

# Empowerment of Women through Participation in Indian Politics

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**Abstract:** Empowerment of women refers to giving decision-making power to women in social, economic and political sphere of life. It is a process of making women aware of socio-psycho-cultural and political injustice that is prevailing in the society against women. Women empowerment is a prerequisite to gender equality and development. The process of empowerment should start from our own home. Women's position in the household determines women's autonomy in the family. It is worth to examine whether women can decide about household matters like buying jewelries, having access to money, having mobility to go to market or relatives house or getting health care facilities. In this paper we have found the state wise variations in the percentages of women who are involved in the household decision making power and have examined whether levels of education, types of occupation, working status of women etc., and the other characteristics of the household like standard of living, sex of head of household etc. have positive influence on the empowerment. Data from NFHS-2 Survey conducted in 1998-99 have been used for the analysis. The degree of women's decision making power is not same over the different aspects of life considered here. Women are almost the sole authority to decide about cooking and have access to money but can rarely buy jewelry of its own. Less than one-third of women can decide about health care or get permission to go to relatives house or market. The empowerment of women increases with the age of women and remains almost same among different occupational groups. Husband's education or occupation does not contribute much to the empowerment. Working women have distinct advantage as against non-working or unpaid working women. Though maximum percentage of empowered women has been observed about cooking but its nature is different from others. Unlike others, this percentage decreases as SLI increases, is less for literate women and female headed households. Behaviour of North-East region is also a bit different from other regions in India which becomes evident if one compares the coefficients of the logistic regression.

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## 1. Introduction

India is a democratic country and democracy implies equal opportunity to all and thus also implies gender equity. But in reality, most of the states are patriarchal where women lack autonomy and have low status in the family as well as in the larger society. Since the mid 1980s, the term empowerment or autonomy has received considerable attention in the study of development, especially with reference to women. In the world conference on women in Beijing (1995) priority has been given for empowering the women in the developing countries because the status of women has been found to be low in these countries. According to Dixon (1978), autonomy means "the degree of women's access to material resources (including food, income, land and other forms of wealth) and to social resources (including knowledge, power and prestige) within the family, in the community and in the society at large". Dyson and Moore (1983) stated that female autonomy as "the capacity to manipulate one's personal environment". Mason (1984) stated "Measurement of female autonomy includes the degree of power of women to have over their own mobility, personal decision and decisions within the household". So autonomy means the controlling power of women in their own lives as well as on their family members, authority to make independent decisions, freedom from constraints on physical mobility etc.

India is a cosmopolitan country, so autonomy has a great regional variation. There are many approaches to assess the degree of empowerment among women. One of the factors of regional difference is the participation of female population in the labour force. For example, in South India, wet rice cultivation is more prevalent than in North India. In South India, women are more engaged in this cultivation than the wheat production of North India (Bardhan, 1974). Earning status of women is one of the key factors towards decision-making power of women. The paid workers has the natural advantage of taking decisions about how money should be spent along with taking decisions on other aspects of life compared to a non-earning women. The state policies regarding gender equality vary which lead to variations in autonomy in different states and regions of India (Jeffrey, 1993). Autonomy has a multi-dimensional aspects such as civil, political, social, economic, cultural participation and rights. So to measure the degree of autonomy, its associated various factors have to be measured.

Family is the smallest area where women can share or control over the resources. But gender inequality in the family level is manifested by a weaker role of women in decision-making and less control over resources and restrictions in physical movements by women. According to Jejeebhoy (1998) “.....while women’s autonomy is indeed multidimensional, at least three dimensions - decision making, mobility and access to economic resources- are closely related in all settings, irrespective of region or religion”. In anthropological approaches, women’s autonomy is also dependent on social organization, kinship, marriage patterns etc. In India, after marriage the brides usually go to a completely unknown family which ultimately affects the position of women.

## **2. Factors Hindering Women’s Political Participation**

Women’s participation and access to formal political power structures vary across countries. There is a steady upward trend in women’s political participation and representation in developed countries particularly in Nordic countries. Out of twelve countries where women representation in parliament is more than 33%, nine of them are ranked in the high human development category. However, the improvements in medium and low human development countries are not significant. The structural and functional constraints faced by women are shaped by social and political relations in a society. The common pattern of women’s political exclusion stem from (a) social and political discourses (b) political structures and institutions (c) the socio-cultural and functional constraints that put limits on women’s individual and collective agency.

### **2.1. Ideological Factors**

Patriarchy as a system of male domination shapes women’s relationship in politics. It transforms male and females into men and women and construct the hierarchy of gender relations where men are privileged (Eisenstein 1984). Andrienne Rich defines patriarchy as: The gender role ideology is used as an ideological tool by patriarchy to place women within the private arena of home as mothers and wives and men in the public sphere. This is one of the vital factors that shape the level of women’s political participation globally. However, this ideological divide is not reflective of the reality. The boundaries between public and private are often blurred in the daily lives of women. Nonetheless, domestic domain continues to be perceived in the North as well as in the South as the legitimate space for women while public space is associated with men. Women have to negotiate their entry into and claim on public space according to the discursive and material opportunities available in a given culture and society. Although the gender role ideology is not static rather remained in a flux while intersecting with economic, social and political systems of a particular society, women continue to be defined as private across countries which resulted in their exclusion from politics.

### **2.2. Political Factors**

The nature of politics is an important factor for the inclusion or exclusion of women in politics. Vicky Randall defines politics as an “articulation, or working out of relationships within an already given power structure”, which is in contrast with the traditional view of politics that defines it as an activity, a conscious, deliberate participation in the process by which resources are allocated among citizens. This conception of politics restricts political activity only in public arena and the private sphere of family life is rendered as apolitical. This public-private dichotomy in traditional definition of politics is used to exclude women from public political sphere and even when women are brought into politics they are entered as mothers and wives. Male domination of politics, political parties and culture of formal political structures is another factor that hinders women’s political participation. Often male dominated political parties have a male perspective on issues of national importance that disillusions women as their perspective is often ignored and not reflected in the politics of their parties. Also women are usually not elected at the position of power within party structures because of gender biases of male leadership. Meetings of councils or parliamentary sessions are held in odd timings conflicting with women’s domestic Responsibilities. The larger democratic framework and level of democratization also impact women’s political participation. Secular democracies in Europe and also in some of the developing countries have created relatively more space for women’s participation in politics as compared to countries where religious orthodoxy has been shaping politics and democracy.

## **3. Global Context of Women’s Political Participation**

According to United Nations Deputy Secretary General Asha Rose Migiros, “when women are empowered, all of society benefit” (National Democratic Institute, 2010). With this in mind, the empowerment of women has drawn global attention. There are international instruments that have addressed women’s equal political participation, like Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948), which expresses that everyone has the right to take part in

their country's government. Also, Article 7 of the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women, under the United Nations Resolution 34/180, declares that there should be no form of discrimination against women in terms of equal political participation. This article calls on all state parties to take all measures necessary to protect women against inequity. Additionally, the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 calls on all actors involved in negotiating peace agreements or writing constitutions to ensure that women's equitable participation is fully addressed. There are other methods to ensuring political equality in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Article 2 and 7), the third Millennium Development Goal and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995); however, none of these have helped women succeed in attaining the target of 30 percent of seats in parliament. A report by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) indicates that the global average of female parliamentarians in 2010 was 19.1 percent (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2010). In 2000, the average was 13.1 percent. The IPU report further indicates that the election of female heads of state in some countries has not translated into increased parliamentary representation. An Increasing Women's Political Participation in Liberia example of this situation is the Philippines. While they have had two female presidents in the last 25 years, only 22 percent of the lower house is made up of women and the upper house is home to only 13 percent.

Another issue raised in the IPU 2010 report is that the legal framework can have an impact on the outcome of elections. Accordingly, electoral quotas and proportional representation within a legal framework have proven to be the most effective in increasing the electability of women. Simply increasing the number of female candidates while using a "first-past-the-post" electoral system does not increase the odds that women will obtain 30 percent of seats in parliament. For instance, during the 2010 mid-term election in the United States, the Democratic Party fielded more than 70 percent of women candidates, but lost seats. This indicates that more women on the ballot does not necessarily translate into more women being elected, especially when they are not fielded by popular parties at a particular point in time (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2010).

Meanwhile, a United Nations report on promoting women's participation in elections has outlined key elements of electoral processes affecting women's participation in elections. A legal framework is one key element that could facilitate or deny gender equity in political governance. The legal framework for elections, in addition to the national constitution, includes the electoral system which is the means by which votes are calculated into seats. Categorized into 12 different units, electoral systems can be grouped into three broad families: a plurality/majority, proportional representation and mixed systems (International Institute for Democracy and electoral Assistance, 2006). Research has shown that of the three families of electoral systems, the proportional representation (list PR) is most appropriate in terms of gender equity and governance. The United Nation's report shows that 14 of the 20 top nations in which women are significantly represented in parliament use quotas and the list PR system.

The quotas, or a reserved seat system, have been effective in Rwanda, South Africa and several Arab countries in enhancing women's participation. However, legal frameworks for many other 2011 Humphrey Democracy Studies Fellowship Paper countries, including Liberia, have no PR system or gender quotas. The general mentality is that countries that include seat quotas for gender equality do so to compensate for other barriers that prevent women from getting their fair share of political seats. However, other countries believe this allocation of seats to women, without going through the regular electoral process is discriminatory and undemocratic (Dahlerup, 2002). The second element that could facilitate or deny gender equity in political governance is general political participation. Advocacy, activism, training and the internal democracy of political parties have been identified as items central to increasing women's political participation. Parties can encourage democracy within themselves, promote political quotas and opt for a list PR system that makes it easier for women to be elected. Voter registration plays a role in gender equality, be it state-initiated or self-initiated.

The key is access to the process for women. Playing the role of household manager in many societies, women are frequently disadvantaged when voter registration centers are located too far apart or when information about the registration process is not adequately disseminated. Voter education, which includes information on voting rights, the political system, candidates and issues in the election, as well as where and how to vote, has been identified as a big factor in gender equity in governance. Voter education programs should highlight the rights of women to be elected and to vote without interference from husbands or anybody else. This preserves the secrecy of the ballot and guarantees independent judgment. Solid election administration also furthers the independence, transparency and impartiality of the electoral process. The equitable representation of women to the election management body is considered cardinal in the pursuit of women's participation in general. In the pursuit of increased electoral transparency by the election management body, there have been calls for gender-disaggregated data.

This research would be produced on the composition of election Increasing Women's Political Participation in Liberia management bodies and voter registration and polling data for future reference and planning. Such data could allow elections planners and women's right advocates to determine the number of women that took part in running the elections, as well as those that registered and those who actually voted. Finally, election observation is also listed as an area that should always involve an equal number of women and men. The Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe believes that for an election observation report to be deemed credible, the observation team should ascertain whether or not women have an equal opportunity to take part in the process. If opportunities are equal, are women taking adequate advantage? Are there any regional, minority or ethnic groups among which women's participation is relatively low? Could any change be made to laws and practices that could increase female representation? These are the questions that should frame any adjudication process after an election and shape future efforts. International efforts to enhance women's political participation are not limited to state actors and agencies of the United Nations.

There are other technical, pro-democracy institutions that have been active around the globe supporting the struggle for women's suffrage and gender equity in democratic governance. An example of such an institution is the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES). Since 1987, IFES has facilitated democratic processes and encouraged women's political participation in more than 100 countries including Ecuador, Guinea, Qatar, Sierra Leone, Tajikistan and Liberia through political and technical empowerment. IFES has pushed women to participate in elections not only as electorates, but also as candidates, and eventually elected officials (International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 2011). Another institution that has played a key role in political participation amongst women globally is the National Democratic Institute (NDI). Since 1983, the NDI has been in the vanguard of promoting democracy by building the capacity of civil society and parliamentarians, in general, and female parliamentarians, in particular (National Democratic Institute, 2010). 2011 Humphrey Democracy Studies Fellowship Paper Amidst the efforts to increase women's political participation, the attainment of gender equity in the governance of states across the globe remains distant. For instance, the National Women's Council of Ireland recent study concluded that, "without proactive measures to promote women's political participation, it would take 370 years for women to reach 50 percent of seats in the country's national parliament" (50-50 Manifesto: 1, 2011). Until gender mainstreaming is integrated into democracy, genuine democratization will not be reached.

#### **4. Enabling environment for Women Participation in Politics and Development**

In the interconnected world of today, external factors such as globalization, international trade and economic policies impact the development policies of the nation-states. Therefore, the creation of enabling environment for women's participation in politics and in development cannot be viewed only within the boundaries of a country. It must be linked with global factors. Thus, the responsibility to create supportive environment for gender equality and advancement of women as shared responsibility falls equally on the national and international communities. Interlocking layer of gender inequalities are rooted in the power structures at the national and international levels. Development and the globalization policies have led to increased poverty, exclusion and marginalization. Structural forces must be challenged and transform by linking them with the rights of people. Without changing socio-cultural, political and economic structural barriers at the national and international levels, the goal of gender equality or women's equal participation in politics and development will remain impossible to attain. Another important element in the enabling environment relates to the nature of democracy and the level of democratization in society. The participative and decentralized form of governance creates greater space for citizens to participate in governance processes and structures. It also creates space for greater interaction between the state and the society.

Human capacities are dependent on the availability of resources such as education, health and employment that build capabilities and enlarge human choices. Access to education, health and employment is directly linked with women's ability to create space for themselves in politics and development. Women's consciousness of their political rights is another critical element for women's individual and collective agency. Political consciousness through building transformative communities is the sustainable way to transform politics and development. A strong women's movement and civil society is another condition of enabling environment that can influence the direction of politics and development in favor of women. Triple roles of women in productive, reproductive and community management spheres must inform the efforts for creating supportive environment for women's political EGM/WPD-EE/2005/EP.1203/11/2005 participation. Provision of childcare and care work is vital to enabling women to participate in the development processes.

### **Conclusions**

As demonstrated throughout the background papers, it is clear that any analysis of democratization that fails to incorporate a gendered perspective will be flawed. Therefore, it is critical that any future studies of democratic governance be improved by creating a framework for analysing the interplay between gender relations, women's rights, and democratization. Gender equality and egalitarian relations between men and women are an essential component of an inclusive and representative democratic society. The participation of women and women's movements in political processes is instrumental in fostering democratization and gender sensitive modes of governance. Furthermore, as Kazi notes, gender equality and social justice must constitute one of the core pillars of democratic governance. If democratic governance is to be compatible with and advance women's rights, it should not only embody a greater presence of women in formal politics, but more fundamentally, it should acknowledge, be sensitive of and responsive to the social and economic disparities between men and women. Moving forward, future research on the field of democratic governance and women's rights, including this IDRC initiative, should look towards achieving "gender-just governance," premised on the demand for gender equality, an agenda of transformative change, and the active engagement of women, feminists, and social movements, in order to effect changes within institutions and processes of governance at local, national, and international levels. As the eight background papers demonstrate, such research will provide a basis for relevant national, regional, and international policies and strategies needed to promote women's rights as a central feature of democratic governance.

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