Women’s Empowerment in India

From participation to political agency

Women’s empowerment and equal participation in political life is important at all levels of Indian society. Despite benefiting from reservations, women frequently experience obstacles when they participate in politics. However, to address women’s aspirations for political agency we should explore the emerging opportunities, and not only the challenges. We should also keep in mind that there are multiple aspects of identity, and huge differences in the economic and political status of women, within India as in the rest of the world. ‘Women’ is not a homogenous category that can be defined merely by the need for aid or support.

Brief Points

- Women’s empowerment is about agency rather than upliftment of women.
- Women can be active participants in policymaking through diverse ways, not just in party politics.
- We should explore emerging opportunities as well as obstacles to women’s political agency.
- Women’s empowerment is a process to stop the violation of rights, end discrimination, and build capacity for voice and choice.
- The category of ‘women’ is not homogenous, and potentially conceals vast socio-economic and cultural differences.

Åshild Kolås

Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)
As women’s studies illustrates, discriminatory practices against women are evident across the world. Highly skewed gender relations, deeply embedded in the family, communities, the state and its governance institutions, have obstructed women’s access to education and participation in the workforce, politics and governance.

At a time when development was seen as an unquestionable good, efforts to integrate women into the formal economy gave rise to the Women in Development (WID) approach. A key influence was Ester Boserup’s (1970) ‘Women’s Role in Economic Development’, which called for more attention to women’s issues and the unique problems of integrating women into the workforce. Following this, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) established a special Division for Women in Development.

The WID focus on productivity, income and women’s employment was scrutinized by neo-Marxist feminists and other critics for failing to question the underlying causes of women’s ‘development challenges’. Rejecting the focus on improving women’s quality of life through aid and assistance, critics turned to issues of women’s marginalization and overt oppression.

Out of this came an alternative approach, known as Women and Development (WAD), which recognized that the inclusion of women was much more than a ‘women’s issue’. WAD brought into focus women’s subordination within larger structures of power, dependency and class inequality. Meanwhile, activists and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were increasingly critical of the ‘modernist’ views and ‘quick-fix’ solutions of development agents who constantly failed to reach their poverty reduction goals. There was also a reaction against alleged ‘western biases’, as powerful multilateral agencies such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) ramped up their interventions in Third World countries while championing women and the marginalized.

Within the Indian context, a key benchmark was the 1975 Report of the Committee on the Status of Women, which exposed women’s structural marginalization.

Both WID and WAD have since received criticism for lack of attention to patriarchal social structures and biased assumptions about Third World women. Subsequently, the Gender and Development (GAD) approach shifted the focus towards gender as socially constructed roles and relations between men and women. In GAD, women and men are viewed as actors and stakeholders, not merely recipients of development. GAD recognizes the adverse effects of patriarchy, emphasizing the importance of women’s empowerment. The turn to ‘empowerment’ as a core concept was accompanied by the emergence of rights-based approaches to development and a strong focus on ‘good governance’. Women’s studies followed suit by taking up the issue of women’s reproductive rights, as well as equal representation and participation in politics and governance. A growing global movement for women’s rights, gender equality and women’s empowerment drew attention to gender-based discrimination and the exclusion of women from institutions of power.

Women’s empowerment can be seen as a process of renegotiating accepted norms and expectations about female and male roles, relations, and responsibilities, opening up new opportunities for women within the household, the community, state agencies and civil society. From an individual perspective, it is a process that enables a woman to analyse her situation, decide on her priorities, develop solutions to her problems, and take action towards improving her situation.

Women’s empowerment in India

The emergence of ‘women’s empowerment’ as a policymaking goal reflects the agenda of the global women’s movement to combat gender disparities and discrimination against women. Inclusion of women in the political sphere is thus seen as a powerful instrument for much-needed social change. This has given rise to an array of policies and programmes, in which the reservation scheme for women in local self-governing institutions (Panchayats) stands out as an ambitious social experiment in the inclusion of women in decision-making.

In 1993, India enacted constitutional reforms (the 73rd and 74th Amendments) making Local Self-Governing Institutions mandatory. To increase women’s participation in LSGIs, the amendments stipulated that 33% of seats in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) were to be reserved for women. This applies to all of India with the exception of ‘tribal’ (Sixth Schedule) areas in Northeast India where state bodies or autonomous councils are free to choose whether or not to reserve seats for women in local assemblies. In a region with weak participation of women in several state legislatures, customary law often excludes women’s political agency at the local level as well.

Indian states such as Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Kerala, Rajasthan, Tripura, and Uttarakhand have increased reservations for women from 33 to 50%. On the other hand, there has been persistent opposition to the Women’s Reservation Bill that proposes to amend the Constitution to
reserve 33% of seats for women in the Lower House of the Indian Parliament, the Lok Sabha, and all state legislative assemblies.

A key question with regard to reservations for women is whether this actually contributes to women’s more active political participation. Many analysts complain that men continue to act as key decision-makers in Panchayats, while women play a more passive role. Moreover, the work of female politicians is typically dismissed, underrated or unrecognized by their male counterparts in LSGIs. An oft-cited example is a study of Panchayat committees in Kerala in the 1990s, where male members ridiculed and intimidated female members. Other analysts have argued that women are no longer silenced, and that they are as motivated and outspoken as male members.

**Experiences from Northeast India**

It is interesting to compare the experiences of Panchayats with similar local councils in areas governed by customary institutions such as village councils and the *durbar* in Meghalaya, where there is no reservation scheme for women. In recent years, efforts have been made to elect women into local municipal wards, but the *durbars* tend to resist such efforts and most disapprove of reservation for women. In Nagaland state, organizations such as Watsü Mungdang, the apex women’s organization of the Ao Nagas, have actively supported women who have filed their nominations for office in the state legislature. This addresses key obstacles for women who want to stand for election: lack of opportunity and financial resources required to launch a political career. Despite that women’s networks are powerful, due to the obstacles and opposition by male members, women are much less likely to be nominated by a party.

Since 2006, Naga women have campaigned for the implementation of reservations for women in municipal councils as stipulated by the Nagaland Municipal (First Amendment) Act, 2006. After years of non-implementation of this act, women activists filed a case in Gauhati High Court demanding reservation according to the law. In the meantime, a number of elections have been postponed.

The gendered nature of customary law and male-dominated traditional councils is now up for debate in Northeast India. One view is that such tribal institutions are spheres of male domination and represent obstacles to women’s equality.

Critics emphasize the challenges faced by women due to the traditional gender roles prescribed by the community. On the other hand, ‘proxy representation’ of women is not seen as a good solution. The nomination of women simply to fill a quota may dissuade women’s active role in such fora. This is seen in state-sponsored ‘women’s empowerment’ schemes such as Village Development Boards, which are supposed to be ‘gender-sensitive’ but remain steeped in gender biases.

Taking a very different view of ‘traditional’ gender roles, some would also argue that marketization is the key problem - the entry of global capital giving rise to new forms of inequality and injustice that have eroded the equal value once afforded to tribal women. In this view, globalization and market forces leave women less independent and more vulnerable.

Governmental agencies set up to address the needs of women are equally criticized for their ‘welfare approach’. By contrast, self-help groups foster economic independence, which is widely understood as crucial for women’s empowerment.

Few would question the key role of women’s representation in governance structures, from the lowest to the highest body of governance. This is not just a way to promote women’s issues, but to build a women’s perspective into every field of governance. The presence of women in political debates is important in its own right. However, the question remains as to how women are to achieve this presence.

**Critical questions**

Multilateral agencies such as the UNDP and UN Women place a high premium on the active inclusion of women in governance and formal political institutions, despite that both policy measures for inclusion and local experiences remain widely disparate and contested. This raises some important questions: Are women at large empowered by reservations? And is it reasonable to assume that female politicians are more committed to working for ‘women’s issues’ than their male counterparts? Do we really find that female politicians stand united across social fault-lines and party loyalties for the greater cause of women’s emancipation? To address these concerns, we need to revisit the underlying assumptions of the women’s empowerment agenda. Related to this, more fundamental questions should also be asked: Are programmes targeting women implicitly creating a category of ‘women’ that constructs them as weak and in need of protection or assistance? And are policymakers’ efforts to address ‘women’s issues’ simultaneously contributing to the reification of marginalized ‘womanhood’? The issues raised here are not new, but they need to be revisited as long as women remain a minority in the political sphere.

We should particularly review the ways in which policies and programmes construct ‘women’ as a target group, and the related identification of ‘women’s issues’ by policymakers and civil society organizations alike. This arises from recognition of the real-life importance of the categories employed by...
The construction of a target group called ‘women’ invariably creates both obstacles and opportunities. In addition, by identifying ‘women’s issues’, we highlight the boundaries of the female sphere in which women are expected to be in charge. The classification of ‘women’s issues’ thereby brings to light the legitimate spheres and spaces of women’s activities, or the female domain. Such spheres or spaces are often found under the rubric of the ‘domestic’, demarcated by labels such as education, health, reproduction, and family welfare.

Importantly, spaces of women’s activities, or ‘women’s issues’, are not the same as spheres of female decision-making. Rather, notions of ‘women’s issues’ demarcate how opportunity and responsibility is structured, and form the basis for normative prescriptions about the acceptable female and male roles. Thus, when we set out to define ‘women’s issues’, or even to identify ‘key challenges facing women’, we run the risk of solidifying the very boundaries that delimit the female sphere, which those who aim for empowerment may rather want to break down. Such a ‘feminist dilemma’ is apparent as well in debates on ‘empowering’ effects of reservation for women.

We should keep in mind that gender is only one aspect of identity among many, in multi-faceted social landscapes. The category of ‘women’ is by no means homogenous, as women in most societies experience significant inequalities among themselves. In India, as elsewhere in the world, there are massive differences in the socio-economic and political status of women. As a consequence, it is difficult to find a blanket formula for supporting women’s empowerment. All such measures need to be context-specific, locally grounded, and culturally sensitive.

In the process of applying the category of ‘women’ to programming and policymaking, we also run the risk of ignoring other and perhaps more important social, economic and cultural differences. Moreover, when ‘women’ are included as such among ‘marginalized’ groups, this feeds the notion that women are invariably in need of support towards their ‘upliftment’.

Despite persistent and often deep divides along fault-lines of ethnicity, class, education, age, family background and religion, women still have a common interest in how female identity is socially framed, legally defined, and culturally shaped. Even as processes of framing, defining and shaping female identity are constantly in flux, the contested meaning of ‘womanhood’ inevitably unites women across time and space.

Towards women’s agency

From this brief review of key debates on women’s inclusion and empowerment we can take away three points of relevance to policymakers, practitioners and civil society:

1. Firstly, in a critical view of empowerment the attention is directed towards women’s political agency rather than the upliftment, betterment or progress of women.

2. Secondly, women’s active participation in social transformation need not (or should not) be measured solely in terms of women’s formal participation in governance and party politics. Women can also make a vital impact on societal change through non-governmental organizations and other arenas outside the purview of formal state institutions.

3. Thirdly, in their efforts to address women’s aspirations for agency, policymakers should not only look at the systemic challenges and obstacles. They should also consider new emerging opportunities both within and outside formal institutions, especially in the form of networks among women to share knowledge and experiences, and build up common resources and capacity for voice and choice.

From a policymaking perspective, women’s empowerment is best understood as a process to end gender-based discrimination and stop the violation of women’s rights. These are measures that enable women to empower themselves, leaving political agency to the agent herself.

Notes


3. Kolås, Åshild & Legia Lyngdoh, 2012. Gender, Empowerment and Conflict: Experiences from Northeast India, report from workshop on Gender, Empowerment and Conflict, Shillong, August 2012. Oslo: PRIO. I would like to thank all the participants in this workshop for generously sharing their views and experiences. Many of their invaluable insights are reflected in this policy brief.

4. I also thank the participants of ‘Women and Peacebuilding: A Policy Dialogue’ organized by WISCOMP in New Delhi, 21-22 February 2015, for insightful comments to this brief.

THE AUTHOR

Åshild Kolås is a social anthropologist and research professor at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO). She has published extensively on ethnicity, governance, the politics of identity, and peacebuilding. Currently she is working on conflict, peacebuilding and gender, with a particular research focus on Northeast India.

THE PROJECT

‘Making Women Count for Peace’ is a project funded by the Research Council of Norway (RCN) to study women’s political agency in Northeast India and Nepal, focusing particularly on women’s involvement in security and peace processes. This project represents a joint effort by researchers based in Nepal, India and Norway.

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