
Women and Politics

Representation of Women in Indian Political Realm

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ABSTRACT:

Political participation " is not only restricted to the "right to vote" but include activities like decision-making process, political activism, political consciousness, campaigning etc. As the libertarians remarked that all individuals are born free and equal in dignity and should be entitled to same rights and opportunities without taking into consideration distinctions based on sex, caste, gender, language. Etc. However, it is unfortunate that women across world have faced atrocities in various fields. This paper deals with various aspects of connection between women and politics and why there is a need to study political participation in context of gender inequality. Women around the world at every socio-economic-political level find themselves under-represented and less involved in decision making process. While the level of discrimination faced may vary from state to state. But one feature remains constant that political activism is uneven and not contributive to women. This paper seeks to examine the potential barriers that lie in the existing social, economic, and political structures that have aggravated the problem of lack of female participation in politics. Also it scrutinize the unequal change of women's participation at different levels of politics. In this context, the paper makes an attempt to study the status of women in politics at international level in brief, and a detailed analysis of the same in India. Though the constitution and other legal enactments have taken a number of efforts for achievement of the objective of gender equality yet in actual practice equal female

representation, still remains a dream. This paper emphasizes that a concerted structural change is as important as the legislative measures to bring women on an equal footing with men. Also it concludes with a few suggestions that can go a long way to attain the objective.

KEYWORDS:

Gender equality; female participation; political representation; reservation; women rights; women empowerment;

HYPOTHESIS:

Political Participation and Representation of Women in Indian scenario has considerably increased but despite affirmative actions like Reservation, parity with their male counterparts in political sphere still remains a dream.

METHODOLOGY:

The research paper has focused more on secondary sources. A thorough analysis of various articles, periodicals and journals forms the bedrock of this paper. For better understanding and clarity of statistics, graphs and figures have been incorporated based on reports from reliable sources. The various books and articles used have been cited under the references section at the end of the paper.

INTRODUCTION:

*"The role of women in decision- making was central
To the advancement of women around the world
And to the progress of human kind as a whole."*

---UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan

Women all around the world have been subjugated to different kinds of oppression. In ancient times, the women enjoyed equal status with men in all spheres. But women of later periods have been denied equal say as men. The roots of the present always lie in the past. And hence to study and analyze women's participation in politics, we need to peep into the history of any system and structure.

At the international level, in countries like ancient Greece and Rome and some democracies in Europe, women were totally denied voting rights by the end of 18th century. Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792)¹ acknowledges rights of women to equality of education and civil opportunities. Her book has been a foundational text of liberal feminism. During the first wave of feminism the women across the world especially in Great Britain and United States began the struggle to demand equal political and civil rights as men. In United Kingdom, the right to vote was granted on the basis of wifehood, property, and education. But later women won voting rights in most of the western democratic countries through systematic battle and with the help of NGO's, International agencies etc. However in a number of conservative Arab countries bordering the Persian Gulf, women are still denied equal voting rights. This was a brief overview of women's history of political participation at the international level.

Indian Scenario: In ancient India women enjoyed equal status with men in all spheres. The various Vedas like the Hymn XXI of the Rig-Veda considers the virtues of women greater than men. But with the coming of Smritis specially Manusmriti, women's condition started to deteriorate (Menon,1999). Practices like Sati became common and women were confined to the four walls of their homes. According to one of the sayings of Manusmriti :

¹ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A vindication of the rights of woman*,1792

".....A women must be her father's shadow in childhood, her husband's in her youth and her son's in her old age". This depicts how the very existence of every role of women was dependent on men.

With the coming of Muslim invasion, the situation turned more drastic and hence this age was termed the darkest age as there was no way left to resort back to the Vedic period. The ability to challenge the subordination of women was severely affected by removing women from positions of power in all its manifestations.

The condition of women in the colonial era was also in a very deteriorating state of affairs. This was because the British did not believe in intervening in the existing religious structures. The real Indian history of women's political participation can be traced back from the Swadeshi Movement of 1905, which allowed women to come out of their homes and participate actively in the independence movement. Mahatma Gandhi was a strong advocate of women's right. Hence he urged women to fight exploitation both within and outside their homes. It was in this context that women realized that entry into politics is a pre-requisite to socially reform existing structures of oppression.

Initially very limited suffrage rights were given to women based on property qualification, literacy, ownership, marriage to a propertied men etc. But after independence universal adult franchise was formulated giving equal voting rights to all men and women after a certain age. Though after independence there was no provision of reservation of seats for women in legislature, the reservations in waning days of colonial era gave women a foothold in legislative life and set a precursor which women could draw decades later.

Overall, it is evident that women's participation in politics was restricted to the freedom movement and after independence it declined steadily. And thus the need to make required legislation for active participation of women in India was felt.

Reservation for women in India has been provided only at the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI's)² and not for the Parliament for which the bill is yet to be passed. The reservation for women is not an uncontested issue so far.

But despite the constitutional provisions guaranteeing equality of sexes, electoral participation of women in terms of legislature or decision-making is very low and they continue to be marginalized and under-represented.

STEPS TAKEN TO INCREASE WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS IN INDIA:

The Government of India has taken many substantive steps to maintain parity between men and women in politics and other spheres. The constitution of India provides for a national charter to abolish discrimination faced by women who remained in abject slavery. The need for special constitution protection of weaker sections of the society was considered necessary to ensure equality in the society. Though what was given more focus was on substantive equality rather than formal equality. Hence promoting the concept of protective discrimination. Protective Discrimination is the policy of granting special privileges and rights to down-trodden and under-represented sections of society to bring them to a level playing field with rest.

Legal measures:

1. Article 14³: Article 14 enshrines the principle of equality as a fundamental right, and mandates that the State shall not deny to any person equality before the law, or the equal protection of the laws within the territory of India.
2. Article 15⁴: Article 15 prohibits the State from discrimination against any citizen on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth. The object of this provision was to

² Himanshi dhawan, women reservation bill in limbo, TOI, 30 June 2019

³ Constitution of India

⁴ Ibid.

guarantee protection to those citizens who had suffered historical disadvantage, whether it be of a political, social, or economic nature.

- Article 15(3):, states that nothing shall prevent the state from making special provisions for the benefit of women and children.
3. Article 16⁵: confers the right of equality of opportunity in matters of public employment. Secondly no citizen shall, on grounds of religion, race, sex ,decent , place of birth, residence or any of them, be eligible for, discriminated against in respect of any employment or office under the state.
 4. Article 21⁶: Right to life.
 5. Article 23⁷: Right against exploitation and trafficking in human beings.

The above mentioned rights enshrined in Part III of the Indian constitution provides for a foundational base on which women can fight for equal political representation.

Quotas:

The reservation of seats or quotas for women have been one of the most effective measures to reduce structural exclusion of women from politics. The step has significantly helped to bring women into the formal arena of politics.

In India, there was no provision for reservation of women after independence in 1947. But as a token of appreciation for women in their contribution to the national movement a few seats were allotted to them. The need for special reservation of seats for women was raised after the report of Committee on the Status of Women (CSW) was published in 1976. This was in response to low representation of women in political institutions, as low as 4.4% of the total seats in First Lok Sabha Election in 1952. In 1988, the National Perspective Plan for Women recommended that at least 30% of the seats should be reserved for women in all levels of elective bodies.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

After much deliberation, the 73rd and 74th amendments were introduced in the constitution in 1993. These have introduced 33% reservation for women in local political institutions or the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI's).

When again the bill to provide reservation for women in Parliament was introduced in Lok Sabha in 1997, many political parties and groups showed discontent regarding the same. As per the present status, the proposed bill is yet to pass in the Lok Sabha but it has already been passed in the Rajya Sabha.

Although quotas have been a major breakthrough for increasing the percentage of women in politics. But the critiques argue that gender disparities are structural and systematic in nature. Without eradicating the underlining structural impediments and subjugation, quotas are rendered ineffective in efficient representation of women.

Moreover, these quotas treat women as a distinctive homogenous group. But the reality is totally different, even within women are divided on lines of class, caste, religion, ethnicity etc. The domination of elite women in state quotas has called for emphasis on fair opportunities to all women.

The role of civil societies and women's organization:

After 1990's there was a great upsurge in the voter turnout of females. The reason for the same lied in four aspects. First, liberalization which encouraged electronic media and made large sections of women aware about their political roles. Second, the initiatives of Election Commission of India to facilitate free and fair elections. Third, the reservation of 33% seats for women in local governance and Lastly, the major role of Civil societies and women's organization in active political mobilization of women and make them self-conscious about their electoral rights as well.

These organization have complemented reservation scheme because it has not only brought forth women into political arena but also have worked upon to eradicate the structural oppression meted out to them because of their gender. It has empowered women by providing necessary education and skills required to contest elections. And moreover have mutually supported them

to rise up against the oppressive traditional practices and notions that restricts them to the four walls of their homes.

MAJOR OBSTACLES TO LACK OF PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN POLITICS

Despite repeated international and national commitments to equality, women are still under-represented in politics. The reason for lack of political participation lies not only in legislative constraints but also other social, political, economic and ideological barriers.

POLITICAL OBSTACLES

- The preponderance of "*patriarchal model*": the very existence of a masculine model in political and social arena have sidelined women from participating in these arenas. Many who are proponents of this idea believe that policies were formed from a "male perspective". Some argue that electoral process in India is fraught with male patriarchy and dominance that act against equal female representation.
- Lack of party support: though recent studies have shown a gradual increase in the percentage of women voters, there is no significant increase in women legislators. The reason being the political decision of parties at both national and regional level because of the idea of 'winnability' of women. Also these parties follow a 'policy of exclusion' that clearly restricts women to campaigning and mobilizing and does not provide them party tickets.
- Absence of strong mobilization: women in India are restricted to their homes and hence they are less aware of the political and economic scenario outside the four walls of their homes. This calls for the establishment of strong training and educational system to make women politically conscious about their rights and their role.
- "Vicky Randall defines politics as an “articulation, or working out of relationships within an already given power structure”

SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONSTRAINTS:

- Illiteracy and limited access to education: In India, women are not equally entitled to opportunities as that of men. This is manifested in different forms like education, healthcare, employment etc. As per the census of 2011, an effective literacy rate for men was **82.14%** whereas for women it was **65.46%**. Due to low literacy rate and lack of access to education, they are not properly mobilized and hence lack the basic political knowledge about their rights and their opportunities.
- Lack of resources: The gender status quo is maintained through low resource allocation to women's human development by the state, society and the family. As per Indian context, women have less property rights as the property of ancestors is passed to male member of the family. Due to this lack of resources they are hardly able to come at par with men.
- Dual role in productive and reproductive sphere: women in India have to manage both their professional and personal roles, striking a perfect balance between both of them. With their primary role as mothers and wives along with the household chores, women hardly get time to enter the political arena.

IDEOLOGICAL CONSTRAINTS:

- Women's place: All societies across the world are dominated with the idea that women should play the roles of "working mothers", which in turn is low-paid and apolitical in nature. Moreover they are restricted to their homes and men in the public sphere. This way the line between public and private is blurred. Hence the fact has been denied that what happens in the public have a impact on the private and vice-versa. Andrienne Rich defines patriarchy as:
“A familial-social, ideological, political system in which men by force, direct pressure or through ritual, tradition, law, and language, customs etiquette, education, and the division

of labor, determine what part women shall or shall not play in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male.

- Lack of confidence: Women have been made to believe that they lack the required confidence that is needed to enter the "competent" political sphere. The idea of women being "emotional" and "tender" renders them incapable of participating in politics. Therefore there was a steady rise in the number of women campaigners and voters and not women legislators.
- Politics as a "Dirty game": the notion of politics being unsuitable for females due to its "fraudulent" and "treacherous" nature has barred women to test their skills in this sphere. And rather have promoted them in relatively more "sophisticated" realm.

ROLE OF MEDIA:

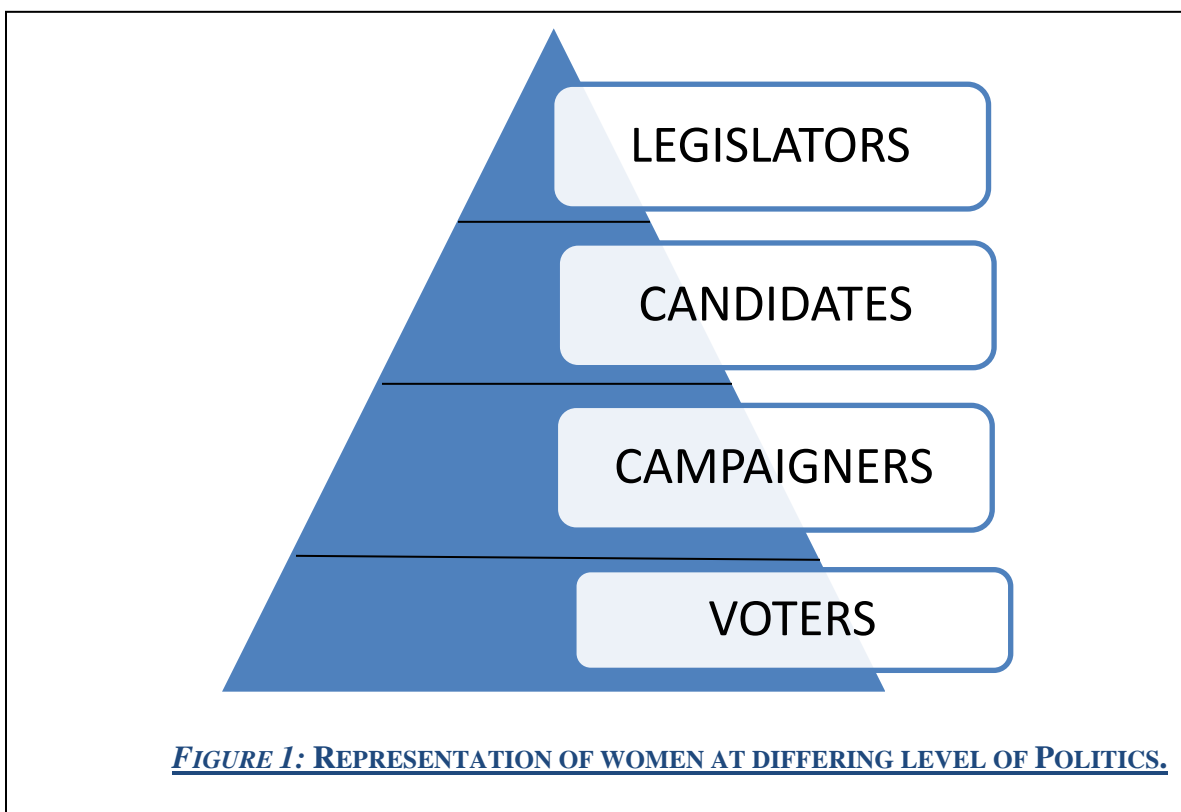
The media has been an influential branch to reflect public opinion and public consciousness. The media plays the role of chronicler of various events and hence also plays a major role to put forth differing public opinions. But this has been seen that women's issues have been paid less attention by the Indian media. Though it can play a major role in mobilizing women and to make them aware of their rights and roles in society. So far it has been seen that media houses that are owned by business houses or backed by political parties have not broadcast issues of women due to pressure from above.

STATISTICS

(POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN INDIA)

This sections deals with statistical facts relating to change in political participation of women in India. To start, it is important to acknowledge that there are four levels of Political participation. And at all these different level the percentage change of women's participation in not the same.

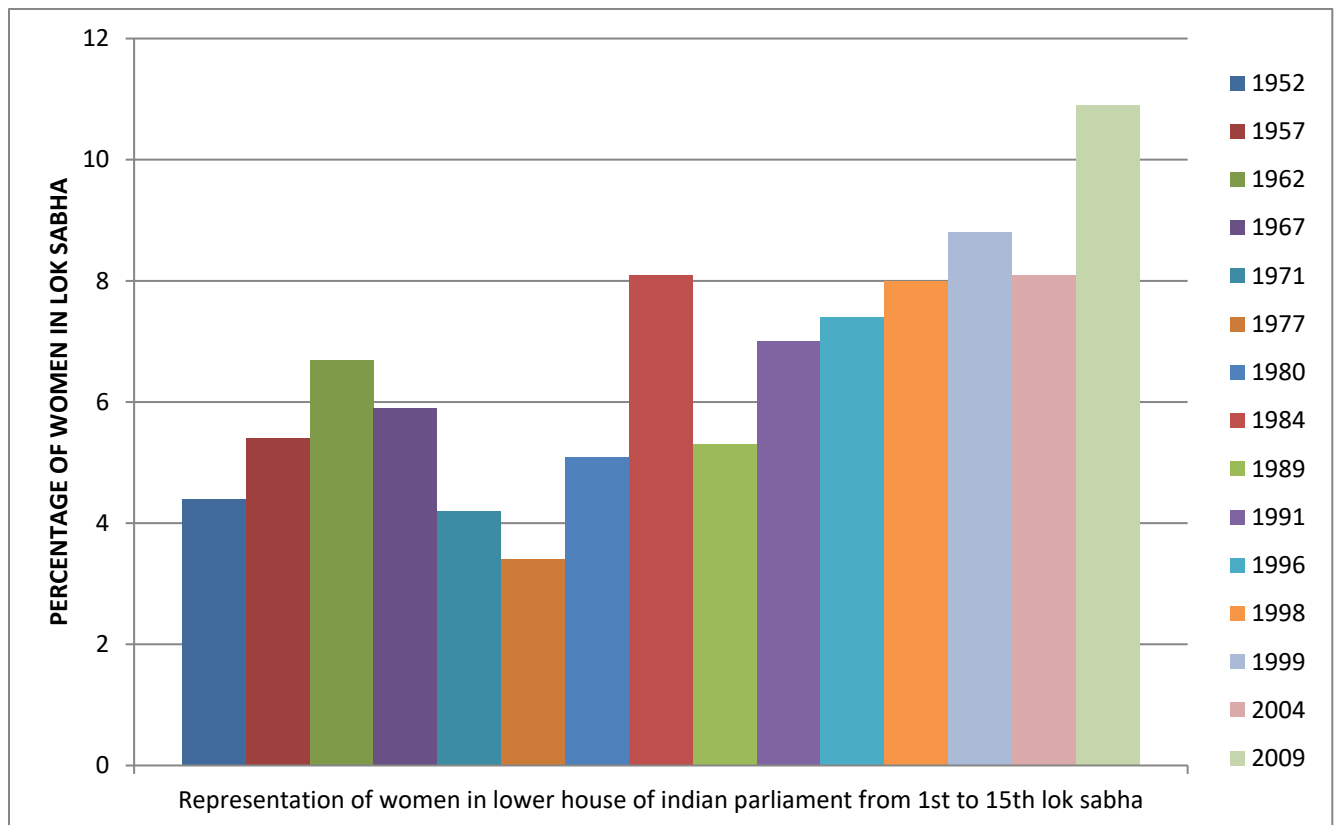
The four levels of participation occur in pyramid form with women as 1)legislators at the peak with lowest representation;2)then as candidates on the second strata;3) as campaigners ; 4) and lastly at the broader base as single-time voters.



- In India, there is an upswing in women voter turnout especially after 1990's. The level of participation of women in the first two tiers i.e. as legislators and candidates have not increased considerably. This is because of the " policy of exclusion" followed within

political parties against women. In the lower two tiers women have achieved some form of parity with their male counterparts.

- India had ranked 3rd in highest number of women legislators in 1937 after USA and USSR. But now India ranks 153 out of 190 nations.



***FIGURE 3: SOURCE: ELECTION COMMISSION OF INDIA**

- THE ABOVE GRAPHS SHOWS THE PERCENTAGE OF WOMEN IN LOWER HOUSE OF INDIAN PARLIAMENT FROM 1ST TO 15TH LOK SABHA ELECTION HELD FROM 1952 TO 2009. FEMALE REPRESENTATION AS LEGISLATORS IN LOWER HOUSE IS LESS THAN THE WORLD AVERAGE OF 20%. THIS IS MUCH LOWER AS COMPARED TO OTHER SOUTH ASIAN COUNTRIES LIKE

AFGHANISTAN (27%) AND PAKISTAN (21.35%). THOUGH IN INDIA IT IS STILL 12%.
(WORLD BANK REPORT ON PROPORTION OF SEATS HELD BY WOMEN IN NATIONAL
PARLIAMENTS.) THE REASON FOR THE SAME IS BECAUSE OF LACK OF RESERVATION OF
SEATS FOR WOMEN IN PARLIAMENT IN INDIA.

- Globally, Rwanda records the highest number of women acquiring seats in parliament i.e. 61% .

THE WAY FORWARD.....

In Indian Brahmanical text women are depicted as source of strength and power. But the years that followed has reflected an altogether different reality. Women in India and across the globe have been subjugated to structural forms of patriarchy. Giving women a higher position of being a "pious" and "tender" being has worked out against women itself. They are expected to be "protected" by the male members of the society and their delicacy has often allotted them roles relating to being good mother, daughter and wife. This kind of structural discrimination has barred women from entering into the public sphere and realize their full potential. They are being denied proper education, healthcare, ownership rights etc. This further has declined their social, political, and economic status in the society.

With the first wave of feminism that started in the west, women gained self-consciousness about their political and social role. The realization that "change" can only come when women enter the political sphere and play decisive roles of decision-making. This in turn would bring forth women issues to the table that were being suppressed from time immemorial. As a Chinese proverb stated: WHEN SLEEPING WOMEN WAKE, MOUNTAINS MOVE.

In India, affirmative actions in the form of reservation for women have proved to be effective to honour women and guaranteeing them equal rights as of men. But they have not been able to combat the problem of structural inequalities. Moreover, a deep analysis of statistics reveal that women's participation in politics have increased in terms of voter turnout and election campaigners. Women are still under-represented in the legislator and hold less ministerial positions. It is substantially important to hold these position to influence decision making process and to bring forth economic, social and political issues of women.

“For me, a better democracy is a democracy where women do not only have the right to vote and to elect but to be elected.”—Michelle Bachelet, head of UN Women, former president and defense minister of Chile.

Also even women have failed to break the "glass ceiling" (Praveen Rai 2011). This is because women who have entered party politics also are given "soft issues" like women and child care, textiles etc. To ensure that the reservation policies works in its most efficient manifestation in favor of women, the government should take stringent measures to curb corruption and communalization of politics. Also it should make the representation of people act, 1951 should ensure that at least one-third of women are nominated and given party tickets. The legal system should be strengthened to make sure that all forms of discrimination against women should be removed so that women are not structurally excluded due to their gender, poverty etc. The reservation of seats for women should be extended to higher levels of government and women's organizations should provide for adequate training and awareness programmes. To curb

background inequalities an efficient education system and adequate job opportunities for women should be institutionalized. The media can be proved to bedrock in providing the women the most adequate platform to bring forth their contesting voices .Hence this struggle is not for mere "Representation" but Equality, the very intrinsic idea of Democracy.

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