

SOCIOLOGICAL VIEW OF WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN INDIA AS LEADERS AND CITIZENS

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Abstract: This article discusses the significance of women's involvement in politics as a crucial factor in the discussions leading up to the state elections in India. Nalini Gulati and Ella Spencer delve into the evidence regarding women's political engagement, including their representation in government, role as political leaders, and participation as active citizens.

Keywords: Women empowerment, Political participation, Leaders, Citizens, Political Empowerment, Sociological view, Indian society

1.0 Introduction

Various studies have demonstrated that a higher representation of women in parliament leads to increased focus on women's issues. Women's involvement in politics is a crucial element for achieving gender equality and fostering true democracy. It allows women to have a direct role in public decision-making processes and ensures greater accountability towards women. While having more women in leadership positions is a good start, it is essential to implement gender-sensitive governance reforms to enhance the effectiveness of all elected officials in promoting gender equality in public policies and ensuring their enforcement. UN Women places a strong emphasis on promoting women's political participation and good governance to guarantee that decision-making procedures are inclusive, responsive, fair, and participatory. The organization concentrates its efforts on strategic areas that can have a significant and lasting impact on advancing women's status. Support is extended to empower women in translating the principles of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) into legal protections for gender equality. Additionally, collaboration with various stakeholders, including women's groups, governments, the UN, and the private sector, is crucial in increasing female representation in government, providing leadership training for women, and enhancing women's capabilities to actively engage in elections as candidates and voters.

Political representation involves ensuring that citizens are actively involved in the decision-making processes of public policy by political actors who work in the best interest of the people. According to Hanna Pitkin, representation means "to make present again." Throughout history, the representation of women in politics has been significantly low, with only a few exceptions such as Razia Sultan, Rani Laxmi Bai, and Sarojini Naidu. Political representation is a key aspect of a democratic system, which is founded on the principle of equality for all individuals, regardless of gender. However, women continue to face exclusion in various spheres of life, particularly in politics. Despite constitutional provisions, fundamental rights, and directives aimed at ensuring equality, the representation of women in electoral politics remains inadequate. Studies have shown that constituencies with women legislators experience a higher rate of growth compared to those with male legislators. Therefore, increasing the representation of women in politics not only promotes women's empowerment but also contributes to the overall betterment of society. The economic survey of 2018 highlighted the need for greater representation of women in decision-making roles, as their political participation has been disproportionately low despite constituting nearly half of the population. In the 17th Lok Sabha, which saw the highest number of women legislators elected, women only make up 14% of the total members. Women's participation in decision-making processes can lead to enhanced efforts in addressing issues such as infant mortality, maternal mortality, anemia, malnourishment, and other challenges that predominantly affect women and children. The underrepresentation of women in politics can be attributed to various factors, including patriarchal norms, male dominance in most sectors, the perception of women primarily as homemakers, the emphasis on their role in childbearing, and the lack of equal opportunities. It is crucial to bring

about a shift in societal attitudes through the socialization process in order to address this issue effectively. Mass media and social media have the potential to serve as a guiding light in today's technology-driven world. For example, the Metoo campaign, which aimed to combat sexual abuse, empowered numerous women to speak out about their previously untold experiences. Likewise, empowering women to be self-sufficient, offering them training, and showcasing the achievements of successful women in different sectors can inspire others to break free from their limitations and take on more significant roles in decision-making processes for the betterment of society as a whole.

The 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments have provided women with the opportunity to participate in politics at the village and local levels. However, there is no reservation provision for women in state legislatures and parliament. It is necessary to pass an act reserving 33% of seats for women in parliament and state legislatures. Simply reserving seats is not enough; women must be provided with the skills and capabilities to actively participate in political processes. India can learn from other countries such as Chile and Switzerland, where women have a significant presence in politics. Despite making up nearly half of the population, women are significantly underrepresented in the House of Representatives and Lok Sabha. Increased representation of women in politics would bring attention to important women-oriented issues and contribute to the betterment of society as a whole. Swami Vivekananda's words, "A bird cannot fly with one wing only," highlight the importance of women's participation in strengthening democracy and the inclusive nature of India. Furthermore, women's participation in politics would contribute to the implementation of the objectives of the Indian constitution and empower women in other areas of life.

2.0 Review of the Literature

Throughout the years, the issues surrounding women have evolved and been addressed in various ways by the United Nations and its specialized agencies. The concept of gender equality was acknowledged in the United Nations Charter (1945) and later in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). Despite international agreements affirming equal rights, women still make up a small percentage of those involved in political decision-making and leadership roles. Numerous global conferences, such as the Cairo Conference on Population and Development (1994), the Fourth World Conference on Women (1995), and the World Summit for Social Development (1995), have highlighted that gender disparities persist, particularly in terms of political participation. The limited representation of women in these positions hinders their ability to influence the legal framework for advancing gender equality, as very few women are involved in the legislative process. The push for increased female participation in politics is driven by principles of fairness, equality, and progress.

3.0 Women's political representation in India

Nevertheless, the number of women holding high-ranking positions in government is still quite low. Specifically, the presence of women in state-level positions has fallen far behind, preventing them from occupying crucial roles in institutional power and decision-making. The IGC has gathered information on the leadership composition of state governments from their official websites, as of 30 March 2017. Six states in India have no female ministers, such as Nagaland, Sikkim, and Manipur. None of the states have even close to a third of female ministers – the highest percentage of female ministers is in Tamil Nadu at 13%, and 60% of states have less than 10% female representation in state leadership roles. Figure 1 illustrates the low levels of female representation in ministerial positions in Indian states.

The Women's Reservation Bill, aiming to modify the Constitution of India by allocating one-third of all seats in the Lok Sabha (lower house of parliament) and in all state legislative assemblies for women, was approved by the Rajya Sabha (the upper house of parliament) in 2010. Nevertheless, the Lok Sabha (lower house) has not yet voted on the bill to enact it as a law. The bill has regained attention in current public discussions, acknowledging the necessity for greater female political representation across all government levels.

4.0 Women as political leaders

Anecdotally, there is a perception that female political representatives in local government are simply figureheads for their male relatives. If this were true, we would expect no variation in policy decisions made by political leaders based on their gender - as these decisions would be influenced by men even when female leaders occupy reserved seats. However, this notion has been disproven by the renowned study conducted by Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004). Through data collected on 265 village councils in West Bengal and Rajasthan, the study reveals that reserving a council seat has an impact on the allocation of public resources, with female

leaders prioritizing investments in public goods that are important to women. Several research studies have highlighted the positive impact of female political leaders, emphasizing the importance of experience in their effectiveness. For instance, a survey carried out in Maharashtra in 2008 revealed that villages led by women tend to have better access to basic public services, especially when the female leader has been in office for 3-3.5 years. On the other hand, a study conducted by Afridi et al. (2017) as part of the IGC found that women leaders without prior experience may initially lag behind, but they quickly learn and eventually perform on par with male leaders in unreserved seats. This underscores the necessity for capacity-building initiatives and institutional support to improve the efficacy of policies related to affirmative action and women's involvement in politics.

According to a study by Bhalotra et al. (2018), despite the common belief that female political leaders focus more on redistributive policies, they are actually more effective in driving economic growth in the short to medium term. Analyzing data from 4,265 assembly constituencies in India between 1992-2012, the study reveals that women legislators contribute to a 1.8 percentage point increase in economic performance annually compared to male legislators. This surprising outcome is credited to the lower corruption levels, higher efficiency, and increased motivation of female leaders over their male counterparts. In rural Bihar, Gangadharan, Jain, Maitra, and Vecci (2015) conducted an artefactual field experiment to investigate whether females in power are less corrupt. Their findings suggest that women who have previously served as village chiefs tend to appropriate resources more than men when acting as leaders. One possible explanation proposed by the authors is that female leaders anticipate mistreatment, leading to a self-fulfilling prophecy of negative behavior. Another explanation is that women, facing limited leadership opportunities, make short-sighted decisions when presented with a chance to lead, assuming they will not be re-elected.

However, the presence of female political leaders has been linked to other positive social impacts. According to Iyer and Mani (2012), who analyzed data from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), there was a significant 26% rise in reported crimes against women following the increased political involvement of women after the 1993 amendment. Upon closer examination, the researchers discovered that this increase was not due to a surge in actual crimes against women, but rather to an increase in the reporting of such crimes. The improved responsiveness of law enforcement under female political representatives has empowered women to speak up about their concerns. Despite the common belief that female political leaders can serve as role models for girls and women in society, the impact on political candidacy appears to be different. Bhalotra, Clots-Figueras, and Iyer (2018) analyzed constituency-level data from all state elections in India from 1980-2007 and found that there is a decrease in the number of new women candidates after a woman's electoral victory. This decrease is particularly noticeable in states with deep-seated gender bias and in male-dominated political parties, indicating a male backlash against women taking on non-traditional roles. This finding challenges the assumption that female political leaders automatically inspire more women to enter politics.

5.0 Women as active citizens

The study conducted in Uttar Pradesh (Iyer and Mani 2018) confirms that the most significant gender disparities exist in non-electoral engagement, such as attending village gatherings, rather than in electoral participation. These gaps can be attributed in part to factors like women having less knowledge about political structures and electoral regulations, trailing men in self-perceived leadership abilities, and requiring permission to leave their homes. In an effort to boost women's involvement in politics, a trial in Madhya Pradesh (Prillaman 2018) reveals that women who joined a self-help group (SHG) were twice as likely to participate in village meetings or assert their rights with local authorities. The study suggests that this positive impact is largely due to women's collective efforts to demand representation and counter resistance from men. Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) found that women are more inclined to engage in the policymaking process when the leader of their village council is a woman. The study revealed that when the Pradhan is a woman, the percentage of women participating in the Gram Samsad increases significantly from 6.9% to 9.9%. Moreover, women in these villages are twice as likely to have communicated a request or complaint to the Pradhan in the past six months. The researchers suggest that this trend aligns with the notion that political communication is influenced by shared gender between citizens and leaders. They also propose that the heightened involvement of female villagers in policymaking may impact the policy decisions made by female Pradhans.

6.0 Conclusion:

India still has a long way to go in terms of women's political representation, especially at higher levels of government. However, with more female political leaders and increased participation of women in exercising their democratic rights, there is hope for policy changes that could contribute to improved performance in women's economic participation, educational attainment, health, and survival. It is clear that excluding women from positions of power and elected bodies hinders the development of democratic principles and inhibits the economic development of society. Therefore, it is crucial for women to organize, mobilize their networks, communicate their interests, and push for mechanisms to enhance their own representation.

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