



Women Empowerment and Political Participation

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ABSTRACT: Studies show higher numbers of women in parliament generally contribute to stronger attention to women's issues. Women's political participation is a fundamental prerequisite for gender equality and genuine democracy. It facilitates women's direct engagement in public decision-making and is a means of ensuring better accountability to women.

Political accountability to women begins with increasing the number of women in decision-making positions, but it cannot stop there. What is required are gender-sensitive governance reforms that will make all elected officials more effective at promoting gender equality in public policy and ensuring their implementation.

One of the pillars of UN Women's work is advancing women's political participation and good governance, to ensure that decision-making processes are participatory, responsive, equitable and inclusive. Efforts are focused through strategic entry points that can advance the status of women by catalysing wide-ranging, long-term impacts.

Support is provided to equip women to translate the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), now ratified by the majority of the world's governments, into legal guarantees of gender equality. Another strategy is through working with multiple stakeholders, like women's organizations, governments, the UN system and the private sector, to bring more women into government, train women leaders, and boost women's skills to actively participate in elections as candidates and voters.

KEYWORDS; women, empowerment, political, participation, parliament, governments

I.INTRODUCTION

Gender equality and women's empowerment remain critical development issues in many countries worldwide. Achieving women's representation in elected institutions in equal proportion to men is essential to establishing the credibility and legitimacy of parliaments, national assemblies, and local governments. However, even though women comprise half of the world's population, they only make up about 20 percent of parliamentary representation.[1,2,3]

UNDP works with governments worldwide to combat discriminatory legislation and policies and improve gender equality outcomes in policymaking by creating structures and strategic plans to enhance women's political participation and gender equality. UNDP has facilitated the creation of such systems in many countries, recognizing their essential role in empowering women as parliamentary representatives, supporting the emergence of gender-sensitive parliaments, and adopting gender-sensitive policy and legislative frameworks.

It is a challenging environment where barriers to women's participation in governance, including patriarchal gender norms, continue to exist. In contexts of closing democratic space and a backlash against gender equality, UNDP is well positioned with its knowledge of the political context and the breadth of its programming to respond smartly to ensure that programming and policy advice builds on astute political analysis. UNDP seeks to increase the number of countries with strategies/programmes/initiatives to advance women's political participation in the electoral process and prevent violence against women in politics. It also works to introduce initiatives at the local level that strengthen dialogue mechanisms and enhance policy spaces to enable gender equality advocates and civil society to promote gender equality and women's political participation.[5]

There is overwhelming evidence that women's participation in politics is beneficial to both their own communities and societies, and broader peace and stability. But despite the existence of a number of international conventions and legal frameworks guaranteeing women's political rights, we remain far from the goal of gender parity.



This needs to change. The inclusion of women in political processes is a key element in achieving a truly inclusive democracy, and women must have the chance to exercise their political rights and participate in all political decision-making.

OBJECTIVES

- Ensure that all our approaches and solutions are rooted in an in-depth understanding and analysis of the culture and context of specific countries and regions
- Include women from across all sectors of society, reaching beyond the large urban areas and into the communities where women that have traditionally struggled to make their voices heard
- Bring together women from across political, religious, ethnic and cultural lines to build the cross-party networks needed to work together for the common good of all women in the country[2,3,5]
- Invest in training the next generation of female and male leaders, by working towards gender parity in all our democracy education programmes
- Foster global recognition of the disproportionate effect of wartime violence on women, and promote the vital role of women in peace-building and reconciliation
- Bring about meaningful systematic change, so that the results of dialogues and consultations go beyond proposals and recommendations and are embedded into democratic structures
- Include a gender perspective in the design, monitoring and evaluation of each of our country programmes, so that we can learn from past experiences and shape future programmes based on expertise and analysis

II.DISCUSSION

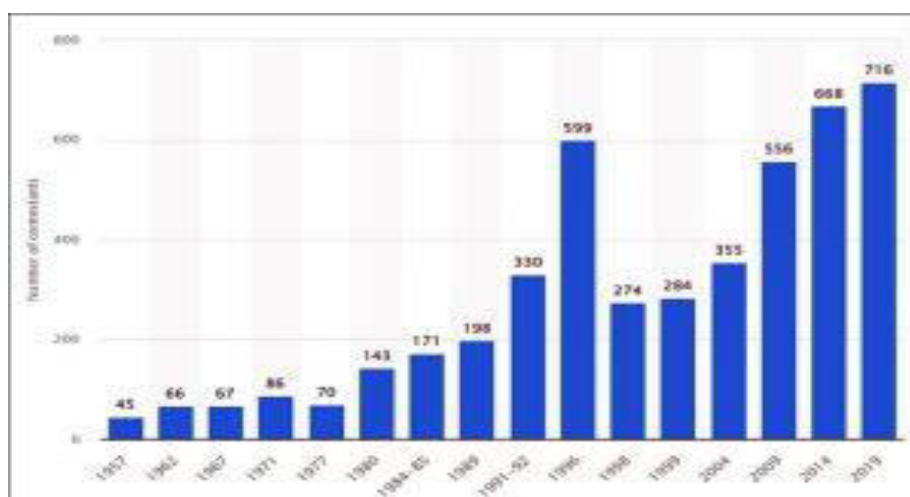
- A truly representative democracy seeks adequate representation of women in politics. India is the largest and one of the most resilient parliamentary democracies in the world. Women's representation in India's Parliament has improved since independence. It is an important metric to evaluate progress in bridging gender inequalities in the country.

Background: Gender Inequality in Politics

- Women historically been Politically marginalized: Women, who constitute almost one-half of the world's population (49.58 percent), have historically been politically marginalized in both developed and developing nations.
- Beginning of social reforms: From the mid-19th century onwards, however, social movements have succeeded in effecting widespread reforms.
- UN charter: The charter of the United Nations Organization (UNO, started in 1945) supported women's rights.[29]
- International Bill of Rights for women: With the rise of feminist movements of the 1960s and '70s, the UN General Assembly in 1979 adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), often considered as an International Bill of Rights for women. In the Convention, Article 7 upholds women's right to hold political and public office.
- Millennium development goals (MDGs), included gender equality: In 2000, UN member states adopted the Millennium Declaration and outlined eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), to be achieved by 2015, which included promoting gender equality.
- Empowering women under Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): In January 2016 the initiative was extended to pursue 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of which Goal 5 seeks to "achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls", ensuring "women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life."

The present status of Women representation in politics worldwide.

- Representative governments increased but women count remains low: According to UN Women, as of September 2020, there were 30 women serving as elected heads of state and/or of government in 28 countries (out of a total of 193 UN member states).
- Dichotomy in active participation: There is the dichotomy between the rapid increase of women's participation as voters in elections and other political activities, and the slow rise of female representation in Parliament.[7,8,9]
- Global average women representation: As of May 2020, the global average of female representation in national parliaments was 26.2 percent.
- Above average representation: The Americas, Europe, and Sub-Saharan Africa have women's representation above the global average;
- Below average representation: Asia, the Pacific region, and the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA) region, are below average.
- Varied representation within Asian countries:
- The South Asian countries faring worse than the others.
- IPU data of May 2020 showed that women's representation in Nepal, for example, was 34 percent, in Bangladesh 21 percent, in Pakistan 20 percent, in Bhutan 17 percent and in Sri Lanka 5 percent.[10,11,12]
- For India, women's representation in the Lok Sabha (the Lower House) has remained slightly below 15 percent.
- The study does not include Afghanistan, but World Bank data of 2020 stated that female representation in the country's last parliament was 27 percent.



Journey of Women's Political Participation in India

- Before Independence: India has a history of marginalization and exploitation of women framed by patriarchal social structures and mindsets.
- Beginning of social reforms and participation in Freedom struggle: The Indian freedom movement, starting with the swadeshi in Bengal (1905-08) also witnessed the impressive participation of women, who organized political demonstrations and mobilized resources, as well as occupied leadership positions in those movements.
- Post-Independence: After India attained independence, its Constitution guaranteed equal status for men and women in all political, social and economic spheres.[13,1,15]
- Equality guaranteed by The Constitution:
- Part III of the Constitution guarantees the fundamental rights of men and women.
- The Directive Principles of State Policy ensure economic empowerment by providing for equal pay for equal work by both men and women, humane conditions of work, and maternity relief.[1]
- Any Indian citizen who is registered as a voter and is over 25, can contest elections to the lower house of Parliament (Lok Sabha) or the state legislative assemblies; for the upper house (Rajya Sabha) the minimum age is 30.
- Articles 325 and 326 of the Constitution guarantee political equality and the right to vote.
- Reservation for women in local bodies: In 1992, the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Constitution provided for reservation of one-third of the total number of seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and municipal bodies.

III.RESULTS

Three main parameters to assess women's participation in politics in India

1. Women as Voters: In the last Lok Sabha election of 2019, almost as many women voted as men a watershed in India's progress towards gender equality in politics which has been called a "silent revolution of self-empowerment The increased participation, especially since the 1990s, is attributed to a number of factors.[2,9]
2. Women as Candidates: Overall, however, while women candidates in parliamentary elections have increased over time their proportion compared to male candidates remains low. In the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, of the total of 8,049 candidates in the fray, less than 9 percent were women.[30]
3. Women's Representation in Parliament: Although women's participation as voters in elections has increased significantly, the data on women's representation in both the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha suggests that the proportion of women representatives has remained low in comparison to their male counterparts.
 - The highest proportion of women representatives elected to the Lok Sabha so far was in the 2019 elections, and it was less than 15 percent of total
 - The number of women candidates and MPs varies greatly across states and parties.
 - In the present Lok Sabha (17th), Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal have the highest numbers of women MPs. In terms of percentage, Goa and Manipur had fielded the highest proportion of women candidates.

Why female representation in Parliament and state legislatures remained low?

- Inaccessibility of Institutions: Election records show that most political parties, though pledging in their constitutions to provide adequate representation to women, in practice give far too few party tickets to women candidates. A study found that a large section of women who do get party tickets have family political connections, or are 'dynastic' politicians. With normal routes of accessibility limited, such connections are often an entry point for women
- Notion of women less likely to win: It is still widely held in political circles that women candidates are less likely to win elections than men, which leads to political parties giving them fewer tickets.[1,17,18]
- Challenging Structural Conditions: Election campaigns in India are extremely demanding and time-consuming. Women politicians, with family commitments and the responsibilities of child care, often find it difficult to fully participate
- Highly vulnerable: Women politicians have been constantly subjected to humiliation, inappropriate comments, abuse and threats of abuse, making participation and contesting elections extremely challenging.
- Expensive electoral system: Financing is also an obstacle as many women are financially dependent on their families. Fighting parliamentary elections can be extremely expensive, and massive financial resources are required to be able to put up a formidable contest. Absent adequate support from their parties, women candidates are compelled to arrange for their own campaign financing this is a huge challenge that deters their participation
- Internalized patriarchy: A phenomenon known as 'internalized patriarchy' where many women consider it their duty to priorities family and household over political ambitions.[18,19]

Why women participation in law making process is so important?

- Political empowerment: Legislative representation is fundamental to political empowerment, enabling participation in the law-making process. Legislatures play a vital role in raising debates and discussions on various aspects of governance and in exacting accountability from the government.
- Shows the status of gender parity: Women's representation in the national parliament is a key indicator of the extent of gender equality in parliamentary politics.
- Women bring different skills to politics: According to Political scientist, Anne "women bring different skills to politics and provide role models for future generations; they appeal to justice between sexes.
- Facilitates specific interests of women in policy: Their inclusion in politics facilitates representation of the specific interests of women in state policy and creates conditions for a revitalized democracy that bridges the gap between representation and participation.
- Highly effective and less likely to be criminal and corrupt: Study found that, women legislators perform better in their constituencies on economic indicators than their male counterparts also women legislators are less likely to be criminal and corrupt, more efficacious, and less vulnerable to political opportunism.

IV.CONCLUSIONS

- It should be made legally obligatory for every registered political party to give one-third of the total number of party tickets it distributes at every election to women. The Representation of People Act, 1950, will have to be amended to enable this strategy.



- Second, if the party-level reform proves difficult, the Women's Reservation Bill 2008 which mandated reservation of one-third of parliamentary and state assembly seats for women will have to be revived. [20,21,22]
 - The organic shift to opening up spaces for women in Indian parliamentary politics has been slow. More women are needed in these platforms to transform the discourse on governance and policy-making, and bring India closer to becoming a truly inclusive and representative democracy. [23,2,25]

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