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Sunita Kumari
Research Scholar,
Political Science, Career Point University, Hamirpur, Himachal Pradesh, India

Dr. Rakesh Kumar
Assistant Professor, Political Science, Career Point University, Hamirpur, Himachal Pradesh, India

Corresponding Author:
Sunita Kumari
Research Scholar,
Political Science, Career Point University, Hamirpur, Himachal Pradesh, India

Women's Political Participation & Constitutional Reforms at Grassroots Level: with Special References to Himachal Pradesh

Sunita Kumari and Rakesh Kumar

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Abstract
In the era of globalization, liberalization, democratic decentralization, and women's empowerment, the nation-building process depends on the participation of women at all levels. The Indian Constitution states that men and women are equal citizens of the country. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts created a specific political space for women in grassroots institutions with the aim of increasing their representation in the process of creating the nation, as strong female leadership is essential to integrating them into the mainstream of development. Despite the fact that women have some reservations in local bodies under the current political structure, some have abused this, using women as rubber stamps. Women are significantly underrepresented in public and electoral entities, mostly due to the systemic obstacles imposed by patriarchy, a pervasive cultural norm in the nation. As of September 2021, government data indicated that at least 18 states had over 50% of elected women in Panchayati Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies, including Uttarakhand, Chhattisgarh, Assam, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Odisha, Kerala, Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Rajasthan, Manipur, Telangana, Sikkim, Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Madhya Pradesh. These 18 states, including Gujarat and Kerala, have implemented legislation mandating a 50% reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). Uttarakhand has the highest percentage of female PRI lawmakers at 56.02%. According to the Constitution (106th Amendment) Act, 2023, women are entitled to one-third of all seats in the Lok Sabha, State legislative assemblies, and the Legislative Assembly of the National Capital Territory of Delhi, including those reserved for SCs and STs.

Keywords: Women, empowerment, grassroots, institutions, representatives, constitution

Introduction
Human beings are traditionally classified as 'men' or 'women' based on their gender. Women's status in India has changed dramatically throughout recorded history. The status assigned to women in society represents the level of advancement. The way a civilization's members treat women can be used to judge its spirit. The status of women is a subject of sociological research and debate since it reflects the situation of approximately 50% of the people in any community. The history of human society reveals that women have never had complete equality with men in global society. Inequality existed everywhere (Rao).

In India, women make up a little less than 50% of the population. Despite some positive traditional values and rituals, as well as the rise of great female characters throughout history, women's positions have not been pleasant. Their social and economic status, however

poor and they face discrimination in almost every area of life. For decades, women have been restricted to the home and, as a result, denied the right to receive mental health therapy from a male-dominated society. Since independence, gender discrimination has been highlighted as one of the most significant and contentious concerns.

The Industrial Revolution brought social justice, equality, and democracy to Western Europe and North America. New Zealand was the first country to confer voting rights to women in 1893. Finland, Australia, and Canada granted women suffrage in 1906, while Norway followed likewise in 1913. "Women acquired the right to vote in the United States in 1920 and in the United Kingdom in 1928 following a protracted struggle for equal political rights. Women were given the right to vote in France in 1944 and Germany in 1919 by the" Weimer

Constitution. Women in Switzerland were granted the right to vote in 1971. Nearly all nations in Asia, Africa, Europe, America, and Latin America have progressively conferred voting rights to women; nevertheless, the majority of Middle Eastern countries still deny women this privilege.

Women are an essential component of society and have a significant influence on a country's future. Their increased participation in political and socio-economic affairs gains significance. But history shows that women have not received the recognition they deserve in society. Women in society are often overlooked on a social level. In general, and especially in developing nations like India, they have been and continue to be the victims of several societal taboos. Women contribute over fifty percent to the social and economic progress of civilizations, compared to males, due to their dual roles in reproductive and productive domains. Nonetheless, they continue to have limited influence over the allocation of social resources between men and women in formal political procedures and institutions. Approximately 15% of lawmakers globally are now women (Kumari and Rao).

Political Participation

"Participation" describes voluntary actions that include community members in decision-making at different governmental levels. This indicates that in a democratic system, the people exercise their sovereign authority. There are several sorts of involvement, including political, administrative, and social. Political engagement is vital since it represents the highest and wide to societal fabric within the state. The civilization thrives on political ideas that align with its location, the people's agreement, and an effective governing system. In a democratic government with a mixed economy and a hierarchy of values prioritizing liberty, equality, and development, political engagement is crucial.

There are three types of participation: direct at the community or project level, indirect, and mobilization from above. Direct engagement can take several forms, such as voting, campaigning, influencing government policy, and joining an association. Participation in non-election activities is crucial. There are two types of participation: institutional and non-institutional. Institutional involvement refers to official frameworks, whereas non-institutional engagement includes meetings, processes, rallies, and more. (Dutta)

Measures facilitating “women's involvement in politics and decision-making were implemented at the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995. A comprehensive understanding of the” critical role women occupy in sustainable development and environmental conservation, the significance of human rights, the intolerable infringement of these rights through violence against women, the necessity of access to healthcare, maternal services, and family planning resources, alongside education and information, all emerged from these international conferences. Beijing, 1995, Fourth World Conference on Women: Article 181

As “of January 1, 2023, women constitute 22.8% of cabinet ministers across all countries. Europe and North America possess the largest percentage of women in cabinets at 31.6%, followed by Latin America and the Caribbean at 31.1%.Conversely, in numerous other locations, women are significantly underrepresented; in Central and Southern Asia, the representation is only 10.1%, and in the Pacific Islands, it decreases to 8.1%.Only 13 nations, predominantly in Europe, possess gender-equal cabinets, signifying that at least 50% of the ministers are women. Countries with over 50% female representation in cabinet seats include Albania (66.7%), Finland (64.3%), Spain (63.6%), Nicaragua (62.5%), Liechtenstein (60%), Chile (58.3%), Belgium (57.1%), Mozambique (55%), as well as Andorra, Colombia, Germany, the Netherlands, and Norway (50%)”, among others. There are 17 more nations where women make up between 40 and 49.9% of cabinet ministers. There are nine nations in Western Asia and Oceania where there are no female cabinet members leading ministries (Un women).

Previous Studies

Since the PRI movement began, a number of studies have been made through published and unpublished material on PRI’s and women's representation.

V. Mohini Giri examined in her book "Women and Politics, (1995) how the historic 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution, which allowed women to serve in local government, improved our democratic system and decreased inequality. According to her, women's involvement might significantly improve how institutionalized machinery for implementing programs for women's and children's welfare and development operates. According to research by Dr. Anupma Singh (2008) [8], complete development could not be possible unless women and the resources they represent are completely included in the process. According to K.S. Saxena (1999) [9], women are being actively recruited into politics now not just to address historical injustices or achieve equal citizenship, but also to appeal to women's vote and offer an alternative, overtly feminine view point. Adequate representation of all groups is seen to improve the consolidation of responsive and open democracies, making them more resilient. Since India's first female prime minister, women have held a number of significant roles. However, in this male-dominated culture, crimes against women continue to be committed on a daily basis.

Panchayati Raj Institutions

Since the Vedic period (1700 BCE), panchayati raj has been in India. “Since the Vedic period, the village (gram) has been considered the basic unit for local self-government in the country. As the cornerstone of India's democratic system, Mahatma Gandhi advocated Panchayati Raj, a decentralized form of government where each village would be in charge of its own” affairs. This idea was referred to as "Village self-governance," or Gram Swaraj. In contrast, India established a highly centralized government.

In January 1957, the Government of India established the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee to evaluate the “National Extension Service (1953)” and the “Community Development Programme (1952)” and propose enhancements. The committee was presided over by Member of Parliament Balwantrai Mehta. The NDC carried out the “committee's suggestion in January 1958, which paved the way for the establishment of Panchayati Raj Institutions across the nation”. The “group proposed the implementation of the "democratic decentralization" plan, which subsequently became known as Panchayati Raj. A three-tier Panchayati Raj system was instituted, comprising the Zila Parishad at the district level, Panchayat Samiti at

the block level, and Gram Panchayat at the village level" (Proceedings of committee, 1958, 23).

Equal rights for men and women are guaranteed by Article 325 of the Indian Constitution. According to the 1988 National Perspective Plan for Women, women's equality in the process of nation-building depends critically on their ability to influence politics and have access to decision-making authority. The group encouraged women to be involved at all levels in rural local self-governing groups. Women are represented in a critical mass by the 73rd amendment, which requires a minimum "one-third reservation for women in panchayat membership and chairperson duties at all three levels—the village, district, and intermediate levels. In order to comply with" the new amendment, the states were given a year to modify their panchayat legislation. All states have only given women a one-third reservation, despite the amendment's requirement that women participation "not less than one-third" in both membership and chairperson positions (Buch).

Constitutional Reforms

Changes to the constitution were proposed in 1996, 1998, 1999, and 2008 with the intention of allocating "seats for women in parliament and state legislative assemblies. The first three pieces of legislation expired when their respective Lok Sabhas were dissolved. The Rajya Sabha introduced and adopted the 2008 bill, but it likewise came to an end with the dissolution of the 15th Lok Sabha. According to the Constitution (106th Amendment) Act, 2023, women are entitled to one-third of all seats in the Lok Sabha, State Legislative Assemblies, and the Legislative Assembly of the National Capital Territory of Delhi, including those reserved for SCs and STs".After the census is completed, following the Act's creation, the reserve measure will go into force. It will last for fifteen years, and whether it is extended or not will be decided by parliamentary action. Following each delimitation procedure, the legislative statute will control the rotation of seats allotted to women. Women now make up around 14% of the 18th Lok Sabha's overall membership, compared to 9% on average for state legislative legislatures. (drishti ias.com)

The Himachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Acts

On August 15, 1947, India became an independent nation. The people living in hilly regions desired the quick unification of the hill states with the Indian unification. As a result, on January 26, 1948, a convention of hill state people was held in Shimla under the auspices of the All India State Peoples Conference. Unanimous resolution was passed, urging the national

Leadership to combine all hill states into one state, which is now known as Himachal Pradesh. The state was created on April 15, 1948, as a "centrally administered" unit by combining twenty-six hill states in Shimla and four hill states in Punjab. Himachal Pradesh formerly "had four districts: Mahasu, Sirmour, Mandi, and Chamba, with an area of 25,839 square kilometers. As the 18th state in the Indian Union, Himachal Pradesh" attained full sovereignty on January 25, 1971. On September 1st, 1972, the districts were reorganized as a result of 112, which resulted in the creation of two further new districts, Una and Hamirpur, by the trifurcation of the former Kangra District. Additionally, the boundaries of the then-existing districts of Mahasu and Shimla were rearranged to create the new districts of Shimla and Solan.

The state of Himachal Pradesh accepted the Punjab Village Panchayati Act 1939 as the first step in implementing the Panchayati Raj system in 1949. In 1950, the state legislature created the Himachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act to ensure that Panchayats function properly. It became operational in 1954, when the state's Panchayats were founded. That act distinguished itself with a three-tiered scheme. The legislation authorized the state government to establish a Gram Sabha for every village and a Tehsil Panchayat for each tehsil or subdivision. Seats were allocated for Scheduled Castes and women in the Gram Sabha.

The "Himachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act" was reestablished in 1968, when the state assembly approved a new Panchayati Raj Act. This statute created a uniform foundation for the entire state. With the passage of this law in November 1970, a "three-tiered system of Panchayati Raj was established: Zila Parishad at the district level, Panchayat Samiti at the block level, and Gram Panchayat at the village level. In accordance with the 73rd Amendment Act of 1992, Himachal Pradesh passed the Himachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act 1994". On February 22, 1994, the 1994 Act, which reaffirmed the earlier State Panchayati Raj Act of 1968, went into force. This Act instituted Gram Sabha, Gram Panchayats, Panchayat Samities, and Zila Panchayats at the village, block, and district tiers, respectively. Post-independence, the Indian constitution conferred upon women equal rights to engage in the political process of the nation as stipulated in Articles 14 and 15. "In May 1993, the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution went into force" after its approval in 1992. Women will have a one-third reservation in grassroots organizations at all levels due to this legislation.

The "73rd and 74th constitutional amendments" mandate that all local elected bodies allocate one-third of their seats for women. Women remain marginalized in positions of governance as well as decision-making, even though their numbers at all levels of political activity have significantly increased. As "per Article 243D of the Indian Constitution, each Panchayat must hold direct elections to fill at least one-third of the seats reserved for women.

In April 2008 the state government made another amendment to broaden women participation in decision making at grassroots level and reserve 50% seats for women candidates under sec- 8 (3), (3A), (4) in gram panchayats, sec-78 (5), (5A), (6) in panchayat samities, section-89 (5), (5A), (6) inzilaparishad and section-125 (2), (3) for chairperson or office bearers. ("Himachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj (Amendment) Act, 2008, notified on 13/04/2008")

However, "21 states and 2 union territories have made progress by enacting 50% women's reservation in Panchayati Raj institutions under their State Panchayati Raj Acts/Rules. One-third of direct-election seats in each Municipality must be reserved for women under Article 243T of the Indian Constitution. According to the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs statistics, 17 States and 1 Union Territory have 50% women's reservation in urban" local bodies.

Conclusion

Women are underrepresented in the State Legislature, Parliament, and other decision-making bodies.In politics at all levels, gender bias has long persisted. Men want to

maintain their stranglehold on politics. Numerous factors contribute to the low percentage of female political participation. In reality, women's political participation is impeded by various socio-cultural, political, and economic obstacles. Social norms view women as belonging to the home, not the public sphere. Because they believed that women had a lower chance of obtaining seat, political parties were formerly hesitant to nominate female candidates in elections. The criminalization of politics, a lack of safety as well as security, a lack of incentives, illiteracy, ignorance, a lack of political awareness and self-confidence, and a lack of time and resources are some of the other factors that deter women from getting involved in politics.

Equal participation by men and women in decision-making is essential to preserving, advancing, and ensuring the smooth operation of democracy. This will lead to a balance that more closely reflects the makeup of society. To achieve equality, progress, and peace, women must actively participate and receive consideration at all levels of decision-making. Positively, seat reservations have led to the election of many women to PRIs. Women's identity and public presence have been acknowledged by reservations. On the negative side, it has been found that elected women members of panchayati raj institutions are considered as puppets.

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