

Towards Achieving the Sustainable Development Goal of Gender Equality Through Political Participation of Women in Legislative Bodies: An Experience from India

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Abstract

The 5th goal of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (UN-SDG) is aiming at achieving gender equality throughout the globe while encouraging and facilitating the empowerment of women in every corner of legislative bodies. On the broader objective of UN-SDG, India being a signatory has initiated a number of proactive steps to realize this vision. India, since its independence has taken a wider initiative for ensuring the fundamental right to equality in every sphere including equal opportunity in political representation and leadership. The State leaders realized the fact that less number of women is visible in the political leadership position and their representative roles in the decision-making bodies were found negligible as compared to males. Therefore, the paper includes various issues and problems that are acting as hindrances to the goal to be achieved. The paper shall try to provide appropriate recommendations for improving women's leadership skills with a number of policy options.

Keywords: Political Participation, Sustainable Development Goals, Political Representation, Fifth SDG, Gender Equality, Leadership.

Introduction

UN-SDG has a list of a total of seventeen goals that consist of various issues to be addressed globally, with 2030 decided as its target year for the goals to be attained. All the chosen goals are interlinked and impact each other in one or the other way. One of the most important goals that this paper is going to emphasise is its fifth goal of 'Gender Equality' in terms of political participation and representation of women taking India as its case study in special reference to the leadership positions held by women. The aim of the fifth SDG is defined as to "achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls" (*THE 17 GOALS | Sustainable Development*, n.d.).

Fifth SDG: Overview, Targets and Progress

The fifth SDG is committed to achieving its target with the help of the classification of the steps that are required to be taken to address the issue of Gender inequality. First, it has defined the area of the

problem; second, it has provided the indicators to measure the problem and its targets that are needed to be achieved and lastly, the progress of the implemented policies and programmes. The overview shows drastic levels of inequality women have been facing in different scenarios including, political participation, leadership positions and decisions making roles apart from the Employment, Gender Responsive budgeting, violence and healthcare sectors. It has six main and five sub-targets. The main targets are as follows along with their indicators-

S. No.	Targets	Indicators
1.	End of all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere.	a) Whether or not legal frameworks are in place to promote, enforce and monitor equality and non-discrimination
2.	Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation.	a) Proportion of ever-partnered women and girls aged 15 years and older subjected to physical, sexual or psychological violence by a current or former intimate partner in the previous 12 months b) Proportion of women and girls aged 15 years and older subjected to sexual violence by persons other than an intimate partner in the previous 12 months by age and place of occurrence
3.	Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation	a) Proportion of women aged 20-24 years who were married or in union before age 15 and before age 18 b) Proportion of girls and women aged 15-49 years who have undergone female genital mutilation/cutting, by age
4.	Recognise and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate	a) Proportion of time spent on unpaid domestic and care work by sex, age and location
5.	Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life	a) Proportion of seats held by women in a) national parliaments and b) local governments

		b) Proportion of women in managerial positions
6.	Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights as agreed in accordance with the Programme of Action of the International Conference on	a) Proportion of women aged 15-49 years who make their own informed decisions regarding sexual relations, contraceptive use and reproductive health care

Sub-Targets:

S. No.	Sub-Targets	Indicators
1	Undertake reforms to give women equal participation and equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to ownership and control over land and other forms of property, financial services, inheritance and natural resources, in accordance with national laws	a) Proportion of total agricultural population with ownership or secure rights over agricultural land, by sex; b) Share of women among owners or rights bearers of agricultural land and type of tenure
2	Enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women	a) Proportion of individuals who own a mobile telephone, by sex
3	Adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women and girls at all levels	a) Proportion of countries with systems to track and make public allocations for gender equality and women's empowerment

Source- (*THE 17 GOALS | Sustainable Development*, n.d.)

The above-mentioned targets and sub-targets of the fifth SDG mentioned above, present a comprehensive plan towards achieving gender equality. But only the fifth Target of this goal emphasised equal political participation and representation in leadership positions in all spheres. When the progress for the same is analysed by the UN, it is found that “it will take 47 years for women to attain the goals of equal representation in parliaments and 140 years for women to be represented equally in positions of power ad leadership in the workplace” (*THE 17 GOALS | Sustainable Development*, n.d.). As a solution it has UN has suggested: “political leadership and a comprehensive set of policy reforms are needed to dismantle systemic barriers to the achievement of SDG 5”(*THE 17 GOALS | Sustainable Development*, n.d.).

In this regard, UN Goals have given a worldwide picture. It has given importance to the “quotas” that half of the countries are lacking in the national parliament in the first target itself. For the fifth target of this goal, it stated: “As of 1 January 2023, women held 26.5% of seats in lower and single chambers of national parliaments, up from 22.3% in 2015” (*THE 17 GOALS | Sustainable Development, n.d.*) which means in a time period of 8 years, only 4% of growth is seen in the number of women sitting in the parliaments. This analysis doesn't indicate much change in the levels of political participation by women at national levels and not much has been achieved at the local levels also.

As per UN Goals “At the local level, women held 35.4% of seats in deliberative bodies, up from 33.9% in 2020. At this pace, parity in such bodies cannot be achieved by 2030. Also, gender parity in political institutions continues to be rare: only six countries had 50% or more women in their lower/single chambers of national parliaments and 3 in local legislatures” (*THE 17 GOALS | Sustainable Development, n.d.*). The present scenario needs unprecedented attention from the governments.

Political Participation: A Conceptual Framework

Before diving into the subject, the paper will try to look at various definitions and meanings of political participation. As per Oxford Learner's Dictionary “the activities involved in getting and using power in public life, and being able to influence decisions that affect a country or a society is a political participation”. As per Rosenstone & Hansen's (1993) opinion, ‘Political participation is an action that influences the distribution of Social goods and values’. Verba and Nie (1972), presented political participation as a larger concept and said, “It can be defined as those voluntary activities which are performed by the citizens of a democracy through which people express their political preferences, participates in decision making and demonstrates their collective action.”

The attempt to explain the term as a verb was also done by many political scholars. Letha Kumari in her work has extensively elaborated on the same. She observed political participation in the following actions “voting, campaigning in elections, convincing other persons to vote in a particular way, attending public meetings, distributing literature, joining an organisation or a party, contributing money to a party, contesting elections, holding public or party office”. More can be added to it by looking at Milbrath's perception of the term as “Rallies, gheraos, strikes etc.” Similarly, as per UNO Women's Watch “participation in the electoral process involves much more than just voting. Political participation is derived from the freedom to speak out, assemble and associate; the ability to take part in the conduct of public affairs; and the opportunity to register as a candidate, to campaign, to be elected and to hold office at all levels of the government.” As per J. W. Deth since the 1960s political participation has included actions like “signing petitions, blocking traffic, donating money or fighting with the police”.

Political Participation of Women: A Case Study of India

The limitation of the term is that political participation can be explained in many ways. But it is argued many political scholars that change will occur if women are given more representation because many studies have proven visible changes in the levels of political participation of women in the systems where women are substantially included in policy formation due to their personal encounters and exposure to the challenges they face while entering any sphere of the public life.

These women understand their plight as a marginalised group better than their men counterparts to form women-focused policies and programmes. “Women's representation in the national parliament is a key indicator of the extent of gender equality in parliamentary politics”(Ghosh, 2022). Since political

representation is also a form of political participation, this study will only address the issue of the lack of women's political representatives in legislative bodies and decision-making positions in India. As argued by Panda “involvement of women in the process has been considered as imperative to make politics more democratic and inclusive”.

After the significant literature reviewed on the issue, it is observed that for India in the past women have not been able to reach the bar of equal political participation at all levels. Even though women and men were considered equal members of universal suffrage and were provided equal voting rights in India after gaining independence, only women still need fair representation in the field. Nevertheless, our constitution also granted equal protection of rights to all citizens and its 73rd and 74th Amendment acts were major acts of affirmative action and positive discrimination towards the woman members of society which have assisted them to participate and represent themselves in unprecedented numbers at the local levels. The increased levels of political activities in which women are participating is a remarkable shift in the paradigm brought by these amendments.

There are a total of 28 states and 8 Union Territories in India. The total population percentage of women in all these states together is 48.4% (*World Bank Open Data*, n.d.). But as one goes exploring for data analysing women's presence in legislative bodies, it is observed that, at the parliamentary level, “there is a rise in seats won by women in parliament from 22 to 78 and hike in percentage of women members which jumped from 4.4 to 14.2 from the first to seventeenth (2019 Lok Sabha) general election (Panda, 2021).” Data from Rajya Sabha also indicates the same trajectory where it is found that “the average number of female representation is around 9.5% and the highest was 12.7% in 2014 (Panda, 2021).”

Discussing the number of women in state assemblies, Panda has examined the data from the last 10 years and pointed out that “their representation has remained less than fifteen per cent invariably which is lower than the critical mass” (Panda, 2021). Giving state-specific information she added “In states like Nagaland and Sikkim they have found no voice. Their share fell from 28 to 26 per cent despite constituting half of the population of the state and playing a crucial role in determining the power equation. Delhi despite being the capital has only eight representatives of women which come only to 11 percent. Even in the highest literate state of Kerala, women constitute less than 5 per cent of elected representatives in the last election”(Panda, 2021).

Sustainable Development Goals in India

As per UN India, “the UN Country Team in India supports NITI Ayog, Union ministries and state governments in their efforts to address the interconnectedness of the goals, to ensure that no one is left behind and to advocate for adequate financing to achieve the SDG.” UN is spending a total of 298.7 \$USD which is 7.37% of the total funding. In India, it has granted 105.4m \$USD. In the annual report of UN with India 2021, Gender Equality is placed as the last and 7th priority area out of a total of 7 priority areas which was written in the post- Covid 19 context. As per the report, India lies at 131 ranking in terms of gender equality out of 189 countries.

As per the report, the UN has helped the Indian government to counter and reverse unequal gender practices. The report stated “We strengthened plans strategies and budget at national, state and local levels to realize India's national and international commitments towards advancing gender equality and the rights of women and children. We supported governments and CSOs in fighting the root causes of inequality, including harmful social practices such as child marriage and gender-biased sex selection-and

we supported expanding opportunities for social, political and economic participation and empowerment of young people” (UNI, Annual Report 2021).

NITI Aayog has maintained a record of the Sustainable Development Goals mechanism. As per NITI Aayog, the SDG Vertical is the nodal agency managing all the SDG-related actions. It is working in coordination with the Union Ministries and states/UTs which closely works with Government, civil society, private sector, academia, think tanks, research organisations and multilateral organisations which are the key stakeholders in the process. Out of 29 verticals, women and child development is the last vertical.

Under the 2018 Report, for mapping of Central Sector Schemes and Ministries of Government of India regarding Sustainable Development Goals in India, Niti Ayog has given a detailed listing of all the centrally sponsored schemes and programmes for each and every target and SDG. For the SDG target 5.5 it has mentioned Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan managed by Ministry of Panchayati Raj department. And the similar kind of a target is 5.c as well under which the government is to adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels for which there is a group of schemes/initiatives launched by the government.

The first group of schemes is titled Mission for Protection and Empowerment for women- Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Pardahan Mantri Mahile Shakti Kendra, Ujjawala, One stop Centre, Women Helpline, hotels, SWADHAR Greh, Gendet Budgeting etc. and the second category itself is called Gender Budgeting. The concerned departments for both the policy groups are WCD and Social justice & Empowerment.

In the sustainable development India index, 2018, Niti Ayog mentioned that in terms of equality, Kerala, Sikkim and Andaman and Nicobar Islands. As per the 2023, Index Report, India has only achieved a score of 63.5 percent as an overall improvement. For the 5th Target specifically, with the help of map, it showed that the growth is stagnating or increasing less than 50% of required rate. Also it noted, that the major challenges remain to be resolved. The Index has shown four indicators for the quality index. Out of which- ratio of female to male labor force participation rate and seats held by women in national parliament are directly and indirectly related to the SDG and both are seen stagnating.

Challenges to Overcome

The literature available on the subject, suggests many challenges that are a threat for the fifth SDG to be achieved. The very first challenge is undoubtedly, the dream of getting reservation for women in parliament and state assemblies, not becoming a reality. The bill has not been passed, neither in the parliament and nor in any of the state assemblies except for Orissa.

Gender mainstreaming as a concept of bringing gender issues into the mainstream of society, was adopted at the Fourth World Conference on women held in Beijing in 1995. It demanded taking account of gender equality concerns in all policies and programmes, administrative and financial activities and in organisational procedures by every signatory government. As per K. Vijaya, the Global Gender Gap Report 2006, analysed women’s empowered position after the adoption of Gender mainstreaming and its impacts. In India, it faced major data limitations, hence constrained choice of indicators used. He suggested that the figures that are obtained by state and UT governments, HDI, GDI, GEM can be used positively to bring change in the policies and programmes in this direction.

Other than technical reasons, socio-economic factors also exist. It has been long since the government has launched a series of policies and programmes to help women in their empowerment. Awareness programmes and workshops in villages are required in large numbers since most of the population is living in the villages only regarding women's political leadership. There is a need to impart knowledge in women and men alike for the purpose. Similarly, it is important to inculcate the leadership qualities which need to be started from their middle level school education. They should be encouraged to take part in political activities organised by either school authorities or even any other body, for that matter. Sensitisation programmes for all age groups and gender should be held so that a comprehensive understanding of the importance of women's equal participation in politics can be achieved.

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