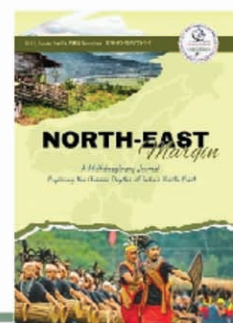


Gender Gap and Political Participation

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Abstract

The political arena remains skewed towards men, with women facing significant barriers to equal participation. This gender gap, a persistent global issue, limits women's influence on policy decisions and hinders progress toward a more equitable society. Despite women comprising half the population, they hold only 23% of parliamentary seats worldwide. This underrepresentation is detrimental as increased female participation leads to better policies on issues impacting women and society. Political participation encompasses a broad range of activities beyond voting, including membership in political parties, campaigning, holding party positions, contesting elections, and influencing decision-making in representative bodies. Empowerment is crucial for women to actively participate in these activities, enabling them to shape their own lives, set agendas, and demand support from both the state and the community. However, numerous challenges persist, hindering women's political involvement. Lack of education, gender-based violence, patriarchal norms, low party membership, and lack of support from female voters all contribute to this disparity. While India's Constitution guarantees equal rights, structural inequalities and cultural barriers remain. The underrepresentation of women in Scandinavian parliaments further highlights the global nature of this issue. Despite these challenges, women have made significant strides in various fields traditionally dominated by men, including politics. Notable figures like Sarojini Naidu, Indira Gandhi, and Pratibha Patil serve as role models, inspiring future generations. However, there is still a long way to go in achieving true gender equality in the political sphere.

Key Words:

Women's Political Participation, Vote, Leadership, Governance, Political Parties

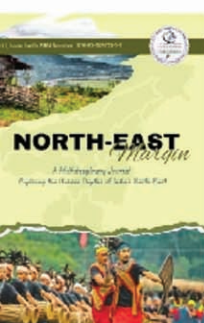
1. Introduction

The World Bank recognizes women's empowerment as a crucial factor for overall social development. In the context of the Millennium Development Goals (2019), gender equality and women's empowerment were highlighted as key drivers for significant improvements in emerging countries. Consequently, each country requires tailored programs to address gender imbalances and empower women politically.

Empowerment should be understood as the perception of oneself as an active decision-

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maker. For females, empowerment enables them to shape their own lives, set agendas, and demand support from both the state and the community during transitions. While women's roles are integral to societal growth in many cultures, they often do not receive the same recognition as their male counterparts. Therefore, it is essential to provide additional assistance to women in decision-making and social development.

The term empowerment encapsulates the sense of acquiring power and participating in decision-making processes. The Beijing Declaration (1995) emphasized that women's empowerment and full equality in all aspects of culture, including decision-making and authority, are critical for achieving inclusion, growth, and harmony. As a result, the United Nations designated women's empowerment as the fifth of its Millennium Development Goals.

Political empowerment is a critical avenue for women to enhance their mobility, break isolation, build self-confidence, and establish their presence in government decision-making. In this context, national governments play a significant role by attempting to shift societal mindsets and creating more platforms for women's participation in political decision-making.

Decentralization of authority and power is essential to support marginalized segments within cultural contexts. By promoting the involvement of marginalized sections in decision-making, we can address inequality and empower individuals. It is crucial to recognize that women's inequality violates human rights, and the underrepresentation of women in Scandinavian parliaments has been notably evident.

Scholars have extensively studied female empowerment. Notably, there exists structural inequality between women and men in the political arena, particularly concerning organizational influence and decision-making. Understanding the concepts of power (which perpetuates female oppression and patriarchy) and gender (highlighting the hierarchical social order that privileges men) is central to comprehending women's empowerment in political leadership. Additionally, cultural contexts significantly shape women's empowerment, and it cannot be universally interpreted due to distinct ethnographic conditions across different regions. However, there remains a dearth of research on the decision-making capacity and challenges faced by elected women leaders within institutional structures. To address this gap, this paper focuses on analysing whether women leaders succeed in their democratic political participation at the panchayat level. The research objective centres on women's political participation, aiming to analyse their role in Indian democracy.

2. Statement of Problem

Gender inequality remains a significant challenge globally, impacting women's lives in various ways. Let's delve into some critical aspects related to this issue:

Lack of Women in Leadership: Only 27% of parliamentary seats, 36% of local government seats, and 28% of management positions are held by women. This lack of diverse perspectives in decision-making processes hinders comprehensive policy formulation.



Poverty and Economic Opportunities: More than 340 million women and girls are projected to live in extreme poverty by 2030. Social protections, decent work opportunities, and support systems are urgently needed to lift women out of poverty.

Workplace Discrimination and Inequalities: Only 61 % of prime working-age women participate in the labor force, compared to 91 % of men. Women earn only 51 cents for every dollar men earn in labor income¹.

Unpaid Care Work Imbalance: Women globally still spend 9.5% more time (2.3 additional hours per day) on unpaid care work than men. This affects women's participation in education, employment, and other opportunities¹.

Social Norms and Cultural Practices: Harmful practices like child marriage and female genital mutilation persist. Globally, one in five young women is married before age 18, highlighting the need for attitudinal shifts and legal frameworks to safeguard women's rights. **Inadequate Access to Education and Healthcare:** An estimated 110 million girls and young women may remain out of school by 2030. Targeted interventions are necessary to meet educational and maternal health goals¹.

Food Insecurity: Nearly 24% of women and girls are expected to experience moderate to severe food insecurity by 2030. Empowering women in food and agricultural systems is vital for food security and economic growth.

In the context of India, the Constitution plays a crucial role in ensuring women's rights and equal opportunities:

Article 14: Guarantees equal rights and opportunities for men and women in the political, economic, and social spheres.

Article 15 (3): Enables affirmative discrimination in favor of women.

Article 16: Ensures equality of opportunities in public appointments.

Article 39 (a): Directs policy toward securing equal means of livelihood for men and women.

Article 39 (d): Advocates for equal pay for equal work.

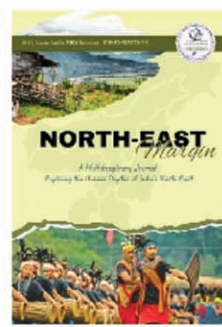
73rd and 74th Amendment Act 1992: Reserves one-third of seats in local bodies (panchayats and municipalities) for women.

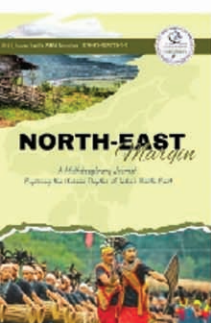
Empowering women in politics not only benefits them but also contributes to better governance, economic stability, and social justice. Their inclusion leads to more equitable policies and improved societal progress³⁴. Let us continue advocating for gender equality and women's empowerment to create a more just and prosperous world.

3. Challenges

Addressing the challenges faced by women in political involvement is crucial for promoting gender equality and empowering women. Let's delve into these issues:

Lack of Education: Education plays a pivotal role in empowering women to actively participate in politics. Quality education ensures that women are aware of their rights





and privileges as enshrined in the Constitution. Bridging the education gap is essential to enable women to engage effectively in decision-making process.

Gender Based Issues: The issue of gender-based violence (such as rapes, physical abuse, molestation, etc.) and provision of safety and security of women should also be addressed on a priority basis to promote gender equality in the social and political arenas.

Patriarchal Blame Game: Geeta Mukherjee observed that women often blame the patriarchal society for their situation. Men, while acknowledging male domination to some extent, tend to place the primary responsibility on women themselves. Empowering women can break this cycle and create a more equitable political landscape.

Low Women Membership: Women's membership in political parties remains extremely low. This leads to inadequate representation of women at higher levels. Women's issues are often neglected due to their limited presence in decision-making posts.

Lack of Women's Support for Women: Data from the 2014 Lok Sabha elections revealed that the highest winning percentage for women contestants was only 8%. Women voters often do not provide strong support to female candidates.

3. Women Politicians

In independent India, there were several women nationalists appointed to high-level government positions including that of ministers, governors of provinces, and emissaries to other countries. First enshrined in the Constitution, AIWC women seated in high political offices include Sarojini Naidu - first governor of Uttar Pradesh, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, first minister of health, Hansa Mehta, Indian representative to the UN Human Rights Commission and Sharifa Hamid Ali, UN representative to the Commission on the Status of Women. India's first Ambassador to the United Nations was Vijayalakshmi Pandit, who was elected to be the first woman President of the General Assembly. She was among many female patriots from powerful families who were recognized for their contributions. From 1963 to 1967, Sucheta Kriplani served as chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, making her the first lady chief minister in India. It was under Indira Gandhi's regime that the United Nations released the Report of Towards Equality, which was considered to be one of India's most influential documents. She was described as one of India's most popular leaders. Her bill introduced by the first woman legislator (1927-28), Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddi, made women's issues a priority. There have been some women who have served as the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu six times during the period 1991-2016, including Sheila Dixit, former Chief Minister of Delhi, Jayalalitha, the former Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu. Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) Chief Minister Rabri Devi of Bihar (1997-2005) served for three terms, while her daughter-in-law Vasundhara Raje (BJP), daughter-in-law of Rani Gayatri Devi of Jaipur (2003-2008), served as Chief Minister of Rajasthan. Following her tenure as Governor of Rajasthan, Prabha Patil became India's first female President (2007). She was the first woman to hold the position

of speaker of the Lok Sabha, an Indian diplomat, politician, and government official. Sonia Gandhi, the leader of the Congress Party, Sushma Swaraj, and Mayawati are few noteworthy Mamta Banarjee of West Bengal, Uma Bharati of Madhya Pradesh, and the Bahujan Samaj Party of Uttar Pradesh. While the number of Indian women politicians occupying high positions in Indian politics is small, they serve as role models and inspiration for women who wish to pursue careers in politics. There are a number of social and economic constraints preventing women from participating in political processes. Their history, geography, politics, and culture are influenced by economic, historical, geographical, and cultural factors. Participation was minimal and exclusion was influencing. The triple burden, women's illiteracy and discrimination were factors. The paternalistic values, the lack of control and access to income and other resources, and the restrictions they face. Insensitive legal systems and public spaces continue to undermine their effective political participation. A lack of adequate infrastructure and support services aggravates this problem. They will be able to participate more easily. As women often rise in positions of power, public participation and decision making will empower them. From business owner to farm manager to army commander Organizations. Women take on roles and occupations previously dominated by men more and more often. Political parties have also shown effectiveness in becoming more aware, training and reforming Enhancing the role of women as leaders. Women lack representation in elected office despite their participation While their involvement in formal political structures has increased, they have remained largely unchanged.

4. Conclusion

If a nation is serious about progress, it cannot ignore capacity building and education Increasing women's empowerment. A gender sensitive approach is, therefore, a prerequisite. All levels of the organization have been strengthened. Many females in India have entered areas that were traditionally male dominated. This domain is considered to be male. Increasing numbers of women are taking on leadership roles within a number of fields. These include fields such as aeronautics, medicine, space, engineering, law, politics, education, and business etc. Currently, women in India are emancipated and granted equal status with men. Politics, socialization, domestic, and education touch all walks of life.

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