
VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE: POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

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Abstract: Political processes in India are marked by divergent issues like race, culture, ethnicity, gender, language etc. Political Empowerment in India is related to historical struggles where in political representation is very low in the State Legislative Assemblies and the Indian Parliament as well. The factors that have dithered in exploring the possibility of gender bias in India need to be examined carefully. In the political arena women with not only political connections but also ordinary women should have the chance to reach the top leadership position. The UN General Assembly resolution on women's political participation of 2011 clearly stated that in every part of the world women are largely marginalized from the political sphere, often as a result of discriminatory laws, practices, attitudes and gender stereotypes, low levels of education, lack of access to health care and the disproportionate effect of poverty on women. I appreciate the work of the Non-Aligned Movement Institute for the Empowerment of Women which has been working for women's cause since its emergence. Tracing the historical struggle of women leaders and activists would enable us to understand the need for political empowerment. Though the percentage of women contestant is lower than male contestants yet, the improvement in the participation of women can be noticed. Yet, the discrimination prevails and empowerment process has been further delayed. From a Feministic perspective if we observe the role of women during the National Movement women's participation in the freedom struggle had created great confidence to be able to tackle successfully their public-political. Yet, as rightly observed by Neera Desai and Usha Thakkar, "the assimilation of women in the struggle to free the nation had given them the confidence and access to positions of power and responsibilities, still the positions of power were not within easy reach". The Women's Manifesto challenged the dominant style of politics and electioneering. Henceforth, it became a 'janandolan' and the move towards 33% reservation for women can be found in an expressive way even by the National Commission for Women.

Keywords: Empowerment, Gender Justice, Gender Equality, Gender bias, Resolution

Motivation: I would like to explore the extent of Gender Bias and Political representation of Women in India as a part of women's struggles. Political struggle of women can be placed on records with the formation of Women's India Association in 1927. The All India Women's Conference was also established. Ms Sarojini Naidu participated actively in the women's struggle. The Bombay Women's Committee for Women's Suffrage passed a resolution that stated: "Women ask no favour but claim rights and justice. If the vote is denied it will mean a serious check to women's advancements." In Madras Province, Muthlakshmi Reddy was nominated to the Legislative Council in 1927 and she was subsequently elected as the Deputy President of the Madras Legislative Council. This nomination marked the beginning of lifelong efforts to "correct the balance" for women by removing social abuses and working for equality in moral standards. Under the Constitution of Sovereign India in 1950 women got equal right to vote. It was the result of the vibrant women initiated by the towering female personalities of pre-independence India, which led to the realization of demands such as Universal and Adult Franchise and Constitutional guarantee of Equality.

Method of solution: Documentation on the role of women leadership and political struggles. Showcasing the role of activists. Critical issues of women in

their active participation ex: nature of political systems -democratic versus autocratic etc.

Important findings of their investigation: A Study - Report on the emergence of new issues in the empowerment from a historical perspective. Role of political parties and politicians in giving equal opportunities. Feministic undercurrents from the colonial era to the present.

Seminar Paper: "Empowering women is a prerequisite for creating a good nation, when women are empowered society with stability is assured. Empowerment of women is essential as their thoughts and their value systems lead to the development of a good family, good society and ultimately a good nation." Former President of India A.P.J. Abdul Kalam

Introduction: The idea of women in development has set a specific trend in including women in the theories of development. Brazilian educationist Paulo Freire discussed about the concept of women empowerment. To nurture, liberate, energise the un-affluent and the un-powerful people can be called as empowerment. Women empowerment is commonly associated with women's struggle for social justice and equality. The whole process of women empowerment is continuous and depends on the interactions between the social and economic aspects of empowerment. Mobility, control over resources,

decision making and social interaction are a few. There is no country in the world where gender equality was realized. Of late, however a consensus has emerged that equality of opportunity for all people is essential. This will help to construct just and democratic societies. The core areas are equality, development, health, education and peace.

Empowerment is an active multi-dimensional process that enables women to realize their capacities. Development with justice can be generated through the forces that lead to the empowerment of various sections of population in the world. The acquisition, sustenance and preservation of the empowered groups are vital for the future of the world. Through education and training this can be realized. All activities should be built on the premise that women's rights are universal, indivisible and inalienable human rights. These rights should be protected and promoted. By supporting and advocating women's empowerment gender equality and gender justice can be achieved. The empowerment process can help in exercising assertiveness and collective decision - making, growth process and perception, by democratic means.

Women Empowerment Approach: This is popularized by the Third World Feminist writers and grassroots development organizations. The Empowerment approach comes from women's groups who seek to empower themselves through greater self-reliance. They also seek women to gain control of and access to resources. This approach differs from the Equity approach in origin and strategy. The Empowerment approach recognizes the role of women and seeks to meet strategic practical needs.¹

What is empowerment: The concept of empowerment was introduced by women from the South at the International Conference in Nairobi in 1985 as a Counter - Project to the integration concept for advancing women. The empowerment concept makes clear the political and economic gap between North and South, between social classes and between men and women. It aims at a redistribution of social power and control of resources in favour of women based on a development strategy which is no longer oriented on growth, the world market and military power.²

M.C. Whirter (1991), explains empowerment is the process by which people, organizations or groups that are powerless:

- a) become aware of the power dynamics at work in their life context,
- b) develop the skills and capacity for gaining some reasonable control over their lives
- c) exercise this control without infringing upon the rights of others and
- d) support the empowerment of others in their community

According to Rounaq Jahan, "Politics is both Transformed and Transformational. Transformed because it uses power to create change, to develop people, and to build communities, it is non-hierarchical and participatory in its structures and processes; and it accords priority to the disadvantaged sectors, such as the poor grassroots women in the rural and urban areas and indigenous women :Transformational because it is development oriented, issue based and gender responsive: it seeks economic, social and political equality between sexes and among sectors: and it builds a society that is just and humane, and a way of life that is sustainable. The women of Asia-Pacific region will create a system of politics that is holistic, integrated and life enhancing in its perspective."³

Several studies have emphasised that the obstacles encountered by women in political recruitment are many. Kirkpatrick observes, "This explanation of women's non-participation in power sees women as oppressed, barred from power by a ruling class bent on maintain its hegemony". She further maintains that cultural constraints especially those arising from socialisation -role constraints: "Male Conspiracy", and situational and structural factors are some of the additional constraints on women's participation in politics".⁴

We can reemphasise on Kirkpatrick who stated as follows, "Volunteer work can also lead to a reputation for leadership. The woman with such a reputation moves into politics with the basic resources necessary to political success: leadership, influence and name recognition are the currency of politics. Under the proper circumstances this currency can be converted into votes".⁵

She further writes, "moving from the community activity to the legislature has important implications for the focus of attention. They bring to politics a problem-solving .Orientation rather than an ideological one and stand in sharp contrast to persons.. out of a desire to influence national politics.

- Elimination of violence such as war, colonisation, militarisation, nuclear proliferation and economic exploitation.
- Reduction of barriers and hierarchy.
- Ensuring political participation by women.
- Transparency in the political system.
- Sustenance of a responsive, egalitarian and accountable system.
- By ensuring the active participation of women 'Gender Balance' in politics is attained.
- It ensures a 'Critical Mass of Women' in positions of power and decision -making so that their voices can be heard in the corridors of power.
- Parity to ensure gender equality

- Numbers and effective participation are important for the empowerment of women.
- Feminization of politics ensures both quantitative and qualitative women's representation at the power and decision making levels.

Alida Brill asserts "without our own voices being heard inside the government arenas and halls of public policy and debate, we are without the right of accountability - a basic entitlement of those who are governed." Gender equity in politics and policy making is the main focus in the present century. Some evidence indicates that supporting women's political inclusion requires going beyond technical tools such as women's quotas to a deeper understanding of how to support women networks of influence and their capacity to empower them.

On the occasion of "Women's Empowerment Year", the Chairperson of National Commission for Women Vibha Parthasarathi said the years to come must see women in apex decision making bodies, enter profession denied to them so far, recognise their contribution on important and legitimate issues and help them to fight against disease and deprivation.

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Future Strategies for Political empowerment of women in India:

- Pro- active participation of women
- Elimination of Legal hurdles
- Preference for women representatives
- Elimination of barriers to women participation on grounds like sex, religion, race etc.
- Women's leadership, political participation and elimination of violence are to be focused. Gender gap concerns global patterns of inequality between men and women.

Conclusion: The present world requires transformative politics in order to achieve governance and gender equality the feminist perspective .Further, it is asserted that as women gain power they need to use it with others rather than over others.The concept of empowerment is enlightened by an Aboriginal woman from Australia: "If you came only to help me, then you can go back home. But if you consider my struggle as part of your own survival, then perhaps we can work together."

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