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Factors impeding women's political participation - A literature review

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Abstract

Gender equality in political participation is a fundamental aspect of modern democratic governance. Under international standards, both men and women should have equal rights and opportunities to participate fully in all aspects and at all levels of political processes. Although, women have made great strides forward in obtaining a vote and right to be elected to political offices in many countries, they comprise less than 11 per cent of the Members of Parliament. Though the various legislative enactment and different commissions established for promoting gender equality, gender disparity still exists particularly in political arena too. Promoting women's participation in politics is one of the core areas of women empowerment. The presence of women in the decision-making levels not only enhances their social, political and economic status, but also strengthens democratic institutions by making them more inclusive and meaningful. Though women have achieved greater strides still they are unable to participate in politics due to political, socio-economic, ideological and psychological factors. To have strong democratic governance, women's equal participation is must and therefore their contribution to this processes needs to be analyzed in the appropriate context. There cannot be a real democracy if the voices and issues of women that constitute half the population of the country are ignored or sidelined. Thus this paper analyzes the challenges and issues of women in participating at national and local governance.

Keywords: Democracy, Gender, Gender Equality, Governance, Political Participation

1. Introduction

Over the decades, the issues concerning women have taken on new dimensions and received varied treatment by the United Nations and its specialized agencies. The principle of equality of men and women was recognised in the United Nations Charter (1945), and subsequently in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). In spite of the international declarations affirming the rights and equality between men and women still constitute a disproportionately small percentage of those participating in political decision-making and leadership. Many global conferences, including the Cairo Conference on Population and Development (1994), the Fourth World Conference on Women (1995), and the World Summit for Social Development (1995) have recognised that, despite the progress made globally in improving status of women, gender disparities still exist, especially in regard to participation in electoral politics. The low participation of women in these positions affects their progress in improving the legal and regulatory framework for promoting gender equality since very few women are influencing the legislative process. The rationale for promoting women's participation in political dispensation is based on equity, equality and development.

2. Obstacles to Women's Political Participation In India

These factors may be categorized in the following areas:

- Political,
- Socio-economic,
- Ideological and Psychological factors.

Political Factors

Political factors is further categorized into:

- Masculine Model of Politics

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- Lack of Party Support
- Lack of Cooperation with Women's Organizations
- Absence of Well – developed Education and Training Systems
- Nature of the Electoral Systems

Masculine Model of Politics

Historically, Political life is organized according to male norms and values and in some cases, even male lifestyles. For example, the political model is based on the idea of “winners and losers”, competition and confrontation, rather than on mutual respect, collaboration and consensus building. This environment is often alien to women. The existence of this male-dominated model results in either women rejecting politics altogether or rejecting male-style politics. Thus, when women do participate in politics, they tend to do so in small numbers.

Differences between men and women also appear with respect to the content and priorities of decision-making, which are determined by the interests, backgrounds and working patterns of both sexes. Women tend to give priority to societal concerns, such as social security, national health care and children's issues.

The male-dominated working pattern is further reflected in the parliamentary work schedule, which is often characterized by lack of supportive structures for working mothers in general and

for women MPs in particular. Women are overstretched and overworked, since in addition to their party and constituency work, they have to serve on various committees, network with women within their parties, at multi-party levels and with women outside parliament. Furthermore, they have to play the role of mother, wife, sister and grandmother. Presently, most parliamentary programme and sitting times are not adjusted to take into consideration of dual burden that women carry. Many women MPs, Elected Women Representatives, Women Councilors and Women Ward members struggle to balance family life with the demands of work that often involve late hours, travel and few facilities.

Lack of Party Support

Women play important roles in campaigning and mobilizing support for their parties, yet they rarely occupy decision-making positions in these structures. Although political parties possess resources for conducting election campaigns, women do not benefit from these resources. The selection and nomination process within political parties is also biased against women in that “male characteristics” are emphasized and often become the criteria in selecting candidates.

“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.”

The above quote of Sushma Swaraj (Union External Affairs Minister) gives a glimpse of reality that how women have to face so many problems and criticisms while entering the politics.

Lack of Cooperation with Women's Organizations

Although governments might declare their commitment to democratic forms of change, it is nevertheless unrealistic to expect governments alone to secure women's rightful place in all spheres of society. Civil society in general, including non-governmental organizations and women's groups, must play a role in advancing women's representation. To achieve gender balance in political life, it is necessary to ensure that commitment to equality is reflected in laws and national policies. Affirmative action is a necessary tool to maintain at least 50 per cent of women at all levels of decision-making. Women must also think carefully about their own goals, strategies and tactics. It is important to assist women already in governance to be able to deliver on their promises and to equip them with the necessary skills and strategies to ensure that women's issues are taken into account in the debate and discourse that takes place in parliament. In order to empower and enable women to participate in politics, it is necessary to extend the scope of women's involvement at the grass-roots level of women's movements and among local elected bodies. This also constitutes an important step towards confidence-building and facilitates the sharing of experiences.

Absence of Well – developed Education and Training Systems

Expanding the pool of women who are qualified for recruitment in political careers is also needed. This can be done by giving women access, from an early stage, to work patterns that are conducive to political leadership, such as special training in community-based or neighbourhood organizations. Common understanding of the concerns of women, gendered political awareness-raising, lobbying skills and networking are important for the process of training women for political careers. Gender Sensitization training programme for both genders would also provide a platform for gender parity in politics.

Nature of the Electoral Systems

The type of electoral system of a country plays an important part in women's political representation, especially in the developed world. Gender bias in electoral process prevents women in entering into politics. Most argue that proportional representation systems are better suited than majoritarian systems in increasing women's representation.

Socio-Economic Obstacles

It includes:

- Feminization of Poverty
- The Triple Burden

Feminization of Poverty

The feminization of poverty describes a phenomenon in which women represent a disproportionate percentage of the world's poor. This trend is not only a consequence of lack of income, but also of lack of opportunities due to gender biases and fixed gender roles in societies.

The causes of the Feminization of Poverty are family composition, family organization, inequality in the access to public services, Inequality in social protection and labor market finally legal, paralegal and cultural constrains in public life.

The Triple Burden

In all most all countries women are carrying a disproportionate share of domestic work. It must be recognized that it is difficult for women to participate in political life when their major concern is survival and to spend much of their time to fulfill the basic needs of families. In addition to that, however, some women may have full-time careers (e.g., as teachers, lawyers, doctors). Becoming a women politician in these conditions might then be considered a third full-time job.

Ideological and Psychological Hindrances

Ideological and psychological hindrances for women in entering in to politics include the following:

- Gender ideology and cultural patterns, as well as pre-determined social roles assigned to women and men;
- Women's lack of confidence to run for elections;
- Women's perception of politics as a “dirty” game; and
- The way in which women are portrayed in the mass media.

Traditional Roles

In many countries, traditions continue to emphasize and often dictate, women's primary role as mothers and housewives. A traditional, strong, patriarchal value system favours sexually segregated roles and so-called “traditional cultural values” militate against the advancement, progress and participation of women in any political process. Societies all over the world are dominated by an ideology about “a woman's place”. According to this perception, women should only play the role of “working mother”, which is generally low-paid and apolitical.

Lack of Confidence

Lack of confidence in themselves is one of the main reasons for women's under-representation in formal political institutions. With confidence and determination women can reach the highest levels in the political process. That is why women should believe in themselves and should do away with the widespread perception that men have to be their leaders. Women are equal to and have the same potential as men, but only they can fight for their rights. Women are very good campaigners, organizers and support mobilizers, but fear sometimes prevents women from contesting elections and from participating in political life.

The Perception of Politics as “Dirty”

The perception that politics is a dirty game is simply unfortunate. Politics may be a difficult game, fraught with dangers, but it doesn't have to be dirty. In many countries, women perceive politics as a “dirty” game. This has jarred women's confidence in their ability to confront political processes. Corruption, bribery and extortion create wrong perception about the politics and prevents women to enter into politics. In fact, such a perception is prevalent worldwide.

Although the perception of corruption may not always be a fair reflection of the actual state of affairs, it is itself having an impact on women's attitude towards a political career. The countries with a small or moderate degree of corruption seem to have a higher rate of women's representation in elected bodies. For example, Norway, Finland, Sweden, Denmark and New Zealand are perceived as the least

corrupt and in these countries women MPs comprise from 30 per cent to 43.4 per cent.

The Role of Mass Media

Media is the source of information for every citizen. People get political news and information through television, newspapers, magazines, radio and news websites. Media plays a significant role in determining how women in politics and decision-making bodies are viewed and perceived by society in general. It does not only play an important role in shaping the values of society but also reflects those values. It plays the role of an informer, educator and a mediator for social change. Media, which is considered to be the best medium of creating awareness among society, needs to play a proactive role. In case of highlighting women's issues, media role has been a matter of debate. Media stereotyped the image of women as homemakers and limited to private sphere only. It sometimes does not focus on woman's political performance. Their values, beliefs and experiences are not only overlooked by the media but also their interest in political participation is criticized citing the reasons of cultural beliefs.

Media should recognize women politicians, their voices, their contributions in decision- making and highlight women's issues and also appreciate the work done by women in order to increase their inclination towards political system. During electoral campaigns, media houses and publications should provide gender-sensitive coverage of elections. These information tools should avoid negative stereotypes of women and highlight women's image as effective leaders of the country.

3. Conclusion

It is appropriate to conclude this article that excluding women from positions of power and from elected bodies impoverishes the development of democratic principles in public life and inhibits the economic development of a society. Male dominated political institutions of government do not promote women or women's issues. Thus it remains imperative to emphasize that women themselves must organize and mobilize their networks, learn to communicate their interests with different organizations and push for mechanisms to enhance their own representation.

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