

Empowering Women: A Study of Political Participation in Indian Democracy

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Abstract

Political participation of women is essential for the functioning and vitality of any democracy. In India, despite constitutional provisions and various initiatives, women's participation in politics remains significantly lower than that of men. This study aims to delve into the factors influencing women's political participation in Indian democracy and explore avenues for their empowerment in the political sphere. Through a comprehensive analysis of existing literature, data, and case studies, this article examines socio-cultural, economic, and institutional barriers that hinder women's entry into politics. Additionally, it highlights successful initiatives and policy measures undertaken at various levels to enhance women's political participation. The study underscores the importance of addressing structural inequalities, promoting gender-sensitive policies, and fostering a conducive environment for women's engagement in politics. By advocating for inclusive and equitable political representation, this research contributes to the ongoing discourse on women's empowerment and democratic governance in India.

Keywords: Women's political Participation; Indian Democracy; Gender Equality; Empowerment; Barriers; Initiatives; Policy Measures.

INTRODUCTION

Women's political participation is not only a matter of fundamental rights but also a crucial element for the effective functioning of democratic governance.¹ In India, despite

significant progress in various socio-economic indicators, women's representation in political decision-making remains disproportionately low.² This article aims to analyze the intricate dynamics of women's political participation in the Indian context, identifying barriers and exploring avenues for their empowerment. In Indian democracy, Constitution has granted equal rights to women like men and several laws have been enacted by successive governments to realize the goal of equal representation in politics, but the ground reality is different in actual terms. In real life treatment to women is based on biases and discriminations.³ Definitely, the Indian politics does not stand for a fair status of women in practice.⁴

Women's political rights in India, there exists a wide gap between theory and practice.⁵ Political participation identifies and accepts the equal distribution of liberty, status, dignity, opportunities

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and authority between men and women as its prime values. It is not enough if these values are only legally guaranteed and rest are only in the law books and the constitution, but are never actually practiced. Very often they have to face discrimination, injustice and dishonour in politics.⁶

Socio-Cultural Barriers:

India's patriarchal societal norms and deep rooted gender stereotypes pose significant barriers to women's political participation.⁷ Cultural expectations often confine women to domestic roles, limiting their mobility and political agency. Moreover, prevalent notions of 'appropriate' behavior and leadership traits reinforce gender biases, deterring women from entering politics.⁸

Economic Constraints:

Economic disparities and unequal access to resources further marginalize women in political spheres.⁹ Financial constraints, lack of education, and limited employment opportunities constrain women's ability to actively engage in politics.¹⁰ Additionally, the absence of adequate support mechanisms such as childcare facilities impedes women's participation, particularly those from marginalized communities.¹¹

Institutional Challenges:

Structural impediments within political institutions perpetuate gender disparities in representation. Male dominated party structures, limited access to decision-making positions, and electoral violence deter women from contesting elections. Moreover, inadequate implementation of legal frameworks, such as reservation quotas for women in local bodies, undermines their effective participation.¹²

Initiatives and Policy Measures:

Despite challenges, several initiatives and policy measures have been implemented to enhance women's political participation in India. The introduction of reservations for women in local governance institutions, such as Panchayati Raj institutions, has significantly increased their representation at the grassroots level. Additionally, awareness campaigns, capacity building programs, and targeted financial support schemes have been instrumental in encouraging women to enter politics.¹³

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

To understand the discrimination of women in politics.

To analyze the Poor participation of Women in party politics.

To know the increasing violence and criminalization in politics.

To suggest measures for bring in women force in politics.

METHODOLOGY

This study is fully based on secondary data. The data was collected from books, magazines, research articles, newspapers, documents and websites.

Discrimination of Women in Political Aspects:

Participation of women in political structures implies the degree of equality and freedom enjoyed by women in shaping and sharing of society to the role of women. In most societies men have always monopolized the political space. Until and unless marginalized sections of society which include women get into the political system of power, true democracy cannot be realized.

In the 1952 elections, many women contested and were given positions in the central and state cabinets or appointed as ambassadors and governors. However, after the initial enthusiasm, women's participation in the political process declined both as voters and contestants at no time has women's representation in Parliament and State Assemblies gone beyond 8 or 11 percent.

When India's first Lok Sabha was formed after the 1952 general elections, 4.4% of the members were female. Though the number was low reflective of the deeply entrenched patriarchy in India's society it is worth noting that India was ahead of western and seasoned democracies of the time like the US and the UK. Merely 3% of the UK's parliament and 2% of the US House of Representatives was female.

Women in Lok Sabha 1952-2019

Year	Total Seats	Women Members	Percentage to Total
1952	499	22	4.4
1957	500	27	5.4

Table Cont..

1962	503	34	6.7
1967	523	31	5.9
1971	521	22	4.2
1977	544	19	3.4
1980	544	28	5.1
1984	544	44	8.1
1989	517	28	5.41
1991	544	36	6.61
1996	543	40	7.4
1998	543	44	8.1
1999	543	48	8.83
2004	543	45	8.28
2009	543	59	10.86
2014	543	66	12.45
2019	543	78	14

Source: Election Commission of India

Minimum Representation of Women in Lok Sabha

The representation of women in the Lok Sabha has been very poor since 1952 elections itself. For example, in 1952, there were 22 women Parliamentarians constituting only 4.4%, that is, out of a total of 499. In the 12th Lok Sabha, (1998) their number increased only to 44, that is out of the total strength of 543. In no previous elections, women's representation in the Parliament had exceeded this mark of 8.8%. This means women who constitute 50% of the total population do not even get 10% of the representation in the Parliament. In the 13th and the 14th Lok Sabha Elections also representation of women is less than 10%. In the 15th Lok Sabha Elections representation of women is less than 11%. Two things are clear from the above table. There is male domination in Indian politics and almost all political parties give very little participation to women in election despite their vocal support for 33 per cent reservation of seats for women in Parliament and Provincial Legislatures. Women have made initiatives in political participation but they have not been accepted in politics. We can conclude from the analysis of the table above that women lag behind their male counterparts in politics even in 21st century.

Poor participation of Women in party politics:

Not only in the legislative bodies but even within the framework of the political parties also

the participation of women is very poor. Political parties are still male-dominated and unwilling to give sufficient representation to women. For example, in 2001 the Congress party had only 3 women in its 20-member working Committee. In the BJP working Committee, out of 75 members there were only 8 women, and in its 650-member National Council, there were only 150 women. The Communist Party Marxists had only 12 women in its 150-member National council, and 3 women in its 21-member National Executive. At the state and district levels also the picture of this representation is more or less the same. No political party is ready to give representation to women in proportion to their strength in the population.

Increasing Violence and criminalization in politics:

Political corruption, criminalization of politics, erosion of political values, disappearance of political decency, instability, lawlessness, terrorism and confusion have been increasing in our public life since 1980s. This state of confused political situation has discouraged women from taking active role in politics. Besides this the cultural constructions of gender roles, in the absence of adequate support structures in the family and domestic responsibilities cannot completely be done away with, once she becomes a people's representatives.

Women's Political Participation Challenges

1. **Socio-Cultural Barriers:** Traditional gender roles and social expectations often prevent women from actively participating in politics. Cultural norms dictate that the main role of women is in the family and may limit their opportunities to participate in political activities.
2. **Limited access to education:** In many parts of India, especially in rural areas, women have limited access to education. Lack of education can prevent them from effectively participating in the political process, such as understanding politics, running for office, or voting.
3. **Lack of financial resources:** Political participation often requires financial resources, such as campaign financing or membership fees for political parties. Women, especially those from marginalized communities, may lack the financial resources to actively participate in politics.

4. **Political violence and intimidation:** Women in politics often face threats of violence and intimidation from their own communities or from rival political groups. This can prevent women from seeking political office or engaging in political activism.
5. **Under-representation in political institutions:** Despite constitutional provisions and affirmative action policies, women are under-represented in Indian political institutions such as Parliament, state legislatures and local bodies. These errors point to persistent barriers to women's political participation.
6. **Party politics and patriarchal structure:** Political parties in India are often dominated by male leaders and operate in a patriarchal structure. This can make it difficult for women to join party ranks or find support for their political ambitions.
7. **Media bias and stereotyping:** female politicians in India often face bias coverage and stereotyping in the media, which can damage their image and effectiveness as political leaders. A media persona can focus more on their appearance or personal life than their political achievements and ideas.
8. **Legal and Institutional Challenges:** Although the legal framework promotes gender equality, enforcement mechanisms are weak and can lead to discrimination against women in politics. Institutional biases and bureaucratic obstacles can hinder women's political participation.
9. **Gender and intersectional discrimination:** Intersectional discrimination based on caste, religion or ethnic factors can exacerbate the challenges of women in politics, especially from marginalized communities.
10. **Lack of support infrastructure:** Women often lack support infrastructure, such as childcare facilities or transportation options, needed to balance political responsibilities and domestic obligations.

Findings and Suggestions

Women can be brought at par with men only after providing them in practice all social, economic and political equality and equal rights and through educational empowerment. It is necessary for the protection of women's human rights that every woman is educated, made aware of available legal rights and in practice she is provided with her due

legal rights. Education is the best instrument of bringing awareness in any society and by including them in the mainstream of development.¹⁴ At the same time women have to come forward to struggle for their rights. In fact, the struggle for women's rights is a struggle for human welfare and democracy. Democracy could only be strengthened after women empowerment. The establishment of real democracy in India is only possible when we bring men and women at equal pedestal in social, economic and political spheres. Democracy in the family will establish social and economic democracy which can establish and empower in real terms true political democracy in the country.¹⁵

Fundamentally India is a male dominant society where in all privileges were male oriented. Women were denied basic rights and discrimination is obvious in every walk of life. Indian women, by and large, educationally backward, socially and economically dependent, she was assured, the unique pride of the mother hood of man, and unparalleled influence in the shaping of the society, has had lived through suppression, exploration and ill treatment at the hands of man.¹⁶

Despite governmental concern and official attention to these issues of women, a large proportion of women living in the country both, in the rural and urban areas, continue to experience and suffer from acute inequalities, deprivation, exploitation and violence. Official and unofficial data collected and various indicators applied to assess the position of women, reveal that only a small number of women have been benefited from these measures. Majority of women will occupy a lower status than men in power, wealth and opportunity. Therefore, more efforts are made to bring in women force in policy-making and public life in the years to come.¹⁷ Women should also make use of the opportunities and provisions provided to them and try to come to the mainstream both in administration and public life. Moreover, it is the moral obligation of all including the Media, Educational Institutions, NGO, Governmental Machineries, Feminists, Political and Socio-Religious Leaders to fight injustice and uphold individual dignity.

CONCLUSION

Efforts to empower women politically are integral to fostering inclusive and representative democracies. Addressing socio-cultural, economic, and institutional barriers is essential for enhancing women's political participation in India. By promoting gender sensitive policies, mainstreaming

gender perspectives, and fostering an enabling environment, Indian democracy can harness the full potential of women as active agents of change and progress. It is imperative for policymakers, civil society, and other stakeholders to collaborate in advancing gender equality and ensuring women's meaningful participation in political processes.

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