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WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Women equality with men is almost necessary in all aspect of life. Equal voting right in election represents country's initiative to establish equality among men and women in democracy. But the current scenario of policies has witnesses that a woman does not get equal opportunities like men to participate in political affairs. Numbers of constrain affect women participation in politics and decision making. This paper aims to explore issues and challenges faces by women in political participation. This is conceptual paper that based on review the literature from various research generals, articles and case studies to explores important aspect of women's' political participation.

Keywords: women equality, equal voting right, women participation, politics

INTRODUCTION

It is very difficult for a woman to make up her mind to enter politics. Once she makes up her own mind, then she has to prepare her husband, and her children, and her family. Once she has overcome all these obstacles and applies for the ticket, then the male aspirants against whom she is applying makeup all sorts of stories about her. And after all this, when her name Goes to the party bosses, they do not select her name because they fear losing that seat. Women's participation in politics of any country gives a strong message globally not only in terms of equality and freedom of liberty but also in the space provided for women in the democratic framework of electoral politics. India has one of the strongest laws that provide women a life with full honour and dignity. But the customs, patriarchal set ups and societal norms have always treated them as subordinate to men. They are always taught to be submissive. Because of unequal distribution of resources, women do not have adequate resources, be it economic, material or human. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that women's under-representation in American politics raises grave concerns regarding democratic legitimacy and fundamental issues of political representation. Electing more women increases the likelihood that policy debates and deliberations include women's views and experiences. Political participation means which allows for political agendas to be developed by women 'taking part in politics' through a range of activities such as discussion and debate, lobbying and activism in formal and informal ways.

The prime obstacle that hinders women's representation and participation is patriarchy. It is the very basis that makes most of the society realize and even forces them to think that women are incapable of political participation and representation. And, so they should be restricted inside the four walls to perform household chores. Some of the facets of patriarchy that play major role are (a) public-private divide (b) lack of family support especially husband (c) the belief that politics is man's arena (d) political parties also believe that women lack the 'win-ability' characteristics.

The term 'political participation' has a very wide meaning. It is not only related to 'Right to Vote', but simultaneously relates to participation in: decision-making process, political activism, political consciousness, etc. Women in India participate in voting, run for public offices and political parties at lower levels more than men. Political activism and voting are

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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 labour, 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.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many researchers including Randall (1987), Matland and Taylor, (1997) Rule, (1981) explores various factors hinders women participation in politics such as lack of time for politics due to their domestic obligations, their lack of socialization for politics, their lower social capital and weaker asset base than men owing to discrimination in schools and in the market, their under representation in the jobs that favour political careers, their marginalization within male-dominated parties, their inability to overcome male and incumbent bias in certain types of electoral systems. Research by Browne and Barret (1991) found a strong association between female education and socio-economic development at both the individual and societal level. Oduol (2008) found access to education and lack of quality education still remains a barrier for many women. That shows education ill-equips women for leadership.

Some of the researcher including Kellerman & Rhode (2007), Kiamba (2008) found gender stereotype was one of the important barriers for women leadership. That explained women face a ‘double edged sword’ ascribed to gender role stereotypes, as there is a long-standing and widespread belief that male traits are consistent with leadership. Kunovich, Paxton and Hughes (2007) explained that cultural ideas about women can affect women’s levels of representation throughout the political process, from an individual woman’s decision to enter politics, to party selection of candidates, to the decisions made by voters on Election Day.

Bari, (2005) in a study formulated and narrated some important factors which hinder the women political participation. Ideological factors, political factors, socio-cultural factors, economic factors are very important in this regards. Besides these lack of capital and strategy for women political participation are also in the same regard.

Bano, (2009) conducted a study to observe the situation of women in Parliament in Pakistan. The focus of this research is on the role of Pakistani women in the political arena. The study observes how this numerical strength in parliament has contributed to the empowerment of women. The study concluded that in relative terms, the status of women has improved in contemporary society with the passage of time, but the ideal of women’s empowerment is still a distant dream.

McCarthy and Sultana, (2004) conducted a study to explore the possible hindrance in the women political participation. Domestic violence and other forms of violence are flourishing in families, society and also in the state as a means of controlling women. Their subordinate social and legal status and domination by men in the family, society and state obstruct their

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participation in public life. Hence the patriarchal mind-set is considered to be a key issue in limiting the women political participation.

National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW, 2010) in its report suggested that women are not much active despite coming into the field of politics. Although women are brought into political institutions, no effort is made to transform the patriarchal nature and culture of institutions.

MoWA (2006) shows the number of elected women representatives is still low; More and more women are engaged in formal employment, but are underrepresented in middle and higher management positions; The number of women leaders and decision makers at the various level of the decentralized government structure is still very low.

CHALLENGES TO WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION

The level and forms of women's participation in politics is largely shaped by cultural and societal barriers in the form of violence, discrimination and illiteracy.

Sexual Violence:

Martha Nussbaum highlighted a significant barrier to women's capability of participating in politics to be the 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. A 2011 study found, "24% of Indian men have committed sexual violence at some point in their lives, 20% have forced their partners to have sex with them 38% of men admitting they had physically abused their partners." Widespread sexual violence is attributed to the fact that violence within marriage is not against the law, and sexual violence goes largely unpunished. Martha C. Nussbaum states that "In the larger society, violence and the threat of violence affects many women's ability to participate actively in many forms of social and political relationship, to speak in public, to be recognized as dignified beings whose worth is equal to that of others." Self-confidence is likely to increase participation among Indian women, specifically in running for election.

Discrimination:

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. Discriminatory attitudes manifest in the limitations presented to Indian women including low access to information and resources. Women rely on receiving information from family or village members, typically men. Women also lack leadership experience due to the fact they are burdened with household duties. 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.

Discrimination is further perpetuated by class. Dalit women, of the lowest caste in India, are continually discriminated against in running for public office. The Government of India requires reservation of seats for Dalits and Scheduled Castes, but women suffer from abuse and discrimination when serving as elected officials. Dalit women experience harassment by

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being denied information, ignored or silenced in meetings, and in some cases petitioned to be removed from their elected position.

Illiteracy:

India 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. Problems with exploitation, such as women being left off of voters lists, have been reported as illiteracy limits the ability of women to ensure their political rights are exercised. Martha C. Nussbaum concerning political participation stated, "Because literacy is connected in general with the ability to move outside the home and to stand on one's own outside of it, it is also connected to the ability of women to meet and collaborate with other women." Studies conducted by Niraja Jayal and Nirmala Buch found women are "persistently mocked and devalued in the panchayats if they are illiterate." Nussbaum also found literacy can play a key role in the dignification and independence of women in politics by giving them access to communications, such as memos and newspapers, they can become better informed on political issues.

Overcoming barriers to participation:

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 to participate by family, and when familial support is present they are more likely to run for office.

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.

There are numbers of obstacle of women participation in polities such as.

1. Illiteracy is one of the main hurdles in making women as politically empowered. Because of lack of understanding they do not know about their basic and political rights. Gender disparities in terms of education, ownership of resources and continual biased attitudes still act as barriers for women leaders. Education influences the social mobility of women. Formal education such as provided at educational institutions

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created opportunities for leadership, and imparted leadership essential skills (Walters & Mason (1994).

2. Work and family- uneven distribution of house hold work between men and women also one of the important factors in this regards. Uneven distribution of family care responsibilities means that women spend far more time than men in home- and child-care. It relating not just to the time, effort, and medical care of pregnancy and childbirth, but to the far greater maternal involvement necessary for breastfeeding, and to the persistent tendency of women to do a larger share of childcare as the child grows.
3. Lack of political networks- The lack of openness in political decision-making and undemocratic internal processes poses a challenge for all newcomers, but particularly for women as they tend to lack insider knowledge or political networks.
4. Private-public divide in terms of domain identification and male preponderance in political institutions. Because of their low proportion in inner political party structure of India, they are failed to gather resources and support for nurturing their political constituencies.
5. Lack of financial support - Women do not get adequate financial support from the political parties to contest the elections.
6. Societal and cultural norms imposed on women bar them from entering politics. They have to accept the dictates imposed on them and bear the burden of society. They also bear their deprivation and undermining status thinking as a culture of the society. Public attitudes not only determine how many female candidates win a general election, but also directly and indirectly how many are considered and nominated for office (Welch and Sigelman, 1982).

CONCLUSION

It is the need of the hour in a country like India to have equal participation of women in mainstream political activity. Society needs to deconstruct the stereotype of women as limited to household activities only. Overall political parties' environment too is not women friendly, they have to struggle hard and face multi-dimensional issues to create space for them in the party. it is important for all institutions (state, family and community) to respond to women's specific needs such as bridging gaps in education, renegotiating gender roles, the gender division of labour and addressing biased attitudes

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