

POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN INDIA: STATUS AND CHALLENGES

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"You can tell the condition of a nation by looking at the status of its women"

Jawaharlal Nehru

ABSTRACT

Women constitute almost 50% of the world's population but India has shown disproportionate sex ratio whereby female's population has been comparatively lower than males. There are 940 females per 1000 male. Literacy rate of males is 82.14% while of female is 65.46 %. As far as their social status is concerned, they are not treated as equal to men in all the places. Though women's are equally competent to men in every activity but they are highly involved in reproductive role only. Despite of various researches, programmes and policies of Government, international agreements, conferences, recommendations and passing of women reservation bill in Parliament, the participation of women in politics is still lacking behind and it is very low in comparison to men in India. The political participation meaning is not confined only to right to vote given for women but it also involves active participation of women in political consciousness, activism and decision making process. We can see that women is empowered to some extent economically, socially, nutritionally as well as technology, but the pace of political empowerment is too much slow among them. So, this is matter of great concern for our nation, why women is not giving their participation in politics and women should be involved in local as well as national decision making bodies. Gender equality could be achieved by strengthening women's rights and addressing barriers to their political participation.

KEYWORDS: Political Empowerment, Gender Equality, Decision Making

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INTRODUCTION

The total population of females in India is 65.2 crore as compared to males which are 69.7 crore (Anonymous 2017). Their contribution to the social and economic development of societies is also more than half as compared to that of men by virtue of their dual roles in the productive and reproductive spheres. The origin of the concept of empowerment goes back to the civil rights movements in the USA in the 1960 (Kaur 2013). Empowerment means moving from enforced powerlessness to a position of power. Despite various researchers, programmes and policies of Government, international agreements, conferences and recommendations, the participation of women in politics is still lacking behind and it is very low in comparison to men in India (Leyner 2014). The political participation meaning is not confined only to the right to vote given for women but, it also involves active participation of women in political

consciousness, activism and decision-making process. It can be observed that women is empowered to some extent economically, socially, nutritionally as well as technology, but the pace of political empowerment is too much slow among them. So, this is a matter of great concern for our nation that why women are not participating in politics and women should be involved in local as well as national decision-making bodies. Gender equality could be achieved by strengthening women's rights and addressing barriers to their political participation.

Today gender inequality leads to deprivation of power among women. Women are perpetually excluded from decision-making at every step of the ladder, starting from the household to the top layer of policymaking. Although the Constitution of India attempts to remove gender inequalities by interdicting discrimination based on gender and class, and enshrining fundamental rights for all citizens, women still have only *de jure* rather than *de facto* access to these rights. (Paul and Mehta 2016)

Female literacy in India is 65.46 % while of the male it is 82.14 % (Census 2011). It also provided a positive indication that growth in female literacy rates (11.8%) was substantially faster than in male literacy rates (6.9%) in the 2001–2011 decadal period (Anonymous 2011). In the population Census of 2011, it was revealed that the population ratio in India 2011 is 940 females per 1000 of males. The sex ratio of 2011 shows an upward trend from the census 2001 data. Census 2001 revealed that there were 933 females to that of 1000 males, which means the gender gap appears to be narrowing. Still, their representation in political structures and spheres, where decisions regarding the use of societal resources generated by both men and women are made, remains negligible.

POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

Politics is generally understood as an exercise of power. Political participation means involvement of people in the process of exercising power (Patni 1994). So, political empowerment is to invest with power, especially legal power or official authority.

According to Kaushik (1998) participation in political sphere involves framing of policies and decisions and effective control over the implementation of the same.

Pandey (2002) defines political empowerment as the capacity to influence decisionmaking process, planning, implementation, and evaluation by integrating them into the political system. It implies political participation which includes the right to vote, contest, campaign, party membership and representation in political office at all levels and effectively influences decisions thereby leading to political empowerment.

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

- The term political participation generally refers to those voluntary activities of members of a society, in the selection of rulers and formation of public policy.
- It is not only related to 'Right to Vote', the gap between men and women voters has narrowed over time with a difference of 16.7% in 1962 to 4.4% in 2009, but simultaneously relates to participation in: decision-making process, political activism, political consciousness, etc. Women in India participate in voting, run for public offices and political parties at lower levels than men.
- (Anonymous 2014)

- It is the involvement of the members of the society in the decision-making process of the system. (Shodhganga 2012)

STATUS OF WOMEN IN PARLIAMENT

At Global Level

Table 1

HDI Rank	Country	Share of Seat in Parliament (% Held by Women) 2015
1	Norway	39.6
2	Australia	30.5
3	Switzerland	28.9
131	India	12.2
169	Afghanistan	27.4

Source: Gender Inequality Index: HDI report (2015)

It is indicated in the table that developed countries like Norway, Australia have more women’s seat in parliament. India has only 12.2 % of women representation in Parliament almost less than half of the percentage share of Afghanistan’s women in Parliament though it is less developed than India.

- In this global mapping, India’s 148th rank is very low; and even several Asian countries, viz., Nepal (48th), Afghanistan (54th), Pakistan (89th), Bangladesh (91st), United Arab Emirates (96th), and Saudi Arabia (98th), among others, have fared far better than India.
- Out of 47 Asian countries, India holds the 31st position. Among 8 SAARC countries, India’s position is 5th and India holds the 4th rank among 5 BRICS countries. A relatively poor performance is evident, if India (11.9 per cent) is compared to the best performer in Rwanda (61.3 per cent) in terms of women’s representation in the parliament.

At national Level

Women Presence in the Lok Sabha

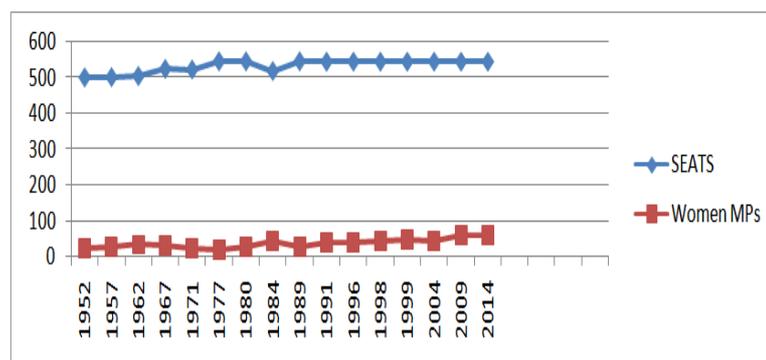


Figure 1

Source: Election Commission of India (2014)

It is very clearly indicated that women had very little participation in Lok Sabha as compared to male. As for as representation of women in Lok Sabha is concerned that it was increased from 4% in 1957 to 5.5% in 1971. In 1984, for the first time, women’s representation was increased 8% when 42 MPs were elected to the lower house. However, 2009

election brought the 59 representatives out of 556 candidates. The current Lok Sabha undoubtedly observed the highest share of women in Lok Sabha. Total women members have increased to 61. If this trend continuous to remain it would take another 50 years to achieve the critical mass of 33% forget about the equal share.

Women Presence in the Rajya Sabha

Table 2

Year	Total Seats	No of Women	% of Women
1952	219	16	7.3
1957	237	18	7.6
1962	238	18	7.6
1967	240	20	8.3
1971	243	17	7.0
1977	244	25	10.2
1980	244	24	9.8
1985	244	28	11.0
1990	245	38	15.5
1996	223	20	9.0
1998	223	19	8.6
2004	245	27	11.1
2009	245	22	8.97
2014	245	29	11.3

Source: Election Commission of India (2014)

- Women voting during India's 2014 parliamentary general elections was 65.63%, compared to 67.09% for men (Anonymous 2014).

Status of Women at Administrative Level

There is no special reservation for women in the IAS services. Their entry is on merit alone. 331 of the total of 4,284 IAS officers are women. The percentage of women in the administrative service is 7.7 per cent (Goyal 2017).

Table 3

	Total Male	Total Female
Number	3953	331
Percentage	92.3%	7.7%

(Bureau of Police Research and Development, Ministry of Home Affairs 2014)

NEED OF POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

It is important to understand that overall development of a nation requires maximum utilization of human resources without any discrimination. A more developed society is a more participant one. So the participation of women in the political process is a major step towards inclusive growth.

Women are key components in many areas like family, society and a nation. So, positive impact on women ultimately brings positive impact toward their life and culture. A nation is nothing but the combination of people and it's thought. If women become aware and empowered about their rights then ultimately positive effect will lead them to every sectors of a nation (Anonymous 2010).

And rocentrism can be balanced with the practice of placing the feminine point of view at the center with political

empowerment of women (Anonymous 2010).

FACTORS HINDERING WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

- **Political Factors:** The dominance of males in political parties and political activities that restrict women's participation in such activities. When it comes to national issues, the female always feel to be ignored because male members make decisions according to their perspectives.
- **Socio-Cultural Factors:** Social-cultural factors are also important which effect women's participation in public spheres. Women find it difficult to participate in politics due to the limited time available to them because of their dual roles in the productive and reproductive sphere. There is the gender-based segregation of space as public (masculine) and private (feminine) (Basu 2015). Family and political connections are believed to help women at every step from the decision, not always an independent decision taken by women themselves to contest, to getting successfully elected.

(Planning Commission, Government of India 2014).

On the other hand, under-privileged women often face threats of violence when they have dared to express their intention to contest elections. (Anonymous 2012).

Women representatives face many social confronts including restrictions on going out of the house; lack of education; the household chores of fetching water and fodder, cooking and raising children that affect their performance in office.

It is true that many women are nominated by their husbands, fathers and father-in-law to take advantage of the quota, which made it difficult for the man to contest the election himself. In some cases election materials – banners, posters, and etc.-are made in the name of the man rather than the woman who is the official candidate, and that the man tends to assume the role of the Pradhan or Sarpanch, attending and even chairing the meeting in place of the elected women representative. The phenomenon of proxy or surrogate representation is, thus, prevalent (Singh 2014). In some of the countries, particularly in South Asia, women also face cultural constraints on their mobility. The purdah system used to restrict their mobility.

- **Economic Factors:** These days' politics moves around money making and it has become commercialised. Women usually have less ownership on productive resources and capital, limiting their scope of political participation. Political processes have become expensive. The cost of election also put hindrance.
- **Psychological Factors:** Psychological factors are also responsible for women's low political participation. Generally men are more psychologically involved in politics because they regard politics as their respective sphere, while women are generally unfortunate in these matters. Politics is a very risky game, election shave also become very complicated, violent, and dirty. Therefore women want to keep themselves away from politics. During ancient period, it was not that women could not join politics, but the fact was that they did not take interest in it due to a patriarchal set up.(Phukhan 2010)

Even though, females are pushed forward in political activities, still they are expected to concern everything with male members of party or male members of home before making any decision. It is also a matter of negative self-perception and self-doubt among women (Lawless 2014).

- **Threat to Safety of Women:** Nussbaum (2005) state that in the larger society, violence and the threat of violence affects many women's ability to participate actively in many forms of social and political relationship, to speak in public, to be recognized as dignified beings whose worth is equal to that of others.
- A 2016 report found that more than 44 percent of elected female representatives have been threatened in office, including threats of death, rape, beatings, or abductions (Anonymous 2016).
- More than 60 per cent of women do not participate in politics due to fear of violence. (Voglestein 2017)

STRATEGIES FOR INCREASING PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN POLITICS

- **Education:** Education is the most powerful tool for development of human resource. As far back as the 3rd World conference on women in 1985, conveyed under the theme “equality, development and peace, education was promoted as the basic tool that should be given to women in order to fulfil their roles as vital members of society. The female literacy in India is 65.46 % while of male it is 82.14 %(census 2011). It also provided a positive indication that growth in female literacy rates (11.8%) was substantially faster than in male literacy rates (6.9%) in the 2001–2011 decadal period, which means the gender gap appears to be narrowing (Anonymous2016).Studies conducted by Jayal and Buch (2010) found women are "persistently mocked and devalued in the panchayats if they are illiterate.
- **Amendments in Indian Constitution:** The main emphasis of Government is inclusion of more women in decision making and participation in policy formulation at all levels of political activities. Year 2001 was declared as a year for the empowerment of women by Indian Government, that there should be reservation for women in *Panchayats* to increase their political participation. Thirty three per cent reservation for women in Panchayats and urban local bodies are provided to all Indian women according to 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Indian constitution in 1992.

The idea behind this move was to enable more women at the grass root level to enter in the political stream and create “Critical mass” of women leaders whose voices are heard at various levels(Batta 2009).

ROLE OF PRI IN WOMEN’S POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT

PRI has brought about significant transformations in the lives of women themselves, who have become empowered, and have gained self-confidence, political awareness, and affirmation of their own identity. The *Panchayat* villages have become political training grounds to women, many of them illiterate, who are now leaders in the village *Panchayats*. Women leaders in the *Panchayati Raj* are transforming local governance by sensitizing the State to issues of poverty, inequality and gender injustice.

Participation of women in PRI’s involves women as voters, women as members of political parties, women as candidates, women as elected members of PRI’s taking part in decision-making, planning, implementation and evaluation of programmes, women as members of Mahila Mandals and their association with various organizations.(Batta 2009)

Many elected women complained that their suggestions were not considered seriously nor were they consulted while decisions were being made. Some felt that their views were ignored only because they are women. At times they were pressurized by their husbands to approve their decisions made by the male-dominated Panchayats. Women were actively prevented from participating in Panchayat activities by male family members and other members of the Panchayat

itself. (Sadhu and Sharma 2012)

- Kumari and Singh (2012) studied on the participation of women in Panchayati Raj found that majority of women had low participation in the functioning of Gram Panchayat.
- Nambiar (2001) in her study of 'Making the Gram Sabha Work' noted the different utilities in organizing the Gram Sabha. Majority of women reported that they were not informed or invited to the meetings.
- Nandal (2013) revealed in his study that women were restricted to right to vote only, they did not have awareness and knowledge regarding constitution, to whom they would give vote was also decided by their husband or father.
- Gochhayat (2013) revealed that women did not know the names of political parties and they casted their votes identifying the symbols of political parties.
- Kaul and Sahni (2009) conducted a study on the participation of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions and they revealed that neither the reservation for women nor their actual presence in the Panchayat has become any more sensitive to the problems related to the village women. The women who are elected are not always treated with due respect.

ROLE OF EXTENSION EDUCATION IN WOMEN'S POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT

- **Use of Media as a Tool for Empowerment:** There should be radio programme in local dialect which must be broadcasted every day or a once week which can have themes like the role of Panchayats, its working and its goals etc. Social media can play a significant role to provide knowledge about rights and duties of women. Social networking sites and mobile app can be a good source for them to sensitize about cruelties and barriers they are facing. Print and electronic media can prove to be an important factor in creating awareness in ruler society (Gochhayat 2013).
- **Exposure Visits:** To motivate illiterate and unaware women, a visit should be conducted to places where women are performing outstandingly in politics. Successful working women Sarpanch can be a source of encouragement (Sharma 2008).
- **Women Organisation:** Women should be encouraged to organize themselves through Mahila Mandal and Self-help groups. Government should provide financial aid to those groups who are successfully working and encouraging women representation in the political arena. (Rai 2014).
- **Incentives:** Women who are successfully leading political parties should be honored and encourage them by publishing their leadership qualities in public meetings. It would definitely motivate all women who were present at that time. (Anonymous 2016).
- **Trainings at Grass Root and National Level:** Training programmes should be organized at the village and national level by extension personnel's for creating awareness among women why they need to participate in decision-making process, what are their rights, how can they come out of their socio-cultural barriers. These training can also induce better communication and leadership skills among them. Training on various aspects of the PRIs should be provided to the women members and all other PRI members & concerned local officials. Provisions of the 73rd Amendment, writing records, conducting meetings, maintaining community assets,

financial management, understanding of bureaucratic structure, government schemes for the rural poor, unemployed, education, public distribution system, etc. are some of the areas in which training could be given. (Planning Commission, Government of India 2014)

- **Creation of Awareness:** Political awareness is the stepping-stone of political participation. Awareness creates interests and interest creates involvements. Women have very poor awareness regarding the electoral process of the Gram Panchayats, it can be created by an organisation of rallies and nukad nataks in villages. They have very little knowledge about the voting age, the period of elections, the provisions of political rights, and the reservations of seats for women in Gram Panchayats, Panchayat Samitis, Assemblies, and Parliament.
- **Motivation of Women:** Extension workers can play a major role in motivating women for taking advantage of their rights provided by Indian constitution.

CONCLUSIONS

Although India is moving towards development side, still it has a very low representation of women in politics. So, extension education can play a major role in achieving gender equality by strengthening women's rights and addressing barriers to their political participation. Women should be involved in local as well as nation decision making bodies for the overall development of a nation. The issue of gender-based violence and provision of safety and security of women should also be addressed on a priority basis to promote gender equality in the social and political arenas. The goal of women's empowerment will not be accomplished by reservation alone. To expedite and speed up this process it is essential to implement supplementary policies which encourage the self-confidence of women and build capabilities.

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