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Political Participation of Women: Some Issues and Challenges

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Abstract

Indian democracy is more than 50 years old now yet the ideals of democracy are far from destination especially for women in India. It is a global experience that women play a marginal role in politics. Their political participation is almost invisible; however, the importance of women's political participation for a viable democratic polity is being increasingly realized in all corners of the world. Women constitute nearly 50 percent of the total population in any country and if it has adopted a democratic system it cannot run successfully with just half of the population. It will be a crippled democracy. So, to think of a democratic government, without their participation is unthinkable and to empower them socially, economically and politically will require their decision-making capabilities. Moreover, women as a group have problems, demands and aspirations which cannot be aptly expressed by men. The problem issues of the people in any country such as, education, employment, health and nutrition besides the country's foreign policy, relationships with other countries, issues of war and peace, science and technology, protection of the environment do need a women's angle because they will affect women too, in a particular manner. But a glimpse at the world scenario gives us the grim picture that barring a couple of exceptions, most of the Parliaments have 93 percent male representatives and just 7 percent are women. The World Congress of women at Beijing in 1995 reiterated the importance of increasing women's participation in Politics and in its "Platform of Action" recommended ways and means to the participating countries to increase "space for and visibility" of women in political institutions and processes. This is the important first step towards women's empowerment. The Women's Reservation Bill in legislatures seems to have shown some light at the end of the dark tunnel that they have been pushed into since time immemorial. Merely lamenting upon the state would not lead us anywhere. The movement for creating adequate space for half of our own population in the process of decision-making, right from within the home to the state and national legislature is required to be taken to its logical end. This paper is an endeavour to present the need and imperatives towards enhancing women's political participation. An attempt has also been made to peep into the history of women's political participation.

Keywords: democracy, women, political participation, decision-making.

Introduction

Politics is the process by which groups of people make decisions. It consists of social relations involving authority or power, and refers to the regulation of a political unit, and to the tactics used to formulate and apply policy (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politics>). Though these units consist of both men and women, men have always dominated the field.

Jean Jacques Rousseau, whose ideas inspired the French Revolution, advocated women's exclusion from politics in 1762. The American Declaration of Independence also denied the right of equal participation of women in politics. But after one century, thinkers like J.S. Mill advocated gender equality in every field including politics. In post-World War II, the sensitivity about equality of sexes gained ground. The UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights also highlighted equality between men and women. But women are still marginalized in political field and are victims of masculine prejudices towards their participation in politics.

The Indian Context

There is a strong correlation between the status of women and their role in political participation. The Indian civilization has produced great women ranging from *Brahma*

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vadinis (lady Rishi) to stateswomen, from ideal wife to warrior queen. Hindu mythology shows that the status of Hindu women during the Early Vedic period was honourable and respectable. In this period, women had sufficient freedom to attend fairs, festivals and assemblies. But during the post-Vedic period, they started losing their status in society. They lost their independence. They became a subject of protection. Manu, the progenitor of Hindu race, stated that a woman should be kept day and night in subordination by the males of the family – the woman has to be protected by her father in childhood, by her husband in young age and by the sons in old age. He did not treat women on par with man. He believed that there is a vital structural difference between man and woman, each suited for different types of work. He regarded women as more emotional and less rational by nature than men. Man was responsible for hard work, earning the bread and women for household duties. The rigid institution of caste reinforced these notions.

During the Mughal rule, the socio-economic status of Hindu woman was further lowered. Social evils like the purdah system came into force. Child marriage was prevalent. Lack of education, early marriage, non-existence of employment opportunities, absence of absolute property rights were the main causes of inequality of sex in the socio-economic field. Economic dependence made a Hindu woman socially backward. Incidents of female infanticide and custom of sati could be witnessed. Thus, women were deprived in many ways.

During the British rule in India, legislation was used to bring about significant modifications in the structure of society. Various reforms were initiated with respect to the status of women. The advent of British rule in India in the nineteenth century saw the rise of a new elite group influenced by Western liberalism. A variety of socio-religious reforms were undertaken by this group on issues related to women. By the end of the century a nationalistic movement had emerged. This continued for the next 50 years carrying a common interest of all the political leaders, i.e., achieving freedom from British rule. This struggle for freedom, broadly speaking, marked the beginning of a political awakening among women in India (Evrette, 1979)^[5].

The first Indian National Congress was founded in 1889 and only ten women had attended its first meeting. Subsequently, women started attending annual meetings regularly. Gandhiji's emergence as a political leader worked as an instrument in bringing thousands of women out of their homes to join the freedom struggle. Under his leadership women in large numbers joined the Satyagraha movement and many went to prisons willingly. The non-cooperation movement started in 1921 and gave a forward kick to the participation of women in politics. Gandhi's civil disobedience movement and *Dandi yatra* (march) campaign brought a large number of women into public life. This helped the traditional housebound women to emerge as a powerful instrument of political action. They demanded equal right of representation for the fair sex in Indian provincial legislature, which at first was denied by the British government but finally came through in 1935.

With India attaining freedom in 1947, our Constitution guaranteed equality before law and equal protection of law, prohibiting discrimination on the ground of sex. It also empowered the state to make special provisions for women and children, to provide for securing just and humane

conditions of work and for maternity relief (Yogendra, N *et al*, 2005)^[30].

Now in independent India women are holding important political and administrative positions, like governors, chief ministers, and ministers in cabinet and state governments, presiding officers of legislative bodies, judges of high courts and secretaries to the Government of India. There is no doubt that India figures among the first few states in the world to have a woman as head of the government and head of the state. Indian women got the right to equal political participation, including their right to vote, much earlier than most of the Western countries. In the regional political scenario there are few women who have become prominent centers of power in their respective states, for instance, Mayawati in Uttar Pradesh, Jayalalitha in Tamil Nadu or Mamata Banerjee in West Bengal. They also have got significant influence on the national politics. However, it should also be kept in mind that these women entered politics and rose to glory because of their proximity to male leaders. Excepting a few women, politics in India is still a male bastion. Their representation in the parliament remains at a very low level; it never got beyond 10 percent at any point of time. The Government of India made effort to improve the socio-economic status of women through its five year plans. The Ninth Five Year Plan commits to "empower women through creating an enabling environment where women can freely exercise their rights both within and outside their homes, as equal partners along with men".

The National Commission for Women was set up by an Act of Parliament in 1990 to safeguard the rights and legal entitlements of women. The 73rd and 74th Amendments (1993) to the Constitution of India have provided for reservation of seats in the local bodies of Panchayats and Municipalities for women, laying a strong foundation for their participation in decision making at the local levels. This has brought over a million women into panchayats and urban local bodies (Panda, 2001)^[17]. In many states women panchayats have been acclaimed and commended.

During 1987-92 Karnataka had 14,000 women in its development councils. In 1991 in Orissa, 22,000 women were elected to panchayats. In Kerala 30 percent of seats were reserved for women whereas women won 35 percent and the corresponding figure in 1994 in Madhya Pradesh was 43 percent. Just in two to three years there was a manifold increase in the percentage of elected women to local government bodies (Sen S, 2000)^[22]. However, still our Parliament is a man's world.

Women represent half the population of a country and have the right to half the seats and parliamentary decisions that affect their lives; then why is the reservation 33 percent? If the aim of this Bill is to promote gender equality, 33 percent quota does not pass the test of equality. Some have argued that parties should simply ensure that 33 percent of their candidates for elections are women. Opposing the bill many have argued that reservations of 33 percent will only bring urban elite women to power. Everybody agrees on the principle of equal participation for women, but none will lift an honest finger to ensure equal representation. Preventing women from creating their own leadership and obstructing them from policy-making decisions is simply a continuation of the gender subjugation. Only women in positions of power can inspire more women to take up these paths (Gupta V, 2005)^[6].

Marginalization of women and insincere efforts of mainstreaming them into the political process play a detrimental role in their current level of political participation. It remains difficult for any women coming from an average household to climb up the political ladder. There is no doubt that there are several women holding key positions at various political levels, but given the size of their share in the electorate and population, their political participation is not encouraging. Women cannot exercise their rights and enjoy liberties till they are given their due share. This is the reason why their presence is hardly felt when important decisions for the countries or for women welfare are made.

Political Issues in Women's Development

In the traditional societies, political system and its control was the privilege of a few. In India, the participation of women in political activities and programmes is of recent origin. According to Myron Weiner, "The concept of political participation refers to any voluntary action, successful or unsuccessful, organized or unorganized, episodic or continuous, employing legitimate or illegitimate methods, intended to influence the choice of public policies, the administration of public affairs, or the choice of political leaders at any level of Government, local or national". Women are still fighting against traditions and discrimination that hindered the realization of their political rights.

To see the actual interest of the women in politics and to know the extent of participation of the women in politics, the following indicators were selected for the study:

- (i) Voting behaviour
- (ii) Consultation for casting the vote
- (iii) Participation in canvassing, political meetings and agitations
- (iv) Opinion on 33 percent reservation
- (v) Membership in any association or political party
- (vi) Attitude towards increased women's participation in politics.

Voting Behaviour

Voting is the commonest yet the most important act of political participation. Women voters constitute an important component in any democracy. But till now, women voters were not taken seriously. Illiteracy, preoccupation with household duties, looking after children, voting place far from their house were some of the reasons for low participation of women in voting. However, increasing awareness among women voters about their rights has begun to influence the political scene. A number of schemes are announced to encourage women voters which reflect their importance.

The question of voting reflects the position of women in our democratic society. The political right to vote was granted to every adult citizen of India irrespective of sex from the time the Constitution became effective and the first free election were held in politically free India. Voting is the basic means by which citizens are assimilated in the political process. According to Shashi Jain (1988) ^[9], Sanjay Ketan Jena (1994) ^[10] and Inderjeet Kaur (1983) ^[11], women's participation in the voting process was very high.

In order to know the political awareness and participation of the women, the respondents were asked, "Do you vote?" It is observed that almost all women under study participated in voting which is a significant change compared to the

traditional days. They are also aware that each vote is important as it decides the destiny of a party and so everybody should vote. Few respondents did not vote due to change of address but they were getting their names included in the new list, few respondents' names were not in the voter's list and a few others were indifferent and did not vote as they felt that all political parties had their own selfish intentions and make false promises.

Consultation for Casting the Vote

It is generally seen that in social matters a woman rarely exercises independent judgment. In a family, the woman willingly or unwillingly reacts to the actions and directions of some male figure in the family. The location of the polling booth, the distance of the booth from the house and the political climate around the polling booth are the factors seen by the male members before sending the females to exercise their voting rights. She is even told by the men in the family about whom or which party to vote. She cannot exercise her choice in most of the cases because she has never learnt to exercise her choices due to her submissive role, socio-economic dependence or lack of knowledge in decision making. But according to Shashi Jain (1988) ^[9] and Seema Salgoankar (2006) ^[21], majority of the respondents exercised their independent judgment in casting their votes. It is seen that almost all the respondents relied on their own independent judgment for voting which shows that women have become politically aware. That is a noteworthy change compared to the traditional days. Only a few respondents listen to their husbands, friends or relatives before casting their votes.

Participation in Campaigning

In traditional India, mass illiteracy and a rigid social system cut off a great majority of women from effective participation in the political life of the country. Women's traditional role demanded full attention to the home, husband and family. They were expected to be submissive and docile. The social environment was such that it was not favourable for political participation.

However, with the removal of legal disabilities and with opportunities in education and employment, political awareness is increasing among the women. The technique of personal contact with the voters through political meetings, canvassing, holding agitations for demands imparts a personal touch and is more effective. Verba and Nie (1971) ^[25] include various activities in campaign activity: (a) Persuade others how to vote. (b) Actively work for a party or a candidate. (c) Attend political meeting or rally. (d) Contribute money to a party or candidate. (e) Membership in political clubs.

Election meetings are an important medium for approaching the voters collectively to inform them about the party, its programmes, and its symbol and to introduce the candidate. Door-to-door canvassing on behalf of any candidate or party is also an index of commitment of the electorate. It was seen that though the voting turnout was good, the interest and involvement in campaign activity was low as the meetings were usually held in towns where there was no proper transport facility, the meetings were mostly held at night, which was not convenient for women, and also the social taboos on the movement of women, lack of individual incentive are the reasons for non-participation of women in political campaigning.

In order to understand the degree of exposure of women voters to campaigning, the women were asked to inform whether they participated in campaigning activities such as political meetings, election campaigns and agitations. It is seen that some of the women took part in canvassing, they distributed slips, pamphlets during election, shouted slogans, and moreover they also took part in “padyatras” and convinced others to join to support their candidates. In doing so, they created awareness among the people and sought their support. Few women took part in political meetings and agitations, but these respondents’ families had a political background. These women arranged meetings during elections and also when a leader was visiting their area to create awareness, to give knowledge to the people about their rights. They also took part in agitations to show their support to their leader, to press for their demands and to bring a change in society. But on the whole, it can be said that though woman voters are increasing in number, they are still traditional in outlook when it comes to real participation in politics. It seems domestic responsibilities, restrictions imposed by the family members and lack of interest are barriers in their path of participation.

Opinion on 33 Percent Reservation

The position of women in society was very unsatisfactory as far as their social rights were considered. However, successive governments have concentrated on policies for women and tried to give them a place of dignity, equality and opportunity in a protected legal framework. Many acts such as the Hindu Succession Act, 1956, the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955, the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, the Maternity Benefit Act, 1961, the Equal Remuneration Act, 1976 and many more rights were given to women to improve their position in society. In spite of all these acts it is seen that women’s position is not satisfactory, they continue to remain almost invisible in the power structures. This is due to the fact that there is underrepresentation of women in politics in India. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments have enforced 33 percent reservation for women in local government only. There is demand for such reservation for women at parliamentary and assembly levels. There are women, of course, in politics but it is seen that they are ‘proxies’ which means they contest from a ward which is reserved for women. So, the women are just puppets and all the decisions are taken by the male members in the family. Political parties are reluctant to give tickets to women candidates unless they are sure they will win. So, the question arises whether women should organize themselves to demand more tickets for contesting elections or should there be reservation of seats for women.

It has been observed that majority of women favoured 33 percent reservation for women in legislative bodies as according to them women are oppressed and suppressed even today and to improve their status, women should be there at the decision making levels and this is possible through reservation as parties will be forced to put up women candidates and it will be easier for women to fight elections. Reservation bill will be a means for women’s upliftment, empowerment and development. They also said that a woman can understand women’s problems well. While some of the women respondents felt that there should not be 33 percent reservation for women in legislative bodies as women have proved their abilities in other fields, they should also prove themselves in the field of politics. They feel that

by asking reservation, women are proving that they are weak and inferior. They also felt that the women who were elected through reservation in the “panchayat” were just dolls taking orders from the male members or “sarpanchs”. Moreover, due to corruption and controversies women think that politics is a dirty field. It is the job of the government and judiciary to change the viewpoint of people regarding politics.

Membership in any Association or Political Party

Traditionally, women have been a dormant segment in Indian society. They were only a unit of the family but now due to the various socio-political processes which have been at work since the early twentieth century, have made the woman a significant unit of the society. She has now become a leader, a social figure and an important instrument of social change. According to Hate (1969)^[8], the extent of women’s participation in community life is the measure of social change in India.

In any society, women are victims of subjugation and aggression in varying degrees. This has led to coming up of a number of organizations working on multiple problems of women such as poverty, violence, health, dowry deaths and so on. Memberships to organizations or associations also indicate social participation. Organizations perform an important function of interest articulation. Membership or identification with a political party indicates a person’s political thinking and beliefs. They take up various issues from time to time which have impact on elections.

So, in order to know whether the women respondents were involved with any organization or association, they were asked, “Are you a member of any association or political party?” We had observed that none of the respondents were members of any association or political party and they preferred to work for the betterment of society on individual level as they had no faith in organizations and political parties. Very few of them were members of some associations such as mahila mandals”, “bhajan mandals”, “bal sansthas”, labour unions and doctor’s associations. These associations worked for economic upliftment of women by giving loans on low interest rates, some were involved in religious activities, and some worked for welfare of children and some of the organizations held free check-ups for the poor. They helped these organizations by collecting funds, by teaching and guiding the poor children, by counseling the women on various issues, by telling them about the legalities in case of a problem, by arranging lectures on health-related topics, by organizing free check-ups and by organizing “satsangs” and visits to religious places. While few were members of political party, few were corporators and they solved the common man’s problems by taking them to the higher authority. They also helped their parties by organizing meetings, by campaigning during elections and by creating political awareness among the people. Thus, it can be concluded that women’s participation in organizations is very limited. It seems that tradition and family commitments still rule women when it comes to their social life and though it has started it will take time to gather momentum.

Attitude towards increased Women’s Participation in Politics

Women are more looked upon as members of the family rather than as individuals in our patriarchal society. Women are confined to home-bound activities and the role of mother;

wife and daughter are seen as the natural roles for them. In these roles, most of their work goes unnoticed and it reduces her chances of wider participation in the economic, political or religious fields.

But, in recent decades, the country has been witnessing a change at the socio-economic front and a strong opinion is building up in favour of increasing women's involvement in the decision-making process of the government. It is believed that if women come into power the entire political system would be transformed. It is claimed that female leaders, by virtue of their sex, would act as a cohesive force to bring about social change due to their innate qualities as being loving, caring, sharing and sensitive in handling problems.

Majority of the respondents were of the opinion that increased women's participation in politics will bring qualitative changes in administration, they felt that with qualities such as understanding nature, affection, patience and sensitiveness in handling problems could make women good leaders and with more women in politics, women's problems would be solved, would raise the status of women and would lead to fast development of the nation that is a significant change. While some of the respondents felt that whether men or women once in power they became self-centered. They also said that the main decision-makers were men, moreover when a woman entered politics she became a mere puppet and her image was blemished, so politics was not the field for women.

Thus, it can be said that women are interested in politics but are doubtful about their success due to traditional values on one hand and due to increasing corruption, criminalization and muscle power in politics on the other hand.

Strategies for Enhancing Participation of Women in Politics:

The participation of women in politics and decision-making is influenced by the actions of political parties and the extent to which parties and the extent to which parties are committed to the promotion of women's involvement in politics. Quotas and reservations are a first step in increasing women's participation in the political world (UNIFEM, 2005). The following are the few strategic measures:

1. Create or Strengthen National Machineries and Other Governmental Bodies

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that everyone has the right to take part in the Government of his/her country. The empowerment and autonomy of women and the improvement of women's social, economic and political status is essential for the achievement of both transparent and accountable government and administration and sustainable development in all areas of life. Achieving the goal of equal participation of women and men in decision-making will provide a balance that more accurately reflects the composition of society and is needed in order to strengthen democracy and promote its proper functioning. Equality in political decision-making performs a leverage function without which it is highly unlikely that a real integration of the equality dimension in government policy-making is feasible. In this respect, women's equal participation in political life plays a pivotal role in the general process of the advancement of women. Women's equal participation in decision-making is not only a demand for simple justice or democracy but can also be seen as a necessary condition for women's interests to be taken into

account. Without the active participation of women and the incorporation of women's perspective at all levels of decision-making, the goals of equality, development and peace cannot be achieved.

The Platform for Action is an agenda for women's empowerment. It aims at accelerating the implementation of the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women and at removing all the obstacles to women's active participation in all spheres of public and private life through a full and equal share in economic, social, cultural and political decision-making. This means that the principle of shared power and responsibility should be established between women and men at home, in the workplace and in the wider national and international communities. Equality between women and men is a matter of human rights and a condition for social justice and is also a necessary and fundamental prerequisite for equality, development and peace. A transformed partnership based on equality between women and men is a condition for people-centered sustainable development. A sustained and long-term commitment is essential, so that women and men can work together for themselves, for their children and for society to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century.

In keeping with the commitments to the Beijing Platform for Action, national machineries and mechanisms have been set up in South Asian countries.

India started its institutional interventions for women about six decades ago. The Department of Women and Child Development (DWCD) is located within the Ministry of Human Resources Development of the Government of India, and several other agencies have been set up to work with women. The National Commission for Women (NCW) was established in 1992 through an Act of Parliament "to examine legal safeguards provided by the Constitution, recommend measures for their effective implementation and improvement, take *suo moto* notice of abuses of women's rights and correct these conditions in collaboration with the appropriate authorities", among others. The objective of the NCW is to represent the rights of women in India and to provide a voice for their issues and concerns. The subjects of their campaigns have included dowry, politics, religion, equal representation for women in jobs, and the exploitation of women for labour. They have also discussed police abuses against women. State level commissions for women have been set up in most states. Crimes against women cells have also been set up in most states to mediate between the police and survivors and violence. Legal-aid cells and all-women police stations have been initiated in some states. The National Crimes Records Bureau has been instituted for monitoring registered cases of violence against women, and recently district level bureaus have also been set up for the purpose.

India ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against women (CEDAW) in the year 1993. The Preamble of CEDAW states, "Discrimination against women violates the principles of equality of rights and respect for human dignity; is an obstacle to the participation of women, on equal terms with men, in the political, social, economic and cultural life of their countries; hampers the growth of the prosperity of society and the family and makes more difficult the full development of the potentialities of women in the service of their countries and of humanity".

The National Policy for Empowerment of Women, 2001 in India had the goal to bring about the advancement, development and empowerment of women. The Policy is widely disseminated in order to encourage active participation of all stakeholders for achieving its goals. Similarly, The National Mission for Empowerment of Women (NMEW) was launched by the Government of India on International Women's Day in 2010 with the aim to strengthen overall processes that promote all-round development of women. The mission had the mandate to strengthen the inter-sector convergence; facilitate the process of coordinating all the women's welfare and socio-economic development programmes across ministries and departments. In light with its mandate, the mission has been named Mission Purna Shakti, implying a vision for holistic empowerment of women. As expressed in the statement of the mission which is "to strengthen the processes which promote holistic development and empowerment of women, gender equality and gender justice through inter-sectoral convergence of programmes that impact women, forge synergy among various stakeholders and create an enabling environment conducive to social change", the mission aims to provide a single window service for all programmes run by the Government for Women under aegis of various Central Ministries.

In Bangladesh, the Ministry of Women's and Children's Affairs facilitates the mainstreaming of gender equality in all areas. Bhutan has a National Commission for Women and Children to coordinate and monitor gender-related issues. The Ministry of Gender, Family Development and Social Security in the Maldives implements its activities through the Gender Equality Council. The setting up of the Ministry of Women and Social Welfare in 1995 was deemed a path-breaking initiative for Nepal as there had been no women in the cabinet in the first half of the 1990s. The National Commission for Women, formed on Women's Day 2002, is entrusted with promoting the welfare of women.

The Government of Pakistan has developed institutional arrangements at the federal and provincial levels. A National Commission on the Status of Women was set up in 2000. A National Policy for Development and Empowerment of Women has been in place since 2002, which aims at gender equality and social, political and economic empowerment of women.

Sri Lanka's Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Social Welfare acts through the National Commission on Women (NCW) by monitoring the implementation of the Women's Charter of 1993, the national document that provides for the eradication of sex-based discrimination, enhanced gender equality and standards in the areas of political rights, education, health, and also violence against women.

CEDAW observed that in every country in South Asia, the "national machinery is weak in implementation" without distinction as to whether the national machinery has a ministry level status or not. The challenge of promoting gender equality and advancing women's status does not end with the creation of an implementing office. Almost all countries highlighted the lack of resources for institutional machineries looking into women's programmes in the region. National machineries for the advancement of women are also bogged down by the same stereotypes and prejudices that women face in society. The Third Beijing Biennial Regional Ministerial Meeting aptly observed the "marginalization of women's issue." The change of mindset

about women and about gender relations is necessary for the successful realization of governmental commitments.

2. Integrate Gender Perspectives in Legislation, Public Policies, Programmes and Projects

With a view to implementing international commitments made through the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA), CEDAW, and other instruments, as also continuing efforts at perspective building can be seen across South Asia. The recent trend at gender budgeting exercise in most countries in South Asia intends to highlight the existing biases and suggest ways of promoting equality. Gender budgeting is not a separate budget for women, but an analysis of the government budget to see what its gender-differentiated impacts are, and to enable better translation of policy commitments into resource commitments. A gender sensitive budget is one that improves the gender balance in outcomes and more effective targeting of expenditures. It is one of the most recent and effective tools for gender mainstreaming. Governments may allocate budgets for a certain purpose but given gender differentials in society, the impact on men and women, boys and girls is not the same. The challenge is to provide budgets and programmes that are able to counter pre-existing social biases.

3. Generate and Disseminate Sex-disaggregated Data and Information for Planning and Evaluation

A conscious effort is needed to generate nuanced information on the situation of women and men from the household level and upwards to ensure realistic inputs to planning and policy making. Sex-disaggregated data is crucial to counter the long-standing issue of women's invisibility.

4. Increase Women's Participation and Leadership (Capacity Building, Gender Training and Awareness Raising)

As women are relatively new to politics at the local level, capacity building and training in political processes are extremely important across South Asia. In Bangladesh gender training is being conducted in the National Institute for Local government for ward commissioners, government official, etc. The programme schedule includes women's empowerment, gender and development, women's rights etc. Programmes are also conducted by NGOs on awareness raising and sensitization for political empowerment of citizens. In India, both government and non-governmental organizations conduct capacity building programmes for elected women members. In Kerala, systematic gender training programmes for women in panchayats have been conducted and technical training on gender budgeting imparted.

Conclusion

To secure women's rightful place in society and to enable them to decide their own destiny and for the growth of genuine and sustainable democracy, women's participation in politics is essential. This will not only uplift their personality but will open the way for their social and economic empowerment. Their participation in public life will solve many problems of society. Gandhiji had written in 1929: "Women is the embodiment of sacrifice and suffering, and her advent into public life should, therefore, result in purifying it, in restraining unbridled ambition and accumulation of property".

It is supposed that women's participation will clean the politics and bring more transparency in administration. More women representation would expand areas of co-operation, reduce unnecessary irritants, and develop reciprocity in goodwill and mutual confidence. Equal participation of women would change the political face of the globe, and will also open a new vista of co-operation, amity and growth. Swami Vivekananda rightly observed: a civilization could be judged by the way it treats its women. If a true democratic and equitable society is to be created then women from all segments, including the less privileged, must be given a voice in decisions that affected their lives and that of their family.

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