



WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: A STUDY OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN SURAT

*Sharmistha Chakraborty

Research Scholar, Department of Public Administration,
Veer Narmad South Gujarat University, Surat, Gujarat

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*Corresponding author:

ABSTRACT

The paper attempts to analyze the status of women empowerment and women political participation in Surat urban area. In present times, empowerment of women has become one of the most important concerns of 21st century because of their right to participate in political processes which also impact their family and in turn the society. Countries are making attempt to increase women's political participation and leadership in civil society and now political parties want more women to join in political activities. Women around the world are still largely absent from national and local-decision making bodies. Globally about 20% women participate in political activities, for women it is very difficult to participate in the civic and political life of their countries due to lack of support and gender discrimination. Strengthening women's rights and addressing barriers to political participation are critical to achieving gender equality and women empowerment.

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INTRODUCTION

Empowerment refers to increasing the economic, political, social, educational, gender, spiritual strength of an entity. The subject of empowerment of women has becoming a burning issue all over the world including India since the last few decades. Inequalities between men and women and discrimination against women have also been age-old issue all over the world. Empowerment focuses on mobilizing the self help of the poor and needy. If we look back to our society we can observe very few women took active participation in local politics due to the limitations of being a woman in a patriarchal society. Women did not raise their voice in the family and found it difficult to speak with courage in front of their male colleagues. It is mentioned that though women are very much active in their house hold job but they have a negligible involvement in the decision-making process in the local politics on account of their low socio-economic status.

The participation of women in the nation's politics was very low before the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment act. These acts are landmark legislations for women in the history of local government. Since the enactment of the law, a number of rural and urban women have willingly or unwillingly entered local bodies. Local bodies are at the entry level of political participation where women can enter political activities as the cost of election campaigns are very low and it provides an opportunity for the women to participate in political activities, with some help and support from their families and friends.

Why need for women empowerment

Indian tradition has provided a prominent position for women in society. This process started at the Neolithic period. At this stage women were found to contribute maximum benefits in the development of human society. Their role was never neglected or was placed in inferior position.

This practice continued up to the Vedic period, when women were given enough education facility. Gradually the scenario started to change and women were not given basic education and other facilities that may empower them. The status of women in India particularly in rural areas is relatively low and hence, the issue of empowering women. Due to prevalent social customs majority of the female population in rural areas are not empowered and their contribution is under stated. This is mainly due to the fact that in agriculture and animal care women's contribution is quite substantial but not reflected in their economic earnings. Of the total workforce women constitute almost half of the population, perform nearly 2/3 of the work hours (both domestic and outside work), receive 1/10th of the world's income and own less than 1/100th the world property. The existing studies show that the women are relatively less healthy than men though they belong to same class. They constitute less than 1/17th of the administrators and managers in developing countries. Only 10% seats in world parliament and 6% in national cabinet are held by women and therefore for uplift of any society the women need to be empowered.

Ways to empower women

Women empowerments include some of the following:

- To provide for basic minimum needs like nutrition, health, sanitation, and housing.
- Changes in women's mobility and social interaction, control over decision making, labour pattern, education, employment and career development.
- Creating awareness about their rights.
- The society's attitudinal change.

Though the above four are not exhaustive, they represent a beginning towards empowerment.

Objectives of this paper is to examine how the concept of empowerment is directly related to social, political and economic factors, to find out how the women of Surat, both literate and illiterate, are aware of their powers, rights and duties and to evaluate whether women empowerment has helped to develop and advance in social, political and economic spheres and activities.

Hypotheses of the study

- Literate woman are more empowered than the illiterate women.
- Women from privilege sections are better empowered than the women of non-privilege group.
- Women are more empowered when they have economic independence.
- Empowered women participate in political activities.

Sources of Data

To refute or validate the hypotheses the researcher collected data through survey research. Primary data was collected through survey of literate, semi-literate and non-literate women in Surat. This was supplemented by secondary sources that include books, journals and web references. In all 360 respondents from the age group of 18 to 75 were administered structured questionnaire.

The sample was selected using stratified random sampling - stratified on the basis of education, income, social background, employment/vocation and geographical area. It was also observed that out of 360 respondents, 138 respondents did not state their social background and therefore they were put under the general category. Thus the total of 274 respondents in general category also include 138 respondents who did not state their social background and another 31 respondents were belonging to non-hindu religion.

Analysis

The following tables (Table 1 to Table 6) provide the background of the respondents:

Table 1: Age group of respondents

Age-group	Respondents	%
18-30	102	28
31-40	143	40
41-50	76	21
50-75	39	11

Table 2: Social background

Age-group	Gen	SC	ST	OBC
18-30	77	08	07	10
31-40	109	06	09	19
41-50	58	04	04	10
51-75	30	03	02	04
Total	274	21	22	43

Table 3: Marital status

Age-group	Married	Unmarried	Widow	Divorce
18-30	68	28	03	03
31-40	130	05	05	03
41-50	69	02	03	02
51-75	22	01	14	02
Total	289	36	25	10

Table 4: Education Background

Age-group	Illiterate	Up to 5 th	Up to 10 th	Graduate	Post Graduate/PhD	Other
18-30	06	14	52	26	02	02
31-40	08	11	86	34	01	03
41-50	08	25	26	16	-	01
50-75	15	14	05	05	-	02
Total	37	64	169	79	03	08

Table 5: Economic Background

Age-group	<5000	5000-10000	10000-20000	Above 20000	Others
18-30	58	22	19	02	11
31-40	61	29	24	05	25
41-50	22	08	05	04	26
50-75	11	04	04	02	18
Total	152	63	52	13	80

Table 5.1: Privileged and Non-privileged economic background groups

Income level	Privileged	Non-privileged	Marginal
less than 5000	Nil	152	Nil
5000 to 10000	Nil	Nil	63
10000 and above	65	Nil	Nil

In this case, the researcher classified the privileged and the non-privileged group on the basis of educational and economic background – that is those whose income is above 10000 and whose educational background is 10th standard pass and above as privileged and the rest as non-privileged group.

Table 5.2: Privileged and non-privileged groups – On the basis of economic and educational background

Privileged group (income >10000 and education 10 th Standard pass and above)	Non-privileged group (income <10000 and education below 10 th Std)	Others
63	217	80

Table 6: Area-wise distribution of respondents

Age-group	Adajan	City light	Godadra/ Parvat	Limbayat	Vesu
18-30	13	13	34	28	14
31-40	27	21	63	17	15
41-50	09	20	26	12	09
50-75	04	06	17	08	04
Total	53	60	140	65	42

It can be observed from the above tables that the 360 respondents represent different age-group, coming from varied socio, economic and educational backgrounds and the sample has been drawn from different areas of Surat City, adequately reflecting the demographic profile of the city.

Table 7: Empowerment

	Respondents	%
Employment	76	21
Independence & Freedom	55	15
Decision making in family & workplace	182	51
To do anything	47	13

To the question on what empowerment means to the respondents, the responses are as shown in Table 7. Women consider decision-making in both family and workplace as a primary feature of empowerment.

Table 8: Factors contributing to empowerment

	Respondents	%
Education	109	30
Work Experience in any field	57	16
Both of combination is literacy	172	48
None of these	22	06

To another question on what makes women empower, majority of the respondents stated that both education and work experience (i.e., employment) empower them.

Table 9: Different ways to empower the women

	Respondents	%
By giving training	191	53
Skill training	45	12
Vocational training	39	11
Personalized training	85	24

From Table 9 it is observed that respondents view training as a primary reason that help empowerment of women.

Table 10: Views about the independence of empowered women

	Response	%
a.Yes	202	56%
b.No	111	31%
c.Some	47	13%

Table 10 is the response of women to the query whether empowered women are independent and free in making decisions. While 56% of respondents say in affirmative, the rest do not agree and have stated that through education and employment ideally help empower women, in reality it is not. It can be inferred from the above tables (Table 7 to Table 10) that education and employment help empower women and it provides them independence and freedom to decide, both at home and workplace. However, it is also a social reality that empowerment through education and employment alone does not guarantee freedom and independence. It is therefore a reflection of social attitude rooted in patriarchal society.

Table 11: Literacy level in relation to social status

Figures in brackets shows % in respective category

Literacy level	SC	ST	OBC	Gen	Total
Illiterate	8(38)	8(36)	6(14)	15(5)	37(10)
Upto 5 th Standard	5(24)	5(23)	4(9)	50(18)	64(18)
Upto 10 th Standard	6(28)	4(18)	11(26)	148(54)	169(47)
Upto Graduation	1(5)	3(14)	18(42)	57(21)	79(22)
Post Graduate/ Ph.D	Nil	Nil	1(2)	2(1)	3(1)
Others	1(5)	2(9)	3(7)	2(1)	8(2)
Total	21(100)	22(100)	43(100)	274(100)	360(100)

Table 12: Economic background in relation to social status

Figures in brackets shows % in respective category

Income	SC	ST	OBC	Gen	Total
Less than 5000	09 (43)	11(50)	12(28)	120(44)	152(42)
5000-10000	07(33)	05(23)	13(30)	45(17)	63(18)
10000-20000	01 (05)	02(09)	07(16)	36(13)	52(14)
above 20000	nil	nil	05(12)	07(02)	13(4)
Nil income – Students/Unemployed Housewives and others	04(19)	04(18)	06(14)	66 (24)	80(22)
Total	21(100)	22(100)	43(100)	274(100)	360(100)

Tables 11 and 12 depict the correlation between social status on one hand and literacy level as well as economic background on the other of women respondents. It is observed that the percentage of illiteracy is high in case of SC/ST categories and low in case of OBC and General categories. This reflects lack of awareness and opportunities among the SC/ST categories. The education level among OBC and general categories of respondents is shows a relative higher percentage. This helps to infer that awareness and opportunities regarding education have not percolated to the SC and ST categories of respondents.

However the correlation between social status and economic background among different categories of respondents show negligible variation. This may be due to the fact that economic opportunities are available for varied type of unskilled, semi-skilled and skilled labour, both in the formal as well as the informal sectors. Table 5.1 shows the privileged, non-privileged and marginal respondents in terms of their economic background. Those whose income level is below 5000 are considered as non-privileged because their economic earnings are essential to fulfil the basic life needs of their families. Those in the marginal category (income level between 5000 to 10000) earn to complement their family income for better economic benefits and those who are categorized as privileged group work and earn not to fulfil their basic needs but to show their independence, reflecting they are educationally and economically empowered.

Political participation

Political participation includes participating in such social and political activities that can influence others through persuasion, through awareness programmes and of course by being members of political outfits like political parties and their related organisations. Women being elected representatives in urban or rural local bodies are one of the factors in political participation. The issues relating to women empowerment and political participation are varied and many and is not confined to having one-third elected representation in local bodies like panchayats or municipal authorities. Some of the issues to enable women to actively participate include the nature of participation, relative financial independence, support systems, awareness and literacy, role of NGOs, perception about political empowerment, and above all accessibility to the political processes. The survey, through the questionnaire, was intended to find out the issues and problems of women empowerment in political process and the analysis that follows indicate the respondents' perception about the nature and scope of political participation and the challenges they face in the process.

Table 13: Is there a need for financial independence for political activity?

	Respondents	%
Yes	173	48
No	89	25
May be	98	27

From the above table shows 48% respondents have said that financially independent women can undertake political activity, 25% believe that there is no need for women to be financially independent for political activity, 27% respondents were unsure.

Table 14: Do empowered women actively participate in political activity/process?

	Respondents	%
Yes	120	33
No	166	46
May be	74	21

From the above table the view of respondents seems to be divided on the issue of empowered women's active participation in political activity.

Table 15. Perception about women belonging to minorities group or backward classes actively participating in political activities

	Respondents	%
Yes	86	24
No	227	63
May be	47	13

The above table does not clearly indicate as to whether women belonging to minorities group or backward classes indulge more in political activities.

Table 16: Literacy and political activity

	Respondents	%
Yes	108	30
No	146	41
May be	106	29

From the above table it is clear that the respondents opine that literacy is not an important factor to participate in political activities. This confirms a general perception that an individual need not be educated or even literate to be in politics.

Table 17: Is participating in active politics a choice of empowerment for non-privilege group?

	Respondents	%
Yes	180	50
No	146	41
May be	34	09

From the above table it is evident that equal number of respondents feels that for non-privilege group political activity is a choice for empowerment.

Table 18: Perception about women's awareness of political empowerment

	Respondents	%
Yes	175	49
No	128	36
No opinion	57	15

From the above table shows 49% respondents feel women should be aware of political empowerment, 36% respondents feel that there is no need to make women aware of political empowerment and 15% respondents have no opinion.

Table 19: Are empowered women generally successful in political activity?

	Respondents	%
Yes	225	62
No	83	23
May be	52	15

The above table shows that majority of respondents are of the view that empowered women are generally successful in political activity.

Table 20: Forms of women's involvement in political activity

	Respondents	%
Voting	300	83
Member of political party	25	07
Propaganda	15	04
Creating awareness about the party	20	06

The above table indicates the nature and form of women's involvement in political activity.

Table 21: Women and Party politics

	Respondents	%
As Corporator	4	01
As working member	21	06
No involvement with party politics	335	93

It is clear from the above table that only 7 % of the respondents are involved with political parties, either as corporator or as a member.

Table 22: Women and NGOs

	Respondents	%
Yes	49	14
No	311	86

From the above table it is evident that only 14% respondents are connected with some NGO.

Table 23: Nature of NGOs with which the respondents are associated with

	Respondents	%
Social education	10	3
Legal function	10	3
Management function	20	6
Create political awareness in minorities & backward class women	09	2

The above table portrays the nature of NGOs the respondents are associated with. The above two tables (22 and 23) clearly indicate that majority of the respondents are not associated with political parties or NGOs, but are aware of various facets of women empowerment.

Table 24: Perception about the role of women party workers and their functions

	Respondents	%
Political consciousness	04	01
Knowledge of electoral politics	04	01
Participation in political party's functioning	16	04
Awareness of political party's ideology	16	04
No opinion	320	90

01% respondents think that political consciousness as well as knowledge of electoral procedure is the main function, 04% respondents think participating in political activities as well as awareness about political ideology of the party are main functions. It is observed that majority of the respondents have no opinion as they are not involved in any form of political activity.

Table 25: Need for "Reserved seats" for women in elected bodies

	Respondents	%
Yes	259	72
No	101	28

From the above table majority believe in reservation of seats for women in elected bodies.

Interpretation of the analysis

- 68% of the respondents are in the age group of below 40, that reflects the demographic profile of the women respondents. This is also largely in conformity with the demographic profile of women in Surat, where in nearly 65% are in the age group of below 45.
- As regard the distribution of the respondents on the social background factor, no conclusive inference can be drawn since 23% of respondents belong to SC/ST/OBC categories. Many respondents did not wish to state their social background and hence were included under the general category.
- In terms of educational background, 28% of respondents can be considered as illiterate or having very poor literacy since they have studied only up to 5th standard.
- The researcher classified the privileged and the non-privileged group on the basis of educational and economic background – that is those whose income is above 10000

and whose educational background is 10th standard pass and above as privileged and the rest as non-privileged group. Nearly 60% respondents belong to the non-privileged group, which again is similar to the universe (of the study).

- The sample selected from different areas of the Surat city is almost similar to the population density of the city.
- It is observed that the percentage of illiteracy is high in case of SC/ST categories and low in case of OBC and General categories. This reflects lack of awareness and opportunities among the SC/ST categories. The education level among OBC and general categories of respondents is shows a relative higher percentage. This helps to infer that awareness and opportunities regarding education have not percolated to the SC and ST categories of respondents.
- However the correlation between social status and economic background among different categories of respondents show negligible variation. This may be due to the fact that economic opportunities are available for varied type of unskilled, semi-skilled and skilled labour, both in the formal as well as the informal sectors.
- Respondents in the marginal category (income level between 5000 to 10000) earn to complement their family income for better economic benefits and those who are categorized as privileged group work and earn not to fulfil their basic needs but to show their independence, reflecting they are educationally and economically empowered.
- Majority of the respondents consider empowerment as the right to take decisions, both in family and at workplace. This indicates the assertiveness as an attribute of empowerment among the respondents.
- Education, work experience and formal training are identified as some of the ways to be empowered. The fact that only a small percentage of respondents believed that empowerment has nothing to do with the three aspects (i.e. education, experience and training) indicates that empowerment of women need to focus on these three core areas.

If social and economic empowerment serves as a base for women empowerment, the responses to political empowerment reveals that respondents have serious limitations on the issue of political activity and empowerment.

- 48% of respondents feel that financial independence is needed for undertaking political activity, though majority of respondents do not participate in political activities. Majority of respondents feel that social work, performed through NGOs or similar such agencies, also constitute political activity.
- Women belonging to Backward classes and minorities do not actively take part in politics and there is a strong perception that literacy has very little to do with politics. This also reflects the perception of the respondents about the contemporary political actors and activities.
- The responses also indicate awareness about political empowerment is substantially high among the respondents, that non-privileged women need to actively participate in the political process to get empowered, and the view that political empowerment is a process in social and political development of women.

- Though they perceive that empowered women can be successful in political activity, majority of them shy away from party politics and their active political participation is restricted to voting in elections.
- Respondents think that political consciousness, the knowledge of electoral process as well as awareness about political ideology of the party is the main political functions. It is found that majority of respondents have no opinion regarding this matter as they are not involved in any form of political activity.
- It is noticeable that on the matter of distribution of the reserved seats, 72% respondents show their positive answer. 28% respondents did not think the reservation of seats for women is needed in elected bodies.
- Only 14% of respondents are involved with some NGOs and similar agencies reflecting the restriction the society imposes on them.
- The researcher also observed that major hindrances to active political participation come from the family itself and also due to preoccupation with domestic chores.
- The foregoing analysis of the responses validates some of the assumptions earlier put forward as hypotheses but also negates other hypotheses.

Conclusion

The concept of empowerment is related to and dependent on social, economic and political factors. The study validates and negates many common perceptions about women empowerment.

Women who are literate and who belong to the privileged group are empowered is only partially true, because of their low political participation and empowerment. It is also noted that political activities in present times require financial support is validated by the fact that the respondents consider financial independence and economic prosperity as an important factor in political empowerment.

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