



## **WOMEN EMPOWERMENT THROUGH POLITICAL PARTICIPATION: A STUDY**

**Mr.Nagula Venu**

*Assistant Professor, Department of Public Administration, N.G. College, Nalgonda, Telangana state.*

### **Abstract**

*The political empowerment of women is a social process crucial to development and progress. The status of women is measured internationally by the participation of women in politics and their empowerment. Women remain seriously underrepresented in decision-making positions.*

*Women empowerment may mean equal status to women, opportunity and freedom to develop her. The focus of empowerment is equipping women to be economically independent, self-reliant, have a positive self- esteem to enable them to face any difficult situation and they should be able to participate in the process of decision-making. Political participation is broadly defined as being a process through which individual plays a role in political life of their society, has the opportunity to take part in decision making. Political participation is a process by which people take part in political activities. Exercising voting rights during elections is one of the important political activities of the people. Participation of women in this political activity is almost equal to men.*

**Keywords: Political Empowerment, Decision Making, Political Participation, Exercising Voting.**

### **Introduction**

The political empowerment of women is a social process crucial to development and progress. The status of women is measured internationally by the participation of women in politics and their empowerment. Women remain seriously underrepresented in decision-making positions.

Women empowerment may mean equal status to women, opportunity and freedom to develop herself. The focus of empowerment is equipping women to be economically independent, self-reliant, have a positive self- esteem to enable them to face any difficult situation and they should be able to participate in the process of decision-making.

Political participation is broadly defined as being a process through which individual plays a role in political life of their society, has the opportunity to take part in decision making. Political participation is a process by which people take part in political activities. Exercising voting rights during elections is one of the important political activities of the people. Participation of women in this political activity is almost equal to men. Political participation is not just casting vote. It includes wide range of other activities- like membership of political party, electoral campaigning, attending party meetings, demonstrations, communication with leaders, holding party positions, contesting elections, membership in representative bodies, influencing decision making and other related activities.

With this understanding of political participation, the evidence shows that in most of the countries participation of women is not impressive as the number of women participating in active politics is smaller compared to men. Women who are able to acquire decision-making power are mostly from urban and elite groups. Large mass of women are kept out of political arena due to various reasons. There was no serious attempt to accommodate women in politics. In many countries women had to wage long battles to get their rights. Despite that, they were not able to get rightful position in the arena of politics.



Women's political participation has been the agenda of various international conferences and symposiums. Various recommendations were made to improve the participation of women in political decision making. Women's political empowerment was at the centre stage of all discourses on women's issues at the international level. India is in no way an exception from the rest of the countries with respect to the women representation. Corresponding to this, various initiatives were taken in India.

### **Meaning of Empowerment**

The empowerment of women is also becoming an increasingly popular term in the realm of human rights and development literature. In these fields women's empowerment is considered as a process through which women gain greater control over the material and intellectual resources of the society. It is also conceived that empowerment challenges the ideology of patriarchy and the gender based discrimination against women in all the institutions and structures of society. In fact, women's empowerment is not against men, but against the system of patriarchy and all its manifestations. The empowerment benefits every person in the society along with the environment.

Women constitute half part of the society, but they are away of political, social, economical and health opportunities. Women with disabilities have been largely neglected. Also due to many societal rules and regulations, they never be a part of the decision making process. Though at present women enjoy equal status with men as per the constitution and legal provisions but still they have a long way to go. It is true and proved that "a country prosper if its women prosper". So women's empowerment is vital towards the development of the society.

### **Empowerment of Women: Conceptual Dimension**

Empowerment of Women can be seen through women's physical mobility, socio-political and general awareness decision making power regarding their lives and the lives of their children and also through their working status. Empowerment also talks about participation. So it can be accessed through women's participation in public life and their political participation. Feminists like Rowlands Jo, Bunch and Frost argue that most of the theories of power take the view of power over, which itself is constraining. Instead, other forms of power, that is 'Power to', Power with' and 'Power from within' are important for providing a different meaning for empowerment. In this kind of understanding power is enabling and generative. For Foucault, power is relational and is something which exists only in its exercise. According to Bunch and Frost: "Empowerment is a process that aims at creating the conditions for the self-determination of particular people or a group".

**Definition: Political** participation is closely intertwined with the political empowerment. Hence participation of women in political process warrants some attention in any discussion on their political empowerment. Political participation refers to those voluntary activities by which members of a society share in the selection or rules and directly or indirectly in the formation of public policy. The active forms of participation include formal enrolment in a party, canvassing and registering voters, speech writing and speech making, working in campaigns, and competing for public and party office.

### **Women Political Participation in Post Independence**

Post independent women continued to play a significant role in less conventional activities such as environmental movements, anti-alcohol agitations, peace movements and even revolutionary activities which equally effect power relationships as they have the capacity to influence the state. Yet politics proved to be a very inhospitable terrain for women and continues to be the male domain where entry to women is severely restricted. Representation of women in parliament and state assemblies remain at a



very low level. Their representation is 10.8% in parliament. No doubt a few seats have been given to women but it has not been in proportion to women's strength in population.

The foundation of political participation of women was laid down during the national movement. The transfer of power from British to Indian hand gave women opportunity to participate in democratic process. Large number of legal, social and economic measures has been taken up by the Independent government to raise the status of women in India. Women too have become politically conscious, as they have started participating in national and state politics.

### **Constitutional Provisions and Women Empowerment**

The Constitution of India, one of the greatest documents ever produced came into force in the year 1950 guarantee justice, liberty and equality to all citizens. The preamble of the Constitution of India resolved to secure to all its citizens justice, social, economic and political, liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith, and to worship, equality of status and opportunity and to promote among them fraternity assuring the dignity of individual and the unity of nation. To attain this, the Constitution guarantees fundamental rights. Specific articles and amendments have been enacted to ensure that women and children enjoy the Constitutional rights. The Constitution not only grants equality of treatment to women but also calls upon the state to adopt measures favoring women neutralizing the socio- economic, educational and political disadvantages that they face. The following are the various provisions in the constitution which ensures equality between men and women.

Article 14 guarantees equality before law and equal protection of law with in the territory of India. This Article stands for absence of any discrimination by law or in their administration.

Art 15 prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth. It is a guarantee against every form of discrimination. According to article 15(3), nothing shall prevent the state from making special provisions for the benefit women and children.

Article 16 guarantees equality of opportunity for all citizens in matter relating to employment or appointment to any office under state. Secondly no citizen shall, on grounds of religion, race, cast, sex, decent, place of birth residence or any of them, be eligible for, or discriminated against in respect of any employment or office under the state.

Article 39- a) guarantees right to an adequate means of livelihood for all citizen. Article 39 b) guarantees equal pay for equal work for both men and women. c) that the health and strength of workers, men and women, and the tender age of children are not abused and that citizen are not forced by economic necessity to enter occupations unsuited for their age or strength.

Article 42 guarantees just and humane condition of work and maternity relief. This is in accordance with Article 23 and 25 of Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Article 51-A clause (e) says that it shall be the duty of every citizen of India- to promote harmony and spirit of common brotherhood amongst all the people of India, transcending religious, linguistic and religious or sectional diversities, to renounces practice derogatory to the dignity of women.

The 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment has added the following articles to the Constitution providing reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions.



Article 243-(D) (2) states not less than 1/3 of the seats reserved under clause (1) shall be reserved for women belonging to S. C or as the case may be S.T.

Article 243-(D) (3)-extends political reservation to women not less than 1/3 of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every panchayat shall be reserved for women and such seats shall be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a panchayat.

Article 243 (D) (4) extends reservation to elected offices as well. The office of the chairpersons in the panchayaths or any other level shall be reserved SC,ST and women in such a manner as legislature of state may by law provide.

The legal Constitutional framework in India would appear a combination of Communitarian perspective on one hand and that of liberal democracy on the other hand. In spite of such provisions in the Constitution, the decades following independence witnessed a decline in the women's participation in politics. These rights appeared illusionary as there was a shift from the aims of the Constitution. Gap started widening in all political spheres. Article 325 and 326 guarantees political equality, equal right to participate in political activity and right to vote, respectively. While the latter has been accessed and enjoyed by large number of women, the right to equal participation is still a distant dream. The lack of space for participation in political bodies has resulted in their presence in meager numbers in this decision making bodies.

The 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution of India with 33.33% reservation for women has given opportunity for the entry of large number of socially marginalized category such as women to enter into the domain of local institution and their performance is very encouraging. In the year 2006, 10,41,430 women were elected to the local institutions. These reservations or quota brought quantitative changes, facilitated women to be represented in local governments and deserved to be hailed as major achievement in the empowerment of women. Success stories of women in local governments indicate the qualitative changes that are coming forth. Increment list perspective would enable qualitative change in the performance of women in politics and governance. It would provide a way to bring a sense of equality in gender.

### **Factors Hindering Women's Political Participation**

Today, even best women parliamentarians feel sidelined and powerless within their parties except a few. Male party leaders have shown little willingness to include women in party decision making bodies or help to create a conducive atmosphere for women's participation in their own organizations. Therefore special measures are required. Otherwise our democracy will remain seriously flawed if it fails to give adequate space for women. Political parties and other organizations should encourage women's participation in politics and in the exercise of political responsibilities. The strategy should be to encourage a still greater number of women in decision – making power. In this background the demand for 33% reservation for women in legislature becomes important.

The increase in the number of women in legislature definitely will not bring overnight changes in the status of women. It is foolishness to think that it will solve the entire problems faced by women and bring equality immediately. It is also true that powerful women leaders in our politics have failed to do much to the women in India.



## **Initiatives of Indian Government for Women's Political Empowerment**

The Government of India has declared the year 2001 as year for the Empowerment of Women. In India genuine efforts have been made for promoting gender equality and women's empowerment through various departments of Women and Child Development Human Resource Development Ministry. Several commissions, particularly the National Commission for Women and its state branches, Central Social Welfare Board and state branches, National Council of Educational Research and Training, (NCERT)—National Institute of Public Co-operation and Child Development (NIPCCD) and other various National and NGO's dedicated to the cause of women are also working towards the goal of promoting women's empowerment.

As a result of all these efforts made at various levels, the situation of women on the whole has improved with regard to some of the critical indicators of women's empowerment, like literacy, education, employment, health, human rights and so on.

According to the various surveys, national and international studies, considerable progress has been made in reducing the gender gap worldwide, though gender inequalities; inequity and injustice persist in many important areas. It will go to enhance the participatory character of India's democracy very significantly. In India lot has been made in all the critical areas of concern for women's development and empowerment. Considerable progress has also been achieved. Women in increasing numbers are becoming literate, getting various levels of education, skills and professional training and entering into all kinds of jobs and professions, are working in the lowest to the highest rank and are making success of these. They are provided with the constitutional and legal rights and other human rights and even land rights becoming women rights. The political participation of women as a pre-condition for their empowerment is the issues gradually gaining visibility and acceptability.

But observing the critical analysis of many reports about how women are being treated in the family and society in day-to-day life, it is obvious that they are far from being empowered in reality. When panchayat raj system was introduced very few women contested or got elected, Balwantrai Metha Committee (1978) recommended that in the constitution of panchayats, provisions might be made for the co-option of two women members, "who are interested to work with women and children" Subsequently the Ashok Metha Committee (1978) had mentioned that two women securing the highest number of votes among the women candidates in the election could take the seats reserved for them, a method of co-option by election.<sup>53</sup> Though panchayat raj institutions were established in many states, women's representation did not exceed more than two or three.<sup>54</sup> It was only in 1976, after the publication of the Report of the Committee on Status of Women, there was a demand for the representation of women in panchayat raj bodies through reservation. Karnataka is a pioneer state in this regard. It was the first state in the country to introduce the policy of reservation for women in panchayat raj institutions. Yet politics proved to be a very inhospitable terrain for women and continues to be the male bastion into which the entry of women is severely restricted.

Women continued to remain invisible and marginalized in decision- making bodies. It was only with the setting up of the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI, September 1971) that the demand for greater representation of women in political institutions in India was taken up in a systematic way. The CSWI Report suggested a more meaningful association of women representatives in the structure of local administration. The report recommended the establishment of statutory women's panchayats at the village level. It recommended the reservation of seats in municipalities, constitution of permanent committees in municipalities to initiate and supervise programmes for women's welfare and



development and those political parties should adopt a definite policy regarding the percentage of women candidates.<sup>56</sup> However it was not unanimous in favour of reservation.

The question of reservation of seats was left to the National Perspective - Plan (1988) for women to take up. In 1988 the Department of Women and Child Development conducted a study which has been published in the form of a report titled 'National Perspective Plan for Women 1988-2000' which has come out with some significant recommendations on the role of women in panchayat raj institutions. The core group set up by government of India pointed out that political power and access of position of decision making and authority are critical three- requisites for women's equality in the process of nation building. Later with these feedback and objectives, reservation was given in local bodies which had provided an opportunity to women to raise their grievances and other related social and economic problems It recognized that political participation of women is severely restricted and suggested that 30 percent quota for women must be introduced at all levels of elective bodies. To encourage grass-root participation in politics, women's organizations too favoured introduction of reservation in village panchayats.

### **Reservation Bill- 33.33 percent Reservation for Women**

Above discussion makes it clear that women remain invisible and marginalized in decision- making bodies. Data shows that there has been only a marginal increase in the last few decades in the number of women candidates contesting elections and getting elected.

The National Perspective Plan for Women, 1988 recommended 30% reservation for women in local governments and other decision making bodies to encourage participation of women in grass root politics.<sup>59</sup> This debate finally culminated in the passing of the 73rd and 74th Amendment Act, 1992. This paved way for the entry of more than one million women into the local governments as members, presidents and vice-presidents. The 73rd Amendment Act, provided a new constitutional platform which ensures the representation of 1/3 women in the Panchayati Raj Institutions. This legislation accelerated the participation of women in the policy making bodies.

The low representation of women in parliament and state assemblies has been the major concern of various women organizations. Women constituting nearly half of the population have to abide by the decisions taken by men in power. No serious efforts have been made by political parties to give more representation for women. Representation of women in legislatures, thereby entering into power position is inevitable for political empowerment and equality of women. Given our political situation, it has become clear that it is difficult for women to enter into legislature without reservation. Therefore demand for 33% reservation in national and state legislature has become a major demand of various women's organizations.

During 1990's, the issue of women reservation was in the manifesto of various political parties, which was also a way of wooing women voters. Women reservation bill was first introduced by Deve Gowda led national front government in September, 1996 as the 81<sup>st</sup> amendment bill. Various political parties like Samajavadi Party, Janatha Dal,

Lok Shakthi etc opposed the bill severely as it does not provide sub-quota for other backward classes and minorities. The argument put forth by the opposing group is that if the bill is accepted as it is, this opportunity will be encased by the upper caste, urban elite women and have no effect on the patriarchal structure. In fact there is some truth in what has been argued here. Various studies have pointed out that



those women who are in the forefronts of politics in India since independence have been mainly elite urban women. But, so far no serious attempts have been made to analyze this aspect.

Even as C.P.Bhambhri reiterates that the logic that women should participate in the decision-making process gets diluted if participation is on the basis of their religion or caste because they are reduced to the level of sectarian leaders and not women leaders. Veena Nayyar, too on the issue contents that the talk of quota within quota is a blatant attempt to divide the women. That they forget about OBCs when it came to the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment because it concerned only governance at the village level and there was no need for considering a system of proportional representation where by the legitimate political aspirations of each group can be satisfied without breaking down the whole system with competing quotas. Caste and communal card was used to confuse the whole issue. What is essential today is the general involvement of women at all levels of power structure to ensure a true society, without any quota within quota for political leverage. The politicians, women activists and thinkers are divided on the issue of women's reservation bill.

#### **74th Constitutional Amendment Act**

The 74th Amendment to the Indian constitution has served as a major breakthrough towards ensuring women's equal access and increased participation in local government. The constitution (74th Amendment) Act, 1992 aims at constitutional guarantees to safeguard the interests of urban local self government to enable them to function as effective democratic and self governing institutions at the grass roots level. This Amendment provides for reservation of 33, 1/3 percent of elected seats for women at local government level in urban and rural areas (R. Letha Kumari, 2006).

73<sup>rd</sup> & 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional amendments have reflected the spirit of Directive Principles by giving 30% reservation for women in Rural and Urban Local Bodies respectively. A step ahead, at present 50% reservation for women in Urban Local bodies is already in vogue in 14 states, and Gram Panchayats of 17 states.

#### **Present position of Women in Politics**

As the Lok Sabha elections 2019 begins to wrap up, the discourse is slowly shifting towards questions about voter participation. A recent report has suggested that women may be the deciding factor for this election by constituting the swing vote. The report suggests that voter turnout amongst women is higher than ever. While this might appear to be a positive development on the surface, one must ask: does an increase in number necessarily indicate more meaningful political participation. The history of a nation is created by the milestone events, which drastically change the way society is governed, organized and bequeathed to the new generation.

#### **Conclusion**

One of the key challenges faced by women is lack of education which hinders their political involvement. We recommend bridging this gap by providing quality education to women in the country. Awareness about their rights and privileges as mentioned in the Constitution can only be ensured once women are appropriately educated. Although the Government of India has initiated the National Mission of Empowerment of Women in 2014 with the broad objective of gender empowerment, the progress of this project is not up to the mark. It is thus imperative to strengthen its functioning and implementation. In addition, there is need for capacity building of prospective women leaders by imparting leadership training to the female members of political parties. Women's participation in politics is essential. This



will not only uplift their personality but will open the way for their social and economic empowerment. Their participation in public life will solve many problems of society.

### References

1. Bashevkin, Sylvia B. *Women, Power, Politics: The Hidden Story of Canada's Unfinished Democracy*. Oxford University Press, USA, 2009.
2. "Constitutional Law: Constitutional and Charter Provisions: Right of Women to Vote." *Michigan Law Review*, vol. 16, no. 2, 1917, p. 125.
3. Minault, Gail. *The Extended Family: Women and Political Participation in India and Pakistan*. South Asia Books, 1989.
4. Mohini Giri, V. *Emancipation and Empowerment of Women*. Gyan Books, 1998.
5. PTI United Nations(2017), India ranking in women political empowerment, [www.financial express.com](http://www.financialexpress.com)
6. Shoba Narayan (May 21, 2009), Role of women in politics, [knowledge.whartonupenn.edu](http://knowledge.whartonupenn.edu)
7. Pamela Parton (June 2017), women's political empowerment a global index, 1900-2012, [www.sciencedirect.com](http://www.sciencedirect.com)
8. D.Syamala Devi and G Lakshmi( Jan-March 2005), political empowerment of women in India.