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Women empowerment in local governance: Macro myths and micro realities

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Abstract

This article 'Women Empowerment in Local Governance' tries to explicate the political empowerment of marginalized section hitherto denied of representation and participation in local decision making bodies. The author unveiled the extent of representation facility for women has fulfilled the expectation of the Act or not. The Article also focus on issues like; Is there any change in the behavior of women after entering into these institutions, whether the perception of male elected members, officials and villagers about the role of women members have changed over the years and to see whether the strong plea for reservation for women in augmenting their all round development is justified. It was found that majority of women representatives are first time entrants.

It is too early to come to any decision about the efficacy of political representation in terms of their empowerment. The emancipation through political empowerment has opened up many avenues to fight against negative impact of patriarchy and to raise their grievances for better position in all relms of life.

Keywords: Women, empowerment, governance, Macro, micro

Introduction

It is very difficult to define the term empowerment in precise terms thought not impossible. As the concept is unarguably multidimensional, attempts have be made to interpret empowerment as economic empowerment, political empowerment, social empowerment etc. Political empowerment is used to denote the exercise of constitutionally provided rights and privileges by an individual or a group or an organization. It also means that an individual or a group or an organization has the capacity to influence the governmental systems as well as the decisions taken thereon, of course, keeping in view the limitations as indicated in the constitution of the country. Empowerment is a collective process in which social power relations are challenged and changed. It is autonomy, both collective and individual. It is a myriad process of creation of agency, organizations and social consciousness. Togetherness is empowerment. It has two necessary aspects: i. It is a collective work and ii. It is self – confidence. Only with these two crucial components will progress become possible ^[1].

“In a broader sense Empowerment refers to creating ‘popular knowledge ‘questioning monopoly of the dominant paradigm Keep alive the population’s resentment against the most visible aspect of political and social discrimination. In a more specific context, the reference is to the provision of assured representation to the ‘deprived’ groups in elected institutions so that participation is assured’’ ^[2].

Bookman and Morgan defines the term empowerment as a “process aimed at consolidating, maintaining or challenging the distribution of power in a particular cultural context’’ ^[3]. The above definitions include the political insight of the term empowerment.

The Meaning of empowerment seems to have changed over time and place. Many factors have a determining effect on empowerment. Some of these factors are cast, religion, sex, place, political and economic conditions etc. Among these factors, representation being a political factors has a telling effect in determining the level of empowerment.

Women Empowerment

In the first place it is essential to know what exactly women empowerment is. It simply means that women are equal to men in all decision –making process. This becomes evident if women ‘wield as much influence as men do on the allocation and use of economic resources.

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In other words she must be treated on par in all respects with man. This becomes possible only when women are allowed to participate in the process of planning, formulation of policies, their implementation and decision-making. According to another view point, women empowerment is exercise of authority by women over resource and ideology. Resources encompass physical, human, intellectual and finance^[4].

Of late women empowerment is gaining prominence. Women have begun to argue that they are being deprived of their just share in the governance because of lack of representation. It is essential to know how representation leads to empowerment of women. Sex discrimination is a universal phenomenon with difference in degree from country to country. The U.N.O and I.C.H.R have confirmed that sex discrimination prevailed all over the world. It is in this context that all thinkers have begun to attach prominence to women empowerment.

Feminist Response

Different feminist thinkers have argued in favor of women empowerment in different ways. This is clear from a comparison of the analysis of women empowerment made by Indian feminist thinkers and their feminist counterparts elsewhere. Feminists like Jones K.B, Anne Phillip, Virginia Sapiro argue that it is not possible to achieve women empowerment by a mere grant of political representation to women on the basis of sex. It is because in the modern democratic system decision-making process is governed by political parties and political ideologies. A woman, because of her allegiance to a political party, invariably becomes a part and parcel of the decisions-making process. She cannot hold a different standpoint in order to help the female populace. Thus, a grant of feminists. Political representation to women on the basis of party based ideology may strengthen the democratic setup and not lead to the cause of woman empowerment. Only when woman falls out of party ideology but remains committed to woman empowerment solely depending on her own abilities and personalities, woman empowerment can be achieved. But in the opinion of some western thinkers, such an atmosphere has not yet been created^[5].

52.7% of woman members replied in the affirmative that they were able to supervise the development activities undertaken by the PRLs in their respective areas. However, the residual 47.3% of woman members negated this and admitted that they could not perform any kind of supervisory work. Those who express that they could not get the proposed work completed gave several reasons for the same. According to them financial resource constraints of these institutions do not give scope for undertaking many works. Woman members are not so much influential in getting finance allotted for work proposed by them. In addition they are incapable of wielding influence as compared to their men counterparts women members also admit that their limited mobility in and around their panchayat area and family commitments, social rigidities etc. do not allow them to supervise the work. It is because of dominance of male members over all the others, women members are incapacitated to get funds for their proposed work and get them completed.

Conclusion

From the above analysis it becomes clear that even after the

extension of reservation facility woman members have not performed up to expectation. Their association with local people and local issues seems to be minimum. Their involvement in administrative as well as developmental activities of panchayat institutions is far from satisfactory.

A doubt may arise that woman empowerment has not yet taken place in its real sense although they have gained political representation. They are found deficient on many counts compared to men because of several constraints they face from the male dominated social and political set up and not because they are women. Another factor is, the women interviewed-large majority of them-are first time entrants. It is too early to come to any decisions about the efficacy of political representation in terms of their empowerment. The very fact that they are willing to contest election next time also is an indication of their political awareness. Reservation will provide them an opportunity to raise their her in all spheres of life. It has opened many opportunities to them in terms of participation and to fight against negative impact of patriarchy. The research has shown that the process needs to be carried forward and not halted.

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