

NEED FOR POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The role of women in development is intimately related to the socio-economic and political development of a country. Any country, which neglects the need for enhancing the role of women as a dynamic factor and a valuable asset, for the overall process of development would be left trailing behind. In India the role of women in the socio-economic and political development of a society is underestimated and underscored. Empowerment is not characterized as achieving power to dominate others, but rather power to act with others to effect change. Political participation is a major component of empowerment. The paper tries to highlight the impediments faced by the women in entering politics like personal and familial factors, triple role women are forced to play, illiteracy, character assassination, reservation etc. It also tries to draw attention to the position of women in Indian politics and the adverse effects of low participation of women in political process. It also tries to suggest some strategies for political empowerment of women in India.

KEY WORDS: Empowerment, Impediments, Political Empowerment of Women, Position of Women, Strategies.

INTRODUCTION

The role of women in development is intimately related to the socio-economic and political development of a country. Any country, which neglects the need for enhancing the role of women as a dynamic factor and a valuable asset, for the overall process of development would be left trailing behind. In India the role of women in the socio-economic and political development of a society is underestimated and underscored. Right from cradle women are forced to uphold slavish practices for ever in future.

Women are stereotyped as followers and not leaders. It is necessary to break this stereotypes of the past and move towards a new generation of women working together to face the challenges of equality and development. The prerequisite for this is empowerment.

Empowerment is a process of creating awareness about one's rights and responsibilities and socio, economic, educational and political opportunities.

The 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 social problems.
- 4) Political Participation: Democracy becomes meaningful with effective participation of women in decision-making.

The extent of empowerment of women in the natural hierarchy is determined largely by three factors-her economic, social and political identity and their weightage. These factors are interrelated and cannot be viewed in isolation. It is only when all the three factors are simultaneously addressed and made compatible with each other then only women can be truly empowered. Therefore for holistic empowerment of the women to happen social, economic and political aspects impacting a women's life must converge effectively.

Empowerment is not characterized as achieving power to dominate others, but rather power to act with others to effect change. Political participation is a major component of empowerment. Political participation may be defined as those actions of private citizens by which they seek to influence or support Government and politics.

In order to have effective and meaningful participation of women in politics a three dimensional approach is needed that is political will of the people, people's general political awareness and the constitutional and legislative measures.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

- 1) To highlight the impediments faced by the women in political participation.
- 2) To find out the position of women in National Parliament.
- 3) To examine the effects of women's low political participation.
- 4) To suggest strategies for political empowerment of women.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The information for this paper has been primarily collected from secondary sources i.e. books, journals, Government Reports.

IMPEDIMENTS FACED BY WOMEN IN ENTERING POLITICS

Personal and Familial Factors

The primary area of subordination is the family where the patriarchal values are enforced and where the control over women's person-hood is really questioned. Women in the family are viewed as liabilities because of which gender-based discrimination in all dimensions of their lives prevails. This is reflected in alarming proportion of violence against women within the family in the form of female feticide, infanticide, malnourishment, dropouts, neglects and deprivation through limited access to resources.

Milbrath and Goel observed that is a tradition in almost all societies that politics is mainly an affair of men and that women should fall in line with them politically. Support from other family members to play a dominant role in the public domain is not forthcoming and the only time they do so is when they have complete control over the women. This control takes the form of families only supporting women to get elected in order to keep the position in the family but they refuse to help her participate in the daily task of political processes.

Women having young children in the family do not get the support that can free them to participate in activities outside the home. Young and unmarried women have more restrictions placed on their participation because of the control exercised on their sexuality.

At the personal level, 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.

Triple Role Women Play

Women typically are forced to play a triple role when they enter politics, namely they to work at home, in their jobs and in the political institutions. Since, it is hard for a woman to sustain this triple burden, it can pose as a barrier to her political work or her political work can interfere with her work at home or in her vocation. There are no mechanisms to reduce the burden of women in fulfilling their domestic responsibilities. In particular, poor women who are engaged in long hrs of non-waged productive activities like collection of water, fuel, fodder, grazing etc the absence of support services to free women to participate in political activity limits their participation. The family responsibilities and cultural values, traditions and practices of confining women to the activities at home have excluded them from actively participating and fulfilling their duties as elected representatives, the burden of triple roles on women restricts the exercise and enjoyment of their right in various political processes. The demand of the job and family, in the effective discharge of responsibilities as elected representatives.

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 measure has indirectly affected women's potential to participate in political activities. The number of children that

a citizen has 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 election. Though his policy is meant to help control population, it can as a direct impediment to women's participation in the Panchayats. The implementation of a legislation of this nature has serious implications on women since it excludes a vast majority of them from participating in politics. A large number of women with more than two children have gained tremendous experience in governance during their terms in Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs). Such legislation would deny them not only the opportunity to contest elections in subsequent terms but would also result in the loss of the experience gained by these women. Caste has played an instrumental role in raising issues related to the more marginalized among women. In a highly hierarchical society, women belonging to the lower castes have lesser access to public for a, which is compounded by their gender. This exclusion makes it difficult for these women to represent and articulate the voices of their constituencies and their demands are often overlooked or subsumed by the dominant sections of the society. Social divisions on the basis of caste often limit the potential for gender solidarity between women, there by thwarting attempts at developing a common political agenda. Women are victims of triple discrimination, i.e. caste, class and gender which has the effect of limiting their potential for solidarity, there by hindering efforts towards developing a common political agenda. At an individual level, women suffer discrimination and subjugation. A combined effect of these factors adversely impact on women as a political entity and a leader. The class-caste nexus has the effect of nullifying the affirmative action of the government, which provides for 33% reservation for women. It has been observed that powerful men in the community field candidates who are in articulate and in experienced thereby defeating the very purpose of the reservation policy for women.

Literacy

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. Very often literate women are typically from the more privileged backgrounds. These results in the poor women not being able to represent their communities and not even being able to relate easily to the more privileged women who are in power. Illiteracy therefore is one of the key elements, which impedes women's empowerment and more especially her political empowerment. Unless importance is given to the education of the girl child and adult literacy, women will not to be able to access the opportunities created for them. Lack of literacy skills affects herself confidence and impedes her effective participation in politics. Such women would not be able to enjoy their right as elected representatives and demands for resources and participation in decision making.

Back Lash to Entry into Politics

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.

Character Assassination

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. It is always her sexuality that is first questioned. Furthermore, when a woman in power becomes a political threat her being a woman is used against her in the entering politics or being visible in politics.

Lack of Interaction

Women have entered the political arena in large numbers at the level of local self-governance through the enactment of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments. Sharing of experience and struggles of elected women is lacking between themselves and among those at the different tiers. This is due to division on party lines and on caste/ class identities. The bonding and solidarity building is almost non-existent. 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.

Reservation

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. This interpretation by the vested interest groups has limited women from exercising their right to contest beyond the reserved quota. The policy of rotation reservation of the constituencies for women and other reserved categories in local self-governance has proved to be detrimental to the enjoyment of their right to political participation.

Participation of Women in Politics

Historically many women have been active in the informal political sphere in terms of political mobilisation and they have participated in large numbers in political demonstrations and agitations as well as in the activities of nationalist and political bodies and organizations. The political mobilization and participation has been impressive in the Indian National Movement particularly under Gandhiji's leadership when they participated actively in the cause against colonization for e.g. Civil Disobedience Movements and Salt Satyagraha.

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.

Even after the Right to Vote became a reality for all women, their representation in 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 legislatures and as leaders of opposition mostly through family dynasties or through male political patronage.

POSITION OF WOMEN IN NATIONAL PARLIAMENT

Position of Women in Lok Sabha

Year	Total Seats	Seats held by Women	% of Female Members to Total
1991	544	39	7.17
1996	543	39	7.18
1999	543	49	9.02
2004	544	45	9
2007	544	47	8.63
2009	545	49	8.99
2011	544	60	11.02

Source: Lok Sabha Secretariat, New Delhi.

Position of Women in Rajyasabha

Year	Total Seats	Seats held by Women	% of Female Members to Total
1991	245	38	15.51
1996	223	19	8.52
1999	245	19	7.75
2004	250	28	11.2
2007	250	25	10
2009	234	21	8.97
2011	241	26	10.78

Source: Rajyasabha Secretariat, New Delhi.

Position of Women in National Council of Ministers

Year	Total Number of Ministers	Number of Women Ministers	% of Female Ministers to Total
2002	73	8	10.95
1996	68	7	10.29
1999	87	6	6.89
2004	78	7	8.97
2007	76	8	10.52

Source: www.parliamentofindia.com

It is very clear from the above statistics that % of women in legislatures and decision making positions always remained low. The data, released by Inter Parliamentary Union (IPC) showed India ranks 98th in the world for proportion of national parliament seats held by women. Women do not share the power of decision making and are not involved in policy making in Indian democracy in proportion to their numerical strength. Thus there is a gap between the formal idea of women's participation and their meaningful use of power (Susheela Kaushik 1993).

Thus it seems clear that the actual political power remained something of a male domain and only few crumbs are thrown to women. Women are unjustifiably rare in decision making bodies. Moreover, if anybody is elected to such bodies they will have to struggle hard to be counted for notable posts. This is the real situation that exists in India in terms of political participation. Hence their quest for greater political representation of women is still relevant (Asha Kapoor Mehta et al 2001).

EFFECTS OF WOMEN'S LOW POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

The lack of representation of women in decision making positions results in women's agenda not getting reflected and addressed in policies and programmes. Lack of critical number of women elected representatives impedes them from negotiating for important portfolios such as finance, home, defense etc. which are generally termed as key portfolios and primarily controlled by men. It has been observed that women are allotted soft portfolios such as those related to women and children, information, culture, social welfare etc which are relatively less important and have correspondingly fewer resources both financial and human. They are unable to negotiate for resources to develop their constituencies. They cannot mobilize the necessary financial resources to meet the demand for their electorate, which facilitates women being accepted as political leaders.

Inadequate number of women in governance makes them vulnerable and voiceless. Women's self confidence and esteem is affected in a predominantly male set up, as their male colleagues view them as being weak and ineffective.

India has been ranked 114th position amongst 134 countries in terms of gender equality in World's Economic Forum's The Global Gender GP Index 2009 that assessed the distribution of resources and opportunities among males and females. Under representation of women and absence of women from positions of power and decision making reinforces their exploitation and deprivation. It is in this context that women's greater political representation becomes all more necessary.

STRATEGIES FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

1. To enact the 85th Constitutional Amendment Bill pending in the parliament, providing reservation for women, thereby involving women in the political and decision making process.
2. Governments at both Centre and State should not delay any further to complete the devolution and decentralization of powers from higher bodies in the panchayati raj structure. This devolution right is lagging in almost all the States. The delay in genuine devolution and

decentralization in causing a serious set back to the political empowerment of the locally elected bodies.

3. Provision of non confidence clause need to be amended is which is often used to women sarpanches, to ensure that a non-confidence motion cannot be passed for a year and a half of having taken office.
4. If a non-confidence vote is passed, the replacing incumbent should be from the same such group as the earlier incumbent.
5. To ensure that two children norm law that prevent those who have more than two children from holding office are repealed across States. These laws are most often used against women and disproportionately impact poor, Muslim and tribal women. More tragically, the norm leads to increasing female feticide.
6. Electoral reforms should provide for State funding for women contesting for elections to parliament, state assemblies, urban local bodies and panchayat raj institutions.
7. To ensure that women are taken seriously in their elected post by allotting important portfolios and limiting their functions to social welfare and w omen and child development.
8. To ensure awareness amongst women through mass media about the electoral process and also the candidates contesting for election, thereby eliminating powerful men taking advantage of the ignorance of women and controlling their decisions in exercising their right to vote.
9. To ensure that women have adequate space in trade unions and co-operative societies and such other registered institutions.
10. To amend the Representation of People Act, making it mandatory for every political party to have one-third of its cadre to be women.
11. To enhance the existing training for elected women representatives in terms of content. The packages must address the gender responsiveness and issues affecting the women life, in addition to the necessary input of the functional responsibilities that would enable women to govern effectively. More training should be imparted in a conducive and enabling environment without creating a burdensome situation like convenient timing, facilitate mobility , child care support etc.

CONCLUSIONS

Women's participation in the political process is critical both to the strengthening of democratic traditions and to their struggle against oppression. Political activism of women as for other underprivileged groups is integral to social transformation. Unless women are brought to the decision-making levels directly important women issues will never be tackled with the seriousness they require. The momentum therefore requires considerable strengthening and acceleration. Countries that promote women's rights and increase their access to resources and schooling have lower poverty rates, faster

economic growth and less corruption than countries that do not. Countries with smaller gaps between women and men in areas like education ,employment, property rights not only have lower child malnutrition and mortality, they also have more transparent business , Government and faster economic growth, which in turn helps to further narrow the gender gap. In short, education, health, productivity and governance all work better when women are involved. To quote Ranjana Kumari and Sara Khurtzezna “Political empowerment is critical to women’s achievement of equality for without real clout at the decision making level social and economic empowerment

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