

Political Participation of Women Elected Representatives in North Gujarat: An Assessment

A Thesis
to be submitted by
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Chapter-9

Conclusion, Theoretical Contribution and Recommendations

9.1. Conclusion:

Lack of Gender equality in political participation at grass root level is a fundamental problem in rural India. The Global gender report (2018), notes that the largest gender disparity (77.1 per cent) is observed in political participation. Surprisingly, only 17 countries out of 149 have women as head of the state, just 18 per cent of ministers and 24 per cent of parliamentarians globally. On political participation, India's ranking came down to 19 in 2018, from 15 in the previous year. Previous cross national research on women in grass root level politics shows that multiple factors are responsible for this situation, including institutional factors, cultural and traditional norms and socio-economic factors. But what challenges do WERs face because of these factors ? Are these constraints acts as a significant barriers to effective political participation of WERs ? In particular, what are the changes in the lives women after assuming charge as ER's ? What is the socio-economic status of WERs ? These are the question the present study addressed by using mix method research specially (i).the use of in-depth interviews with WERs to obtain both retrospective and real time accounts of the aspects of changes experienced by them after assuming charge as ER during pilot study (sample 25), (ii). 5 focus group discussion with members of gram panchayat and (iii). views of WERs on the emerging themes from pilot study using questionnaire (sample 230).

From the findings it is clear that political participation of women in Sabarkantha and Banaskantha district is less than that of males. This can be attributed to a number of reasons which includes lack of political interest of the women and also up to some extent a pre conceived notion among the village community that they do not have the ability to make political change and their participation in will make no change in the grass root democracy. (Mohanty, 1995). This is evident from the fact that out of five district, in Sabarkantha and Banaskantha women still occupies subordinate position (deputy sarpanch which is an informal post) to the man in panchayat being an elected representative due to patriarchal value system. It must be noted that a study by Pandey (2013) reiterate similar findings in his study which is discussed in brief in Chapter 2 of this study.

Major constraints encountered by women which emerged in this study is lack of experience, awareness, education and competence to carry out day to day tasks of the panchayats (mainly administrative). The lack of these elements is a result of inaccessibility to various important resources such as education and economic independence. Consequently, male members of the panchayat occupy or dominate the most important position in the panchayat. It was also observed that male members of the panchayat at times deliberately, perpetuate subordination of women even in case where women hold important positions. Low rate of political participation by WERs, however, is not solely perpetuated by male members of the panchayat. Apart from the above discussed elements disrespectful attitude of government officials (higher authority) and human resource deficiency cannot be ignored. In this study it emerges that government officials like District Development Officer (DDO) or Taluka Development Officer (TDO) always exhibit non-cooperative or disrespectful attitude towards WERs who belong to Schedule Caste (SC) or Schedule Tribe (ST). According to the experience of WERs, gender or selective caste discrimination are major factors for such behavior of government officials. Apart from that government officials encourage only male members of the panchayat as it is easy for the officials to negotiate with them. In fact, Homana (2018) and Pyeatt and Yanus (2018) notes non-cooperating attitude of the government officials is indication of lack of commitment to decentralised government.

This study also reveals an interesting trend of political leadership, in village panchayats of districts like Gandhinagar and Mehsana, the women who are elected as a representative have reach or elite background. As a result, ordinary people specially the women from village community are unable to establish a comfort zone with the elected representative where they can openly share the problems (personal or administrative). Hence, WERs in some areas of Gandhinagar and Mehsana districts are not aware about the problems of the people. In this context, the researcher feels that there is need to carry out further research on the real cause of stark disconnect between elected representatives and people of the village. Surprisingly, it was also observed that these WERs had the tendencies to sideline their fellow members of the panchayat especially the women members and portray negativity on their part. Singh

(2004) in his empirical study in context of PRIs in Haryana has similar findings which are discussed in brief in Chapter 2 of this study.

Further, the study finds that another major obstacle for effective political participation of women are patriarchal system in the family and non-cooperating attitude of the family members is a major obstacle for political participation of women. This is true in case of Banaskantha and Sabarkantha district where in many villages due to patriarchal system in the family women have to confine themselves as mother and housewives which restrict their advancement, progress and participation of women in grass root democracy. From the findings it is clear that in spite of quota based reservation, WERs in village panchayat still have to face constraints due to intuitionial design and social inequalities of gender and caste. In addition to these factors, lack of education and economic dependence play a major role in inhibiting political participation of WERs. Nevertheless, it can be said that WERs in spite of these constraints have been reasonably successful in smooth functioning of the panchayats for the development of the village. Along with the attempt to understand the constraints faced by WERs, the researcher also came across few respondents who claim that gradually they see a change in their husbands and family member and they have gained prestige in their family because of the work they do for the development of the village. In fact, it was also observed that the relationships within the family are changing as their husbands have now begun to realize the importance of being WERs which can be considered as radical departure from the traditional practices.

This study has also attempted to understand the changes in lives of women after assuming charge as ERs. It can be conclusively stated from the findings discussed in the study that women are experiencing changes in their lives after assuming charge as ERs at individual as well as societal level. However, it can be noted that the aspects of changes discussed in the study are not significant for WERs of Banaskantha and Sabarkantha district. The results from the survey also shows that the WERs of Banaskantha and Sabarkantha districts are not positive about their role as ERs because of various factors like; lack of knowledge and awareness of conducting day to day affairs of panchayat, lack of self confidence, hesitation to express views or opinions, non-cooperative attitude of male members of the panchayat etc. Further, the findings also suggest that efforts to bring about good governance at the grass root level with the recognition of male member of the panchayat only is like clapping with one hand. For good governance at grass root level, effective political participation of women is very crucial as it enables them to use their potential and talent, which are instrumental for effective governance at grass root level. Therefore, a comprehensive capacity building initiative, that address the issues/constraints faced by WERs, is required. The next section will present the recommendations and suggestions for the future research.

9.2. Theoretical Contribution:

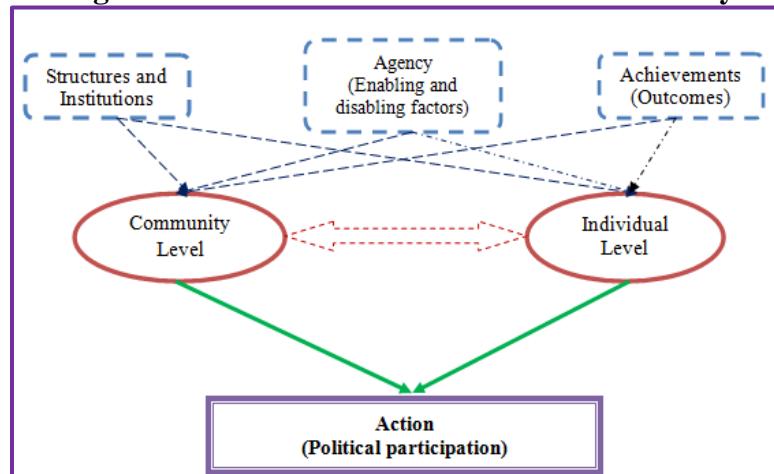
The study makes following major contributions:-

Prior literature in the area of gender and political participation largely examined constraints faced by women in political participation at National, State and District level. Also, studies till date have highlighted efforts by CSOs and activists to improve the participation and representation of women in politics which includes; capacity building programme for WERs, advocating strong compliance of quota policy in the state, regular training and monitoring programmes for WERs etc. With regards to PRIs in India, studies have shown that state of affairs of PRIs in India is in awful condition because of acute financial dependency on state. Due to limited financial resources for PRIs, the state has not been able to allocate untied and development funds baring for more than two years. As a result, PRIs have not been

able to remain responsive to the felt needs of the people. Overall, these studies have shown that institutional constraints and social norms contributes to the persistence of low political participation of women in National level politics. There is a dearth of research studies examining constraints faced by women in rural local governance.

Hence, the current research contributes in examining the constraints faced by women at *individual level* as well as at *community level* from various structures and instructions in political participation. It also contributes in understanding the *outcomes* (changes) in lives of women after assuming charge as elected representatives. Moreover, the results throw light on status and role of WERs in village panchayat, social, economic, and political background of the women representatives of the PRIs, their role in the decision making, planning, implementation and evaluation process, strategic measures for political participation etc. Figure 9.1 shows the diagrammatic presentation of theoretical contribution by the study.

Figure: 9.1: Theoretical contribution of the study



Source: Author

9.2. Recommendations:

The study was aimed at making multiple contribution in the domain of New Knowledge by providing valuable inputs on status and role of WERs in village panchayat, social, economic, and political background of the women representatives of the PRIs, their role in the decision making, planning, implementation and evaluation process, constraints on the way of achieving political empowerment, strategic measures for political participation, given the existing social inequalities, how essential it is for women to fight against the impediments of which will enable them participate in the grass root democracy with confidence.

The study also aimed to fill in a gap in the literature on political participation of WERs in five districts of North Gujarat namely; Gandhinagar, Mehsana, Sabarkantha, Banaskantha and Patan. Based on the findings and research information in this study various recommendations can be suggested. These recommendation can help to overcome challenges for effective political participation of women in grass root democracy. In addition these recommendations provides useful information for WERs that they can use to empower themselves and finally participate effectively and actively in grass root democracy.

Based on the findings following recommendations are suggested:

1. Gender equality in political participation at all levels of decision making is a matter of human right, inclusive growth and sustainable development. Moreover, to accommodate women's perspective and experience into the decision making processes, active participation of women is a necessary condition. (OECD, 2018; Mlambo and Kapingura, 2019). However, in this research it was clear from the information derived from the respondents that cultural attitudes and perceptions has jarred the confidence of WERs in their ability to participate effectively in grass root democracy. Moreover, political environment in villages of districts like Sabarkantha and Banaskantha are often unfriendly and even hostile to women. Hence, women are unable to participate

effectively and actively in grass root democracy. Therefore, it is recommended that these cultural attitudes and perception have to be changed by engaging women through awareness campaigns. Also, women who wish to contest the election should be made aware about her rights as a elected representative.

2. The presence of women in leadership positions especially in institutions of local government is possible only when there is gender equality and inclusive democracy. Hence, such legislations and policies should be enacted which address the issue of gender imbalance not only in government and civic bodies but it should also be extended to political parties. The findings of this study shows that technological advancement in day to day official work have entirely reshaped the local governance institutions as well as increased the transparency and accountability in governance. However, both empirical and anecdotal evidences have shown that gender discrimination and digital illiteracy have widened *digital gender gap* among WERs in local governance institutions. As a consequences it has been observed that '*Usability*' of various ICT tools in day to day official work has become a challenge for WERs since they are not adequately trained to use technological devices like Computers etc. Due to such challenges it has become difficult for WERs to carry out day to day tasks and they have to remain dependent on clerks and secretaries. Hence, it is recommended that there is a need for develop policy guidelines with the goal of achieving gender equality in access and use of technology. This would involve conducting regular digital literacy programmes for WERs.
3. Majority of the respondents from Sabarkantha, Banaskantha and Patan district expressed their concerns on the day to day challenges faced by them due to lack of political and administrative experience. In many cases, husbands often force their wives to contest an election. Once the election is over and the result is declared wives have no role in taking any decisions for the development of the village. As a result they are overshadowed by men. Every time they have to shout to get heard or work twice to be recognized. Therefore it is recommended that State Institute of Rural Development (SIRDs) or State

Resource Center (SRCs) should actively collaborate with Ministry of Women and Child Development and conduct regular capacity building programmes for WERs. This exercise will empower WERs by developing their leadership capacities and also will help in enhancing their administrative knowledge.

4. A growing body of evidence in political science has shown that an individual's self-confidence and esteem are linked to his/her political ambition to participate effectively in politics. This study reveals that psychological hindrance like lack of self-esteem and confidence deter women from being an elected representative. Majority of respondents in Patan, Banaskantha and Sabarkantha district opined that one of the major reason for this hindrance is low level of education or illiteracy. Hence it is recommended that the District Panchayat or the Block Panchayat should arrange substantive educational programmes for WERs. For instance in State of Rajasthan every day a 15 minute radio programme in the local language is broadcast by Block Panchayat or District Panchayat which covers subjects like monitoring, planning, budgeting etc.

5. Some of the WERs specially in Banaskantha and Sabarkantha district reported that they had to face disrespectful and insulting attitude of the government officials because they belong to Schedule Cast or Schedule Tribe background. There are times where the language of the government officials are extremely derogatory to the extent that they don't hesitate to make casteist remarks. However, no actions are taken against such officials even if WERs lodge complain with the higher authority. Therefore, it is recommended that such attitudes of the government officials should not be taken for granted by the government and they should be punished or penalized for such behaviors.

9.3. Suggestions for future research:

The findings of the study opens up avenues for further research regarding enhancing the political participation of women in local governance. This study was limited to understand the constraints and aspects of changes experienced by WERs in their lives after assuming charge as elected representative in North Gujarat. However, given the evidence and findings discussed in this study it is difficult to assert conclusively how WERs overcome these challenges and constraints. Hence, there is a need to undertake an in-depth study to understand the coping mechanism adopted by WERs specially in State like Kerala which is considered to be the most progressive state when it comes to local governance. Since, government has a key role to play in enhancing political participation of women a detail study can be carried out to understand the strategies adopted by the state government to enhance the political participation of WERs.