



## Women and democracy (opportunity or challenges)

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### Abstract

In the 'era of globalisation' women's participation and representation in legislative bodies are the key issues that need to be addressed with concern within a wider global context. Women's greater representation and their inclusive participation in political process are considered a good test of its claim to democracy. Their engagement, also in electoral process is an important marker of the maturity and efficacy of democracy in any country. It can be defined not only in terms of the equality and freedom with which they share political power with men but also in terms of the liberty and space provided for women in the democratic framework of electoral politics. Regrettably, women are not adequately represented in politics all over the world. They constitute half of the world population, but the worldwide average percentage of women in national parliament at present is only 21.3 percent. This figure notifies that politics is mainly men's business; they had occupied more than 75 percent of world's parliamentary seats. It is certainly clear that there is no necessary correlation between length and experience of democracy and number of women in political offices. On these grounds Anne Marie Goetz argues that "established Democracies are facing not simply a 'deficit', but they are built upon deeply Gendered conditions for political participations". According to the feminist movement as well as to feminist theory this shortage of women in political institutions may have serious consequences for the political agenda, for the articulation of women interests and for the legitimacy of democratic institutions.

**Keywords:** democracy, political power, electoral politics

### Introduction

The legislatures of various nations have presented the dramatic representation of women across the world. For instance, in some countries like Rwanda, Sweden, and Argentina; women have made noteworthy improvement in participation and representation. While in other countries, women are either left without the right to vote (Saudi Arabia) or are entirely dominated by male legislators such as in Kyrgyzstan, Micronesia, Solomon Island, United Arab Emirates etc <sup>[1]</sup>. In fact, most of the countries in the world have failed to give due space and adequate representation to women in their public offices. Even in societies where women exercise relatively more freedom in day to day living but they still remain politically marginalised and under-represented. Issue of Women's under representation as feminist agenda arrived on the international platform in the late 1970s to early 1980s. Between 1985 and 1995, a series of United Nation's conferences on women identified specific targets and a timetable for reaching them. In particular, Beijing Platform for action declared, that women should occupy at least 30 percent of political decision making positions. In addition, numerous international conferences and meetings were held about women and their political participation. The assembled women parliamentary, government and civil society representatives and focused on strategies for increasing women's representation in political institution at all levels, recognising that this was inseparable from question of

poverty, employment and the removal of barriers to economic independence <sup>[2]</sup>.

However, moving towards the 'Golden Age of Democracy' (as democracy is termed in post modern era), Women have the legal rights and stand for election in almost every country of the world (except Saudi Arabia). Women also have made dramatic gains in electoral politics, winning a number of high profile positions of national leadership and a record number of seats in Parliament around the world <sup>[3]</sup>. Although, women still do not occupy half of all positions of political leadership, because cultural and traditional barriers on women's use of their political rights including family resistance and illiteracy are still remain in societies <sup>[4]</sup>.

Women's representation in legislative bodies is only one of the many ways that women can access power. But female in the top leadership position of a country is an extremely rare creature. History stands witness to the fact that in the political management and in having commanding position dealing with the affairs of the state and government, the role of women have been and still is far from being at par with their male counterparts. To provide women representation in legislative and the administrative bodies commensurate with their percentage in the population the male mindset is yet to thaw.

<sup>1</sup> Pamela Paxton, Sheri Kunovich and Melanie M. Hughes, "Gender in politics", Annual Review of Sociology, Vol. 33 (2007), pp. 263-264. doi:10.1146/annurev.soc.33.040406.131651. tp.263-270,

<sup>2</sup> Gill Allwood and Khursheed Wadia, "Increasing Women's Representation in France and India", Canadian journal of political science, Vol. 37 (2) (June 2004), P.380, <http://www.jstore.org/stable/25165646>, tp.375-393.

<sup>3</sup> Farida Jalalzai and Mona Lena Krook, "Beyond Hillary and Benazir: Women's Political leadership worldwide", International Political Science Review (Washington), Vol. 31 (1), (January 2010), p.5, doi: 10.1177/0192512109354470. tp. 5-21.

<sup>4</sup> Paxton, n. 5 pp. 263-264.

The lion's share in the politics the world over is still grabbed by men and males are loath to part with that share.

Today only few women leaders have appeared on the world stage <sup>[5]</sup>. For instance, Angela Merkel in Germany, Michelle Bachelet in Chile, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf in Liberia, Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner in Argentina, Dilma Rousseff in Brazil, Park Guen-Hye in South Korea, Erna Solberg in Norway and Sheikh Hasina Wajed in Bangladesh to name a few <sup>[6]</sup>. Although, outstanding performance played by these giant women have sparked the widespread discussion towards female leadership. Looking at the performance of these giant women political leader, it is really outstanding. For instance, entry of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (President of Liberia) in the political affairs of the country has pursued a pattern of challenging powerful men. By the time, she held the post of president, the condition of her country was worst; civil war had almost demolished the Liberia: It's million population had been killed, thousands displaced, and a lot of women had been raped. Rebuilding of Liberia was a toughest task, but the charismatic personality of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf made it possible. She excellently bargains debt relief through negotiations, had increased national budget fourfold, started a large investigation into corruption and established the reconciliation commission to deal with offender during the civil war. Women got high representation in her cabinet, and females also recruited in the police and military <sup>[7]</sup>.

The Angela Merkel (Chancellor of Germany), aged 56 years now, control the largest economy of Europe; definitely she is the most distinguished and admirable lady in the world. Dilma Rousseff, (first female President of Brazil) is another eminent female public figure of the world. She is a pragmatic, hard working and sensible manager, who won power by announcing that she will reduce poverty, improve education and health care and rebuild the economic stability <sup>[8]</sup>.

For the last 19 years, Bangladesh politics has been dominated by two main women leaders headed parties, Sheikh Hasina Wajed of Awami League (AL) and Khalida Zia, leader of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). These two women had occupied apex position in the political system and are running the state well, one as Prime Minister and the other as leader of the opposition alternately. At present Sheikh Hasina had taken the charge of State as Prime minister in 2009 and now she is fighting for survival of state democracy.

However, at present, the status/position of women in politics has grabbed the attention of all around the world. This follows on the form of interests in the election of other female leaders around the globe, and coincides with the election of record numbers of women to national Parliaments worldwide. Such developments have sparked widespread discussion as to the role of sex and gender in political life. For some the rise of

several prominent female leaders reflects important giant that women as group have made in the political sphere. For others however, the experience and portrayals of female politicians, as well the continued under- representation of women in politics more generally draw the attention to the many ways in which access to political office is still very much stratified by gender <sup>[9]</sup>.

The world over, Women's political behaviour has always drawn the attention of researchers. Initially, researcher found that women were politically marginalised. Everywhere, in the developed countries and in less developed or developing countries as well- studies had shown that women participation as voter were lesser than men, their rate in political engagement were often less than men, had less of sense of political efficacy than men, were less interested in politics than men and were less likely to join political groups, run for offices and attain positions of power. Although, women's lesser rate in politics challenged themselves by their active political participation and by the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century, these differences had disappeared in most of the developed countries of world <sup>[10]</sup>

As a result, political activeness of women has offered women a chance to engage with various tasks regarding the affairs of the country. Subsequently, women leaders perform multiple tasks- they address political issues, put political demands, convince others women to join politics and connect with political cause, defend their legal rights, voluntary organise with various group activities, had capability to address a mob with a bullhorn sound and exercise their responsibility as an administrator.

These Political roles provided them more opportunity to engage in new types of political behaviour than any ordinary roles they played. These changes has given the new definition or redefinition of women's roles and had forces to modify the dominant ideology of women's role. Thus, such dynamic roles of women leader hold attractions of researchers from all over the world, and they have become subject of much recent enquiry and viewed at large scale by many others.

Although, some key factors are accountable to make women more dynamics towards their role. Firstly, higher education of women proved key force in changing the political roles of women. From higher education they were acquiring political skills that are pre-requisite for leadership roles. Secondly, politically advanced country also equally important to provide such atmosphere, in which women accessed political opportunity easily and expanded their role in such advanced society at mass level. Thirdly, strong socio economic and political factors are equally powerful spur to change the role of women in politics. As women's strong profile made easier the process of entry into politics, their survival into political struggle and are smoothing the way for them. Lastly, granting a fix percentage of reservation for women in Legislatures by most of the countries of the world, also provide powerful impetus to women and had push them to become politically active. In the end, all these factors are equally powerful in expansion the roles of women in the area of politics.

The question of equitable representation for disadvantaged

<sup>5</sup> Pamela Paxton and Melanie M. Huges, *Women Politics and Power: A global Perspective*, California: pine forge press (sage publication) 2007, p.80.

<sup>6</sup> Female world leaders currently in power, [http://www.jjmccullough.com/charts\\_rest\\_female-leaders.php](http://www.jjmccullough.com/charts_rest_female-leaders.php). (Accessed on 25/6/2014)

<sup>7</sup> Emina Saner, who is Ellen Johnson Sirleaf?, *The Guardian*, Tuesday 8 March 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/mar/08/ellen-johnson-sirleaf-100-women>

<sup>8</sup> Homa Khaleeli, Angela Merkel, *the guardian* 8 march 2011. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/mar/08/angela-merkel-100-women>

<sup>9</sup> Jalazai and Krook, n. 7, pp. 5-21.

<sup>10</sup> Fatima Ehtesham siddqui, p. 1-15.

groups (particularly for women) has been at the heart of Indian political debate since independence <sup>[11]</sup>. Several provisions for empowering women have been made in the constitution of the country, but they are not equally represented that they legitimately deserve in the society. The literal meaning of Empowerment of women refers to giving them maximum participation in decision making process and sharing of power in representative bodies, employment, access to property, productive assets, common land and financial assets etc <sup>[12]</sup>. India has heralded the new millennium by pronouncing the year 2001 as the year of Empowerment of women <sup>[13]</sup>. However, after the one decade of this announcement, women are poorly represented in the rank of power, policy and decision making. In spite of constitutional provisions of gender equality only a few women have been able to make a room for themselves in the legislatures and decision making process <sup>[14]</sup>.

Ours is the largest democracy in the world where the womenfolk constitute almost half the population. The Indian constitution provisions of equality, gave women political right by legitimizing their roles for participating in public life, within the formal and legal framework. Despite this, relatively a few women have been able to reach top executive posts or decision making in legislature. Indian women's record as political office holder is dismal and well below what their numerical strength warranted <sup>[15]</sup>. Though constitutional guarantees for women exist, they were observed more in the breach than in practice <sup>[16]</sup>. In fact, the equal rights given to women in the constitution have little weightage in practice as seen from their poor representation in Lok Sabha. At national level it constitutes only 10% female representation. Thus, in India there is a great hiatus between constitutional guarantees and the active representation of women.

Moving towards the number of female representation in legislative bodies of all states of Indian union including Uttar Pradesh, it has also been found that no state has set the good record of women in their assembly, although some states represent above score of women in comparison of UP (8.68%). Hence, women representation in Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies are very small, and their representation in decision making bodies even too shorts, but those few women who got the chance to get entry in these bodies, played a very admirable role and sometimes have challenged the male colleagues by their giant personality.

<sup>11</sup> Allwood and Wadia, n. 6, p. 381.

<sup>12</sup> Shadima Hatim, "Empowerment of Women: Problems and prospects", Indian journal of politics, (Uttar Pradesh, Aligarh), no. 182, (January to June 2001), p. 43.

<sup>13</sup> Annual report 1999-2000, Government of India, Ministry of rural department, p.66.

<sup>14</sup> Dr. Syamla Devi and G.Lakshmi, political empowerment of women in Indian legislature: A study, the Indian journal of political science, Vol. 66 (1) Jan March 2005, pp.75-92, p.75.

<sup>15</sup> Dr. Syamla Devi and G.Lakshmi, "Political Empowerment of Women in Indian legislature: A study", the Indian journal of political science, Vol. 66 (1) (Jan March 2005), pp.75-92, p.75.

<sup>16</sup> Fatima Ehtesham Siddiqui, Political Women: Country Experience in Identity and Gender Debate, (New Delhi: Kanishka publishers distributors 1999), p.14.

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