 reveals that the representation of women hasn't changed much. In fact at times it showed a fall.

6. DEVELOPMENTS IN EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN POLITICS

Active participation of women in public life is essential for sustained economic and social advancement of women. Political participation in India can be traced to the freedom struggle when women raised the issues of representation in politics. Sarojini Naidu and Margaret Cousins raised the question of right to vote for women as early as in 1917. At that time it was basically a demand for universal adult franchise and political participation. By 1930 women had gained the Right to Vote, which initially benefited women from elite families.

The Government of India set up "Committee on the Status of Women" in 1971. The committee suggested increasing women's representation in political institutions, especially at the grass roots level through a policy of reservations. In 1988 National perspective plan for women suggested introducing 30% quota for women at all levels of elected bodies. After long deliberations the constitution Amendments 73 & 74 enabled the reservation of one third of elected members to Panchyats and Urban local bodies to women. The reservations extended to the heads of local bodies also. This paved way for participation of women in decision making at local level on a large scale.

From 1985 onwards the government of India is trying to pass the Bill on Women's Reservation in parliament and State Assemblies, but successive governments could not get it through. The reason attributed for the need to have reservation is that win ability of women candidates without reservation is difficult. But the statistics reveal that success rate of women who contested Parliament Elections are higher than that of men.

In the World conference on women held in 1995 at Beijing 189 governments committed to ensure women's equal access to and full participation in power structures and decision making. The governments also pledged to set goals of gender balance in government bodies as well as committees and in public administrative entities

Women's participation in managerial and technical fields is showing considerable progress whereas the same is not true in participation in politics. This is the reality throughout the world. In many countries reservation of seats for women in various forms are introduced to encourage women's participation.

United Nations role: UNDP is mainstreaming gender concerns into its operations to ensure women's participation. It supports capacity development of women members of political parties and independent candidates who prepare to enter politics. Gender de-

velopment Section of UNESCAP works to promote women empowerment and advancement overcoming barriers of gender equality.

It has been implementing the multiphase Advancement of Women in Urban Local Government Project since 1999. It conducted Asia-Pacific Summit of Women Mayors and Councilors in 2001 at Bangkok.

United Nations International Training & Research Institute for Advancement of Women (INSTRAW) is providing training for women.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to fulfill the goal set at 2005, World summit “Progress for women in Progress for All” Affirmative steps need to be taken by governments as well as NGOs. They include:

1. Universalisation of education
2. Including the rights and legal remedies available to redress their grievances as part of the curriculum.
3. Providing training in political and legislative affairs, government programmes.
4. Reducing the cost of contesting elections.
5. Decriminalization of politics.
6. Democratic section of candidates by political parties rather than giving preference to kinship.
7. Prescribing minimum qualifications for the contestants.
8. Reservations of seats on the model of Rwanda.
9. Building up an effective modern communication system to attend to the grievance of the people whom they represent.
10. To ensure that women have adequate space in trade unions and co-operative societies and such other registered institutions.
11. Electoral reforms should provide for State funding for women contesting for elections to parliament, state assemblies, urban local bodies and panchayat raj institutions.

8. CONCLUSION

The barriers preventing women’s empowerment extend beyond individuals – there are institutional and systemic reasons why women in some societies cannot participate freely. To break down these barriers, individuals have to work together to reform the laws, social norms, or whichever institutions are inhibiting women’s productivity. Societies must also acknowledge the potential for growth and prosperity that can be achieved when women are included.

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