



Participation of Women in Political Process in Local Bodies: An Assessment

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Abstract:

Political participation is not only a symbol of women's empowerment by promoting women's interest but also creates further awareness and mobilizes other women to be a part of the political arena. Women's political participation and empowerment cannot be confined to merely political rights. This study has been carried out to take valuable feedback regarding the performance of women who were local representatives of their area and to understand what women as ordinary voters think about women who are active in politics and part of local administration. For this purpose a field study was conducted across different areas of the state in order to study the nature of political participation among rural and urban women in the state. Total 404 women were interviewed during the field study, 192 women from the rural area and 212 from the urban area across the five districts in the state. The findings indicate that Women in the villages were mostly dependent on a Pradha/Mukhiya/Councillor for all sorts of help be it economic or social and women Voters in the village had individual capacity to judge a candidate based on their campaigning.

Keywords: Village, Women Voters, Economic, Social, Political Participation.

Introduction:

Political participation is a fundamental requisite of gender equality in the society. In order to ensure smooth functioning of a democratic political system based on the principles of equality, women must actively participate in all forms of political activities. Political participation is not only restricted to women who seek political power and aspire to be a part of the decision making bodies. It is equally important that women voters across the country actively participate in the political process in a more informed manner having individual opinion of their own.

Political participation is a complex phenomenon liable to be influenced by a variety of variables. It involves both decision making and acts of opposition. Only in a decentralized decision making process can citizens have the opportunity to perform their responsibilities and make proper use of their democratic rights. Initially citizens participated in electoral processes through voting, campaigning, attending party meetings, communicating with others and collecting money for campaigns. It was a part of political participation. Later the concept was broadened to include activities in the period between elections when citizens tried to influence government decisions. The nature and extent of political participation is affected by psychological, social and political factors (*Khan and Fardaus, 2006*).

Grass root organizations are vital instruments in providing women with collective strength, bargaining

capacity and proper channels for collective articulation of their strength. Women who have been active in local organizations, movements, Mahila Mandals, literacy campaigns, anti- liquor movements and self-help groups have been exposed to various sensitization activities, training and mobilization, have both the political will and energy to take on the challenge and withstand counter pressure. These experiences of leadership and collective action need to be channelized and directed towards political action (Shabnam, N.2021).

Statement of the Problem: Women’s participation in the political process has shown an increase both in elections and their readiness to express their views on different issues. But their ability to produce an impact on the political process is still limited, because of poor mobilization of women by political parties and women’s organization. Formal participation of women in active politics reveals that there has been a marked increase in voting turnout and election campaigning among women. While there has been a significant increase in these areas of political participation, they continue to be excluded from legislative bodies at the national and state levels and are deprived from key decision-making positions in government and political parties (Ali, Md. Almas, 2003).

Women from Bengal are poorly represented in the Lower House of the Parliament. In this context the researcher has stated the problem as “Participation of Women in Political Process in local Bodies: An Assessment”.

Objectives:

- To take valuable feedback regarding the performance of women who were local representatives of their area.
- To understand what women as ordinary voters think about women who are active in politics and part of local administration.

Method: A field study was conducted across five districts of the states in order to study the nature of political participation among rural and urban women in the state. Total 404 women were interviewed during the field study, 192 women from the rural area and 212 from the urban area across the five districts in the state. It must be noted that only those women were interviewed who belonged to the local constituencies where seats of a local Councilor or a Mukhiya was reserved for a woman. Percentage system has been used for data analysis.

Acquaintance with the local Councilor/ Mukhiya

Who is your Councilor/ Mukhiya/Village Pradhan	No. of Respondent (Rural)	Percentage (Rural)	No. of Respondent (Urban)	Percentage (Urban)
Could Answer	184	95.8	43	20.3
Couldn't Answer	8	4.2	169	79.7
Total	192	100	212	100

Source- Interview taken by the Researcher on: Who is your Councilor/Mukhiya

Mukhiya has a very important role to play in the rural society. As evident from the table we can see the during the field study about 95.8% of the women interviewed in the rural area could easily recognize their Mukhiya and majority of them knew their house as well. Only 4.2% of them could tell us the name of their Mukhiya. In a village the locals are highly dependent upon the Mukhiyas to get a access to most of the

government schemes. Most of the women are engaged in some or the other training programs organized by the Gram Panchayat or Gram Sabha. Most of these women interviewed said that Mukhiya often played a very active role in solving family problems in the village and was seen as someone belonging to the same community. This sense of having the belief that the Mukhiya is someone who can be related to, gives us an idea about one to one relation of the Mukhiya with the local women.

Councilor in an urban area is expected to engage with the people of the local community to ensure more participation of people at the grass root level. It was very disappointing to see that only 20.3% of the women respondents in the urban area knew their ward Councilor's name. About 79.7% of them could not give us the name of their Councilor. During the field study it was ensured that only those women were interviewed who could confirm that they had a women Councilor in their locality. So this is clear that respondents knew that they had a women Councilor. Some of them could tell their caste, family, profession, but not their exact names. Some of them said wife of so and so uncle but could not recall their names. Few of them were able to locate their house, but didn't bother to know their names.

Frequency of Meeting Local Councilor/ Mukhiya

How Often Your Councillor/ Mukhiya Come to Meet Women in the Locality/Village.	No. of Respondent (Rural)	Percentage (Rural)	No. of Respondent (Urban)	Percentage (Urban)
Daily	95	49.5	3	1.4
Twice in a Month	64	33.3	7	3.3
Once in a month	28	14.6	31	14.6
Once in Two- Three Months	2	1	1	0.5
Once or Twice in a Year	3	1.6	1	0.5
Never	8	4.2	169	79.7
Total	192	100	212	100

Source- Interview taken by the Researcher on: How often do you meet your Councilor/Mukhiya s

It was found that the Mukhiyas in the rural area did make an attempt to meet local women on regular basis. About 49.5% of the Mukhiyas meet the local women daily. About 33.3% of them meet twice in a month and 14.6% meet once in a year. 1% of the respondent said their Mukhiya meet them once in two-three months, 1.6% said once or twice a year and only 4.2% said that their Mukhiya never came to meet them. It is clear from the above data that more than 80% of the respondents said that their Mukhiyas meet them at least once in two weeks. This gives us an impression that most of the Mukhiyas were approachable in villages which led to one to one contact with other women in the village.

Reasons for Voting in Favor of a Particular Councilors/ Mukhiyas

Why Did You Vote for Your Candidate	Number (Rural)	Percentage (Rural)	Number (Urban)	Percentage (Urban)
Good Campaigning	36	18.8	36	17
Caste	31	16.1	80	37.7
Family Background of The Candidate	3	1.6	126	59.4
Education	2	1	14	6.6
Personal Relation with The Candidate	96	50	71	33.5
Previous Record as a Social and Political Worker	54	28.1	35	16.6
Family Member Persuaded You to Vote for the Candidate	13	6.8	59	27.8
Total	192	100	212	100

Source- Interview taken by the Researcher on: Why did you vote for a particular Mukhiya/ Councilor?

Women form almost half of the voter's list of any constituency. It is very important to analyze on what basis they elect a candidate, considering the fact that all the candidates are women. One must see what motivated women to vote for a particular candidate in the absence of male contenders. Least important criteria while voting for a particular candidate in the villages was their educational background, only 1% of the respondents said they voted for a particular candidate because they were educated. Family background of any candidate didn't matter to the voters as only 1.6% of them voted looking at the family background. It was also discussed that many Mukhiyas did not belong to affluent families in the village and had to struggle a lot, it was with the help of local people they got elected.

About 28.1% of the voters voted keeping in mind the previous record of the candidates as social and political worker. This specially applies to those candidates who were elected for more than one term because of the work done by them for the village. About 18.8% of the respondents voted for candidate as they were convinced after their good campaigning. This gives us an idea that voters in the village had individual capacity to judge a candidate based on their campaigning.

Table 5.11: Help Received from a Particular Councilors/ Mukhiyas

What Kind Of Help You Receive From Your Councilor/ Mukhiya?	Number (Rural)	Percentage (Rural)	Number (Urban)	Percentage (Urban)
Economic Independence	167	87	36	17
Social Security Schemes	131	68.2	21	9.9
Physical Security	17	8.9	2	0.9

What Kind Of Help You Receive From Your Councilor/ Mukhiya?	Number (Rural)	Percentage (Rural)	Number (Urban)	Percentage (Urban)
Family Matters	74	38.5	4	1.9
Health Schemes	27	14.1	18	8.5
Did Not Get Any Help	13	6.8	152	71.7
Total	192	100	212	100

Women in the villages were mostly dependent on a Mukhiya for all sorts of help be it economic or social. About 87% of respondents receive economic help from the mukhiyas and 68.2% received the benefit of various social security schemes run by the government. Economic help was in the form of training to take up various jobs for economic independence. About 38.5% of the respondents agreed that the Mukhiya helped them solve their family issues. This gives an impression that most of the Mukhiyas are respected in the rural families and they act like a community leader for the people. About 14.1% of the were give benefits of health schemes by the Mukhiyas were as 8.9% said physical security of women were ensured by the Mukhiyas. Physical security and health being one of the basic women issues do require more attention at the local level. Only 6.8% of the respondents said that they did not receive any help from the Mukhiyas, most of them were from rural middle class families who said they did not need any help from the Mukhiya as they are self-sufficient (*Rai, S. 1995*).

In the town and cities 71.7% of the voters said that they did not receive any help from the local Councilor. It is not true that all the respondents did not need any kind of help. Many of them said that the Councilors were not approachable and did not help them. 17% of the respondents received economic help, 9.9% received benefits of social security schemes and only 8.5% received benefits related to health care. Only 0.9% said that Councilors were working for physical security of women and another 0.9% said they received help to solve their family matters.

Findings:

- Women in the villages were mostly dependent on a Mukhiya for all sorts of help be it economic or social.
- Voters in the village had individual capacity to judge a candidate based on their campaigning.
- Most of the Mukhiyas were approachable in villages which led to one to one contact with other women in the village.
- Mukhiyas in the rural area did make an attempt to meet local women on regular basis.

Conclusion:

Political parties if seriously interested in seeing more women in politics must began by activating women's front at every levels and recruiting more women to take up decision making roles within the parties. A low proportion of women in the inner party structure further erode women's effort to lobby for greater resources and support for nurturing and building their political constituencies as well as mobilizing financial and human resources required to meet the demands and aspirations of their constituencies. These inevitably results in women being perceived as weak representatives and are generally unaccepted as political leaders by people in their constituencies

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