Role of Women in Politics: Changing Scenario in India

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Abstract

In India where gender inequality prevails in every corner from home to work place, it is difficult for women to rise high and hold equal place like men. The Constitution of India attempts to eradicate gender inequalities by banning discrimination based on gender and class, barring human trafficking and forced labour, and reserving elected positions for women. In the world the scenario of women representation in politics has been bleak. Even the developed countries have a lagging trend than many African and communist countries of the world on this reckon. Interestingly among SAARC nations Nepal has the highest representation and India has the lowest, even lagging behind Bangladesh. Representation of women however sluggishly increasing in the Lok Sabha has never been above a scanty 12% and same true for the Rajya Sabha also. Likewise the picture in State legislatures is also austere being an average of 6.94 per cent, interestingly being highest in Khap dominated Haryana and lowest being in educated Karnataka. Even though women get elected were they really become policy maker or doll in the man's hand in this patriarchal society. This paper focuses on relative data of women participation in Indian politics and the barriers in their growth in politics.

Keyword: Role of Women, Politics, Changing Scenario, India

Introduction

The Constitution of India establishes a parliamentary system of government, and guarantees its citizens the right to be elected, freedom of speech, freedom to assemble and form associations, and vote. The Constitution of India attempts to remove gender inequalities by banning discrimination based on sex and class, prohibiting human trafficking and forced labor, and reserving elected positions for women. The Government of India directed state and local governments to promote equality by class and gender including equal pay and free legal aid, humane working conditions and maternity relief, rights to work and education, and raising the standard of living. Women were substantially involved in the Indian independence movement in the early 20th century and advocated for independence from Britain. Independence brought gender equality in the form of constitutional rights, but historically women's political participation has remained low.

Across nations in the world the scenario of women representation in law making bodies has been dismal. Curiously enough the developed countries have a lagging trend than many African and communist countries of the world on this count. Interestingly amongst SAARC nations Nepal has the highest representation and India has the lowest, even lagging behind Bangladesh. Representation of women though sluggishly increasing in the Lok Sabha has never been above a meager 12%. Same holds true for the Rajya

Sabha also. Similarly the picture in State legislatures is also bleak being an average of 6.94 per cent, interestingly being highest in Khap dominated Haryana and lowest being in educated Karnataka. Political representation was initially based on the premise that it deals primarily with individuals. It was believed that although few women actually joined politics at a given time, the overall improvement in terms of education and employment opportunities would necessarily percolate into the political sphere too and their representation would commensurately increase. Also the number of women who finally get elected is very less compared to them who actually contest elections. Thus it has been the experience of our polity that mere facilitation has proved futile and the old premise of percolation of empowerment into representative democracy has failed to pass the test.

It was therefore thought of to increase representation of women in decision-making bodies by positive discrimination. In pursuance thereof to empower women, the Constitution (Seventy-third Amendment) Act, 1993 and the Constitution (Seventy-fourth Amendment) Act, 1993 reserved seats for women to be filled by direct election to the local bodies; Panchayats and Municipalities. This has led to historic beginning of effective participation of women in   decision-making process at the grassroots level whereby millions of women are being elected every five years. In 2006, 9,75,116 women were elected to Gram Panchayats, 58,094 women to Panchayats at Intermediate level and 5779 women to Panchayats at the District level. Such enthusiastic participation of women signifies an encouraging trend for women's empowerment. Fifteenth Anniversary Charter on Panchayati Raj states, "Today more than 26 lakh representatives stand elected to the three levels of Panchayats. Of these, over 10 lakh are women. The last fifteen years of Panchayati Raj, have thus succeeded in empowering marginalized groups who have gained political representation and valuable experience. Many of them have successfully taken on the challenge of governance and brought about enduring social change through their close links with the community'' Women representatives have prioritized issues of health, education and access to basic services and in some cases have been able to ensure a significant change in living conditions for the entire community. The efforts and work of several women representatives in Panchayats in Maharashtra, Gujarat and West Bengal have been widely acclaimed. Buoyed by the success of 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution the One Hundred and Eighth Amendment Bill, 2008, popularly known as Women's Reservation Bill has been introduced and passed in the Rajya Sabha entailing 33% reservation for women in Lok Sabha which is sure to usher and unleash women power as never before.

Representation of Women in Lok Sabha

S No	Year	Number of women MPs	Percentage of Women MPs
1	1951	22	4.50%
2	1957	22	4.45%
3	1962	31	6.28%
4	1967	29	5.58%
5	1971	28	5.41%
6	1977	19	3.51%
7	1980	28	5.29%
8	1984	43	7.95%
9	1989	29	5.48%
10	1991	39	7.30%
11	1996	40	7.37%
12	1998	43	7.92%
13	1999	49	9.02%
14	2004	45	8.29%
15	2009	59	10.87%
16	2014	66	12.15%

The average representation of women MPs(12.15%) is higher than the national average of women MLAs in state assemblies, which stands at a dismal 9%. While the numbers have increased over the years, the percentage of women that make up the Lok Sabha even today is not a figure to be proud of, especially when the ideal number should be at 33% at least. We still have a long way to go.

Women Members of Rajya Sabha and their Percentage (1952-2018)

Year	Number	Percentage
1952	15	6.94
1954	17	7.79
1956	20	8.62
1958	22	9.52
1960	24	10.25
1962	18	7.62
1964	21	8.97

1966	23	9.82
1968	22	9.64
1970	14	5.85
1972	18	7.40
1974	18	7.53
1976	24	10.16
1978	25	10.24
1980	29	11.98
1982	24	10.16
1984	24	10.24
1986	28	11.98
1988	25	10.59
1990	24	10.34
1992	17	7.29
1994	20	8.36
1996	19	7.81
1998	19	7.75
2000	22	9.01
2002	25	10.20
2004	28	11.43
2006	25	10.41
2008	23	9.50
2010	27	11.29
2012	24	10.04
2014	30	12.53
2016	29	12.03

2018	28		11.71	

Women Members in Legislative Assemblies and their Percentage

Sl.	Name of State/UT	Total No. of Seats	Women Members	Percentage
1	Andhra Pradesh	294	28	9.52
2	Arunachal Pradesh	60	0	0.00
3	Assam	126	13	10.32
4	Bihar	243	25	10.29
5	Chhattisgarh	90	5	5.56
6	Delhi	70	6	8.57
7	Goa	40	1	2.50
8	Gujarat	182	16	8.79
9	Haryana	90	13	14.44
10	Himachal Pradesh	68	5	7.35
11	Jammu & Kashmir	87	2	2.30
12	Jharkhand	81	5	6.17
13	Karnataka	224	3	1.34
14	Kerala	140	7	5.00
15	Madhya Pradesh	230	19	8.26
16	Maharashtra	288	12	4.17
17	Manipur	60	0	0.00
18	Meghalaya	60	2	3.33
19	Mizoram	40	0	0.00
20	Nagaland	60	0	0.00
21	Orissa	147	11	7.48
22	Punjab	117	7	5.98
23	Puducherry	30	0	0.00
24	Rajasthan	200	13	6.50
25	Sikkim	32	3	9.38
26	Tamil Nadu	234	22	9.40
27	Tripura	60	2	3.33
28	Uttar Pradesh	403	25	6.20
29	Uttarakhand	70	4	5.71
30	West Bengal	294	37	12.59
	TOTAL	**4120**	**286**	**6.94**

More than half of the world's population is female, but only 21 percent of national parliamentarians are women. While gender equality in political participation has intrinsic value, instrumental value also plays an important role. The composition of legislative bodies may affect the quality of laws and may influence the extent of their application. Furthermore, women leaders are more likely to be responsive to public needs and tend to cooperate across party lines. A range of official and unofficial, formal and informal barriers can limit women's political participation. There are also opportunities and factors that facilitate participation in various ways. Access to power tends to emerge from familial, communal and economic linkages, and these factors may help explain patterns of participation. Norms about women's appropriate roles and leadership capabilities also shape both aspirations and opportunities. In countries where women have historically been absent in public life, such barriers to entry may be much higher. Participation in local level government may be a good route to participation at the national level. Official measures, such as quotas, can be instituted as part of the parliamentary system and/or at the political party level. The level of transparency in party decision making may affect political participation, especially for women who are less likely to have strong political networks. While informal rules and relationships tend to reinforce hierarchies of power, procedures that promote and guarantee women's decision-making within political parties can increase their public voice. Lack of financial resources can limit participation given the costs associated with elections. Independent funding and placing limits on campaign spending may support women in overcoming the barriers to political participation. The level and forms of women's participation in politics is largely shaped by cultural and societal barriers which is represented in the following table:

Barriers of women participation in politics		How they affect women
Political barriers	**Masculine Model of Politics**	Men largely dominate the political arena, largely formulate the rules of the political game. The male-dominated working pattern is reflected in the politics which is often characterized by lack of supportive structures for working mothers in general, and for women politician in particular.
	Lack of Party Support	Women play important roles in campaigning and mobilizing support for their parties, yet they rarely occupy decision-making positions in these structures. Many parties do not provide sufficient financial support for women candidates. In addition, women are often not placed in winnable positions on party lists. Women's participation is therefore better realized when there are quotas with a placement mandate
	Less Cooperation with Women's Organizations	In new democracies there is less contact and cooperation between women politicians and women's organizations or other broad interest organizations such as

		trade and labour unions. This due either to lack of awareness of the potential benefits of this networking function or to lack of resources to invest in such contacts.
	Electoral Systems	Electoral system in a country plays an important role in women's political representation.
Socio-Economic barriers	**Feminization of Poverty and Unemployment**	Women are major contributors to national economies through both their paid and their unpaid labour. As far as the latter is concerned, rural women's input and their role as a significant electorate should not be underestimated. Although the importance of women's biological and social roles is clear, their input in all spheres of life often goes unrecognized.
	Dual Burden	It is difficult for women to participate in political life when their major concern is survival and they have no choice but to spend much of their time trying to meet the basic needs of families. This is accentuated by the increase in the number of female-headed households (which stands at 25 percent worldwide), particularly in developing countries, where this is partly a result of ongoing conflicts.
	Education and Training	It's very difficult for women to talk, to argue, to press for their concerns. . Though there is no consistent correlation between literacy rates and women's political representation, but many candidacy nomination procedures require a minimum level of literacy. This prevents women from registering as candidates for elections. In addition to basic education, many women lack the political training required to participate effectively in the political arena.
	Traditional Roles	In many countries, traditions continue to emphasize women's primary roles as mothers and housewives and to restrict them to those roles. A traditional strong, patriarchal value system favours sexually segregated roles, and 'traditional cultural values' militate against the advancement, progress and participation of women in any political process. Societies all over the world are dominated by an ideology of 'a woman's place'.

Ideological and Psychological Hindrances	Lack of Confidence	Lack of confidence is one of the main reasons for women's under-representation in formal political institutions, whether parliaments, ministries or political parties. With confidence and determination women can reach the highest levels in the political process. That is why women should believe in themselves and should do away with the widespread perception that men have to be their leaders. Women are equal to and have the same potential as men, but only if they can fight for their rights.
	Perception of Politics as 'Dirty'	Women perceive politics as a 'dirty' game. This has jarred their confidence in their ability to participate in political processes. In fact, such a perception is prevalent worldwide. Unfortunately, this perception reflects the reality in many countries. Corruption inevitably results in the creation of favourable conditions and opportunities for the existence of the most negative manifestation of organized crime. These factors combine to scare women and provoke their fears of losing members of their families, all of which militate against their political involvement or their standing for elected bodies.
	The Role of the Mass Media	The mass media deserve to be called the fourth branch of power because of their influence on public opinion and public consciousness. The mass media tend to minimize coverage of events and organizations of interest to women. The media do not adequately inform the public about the rights and roles of women in society; nor do they usually engage in measures to promote or improve women's position.

Others observed significant barrier to women's capability of participating in politics is threat of violence. Sexual violence in India is exacerbated by issues of education and marriage. Women are sexually abused. Child marriage, domestic violence and low literacy rates have lowered Indian women's economic opportunities and contributed to sexual violence in India. Although the Constitution of India removed gender inequalities among caste and gender, discrimination continues to be a widespread barrier to women's political participation. A 2012 study of 3,000 Indian women found the barriers in participation, specifically in running for political office, in the form of illiteracy, work burdens within the household, and discriminatory attitudes towards women as leaders. The burden of household duties is a significant reason why many Indian women do not participate. Unlike men, there are fewer opportunities for women to get involved in organizations to gain leadership skills. There is

little public space for them as men have dominated the political arena for many years in India. This country has one of the largest illiterate populations. In January 2014, the United Nations reported 287 million adults in India are illiterate. Literacy among Indian women is 53.7%, which is much lower than literacy among men reported at 75.3%. Illiteracy limits the ability of women to understand the political system and issues.

To overcome issues of discrimination and violence, women's organizations have focused on the empowerment of Indian women. Empowerment is tied to the support of family and improved status within the household, which is undermined by the threat of domestic and sexual violence. Socio-economic conditions, such as poverty and illiteracy, prevent the entrance of women into running for public office, and even voting. Inability to understand the rules of Panchayat Raj undermines the self-confidence to participation in public office. Empowerment of Indian women can also occur through "bridging gaps in education, renegotiating gender roles, the gender division of labour and addressing biased attitudes." Women can also be empowered when familial support is present.

The Government of India has addressed the issue of empowerment by consolidating all programmes for women under the National Mission of Empowerment of Women (NMEW). The mission of NMEW is to "enhance economic empowerment of girls and women through skill development, micro credit, vocational training and entrepreneurship." In 2001, the Government of India passed the National Policy for the Empowerment of Women. The policy focuses on "the advancement, development, and empowerment of women." Specifically, the policy focuses on ending gender inequality and violence against women. The United Nations has also encouraged empowerment among India women by campaigning to end violence against women in India. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have also tried to empower women focusing on issues of education, violence, and leadership. NGOs working towards women empowerment in India include Sammaan Foundation, Deepalaya, and CARE India.

Conclusion

The 20th century saw women gain access to political, economic and social rights. All these achievements are leading to important changes in women's lives but, while women have partly succeeded in combating discrimination based on gender, disparities still remain in many fields. At the beginning of the 21st century, women continue to face both old and new challenges. Excluding women from positions of power and from elected bodies impoverishes the development of democratic principles in public life and inhibits the economic development of a society. Men, who do not necessarily support women's political participation, dominate the majority of governing institutions. Thus it remains imperative to emphasize that women must lead the process to organize and mobilize their networks, learn to communicate their interests with their male counterparts and different organizations, and push for mechanisms to enhance their representation. Positive action measures should be taken to assure representation that reflects the full diversity of societies, with the target of the 'gender-balanced' legislative body. To that end, the following two chapters look at two of the most significant mechanisms which have been used to overcome many of the obstacles to women's legislative representation: namely, electoral systems and quotas.

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