Obstacles and Opportunities for Women in the Political System

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ABSTRACT:

Women’s political participation now is very reassuring contrast to the older times. Today it stays more grounded than at any other time. But, in India, women who have basic leadership controls constantly hail from urban and tip top gatherings. Even today, the representation of women in Indian Parliament is far from satisfactory. Women have been demanding for more space in legislative bodies. The root of political participation of women can be traced back to 19th-century reform movements. Social reformers like Rajaram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Mahadeva Govinda Ranade, Behramji Malabari believed that social evils could be eradicated by raising consciousness and educating women. The Constitution of India ensured justice-social, economic and political, liberty of thought, and equality to all citizens. Constitution has given to equity of women and considered State to take measures to neutralize the socio-economic, educational and political drawback faced by women. Gender stereotypes which perceive women as weak representatives should be changes through awareness and education. Efforts need to be taken to enhance the participation of women in governance in large numbers. This paper describes the obstacles and opportunities for women in the political system.

Keywords: Women, Political participation, Indian Parliament, Liberty of thought, socio-economic, education

INTRODUCTION:

In India, political participation of women is not impressive when compared with men. This is the case in most of the countries across the world. Women in India participate in voting, run for public offices and political parties at lower levels more than men. Political activism and voting are the strongest areas of women's political participation. To combat gender inequality in politics, the Indian Government has instituted reservations for seats in local governments.

Women turnout during India's parliamentary general elections was 65.63%, compared to 67.09% turnout for men. India ranks 20th from the bottom in terms of representation of women in Parliament. 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.
NEED FOR POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN:

UNICEF cites the following reasons for the political participation of women:

- Political participation of women has the potential to change societies.
- It can have impact on outcomes for women and children especially in the distribution of community resources.
- Their participation in peace negotiations and post-conflict reconstruction is important to ensure the safety and protection of children and vulnerable sections of populations.

PRE INDEPENDENT POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN:

The late 19th and early 20th centuries witnessed the establishment of women’s associations all over the country. These organisations took up the issues concerning women like right to vote etc. Three main organisations were established during this period. They are:

- **The Women’s Indian Association (WIA):** WIA concentrated its work over religion, education, politics and philanthropy. Annie Besant became the first president of WIA along with Margaret Cousins.

- **The National Council of Women in India (NCWI):** It was established in 1925 as a national branch of the International Council of Women. Due to its elitist nature, the NCWI failed to become a vital national organisation.

- **The All India Women's conference (AIWC):** AIWC materialised due to the dedicated work of Margaret Cousins and other women of WIA and it first met in Poona in January 1927. It worked for female education and opposed social customs that restricted female education such as child marriage and purdah.

CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS:

The Constitution of India guaranteed justice-social, economic and political, liberty of thought, and equality to all citizens. Constitution provided for equality of women and called State to take measures to neutralize the socio-economic, educational and political disadvantage faced by women.

- **Article 14:** It guarantees equality before law and equal protection of law with in the territory of India.

- **Article 15:** It prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth. According to article 15(3), State can make special provisions for the benefit women and children.

- **Article 16:** Equality of opportunity for all citizens in matter relating to employment. No citizen can be denied employment on grounds of religon, race, cast, sex, decent, place of birth residence or any of them.
Article 39: Article 39(a) provides for an adequate means of livelihood for all citizens. Article 39 (b) has provisions for equal pay for equal work for both men and women. Article 39 (c) has provisions for securing the health and strength of workers, men and women, and not to abuse the tender age of children.

Article 42: It guarantees just and humane condition of work and maternity relief. Article 42 is in accordance with Article 23 and 25 of Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Article 325 and 326: They guarantee political equality, equal right to participate in political activity and right to vote, respectively.

Article 243 (D): It provides for the political reservation to women in every panchayat elections. It has extended this reservation to elected office as well.

PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN POST INDEPENDENT PERIOD:

The foundation formed during the national movement helped women to participate in democratic process after independence. Various legal, social and economic measures were taken by the government of India to raise the status of women in India after independence. Women also began to participate in national and state politics.

The first assembly after independence saw the presence of very few women (about 2%). Women members included Masuma Begum, who later on became the Minister of Social Welfare, Renuka Ray, veteran social worker; Durgabai, a veteran Gandhian, Radhabai Subbarayan, who was appointed as a delegate to the first Round Table Conference. As per various accounts, men in the assembly listened carefully to the speeches made by women. Rajkumari Amrit Kaur became Union Health Minister in 1947. Sucheta Kriplani became the general secretary of Congress in 1959, labour minister of Uttar Pradesh in 1962 and subsequently Chief Minister of United Province in from 1963 to 1967. Vijayalakshmi Pandit was selected as a delegate to the UN and was appointed as ambassador to the erstwhile USSR in 1947 and later as ambassador to the US. She was also elected as president of the United Nations General Assembly in 1953.

In the subsequent elections, women started to hold 4-5% seats in the Lok Sabha till 1980s after which their numbers increased to 7-8%. In Rajya Sabha, women have held 7-10% of seats. Representation of women in 16th Lok Sabha is 61. This is the highest in history. Presently, Rajya Sabha has 29 women members. Six of the 23 Cabinet ministers in the present government are women, claiming almost a 25 per cent share.

CHALLENGES:

Women who demonstrated their bravery during freedom movement found it difficult to make the gain ground in electoral politics due to the following reasons:

- Problem of party backing. The political parties are reluctant to provide more seats to women candidates. Women are not able to change social attitudes about women.
- Women have begun to dislike the rough life offered by politics. While many are ready to endure the hardships provided by the political life, they have not been able to change the social stereotypes and attitudes about women’s place in the society.

- Many women have expressed their dislike for political process and has opted for the gentler working atmosphere provided by social welfare work.

- Cultural environment puts maximum emphasis on men. Apart from it criminalization of politics and the political environment of instability and personality traits are the primary causes for marginal participation of women in politics.

GLOBAL SCENARIO:

At the global level also, only a few countries have equal participation of women in par with men in politics. In countries like Germany, Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland, women’s participation in the decision making process is substantial. Sweden with 47% female participation has almost equal participation of women in Parliament followed by Cuba and Iceland.

Women’s presence in parliament is highest in Nordic countries (42.5%), followed by America (22%), Europe (19.5%), Asia (18%), Sub-Saharan Africa (18%), the Pacific (15%) and lastly in Arab states (9.4%).

The issue of political empowerment of women has become the agenda of various international conferences and symposiums. The issue came at the forefront at the time of the Fourth World Conference on Women held at Beijing in 1995. At the conference, it was declared that women’s political participation is crucial for the general process of the advancement of women. This conference stressed the importance of women’s political participation not only because of their points of view and talents, but also as a matter of their human rights.

GOVERNMENT SCHEMES FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT:

Countries around the world including India are emphasizing on women empowerment. The Indian government has also recognized women issues and their contribution to the country's economy. Here are some of the women empowerment initiatives available to women in India:

- Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA)
- Swayam Siddha
- Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao
- Mahila e-haat
- Scheme for Working Women Hostel
- STEP (Support to Training and Employment Programme for Women)
- Swarnjayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana
- Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan
- Indira Gandhi Matritva Sahyog Yojana (IGMSY)
- Rajiv Gandhi Scheme for Empowerment of Adolescent Girls (RGSEAG)—Sbloba Janani Suraksha Yojana
- Integrated Child Protection Scheme Swadhar
CONCLUSION:

Political parties should come forward to increase women representatives. The absence of critical mass of women representatives has pushed women to the fringes in power sharing and has adverse impacts on their overall political status. Gender stereotypes which perceive women as weak representatives should be changed through awareness and education. Efforts need to be taken to enhance the participation of women in governance in large numbers. Women’s Reservation Bill which reserves 33% of seats for Indian women at the legislatures has to be passed soon in the Parliament. Women’s leadership and communication skills need to be enhanced by increasing female literacy especially in rural areas. They should be empowered in order to break socio-cultural barriers and improve their status in the society. Women panchayati members have to be trained to analyse and understand their roles and responsibilities given in the 73rd amendment act.

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