

WOMEN & POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN INDIA – ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Prof. Mamata Sawakar

Asst Professor in Political Science,

Govt First Grade College – Ranebennur

Abstract:

“This article highlights the status of women in different General Elections. It focuses on the under representation of women in Indian Politics. It is grounded along the election commission’s report on electoral participation and representation of women from 1957 to the recently held general elections in 2014. It offers a detailed image of women’s political participation and representation from being women electorate to voters, from women as candidates to women as representatives in Lok Sabha. It indicates, due to various political and non-political reasons women go on to face democratic deficit in government. The substantial representation of women is missing in proportion to their population. Despite an increase in voting percentage in the recently held assembly and general elections still women represent less as candidates and fewer as women legislators”

Keywords: Article, women, elections, focuses, representation, Lok sabha.

INTRODUCTION

Democracy implies equality for all human persons, men and women. As against this basic notion of democracy what is normally seen is that women are excluded from different walks of life, more visibly in Politics. An important area where women have been inadequately represented is in the political sphere. Articles 325 and 326 of the Constitution of India guarantee political equal right to participation in political activities and right to vote respectively. While the latter has been accessed, exercised and enjoyed by a large number of women, the former i.e., right to equal political participation is still a distant dream. Lack of space for participation in political bodies has not only resulted in their presence in meager numbers in these decision making bodies but also in the neglect of their issues and experiences in policy making.

Significance:

In this background, it is significant to trace the participation of women in Indian politics. Some significant questions emerge while doing so, such as, what is the level of political participation of women in Indian politics? What is the percentage of women’s electorate ? What is the voter turnout of women? Women’s voting percentage in the Lok Sabha elections is almost equal to men, then, what is the percentage of their candidature? How many of them are elected as legislators? The verdict of 2014 Lok Sabha elections has once again kept the women political aspirants at the fringes. The number has increased to the record highest since independence; however, this number is ‘negligible’. Would women continue to remain as ‘electors’ and not as ‘decision makers’ in Indian politics? According to the World Economic Forum, in ranking on Women in Parliament index India is currently placed at 106th.

Objectives of the Study:

1.To identify the indicators and substantiate the existence of disparity and disadvantage women face in their political participation.

2.To highlight the causes and barriers that limit women’s political participation and its effect on women.

EVIDENCE OF DISPARITIES FACED BY WOMEN IN POLITICS

Women’s participation in formal politics can be gauged by examining them in relation to the following indicators: women’s participation in the Parliament, political parties and their participation in the electoral process as constituencies as well as candidates. The analysis of these indicators reveal both that historically women have been kept away from politics and political parties as well as other formal institutions have not validated their participation.

Participation of women in the Parliament – Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha

Women are poorly represented at higher leadership levels. Even historically, it is observed that women’s participation in positions of power in both houses of the Parliament has never exceeded 15 per cent of all seats. Table below presents the participation of women in the two houses of the Parliament.

Table 1: Participation of Women in the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha

Year	Member in Lok Sabha			Member in Rajya Sabha		
	Total members	Female	%	Total members	Female	%
1952	499	22	4.41	219	16	7.3
1957	500	27	5.40	237	18	7.6
1962	503	34	6.76	238	18	7.6
1967	523	31	5.93	240	20	8.3
1971	521	22	4.22	243	17	7.0
1977	544	19	3.29	244	25	10.2
1980	544	28	5.15	244	24	9.8
1984	544	44	8.9	244	28	11.4
1989	517	27	5.22	245	38	15.5
1991	544	39	7.17	-	-	-
1996	543	39	7.18	223	20	9.0
1998	543	43	7.92	223	19	8.6
1999	543	49	9.02	-	-	-
2004	543	45	8.03	245	27	11.1
2009	543	59	10.86	245	22	8.97
2014	543	61	11.23	245	29	11.83
Average	531.06	36.87	6.91	238.21	22.92	9.62

Source: *Election Commission of India*

The under-representation of women in the Lok Sabha, and from crucial decision-making positions such as in the Cabinet, are pointers of their systematic exclusion from the political structure and the deeply embedded gender bias in Indian society

Table 2. Women Contesting Elections

Year	Males	Females	Total
1952	1831	43	1874
1957	1473	45	1518
1962	1915	70	1985
1967	2302	67	2369
1971	2698	86	2784
1977	2369	70	2439
1980	4478	142	4620
1984	5406	164	5574
1989	5962	198	6160
1991	8374	325	8699
1996	13353	599	13952
1998	4476	274	4750
1999	3976	278	4254
2004	5080	355	5435
2009	2514	556	8070
2014	7527	636	8163

Women's political participation was very negligible immediately after the independence though they had played a vital role for getting independence for the country. The statistics clearly indicate that during the 1952 elections the percentage of women contestants were as low as 2.29 per cent. In the later years the number of women contesting elections increased at a very low pace. The two elections where there has been a noticeable increase in the number of women contestants are those held in 1980 and 1998. They occurred at the time when the Committee for the Status of Women, 1974 made their recommendations and the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments were passed.

Women as Voters

Today there are 282 million women voters in India. It has been observed that over the last two decades women's participation in formal elections has declined.

Table 3. Percentage of Women Members in Political Parties and their Committees

Name of Party	Women	Men	%
Congress(I)	2	17	11.7
BJP	8	62	12.5
JD	3	25	12.0
CPI(M)	3	58	5.1
CPI	2	18	11.1

The table reveals that women in the decision-making bodies of the major political parties range from a mere 5.1 per cent in the CPI (M) to 12.5 per cent in the BJP. These figures indicate that almost all parties do not place women in leadership positions and therefore women's access to decision-making bodies remains poor.

Table 4. Seats allotted to women by national parties in general elections

National Parties	2004		2009		2014	
	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won
All India	355	45	556	59	668	61
Congress	45	12	43	23	57	4
BJP	30	10	44	13	37	28
Others	280	23	469	23	574	29

Though women continue to be under-represented in legislative bodies and relegated to the rings in party cadres, their participation as voters has taken a quantum leap. The participatory upsurge witnessed among women as voters in the 1990s reached its peak in the general election held in 2014. Their participation in the electoral process as voters has steadily increased from 46.6 percent in 1962 to around 65.7 percent this year. The difference in voter turnout among men and women, as wide as 16.7 percent in 1962, has narrowed to 1.5 percent in 2014.

EVIDENCE OF DISCRIMINATION:(CAUSES AND BARRIERS)

The following main areas have been identified and presented as the disadvantages faced by women leading to their low levels of political participation: Law and Policies.

1 Access to Information: Because of the high rate of illiteracy and low levels of education among women they are deprived of information. Unequal access to information impairs the recognition and enjoyment of the right of women to vote, contest elections, become members of political parties and social networks.

2. Access to Economic Resources: Women are concentrated in the informal economy, the subsistence sector, where many are engaged in low wage or unpaid, low skilled or unskilled labour. Therefore, the expense required for political participation such as election campaign expenditure or resources required to attend meetings, visit and interact with government officials, become an additional burden that women can ill afford, thus impeding their full participation.

3. Access to Decision Making Arenas: In the formal political arena, it is observed that women have very low voting percentages and their representation in local, state, national governments and political parties is not proportionate to their population. Low numbers of women in political parties adversely affect women being leaders in the parties.

4. Access to organisational membership: A study of the background of political leaders revealed that most men have had past experiences as leaders in trade unions, co-operatives and societies. These organisations have been a training ground which prepare men as leaders in politics. The trade union and co-operative movements have been male dominated and women's participation in them has been negligible.

5. Mobility: These cultural norms are perpetuated and sustained by powerful institutions of family, caste and religion. Timings have to take into account women's dual roles in the home and at work. Lack of access to transport, threat to physical security, restrictions on movement, adversely affects the participation of women in political processes as voters, contestants and elected representatives.

6. Awareness: The lack of knowledge and awareness of elections and electoral processes among women is a major barrier in participating in elections

7. Awareness of Electoral Processes: Their lack of awareness of financial resources and information makes them easy targets for corrupt bureaucrats/politicians to take advantage of their ignorance. Thus it impairs their enjoyment and exercise of right to political participation.

8. Personal/Familial: The primary area of subordination is the family, where the patriarchal values are reinforced, and gender-based discrimination in all dimensions of their lives prevail. This is reflected in the alarming proportions of violence against women within the family - female feticide, infanticide, malnourishment, school dropouts, neglect and deprivation through limited access to resources, dowry violence and torture, etc.

9. History of Familial Involvement in Politics: However, some people still attempted to discredit her by claiming that she was unable to look after her own house and therefore incapable of looking after the village.

10. In-laws Support: Resistance from in-laws proves to be another major detriment for women participating in political activities.

11. Triple Role Women Play: Women typically are forced to play a triple role when they enter politics, namely they have to work at home, in their jobs and in the political institutions. Since, it is hard for a woman to sustain this triple burden, it can pose as a barrier to her political work or her political work can interfere with her work at home or in her vocation.

12. Marital Status: Generally, unmarried women are less represented in the politics. Given the fact that women wield less power within the family and in the institution of marriage, representation of "married women" need not necessarily indicate their real participation since in most cases the men are the actual decision makers.

13. Number of Children: Certain policies adopted by the State as a family planning measure has indirectly affected women's potential to participate in political activities. For instance, to control the population growth, the states of Rajasthan, Haryana and Orissa have legislated that candidates standing for elections cannot have more than two children.

14. Caste: Caste has posed to be a more difficult barrier than gender in electoral politics.

15. Class/Income: While there is a large variation across class in women's political participation, within every class, women of that class have lesser access to the political realm than do the men of the same.

16. Class and Caste Nexus: Women are victims of triple discrimination, i.e. caste, class and gender which has the effect of limiting their potential for solidarity, thereby hindering efforts towards developing a common political agenda.

17. Expenditure for Elections: Some women did not know how much was spent on their election as their husband or a male member of their family took care of it, there were some who did not want to disclose such information”.

18. Literacy: The world’s largest number of illiterate women are in India. According to the 2001 census, there is rampant illiteracy among women, it being around 46 per cent as against 24 per cent for men. Illiteracy can also act as a barrier towards getting elected. Illiteracy therefore is one of the key elements, which impedes women’s empowerment and more especially her political empowerment.

19. Political Party Support: “In our country, even the best of women parliamentarians feel sidelined and powerless within the party. The few women leaders have not been able to facilitate the entry of greater number of women in electoral and party politics, and so remain an ineffective minority.”

20. Criminalisation of Politics and Corruption: Another deterrent for women to enter politics is the very nature of politicking. Money and muscle power are used to threaten opponents and the voters; and impose their decisions on the electorate and to raise the kinds of funds required to get into and stay in power. In addition corruption is also institutionalised systematically. Criminalisation and corruption are not part of women’s value systems and therefore they are kept away from politics in general.

21. Communalisation of Politics: The nexus of religion with politics often becomes a convenient tool to divide the women’s constituency.

22. Character Assassination: Patriarchal values relegate women to the home. Furthermore, when a woman in power becomes a political threat her being a woman is used against her in the form of sexual innuendo, molestation and rape. This is a major reason why women resist entering politics or being visible in politics.

23. Lack of Interaction: With increased incidence of violence, criminalisation, corruption and communalisation, women’s participation in politics has been negatively effected. Criminalisation and corruption are not part of women’s value system and hence make them uncomfortable in the political field.

24. Traditional Caste/Community Panchayats: At the village level traditional caste/community Panchayats are male dominated, feudal, and patriarchal. Though they are not legally recognised, such Panchayats interfere with the elected Panchayats and continue to impede women’s political participation.

25. Media Insensitivity; The media being largely male-dominant has not been favourable in depicting a positive image of women and more so of women’s political participation.

26. Cultural Barriers: The age-old patriarchal system gives primacy to males and perpetuates deep rooted values within society that discriminate against women of all ages, classes, castes and religions.

Conclusion:

To conclude, the political representation of women remains low in Lok Sabha despite the shrinking gender gap in their participation as voters. Low percent of women candidates to each Lok Sabha is a serious concern which needs to be addressed. The highest elected body in India remains male dominated both in opinion and person. The high gender gap in representation for the Lok Sabha over a long period of time also reflects the degree of political democracy which affects the women’s chances of winning seats in democratic election. The women representatives may bridge the gap between representation of opinion and

person. The increase in women's representation with these representatives would make a substantive impact on the politics and policies. Moreover, opportunities to women might also improve policy making, construct democratic decision making, improve the level of competition for better governance, and contribute to the diversity of experiences and views in Lok Sabha. The voting percentage of women has increased significantly over the years. Nevertheless, this political expression merely announces the representation of opinion of women. As Ambedkar(1979) stated, "representation of opinions by itself is not sufficient to constitute the popular government. To cover its true meaning it requires personal representation as well". Now, women in India need to convert this 'opinion' into 'persons' at the highest level. This would enable women to directly place their demands in the system and convert them into policies. It is truly essential to establish political egalitarianism in India.

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