

Women in Politics: Violence in Politics and Political Parties in India

Dr Namita Kumari¹, Dr. Pranav Kumar²

¹Assistant Professor, SPM College, University of Delhi

²Assistant Professor, CSSEIP, SSS, JNU.

Abstract

Violence in politics poses a significant obstacle to women's participation in the field. It not only discourages women from pursuing political careers but also makes it challenging for those actively engaged in politics. Moreover, it tarnishes the reputation of women in the political landscape. In some cases, political violence is also employed to target women perceived as a risk to the established order. Violence in Indian politics is a persistent problem that hinders efforts to make politics more inclusive. Political parties have a crucial role to play in this regard. They should not only talk about non-violence but also actively discourage and condemn any promotion or tolerance of violence in politics. If more women can participate in the political process without any fear, it would be a significant step towards empowering women. It would have a major impact on how politics is conducted and perceived. This could lead to decreased aggressive political behaviour and a significant reduction in the likelihood of violence.

INTRODUCTION

In the last three decades, India has steadily increased Women's political participation. This increase can be observed at all levels of political participation. The number of elected representatives is rising from the grassroots to the national level. At the same time, the political parties have also provided avenues and space for women within their fold. In the other modes of political participation (formal and informal), the women are showing their strength. Several factors have contributed to this increase, including:

1. In 1993, India passed the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution, which required that one-third of all seats in local government be reserved for women, resulting in increased female participation in local politics.
2. India has seen a notable rise in the women's movement in recent years, which promotes women's rights, including the ability to participate in politics. As a result of this movement's significant contribution to increasing public awareness of women's vital role in politics, more women have been inspired to run for government.
3. Women are increasingly choosing to further their education and enter the workforce in India. This beneficial development has increased their understanding of their rights and economic independence. Women are, therefore, more inclined to express their agency and get involved in politics.
4. Social perceptions of women participating in politics are changing in India. The women's movement's tireless efforts and the increase in women's job and education levels are to be commended for this excellent development.

5. The success of women in politics has also created role models for many other women to follow. However, despite the success of women in the political arena, their participation, representation and reach remain limited. There are many challenges: Gender stereotypes, Lack of access to resources and violence in politics, especially against women. This article will discuss the challenge of violence in politics, which involves violence against women in politics.

WOMEN IN POLITICS

Politics is shaped by the prevailing social atmosphere, so as society evolves, politics changes accordingly. One significant change happening in our modern world is the empowerment of women, which is altering the landscape of politics. Empowerment involves equipping individuals with the necessary tools and knowledge to overcome challenges and achieve their goals, ultimately building self-assurance for self-fulfilment. Women's empowerment is a process where women gain greater control over their lives and the environment affecting them. Women's empowerment is based on three principles: first, true equality between men and women; second, women's right to develop their potential fully; and third, women's right to self-representation and self-determination. All three principles of women's empowerment are closely related to politics. Self-representation and self-determination lead to women's role in political decision-making. The other two principles reshape the context of politics as an activity.

Women's empowerment in politics leads to their increasing participation in politics. The number of women politicians has increased in the last two decades. This is occurring both at the grassroots level and at top decision-making levels. Despite the underrepresentation of women in politics, there is a visible change, which emanates from the fact that there are more women legislators worldwide. This is a very significant development in politics. This development breaks the myth that women do not have a role in the political world. This myth was used to justify the near-total absence of women in politics. Here, it is essential to remember that once we accept the myth, it perpetuates itself and further hinders the entry of women into politics. If we analyse this myth of 'politics as men's domain', it will become clear that this has been a prevalent means of men's domination over women as a class. Generally, politics is described as an activity related to the public domain compared to the private domain. Women are supposed to take care of the private domain and leave the public domain in the hands of their male counterparts. Across civilisations and beyond the timeline, this male value has been established as a matter of fact. Hence, demolishing the edifice of this 'pseudo fact' has both substantial and symbolic value. It augurs a new era in politics and human history in general. Today, the prejudice towards women in the public domain has diminished, and many women aspire to become politicians. This works like a chain reaction; more women in politics inspire more women to join politics.

The women's approach to politics seems different from the men's approach. And this leads to a tectonic shift in how politics is done and how politics looks when it includes more women. For men, politics primarily involves power and the 'authoritative allocation of values'. Hence, politics tends to be more conflictual and self-interested. Many feminist scholars rightly argue that 'women see political power as a means to an end, whereas men see the obtaining and retaining political power as an end in itself'. This difference arises from the different views of power. Due to its historical origins, men view power in terms of domination. But women's perception of power is about cooperation and empowerment. Hence, with women's charge, politics becomes more consensual than confrontational.

It is a much-underestimated fact in political philosophy and contemporary politics that the 'quasi total' absence of women from political decisions was undermining the claims of democracy. The semi-formal equality of women through equal citizenship needed to provide more avenues for women in political institutions. Women as individuals were taken for granted and their views as a class were not even recognised. It was a big fraud on the part of the ruling male elite that they were involved in. They were undermining the basic principles of democracy. How can there be a true democracy, when half of the population is nearly not represented? But in recent decades, the increasing participation of women in politics 'bodes well for political legitimacy and the consolidation of democracy'. Including women in decision-making makes democracy for the people, by the people and of the people.

Today, women are bringing a feminine approach to politics. Here, they can bring politics closer to day-to-day life. This is becoming possible since women are less concerned about gaining and losing power; instead, they focus on practical and positive aspects of life. Here, it is evident that women are in touch with everyday life, and hence, they can better understand the problems of ordinary people. Therefore, they do not generally waste their time and energy on abstract issues; they address practical problems more humanly and reasonably.

Women's empowerment brings many new issues and redefines many prominent cases around which contemporary politics revolves. Politics does not only involve the actual participants of politics. In every society, politics is based around some current issues. And the priority of these issues depends upon the demands of vocal groups. Before the women's movement era, the problems related to women were never made a priority issue in politics. Many politicians and decision-makers did talk about the status of women. But primarily, these were sympathetic discussions leading to philanthropic activities. The issues about women were generally missing from political debates, and the views of women about other matters should have been taken into account. Today, the context and content of politics are changing. The advancement of women in every field (economic, social, cultural, educational, science and so on) is forcing the demands about the needs and aspirations of women as a class for political agenda setting. In the last two decades, there has been a rapid growth worldwide in legislation dealing with women and children. Interestingly, on most occasions, women legislators have come together, cutting across party lines and hence evolving into a more consensual and communitarian way of politics.

Political violence and women in Politics

To begin with, we can ask some questions: How does political violence hamper the chances of women's entry into politics? How does political violence limit the opportunity for women to be active in politics? How does political violence target women in politics? And how more women in politics can change the face of politics by limiting the possibility of political violence?

Political violence refers to using force, typically involving physical harm or coercion, to achieve political goals or influence political outcomes.ⁱ This phenomenon encompasses many actions, including protests, riots, assassinations, bombings, and armed conflicts.ⁱⁱ Political violence often emerges within contentious political environments, where traditional means of negotiation or expression are perceived as insufficient for achieving desired outcomes. Its causes and manifestations are subject to extensive research and analysis from various academic disciplines.

Political violence is a recurring phenomenon in India, a diverse and populous country with a complex history of social, cultural, and political tensions. When we talk about political violence in India, the focus is given to communal riots and insurgencies, acts of terrorism and political assassinations,

Insurgencies in regions like Jammu and Kashmir and the northeastern states, violent protests by the people against the government, Terrorism, Military revolts and takeovers, Revolts and Rebellion, riots, ethnic conflicts, War etc. The study of this large-scale political violence usually explores the dynamics, actors, implications and counter-measures.

However, events usually mark such large-scale violence, and they fail to capture the regular and continuous violence. On the other hand, there are ongoing processes of violence which are neither large-scale nor event-specific. The low-intensity violence becomes part of day-to-day politics. This violence becomes more visible during the times of democratic elections. But this violence remains pervasive and present in latent forms at all times.

With the three tiers of government, the democratic process of election becomes frequent. And the contestations in politics spill over to personal rivalry and physical violence. This phenomenon is more visible and intense in some states like West Bengal and Kerala. These are politically volatile states in India, and elections are often marred by violence. Several factors are essential to understand the political violence in the states: long history of rivalry between different political parties—criminal gang culture, Armed groups, Radicalisation, Police inaction, etc.

How Political Violence Affects Women in Politics

The pervasive phenomenon of political violence greatly impacts women's participation, representation, and experiences in political spheres.

Women face significant obstacles in participating in politics and engaging in political activities, as political violence is prevalent and frequent. This violence often serves as a deterrent, with women being threatened, intimidated, and physically harmed, making it difficult for them to pursue their aspirations in the political arena. This dissuasion hampers women's access to leadership roles, candidacy, and decision-making platforms.ⁱⁱⁱ Fear of violence may lead to self-censorship, stifling women's voices and potential contributions to policy-making. Therefore, Political violence can deter women from entering politics altogether. Women may be afraid of being targeted with violence, or they may feel that they are not safe in the political arena. On the other hand, Women who are already active in politics may become incapacitated due to political violence. It may be necessary for women to take a leave of absence from their political jobs or even to give up politics entirely if they are assaulted or threatened.

Political violence reinforces gender disparities in political representation. Women are disproportionately affected by the threat of violence, which reduces their willingness to run for office.^{iv} The Lack of female representation in politics has lasting effects. It skews policy priorities and perspectives, leaving women's issues disadvantaged. Additionally, when women politicians are targeted, it threatens their safety and hinders their ability to advocate for gender-sensitive policies. Politics in South Asia has historically been characterised by violence and has long been portrayed as the domain of men. Therefore, women have been generally shut out of the political sphere and prevented from engaging.

Political violence's psychological and emotional toll on women in politics is profound. Experiencing or witnessing violence can lead to trauma, anxiety, and stress.^v Such adverse experiences might dissuade women from remaining in politics or pursuing leadership roles, further contributing to their underrepresentation.^{vi} Additionally, the fear of violence can impede women's political engagement and prevent them from fully participating in public discourse.

At certain times, violence in politics can negatively affect the reputation of women involved. When women are subjected to attacks or threats, they may be viewed as weak or incapable, resulting in their

colleagues or the general public not taking them seriously. This is an important issue that disproportionately affects women.

Even with the difficulties caused by political violence, women in politics show incredible strength. They create plans to move through unfriendly situations, using their support systems and developing new ways to keep their voice and power. Some women view their participation as a form of resistance against violence and as a means to advocate for change.^{vii} Overcoming adversity can foster a strong sense of empowerment and commitment to advancing women's rights.

It has been observed that, in general, the politics in India tends to remain a domain of aggression. In many parts of India, entering the political arena requires muscle power. Because, sooner or later, all the politicians and candidates in the electoral fray are exposed to violence. Incidentally, this violence does not remain limited to the candidate. It involves their families, too. This propensity and possibility of violence can force women politicians to quit their political careers. The aggressive nature of politics is often used to justify excluding women from engaging in politics, whilst violence is also used as a mechanism to threaten those women who choose to participate.

The UN Women conducted an extensive study.^{viii} In India, Pakistan and Nepal, the violence against women in politics. This study has provided important insights about this issue-

1. Women in politics, especially first-generation women, face violence of multiple types, dimensions, and at all levels.
2. This violence is rooted in gender discriminatory, autocratic, patriarchal, and elitist mindsets that prevail within the family, political parties, law enforcement agencies, and the public.
3. violence against women in politics (VAWIP) include character assassination, physical violence, and sexual harassment.
4. Sexual harassment is often not reported due to a culture of silence.
5. Women in politics also face other forms of discrimination, such as not being allowed to make decisions, being side-lined within their party, not being given a ticket to run for office, being portrayed as having low winnability and facing political isolation for not following the line drawn by male party members/leaders.
6. Women politicians have been maltreated during election campaigns and other constituency visits.
7. "Almost 90 per cent of women in these countries feel that violence breaks their resolve to join politics. From our comprehensive review of laws on violence against women, it is clear that none of the three countries has legislation that deals strictly with offenders to prevent violence against women in politics. We know that where laws are in place, prevalence tends to be lower and fewer people think that violence against women is justifiable,"^{ix} Says Rebecca Reichmann Tavares, Representative, UN Women's Office for India, Bhutan, Maldives and Sri Lanka.

Political Parties and Political Violence

In principle, the political parties reject political violence and the use of violence in politics, especially against politics. The parties, in general, criticise violence and call for peace. However, in reality, the political parties act based on electoral gains. They not only accept violence but, at many times, promote a culture of violence. For success in electoral democracy, almost all the political parties have promoted candidates with records of violence. However, the political parties of Kerala and West Bengal seem to go one step ahead by using violence to achieve political goals.

Conclusion

There is a paradox. The culture of violence in politics, and mainly targeted violence against women in politics, limits the participation of women in politics. But at the same time, if women's participation in politics crosses a threshold, there is a probability that the potentiality of violence in politics will decrease. There are arguments which suggest this belief. It is argued that women's participation in politics can contribute to creating a more violence-free political environment. Research has shown that increasing the representation of women in political processes can have several positive effects: conflict resolution, priority to social welfare issues, change in policy orientation towards countering violence and discrimination, engaging communities in the governance process and hence limiting the possibility of alienation,

In general, it has been observed that countries that have higher levels of gender equality usually have lower levels of violence, particularly political violence. The involvement of women in decision-making processes can help establish a more peaceful society. Political parties in India must prioritise increasing the number of women in politics and addressing the challenges they face. By doing so, Indian democracy can achieve multiple positive goals.

END NOTES

1. Della Porta, D., & Diani, M. (2006). **Social Movements: An Introduction**. Wiley.
2. Tilly, C. (2003). **The Politics of Collective Violence**. Cambridge University Press.
3. Dahlerup, D. (2006). **Women, Quotas, and Politics**. Routledge.
4. O'Brien, D. Z. (2018). **Women and Violence in Indian Politics: The Case of Tamil Nadu**. Cambridge University Press.
5. Krug, E. G., et al. (2002). **World Report on Violence and Health**. World Health Organization.
6. Krug, E. G., et al. (2002). **World Report on Violence and Health**. World Health Organization.
7. Celis, K., et al. (2008). **Descriptive versus Substantive Representation: Women as Policy Makers**. European Journal of Political Research
8. UN Women. (2014). **Violence against Women in Politics: A study conducted in India, Nepal and Pakistan**. Retrieved from <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2014/6/violence-against-women-in-politics>
9. UN Women. (2014). **Violence against Women in Politics: A study conducted in India, Nepal and Pakistan**. Retrieved from <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2014/6/violence-against-women-in-politics>