

Role of Women in Contemporary Policy and Governance

(By Shallu Jaglan)

The most recent event that turns our attention to the significance of women's political participation yet again is Senator Kamala Harris, who became the first woman Vice President-elect of the United States of America. This, of course, is a monumental event, not easily achieved.

Looking at women in national parliaments, only a basic 25% of all national parliamentarians are women. The US's global rank is 82 as per 'The Women in Politics Map: 2020' regarding "women in parliament." According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union and UN Women database, as of 1st January 2021, India ranks '148' with a record of 78 out of 540 seats held by women in the lower house (Lok Sabha) and 27 out of 241 seats held by women in the upper house (Rajya Sabha). That is 14.4% and 11.2% in the Lower House and Upper House of the parliament respectively.

The top 5 portfolios allocated to Women ministers are Family/ children/ youth/ elderly/ disabled, followed by Social affairs, Environment/ natural resources/ energy, Employment/ labour/ vocational training, and Women affairs/ gender equality. While other portfolios like Finance/ Budget, Defence and Veteran Affairs, Human Rights, Transport, Information/ Media, Parliamentary Affairs, Public Administration/ Public Service, Economy/ Development are reserved and held by their counterparts. This indicates that even while holding positions that influence decision making, women are side-lined and underrepresented at most levels of important decision making all around the world.

The target set by the United Nation, through its Sustainable Development Goals is for the "world will strive to achieve women's full and effective participation at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life" by 2030. Thus, it is evident that "equal participation and leadership in political and public life is essential" to bridge the gender parity that is so prominent worldwide.

This marginalization of women from the political sphere is exacerbated essentially as a "result of discriminatory laws, practices, attitudes and gender stereotypes, low levels of education, lack of access to health care, and the disproportionate effect of poverty on women" as iterated in the 2011 UN General Assembly resolution on women's political participation.

The core arguments for why such gender disparities have to be erased and the significance of political representation can be explained as follows:

1. Firstly the 'justice argument' simply states that since women account for approximately 50% of the population, hence they must be similarly represented as such in key positions that influence policy implementation.
2. The 'experience argument' points to the fact that women's experiences are distinctly different from men's, implying that women "do politics" differently from men. As such their experience can only be accommodated in the larger discourse through their inclusion in policy-making procedures. For most women their personal and professional lives are interlinked. Women in most countries look over a majority of the unpaid domestic care work, which includes common household chores along with ensuring the wellbeing of their families and collating other aspects of their social lives. Thus, women seem to develop a wholesome sense of ground- realities and solve issues with a more "collaborative and qualitative approach," taking into consideration the diversity in society. However, this argument faces criticism on the account that it fails to recognize the intersectionality among women, that is, how diversity in economic, cultural, and social affects them differently.
3. Following this, the 'interest argument' elaborates on existing social circumstances that result in different or at times conflicting interests between women and men. As such women require "women in representative institutions to articulate the interests of women." An accurate example here is that of the extraordinary Period Products (Free Provision) Bill, which was recently passed in Scotland by MSP Monica Lennon or the 'paid leaves' Zomato, an Indian Startup that has begun providing its female employees. Thus, while there exists awareness regarding issues such as menstruation and menstrual hygiene, it is only women or menstruating individuals who can bring such issues to the fore and give them adequate backing. In another view, such laws and paid leave entitlements are also criticized for "creating further professional barriers for women." At such times of conflict, women representation and inputs are important to emphasize that such actions are only a conscious step towards better-accommodating women in male-dominated workspaces.
4. The 'critical mass argument' articulates that "women are able to achieve solidarity of purpose to represent women's interests when they achieve certain levels of representation." Hence in solidarity, issues of periods or menstrual cycles, that are a central part of a woman's life are evaluated as a mainstream problem, initiating far-reaching social dialogues. Strength in numbers is much needed and this direct engagement in public decision making ensures better accountability to women. To reservations is the method through which a certain level of equality in numbers is maintained. In India, the Women's Reservation Bill guarantees 33% reservation to women in both houses of parliament and state legislative assemblies (though still left pending in Lok Sabha). However, regardless of its implementation in Rajya Sabha, the state of women's participation in India remains dismal. Thus, while the idea of 'critical mass' itself is not flawed, its implementation through the mandatory 33% representation

has little effect as it acts as a ‘ceiling’ rather than promoting representation of women in larger numbers.

5. The ‘symbolic argument’ points to the obvious, that increasing women role models encourage the participation and involvement of other women in political life. Once again, we take from the example of Vice-President Kamala Harris whose recent accomplishments have inspired various young women and girls to follow in her footsteps seen evidently in the crowds of supporters that stood listening to the woman dressed in white (white, indicative of the Women’s suffragette movement) on the day her victory was announced.
6. Lastly the ‘democracy argument’ says that “the equal representation of women and men enhances democratization of governance in both transitional and consolidated democracies.” Therefore, it is very important to have women in parliamentary positions. In recent times some examples where women in leadership positions have made a significant impact are in the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. Female leadership is often characterized by patience, empathy, inclusivity, generosity, and balance. Thus, countries with women leaders seem to have done exceedingly well in these times of lockdown, where existing divides have only widened further. A genuine democracy must be gender-sensitive, achievable only by equal representation of all genders.
7. Identifying such arguments and building upon them is an important first step. Many countries have implemented progressive laws and programs to empower women and encouraged them on certain levels to contest for, demand and accept “key public service and government positions.” India has been promoting education and health for women, their involvement in entrepreneurship, setting up self-help groups, and the like. While the “women in parliament” statistics may have seen a jump as compared to the last 15 years, we have a long way to go before we completely eradicate the persisting gender parity. Therefore, it must become our priority to ensure that the government follows up on legislative and constitutional reforms that ideate and exhibit a greater political commitment to providing substantial roles of leadership in every level of the government to women. Once the predicament of “lack of representation of women and suppressed growth” is on its way to rectification, the ideal of gender equality will inevitably take centre stage. And that is what we must look forward to - “A problem well stated is a problem half solved.”

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