

## SOCIAL AND POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN RURAL AND URBAN AREA: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

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“Man and woman will attain equality only when the birth of a girl is celebrated with as much joy as in the case of boy.”

**M K Gandhi**

Article history:	Abstract:
<b>Published:</b> 10 <sup>th</sup> March 2022	Gandhiji was one of the few noble people in the 20th century who had acknowledged that women had a pivotal role in the Indian society. He realized the importance of participation of women in political, economic and social spheres. So, he fought to attain equal rights for women in every sphere. He endorsed women's participation in politics and he opened up strongly about it on September 1931 during the Second Round Table Conference in London, UK. He said that if women did not have a place in any legislature, he would boycott attending them. He urged women to take part in the legislature for serving people and not just for politicking on party basis in the Constructive Workers Conference in Madras (now Chennai) on June 27, 1946. Gandhiji wanted everyone to acknowledge that a woman is the better half of a man and not a weaker sex. Women should have equal rights of freedom and liberty. Gandhiji perceived the innate vital differences in the biological function of men and women. He made a remark that the men do not possess the quality of motherhood and the art of child rearing with compassion, care and patience. So, without women, the human race would become extinct. While fighting for women rights, Gandhiji wanted the Indian women to not blindly follow the Western methods, but to modify it based on the Indian environment. <sup>1</sup>

**Keywords:** Gandhiji, Women, political,

### GANDHI ON POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN

The Constitution of India has provided equal rights to all citizens. But at present, there are very few women representatives in Indian politics. It is evident that women have not got equality in this case. For the triumph of democracy, it is imperative that women should actively play a dual role in politics, both as voters and as political representatives. But even in this democracy, women are excluded from not only politics but also in every walk of life.<sup>2</sup>

In September 1931, at the Federal Structure Committee meeting of the Round Table Conference, Gandhiji recommended to the Congress to provide fair representation to the minorities and women, failing which he compelled for the creation of an exclusive clause in the Constitution to enable the elected representatives to elect those who should have been elected, but were unjustly left out by the electorate.

Although Gandhiji encouraged women's participation in politics, he was not keen on the introduction of gender-based reservation for women and he rather wanted them to achieve their position through education and on merit. He expressed that it would be wrong to claim membership based on gender and that women should not face such disdain. They should get justice and not favour. Hence, to bring this to fruition, women must receive proper education.<sup>1</sup>

Gandhiji gave importance to the active participation of women in several national movements. He also encouraged them to participate in the Salt Satyagraha movement during the struggle for Independence. Out of the 30,000 persons who were arrested, 17,000 were women volunteers. A large number of women also participated in the civil disobedience movement. Several aristocratic women abandoned their comfort zone and readily marched to prison wearing coarse, handmade Khadi. Some notable personalities in the Gandhian movements were Kamala Nehru, Sarojini Naidu, Anasuya Sarabhai, Sushila Nayyar and Miraben. Women took a lead role in encouraging boycott of liquor, opium and foreign clothes. These incidents were the portrayal of equality and strength of women as envisioned by Gandhiji.

Gandhiji motivated women to participate in politics and in the freedom movement. He acknowledged the potential of women in the strife to develop a new social and political order. However he faced hurdles with the existence of oppression of women at their homes. He was resolved to help women to break the shackles of oppression.<sup>2</sup>

### **NATIONAL INITIATIVES FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT**

India has begun the new millennium by pronouncing 2001 as the year of women empowerment. The Government of India gives top priority to put a stop to the gender-based inequality, to improve socio-economic status of women and to increase their participation in various aspects.<sup>3</sup>

#### **a. Constitutional Provisions**

The Fundamental Rights in the Constitution protects women against discrimination. Some of the important articles are:

- 1) Article 14 ensures equality before the law or the equal protection of the laws on men and women.
- 2) Article 15 prohibits discrimination by the state against any citizen on the ground of sex, especially for women and children.
- 3) Article 16 provides for equality of opportunities in matter of public appointments for all citizens. It prohibits gender-based discrimination in respect of any employment or office under the state. Some of the Directive Principles of State Policy in the Constitution contain provisions for women.
- 4) Article 39 provides that men and women equally have the right to an adequate means of livelihood, that there must be equal pay for equal work for both men and women.
- 5) Article 42 grants for better conditions for work and maternity relief.
- 6) Article 51 imposes a Fundamental Duty on every citizen to renounce the practices derogatory to the dignity of women.
- 7) Article 243 (D) (3) provides for the reservation of 33% of the seats in every Panchayat for women.
- 8) Articles 243 (T) (3) provides for the reservation for 33% seats in each Municipality for women.

#### **b. Legislative Provisions**

Special legislations have been enforced to back the Constitutional provisions. These laws are intended to protect the rights of women and to defend them from social discrimination, abuse and atrocities. Some notable Acts include:

- 1) Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961
- 2) Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971
- 3) Equal Remuneration Act, 1976
- 4) Indecent Representation Of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986
- 5) Immoral Traffic Prevention Act, 1986
- 6) Commission of Sati Prevention Act, 1987
- 7) Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostics Act (PCPNDT), 1994
- 8) Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005
- 9) Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006
- 10) Criminal Law (Amendment Act), 2013
- 11) Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013
- 12) Child Labour Prohibition and Regulation (Amendment Act), 2016
- 13) Maternity Benefit (Amendment Act), 2017
- 14) Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, 2020.<sup>4</sup>

#### **c. Schemes/ Programmes:**

The Central and State governments have been constantly trying to ensure the same with a number of schemes and intervention programmes exclusively for women. Some of them are:

- 1) Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP) ensures the protection, survival and education of the girl child.
- 2) Mahila Shakti Kendra (MSK) aims to empower rural women with opportunities for skill development and employment.
- 3) Working Women Hostel (WWH) ensures the safety and security for working women.
- 4) Mahila Police Volunteers (MPV) envisages engagement of Mahila Police Volunteers in States/UTs who act as a link between police and community and facilitates women in distress.
- 5) Rashtriya Mahila Kosh (RMK) is an apex micro-finance organization that provides micro-credit at concessional terms to poor women for various livelihood and income generating activities.
- 6) The National Crèche Scheme ensures that women take up gainful employment through providing a safe, secure and stimulating environment to the children.
- 7) Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandna Yojna aims to provide maternity benefit to pregnant and lactating mothers.

- 8) Pradhan Mantri Awaas Yojana aims to provide housing under the name of the woman also.
- 9) Deen Dayal Upadhyay National Urban Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NULM) focuses on creating opportunities for women in skill development, leading to market based employment.
- 10) Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana empowers women and protects their health by providing LPG cylinder free of cost.
- 11) Pradhan Mantri Sukanya Samridhi Yojna- Under this scheme girls have been economically empowered by opening their bank accounts.
- 12) Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana (PMMY) provides access to institutional finance to micro/small business. The Government has initiated schemes like Stand Up India and Mahila e-Haat (online marketing platform to support women entrepreneurs/ SHGs/NGOs) to promote female entrepreneurship.

Various initiatives have been put in place to improve the education system such as National Curriculum Framework (NCF), 2005 and several flagship programmes like Samagra Shiksha and the Right to Education Act (RTE). Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas (KGBVs) have been set up in the educationally backward regions of the nation.<sup>5</sup>

With financial assistance from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Government of India has implemented the UN Women Programme in 2011 in order to support women's political empowerment in rural areas. The primary aim of this programme is to reinforce and improve the political participation of women in local Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). It also promotes the Goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which seeks to achieve gender equality and to empower women. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are also known as the Global Goals, is a universal call to action for ending poverty, protecting the planet and ensuring that all people enjoy peace and prosperity by 2030. They were approved by all United Nations Member States in 2015.<sup>6</sup>

In 2018, the World Economic Forum published the Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI) which ranks nations on gender equality through several parameters. Out of the 149 countries that were ranked, India was placed at 108<sup>th</sup> position. In 2020, India ranked at 112<sup>th</sup> position out of 153 countries.<sup>5</sup>

### **GANDHIJI ON PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS**

After India achieved Independence, Gandhiji firmly declared that there can be no salvation for our nation and the notion of decentralization will remain unfulfilled if the women do not contribute in the national matters. Gender inequality is a key concern and government of India alongside various state governments have been engaged in a number of intervention programmes aimed at empowering them in true sense.<sup>3</sup>

It is true that democracy ensures empowerment, but the real empowerment must begin at the grassroot level. To empower the Indian villages and establish governance at the grassroot level, Mahatma Gandhiji had advocated for Gram Swaraj (village self-governance). That is how the Panchayat Raj System came into play in 1957. In 1992, through the 73rd amendment of the Constitution of India, a three-tier Panchayati Raj system in the country and the provision of 33 percent reservation for women in the Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs). The three tiers of the Panchayati Raj System are: the Gram Panchayat at village level headed by a Panchayat Mukhiya or a Sarpanch; the Zila Parishad at district level headed by a Zila Parishad chairperson and the Panchayat Samiti at block level headed by a Panchayat Samiti chairperson.

**Table 1: Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in India**

<b>Name of Institutions</b>	<b>Total Numbers at present</b>
Gram Panchayat (Village level)	250,000
Panchayat Samitis (Block level)	6,300
Zila Parishads (District level)	600

The primary purpose of this local governance system is to implement development projects in the rural community. The citizens of the Gram Panchayats directly elect the representatives of the PRIs, from village level, block level and district level. The village community presents their demands to the Gram Sabha at Gram Panchayat level. After discussions, the appropriate interventions are implemented in the villages.

The PRIs need to be a valuable, efficient and transparent medium for local governance and social justice to meet the requirements of the local population through policy enforcement, appropriate interventions, advocacy, capacity building and financial support. The Ministry of Panchayati Raj has developed the eGram Swaraj, a user friendly portal to put forward better transparency.

The PRIs guarantee participation of all sectors of the society. Empowerment of women through the PRIs not only ensures their participation in political decision making but also strengthens their socio-economic status so that they could lead a dignified and respected life. But the question looms over us as to how many women would be able to surpass the internal and external oppression and successfully win the struggle to enter the PRIs with the intention

to serve and strengthen the panchayats. The primary motive of the women in PRIs must be to make development in order to strengthen the panchayat foundation.<sup>7</sup>

The Constitutional provisions mandate the representation of women in the PRIs. Clause (3) of the Indian Constitution ensures 33 percent reservation for women in the PRIs. However, the increase of women's participation in the PRIs is subject to each state. Twenty states have increased the percentage to 50 percent and they are Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Punjab, Rajasthan, Sikkim, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Tripura, Uttarakhand and West Bengal.

**Table 2: Number of Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in India, State/Union Territory-wise (2020)<sup>8</sup>**

State / UTs	Total PRI Representatives	Total EWRs
Andaman & Nicobar Islands	858	306
Andhra Pradesh	156050	78,025
Arunachal Pradesh	9383	3,658
Assam	26754	14,609
Bihar	136573	71,046
Chhattisgarh	170465	93,392
Dadra & Nagar Haveli	147	47
Daman & Diu	192	92
Goa	1555	571
Gujarat	144080	71,988
Haryana	70035	29,499
Himachal Pradesh	28723	14,398
Jammu & Kashmir	39850	13,224
Jharkhand	59638	30,757
Karnataka	101954	51,030
Kerala	18372	9,630
Ladakh	NA	NA
Lakshadweep	110	41
Madhya Pradesh	392981	196490
Maharashtra	240635	128677
Manipur	1736	880
Odisha	107487	56,627

Puducherry	NA	NA
Punjab	100312	41,922
Rajasthan	126271	64,802
Sikkim	1153	580
Tamil Nadu	106450	56,407
Telangana	103468	52,096
Tripura	6646	3,006
Uttar Pradesh	913417	304538
Uttarakhand	62796	35,177
West Bengal	59229	30,458
<b>Total</b>	<b>3187320</b>	<b>1453973</b>

\*NA - Not Available

In order to boost the community participation in the implementation of the government schemes and to bring about economic development within the villages, the Government of India has ordered all the Gram Panchayats to prepare their Gram Panchayat Development Plans (GPDP) annually. GPDP provides a chance to the Gram Panchayats to be involved in the planning process. According to the Ministry of Panchayati Raj, under Deendayal Upadhyay National Rural Livelihood Mission (DDU-NRLM), around 5.8 crore rural women are associated with the self-help-groups (SHGs) and all these SHGs contribute in the GPDP.

Given that 68 percent of India's population dwells in the villages, the country cannot measure its development process without developing its villages. It is clear that the PRIs are the backbone of the development. The Centre had granted Rs 180,237 crores under the 14th Finance Commissions for the period of 2015-20 and Rs 60,750 crore under the 15th Finance Commissions for the financial year 2020-21, to the Gram Panchayats for execution of the development programmes.<sup>7</sup>

### **PROBLEMS OF ELECTED WOMEN REPRESENTATIVES IN PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS**

A few research studies have been carried out that are related to the provision of reservation for women in the PRIs: whether such reservation has helped to increase their participation in PRIs, whether they are empowered in the matters of decision making and independent functioning after entering into the local government system, whether they are aware of their roles and responsibilities, whether their participation in capacity building programmes is efficient, and to throw light on their interests in politics, community and panchayat activities, etc.

The representation of women in the local government helps them to gain a respectable position in the society and to address their concerns. Yet this has not been entirely favoured by the males in the society. As a result, the reservation of 33 percent or 50 percent of the seats for women in the PRIs is not sufficient to uplift them. Many of the women representatives are housewives and they have entered politics for the first time. Narrow-minded perceptions, patriarchal attitude of the society, poverty and low education and lack of awareness are the stumbling blocks in the path of their low political participation in the PRIs.

Although the struggle for achieving gender equality is underway, the achievement of gender equity is another major issue in Indian society. The abuse of power and authority by the upper caste communities also limit the SC/ST elected women representatives to execute their roles and responsibilities. In some regions of India, the SC/ST representatives are denied entry to the panchayat office. Even when they contest and win the election, they are denied to take charge of their office. The plight of such women is not fully portrayed in the political sphere and their empowerment is an important phase of the socio-economic and political transformation of India. Efforts have been made to empower them with the help public policies aimed at inclusive development, training and capacity building programmes as most of them are either illiterate or they only have primary school level education. It is noticeable that the social inequalities are decreasing due to the provisions made under the Constitution of India.<sup>3</sup>

### **ROLE OF PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

The recent talk has been the COVID-19 pandemic, which has become a wake-up call and has imparted several lessons in the aspects of an individual's life on a personal, professional, societal and institutional level, in India and worldwide. The PRIs have also been deeply impacted by the pandemic. In August 2020, the Impact and Policy Research Institute (IMPRI), New Delhi, a start-up research platform for pro-active, independent, policy-based research conducted a symposium on 'Lessons from COVID-19: Empowering Panchayati Raj Institutions' (PRIs). This provided clarity on how the PRIs can be empowered during the time of crises.

Gram panchayats were involved in saving lives prior to the pandemic too, because the women in panchayats help in building trust of the public with the healthcare service providers. Women members of the PRIs have helped the doctors and nurses to translate and explain the nature of the diseases and their treatment to the villagers. This led to a substantial increase in the number of villagers acquiring the medical services without fear.<sup>9</sup>

### **STRATEGIES**

- Women's education is one of the most important necessities as it creates awareness about their rights and duties and makes the women leaders independent and confident enough to handle problems better.
- The support of the family members is quintessential in the continuation of sustained participation of women in the public sphere. There is a need to abolish the traditional patriarchal system which is the main reason for gender inequality.
- The elected women representatives must be aware of women's issues to be able to provide appropriate interventions.
- The women leaders should be provided with autonomy and adequate financial assistance for efficient functioning.
- The NGOs can play a vital role in organizing training and literacy programmes as well as for providing support to the elected women representatives.
- The media should take a pro-active role in encouraging women's active participation in the PRIs. They should also highlight their struggles and experiences.

### **CONCLUSION**

The credit for placing the stepping stone goes to Mahatma Gandhi as he was undoubtedly one of the first men to inspire women to participate in India's political affairs. Gandhiji had always conveyed that the female sex is not the weaker sex but it is the nobler of the two. The women are the embodiment of sacrifice, patience, compassion, silent suffering, humility, faith and knowledge. He quoted that it is degrading and brutal that men resort to the abuse of their better half. He further continued that the women have the right to participate in all aspects of life with equal rights of freedom and liberty. He realized that the failure in the empowerment of women was a failure in the progress of a nation.

Democracy provides equality to all the citizens. Achieving equality and equity for women in the political aspect should start from the grassroot level. Political journey is arduous for the women representatives in PRIs in this patriarchal society. The times are moving towards progress as recent records have shown an increase in the percentage of women voters. This is due to the rising awareness of women's rights, made possible by the political parties, NGOs, Action Groups and the mass media. Women empowerment is not the responsibility of the women or the elected women representatives alone but it is a goal that can be reached by the combined efforts of all the citizens of our country.

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