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### Research Article

### Women Studies

## GRASSROOT INVOLVEMENT IN POLITICS- A KEY TO WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

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### ABSTRACT

Empowerment of women is critical to the socio-economic progress of the community and bringing women into the main stream of national development has been a major concern of the Government. The empowerment of rural women is crucial for the development of rural Bharat. The empowerment and autonomy of women and the improvement of women's social, economic and political status is essential for the achievement of both transport and accountable. women's equal participation in decision-making is not only a demand for simple justice or democracy but can also be seen as a necessary condition for women's interests to be taken in to account without the active participation of women and the incorporation of women's perspective at all levels of decision-making the goals of equality, development and peace cannot be achieved. This paper supports that women empowerment can be achieved using grass root level women and their political participation.

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### INTRODUCTION

Empowerment of women is critical to the socio-economic progress of the community and bringing women into the main stream of national development has been a major concern of the Government. The empowerment of rural women is crucial for the development of rural Bharat. The empowerment and autonomy of women and the improvement of women's social, economic and political status is essential for the achievement of both transport and accountable. The power relations that prevent women from leading fulfilling lives operate at many levels of society, from the most personal to the highly public achieving the goal of equal participation of women and men in decision-making will provide a balance that more accurately reflects the composition of society and is needed in order to strengthen democracy and promote its proper functioning women's equal participation in decision-making is not only a demand for simple justice or democracy but can also be seen as a necessary condition for women's interests to be taken in to account without the active participation of women and the incorporation of women's perspective at all levels of decision-making the goals of equality, development and peace cannot be achieved.

Despite the wide spread movement towards democratization in most countries women are largely under-represented at most levels of government especially in ministerial and other executive bodies, and have made little progress in attaining political power in legislative bodies or in achieving the target of 30 percent women in positions at decision-making levels.

The under representation of women can be attributed to the great amount of conservation shown by all the political parties. First of all, women are not usually considered winning candidates. Secondly, the few that are ultimately selected are more often than not those who come from established political families or from the old ruling princely families. In fact a majority of women who are actively engaged in politics have had either husbands or parents in politics. However, there are notable exceptions like Margaret Alva, Mamta Bannerjee and Uma Bharati. These politicians have joined politics out of choice and have risen up the ladder from the grassroots. And all of them have done well in their respective parties.

The top decision-making positions remain largely male dominated spheres where women have little influence. Women's exclusion from power in the public arena is in sharp contrast to their ability to make crucial decisions relating to the survival of their families. The

lack of women's participation in political decision-making has important consequences. It deprives women of important rights and responsibilities as citizens and excludes making. Their voices are missing from key decisions on national budgets and setting of government priorities. Their skills and viewpoints often remain unheard, under represented or ignored.

Unquestionably, it is proven fact that although distributive justice has been categorically underlined in all the development plans, the needs of women have not been adequately addressed. While, a majority of women in rural areas attend to domestic work and those who are engaged in free collection of goods (vegetables, roots, fish, firewood, cattle feed etc) and providing services (sewing, weaving, maintenance of kitchen gardens, orchards etc). the number of rural women in the age group of 15-49 years engaged in domestic work is estimated at 43.8 million and those engaged in free collection of goods and services is 26.6 million (Jain.S.P) although rural women constitute a large section of population of the country, their lives are still characterized by hard work drudgery and without any basic amenities. They are trapped in the vicious circle of low income, ill-health, low nutrition, low productivity and low wages. As a result women were considered as target groups in the community Development Programmes.

Now on the front of political participation women won the right to vote as early as 1921 and have held high political offices, yet their participation in the elections has been disappointingly low. For instance, in 1984 election there were only 161 women among the 5493 candidates and Lok Sabha had only 42 members of the fair sex in a House of 545. However, their turnout at the polling booths have increased from 38.8 percent in 1957 polls to 58 percent in 1984 election. The need of the hour, therefore is to choose more women candidates and encourage them to participate actively in politics.

From second to fifth five year plans programmes for and participation of women did not receive any fresh impetus and continued on the earlier lines. But Rural Development programmes for women have only in recent decades recognized the crucial role of organization and mobilization as strategies for women's improvement and development. The programmes envisaged under community development had a strong component for women's development, social education etc. but the emphasis was more on women's role in household activities rather than community participation. In recognition to the importance of democratic institution at grass root level, the Panchayat at Village level was established in 1961. The Panchayati Raj institutions were in fact, considered to be the most effective instruments for realizing the goals of economic betterment and social justice for the least privileged. Participation of women, who constitute nearly half of the population, in panchayat Raj institution has been considered essential for enabling them to participate effectively and independently in democratic and political processes and to influence decision making. It has been recognized as a step towards equal society and a means of realizing for women the development goals.

Panchayat raj institutions are the grass root units of self government. They are the instruments for participatory democracy and decentralization at the grassroots level. They carry back to the people the power that really belongs to them. Thus they have an

immense potential for democratic decentralization and devolving power to the people. They are the vehicles of socio-economic transformation. It is therefore necessary that these bodies are effective and function meaningfully. This demands an active involvement, contribution and participation of the people. Participation refers to direct involvement of people, both women and men in decision making, implementation of development programmes, monitoring and evaluation of programmes and sharing the benefits of development. Thus there has to be a 'bottom up approach' rather than one where people are mere observers and total dependents. The people should operate and the government should co-operate. The equality guaranteed by the constitution of India, demands active political participation by women which is integral to the whole issue of the progress of women. Women constitute 50 percent of the rural population. This gives them the legitimacy to play an important role at the grassroots level.

The top decision-making positions remain largely male dominated spheres where women have little influence. Women's exclusion from power in the public arena is in sharp contrast to their ability to make crucial decisions relating to the survival of their families. The lack of women's participation in political decision-making has important consequences. It deprives women of important rights and responsibilities as citizens and excludes making. Their voices are missing from key decisions on national budgets and setting of government priorities. Their skills and viewpoints often remain unheard, under represented or ignored.

Beginning in the nineteenth century, women in several countries led prolonged struggles to obtain the right to vote. In Europe and North America in particular, opposition to women's suffrage was based mainly on the assumption that women and politics did not belong together, that politics was a non-feminine activity. In other parts of the world women earned their access to the modern political process through their active participation in the struggles against colonialism, for national liberation and in the formation of new states. In India, for example, women received the vote following independence as a natural extension of their active participation in the freedom struggle. Wars, revolutions and independence movements brought waves of women in to the voting booth.

Few women reach the top levels of participation in national legislatures; even fewer reach major decision-making positions in the government.

- On average, worldwide only 10.5 percent of legislators and only 6.1 percent of ministerial level decision-makers in 1994 were women.
- In Norway, which has a female Prime Minister, 37 percent of the cabinet and 39 percent of parliament consist of women.
- In the US women in the current Congress comprise slightly over 11 percent in the House and 7 percent in the Senate.
- In other developed regions, participation rose from about 7 percent in 1975 to about 17 percent in 1994, with a high of 34 percent in the Nordic countries.
- In Eastern Europe, women participation in parliament dropped sharply—from 22 percent in 1987 to 6.5 percent in 1993, largely as a result of the collapse of communism and the elimination of quotas for women in parliament.

However, inter-parliamentary report in 1994 shows an improvement in women representation in 1994. In the Polish Senate, women representation increased from 8 percent in 1991 to 13 percent in 1994; in Hungary from 7.3 percent in 1990 to almost 11 percent in 1994.

#### **Women and local government institutions**

Even after the advent of country's independence things did not improve much in regard to the women's representation in the local government institutions. Most of the local self-government acts both rural as well as urban do provide for reservation of seats for women. By 1970s in almost all state seats were reserved for women. In case none was elected they were co-opted. A study conducted by Nagendra Ambedkar on Municipal Corporation of Hyderabad reveals some interesting insights. Out of 100 seats of the municipal corporation of Hyderabad, 15 seats have been reserved for women. The age particulars of the members reveal that 12 women members were below 40 years of age.

Women should participate in politics because women only can initiate formulate and implement policies and programmes which will benefit women. It does not mean that men politicians never formulate policies for women welfare. Women policy makers can understand the real situation of women and implement policies on women point of view. If it is rural panchayat means rural women understand and execute rural women. They change the focus of rural administration towards important faces of life like health, nutrition, children's welfare, family care and drinking water etc..

Election of more women to village panchayats would play a major role to empower women. Empowering women refers to strengthening their innate capacities through acquiring knowledge, power and experience. Power here means not power to dominate but power to reduce helplessness and dependency. Thus women's access to power structures would help them in overcoming inequality and subordination they have been experiencing for ages. Women are the active agents of socio-economic transformation in rural areas. They have the potentials for effective networking and pooling of resources. They can understand better their problems, identify them give priorities and preferences and are aware of strategies towards its solution. Hence their active participation will not only enhance the status of women in the village, but will also help in development of the village. So political participation of rural women would definitely enrich women empowerment.

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