

EMPOWERING WOMEN THROUGH GENDER QUOTAS

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims to develop a theoretical view on the multiple effects of gender quotas on women empowerment in the political field. The paper focuses women representatives in local government institutions in Bihar by using qualitative methods. It argues that the reservation for women can be an important impetus to women's empowerment in India but it is not a guarantee for participation of the elected women. To speed up the process of women's empowerment it is essential to implement some supplementary policies which encourage the self-confidence of women, build women's capabilities and remove operational obstacles.

KEYWORDS: Women empowerment, Gender Quota, Political participation, Bihar, Panchayati Raj

INTRODUCTION

The theory of representation proposes that all citizens should have the same opportunity to take part in political affairs irrespective of gender, race and other identities. Meanwhile women are globally under-represented at all levels of governance in relation to their share of the population (IDEA 2006), there is a huge demand for more representation of women in political bodies. UN Conferences and CEDAW convention have also been expressly significant for the issue of women's political representation. (Krook, M. L., 2004). Fourth UN World Conference which was held in Beijing in 1995, also addresses of gender balance and affirmative action. Furthermore; different scholars have justified the increased role of women in politics (Phillips 1993, Ross 2002). According to Drude Dahlerup (2006) women is a politically important category that has the right to representation. Therefore it can be argued that representation in decision making bodies is supposed to be crucial for women to protect their rights and opportunities by protecting them in laws and constitutions. So there is a demand for special provisions to facilitate women to be elected or appointed at high-level decision-making positions. In such special provisions, much attention has been given to one particular step, the introduction of quotas for women in political bodies.

However the use of gender quotas challenges the ideas and theories about the connection between women's political representation and their socio-economic position, since, as Dahlerup (2006) argues, quotas may lead to extraordinary historical leaps in women's socio-economic positions. For example, in a country like India where society is patriarchal and most women are supposed to be reliant on their family, how can

33 per cent gender quotas, as granted by the Constitution of India at grassroots level (local political institutions) after the 73rd amendment in 1992, empower women? Thus the basic research question of this present paper is whether women representatives, elected on the basis of gender quotas, are actually empowered? The paper develops a theoretical view on effects of gender quotas on political participation and which can pave the way of women empowerment in political field.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In the writings about political representation and empowerment of women, one cannot overlook the contribution of Phillips (1995) who says that the basis of representation should be shifted from "politics of ideas" to "politics of presence" and political representatives should present the characteristics like gender, race etc. Therefore gender quotas are associated with a politics of presence. However some studies for example, Sekhon (2006) and Kaul and Sahni (2009) disclose that reservation itself cannot bring empowerment unless there is a positive change in the social structure. And women elected on quotas face many complications during their participation in governmental bodies.

Apart from these, there are some studies which reveal that gender quotas have given mixed results and propose that women have become more independent in the decision making process however face many difficulties in the course of their participation (Jayal, 2006 and Kudva 2003). Hust (2002) proposes that the quota for women is definitely an important incentive for women's empowerment but that the procedure will take a long time and that the aim of women's empowerment cannot be reached by quotas single-handedly.

RESERVATION FOR WOMEN IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN INDIA AND THE BIHAR MODEL

The Indian government attempted to create a strong local government system by Balwant Rai Mehta Committee Report (1957) and Ashok Mehta Committee (1978) but in that system very few women were elected to the panchayat and their participation was insignificant. Omvedt's (2005) study claims that many of these very few elected women did not even attend the meetings and merely gave their "thumbprint" as a signature to whatever decision that was taken. To change this condition and to promote the women's participation in the local governmental bodies the 73rd Amendment (1992) and the 74th Amendment, introduced (1993) established the reservation of 33% of all seats in panchayats and municipalities for women. However while understanding the effect the reservation Hust (2004), Omvedt (2005) and Chattopadhyay & Duflo (2003) came to the same conclusion that the representation of women is still not satisfactory in itself as it does not offer the possibility of active participation.

The distinctive social political and economic environment of Bihar is the primary reason for selecting it. The state of Bihar has gone ahead of 33% quota limit and has through the Bihar Panchayat Raj Ordinance introduced a reservation of 50 % for women. Following the Bihar Panchayat Raj Ordinance 2006, elections were held and women candidates got elected in the excess of 54%. This is a significant increase in women representation and it is believed that such a reservation policy will have a positive effect on women's empowerment. Thus it was a matter of interest to explore whether this quantitative increase in the representation of women has converted into qualitative changes in their participation. The data was collected by a field study in Bihar, adopting a qualitative method and while selecting 30 respondents for interview the principle of maximal variation was used to find elected women on different levels of local government institutions with different backgrounds. Other sources were official reports of the government of Bihar. The secondary sources were mainly books and articles published in journals and other published literature related to the research work.

MEANING OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AND FRAMEWORK TO UNDERSTAND THE IMPACT OF GENDER QUOTAS USING THE CRITERIA OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

The notion of women empowerment has been referred to providing women adequate involvement in decision making process and power sharing in the representative bodies, employment, access to property, productive assets, land and

financial assets etc. (Hatim 2001) and as a process that leads women to distinguish themselves as capable of taking decisions and making choices about their lives, which necessitates ample levels of self-confidence and firmness. (Huyer and Sikoska, 2003) On the basis of this understanding the present paper attempts to judge the empowerment by understanding the impact of gender quotas on women's political participation which has been recognised as significant feature in a representative democracy (Verba, 1995), and have been used in previous research to study the impact of electoral gender quota on women's political engagement (Zetterberg, 2009).

ANALYSING THE IMPACT OF QUOTAS ON POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

International encyclopaedia of Social Science (Vol. XII) defines Political Participation as voluntary activities by which members of a society share in the selection of rulers directly or indirectly in the formation of public policy. Thus according to this definition the actions like casting vote, seeking information, holding discussions, attending meetings of political nature, making financial contributions to political party, going on a strike, staging demonstrations, communicating with the legislators, and other leading figures. Based on the collection of data, the impacts of gender quota on women representatives can be understood through analysing their participation in ruling bodies. The paper studied the concept political participation from four different aspects: Communication with the people, participation in meeting, participation in scheme implementation and participation in decision making process.

COMMUNICATION WITH THE PEOPLE

Traditionally people have been seeing men in the role of leaders then after the reservation system women also started representing people and it was a matter of interest that how women started communicating with people because patriarchal society did not allow women for open dialogue with people. The present paper reveals that these women communicate with the people by talking to each household and by meeting people at gram sabha meetings. As one respondent said, *'In addition to attend the meetings I go door to door to know about the problems of my people. Now I am familiar with everybody in this locality.'* Many other women representatives also followed the same method. While some women acknowledged that earlier they communicated with people through their husbands or other male member of the family but gradually the conditions changed and then they started communicating by themselves. Another respondent explained: *'It was a tradition here not to go outside without any male member of your family. People knew my husband and thus they tell their problems to him. But now*

things are changing. Now people share their problems to me and I try to solve them as much as possible.'

The above statement shows a clear picture of the traditional norms of the society. For these women it was very normal that their husbands or other male family members performed these duties in earlier days but at the same time it also shows that now things are changing and women members are more vocal than before.

PARTICIPATION IN MEETINGS

Regarding the participation in meetings the interviews indicated about mixed results. Many women representatives said that they attended panchayat meetings regularly. But there were also some women who said that they were not able to attend meetings due to their household activities and timing which support the Herd and Harrington Meyer (2002) study where they argue that the time and other resources they spend caring for their families take away time from civic activities. This is also evident from this study, for instance, as one respondent who was a ward sadasya said, *'Most of the panchayat meetings occur at noon. It is not a suitable time for me because at this time I have to cook and serve food to my family. My children also come from school at the same time. I have to look after them also. So I do not find time to attend the meeting'*. Whereas another respondent explained her problem, *'The meeting place is also very far from here and my earning is not so much that I can spend money on public transport.'* Thus the study supports the conclusion of Buch's (1999) work that the causes for failure to attend meetings are largely related to domestic work and the inconvenience of distance.

On the other hand there are some examples where we can find the promptness of some women members who attend the meetings regularly even with other responsibilities. One of the respondent explained, *"Before it was very hard for me to go to meeting regularly because of the household works but then I decided not to be absent on the meetings otherwise I will miss many information. Still it is hard to manage everything but I try my best."*

PARTICIPATION IN SCHEME IMPLEMENTATION

Elected women members were very active in scheme implementations, e.g. Self Help Groups, MGNREGA and Sanitation, and they claimed that after the reservations they had attained new knowledge, as explained in early section, and now they have got a chance to do something for their people. There were a few examples concerning women's engagement in the public projects. One respondent stated, *'Women are very intense to implement schemes supported and started by the*

government. As a result of their awareness public toilets and schools have been constructed in this area.'

The interviews also indicated that some women were primarily shy to come out of the home but gradually gained confidence. A mukhiya from Mokama described about her situation, *'In the beginning numerous programs regarding women and child care were unknown to me. But gradually I have done the meetings about the health of women and children in my locality and I am also trying to make the women aware about it through the Health Awareness Programme.'*

PARTICIPATION IN DECISION MAKING PROCESS

During the course of interview the respondents replied that they try to raise issues and demands in the meetings and also give suggestions to overcome problems but their opinions and demands do not get proper consideration. As a ward sadasya from Mokama said, *'In the meetings when I try to give my suggestion, many times my opinion is ignored.'* But at the same time there are many women members who admitted that now their views are very important to draft any policy. One respondent said, *"Whenever there is any problem which can affect the people of my area regardless of gender I give suggestions to solve it and I am happy to admit that my opinions and suggestions are heard every time."*

This statement gets support from other respondent's statement, *"It has been a long journey to be at my present condition. Previously my opinions were normally ignored and nobody was interested in my suggestions but gradually many things changed and with the growing knowledge and political awareness I became more confident and able to give suggestions which could not be ignored. Now everyone pay attention to my views. Thanks to the reservation system that changed everything."* Examples shows that there are mixed results. The reservation gives opportunity to women members to participate more but on the other hand there is still a big gap to be bridged regarding women's participation in decision-making process.

FINAL DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was explore whether rise in the numerical representation of women in political decision-making can lead positive changes in the participation of women thus to pave the way for political empowerment of women. The paper tried to develop a theoretical view on the multiple effects of gender quotas on women empowerment in political field. To evaluate the impact of gender quota to the women's political empowerment their participation in political fields categorised in Communication with the people, Participation in Meetings, Participation in scheme implementation, Participation in

decision making process and Projects started by them, were studied. The data of the present paper reveals that the gender quota had a very positive impact on the women's political participation. The system has given a platform to the women to interact with social and political entities, resulting in that they have become more visible and gained the confidence to perform their duties for the betterment of their people. The women reservation system has also been supportive to women in protesting on issues like alcoholism, dowry disputes, divorces and girl- trafficking. But there are some other areas where it seems that reservation has not been very effective. As far as the political participation is concerned, the overall related data in the paper reveals that women are very keen to learn about the participation techniques but that there is still a big gap to be bridged regarding the participation in decision making process. Apart from routine activities of the panchayats these women representatives have tried to start some public projects but there is a need for the support from government so that they can get more funds.

As a conclusion the paper argues that the reservation for women in the panchayats motivates them to come forward in political field and is an important impetus to women's empowerment in India. To expedite this process it is essential to implement some supplementary policies which encourage the self-confidence of women, build women's capabilities and remove operational obstacles. There is also a need to change many aspects of the existing gender relations, power distribution and power-sharing. It cannot be denied that women have gained a certain extent of authority and confidence as a direct outcome of the quota. In this respect it appears that the quota can be a feasible tool for the political empowerment of women.

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