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Rural elected women representatives: Major issues and challenges: A study

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Abstract

Women constitute half of the population. Issue of political empowerment of women has attracted global attention. The United Nations (UN) adopted Convention on the Political Rights of Women in 1952. UN has organized four World Conferences on Women. Fourth was held in Beijing in 1995 and it declared that 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. It also affirmed that women should have at least a 30% share of decision making positions. This paper tries to explain the Rural Elected Women Representatives: Major Issues and Challenges.

Keywords: Political participation, women empowerment, equality, liberation, modernization, marginalized

Introduction

Women's political participation is required to change the world with new priorities. Empowerment is not for domination but for the right to choose and ability to influence the social and political processes. Women's empowerment is the initial phase of their liberation, freedom, equality as well as long run goal of their political participation. Indian women's involvement in politics in the modern era started in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The main goal was to do away with the traditional Indian practices through abolition of female infanticide, sati, child marriage and the laws prohibiting widows to marry. Lack of education and lack of knowledge about intricacies of party politics among many non-elite women have limited their participation in the formal political arena. The role of money, corruption in politics and growing violence against women have constrained many potential activists. Although India has achieved growth and industrialization but she has nonetheless failed to achieve growth with justice because the development has totally bypassed the needs of Indian women and their substantial contribution to economic wealth. Despite their demographic majority and substantive work performances at the global level women continue to be considered as 'a marginal component' of the world economy. Women's poor health is generally indicated by the declining sex ratio and their higher mortality rates. The majority of population still considers girls to be unwanted burden and that is why they are by and large excluded from the ownership of land and deprived of their rights.

In addition, the tradition bound patriarchal structures have denied women access to resources and power. A prerequisite for any human being is to participate in useful careers even institutions of marriage and family. But customs and religion limit women's equality and their equal status in society. Discriminatory practices and biases prevail on women in all walks of life, whether in education, employment, at home, work place or outside. There should be no disparity with regard to their position in policy making. Much of the work women perform has been officially described as "non-economic activity". Another irony is that women are the main food growers and providers, but always receive less food as compared to men whereas women often have greater nutritional needs than men because of long hours of physical labour, pregnancy or lactation.

Social progress of the developing nations is evidently being seen largely in the hands of women. Sustainable development can't be achieved without the empowerment of women particularly in planning and decision making. So women need to have higher education, better health facilities, greater participation in modernized sector, self-respect, higher

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standard of living and equal rights etc. So the state is always expected to protect the special interests of women. For that matter Indian Constitution provides equal rights and prohibits all sorts of discriminations against women. Art. 14, 15 and 16 clearly prescribe that it shall be the duty of every citizen to renounce practice derogatory to the dignity of women. Art. 39(a), 39(b), 39(e) and 42 of the Directive Principles of State Policy have far reaching implications for provisions of better working conditions and conditions of work for women workers. The state also imposes a fundamental duty on every citizen to denounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women. To uphold the constitutional mandate, the state has enacted various legislative measures from time to time intended to ensure equal rights, to counter social discrimination in various forms of violence and atrocities and to provide support services especially to working women. In spite of all that, there is contained inequality and vulnerability of women in all sectors- social, economic, political, healthcare and legal. As usually women are oppressed in all spheres of life, so they need to be empowered in all walks of life.

In order to ensure empowerment, in political arena, the issue of reservation of one-third of the seats for women at grass-root level was taken up by different organizations. Accordingly, government passed 73rd and 74th amendments mandating reservation of one-third of the seats for women in all villages, block and district level elected bodies. This enactment laid a strong foundation for women's participation at grass-root level decision making and their political leadership & empowerment in politics. There is also the same quota for women in positions of chairpersons and deputy chairpersons in these institutions. Since the Panchayati Raj Institution plays a vital role in ensuring people's participation in the development process, it is felt that political empowerment of women through reservation of seats in PRI will train them up in exercising their power in decision making and remove social and economic discrimination against them. Prior to the 73rd Amendment, Many states introducing new panchayati Raj Acts one third allocated for women. It seems that the 73rd Amendment Act which came into force in April 24, 1993 marked a turning point in the realm of Panchayati Raj. It was described as a "giant step towards a participatory democracy."

Government may offer welfare schemes and float different programs but they can be of use only when women themselves come forward for self empowerment. The success or failure of any development plan in education, family planning, community program, health and nutrition etc. depend upon the involvement and participation of women in these programs. Women in India are under privileged in many ways. Formal education is costly and long term process. Lack of knowledge about complexities of party politics limit their participation in politics. Therefore, it is essential to develop mass media for eradication of illiteracy and spread of basic education among women. Rapid social change can be brought by accelerating the pace of modernization because it brings attitudinal and behavioural changes among the women.

Political modernization enables participation of women in the decision-making process at various levels of caste, religion, language, ethnicity, class or sex. Therefore, by picking up process of modernization process, political participation of women can be enhanced. Meaningful and effective participation in policy formulation by rural women

would not only bring about successful implementation of development programs but also create confidence in them in their own abilities and capacities. Participation helps women to be catalysts in sustainable development by generating 'women-friendly' knowledge and acting together, the rural women could create power to make dynamic socio-economic and political changes in their village situation which shall have far reaching consequences. The participatory process will provide them with an opportunity to empower themselves and help them to protect their human rights. The participation in political discussions not only indicates women's confidence in the democratic process but also suggest their openness to other ideas.

Balwant Rai Mehta Committee suggested for decentralization of power. It argued that people at village level should have power to decide their priorities and build their development structure. If women are made effective participants in development it will have two basic advantages, one, theoretically the women would have statutory position in the task of development administration, second, the empowerment would give a new momentum to rural development.

Under the new Panchayati Raj system in many parts of our country the elected women could execute different rural development programs in spite of resistance from other members. As Panchayat members women have stood up for social issues, which are affecting their lives. The successful cases of women Panchayat members from Himachal Pradesh indicate that they have been making efforts for many developmental works like construction of primary schools and village roads, the electricity supply and drinking water in their villages. Similarly active participation of women at grass root level in some villages of Madhya Pradesh have promoted welfare of women and solved many local level problems.

There is no lack of potential and confidence among rural women but they happen to face gender specific barriers while discharging their duties being elected members of Panchayat mainly due to following reasons viz.

- Lack of awareness about their rights, powers and duties as Panchayat members and lack of information about development and welfare schemes of various government departments make them dependent upon the bureaucrats.
- The rural elite control the socio-economic power and enjoy de-facto status by getting their women folk elected to women reserved seats.
- Illiteracy and financial dependence of elected women representatives on their male counterparts cause major hurdle in the way of their functioning independently.
- Reluctance of state government to transfer funds to the PRI.
- Increasing tendency of corrupt practices in the form of misuse of funds provided for social welfare schemes meant for weaker sections.
- Indulgence of political parties hinders the smooth functioning of PRI. Marginalized women have social handicaps and constraints of various kinds.

Constitutional Provisions for Women Representation in PRIs

- The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 mandates 33.3% reservation for women in PRIs across the country.

- The 73rd Amendment envisages the Gram Sabha as the foundation of the Panchayat Raj System to perform functions and powers entrusted to it by the State Legislatures.
- This has been increased to 50% reservation in several states like Andhra Pradesh, Chattisgarh, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Bihar etc.
- Out of the 30.41 lakh elected representatives of PRIs, 13.74 lakh (45.2%) are women.
- Article 15 (3) to the Constitution of India empowers the State to make special provisions for women.
- Article 243D provides that one-third of the total number of seats and offices of the Chairpersons in PRIs at each level shall be reserved for women to be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a Panchayat.
- Such reservations of seats and offices of the chairpersons for women are also within the reservations for SCs and STs in all three tiers of PRIs.
- In order to bring about 50% reservation for women in Panchayats in all States, the 110th Constitution Amendment Bill was introduced in the Lok Sabha in 2009, but it was not passed despite being tabled several times.

Challenges Before Women in PRIs

- **Patriarchy:** Many women are not allowed to contest

elections and many continue to work as proxies for their male family members. Their male co-workers show insensitivity and may refuse to cooperate. Burden of household responsibilities, purdah (veil) system and domestic violence negatively affect their functioning.

- **Inadequate Capacities:** Majority of women representatives enter into public life for the first time and do not have enough knowledge and skills to handle affairs of panchayats. Training programmes conducted by government training agencies are unable to cover all elected representatives in time.
- **Violent Opposition:** Women often face more resistance from the community if they want to take bold steps. They are also subjected to violence from powerful elements of the society.
- **Two Child Norm:** A few States like Odisha and Rajasthan have the two child norm for contesting panchayat elections. In rural areas women hardly have any say in the number of children in the family and such laws restrict their entry into panchayats.
- **Caste System:** Hierarchical caste system in rural India makes it difficult for women from SC and ST communities to work independently and effectively.
- **Lack of Women at Other Levels:** Lack of women coworkers and at higher administrative level also hinders the free functioning of women representatives.

Table 1: Number of Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in the country, State/Union Territory-wise

State / UTs	Total PRI Representatives	Total EWRs
Andaman & Nicobar Islands	858	306
Andhra Pradesh	156050	78,025
Arunachal Pradesh	9383	3,658
Assam	26754	14,609
Bihar	136573	71,046
Chhattisgarh	170465	93,392
Dadra & Nagar Haveli	147	47
Daman & Diu	192	92
Goa	1555	571
Gujarat	144080	71,988
Haryana	70035	29,499
Himachal Pradesh	28723	14,398
Jammu & Kashmir	39850	13,224
Jharkhand	59638	30,757
Karnataka	101954	51,030
Kerala	18372	9,630
Ladakh	NA	NA
Lakshadweep	110	41
Madhya Pradesh	392981	196490
Maharashtra	240635	128677
Manipur	1736	880
Odisha	107487	56,627
Puducherry	NA	NA
Punjab	100312	41,922
Rajasthan	126271	64,802
Sikkim	1153	580
Tamil Nadu	106450	56,407
Telangana	103468	52,096
Tripura	6646	3,006
Uttar Pradesh	913417	304538
Uttarakhand	62796	35,177
West Bengal	59229	30,458
Total	3187320	1453973

To improve women's position in PRI there is an urgent need of improving the access of women to development schemes

for ensuring their rightful place in the decision-making process. Towards this objective

- A Task Force under an eminent person should be set up to review all existing legislation and Government schemes pertaining to the role of women in PRI.
 - Women-centric programs should reach women in the same manner as they have been executed.
 - Gender sensitizing training must be provided to the male members of Gram Panchayat for proper implementation of rehabilitation and welfare service schemes.
 - All members irrespective of their caste and sex enjoy benefits of welfare schemes.
 - Expansion of educational opportunities, regulatory services and awareness programs for women.
 - For socio-economic upliftment a short duration employment training program at the nearest possible place should be provided.
 - Transparency and accountability on the part of Government secretaries should be ensured.
 - Interference by political parties in the functioning of Gram Panchayats should be minimized.
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Although adequate policing and administrative efforts have been taken by the Government in the form of 73rd and 74th amendments and women have been given crucial role in the management of PRI and cohesive development of society, there is a strong need to change the mindset of society towards women. They themselves should also understand their potential in terms of their personal, social, economic and political rights to wipe out gender inequalities prevailing in all spheres be it education, health, economic opportunities or political participation.

Conclusion

The current proposal is a welcome step. However, the government must bear in mind that equality in representation is not enough to ensure socio-political equity among genders, as the relatively disadvantaged position of women must be taken into account. Increasing women in PRIs will increase the probability of their better representation in parliament, which as of now is only 14%.

To further promote women participation in PRIs, emphasis must be made for gender sensitization of male elected representatives and functionaries of PRIs. In capacity building of women representatives, governments must also invite and involve civil society organizations, women's groups, academic institutions, corporate social responsibility foundations and also international organizations like U N Women. A multi-stakeholder, collaborative, multi-pronged, systematic effort to enhance the capacities of Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) are required.

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