



Women Empowerment in Politics

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this presentation is to explore the challenges faced by women in politics in India the similarities and differences in comparison to male politics. Gender empowerment and equal opportunities are essential features for an egalitarian society, its development, national and international peace. Promoting gender empowerment through women's effective participation in politics is a structural interventional approach in social work. However studies show women face numerous obstacles in achieving political representation. Gender inequality, inequitable division of labour, cultural attitudes, electoral systems are some of the reasons, which subjugate women and limit their representation in public life. India differs immensely in all of these factors and many more. However, similarity in these nations is the low representation of women councilors in key decision-making positions in governance resulting in exclusion of women's interests and issues in public policy. Social work interventions in all these spheres can lead to sustainable empowerment of women.

KEYWORDS : Gender empowerment, women's political representation in India.

Women all over the world are victims of gender inequality and injustice today. Domestic violence, rape, physical, sexual, psychological and economic abuse, eve-teasing, honour killings, dowry deaths, female foeticide, malnutrition, illiteracy, lower salaries, poor reproductive health, Devadas traditions, child marriages, trafficking of girls and women are just a few of the problems women face today. To combat such widespread social problems, social workers work to promote gender equality where women are empowered to defend their rights.

Largely, it is noted that the discrimination against women can be eradicated by women's participation in political systems.

Exclusion of women from decision-making in politics more often than not results in policies and schemes, which are at best indifferent to women's realities and at worst, contribute towards their future. Inclusion of women and giving them power in political institutions furthers inclusion of women's voices in decision-making all around the globe. Generally speaking, the idea of power notes the ability to change one's own status as well as that of others. Moreover, having experienced oppression as powerless victims of abuse and deprivation it gives women a chance to work empathetically for the upliftment of others who suffer similarly. Participation of women in public policy making through membership of elected bodies is thus seen as a step towards gender empowerment. Thus, social workers can contribute their skills in executing gender and societal equality by focusing on inclusion of women in all levels of politics. Studies show that higher number of women in parliaments generally contributes to stronger attention to women's issues and this shows that women's political participation is a fundamental prerequisite for promoting gender equality, empowerment and genuine democracy.

India is a bicameral parliamentary democracy, with a strong multi-party political system. The lower house is called the Lok Sabha (Peoples' Assembly) and has 545 members. The upper house is called the Rajya Sabha (State's Assembly) with 250 members. In 1991, women constituted 5.2 per cent of the membership of the Lok Sabha and 9.8 per cent of the membership of the Rajya Sabha. This was lower than the preceding 1989 parliament. The election results in 1996 showed a further decline in women's representation. This trend is worrying given the recent state-led initiatives to ensure women's representation in political institutions.

The demand for greater representation of women in political institutions in India was not taken up in a systematic way until the setting up of the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI), which published its report in 1976. Before this the focus of the growing women's movement had been on improving women's socio-economic position. The CSWI report suggested that women's representation in political institutions, especially at the grass-roots level needed to be increased through a policy of reservation of seats for women.

In 1988, the National Perspective Plan for Women suggested that a 30 per cent quota for women be introduced at all levels of elective

bodies. Women's groups insisted that reservation be restricted to the Panchayat (village council) level to encourage grass-roots participation in politics. The consensus around this demand resulted in the adoption of the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Indian Constitution in 1993. In 1995, the question of quotas was raised again, but this time the focus was women in parliament. Initially, most political parties agreed to this proposition. But soon doubts surfaced. When the bill addressing this issue was introduced in the Eleventh Parliament in 1997, several parties and groups raised objections. The objections focused around two main issues: first, the issue of overlapping quotas for women in general and those for women of the lower castes; second, the issue of elitism. Most women's groups felt that the caste issue was a divisive one for women. Also, many felt uneasy about giving special privileges to elite women by ensuring seats for them in the parliament, while they had previously supported quotas for women at the grass-roots level of the Panchayats.

Having understood the basic models of elections and politics in both countries, it is vital to focus attention on statistics that show the argument that women face challenges for vertical mobility in politics and governance and are not represented in proportion to their population share in these bodies.

Participation of women in politics and decision-making process is essential so that women can effectively participate in policy making and its implementation. In this regard, women not only at the grass roots, but holding influential positions can create pressure on the government and through collective endeavour advocate for social transformation. For instance, politics is often based on the idea of 'winners and losers', competition and confrontation, rather than on systematic collaboration and consensus, especially across party lines. This kind of an aggressive nature is viewed as a male's domain. This may often result in women either rejecting politics altogether or rejecting male-style politics. A concrete example of masculine model of politics can be seen if we think of the working hours or kind of travelling it needs. Most of the governmental meetings are held during school hours of children and long distance travelling up to the capital city for example cannot be done by mothers. This leaves very less scope for women to gain vertical mobility. All the descriptive feminist approaches on representation have been more significant than the substantive representation.

It is argued that women can make effective impact only if nominated to top positions in portfolios of welfare, health and education.

Finally only with the changes in the social outlook there is possibility in the empowerment of women in politics. There should be equality in the society and at the same time there should be liberty, which should be given by the head of the family to the family members in taking decisions as their own. One of the main aspects to be remembered is that every one should have political awareness, which will mobilize them to participate in elections. In Indian context the education should be on the equality base. Then there is a possibility for the development of women in the political aspects and at the same time with that help empowerment also takes place.