

Barriers to Political Participation of Women: A Case Study of Punjab, India

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Abstract

Political engagement of women is an issue of global concern. Women are underrepresented in national and state legislature around the world. Despite the constitutional provisions, women in India are still marginalized in the political arena. The involvement of women in the decision-making process is negligible compare to men. This study is focused on the Punjab state of India. Punjab is an economically developed state, in spite of that women are less involved in political activities due to the patriarchal setup of society. This research attempts to examine the political participation of women and the major barriers faced by women with special reference to Punjab. The data used in this research has been collected from newspapers, e-journal articles, authentic internet sources, websites, government reports, census of India and such others. The findings reveal that there is a significant increase in women voter turnout for the last few years in this state but the participation of women in other political activities is very low. Elected women candidates act as proxies of male members of their families. It has indicated the major barriers to women's political participation in this state such as psychological, socio-cultural and political to name a few. This paper concludes with suggestions for the enhancement in effective participation of women in the political arena in this region of India.

Keywords:women's political participation, barriers, Punjab, proxy candidates, patriarchal society.

1. Introduction

The success of the democratic system depends upon the extent of involvement of citizens in the political process. Political participation is a process of voluntary involvement in political activities. It is regarded as "those legal activities by citizens which are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel or the actions they take" (Verba & Nie, 1978). It is defined as "those voluntary activities by which members of a society share in the selection of rulers and directly or indirectly in the formation of public policy" (McClosky, H., 1968). Women constitute almost half of the population of India and therefore, the political engagement of women is very essential for their overall empowerment. It is not merely related to casting vote but also includes participation in political campaigning, discussions, communicating with representatives, contesting elections, donating money to the party, protesting, petitioning and other activities related to politics.

The constitution of India guarantees equal social, economic and political rights for women. Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles of state policy provide special provisions to secure

justice and dignity for women. Despite these provisions, women's representation in Parliament and State Legislature is marginal due to social, cultural and political challenges faced by women.

Punjab is an economically developed state of India but due to the patriarchal structure of society, politics is considered a man's game and masculine activity. Women are least interested in political activities. Implementation of the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments provided the reservation of not less than 33 percent seats in local bodies. This reservation has been enhanced to 50% by the Government of Punjab, despite that, women's involvement in the decision-making process is not satisfactory in this region of India. The low level of political representation of women of this state in the State Legislative Assembly and the National Legislature is an issue of major concern. This study attempt to analyze the major barriers to the political participation of women in the Punjab state of India.

2.Review of Related Studies

Khanduri, B. K., & Rawat, R. (2002) revealed that women are neglected social-economic and political spheres. There is a low level of political awareness and political participation in women of the Uttaranchal state of India. Only 30.9% of females are aware of the reservation of seats for females in panchayats and 5.45% of women have their connection with political parties. Overburden of household responsibilities, lack of education, lack of awareness and lack of independent status in the family are major reasons for the low participation of women in political activities.

Panda, S. (2002) in her book "Political Empowerment of Women" highlighted the inferior status of women in social, economic and political fields. There is a low level of women's participation in Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies. Due to the conservative mindset of Indian society women are still restricted to the domestic sphere. The economic dependence of women is also a major barrier to political participation. There is low participation of women in decision-making. Due to male dominance suggestions and opinions of elected female representatives are easily ignored.

Jharta, M. (2005) highlighted the political participation of women and factors responsible for their marginalized position in the political arena of Himachal Pradesh state of India. Representation of females in national and state legislature has been terribly low. There is a marginal involvement of women in the decision-making process. Political parties are reluctant to nominate female candidates due to the perception that women have less chances of winning the seats.

Thainikodi, A. & Sugirtha, M. (2007) in their research examined the status of women at international, national and regional levels. Women all over the world are underrepresented in Parliament and the decision-making process. They are facing social, political and cultural obstacles in political participation. The political career of women depends upon the political position of the family.

Makwana, R. (2009) investigated various problems faced by female sarpanches of Junagadh District of Gujarat, India. This study revealed the burden of household responsibility, lack of knowledge about the Panchayati Raj Act, patriarchal culture, lack of administration and political support are major obstacles faced by elected female representatives.

Kaur & Dindsa (2014) examined the political empowerment of women in the Panchayati Raj institution based on data collected from three districts of Punjab. This study revealed a lack of awareness in female sarpanches about the Panchayati Raj institution. The contribution of women in the decision-making process is not satisfactory. There is male dominance in rural politics. It highlighted that education, caste, experience and economic status of the family are some of the determinants of women's political participation.

Borooah, V. & Tagat, A. (2015) tries to assess the political participation of rural women in 18 Indian states. This study highlights most of married women cast their vote under influence of their husbands. Gender, age, marital status, education level, and occupation impacts the political participation of women. There was a gender disparity in males and females who participated in Gram Sabha discussions. Low education and economic status adversely affect women's political participation.

Kaur, A. (2019) in her study tries to explore the role of female legislators and various problems faced by them in their constituencies. This study revealed the orthodox mindset of Punjabi society creates a hurdle to the involvement of women in political activities. Lack of financial resources, the burden of domestic responsibility and lack of cooperation from administration and political parties are major obstacles to female political engagement in Punjab.

There is a large number of studies that were conducted on the political participation of women but there is a lack of systematic research to explore the major barriers to the political engagement of women in Punjab, India. To bridge this gap, the authors attempted to identify the major hurdles and challenges towards women's political participation in this state of India. Apart from this, it will also contribute to the existing literature in the field of political participation of women.

3.Objectives of the Study

- To examine the political participation of women in Punjab, India
- To explore the major barriers affecting women's political participation in this state
- To provide suggestions to increase the political participation of women in this region of India

4. Research Methodology

This study is exploratory research and is based upon data collected from secondary sources such as various newspapers, e-journal articles, authentic internet sources, websites, government reports, Census of India and Election Commission of India.

5. Political Participation of Women in Punjab:

Punjab is a northwestern state of India. Punjab is divided into 3 regions Mahja, Malwa and Doaba consisting of 23 districts. State Legislative Assembly is unicameral. It consists of 117 members elected from 117 single-seat constituencies. "Total population of Punjab is 27,743,338 consisting of 14,639,465 males and 13,103,873 females (Census of India 2011)". It is an economically developed state of India. Due to the patriarchal nature of the society of Punjab, females have an inferior status to men. Their involvement in the decision-making process is negligible due to male dominance (Hoque, A.,2020). Women's involvement in the political sphere is essential to make political

institutions more representative. To increase participation of women in politics the constitution of India implemented 73rd and 74th amendments and made provision of reservation of not less than 33 percent seats of women in local bodies. This reservation system has been enhanced to 50 percent by the Government of Punjab and since then it has increased significantly.

5.1. Performance of Women in Punjab State Legislative Assembly Elections since 1967

5.1.1. Performance of Women as Electors in Punjab

Table.1. Polling Percentage of Male and female Electors in Punjab State Assembly Elections

Year	Poll Percentage	
	Male Polling Percentage	Female Polling Percentage
1967	73.47	68.50
1969	74.54	69.61
1972	70.36	66.64
1977	66.82	63.65
1980	65.64	62.80
1985	68.20	66.72
1992	25.72	21.59
1997	69.51	67.84
2002	65.92	64.27
2007	75.36	75.47
2012	77.58	78.90
2017	75.88	77.90

Source: Compiled from statistical reports on General Elections to the Legislative Assembly of Punjab, Election Commission of India, New Delhi from 1967 to 2017 (<https://eci.gov.in>).

Table-1. indicates an increase in female voter turnout since the 1967 Punjab Legislative Assembly elections except for the 1992 Punjab Legislative Assembly elections. The polling percentage of women is almost equal to men. During the 2012 and 2017 Punjab Legislative Assembly elections, the polling percentage of women is higher than men.

5.1.2. Performance of Women as Representatives in Punjab State Legislative Assembly since 1967

In the Punjab Legislative Assembly representation of women is marginal as compared to men since 1967. In the 1969 Punjab Legislative Assembly election, there was not even a single female representative in the House. During the 2012 Punjab Legislative Assembly elections, 93 women contested and 14 out of them could manage to win which was the highest number ever constituting around 12% of the total strength of the House. During the 2017 State Legislative Assembly elections, out of 81 female contestants, only 6 won the election which was merely 5% of the total strength of the House. Figure 1. indicates women are underrepresented in Punjab Legislative Assembly.

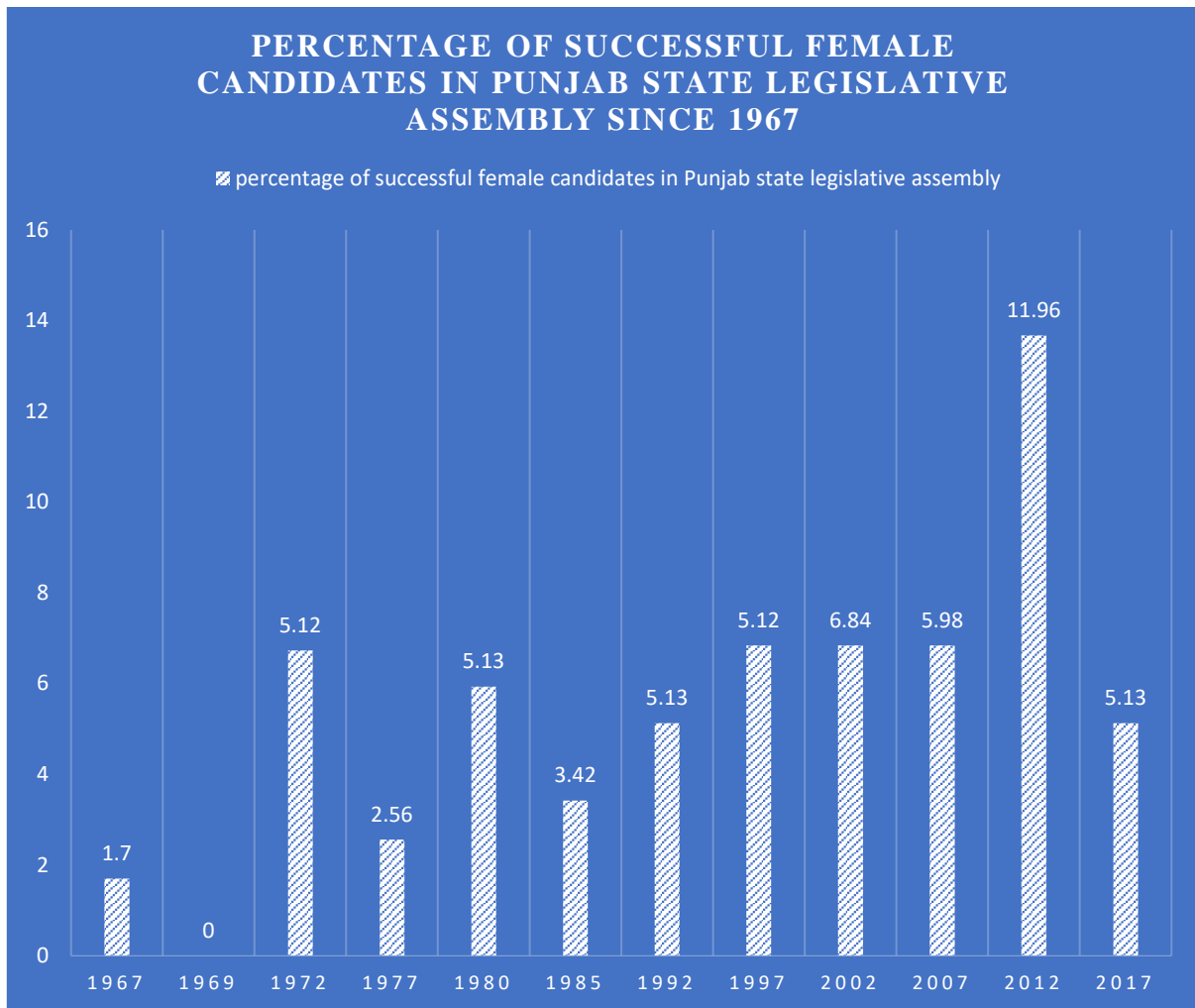


Figure 1. Source: Compiled from statistical reports on General Elections to Legislative Assembly of Punjab, Election Commission of India, New Delhi from 1967 to 2017. (<https://eci.gov.in>)

5.2. Representation of Women from Punjab in Lok Sabha Since 1967

Table 2. Performance of women from Punjab in Lok Sabha elections

Year	Total No. of Candidates	No. of Women Candidate	No. of Seats	No. of Successful Women Candidate
1967	75	3	13	2
1971	83	2	13	0
1977	79	1	13	0
1980	146	3	13	2
1984	74	5	13	1
1989	227	12	13	3
1992	81	4	13	2
1996	259	17	13	2
1998	102	9	13	1

1999	120	14	13	2
2004	132	10	13	2
2009	218	13	13	4
2014	253	20	13	1
2019	278	24	13	2

Source: Election Commission of India from 1967 to 2019 (<https://eci.gov.in>)

There are 13 Lok Sabha constituencies in Punjab. Table 2, indicates women's representation in Lok-Sabha from Punjab has also been quite low. The number of female winners is also insignificant. During the 2019 Lok Sabha election, 24 female contested elections out of which only two women contestants emerged successfully. (Election Commission of India)

This indicates of the representation of women from Punjab is not satisfactory in National as well as State legislature despite a significant increase in female voter turnout.

6. Major Barriers to Political Participation of Women in Punjab

Political participation is a complex phenomenon that depends upon different variables. Many factors could be responsible for the marginal political engagement of women. Some of these barriers to female political participation are given below:

6.1. Psychological Barriers

Due to the patriarchal setup of the society of Punjab, women are confined to the domestic sphere. Politics is considered a masculine activity game. Women have been socialized to believe that politics is a dirty game. Therefore, they don't prefer to associate themselves with politics. Lack of interest in politics is a major barrier to the political participation of women.

6.2. Social and Cultural Barriers

6.2.1 Gender Stereotypes

Due to the patriarchal structure of society, women in Punjab are still confined to the domestic sphere which discourages them to participate in politics. Their involvement in decision-making is marginal compare to men. Restricted physical mobilization of females hinders their participation in politics. Elected female members have to seek permission from male members of the family before performing their duties. Elected females do not get support from the male members of their party because politics is regarded as masculine activity and it is believed that females don't deserve leadership positions in the party.

6.2.2 Family Responsibilities

The burden of household responsibilities is a major barrier to the active involvement of women in politics. Females spend more time in household responsibility and child care than males. The female representative does not attend meetings of panchayats and municipal council due to household responsibilities. Women are not able to devote time to participate in political activities such as

campaigning and voting etc. due to the burden of domestic responsibilities. (Nsana, S., & Kabubi, M., 2017)

6.2.3 Lack of Resources

Women's access to economic resources impacts their participation in political activities. It is impossible to contest an election without economic resources. A huge amount of money is required in election campaigns. They do not receive financial support from political parties to contest elections. The success of a female candidate depends upon the financial status and political background of the family. Therefore, the scenario of Punjab shows that women who have participated and succeeded in the election have a huge amount of declared assets. Lack of control over financial resources is also a major hurdle in female participation in the political arena (Jyoti & DurgaRao, P., 2020).

6.2.4 Educational Level

The education level of females plays important role in political participation. The low educational level of female representatives and voters is a major barrier to effective participation in the political arena. Due to lack of education, women as elected representatives are unable to understand their responsibilities and functioning of Panchayati Raj institutions, Urban Bodies as well as State Legislature.

6.2.5 Caste

Political involvement of women belonging to lower caste is marginal as compared to upper caste. Reservation of seats increased political involvement of Dalit women (female of lower caste) of Punjab but their participation in the decision-making process is negligible due to low education level and lack of resources. Dalit female sarpanches (female representatives) are abused by people of higher caste (Kaur, G., & Kaur, V., 2019).

6.3 Political Barriers

6.3.1 Proxy Candidates

Due to reservation policy, the number of elected women representatives has been increasing rapidly. Due to male dominance in panchayats, elected female representatives are treated as "Puppets" in the hands of their male counterparts. Most of the female sarpanches remain silent listeners and they rarely take part in the discussions. The involvement of women sarpanches in the decision-making process, budget preparation, identification of beneficiaries etc. is negligible. The majority of women sarpanches do not attend meetings of the panchayat. They act as "Rubber Stamp" of male members of the family. Most of the panchayat functions including financial matters are also being performed by the husband of women sarpanches (Hoque, A., 2020; Singh, A., 2008).

6.3.2 Gender Disparities by Political Parties

There are gender disparities on the part of political parties while nominating candidates because political parties prefer to nominate male candidates. Political parties do not want to take risk of nominating women as candidates due to the patriarchal culture of the rural society of Punjab which

restricts women entry into the political arena. Due to male dominance in political parties and the low percentage of women in the party, they fail to get financial support for the development of their constituencies. Elected female representatives face the challenge of a lack of cooperation from party leadership and administration.

6.3.3 Lack of Political Awareness

There is a lack of awareness among female representatives about their political rights and their duties as a representative. Most rural women representatives do not know about the 73rd constitutional amendment, the Panchayati Raj Act and the functions of panchayat due to lack of political awareness and lack of education. The majority of females cast their votes under influence of male members of the family due to a lack of political awareness. Lack of experience and reluctant attitude of women to participate in political activities are also major barriers to women's participation in politics.

7.Recommendations

This study suggested that political parties should make efforts to nominate more female candidates to leadership positions. There is a dire need of changing the social attitude that prevents women's entry into political activities. There is a requirement to train female representatives about their rights and their role in local bodies so that they can perform their duties effectively. The presence of all elected women must be made compulsory in meetings of Gram Panchayat to Zilla Parishad. Media can play also a significant role in generating political awareness. Besides, there is also a requirement to guarantee the active participation of women in politics by economically empowering them

8.Discussion and Conclusion

The major objective of this research was to analyze the barriers to the political participation of women in Punjab. This study revealed that there is a significant increase in the voter turnout of female voters but their participation in the state legislature was low as compared to men. It has also indicated the marginal involvement of women in the decision-making process and it has highlighted the major psychological, social-cultural and political barriers such as gender stereotypes, low educational level, lack of resources, the problem of proxy candidates, gender disparities by political parties and others that are mainly responsible for the low political participation of women in Punjab, India.

The participation of women in the political sphere is essential for the development of a nation. This study revealed that women of Punjab are underrepresented in state and national legislative bodies. The number of women in local bodies has increased significantly after the implementation of the 73rd and 74th constitutional Amendment Acts, 1992 but their participation in decision making is not satisfactory. Due to male dominance, lack of education and awareness, these women act as "proxy candidates". There is an urgent requirement to train elected female representatives of local bodies about their rights and duties to ensure their involvement in the decision-making process. There is also a strong need to change the conservative mindset regarding the involvement of women in the political arena of Punjab, India.

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