

# Women's Empowerment Through Political Participation: A Feminist Perspective

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**Abstract:** Women's empowerment through political participation is crucial for promoting gender equality and social progress. When women actively engage in politics, they can advocate for policies that address gender-based inequalities; increased political participation ensures better representation of diverse perspectives, and women's political engagement can challenge societal norms and stereotypes, promoting gender equity. Equality with respect to empowerment entails women being free to choose the life they want to live unhindered by gender stereotypes, roles and prejudices. First-wave feminists fought for women's suffrage during the late 19th and early 20th century. The first wave laid the foundation for subsequent waves of feminism. It continued to fight for broader gender equality beyond suffrage, addressing issues such as employment rights, reproductive rights, and legal protections against gender-based discrimination. Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill were influential thinkers in the realm of women's rights and suffrage. In her book *The Vindication of The Rights of Women* (1792), Wollstonecraft argued that educating women would enable them to become rational beings capable of making informed political decisions<sup>[1]</sup>. Wollstonecraft's emphasis on equal political representation laid the intellectual groundwork for future suffragists. John Stuart Mill, a 19th-century philosopher, was a staunch advocate for women's rights, including suffrage. In his essay "*The Subjection of Women*" (1869), he argued that women should have the same political rights as men. Mill's philosophy was grounded in the principle of individual liberty. He believed that denying women the right to vote was a violation of their individual freedom<sup>[2]</sup>. Increasing the representation of women in politics is not only a matter of gender equity but also a means to improve governance, address critical social and economic issues and promote a more inclusive and equitable society.

## I. Introduction:

Women empowerment refers to the process of granting women equal rights, opportunities, and resources. It involves promoting gender equality and addressing the systematic barriers that hinder women's progress and autonomy. Empowerment is a central concern for feminists because feminism, as a social, political, and cultural movement, is trying to override all forms of gender-based discrimination, focusing on addressing historical and ongoing inequalities women face. Women empowerment refers to the process of giving women the tools, resources, and agency to make choices and control their own lives. Feminists have advocated for legal and policy changes that promote gender equality and have worked to change societal norms and attitudes about women's roles. By doing so, feminism has contributed significantly to the empowerment of women. There are only 34 women heads of state as of 2023. In India, there are 78 women MPs in Lok Sabha, and in

<sup>[1]</sup> (Wollstonecraft, 2020)

<sup>[2]</sup> (Mill, 1869)

Rajya Sabha, the number is 24 out of 542 and 224 members respectively. The political executive is not alone in missing women; even the central government bureaucracy is dominated by men. Even in the Indian judiciary, women's representation is very marginal.

Women not only find it more difficult to enter the exalted political circle but are also confined within certain ministries. Women are often offered softer portfolios, which require less human and financial resources. There is nothing wrong in women taking responsibility of the softer portfolios, but to ensure that women don't have only a token of representation in governance, they must be provided with the opportunity to hold more important ministries. It has already been proven by previous women MPs that women are highly skilled and capable enough to manage the finance ministry and rail ministry. It has shown that national security is not the sole preserve of men. It reaffirmed that women belong in all sectors and roles.

## II. What is Empowerment:

Empowerment is a multi-dimensional social process. Empowerment indicates the ability to make choices for those who have been disempowered before. Disempowerment refers to the situations where women face limitations, restrictions, or lack of opportunities that hinder their ability to lead autonomous and fulfilling lives. Disempowerment can manifest through various forms of discrimination, such as gender-based violence, unequal access to education and healthcare, limited economic prospects, and exclusion from decision-making roles. It signifies a lack of agency and control over one's life due to societal, cultural, or systematic factors. Promoting women's empowerment aims to counter women's disempowerment and create a more equitable and inclusive society.

Women's empowerment can be explored through three closely related dimensions- Agency, Resources, and Achievement. Agency refers to an individual's ability to make choices, set goals, and act independently. Agency has both positive and negative connotations. In its positive connotation, agency refers to the ability of the agent to make and act on their life choices. In its negative connotation, agency refers to the agent's ability to override the agency of others through any form of violence or coercion. Therefore, agency in relation to empowerment reflects not only one's ability to exercise choice actively but also shows how one can challenge

the hierarchical discriminatory power relation. Empowering women to have agency involves breaking down barriers that limit their autonomy, such as cultural norms and discriminatory practices<sup>[3]</sup>.

Access to economic and social resources is fundamental to women's empowerment. Economic resources such as income, property, and credit access are essential for financial independence. Social resources, including education, healthcare, and support networks, contribute to women's physical and emotional well-being and the ability to participate actively in every sphere of society. Resources and agency constitute the agents' capabilities to rebel against discriminatory, hierarchical social norms.

Achievement represents the outcomes and successes women can attain when they have agency and access to the resources. It includes attainment of education, economic independence, leadership roles in society and politics, and improved health and emotional well-being. When women achieve their goals and reach their full potential, it is beneficial for them individually and contributes to the overall empowerment of women as a group. Recognising and celebrating women's achievements helps inspire others and break down stereotypes and biases that may hinder their progress.

Agency, resources, and achievement are factors that significantly influence women's empowerment. Empowering women involves creating an environment where they can make choices, and access necessary resources and aspirations, ultimately leading to greater gender equality and women's wellbeing. Generally, poverty and disempowerment go hand in hand. The inability to meet one's basic needs and dependence on 'powerful others' rule out the capacity to make meaningful choices. Low literacy rate is another crucial factor that causes hindrance for women in realizing their true potential.

### III. **How Does Feminism Help in Women's Empowerment?**

Feminism and women's empowerment are closely related and often intertwined concepts. Feminism is both a social and political movement that advocates for gender equality and challenges the systematic discrimination and inequalities that women have historically faced. Women empowerment, on the other hand, refers to the process of enabling women to have control over their own lives, make choices, and participate fully in all aspects of society.

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<sup>[3]</sup> (Kabeer, 2005)

If we analyse the advancement that has been achieved in the field of the feminist movement and its positive impact on women's lives, we can clearly understand the deep-rooted connection between these two concepts. The first-wave feminist movement focused on securing women's basic rights, such as the right to vote and legal rights. This period laid the foundation for women's empowerment by advocating for equal legal and political rights. The second-wave feminist movement addressed a wide range of issues, including reproductive rights, workplace equality, and challenging traditional gender roles. It emphasized that women's empowerment requires more than just legal rights; it requires addressing deeply ingrained societal norms.

Feminists fought for reproductive rights, which is a significant aspect of women's empowerment, as it allowed women to have control over body and family planning. Feminist movement challenged traditional gender norms that limited women's roles to homemakers and caregivers. Feminists fought against the sexist and stereotypical way of thinking about women's morality that has been limited to care, nurture, love, compassion, and peace. Feminist scholars have also highly criticised the dichotomy of 'private' and 'public' life and how society overlooks the injustices that are produced in the family, which is seen as part of the private sphere, and hence outside the preview of justice, which is regarded as matters pertaining to public or political life.

Feminism also recognises that the intersection of gender with other forms of discrimination, such as race, class, and sexuality, forms multiple dimensions of hierarchies. This perspective reflects that women's empowerment must acknowledge and address multiple dimensions of inequality. Feminism expanded globally, addressing issues like gender-based violence, education, and health in different cultural contexts. It highlighted the importance of empowering women worldwide. The feminist movement has provided women with support networks and a sense of solidarity, which can be empowering in itself. Feminism is and always has been a driving force behind women's empowerment, which has evolved with time to address changing societal norms and challenges, with the ultimate goal of creating a more equitable and non-hierarchical, gender-just society.

#### IV. How Political Participation Empowers Women:

Political participation is a multi-dimensional process. Political participation can take various forms, including casting a vote and engaging in political activities such as attending protests, rallies, or demonstrations to advocate for specific causes or policies, joining political parties, participating in local initiatives and meetings to address local concerns, participating in direct democracy by voting for referendums or initiatives that allow women citizens to make decisions on specific policies or issues. These forms of political participation can vary in impact and effectiveness. The historical significance of women's political participation is profound and has evolved over time. The struggle for women's suffrage was a milestone in women's political participation. The right to vote granted women a fundamental political voice in a democratic society. Women's political participation has contributed to the expansion of democracy. It challenged the notion that only certain segments of the population were fit for political involvement. Increased women's political representation has led to greater gender diversity in political bodies. This diversification helps to ensure that the concerns and perspectives of women are better represented in policymaking. Female political leaders, from heads of state to local council members, have inspired generations of women to engage in politics and leadership roles. Women's political participation is closely connected to the women's rights movement, which significantly impacts women's empowerment. Women's political participation has been a transformative force in history, leading to greater gender equality. Women politicians often face various challenges and obstacles, many of which are rooted in gender bias and societal norms. Some key challenges include underrepresentation at all levels of office, which limits their influence and ability to shape policies. Gender stereotypes stemming from our society create scepticism about women's leadership capability. Women politicians are often held to different standards than their male counterparts. Women politicians are often scrutinised more intensely for their appearance, behaviors, and personal lives. Women in politics may experience sexual harassment, threats, or violence; as a result, this can deter them from running for office or speaking out on sensitive issues. Women lack access to resources, both human and financial, which results in less access to campaigning, political networks, and party support, making it harder to compete in elections. Tremendous pressure on women to balance political career and family responsibilities is challenging. It discourages some women from entering the politics. Initiatives like reservations to promote women's participation in politics may get certain women elected, but they merely act as a mouthpiece of their male counterparts. Women's self-esteem and confidence are affected in a predominantly male setup, and they refrain from expressing their opinions in such an

intimidating atmosphere. Despite these challenges, many women continue overcoming obstacles and significantly contributing to politics.

#### V. **Empowerment and Women's Political Participation:**

Mary Wollstonecraft, an influential 18th-century philosopher and writer, believed in the importance of women's political participation. In her writings, she argued for women's education and the recognition of their rational capabilities. She asserted that women should be educated to become informed citizens and participate in political life, as this would lead to a more just and enlightened society<sup>[1]<sup>4</sup></sup>. Wollstonecraft's ideas laid the foundation for women's political rights and empowerment.

Women's political empowerment offers numerous benefits both for the individual and the society as a whole. Women's political empowerment ensures that half of the population's diverse perspectives, experiences, and needs are represented in the decision-making process. It promotes gender equality and challenges patriarchal norms and discrimination, fostering a fairer and more just society. Gender-inclusive economic policies can boost economic growth by expanding the labour force and fostering innovation. This would lead to women's economic independence. Women's political empowerment can drive legal reforms related to gender rights, including laws against gender-based violence and discrimination. Women's political empowerment is intertwined with improved access to education, healthcare, and social services, leading to better overall societal development.

When we are trying to get to the core of gender-based discrimination, it is imperative to discuss the difference between the 'sex' and 'gender' dichotomy and their impact on women and society as a whole. Sex and gender, though related, refer to distinct aspects of identity and biology. Sex is assigned at birth based on physical characteristics and chromosomes. Sex is primarily a biological concept and is often considered binary, but sex is more accurately a spectrum considering the existence of intersex individuals. Gender refers to the social and cultural roles, behaviours, expectations, and identities associated with being male, female or non-binary. Gender identity is associated with a deep-held sense of being male, female, a blend of neither, or something else. Therefore, gender may or may not align with one's assigned sex at birth. Gender is a complex, multi-faceted concept influenced by society, culture, and personal experiences. Understanding the distinction between sex and gender is essential for promoting inclusivity and recognising that individuals' experiences of

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[4] (Marry Wollstonecraft, 2020)

gender may vary widely from traditional expectations associated with their assigned sex. Sex is relatively stable and remains unchanged over a person's lifetime, while gender identity can evolve and is influenced by personal exploration and societal factors. Preconceived notions about traditional gender roles can limit women's choices and opportunities. Stereotypes may assume that women are less capable in certain fields and should confine themselves within caregiving roles. Simone de Beauvoir, in her book *The Second Sex* (2011), explores women's lived experiences and the societal constructs that have historically oppressed them. In her book, De Beauvoir introduces the concept of "the Other", where women have historically been defined in relation to men rather than as autonomous individuals. She criticised how the role of motherhood has been used to confine women to domestic roles, and the physiological differences between men and women must not be used to justify unequal treatment or opportunities<sup>[1]</sup><sup>5]</sup>.

It is important that women, like men, must assert their freedom and define their own existence rather than accepting their prescribed roles. Gender equality and women empowerment are two sides of the same coin. Access to education, economic independence, and active political participation are three of the major resources that can lead to the empowerment of women. Training women to become effective politicians involves a multi-faceted approach that addresses various skills. Some of the steps include- providing workshops and seminars on political theory, governance structures, and the legislative process to build a clear understanding of politics. Conducting public speaking and media training to help women effectively communicate their ideas, encouraging women to engage with their communities actively, and understanding local issues and concerns. Mentorship networks and support groups can provide emotional and professional support to women. This way, we can create an inclusive and supportive political environment for women that values diversity and equal representation.

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<sup>5]</sup> (Simone De Beauvoir, 2011)

## VI. Conclusion:

Women's political empowerment is a matter of individual rights and a key driver of positive societal change. By recognising and addressing gender disparities in politics, we move closer to achieving a world where all voices are heard and individuals, regardless of their gender, can contribute to shaping the future of their communities and nations. Reservation in politics for women is a highly debated issue. If a certain percentage of seats are reserved for women, that may help to rectify historical gender imbalances, but critics argue that reservation may result in the selection of women based on their gender rather than qualifications, leading to token representation. Political parties may nominate women candidates just to meet the reservation requirements without supporting their campaigns, which can hinder their success. Exclusive focus on women's reservations may overlook other marginalised groups' representation, such as the LGBTQ+ community. Most importantly, reservation policies can be seen as a substitute for addressing deeper societal issues related to gender inequality, potentially slowing broader progress.

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