

WOMEN REPRESENTATION AND POLITICS: A GLOBAL SCENARIO**Neetu Singh Rai****Abstract**

Women's empowerment is the process by which women exercise control over the ongoing circumstances of their lives. Political participation does not only mean the right to vote; it also involves active participation in political consciousness and decision-making processes, power-sharing, co-decision-making, and co-policy-making at all levels of state governance.

Political participation includes a broad range of activities such as membership in political parties, electoral campaigning, attending party meetings, holding demonstrations, having good communication with leaders, holding party positions, contesting elections, influencing decision-making, and participating in other related activities.

Traditional interpretations of democracy that focus either on the external preconditions for democracy or on institutional designs for its successful operation tend to take democracy for granted more or less. Törnquist (2002) on the other hand, contends that the best way to understand democracy is to examine public control of democratic institutions and processes, or the absence of it. Every discussion of democracy should therefore centre on representational practises since the question of public oversight of democratic processes is inextricably linked to the issue of representation. The argument tends to imply that the level and scope of democracy in a particular society are heavily dependent on the creation of institutions.

Keywords: Electoral Representation; Elections; Quota; Gender Equality; India; Politics; Women; Feminist; Jurisprudence; Gender equality; Political Participation; Reservation; Women Empowerment.

Introduction

In representative democracies, it has traditionally been assumed that voters express their preferences through electoral politics and that it is the duty of the elected officials to hold the government responsible. People urge for closer ties between the people and the bureaucracies that impact them in both the North and the South.

For instance, community governance and more involved forms of citizenship are highlighted in the UK's White Paper on Modern Local Government. Although the principles of representative democracy were the basis for local government, it has since become a passive system. Instead of serving as a continual conduit between the government and the people, the citizen is relegated to becoming an occasional elector.

In order to address the problem of gender inequality, the first-ever international conference on women was convened in Mexico in 1975. A second international conference on women was held

in Copenhagen in 1980, and a third was held in Nairobi in 1985. Governments recognised the human rights of women and the prevalence of violence against them during the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna (1993). Women's empowerment was acknowledged as a key component of successful population policy.¹ during the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo.

Kishwar (1996) argues that in India, women are not getting proper support from political parties, even the best women parliamentarians feel sidelined and powerless within their own political parties. The few women leaders remain an unproductive minority who are unable to smooth the progress of the entry of more women in electoral and party politics. She suggests that parties be forced to give women at least one-third of the tickets by modifying the Representation of the People Act of 1951. According to Hasim (2006), female policy actors are more sensitive to the needs and preferences of women and may be more inclined to provide resources to address those needs and preferences. Women citizens are less able to hold governments responsible when they are under-represented in legislatures.

Decade for Women from 1976 to 1985 was proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly on the recommendation of the first World Conference of the International Women's Year, held in Mexico City in 1975. It was observed to remind the world that discrimination against women continued to be a big problem. The Conference launched a new era in global efforts to promote the progress of women by opening an international dialogue on gender equality. The Conference was designed to improve the status of women and integrate them into all aspects of development. Though there has been increase in the percentage representation of women in the Indian Parliament but the pace is disappointing.

The first ever world conference on women was held in Mexico in 1975 to address the issue of gender inequality. It was followed by a second world conference on women at Copenhagen in 1980 and a third in Nairobi in 1985. At the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna (1993), governments acknowledged that women's rights are human and headed the evidence of widespread violence against women. At the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo (1994), women's empowerment was recognised as a cornerstone for effective population policies.²

1 At the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo, Egypt, 183 countries conceded to the 20-year Program of Action, while a few nations expressed reservations about its implementation. The Program, which has the potential to bring about enormous worldwide change, includes the mutually reinforcing areas of family planning, improved health care and education, women's empowerment, efficient use of resources, environmental protection, reduction of poverty, and sustainable development.

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Democratic decentralization is a key aspect of the participatory governance agenda, and is associated with the institutionalization of participation through regular elections, council hearings and, more recently, participatory budgeting (Blair, 2000). The devolution of power to local authorities is also alleged to create incentives for increased civil society activity. However, despite being lauded by development agencies and theorists across the political spectrum as the key to state reform, popular empowerment and, more recently, poverty reduction (World Bank, 2000), the track record of decentralization in developing countries has come under increasing criticism (Crook and Sverrisson, 2001).

The United Nations General Assembly in 1953 adopted the Convention on the Political Rights of Women, which came into force in 1954. It protects women's equal rights to vote, hold office and access public services on par with male citizens within the ambit of the national laws. In 1979, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, described as an international bill of rights for women. The Convention is a human rights treaty. Among other human rights and fundamental freedoms, it provides for equality between women and men through ensuring women's equal access to, and equal opportunities in, political and public life including the right to vote and to stand for election. (CECI, 2010).

Literature Review

For instance, the White Paper on Modern Local Government in the UK emphasises the idea of community government and more engaged forms of citizenship: Although representative democracy is still the foundation of local governments, it has become inactive. The citizen is reduced to being a sporadic elector, rather than representing a constant link between government and the populace. It appears that the concept of representative democracy has served to constrain public support for local governance. At the same time, it has been asserted that representative democracy and participatory democracy are completely contradictory.

In fact, due to local scales and its proximity to local people, participatory democracy can strengthen an active understanding of representative democracy, especially in local government (Clark and Stewart, 1998).

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Knowing that the nature of political engagement is also essential, as women's empowerment is heavily reliant on their involvement in political and social endeavours. The word "political participation" has been defined differently by different academics. However, they are connected by a common thread. It has a strong correlation with power and is prevalent in democracies. "It is the activity which aims to bring administration to bear in a particular direction, to secure particular results," according to Miller (Carolyn, 2008, p. 90). According to Lasswell, "the shaping, sharing, and exercise of power is the political process" (Niroj, 2000, p. 15).

In democracies around the world, the inclusion of underrepresented groups in legislatures has commanded increasing attention. These measures, which include quotas and reserved seats, are intended to increase the substantive and descriptive representation of groups that have traditionally been underrepresented in politics, such as women and racial and ethnic minorities. These policies aim to bridge political participation gaps and give underrepresented voters more political clout.

In research on women in parliaments, there is a much-used distinction between descriptive and substantive representation. This distinction roughly corresponds with whether the focus is on the number of women elected or on the effects of women's presence in parliament. Influential book *The Politics of Presence* was released in 1995. (Phillips 1995). A correlation between descriptive and substantive representation is predicted by the politics of presence hypothesis, which contends that female politicians are best suited to represent the interests of women. The foundation of Phillips' case lies in the differences between men and women in their day-to-day activities, including those related to childrearing, education, and occupations, the division of paid and unpaid labour, exposure to violence and sexual harassment, and the fact that female politicians, at least in part, share the same experiences as other women. Few contest the existence of gender-related disparities in modern society, although the link to politics is contested. A "shot in the dark," as described by Phillips herself (1995). Her doubt stemmed from her knowledge about rigidity in political institutions; parliaments do not change easily.

The under representation of women and the over representation of men must be addressed in order to make progress towards making democracies more legitimate and accountable.

The promises on behalf of democratic decentralisation, especially in its newer more innovative forms, have been great. As Blair (2001: 23) states, "the hope is that as government comes closer to the people, more people will participate in politics and that will give them representation, a key element in empowerment, which can be defined here as significant voice in public policy decisions which affect their futures. Local policy decisions reflecting this empowerment will serve these newer constituencies, better living conditions and enhanced economic growth. These improvements will then reduce poverty and enhance equity among all groups."

Rappaport (1987) and Zimmerman (1995) define empowerment as a situation in which people, organizations, and communities gain the necessary control over the problems that affect them. Sushama (1998) and Chattopadhyay (2005) explained women's empowerment as the process by which women move from the state of being oppressed to the state in which both the oppressor and the oppressed are equal socially, politically, and economically, and in which women are given the opportunity to participate fully in social, political, and economic spheres of life.

Early notions of empowerment that originated in the United States are grounded in a philosophy that prioritises the viewpoints of oppressed peoples, allowing them to not only express themselves but also to take control and end the dominance to which they were subject (Wise, 2005). The conscientization strategy created by Brazilian theorist Paulo Freire in his 1968 book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is one of the most prominent publications on empowerment. The majority of works on empowerment actually make some Freire aspires to "critical consciousness" from the dominant consciousness existing in rural Brazil. In order to acquire the "instruments that would allow him to make choices" and become "politically conscious," he supports an active teaching approach that would assist the student become aware of his own circumstances and of himself as "subject" (Freire, 1974).

A rising number of scholars and non-governmental organisations are advocating for increased understanding of the social dimensions of development as a result of the shortcomings of development policies and programs. Other models based on "endogenous" and "self-focused" development are suggested based on preliminary field assessments of development programs, especially by anthropologists (Tommasoli 2004).

The notion of empowerment that emerges from the indigenous, political, and social cultures of society is the basis for Friedman's (1992) thesis of "alternative development." Friedman distinguished between three types of power: psychological, political, and social. Social power is the ability to process information, knowledge, and abilities. One mechanism that affects policy changes at both the macro and local levels is political power. It's the result of the power of voice and collective action. Finally, psychological power is expressed as an individual sense of potency demonstrated in self-confidence behaviour, self-reliance and increased selfesteem. Friedman explains empowerment as social power, which can be translated into political power. Social networking enhances their position and power, which consequently expedites and strengthens the process of psychological, social and political empowerment.

Women who are empowered are able to take charge of their own lives, set their own goals, band together to support one another, and demand change from the government and society at large, according to Kate Young (1993). According to Young, empowerment entails a total overhaul of the systems and procedures that contribute to women's subordinate position in society. It is predicated on the idea of "transformative potential," which refers to the necessity of changing women's status in order to ensure that progress is maintained. Finally, she summarizes the

concept of empowerment from individual to wider political perspectives and she puts sufficient importance to collective action, as it is a sure means to individual empowerment.

Hanna Pitkin conceptualizes the term representation into four different categorical features: “Formalistic view”, it aims to give authority to representatives through elections. “Descriptive representation”, means that representatives should reflect the descriptive characteristics of their electorate. Symbolic representation is a kind of “standing for”, but it does not reflect the actual power or ability, like “a flag representing the nation, or an emblem representing a cult” (Pitkin, 1967).

While defining the term of representation Pitkin says, “Representing means acting in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them. He says a political representative is both a special pleader as well as a judge, an agent of his locality as well as a governor of the nation because his duty therefore is to pursue both local and national interest. He says that though this dual task is difficult to perform, but it is not impossible.

Women representatives will work in the interest of women because a woman can understand a woman work and responsibility better than a man. (Phillips, 1995).

Women still face considerable handicaps to their involvement in politics; for example, inadequate education, the burden of reproductive and productive roles, a lack of self-confidence and the opposition of entrenched cultural and religious views.” Therefore, “increasing the representation of women has not automatically led to a more gendered analysis of the issues confronting local government.

She says that substantive representation is a view that concentrates on “the activity of representing” or “the role of a representative”.

Women’s opportunities for political participation also depends on Individual socio-demographic factors including education and income, sociocultural norms and caste. (Agarwal, 1997; Gleason, 2001).

Conclusion

Women's empowerment is the process by which women exercise control over the ongoing circumstances of their lives. Political participation does not only mean the right to vote; it also involves active participation in political consciousness and decision-making processes, power-sharing, co-decision-making, and co-policy-making at all levels of state governance.

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The Authors have made an interesting classification of the concept of equality. They make a distinction between formal and substantive quality. According to them, formal equality has been

explicitly guaranteed to all by the Constitution. Yet women's lives are characterised by inequality and discrimination. This, they argue, is a result of the substantive inequalities from which women suffer. They note that "the legal system itself contributes to the gap between the formal guarantees of gender equality and the substantive inequality that plagues women's lives". Further they illustrate how "the judicial approach to the equality guarantees of the Constitution is informed by a problematic approach to both equality and gender difference" (Rama Kapur and Brenda Cossman, 1999:197). Formal equality, though a necessary pre-condition for equality of status and equal human dignity, is rendered deficient in addressing problems of gender injustice due to the presence of substantive inequalities.

Author states that, 'equality' implies like treatment for similarly situated persons. Difference in treatment is acceptable only when the involved persons or parties are placed in different circumstances. However this understanding fails to recognise that sometimes similarly situated persons also require different treatment. This is the founding basis for a substantive model of equality. While a formal model emphasises sameness, a substantive one recognises that equality requires differential treatment based on disadvantage. The focus of substantive model is not only on equality before law and equal protection by law, but also on the actual impact of the law on women. Kapur and Cossman define: "The explicit objective of a model of substantive equality is the elimination of substantive inequality of disadvantaged groups in society" (Rama Kapur & Brenda Cossman, 1999).

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