

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION - A Way Forward For Women Empowerment

It has been widely experienced that governance structures which do not provide for adequate participation of women, often suffer from State interventions which are neither inclusive nor democratic. Women's participation across political system including local governments is the most essential prerequisite of creating a just, equitable and gender-sensitive society. Women's involvement is necessary in policy-making, because women have different needs and perspectives on social and political issues.

This all necessitates that women participation is important for the following reasons:

Sustainable Overall Development: Women are actively involved in household and community work and hence are well aware of real issues faced by common people. This gives them insight and perspective which can be instrumental in sustainable overall development.

Breaking Stereotypes: The presence of women in local governments serves as an encouragement for other women to enter diverse professions and leads to breaking stereotypes of women's roles in society and public space. People had gained confidence in women as good public administrators and local government representatives after seeing women making a positive difference in another people's life.

Resistance to Criminalization of Politics: The society acknowledges the sincerity and commitment of women to their duties and their resistance to criminalization of politics.

Taking a wide outlook, lets us look how women empowerment have fared in India from past to present.

Historical Context

Indian Freedom Movement

Women participated in the freedom movement with true spirit and undaunted courage and faced various tortures, exploitations and hardships to earn us freedom. Many great Indian women like Rani Lakshmi Bai, Sarojini Naidu, Kasturba Gandhi, Vijayalakmi Pundit, Annie Besant need no introduction for their dedication and undying devotion to the service of India. Indian women who joined the national movement were initially from educated and liberal families. All changed with the advent of Gandhi who converted the freedom struggle into a mass movement involving all sections of society.

Women Reservation Bill

Post-independence, India has seen women participating in politics as the longest serving Prime Minister, as Chief Ministers of various States, members in national Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies in large numbers. Yet, that has not been enough to enable better women participation in active politics. One of the prominent member of freedom struggle, Sarojini Naidu rejected reservation for women, citing that women are not weak, timid, meek.

The issue of women's reservation again came to limelight in 1973 with voices recommending reservation for women in at least one third of the seats and eventually statutory women's panchayats at the village level were recommended to take care of the neglect of women in rural development programs through **73rd & 74th constitutional amendments in 1993. Women's Reservation Bill or the Constitution (108th Amendment) Bill**, is pending in India which proposes to reserve 33% of all seats in the Lower house of Parliament of India.

Panchayati Raj Reforms

Indian Constitution made provisions relating to the establishment, powers, and responsibilities of the panchayats through the 73rd Amendment in 1993 with three tier systems, viz, panchayats (village governance bodies) at the village, intermediate and district levels in every State, except provision of skipping intermediate level in States with less than twenty lakh population.

The States have been empowered through law for the composition of panchayats. The reform provided for reservation of both seats and leadership positions for the Scheduled Castes, tribes, and women. As the legislation provides for reservation for women, the number of women elected representative at local level has sharply increased. India has been maintaining the record of number of women representatives at the panchayat level and statistics indicate that 30-50% of local level elected representatives are women.

Constitutional Provisions

Almost all the provisions contained in the **UN Convention on the 'Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women'** are there in the Indian Constitution. Not only does the Constitution guarantee equal political status to women, there is even a scope for '**positive discrimination**' in their favour as is evident in **Article 15(3) of the Constitution**.

There are many other provisions in the Constitution which **lay stress on equality between men and women**:

1. **Article 14** provides for equality before law
2. **Article 39(a)**, states that the State shall direct its policy towards securing equally to men and women the right to an adequate means of livelihood
3. **Article 39(d)** enjoins the State to direct its policy towards securing equal pay for equal work for both men and women
4. **Article 42** provides for securing just and humane conditions of work and for maternity relief
5. **Article 51(A) (e)** refers to the fundamental duty of citizens to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women

In spite of Constitutional Provisions women's participation and access to formal political power structures vary across countries. There is a steady upward trend in women's political participation and representation in developed countries particularly. However, the improvements in medium and low human development countries are not significant.

The structural and functional constraints faced by women are shaped by social and political relations in a society. The common pattern of women's political exclusion stem from

- (a) social and political discourses
- (b) political structures and institutions
- (c) the socio-cultural and functional constraints that put limits on women's individual and collective agency.

Ideological Factors:

1. Patriarchy as a system of male domination shapes women's relationship in politics. It transforms male and females into men and women and construct the hierarchy of gender relations where men are privileged.
2. This is one of the vital factors that shape the level of women's political participation globally. However, this ideological divide is not reflective of the reality.
3. Women have to negotiate their entry into and claim on public space according to the discursive and material opportunities available in a given culture and society.

Political Factors:

1. The nature of politics is an important factor for the inclusion or exclusion of women in politics.
2. The public-private dichotomy in traditional definition of politics is used to exclude women from public political sphere and even when women are brought into politics they are entered as mothers and wives.
3. Male domination of politics, political parties and culture of formal political structures is another factor that hinders women's political participation.
4. Often male dominated political parties have a male perspective on issues of national importance that disillusions women as their perspective is often ignored and not reflected in the politics of their parties.
5. Also, women are usually not elected at the position of power within party-structures because of gender

biases of male leadership.

6. Meetings of councils or parliamentary sessions are held in odd timings conflicting with women's domestic responsibilities.
7. The larger democratic framework and level of democratization also impact women's political participation.
8. Secular democracies in Europe and also in some of the developing countries have created relatively more space for women's participation in politics as compared to countries where religious orthodoxy has been shaping politics and democracy.

These factors come with the challenges of measuring political participation.

Participation as a Proxy Candidate: There have been evidences that due to reservation policy, certain women got elected into the setup, but they acted merely as the mouth-piece of their male family members. This indicates that there is a possibility of on-roll women participation to be higher than what it actually exists on ground.

Awareness programs and increase in female education is now taking care of such happenings and women active participation is on the rise. Still there is a need to record data at a more micro level so that women who only act as a proxy can be identified.

Measurement of Decision-making Initiatives: The quantitative data of political participation of women at local level is available but the qualitative data on the aspects of their active participation including the utilization of the decision-making functionality provided to them is not being quantified properly.

Although, the legislature has enabled their huge presence into the state of affairs, but their valuable essence into the system is yet to be established at most of the places. The data on their sensitization about their rights and its usage is still missing. Efforts can be made to capture the performance of women in debates, initiative in brining legislation and participation in other aspects of the democratic process.

It can be conclusively stated that there has been a radical change in the movement for empowerment of women. Recognition is dawning that women are indeed becoming a political force, both nationally and internationally. In this context it would be noteworthy to recall the observations of Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen in his book, "India: Economic Development and Social Opportunity", "Women's empowerment can positively influence the lives not only of women themselves but also of men, and of course, those of children". Former CEC M.S. Gill's proposal to make it mandatory for all political parties to nominate at least a-third of women candidates for the seats deserves to be commended. If they are not prepared to accept the principle of representation within their own parties, what moral right do they have to advocate reserving parliamentary constituencies for women? n