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# WOMEN LEADERSHIP AT GRASS ROOTS LEVEL

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## ABSTRACT

In the Indian context the rural local body is the most important channel for popular participation in the process of development as it deals with the day-to-day affairs of the rural folk; it should keep close contact with the people and draw up ways and means to serve them. One of the major problems or short coming that emerged over the years of working of the Panchayati Raj Institution was the non-representation of women in the elected bodies. It was clearly realized that unless women actively participated in the formulation and implementation of various development programmes` they cannot access the benefits.

There is a need for grass roots women to come together to discuss their problems individually and collectively and come up with common strategies to address them. There are no infrastructural facilities of networking available that could bring them together and strengthen them while allowing autonomy in their functioning. Women must be provided with specific kinds of support, which go beyond technical training to build solidarity through strengthening links between women's organizations, groups and elected bodies. There is a need to facilitate the creation of a forums of elected women representative to be raise issues of development and governance irrespective of party affiliations, share their experiences, represent their views, constraints and have a peer network to support them. Though these net works women can achieve unity and consensus on common causes, and exercise influence on decision-making processes on pressure groups.

Leadership is more important in the context of Panchayati Raj Institution because explicitly one of the significant objectives in instituting them was to develop proper leadership suited to development needs of the country side. When women achieve an equal share of political power, many things besides politics would have changed profoundly.

Women and men are traditionally cast in different roles, with males being leaders in the workplace, home and government. In contrast, communities promote women as caregivers who support male leaders and shape future generations as mothers, mentors and teachers. In recognition of this societal view of women that often led to inequality and inequity, the UNDP listed Gender Equality and empowering women as one of eight Millennium Development Goals. The post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals, adopted by the United Nations in autumn 2015, also included gender equality and empowering women as Goal 5.

**KEYWORDS**: *Political Power, Leadership, Grassroots Level, Representation of Women,Capacity Building, Decision-Making, Empowerment, Political Awareness*

## INTRODUCTION

India has heralded the new millennium by pronouncing the year 2001 as women empowerment year. In terms of political empowerment, nearly more than seven lakh women occupy positions as members and chairpersons of grassroots democratic institutions in India, following the reservation clause in 73rd and 74th amendments providing one third seats at district, taluka, village and municipal level for women. This is for the first time in our history that an opportunity has been provided for such substantial entry of women in public life and large numbers have come forward to tackle the challenge of leadership at all levels of panchayats. In fact, right from the days of freedom struggle the Indian women have been consistently encouraged to take part in the active politics. But due to the vitiated political milieu, resulting from increasing politicization and criminalization of politics, the level of political participation of women has been adversely affected despite the fact that there has been a marked increase in the level of literacy and without the full and active participation of women, who constitute a large section of the workforce in the country. A woman empowerment is critical to the process of development of the community and therefore, bring them into the mainstream of development has been a major concern of the government.

The term 'political participation' has a very wide meaning. It is not only related to 'Right to Vote', but simultaneously relates to participation in: decision making process, political activism, political consciousness, etc. Women in India participate in voting, run for public offices and political parties at lower levels more than men. Political activism and voting are the strongest areas of women's political participation. To combat gender inequality in politics, the Indian Government has instituted reservations for seats in local governments

Women leaders in panchayats are engaged in a constant struggle many leaders are in sensitive to their own and gender issues in general. They have been oriented to lose their identity and only serve as instruments to operationally certain processes for others. This process has made them sink in localism and become voiceless. As a result, their space is still severely limited. In order to overcome all these hurdles, an attempt has been made to associate women leaders in to a federation in order to address all the issues which they face in administration and focus on the issues of women.

There is a need for grass roots women to come together to discuss their problems individually and collectively and come up with common strategies to address them. There are no infrastructural facilities of networking available that could bring them together and strengthen them while allowing autonomy in their functioning. Women must be provided with specific kinds of support, which go beyond technical training to build solidarity through strengthening links between women's organizations, groups and elected bodies. There is a need to facilitate the creation of a forum of elected women representative to be able to raise issues of development and governance irrespective of party affiliations, share their experiences, represent their views, constraints and have a peer network to support them. Though these networks women can achieve unity and consensus on common causes and exercise influence on decision-making processes on pressure groups, some recommendation and suggestions given below many help women to talk active role in grassroots democracy.

1. Assessment of the national and state capacity building plans and policies for Panchayat Raj functionaries to tailor them according to the lessons learnt in the project;
2. Building a resources base as good practices on women in politics in print and through production of video and audio cassettes;
3. Dissemination of the information, case studies, good practice through websites, workshops, seminars;
4. Identify women's organization and NGO's to organize and establish a network among them on women in local governance.

Ever since the enactment of 73rd Amendment Act (1993) to the constitution of India, women leadership at the grass roots has become an important theme, though with different meaning and context. Particularly the women constituting important factors affecting the national development and also from half of the population.

## CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHTS OF WOMEN

The Constitution of India establishes a parliamentary system of government, and guarantees its citizens the right

to be elected, freedom of speech, freedom to assemble and form associations, and vote. The Constitution of India attempts to remove gender inequalities by banning discrimination based on sex and class, prohibiting human trafficking and forced labor, and reserving elected positions for women.

The Government of India directed state and local governments to promote equality by class and gender including equal pay and free legal aid, humane working conditions and maternity relief, rights to work and education, and raising the standard of living. Women were substantially involved in the Indian independence movement in the early 20th century and advocated for independence from Britain. Independence brought gender equality in the form of constitutional rights, but historically women's political participation has remained low.

The quintessence of leadership is felt in every walk of organized social life that needs no explanation. With the introduction of Panchayati Raj Institutions there has been a corresponding change in the attitudes and behaviour of rural leaders giving birth of different patterns in the emerging leadership in these institutions. While emphasizing the importance of leadership in Panchayati Raj Institution, it has been observed.

Women leadership and empowerment is one of the major objectives of the third generation of panchayat in India. Particularly, women leadership in PRIS involves women as;

1. Voters:
2. Member of political parties:
3. Candidates:
4. Elected members of the PRIS taking part in decision-making, planning
5. implementation and evaluation:
6. As member of Mahila Mandal and association with voluntary organizations.

The political awareness is a prerequisite for a person's effective political participation. The efficacy of leadership depends upon the level of political awareness once attained many stimulate political interest and hence

## OBJECTIVES

1. To develop proper leadership suited to development needs of society.
2. Women achieve an equal share of political power.
3. Women in representative and democratic politics.

4. Barriers to leadership for women in politics, in management and other areas involving leadership and decision-making.
5. Look at the attitudes of women towards leadership issues.
6. Practical approaches that are working in training women in leadership roles.
7. Make recommendations for engender and others about how to support more women to take on leadership roles.

The traditional systems have not given space for women. Many of the factors that hindered women in the earlier system continue to exist and operate in rural areas. In fact, gender as a phenomenon hardly ever appears in a pure form. It is almost always allowed with caste, class and religions factor. In matters where there is a clash between gender and caste or class, it is impossible to expect women to align themselves with other women, going against their caste or class loyalties. Some women have developed political ambitions too especially when it is seen as a quick means for upward mobility.

## WOMEN IN REPRESENTATIVE AND DEMOCRATIVE POLITICS

1. Women are active in participatory democracy often taking on leadership roles.
2. Women sometimes actively chose not to be involved in institutionalized power
3. structures because they feel they can better use their energies on the outside
4. and retain their integrity as well have flexibility to deal with caring responsibilities.
5. Where there is full support for the caring responsibilities of women they are
6. more likely to be involved in formal decision - making and leadership
7. positions though often channeled into stereotypical areas.
8. Women have a better chance of making a difference where there is support
   a. from inside the organisation and from the outside.

## BARRIERS TO LEADERSHIP FOR WOMEN IN POLITICS, IN MANAGEMENT AND OTHER AREAS INVOLVING LEADERSHIP AND DECISION- MAKING

✓ Women continue to face institutional and individual discrimination;
✓ Many women have low aspirations and low levels of self confidence;

✓ Women's perceptions of careers seem to differ from men with many women not actively planning a career. Women often seek out other benefits from what they do ahead of climbing the ladder such as personal challenges and fulfillment;

✓ Achieving a balance between family and other commitments is important to many women;

✓ Family conflict and responsibilities do take their toll for many but not all women. Where women succeed, support from the home is crucial particularly when they have children;

✓ Women tend to come to leadership and decision making roles later in life than men partly because of interrupted career patterns.

Feminist literatures have shown that politics is important for increased equality between the sexes. However, politics is neither the only source of discrimination against women nor the only source of potential power for achieving more equality. Nevertheless, it is most significant source of current discrimination and Potential Avenue for dealing with many forms of gender discrimination.

A leader in our context is that he/she is an elected member of one or more of the institution of Panchayati Raj System. In other words, the very fact that a person who is an elected member of PRIS makes him/her an institutional leader. The term leadership is defined as the person who is elected for political position in the Panchayati Raj System. Leaders are those who have been elected as members and presidents for the PR System that include the village level, taluk level and district level leaders. These three levels of leadership are considered to be the rural leadership since these leaders are said to have constant interaction and face to face contact with rural mass.

The quintessence of leadership is felt in every walk of organized social life that needs no explanation. With the introduction of PRI'S there has been a corresponding change in the attitudes and behaviour of rural leaders giving birth to different patterns in the emerging leadership in these institutions. While imposing the importance of leadership in PRI'SW, it has been observed leadership is more important in the context of PRI'S because explicitly one of the significant objectives in instituting them was to develop proper leadership suited to development needs of the country side.

Leadership has a pivotal role in the working of PRI'S. It is through the leaders, that the wishes and aspiration of the rural people. In this sense they are the eyes and ears of the rural people are met. It is the uppermost responsibility of every leader to work for the welfare of the people. Leadership should have the capacity to influence people of cooperative towards common end and also to create conditions of collective response. Thus the effective functioning of PRI'S depends mainly on the quality of leader available at the grass root. More over, it is widely believed that leadership plays significant role in promoting, political development and democratic growth.

## ISSUES FACED BY WOMEN IN INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE

Issues in gender inclusive governance not only make inclusion of women difficult, but fail to empower them adequately. The common issues that need urgent attention are:

## IDEOLOGY FACTORS

Patriarchy as a system of male domination shapes women's relationship in politics. 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'sinclusion in the system of governance. The domestic space of women prevents providingpublic political space to them. Patriarchy shapes society's perception of women that they are vulnerable, in need of male guardianship and unsuited for political life. Patriarchy portrays women as weak, dependent and incapable of making smart decisions. With the constant reinforcement of the notion that women are inferior in every aspect, it becomes hard for women to pursue their political rights as an active participant in the decision making bodies. The patriarchal ideology glamorizes the reproductive and care- giving role of women. It believes women need support from their male counterparts as they are incompetent, indecisive and have inferior intelligence. Gender stereotypes cloud the judgment of the common people of the community and prevent in creating a culture thatwill promote women's pro active role in governance. This emerges in the studies of several researchers like Mohanty (2002), Satapathy (2009), and Parida (2010).

## POLITICAL FACTORS

The nature of politics is an important factor for the inclusion or exclusion of women. Women are brought into politics as the

dictate carriers for their male partners, under the pressure of legislations. Male domination of politics, political parties and political structures is another factor that hinders women's true political participation and empowerment. In a male dominated political structure and process women become invisible and unheard. Their vision never finds place nor is their voice paid any heed to.

Male leadership is easily accepted and female stewardship is systematically avoided. Here inclusion becomes a mere political showcasing. In reality Panchayats remain masculine in character.

## SOCIO-CULTURAL FACTORS

The gender status quo is maintained through access to resources, availability of opportunities and differential distribution of power and gender role socialization. Cultures of patriarchy, culture of silence are the accepted ideal practices which make women's inclusion ornamental in governance and their empowerment a myth.

## ECONOMIC FACTORS

In recent days, grass root politics is increasingly becoming commercialized. Women lack access to and ownership of productive resources, which limits the scope of their political work. Lack of access to capital, credit and technology limits women's effective role in the system of local governance. Without property they feel powerless.

## LACK OF CAPITAL AND POLITICAL CAPACITIES

Women often lack public contact and networking due to their home confinement which is a basic need of politics. Due to the absence of social capital they lack political skills, proper training and access to information which are needed to manage local politics and to be effective policymakers. This impoverishment makes theirempowerment difficult. Remaining within the fold of the system of governance, they feeldisempowered.

## EDUCATIONAL FACTOR

Lack of proper education and training defeats the very purpose of genderbased inclusion. This increases women's dependency on their male counterparts and failsto invest in them a capacity of choice and to translate that choice into decision and action. This position renders them disempowered.

## CHALLENGES TO WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION

The level and forms of women's participation in politics is largely shaped by cultural and societal barriers in the form of violence, discrimination and illiteracy.

## SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Barrier to women's capability of participating in politics to be the threat of violence. Sexual violence in India is exacerbated by issues of education and marriage. Women are sexually abused. Child marriage, domestic violence and low literacy rates have lowered Indian women's economic opportunities and contributed to sexual violence in India. A 2011 study found, "24% of Indian men have committed sexual violence at some point in their lives, 20% have forced their partners to have sex with them...38% of men admitting they had physically abused their partners." Widespread sexual violence is attributed to the fact that violence within marriage is not against the law, and sexual violence goes largely unpunished. "In the larger society, violence and the threat of violence affect many women's ability to participate actively in many forms of social and political relationship, to speak in public, to be recognized as dignified beings whose worth is equal to that of others." Self-confidence is likely to increase participation among Indian women, specifically in running for election.

## DISCRIMINATION

Although the Constitution of India removed gender inequalities among caste and gender, discrimination continues to be a widespread barrier to women's political participation. A 2012 study of 3,000 Indian women found the barriers in participation, specifically in running for political office, in the form of illiteracy, work burdens within the household and discriminatory attitudes towards women as leaders. Discriminatory attitudes manifest in the limitations presented to Indian women including low access to information and resources. Women rely on receiving information from family or village members, typically men. Women also lack leadership experience due to the fact they are burdened with household duties. The burden of household duties is a significant reason why many Indian women do not participate. Unlike men, there are fewer opportunities for women to get involved in organizations to gain leadership skills. There is little public space for them as men have dominated the political arena for many years in India.

## ILLITERACY

India has one of the largest illiterate populations. In January 2014, the United Nations reported 287 million adults in India are illiterate.

Literacy among Indian women is 53.7%, which is much lower than literacy among men reported at 75.3%. Illiteracy limits the ability of women to understand the political system and issues. Problems with exploitation, such as women being left off of voters lists, have been reported as illiteracy limits the ability of women to ensure their political rights are exercised. Political participation stated, "Because literacy is connected in general with the ability to move outside the home and to stand on one's own outside of it, it is also connected to the ability of women to meet and collaborate with other women." Women are "persistently mocked and devalued in the panchayats if they are illiterate." Literacy can play a key role in the dignification and independence of women in politics by giving them access to communications, such as memos and newspapers, they can become better informed on political issues.

## OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION

To overcome issues of discrimination and violence, women's organizations have focused on the empowerment of Indian women. Empowerment is tied to the support of family and improved status within the household, which is undermined by the threat of domestic and sexual violence. Socio-economic conditions, such as poverty and illiteracy, prevent the entrance of women into running for public office, and even voting. Inability to understand the rules of Panchayat Raj undermines the self-confidence to participation in public office. Empowerment of Indian women can also occur through "bridging gaps in education, renegotiating gender roles, the gender division of labour and addressing biased attitudes." Women can also be empowered to participate by family, and when familial support is present they are more likely to run for office.

## HOW TO ENCOURAGE AND SUPPORT WOMEN IN TO LEADERSHIP POSITIONS

Various suggestions were made about how to encourage more women to take on officially recognised leadership and decision-making roles. The most popular call was for more training. Other suggestions included:

❖ Mentoring;
❖ Asking women local councilors, MSP's and MP's etc. to share their experiences as women in leadership positions;
❖ Dispelling the myths about what makes a good leader and getting women in

touch with their visions of how the world could be different if they made more
of an impact;
❖ Being creative about the ways in which people can lead with ideas as well as lead projects;
❖ Looking at the wider changes needed such as more family friendly working practices and the legislation governing elections.

In terms of what can be done to support women into leadership positions:

➢ There is a role for training programmes that support women in identifying their leadership skills and building up confidence in their abilities.
➢ Issues of power and discrimination need to be examined in any training along with looking at different approaches to leadership and what style is appropriate when and what women are comfortable with.
➢ Given the importance for many women of keeping a balance, training needs to look holistically at women lives, recognising that other parts of women's lives
impact on what they do.
➢ The approach that may work best in terms of encouraging women working within their communities to take on decision making, influencing and leadership roles in Scotland is to focus on training for participation/ public life skills rather than leadership training itself.
➢ It is likely that continued training and support mechanisms would be of benefit
too many women. Once women do take on leadership roles, confidence can be easily eroded in the face of insidious indirect discrimination, so training for a woman already in leadership positions is to be recommended. This should focus more directly on leadership skills and dilemmas.
➢ Myths and stereotypes also need to be challenged and women in leadership positions need to be encouraged to share their experiences.
➢ There is also a role for mentoring schemes where women can further share

their experiences and develop their skills. As a diverse but underrepresented

group, women need to be supported to recognise, own and use their skills at all levels not just within their immediate communities.

## INCREASING WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND REPRESENTATION

Increasing women's political participation and representation in Indian politics requires electoral and parliamentary reforms. Engaging more Indian women voters has been mentioned already. The number of women standing for elections also needs to increase. For the moment, reservation seems to be the fastest way of increasing the numbers of women contestants elected. Despite the argument that reservations will favor elitist women as has happened in Pakistan, the quota system has proven to be the fastest and most effective way of ensuring women's adequate representation in parliaments all over the world. The 20 countries that have at least 30% women in their national parliaments have used some form of quota system or another. The Women's Reservation Bill, therefore, is a crucial first step towards both electoral and parliamentary reforms.

In addition, the role played by political parties is also very important to ensure that women are adequately represented and policies favoring women are passed. Women's groups had suggested for this election that parties take women's demands on board in their manifestos and campaigns, endorse women candidates and ensure that they do not give tickets to candidates who have charges of gender-based violence, or made remarks reflecting gender discrimination. The structure and organisation of political parties also becomes important to consider. Evidence from 12 developed countries, for instance, shows that women party activists, including their networks and links, and gender-related rules are the most important party-level factors affecting women's Parliamentary representation.

Given that few of these suggestions were adopted by political parties in this election, it is clear that simultaneous and sustained effort will be required for improving the status of women in Parliament. Political parties could at least ensure a better representation in the Rajya Sabha, which is by nomination. They could also ensure that the Women's Reservation Bill is passed. And

finally, they could ensure that the National Commission on Women is manned by women with a track record rather than treating it as an institution where political protégés can be appointed.

## THE ENABLING PROCESS AND THE STATE

Throughout the women's decade and thereafter the government's support for grass root empowerment was hesitant, fragmented, discontinuous and experimental. Government functionaries responsible for programme implementation did not get much or no exposure to face to face dialogue with grass root women. They depended heavily for this purpose on NGOs wherever they existed or on a category of low-paid women functionaries (gramsevikas, anganwadi workers, sathins, village health guides, lady extension officers etc.) whose identities were ambiguous as they were not fully part of the grass root group - even they belonged to a similar, if not the same, background.

A few bureaucrats at the highest policy making level established consultative relations with leaders of the women's movement and came up with some new programmes. Women's cell/ Departments in two or three Ministries, Women's Development Cooperation in certain state etc. were assigned the task of making polices and programme to empower grass root women. A review of the period indicates that the following steps were taken by different Ministries of the government.

❖ Individual grass root women's economic empowerment was sought to be achieved through the delivery of joint paths (joint title to land), training and economic activities and some vague statements of women's right to household productive resources; in antipoverty programmes, a quota was fixed for women beneficiaries. For women's groups, programmes like DWACRA, STEP etc. were launched; a few states passed a resolution to transfer government revenue land to women's groups on a leasehold basis. Both individual and women's groups were declared eligible for bank credit for economic activity. For all wage laborers, the Equal Remuneration Act was passed.

❖ Grass root women's social empowerment was sought to be achieved mainly through awareness

generation programmes which were supposed to reach messages of constitutional and legal rights, and legislative provisions for women, the evils of child marriage, the small family norm, how to fight social disabilities, the evils of dowry, the legal age of marriage for boys and girls, etc.

❖ To provide more space to grass root women in the political process, seats reserved for women in Panchayats bodies were increased in a few states. A Constitutional Amendment Bill was prepared to regularize Panchayat Institutions and enhance their powers and functions, and to introduce compulsory reservation of 1/3 seats for women at all levels.

❖ Grass root women were targeted in non-formal education, by the National Literacy Mission and Mahila Samakhya Programmes.

❖ Programmes like ICDS, Creches for Working and Ailing Mothers, Immunization and Family Welfare and focus on the girl-child were seen as support services for rural women.

❖ That drinking water, sanitation, fuel, fodder and the problems arising out of environmental degradation and deforestation are basically grass root women related problems received some recognition.

It is not the purpose here to review the content of these policies and programmes and to survey how far these have been successfully implemented. As to their impact, it is best to turn the pages of Shram-shakti to see how the Commission assessed the situation as late as 1987-88. With the deterioration of the political situation since then - and the current resource crunch, too much cannot be expected.

## CONCLUSION

It may be concluded that women have shifted traditional assumptions about their roles and capabilities. There has been a marked change, and it has been for the better. Many of its benefits however have yet to touch the majority and all of us continue to experience various forms of gender discrimination. If laws designed to address the concerns of women are to have a dramatic and positive impact on women□s lives, they must be sensitive to the social, economic and political disempowerment of women throughout the world. The most

important measure of their success should be the extent to which they enable woman to interpret, apply and enforce laws of their own making, incorporating their own voices, values and concerns.

Grass root empowerment also needs to be viewed from the standpoint of share of grass root women in the women's movement per se. While there is little doubt that the vitality of the Indian women's movement owes a great deal to the pressures generated from the grassroots, it would be far more difficult to answer the question how far has the women's movement been able to carry the grassroots? What has been largely! achieved is representation by intermediaries of the views and issues of grass root women. To induct grass root women as vocal and active participants in the women's movement, is the challenge of the nineties. The relationship would be of mutual interest. The current political situation makes this imperative, as with the national crisis deepening and violence on the increase, the constructive efforts of over a decade could be washed away overnight.

We need a strong participatory democracy to direct and promote issues that affect women but we equally need women in representative democracy and in influential positions to take make change possible. Supporting women into leadership positions at every level has to be a priority both in terms of social justice and because there are specific issues for women that will not be addressed if the status quo remains. For an organisation like Engender, it may best use its skills and resources in supporting women into leadership positions within participatory democracy as well as continuing to lobby for more women within representative democracy. Within representative democracy, the debate needs to be around how to support and further develop skills for women already in decision –making positions.

Women, especially women of color, continue to lag behind men when it comes to political participation and leadership in the South. Although there are some resources available to promote women's civic engagement and political participation, progress in advancing women's political status continues to move at a glacial pace. This pace is even slower for women.

The Government of India has addressed the issue of empowerment by consolidating all programmes for women under the National Mission of Empowerment of Women (NMEW). The mission of NMEW is to

"enhance economic empowerment of girls and women through skill development, micro credit, vocational training and entrepreneurship." In 2001, the Government of India passed the National Policy for the Empowerment of Women. The policy focuses on "the advancement, development, and empowerment of women." Specifically, the policy focuses on ending gender inequality and violence against women. The United Nations has also encouraged empowerment among India women by campaigning to end violence against women in India. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have also tried to empower women focusing on issues of education, violence, and leadership. NGOs working towards women empowerment in India include Sammaan Foundation, Deepalaya, and CARE India.

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