

Role of Social Work in Strengthening Women's Political Participation in Bihar: Study reference to West Champaran, East Champaran and Muzaffarpur

Abhishek

Ph.D. Research Scholar

Department of Social Work, Jamia Millia Islamia, Delhi

Abstract

Gender equality and democratic governance require women's political participation. The reservation of 50 percent for women in the Panchayati Raj Institutions has made women visible in Bihar but socio-cultural, economic, and institutional barriers remain in the way of women's meaningful participation in the political decision-making process. The present study focuses on the role of social work in strengthening political participation of women in West Champaran, East Champaran and Muzaffarpur districts of Bihar. The study follows the qualitative research design, semi-structured interviews and document analysis as data collection techniques and thematic analysis as a data analysis. The results show how important social work practices such as political awareness, leadership development, community mobilization, advocacy and capacity building are in building confidence, leadership and participation of women in local governance. The study concludes that the reservation has resulted in better political representation for women in Bihar, but the social work effort and support from NGOs, SHG, government etc. is important to achieve political empowerment and to develop grassroots democracy in Bihar.



Keywords: *Women's Political Participation, Social Work, Bihar, Panchayati Raj Institutions, Women's Empowerment, Local Governance.*

Introduction

Political participation is an integral part of democratic governance, which gives citizens the chance to participate in the decision-making process and influence governance. Women's engagement in politics has been shown to be a good indicator of gender equality, inclusive governance and sustainable development. Although the Constitution provides for equal opportunities for women and several policy measures have been implemented, women remain highly marginalized in India's political arena due to the practice of patriarchy in society, access to education and economic resources, political violence, and the lack of institutional support. Women's participation and leadership in political processes and decision-making is particularly witnessed in certain rural areas where socio-cultural barriers limit women participation in politics.

In Bihar, there have been significant efforts to improve women's representation in the political sphere, with the introduction of the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) scheme of 50 percent reservation for women. The policy has considerably enhanced women's numerical representation in local governance, allowing thousands of women to sit on elected office. Just having more reps does not necessarily translate to more participation or decision-making authority. A number of the women representatives elected are still having problems such as proxy leadership, limited awareness of the political matters, lack of leadership skills, mobility and awareness of governance and public administration. Therefore, for the role of women in politics to be strengthened, there is need for continuous and sustained social, institutional and capacity development efforts which go beyond electoral reservation.

Social work is an important part of the values of social justice, gender equality, community empowerment and democratic participation. Social workers engage with communities in order to organize, advocate, build capacity, develop leadership and raise awareness on women's rights for their active engagement in political and governance processes. Social workers collaborate with different agencies, NGOs, SHGs and CBOs and support their efforts to boost women's confidence and empower their capacities in political participation, such as leadership,



awareness of law and capacity in decision making. These interventions help to strengthen democratic institutions and lead towards inclusive and participatory governance.

The present study is restricted to three different socio-economic and political background districts of West Champaran, East Champaran and Muzaffarpur in Bihar. Due to the implementation of reservation policies, more women have been seen at the local governance level in these districts and social welfare programmes, SHGs and civil society organisations are also actively involved. Such an analysis of these districts could provide some enlightenment to the effects of social work interventions on the political consciousness of women, political leadership by women, representation of women in the Panchayat Raj Institutions and the decision-making process of the community.

The study aims to explore the current status of women's political participation, the reasons behind their political non-participation, the role of social work interventions in empowering the political participation and recommendations for policy and practice to strengthen the political empowerment of women in Bihar. The results will inform the areas of social work, gender studies, political science and public policy with evidence-based information and insights on how to facilitate inclusive governance and strengthen women's leadership at the grassroots.

Review of Literature

Political participation among women has grown into a major field of study in the areas of political science, gender studies and social work. There is available literature indicating that although there has been an improvement in the representation of women in political institutions in terms of numbers, their meaningful involvement in political institutions is still constrained by socio-cultural, economic and institutional factors.

Nussbaum (2000) Women and human development: The capabilities approach suggests that empowerment goes beyond political rights to the areas of education, agency, leadership and public life. Her focus is on the need to foster individual capacities through social institutions that enable them to participate in politics.



Agarwal (2001) Participatory exclusions, community forestry, and gender: An analysis for South Asia and a conceptual framework note that the lack of resources, patriarchal power dynamics, and decision-making authority are factors that can affect women's participation in local governance. The study shows that in addition to institutional representation, substantive political empowerment must be guaranteed through a broader social and economic context.

Cornwall and Goetz (2005) Democratizing democracy: Feminist perspectives posit that the more women are in the political institutions the more gender sensitive the governance becomes is not a given. They highlight the need for capacity building, leadership development and institutional support to allow women representatives to have independent powers and influence on public policy.

Research on the impact of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act shows that the reservation has led to a significant rise in women's representation in the Panchayati Raj Institutions in India. But some elected women representatives still experience difficulties like proxy representation, lack of training, limited political skill and opposition from the traditional power structures as reported by researchers like Datta and Sen (2019).

UN Women (2021) Women's full and effective participation and decision-making in public life found that community mobilization, leadership training, legal awareness, and collective action can positively impact women's confidence and involvement in community governance. The report singles out the role of Self-Help Groups (SHGs), civil society organizations and grassroot institutions as key portals to strengthen women's political leadership.

Midgley (2014) Social development: Theory and practice points to the roles of community organization, advocacy, empowerment, and participatory development as key elements of fostering democratic involvement for the "marginalized. Social workers act as information facilitators, build capacity of community leaders and help women to effectively access governance institutions.

The implementation of the “50 percent reservation” policy for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) has shown significant impact on representation of women in local governance in Bihar. Empirical data, however, indicates that many women representatives still suffer drawbacks like low literacy, socio-cultural limitations and financial dependence, which



impact their autonomy in decision making, among other issues. Past studies also show that, in certain districts of Bihar, Self Help Groups, government capacity building programmes and non-governmental organizations have helped to enhance women's political consciousness and leadership abilities.

While there has been a lot of research in the field of women's political representation and the effect of reservation policy, fewer studies have specifically focused on social work interventions strengthening women's participation in political process in Bihar. Furthermore, there is limited empirical study that comparatively analyses the roles of NGOs, SHGs, CBOs and social workers in enabling women political leadership in districts like West Champaran, East Champaran, Muzaffarpur. The current research aims to fill in this void by exploring the impact of social work interventions on women's political participation and leadership at the grassroot level and by offering recommendations for improving democratic governance that is inclusive.

Objectives of the Study

To review the status and level of involvement of women in political arena in Bihar.

To understand the socio-cultural, economic and institutional factors affecting women's political engagement in Bihar.

To understand the part of social work interventions such as NGOs, Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and community organisations in raising the awareness of women and their political leadership and participation.

To suggest the strategies and policy recommendations for enhancing women's political participation and leadership in Bihar from the social work perspective.

Research Methodology

Research Design

The study used qualitative descriptive research design to know the role of social work to deepen political participation of women in Bihar. A qualitative method was deemed suitable to provide



in-depth insight into women's experiences, perceptions, difficulties and impact of social work interventions on women's political participation.

Study Area

The study was carried out in Bihar in the districts of West Champaran, East Champaran and Muzaffarpur. The selected districts were purposively chosen because of the variety of socio-political contexts, involvement of active Panchayati Raj Institutions and government programmes as well as non-governmental organizations in the field of women empowerment and community development.

Research Approach

A qualitative research approach was used to have in-depth information about women's political participation and role of SW interventions. The methodology allowed the researcher to uncover participants lived experience, views and the socio-cultural contexts that shape their political participation.

Participants

The participants included:

Elected as women representatives in Panchayati Raj Institutions.

- Women members of Self-Help Groups (SHGs).

Social workers and those from non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

- Government officials from Panchayati Raj Institutions and women empowerment programmes.

Participants were chosen because of their direct involvement in or experience with women's political participation and/or community development efforts.

Sampling Technique

The purposive sampling technique was used to select participants who have information-rich characteristics, and who can provide meaningful information to the research problem. Sample



size was based on the concept of data saturation where data collection was continued until themes and information became saturated.

Sources of Data

Primary and secondary data sources were used to develop the study.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews with elected women representatives, social workers, NGO staff and government officials were conducted to gather primary data.

Secondary data were gathered from books, peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports, policy documents, official publications and available national and international literature on women's political participation in social work.

Data Collection Methods

The following data were gathered with the help of:

- Semi-structured interviews
- Key informant interviews

Reporting and documentation of analysis of government reports, policy documents and published literature.

Observations in the field

The semi-structured interview method enabled the participants to express their opinions in their own way and with the topics being kept within the framework of the study goals.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the collected qualitative data. The transcripts of interviews were scrutinized, coded and tabulated in the meaningful themes and sub-themes. These themes were then expanded by considering the study objectives and literature to understand the role of social work towards empowering women in political participation in Bihar.

The extent to which the study was accepted as reliable. Reliability of the Study.



In order to provide trustworthiness of the results, the study adhered to the principles of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Triangulation of interview data with documentary evidence combined with extended interaction with participants helped to enhance credibility. The research process was documented in detail, which contributed to dependability, and an audit trail and reflective notes helped to strengthen confirmability.

Ethical Considerations

All three ethical principles were respected during this study. Prior to data collection informed consent was obtained from all participants. The participation was voluntary, and confidentiality and anonymity of the respondents were assured. The information gathered was only for academic research and the participants were told that they could drop out of the study at any time and without consequences.

Results and Analysis

The qualitative analysis showed that though women have been more represented as political leaders after the introduction of the 50 per cent reservation policy in Panchayat Raj Institutions, political participation remains affected due to several socio-cultural, economic, educational and institutional barriers. The results revealed social work interventions as a key factor in enhancing the leadership potentials, political awareness, confidence and decision-making power of women for better involvement in democratic governance.

This analysis shows that reservation policies have had a substantial impact on women's access to local governance. More and more women are running for elections and taking up the roles of Mukhiya, Ward Members and Panchayat Samiti members, respondents noted. This greater representation has helped to bring women into the fore of local political institutions and into community development and decision-making. Participants always indicated however that political representation does not necessarily mean effective participation. The newly elected women representatives were initially reluctant to speak in public, attend Gram Sabha meetings, communicate with government officials and know how to arrange administrative processes. These difficulties were more pronounced among those who had not had much education and had not much previous experience in public affairs. However, it was observed that over time, as women become involved in Panchayati Raj activities, their confidence, communication



skills and leadership became stronger, facilitating them to be more involved in governance and community development forums.

The research also found some factors that affect the political participation of women. One of the most prominent obstacles to women's autonomous political participation was patriarchy-based social norms. Women have less opportunity to devote adequate time to public affairs due to political influence of males and domestic duties and gender roles, many participants explained. Again, the economic dependence of women also limited their engagement, especially in electoral campaigns when economic resources influenced women's effective contestation of elections. Another important variable affecting political participation was found to be educational level. The more educated women felt more confident about understanding government policies, engaging in public discourse and making independent decisions. Respondents, on the other hand, reported that low literacy levels hindered women's access to administrative processes and government programmes. Some participants also cited poor mobility, lack of political consciousness and lack of information, and gender-based discrimination as ongoing issues for women's involvement in local governance. However, these constraints, family support, community encouragement and involvement in Self-Help Groups had a positive impact on women's confidence and desire to participate in politics.

The study reveals that the role of social work is one of the most significant factors in enhancing women's political participation in a transformative manner. The participants in all categories consistently identified social work as an important tool for enhancing women's political empowerment. Social workers were identified to be instrumental in mobilizing communities, delivering political education, leadership development, legal awareness, and advocacy; supporting women to be more empowered in democratic processes, through community mobilization, linkage and collaboration with institutions. Social workers reached out to women, raising awareness about their rights as enshrined in the constitution, showcasing the Panchayati Raj Institutions, the electoral process, and government welfare programmes, and promoting their capacity-building through awareness campaigns, community meetings, training programmes, and workshops. Such interventions helped in improving the participation of women in Gram Sabha meetings, helped them to speak up confidently, to keep a check on the



local development programmes and to contribute in the decision-making process of the community.

Leadership development was one of the strengths of the social work practice. The creators of the training programmes, from both social workers and NGOs and the government, highlighted the significant boost in the confidence of women in public speaking, in preparing development proposals, in running local programmes, and in dealing with administrative officials. These programmes also empowered women by enhancing their negotiation, conflict resolution and governance process skills. This led to the gradual change of many women representatives from symbolic political involvement to real leadership in Panchayati Raj Institutions.

The study also underscores the fact that Self-Help Groups (SHGs) are equally important as political empowerment forum. The social workers actively engaged with the SHGs to promote women's collective involvement in the community development process. SHG meetings drove women to talk about social issues, share their experiences, build leadership skills and get an introduction to governance processes. The participants noted that more women who actively involved in SHGs contest in local elections, attend Gram Sabha meetings, and confidently involved in public decision making. Not only did the SHGs help to empower their members economically, but they also served as vital platforms for political awareness, social mobilization, and the establishment of community leadership.

Advocacy and rights-based work were also important aspects of social workers' work. Social workers have been mentioned by respondents as often assisting women in accessing government welfare schemes, in understanding legal provisions concerning gender equality and in solving discrimination and social exclusion issues. Social workers served as mediators between communities and government bodies, improving women's ability to access public services and holding public officials accountable and transparent. Participants also underscored the importance of ongoing mentoring following elections over training programmes which occurred on a one-off basis. The newly elected representatives of the women were often found to need continuous support in financial management, development planning, implementation of government schemes, keeping of the record books, and co-ordinating with government departments. Social workers were found to be very helpful mentors, which helped the women representatives to carry out their duties effectively and independently.



The results also show that when there is effective cooperation between the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), government departments, NGOs, educational institutions, and community-based organizations, it boosts women's political engagement. Institutionalisation of regular leadership development programmes, political education campaigns, legal literacy initiatives, governance training and institutional mentoring to enhance long-term political involvement of women were recommended. Respondents also suggested that the role of social workers should be extended such that they participate in the community and assist Elected Women Representatives, enhance the strength of SHTGs, and inculcate democratic values at grassroots level. It was also agreed that greater participation of male family members, leaders and political parties in the gender sensitization programmes is imperative to reduce resistance from the male side and creating conducive environment for women leadership.

In sum, the results showed that constitutional reservation has proven to be effective in raising the share of women in local governance, but sustainable political empowerment calls for a sustained process of social support, institutional development, and social work interventions. Social work also plays an important role in raising political awareness and enhancing women's confidence, leadership, decision-making power, civic participation and voice. Social work is a catalyst for women's political empowerment and inclusive governance which is achieved through community organisation, advocacy, leadership development, rights-based education and institutional networking. Thus, it is concluded that professional social work can effectively contribute to women's political empowerment programmes in order to enhance the grass root democracy, gender responsive governance and women's leadership in Bihar. Finally, policy efforts in the future should include social workers as a stakeholder in the quest for increased women's political participation and ensure that women representatives elected to office can effectively participate in local governance and sustainable community development, thereby exercising their constitutional rights.

Conclusion

The study of the present work focused on the contribution of social work to empower the political participation of women in Bihar districts, especially the districts of West Champaran, East Champaran and Muzaffarpur. The results have shown that while the provisions of the Constitution and the 50 percent reservation in the Panchayati Raj Institutions have resulted in



a significant increase in political representation of women, their meaningful participation in democratic governance remains influenced by socio-cultural, economic, education and institutional factors. Reservation has provided women with opportunities to access political institutions, but for them to participate effectively, continuous capacity building, leadership development, institutional support and an enabling social environment is needed.

It reveals the potential of social work to contribute to a broader understanding of women's political empowerment, as well as to formal political representation. Social workers are important in improving women's confidence and political knowledge and skills as they build their capacity through community organisation, political education, leadership training, advocating on their behalf, raising awareness of women's rights and capacity building programmes. These interventions allow women the opportunity to vote, as well as actively participate in governance, public debate, policy development and community development.

The results also show that the contributions, roles and effectiveness of NGOs and SHGs in enhancing women's political participation are complementary. NGOs are used for political awareness, governance training, legal literacy, and institutional networking whereas SHGs are used as a grassroots platform to facilitate collective learning, building of youth leadership and mobilisation of communities. The multi-sectoral initiatives of social workers, NGOs, Government and Panchayati Raj Institutions ensures an enabling environment for women's effective exercise of political rights and increased confidence in local governance.

While all these positive trends are welcome, there are still a number of areas that limit women's substantive political participation. There are still a number of restrictions on women's autonomous political leadership, such as patriarchal social norms, low level of education, economic dependability, lack of political consciousness, limited mobility, and limited institutional support. These structural problems will need consistent interventions through social development, gender equality, participation of the community and democratic governance.

Hence the study calls for a better understanding that augmenting women's political participation will not be possible through constitutional reservation or electoral reforms alone. The need for sustainable political empowerment implies that there is a need for continuous



social work interventions to build the capacities, leadership and participation of women in political processes, as well as change the attitude of the community towards women's leadership. Incorporation of professional social work to the governance and political empowerment programmes can play a significant role in enhancing grassroots democracy, inclusive decision making and gender responsive governance in Bihar.

Policy Implications

The study suggests the institutional systems that can encourage women's political leadership should be strengthened by conducting regular leadership development programmes, training in governance, political education and legal literacy. Increasing inter-departmental cooperation, strengthening the cooperation with the Panchayat Raj Institutions, the NGOs, the schools and social work groups should be encouraged to provide continuous mentoring and technical assistance to the elected women representatives. To further strengthen women's role in democratic processes, a greater role for Self-Help Groups as platforms for civic engagement and leadership development can be achieved. Furthermore, gender sensitization training with families, community leaders and political parties is crucial to lessen patriarchal barriers and create an environment that is conducive to the political empowerment of women.

To conclude, “women's political participation” is not simply about their electoral representation but it is also a key aspect of social justice, democratic governance and sustainable development. Social work, focused on empowerment, participation, human rights and social transformation, is well placed to enhance women's political agency. Social work plays a significant role in bridging the gap between communities, civil society and governance institutions and thus helps to build a more inclusive, participatory and equitable democratic society in Bihar.

References

- Agarwal, B. (2001). Participatory exclusions, community forestry, and gender: An analysis for South Asia and a conceptual framework. *World Development*, 29(10), 1623–1648.
- Cornwall, A., & Goetz, A. M. (2005). Democratizing democracy: Feminist perspectives. *Democratization*, 12(5), 783–800.



- Datta, P., & Sen, P. (2019). *Women in Panchayati Raj Institutions: Issues and challenges*. Rawat Publications.
- Midgley, J. (2014). *Social development: Theory and practice*. Sage Publications.
- Nussbaum, M. C. (2000). *Women and human development: The capabilities approach*. Cambridge University Press.
- UN Women. (2021). *Women's full and effective participation and decision-making in public life*. United Nations. <https://www.unwomen.org/>

