POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

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Abstract:

Political participation and women empowerment have become increasingly important topics in recent times. Women empowerment refers to the process of creating a more equitable society in which women can exercise their rights, access opportunities, and have a voice in decision-making processes. Democracy requires the full participation of all citizens, including women, in political processes. Participation of women in politics is not only a basic right but also a vital aspect of democratic societies and is also essential for creating more representative and responsive governance. The link between political participation and women empowerment is undeniable, as political participation is one of the most effective ways for women to achieve empowerment.

This article aims to explore the importance of political participation in women empowerment. It begins by defining the concepts of political participation and women empowerment, examines the various ways in which political participation can lead to women empowerment and constitutional commitments for promoting women empowerment. It also emphasizes the significance of political participation of women in creating a more equitable and just society. Finally, the article concludes by highlighting the barriers to women's political participation and offers suggestions for overcoming these barriers.

Keywords: political participation, women empowerment, democracy, barriers, gender equality.

Introduction:

The issue of political participation of women and empowerment has gained prominence in recent years as a result of global efforts to achieve gender equality. Women have been underrepresented in political leadership positions worldwide, and their voices have been largely excluded from decision-making processes. However, in recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of women's participation in politics as a means of achieving gender equality.

Women empowerment refers to the process of enabling women to have greater control over their lives, achieve their full potential, and participate in decision-making that affects them and their communities. This involves breaking down barriers that limit women's access to education, employment, health care, and political participation, as well as addressing gender-based discrimination and violence. Women empowerment aims to promote gender equality and create a more just and equitable society where women can thrive and contribute to their fullest potential.

Political participation is a key factor in women's empowerment. Through political participation, women can influence decision-making processes, hold leaders accountable, and advocate for their rights and interests. Political participation can also provide women with the skills, knowledge, and networks necessary to pursue leadership positions and engage in public life. Women's political participation is not only a basic right but also a vital aspect of democratic societies.

Political participation is a powerful tool for promoting women empowerment. Firstly, political participation can increase women's visibility and recognition in society. Women who participate in politics are more likely to be seen as leaders and role models, which can inspire other women to become involved in politics and pursue leadership positions. Secondly, political participation can provide women with opportunities for skill development and capacity-building. Women who participate in politics can develop skills in public speaking, negotiation, and advocacy, which can be useful in a range of other settings. Thirdly, political participation can provide women with networks and connections that can be valuable for their personal and professional development.

Importance of women empowerment for gender equality

Women empowerment is essential for achieving gender equality, which is a fundamental human right and a prerequisite for sustainable development. Gender equality means that women and men have equal rights, opportunities, and access to resources and decision-making power without discrimination or bias. When women are empowered, they can exercise their rights and freedoms, make informed choices, and participate fully in social, economic, and political life. This not only benefits women themselves but also their families, communities, and societies at large.

Women empowerment can lead to better health and education outcomes for women and their families, as well as increased economic opportunities and productivity. It can also help to reduce gender-based violence and discrimination, and promote greater social cohesion and inclusion. In the political sphere, women's participation can ensure that women's perspectives and experiences are represented in decision-making processes, and that policies and programs are designed to meet the needs of all members of society, regardless of gender.

Furthermore, women's empowerment is critical for achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which aim to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure peace and prosperity for all. Women's empowerment is specifically highlighted in SDG 5, which calls for the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. Without women's full and equal participation in all aspects of life, the SDGs cannot be achieved.

Women empowerment is crucial for achieving gender equality and advancing sustainable development. It is not only a matter of human rights, but also of social, economic, and political progress for all members of society. By empowering women, we can create a more just, inclusive, and prosperous world for everyone.

Political participation and women empowerment in India – historical perspective

The struggle for political participation and women's empowerment in India has a long and complex history, dating back to the colonial period and continuing through the present day. Here is a brief overview of some of the key historical developments in this area:

Colonial period: During the colonial period, women's political participation was limited due to patriarchal social norms and British policies that excluded women from political decision-making. However, there were some women who were involved in political activities, such as the Indian National Congress and the Quit India Movement.

Independence movement: Women played an active role in the Indian independence movement, with many participating in protests and acts of civil disobedience. Leaders such as Sarojini Naidu and Kamala Nehru were prominent figures in the movement.

Constitution of India: The Constitution of India, adopted in 1950, guaranteed equal rights and opportunities for women. However, women's political participation remained limited, with few women elected to parliament or state assemblies.

Women's movement: In the 1970s and 1980s, there was a resurgence of the women's movement in India, with feminist groups advocating for greater political participation and empowerment. The movement called for measures such as reservation of seats in parliament and state assemblies for women and increased representation in political parties.

Reservation for women: In the 1990s, the Indian government introduced reservations for women in local government bodies, known as the Panchayati Raj Institutions. This was followed by reservations for women in municipal councils and other local bodies. These measures provided women with a platform for political participation and decision-making.

Recent developments: In recent years, there has been a growing awareness of the need for greater political participation and empowerment of women in India. Initiatives such as the Women's Reservation Bill and the Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao campaign have sought to address gender-based discrimination and violence against women, and promote women's rights and opportunities in political and social spheres.

Women participation in politics before independence

Before India gained independence from British colonial rule in 1947, women's participation in politics was limited due to the patriarchal social norms of the time and the British government's policies of excluding women from political decision-making. However, there were still some women who played important roles in the Indian freedom struggle and in other political activities.

Some notable examples of women's participation in politics before independence include:

Begum Hazrat Mahal: Begum Hazrat Mahal was a queen who played a leading role in the Indian Rebellion of 1857 against British colonial rule. She led a revolt against the British in the state of Awadh and took control of the capital city of Lucknow for several months.

Sarojini Naidu: Sarojini Naidu was a poet and political activist who played an important role in the Indian independence movement. She was a prominent member of the Indian National Congress and was known for her powerful speeches and writings advocating for Indian independence and women's rights.

Annie Besant: Annie Besant was a British-born activist who became involved in Indian politics in the late 19th century. She was a prominent member of the Theosophical Society and later became involved in the Indian National Congress, advocating for Indian self-rule and women's rights.

Kamala Nehru: Kamala Nehru was the wife of Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of independent India. She was an active member of the Indian National Congress and played an important role in the freedom struggle, advocating for women's rights and working to improve the status of women in Indian society.

Durgabai Deshmukh: Durgabai Deshmukh was a social worker and activist who played an important role in the Indian independence movement. She was a member of the Constituent Assembly that drafted the Indian Constitution and later served as a member of parliament. She worked to improve the status of women and promote social justice throughout her life.

While women's participation in politics before independence was limited, these women and others like them played important roles in shaping the political and social landscape of India and paving the way for greater opportunities for women in the years to come.

Participation of women in politics after independence

Here is a chronological overview of women's participation in politics after India gained independence from British colonial rule in 1947:

1947: Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit was appointed as India's first woman ambassador, serving as India's representative to the United Nations.

1952: The first general election was held in India, and 22 women were elected to the Lok Sabha, the lower house of parliament.

1955: The All-India Women's Conference and the National Federation of Indian Women were founded, providing women with platforms to advocate for their rights and interests.

1966: Indira Gandhi became the first woman to serve as the prime minister of India, a position she held for a total of three terms.

1969: The Government of India established the Committee on the Status of Women to investigate the social and economic status of women in India and make recommendations for policy and legislative changes.

1975: The National Commission for Women was established as a statutory body to investigate and review the status of women in India and make recommendations for their welfare and development.

1984: Rajiv Gandhi, the prime minister of India, appointed his wife Sonia Gandhi as the president of the Indian National Congress, the country's largest political party.

1991: The Panchayati Raj Act was amended to reserve one-third of all seats in local government bodies for women, providing them with a platform for political participation and decision-making at the grassroots level.

1993: The Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act was passed, which extended the reservation for women in local government bodies to include the reservation of one-third of all seats in rural and urban local bodies.

1996: Sheila Dixit became the first woman chief minister of a state in India, serving as the chief minister of Delhi.

2014: Nirmala Sitharaman was appointed as the first full-time female defense minister of India.

2019: The Women's Reservation Bill, which would reserve 33% of seats in the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies for women, was reintroduced in parliament after years of delay and opposition.

These are just a few examples of the many ways in which women have participated in politics in India since independence. While there is still work to be done to ensure greater representation and empowerment of women in politics, these achievements demonstrate the progress that has been made over the past 70 years.

Indian Constitution's commitment for promoting political participation and women empowerment in the country:

The Constitution of India guarantees political participation and women empowerment through several provisions and amendments**.** Some of the key ones are:

Article 15(3) of the Constitution empowers the state to make special provisions for women and children. This has been used to provide reservations for women in local self-government bodies such as Panchayats and Municipalities. The 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution introduced in 1993 also mandated that one-third of the seats in these bodies be reserved for women, further enhancing their political participation.

Article 16(2) prohibits discrimination against any citizen on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, and place of birth. This provision ensures that women have equal opportunities for employment and promotion in government services.

Article 51A(e) of the Constitution enjoins upon every citizen of India to promote harmony and the spirit of common brotherhood amongst all the people of India transcending religious, linguistic, and regional or sectional diversities. This constitutional provision recognizes the importance of social harmony in promoting gender equality and women empowerment.

The Constitution also recognizes women's right to dignity, safety, and protection from violence. Article 21 guarantees the right to life and personal liberty, which includes the right to live with dignity. Additionally, the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act of 2005 provides legal protection to women from domestic violence and abuse.

The Constitution of India provides a strong foundation for prompting political participation, gender equality and women empowerment. The provisions and amendments guaranteeing women's rights and representation have played a crucial role in enhancing their political participation and promoting their empowerment.

Empowering women through political participation in India: some inspiring examples and strategies:

India has made significant progress in empowering women through political participation in recent years. Here are a few examples:

Women's Reservation Bill: The Women's Reservation Bill is a proposed amendment to the Indian Constitution that seeks to reserve 33% of seats in the national parliament and state assemblies for women. The bill has been introduced several times but has yet to be passed, despite widespread support from women's groups and civil society.

Panchayati Raj Institutions: The Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) are a decentralized system of local governance in India that provides opportunities for women's political participation. The 73rd and 74th amendments to the Indian Constitution mandated that at least one-third of seats in PRIs be reserved for women. As a result, women now hold over 40% of the seats in PRIs, providing them with a platform to voice their concerns and participate in decision-making.

Self Help Groups: Self Help Groups (SHGs) are community-based organizations that provide women with access to credit, training, and other resources to promote economic empowerment. SHGs have also been used as a platform for political mobilization and advocacy on issues such as domestic violence, dowry, and land rights.

Mahila E-Haat: Mahila E-Haat is an online platform launched by the Ministry of Women and Child Development that provides a market for women entrepreneurs to sell their products. The platform aims to promote women's economic empowerment and has been successful in providing a platform for women entrepreneurs to showcase their products and expand their businesses.

Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao: Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao (Save the girl child, educate the girl child) is a campaign launched by the Indian government in 2015 to address the issue of gender-based discrimination and violence against girls. The campaign aims to promote girls' education and empower women to participate in decision-making processes. The campaign has been successful in raising awareness about the issue and has led to improvements in girls' access to education and healthcare.

Barriers to Political Participation of women:

Despite the importance of women's political participation, there are several barriers that prevent women from fully participating in political processes. One of the main barriers is cultural and social norms that limit women's roles and responsibilities. In many societies, women are expected to focus on their domestic responsibilities and are discouraged from participating in public life. Additionally, women face discrimination and harassment in political spaces, which can discourage them from participating. Economic barriers, such as poverty and lack of resources, can also limit women's ability to participate in politics.

Overcoming Barriers to Political Participation of women:

There are several strategies that can be used to overcome the barriers to women's political participation. These include:

Education and awareness-raising: Education and awareness-raising campaigns can help to inform women about their rights, the political process, and how to engage in political activities. This can help to overcome the lack of knowledge and confidence that may prevent women from participating in politics.

Legal and policy reforms: Legal and policy reforms can help to remove barriers to women's political participation. This can include reforms to electoral laws, such as introducing quotas for women's representation or providing financial support for women candidates, as well as reforms to laws that discriminate against women or restrict their freedom of movement or expression.

Networking and mentorship: Networking and mentorship can provide women with opportunities to connect with other women who are involved in politics, as well as with mentors who can provide guidance and support. This can help to build women's confidence and provide them with the skills and knowledge needed to participate in political activities.

Supportive work environments: Supportive work environments can help to enable women to participate in politics by providing flexible working arrangements, such as part-time work or telecommuting, and by offering childcare support and other forms of assistance that can help to balance work and family responsibilities.

Women's leadership training: Women's leadership training programs can provide women with the skills and knowledge needed to participate in politics, such as public speaking, campaign management, and negotiation skills. These programs can also help to build women's confidence and provide them with the support needed to overcome barriers to political participation.

Hence, a comprehensive approach that involves a combination of these strategies can help to overcome the barriers to women's political participation and promote greater gender equality and representation in decision-making.

Conclusion

In conclusion, political participation and women empowerment are critical for achieving gender equality and promoting inclusive and sustainable development in any society. Women's participation in politics can help to ensure that their voices are heard and their perspectives are taken into account in decision-making processes. It can also lead to policies and programs that promote women's rights, address gender-based discrimination and violence, and improve the socio-economic status of women. As more and more women become politically active and hold positions of power and influence, we can expect to see greater progress in advancing gender equality and building more just and equitable societies for all. It is imperative that we continue to work towards creating an enabling environment for women to participate in politics and decision-making at all levels, and to address the systemic barriers that continue to hold women back. Only then can we truly achieve a world where women are empowered and able to realize their full potential.

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