



Women's Participation In Electoral Politics

Dr. K. SHAMATHA

Academic Consultant, Dept. of Sociology, S.V. University, Tirupati

ABSTRACT

Equality in political participation is one of the major priorities for the advancement of women throughout the globe. Participation in electoral processes involves much more than just voting. Political participation derives from the freedom to speak out, assemble and associate; the ability to take part in the conduct of public affairs; and the opportunity to register as a candidate, to campaign, to be elected and to hold office at all levels of government. Under international standards, men and women have an equal right to participate fully in all aspects of the political process. In practice, however, it is often harder for women to exercise this right. In post-conflict countries there are frequently extra barriers to women's participation, and special care is required to ensure their rights are respected in this regard.

KEYWORDS :

Women's participation is considerably high in informal political activities like demonstrations, mobilizations and other similar activities. Their participation in such atmosphere is much encouraged and considered as important part of every political party in the country. Women's active participation in politics in India raised the issue of representation in politics first time in 1917 in the form of a demand for universal adult franchise which was achieved by 1930. With the Indian constitution coming into force in 1950, women were constitutionally granted equal right to political participation in the country. Today the 33% reservation into Panchayat level may have increased women's representation in figures but still their representation remained marginalized.

Concept of Political Participation

Political participation simply refers to the way through which the citizens of a country take part in the electoral as well as in policy making process. In other words, political participation is a way or a process through which the aspirations and needs of the people can be represented. Generally, the term "political participation" refers to those voluntary activities by which members of a society share in the selection of rulers and directly or indirectly in the formation of public policy. These activities include casting votes, seeking information, holding discussions, attending meetings, staging strikes and demonstrations, communicating with the legislators and the like. According to Herbert Mc. Closky, "Participation is the principal means by which consent is granted or withdrawn in a democracy and the rulers are made accountable to the ruled."¹ Political philosophers like J.S. Mill, Rousseau and Bentham have strongly advocated the need for participation of people in different spheres of political life. As Noorjahan Bava puts it, "direct and indirect participation of citizens in public affairs is the lifeline of a participatory democracy".

Political Participation and Representation of Women In India

The participation of women in politics is not a new concept in India. The struggle for independence has seen many women revolutionaries playing significant role. Women in India raised the issue of representation in politics first in 1917. At that time it was basically a demand for universal adult franchise and political participation. By 1930 women had gained the Right to vote, which initially benefited women from elite families. Women's involvement in struggles for political and civil rights in India were however sought to be linked to nationalist movements in alliance with males against the common foreign enemy. In any case women's involvement in nationalist struggles changed their lives in that even though they were denied equal opportunities to shape the new state, they gained constitutional and legal rights. But even after the right to vote became a reality for all women, their representation in the parliament, political parties and other decision making bodies remained low even after independence, and after the Indian Constitution came into force in 1950. (Susheela Kaushik: 1993:1996, Veena Mazumdar: 1993). A few women no doubt attained positions as members of parliament and state legislatures and as leaders of opposition, mostly through family dynasties or through male political patronage. However, the percentage of women in legislatures and decision-making positions always remained low. Women do not share the power of decision-making and are not involved in policy making in Indian democracy in proportion to

their numerical strength. Thus there is a gap between the formal ideas of women's participation and their meaningful use of power. (Susheela Kaushik: 1993). The quest for greater political representation of women is, therefore, still relevant. (Asha Kapur Mehta et al: 2001).

Obstacles of Women Participation

In many countries the rights of women are enshrined in law, and there are no formal legal barriers to women's political participation in election processes. In practice, however, there are often formidable obstacles to women's active participation in politics. The hurdles to be overcome can be particularly daunting for women considering running for office, and may be overwhelming for women in post-conflict countries.

There are many remaining obstacles to women's equal participation in elections, including gender stereotypes, psychological and traditional barriers, and inequalities in education, training and resources. Political parties, ethnic groups or clans may be dominated by a single, strong leader, usually a male, leaving little opportunity for women to enter the political process through established political groups. Other barriers may be built into political structures, including certain types of electoral systems or candidacy restrictions based on educational qualifications or other factors.

Politics has traditionally been a male domain that many women have found unwelcoming or even hostile. Societies in which traditional or patriarchal values remain strong may frown on women entering politics. In addition to dealing with unfavourable cultural predilections, women are often more likely than men to face practical barriers to entering politics, including a paucity of financial resources, lower levels of education, less access to information, greater family responsibilities, and a deprivation of rights that has left them with fewer opportunities to acquire political experience. With the exception of the close relatives of male politicians, women generally lack the political networks necessary for electoral success.

Women and elections: some United Nations standards and obligations

Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Article 2. Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.

Article 7. All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law.

Article 21. (1) Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives.

(3) The will of the people shall be the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

Article-3. The States Parties to the present Covenant undertake

to ensure the equal right of men and women to the enjoyment of all civil and political rights set forth in the present Covenant.

Article-25. Every citizen shall have the right and opportunity

- To take part in the conduct of public affairs, directly or through freely chosen representatives;
- To vote and to be elected at genuine periodic elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret ballot, guaranteeing the free expression of the will of the electors.

Article-26. All persons are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to the equal protection of the law.

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women

Article-2. States Parties condemn discrimination against women in all its forms, agree to pursue by all appropriate means and without delay a policy of eliminating discrimination against women and, to this end, undertake:

(a) To embody the principle of the equality of men and women in their national constitutions or other appropriate legislation if not yet incorporated therein and to ensure, through law and other appropriate means, the practical realization of this principle.

Article-7. States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the political and public life of the country and, in particular, shall ensure to women, on equal terms with men, the right:

- To vote in all elections and public referenda and to be eligible for election to all publicly elected bodies;
- To participate in the formulation of government policy and the implementation thereof and to hold public office and perform all public functions at all levels of government;
- To participate in non-governmental organizations and associations concerned with the public and political life of the country.

Recommendations

Advancing women's political participation in post-conflict countries requires determined efforts not only by women themselves, but also by Governments, the international community and civil society. Action by political parties is particularly important. Some steps that can be taken by each of these groups are listed below.

Political parties should:

- Adopt internal democratic structures;
- In proportional systems, place women contenders high enough on the candidate lists to ensure they will be elected, including through such mechanisms as "zippered" lists, and consider voluntary quotas or targets for women candidates;
- In majority systems, establish voluntary targets or quotas to ensure a specified minimum number of women are put forward as candidates;
- Provide support and resources to ensure the election of women candidates;
- Make certain that women are fully represented in party leadership and policy committees;
- Clearly identify the advancement of women and issues of special concern to women as priorities in their platforms.

Government actors should:

- Ensure that political party laws and other election-related legislation do not indirectly disadvantage women;
- Consider legislation requiring political parties to adopt democratic procedures for their internal operations;
- Consider temporary special measures requiring political parties to include a substantial proportion of women high on their candidate lists;
- Provide incentives for political parties to promote women candidates, including resources, training and increased access to broadcast time. Providing increased airtime for women in politics between elections could also advance women's participation by enabling voters to make informed assessments at election time

of the overall performance of political parties, including their support of women who have been elected as representatives.

International actors should:

- Provide advice on legislation, electoral systems and best practices that can advance women's participation in the electoral process;
- Assist in the training of women candidates;
- Provide training to political parties, journalists, security forces and others to convey the importance of women's political participation and gender sensitivity;
- Help establish and support cross-party cooperation among women;
- Provide support and training to women who have been elected to office to enable them to function more effectively in their new roles.

Civil society actors should:

- Identify women willing to run for office;
- Provide training and other types of support for women candidates;
- Lobby to ensure issues of special concern to women are addressed in party platforms;
- Lobby for legislative changes to advance women's empowerment;
- Develop cross-party networks of women;
- Develop and disseminate gender-sensitive messages for voter and civic education;
- Advocate improved media coverage of women's issues and women candidates;
- Persuade international donors to support projects aimed at advancing women's political participation.

The media should:

- Provide gender-sensitive coverage of elections, avoiding negative stereotypes and presenting positive images of women as leaders;
- Provide women candidates with at least as much airtime and print space as that given to men;
- Focus attention on issues of special concern to women in news programming;
- Undertake voter and civic education programmes aimed specifically at women

General Recommendations

In post-conflict electoral processes all actors' including governmental, international and civil society organizations should be guided by the following recommendations and best practices for enhancing women's participation:

- Adhere to international standards for the protection of women's civil and political rights;
- Include women as members of delegations to peace negotiations and in bodies created for the implementation of peace accords, including those responsible for the development of new electoral processes;
- Carefully design and implement new laws and electoral processes to ensure and enhance women's participation and to effectively increase the possibility of women being elected;
- Make certain that the practical aspects and details of the electoral process do not indirectly discriminate against women;
- Consider adopting temporary special measures such as quotas;
- Require or encourage political parties to nominate and support women candidates, in part by placing them high enough on their candidate lists to be elected;
- Ensure that refugee and internally displaced women enjoy the right to vote;
- Create platforms to ensure women's voices and concerns are heard;
- Design and conduct voter registration and education campaigns targeting women.

REFERENCES

1. Sarkar, Sumit "The Complexities of Young Bengal" Nineteenth Century studies, Vikash Publication. New Delhi, 1975. | 2. Geeta Balachandran, "The Women who made it to the top at the Grassroots" social welfare vol.36 1989. | 3. Mehta, Aasha Kapur, Kabra, K.N. and Arora, Dolly (2001). 'Parliamentary Debate on the Golden Jubilee of Independence: Equity and Social Justice'. Mainstream, August | 4. A.R. Gupta, Women in Hindu society, Sangita Printers, Delhi, 1976. | 5. Women in Politics: A low key Affair, United Nations News letter Vol.41 1990. | 6. Susheela Kaushik (Ed) Women's Participation in Politics, Indian Association of Women's Studies, Vikas Publishing House, 1993. | 7. Lakshmi N.Menon, "From Constitutional Recognition to Public Office", Vol 3751968. | 8. Veena Mazumdar .Symbols of Power: Studies on the Political Status of Women in India. Allied, 1979 | 9. Vijay Agnew, Elite women in India Politics, Vikas Publications House, New Delhi, 1986 |