Empowerment Of Rural Women Through Political Participation In Paschim Medinipur District, West Bengal, India

Sibsankar Mal, Department of Geography, S.S.M. College, Keshpur, Paschim Medinipur, West Bengal, India
Bikash Ghosh, Assistant Teacher, Haridih Jr. High School, Purulia, West Bengal, India
Prabhat Bhattacharya, Department of Geography, S.S.M. College, Keshpur, Paschim Medinipur, West Bengal, India

Abstract
Empowerment is instrumentally important for achieving positive development outcomes and well-being of life which lies in the doing and being what one value and have reason to value i.e. agency. It makes a strong claim for increasing the agency of the individual to enable them to be an effective agent of their own well-being and development. The concept of empowerment is very complex in itself indeed very fuzzy also. Women’s agency, autonomy and empowerment are widely used idea in development literature and capability approach. But there exists substantial ambiguity in conception of these ideas. While women’s well-being and women’s agency is sufficiently distinguished from each other, there seems to be a large overlap between agency and empowerment and between agency and autonomy. The present paper examines various conceptions of these ideas to clearly mark the overlapping zones and distinguishing features of respective concepts of Paschim Medinipur districts.

Keywords: Women, Empowerment, Well-Being, Paschim Medinipur District

Introduction
Others have found that on average women’s loan sizes are smaller than those of men, even when they are in the same credit program, the same community, and the same lending group. Some differences in loan sizes may be a result of women’s greater poverty or the limited capacity of women’s businesses to absorb capital. But they can also indicate broader social discrimination against women which limits the opportunities open to them, raising the question of whether microenterprise development programs should do more to address these issues. Their contributions whether setting the vision on a board of directors, designing products and services, or implementing programs are missing. Thus, as the industry becomes more sophisticated in developing targeted products and services, it makes sense to look at both targeting women and empowering women.

Women constitute slightly more than half of the world population. Their contribution to the social and economic development of societies is also more than half as compared to that of men by virtue of their dual roles in the productive and reproductive spheres. Yet their participation in formal political structures and processes, where decisions regarding the use of societal resources generated by both men and women are made, remains insignificant. Presently, women’s representation in legislatures around the world is 15 percent. Despite the pronounced commitment of the international community to gender equality and to the bridging the gender gap in the formal political arena, reinforced by the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform of Action, there are only twelve countries where women hold 33% or more seats in the parliaments (UNDP Report, 2005).

The concept of “empowerment” traces its history in the mid-17th century with the legalistic meaning “to invest with authority”. Thereafter, this concept was modernized to mean “to enable or permit”. After 1980s, the novel concept of measuring economic development through “human development” focusing on “political empowerment” linkage with feminist discourse went a long way in shaping the idea of “women’s empowerment”. During 1990s economists argued that “development if not engendered, is endangered” and the major component of the global society i.e. women are left outside the purview of the fruits of development and planning, we cannot achieve the desired goal of a “developed status” of an economy, whether it is developed or developing. The United Nations has shown concern for women empowerment evident in “Millennium Development Goals” to trace the progress of women empowerment across the world. Women’s empowerment in India is heavily dependent on many different variables that include geographical location (urban/rural), educational status, social status (caste and class), and age. Policies on women’s empowerment exist at the national, state, and local (Panchayat) levels in many sectors, including health, education, economic opportunities, gender-based violence, and political participation. However, there are significant gaps between policy advancements and actual practice at the community level. In addition to examining progress toward achieving gender equality and women’s empowerment, the report also examined gender differentials in selected health and nutritional outcomes and evaluated differences by sex in the relationship of women’s empowerment and experience of spousal violence with indicators of these selected health and nutrition outcomes. Finally, the variation in current use of modern contraception by indicators of women’s empow-
erment and experience of spousal violence was also explored.

The impact of the patriarchal structure can be seen in rural and urban India, although women’s empowerment in rural India is much less visible than in urban areas. This is of particular concern, since much of India is rural despite the high rate of urbanization and expansion of cities. Rural women, as opposed to women in urban settings, face inequality at much higher rates, and in all spheres of life. Urban women and, in particular, urban educated women enjoy relatively higher access to economic opportunities, health and education, and experience less domestic violence. Women (both urban and rural) who have some level of education have higher decision-making power in the household and the community. Furthermore, the level of women’s education also has a direct implication on maternal mortality rates, and nutrition and health indicators among children.

This paper discusses the goal of political empowerment and participation of womenfolk in the decision making process at all levels. By analyzing the implications and the practical aspects of these measures and the problems of women at domestic and societal level this paper also suggests the proposals to make the environment conducive for implementing revolutionary steps by the government with the help of civil society and NGOs along with due cooperation of the masses. Women’s political empowerment is not a goal in itself but it is instrumental in stimulating the society for political and social empowerment which would further stimulate the overall development and refinement in the society. The presence and participation of women in decision making process would enable them to revise the gender discriminatory policies and laws on one hand and would support equality based new laws and policies on the other.

**Objectives**

The main objectives of the study are as follows:

a) To identify the various process of economic participation of rural women of the district.

b) To study the degree of empowerment and types of political participations.

**Methodology**

The primary objective of this report was to assess progress in Paschim Medinipur district toward the twin goals of gender equality and women’s empowerment using data from the Census of India, 2001 and HDR, Paschim Medinipur District-2011. In general, the report finds that gender inequality is persistent in every domain examined, and women are disempowered both absolutely and relative to men. Further, an examination of indicators for which trend data are available shows that the progress toward gender equality and women’s empowerment remains very slow.

**Result And Discussion**

The forgoing discussion amply reveals that though the concepts of empowerment, agency and autonomy have been used interchangeably, in practice it is found that they can substantially diverge from each other and are may not reflect into the other. This divergence tells us that there is a need for identification of some cultural factors having bearing on empowerment and autonomy. There is a need to understand that the concepts of empowerment and autonomy are sufficiently different. As the data presented in the above tables exhibited, still a large part of women do not have sufficient autonomy regarding the value choices for their own life. The data also makes us to infer that there is a necessity to look beyond economic resources or material prosperity and into cultural and social influences, which are playing a significant role in shaping the women’s autonomy and agency. Again, it is also true that though not the women’s empowerment and autonomy have a link with women’s access to resources or material well-being, it is to be accepted that there is a variety of potential connections and there exists various forms of linkages among these variables. In Paschim Medinipur till October 31, 2009, 21,015 SHGs have been formed, which are exclusively women groups. Out of these 2, 10,150 members 70% are BPL. 1, 34,726 women have received micro credit and started small businesses. 1692 SHGs have received project loan for implementing bigger projects each amounting to Rs.1.50 lakh to Rs 2 lakh. Recovery of loan was achieved to the tune of 75 per cent during 2008-09. Apart from this 1720 SHGs have been formed in 637 backward villages of this district. Women SHGs are being imparted skill up gradation training on mat, floriculture, soft toy, book binding, catering, ornamental fish, mushroom, jute diversified items, tailoring, zori, batik, tie & dye, goatery, piggery, dairy, poultry, fishery, bamboo crafts, mechanized Sa leaf plate making, wool knitting etc. to augment their income. Present thrust in this district is on networking of women SHGs so that they can collect information of all SHGs, prepare plan of action, contact with the bank, Panchayat, Government & non-Government offices to utilize their services. Out of 3086 Gram Sansads (Village Constituencies), 1316 sub-clusters have been formed in many Gram Sansads. Leaders of these sub-clusters are exclusively women and mostly BPL. Again, 70 clusters of SHGs have been formed out of 290 GPs. Good clusters are getting a building of their own, managerial support of Rs.25000/, infrastructure support of Rs.250 lakh and seed capital of Rs.1.50 lakh to start business. Already 10,699 SHGs have been networked. Four Federations are functioning in 4 blocks, where most of the SHGs under a block have come under the federation. Each Federation has their
own building. Trainings, meetings and microenterprises are conducted in these Federation buildings. Federations are registered under Society Registration Act, 1961. They hold annual general meetings, get their accounts audited and monitor the performance of the SHGs under them.

Engagement of women in workforce is recognized as a positive indicator of development as well as women’s empowerment. In Paschim Medinipur district the work participation rate for women is very low compared to men. While the share of male workers in total male population is 55 per cent, that of female workers is only 26 per cent as per 2001 Census. In the district there is a substantial gap among men and women in respect of main workforce. The proportion of women is more in marginal workforce and in the household industry. The percentage of female non-workers to female population in 2001 was 73.67, which was much higher than the male counterpart. The percentage of female workers engaged in household industry was higher than that of males in 2001 while that of other female workers was lower (Table 1).

Table 1: Work Participation Rate by Sex in Paschim Medinipur District, 2001

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participation in work (%)</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Gender gap</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>55.18</td>
<td>26.33</td>
<td>28.85</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main Work force (%)</td>
<td>82.34</td>
<td>39.40</td>
<td>42.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marginal work force (%)</td>
<td>17.66</td>
<td>60.60</td>
<td>-42.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-worker (%)</td>
<td>44.82</td>
<td>73.67</td>
<td>-28.85</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participation in Non-Agricultural Works (%)</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Gender gap</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(a) Household Industry</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>16.88</td>
<td>-13.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) Other workers</td>
<td>32.09</td>
<td>16.53</td>
<td>15.56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Census of India 2001

Gender equality and gender equity have emerged as major challenges in the global development discourse. There can be no real progress if women of a country are not made partners in this process of development. Women’s participation in political processes is important for strengthening democracy and for their struggle against marginalization, trivialization and oppression. Emergence of women as a strong group would change the prevailing political practices too. The constitutional provision (73rd Amendment) has created a scope for accomplishing development with social justice. This constitutional amendment providing one-third representation to women in elected bodies as well as reserving one-third of the offices of chairpersons for them have far-reaching consequences in Indian political and social life. Though women representatives have some individual weakness like illiteracy and low level of education, family responsibilities, social perception etc., and this affirmative action has paved the way for emergence of an alternative leadership. In Paschim Medinipur district there are 1562 women representatives, representing at various levels of rural local government. Table 2 gives details accounts of women participation in PRIs. In the Gram Panchayat there are altogether 3309 seats where the women representatives are 1309. In the case of Panchayat Samitis, of total 750 representatives 229 are women and at Zilla Parishad level out of 62 representatives 24 are women.

Table 2: Participation of Women in PRI.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tier</th>
<th>Total Seat</th>
<th>Women representative</th>
<th>Male representative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gram Panchayat</td>
<td>3309</td>
<td>1309</td>
<td>2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panchayat Samiti</td>
<td>750</td>
<td>229</td>
<td>521</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zilla Parishad</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4121</td>
<td>1562</td>
<td>2559</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Census of India 2001
Conclusion

Gender equality and women’s empowerment are two sides of the same coin. Both have multiple dimensions that together yield a wide variety of indicators. The report provides information on progress in Paschim Medinipur toward the twin goals of gender equality and women’s empowerment; determinants of selected indicators of gender equality and women’s empowerment; and, associations of women’s empowerment with selected health and nutritional outcomes. It may be concluded that women have shifted traditional assumptions about their roles and capabilities. There has been a marked change, and it has been for the better. Many of its benefits however have yet to touch the majority and all of us continue to experience various forms of gender discrimination. If laws designed to address the concerns of women are to have a dramatic and positive impact on women’s lives, they must be sensitive to the social, economic and political disempowerment of women throughout the world. The most important measure of their success should be the extent to which they enable women to interpret, apply and enforce laws of their own making, incorporating their own voices, values and concerns.

The Empowerment of women has become one of the most important Concerns of 21st century not only at national level but also at the international level. Efforts by the Govt. are on to ensure Gender equality but Government initiatives alone would not be sufficient to achieve this goal. Society must take initiative to create a climate in which there is no gender discrimination and Women have full opportunities of Self decision making and participating in the Social, Political and Economic life of the Country with a sense of equality.

It is important to stress that like the equal right to vote, participation and representation in legislative bodies may not in itself be enough for women’s political empowerment or to remedy the problems of discrimination faced by women in Indian society. Equality with equity is a goal which may not easily be achieved only by high representation of women in legislatures and other public bodies but has to be buttressed by other supportive measures. Even so, the demand for reservation of seats for women in political bodies to rectify the imbalance has gained strength in India in the light of persisting gender gaps in the various spheres of development. In the absence of any serious political self-correction so far, the demand for reservation of seats in legislatures and party structures has been stressed in India aiming at such an equitable representation.

While the steady increase in the electoral participation and mobilization of women in India has increased the visibility of women in the legislative politics this has not happened in the exercise of executive and judicial power due to their lack of presence in the decision making structures. From this perspective, the important question is what are the benefits of democracy for women. Electoral participation and quotas through affirmative action alone are not enough to result in gender equity. Status of females in the society is one of the indicators of the development in past, present and future. Discussion of status of female literacy, better health care and economic & political empowerment needs to continue for ensuring better access to women for social development issues.

References