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Women's Political Participation: Issues and Challenges*

(Draft)

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* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations

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Introduction

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).

This paper attempts to investigate the conceptual and material bases of women's historic exclusion from the formal arena of politics; analyze strategies adopted around the world to promote women's political participation/representation; identify internal and external conditions and factors that facilitate or hinder the creation of an enabling environment for women's political empowerment; and finally draw policy recommendations for the national and international actors. The development context of women's political participation at the community and national levels will be reviewed for nuanced understanding of the nature of women's participation and their share in development processes and outcomes.

With an increasing recognition among international community of women's historic exclusion from structures of power, a global commitment has been made to redress gender imbalance in politics. Women's enhanced participation in governance structures is viewed as the key to redress gender inequalities in societies. The global debate on the promotion of women's political participation/representation has been surrounded by intrinsic and instrumentalist argument. The former argues for equal participation of women in politics from the human rights perspective. Women constitute half of the world population and therefore, it is only fair that they should have equal participation and representation in world democracies. Instrumentalist argument pushed for women's greater participation on the essentialist ground that men and women are different. Women have different vision and concepts of politics owing to their sex and their gender roles as mothers. Therefore, it is assumed that women in politics will bring a special caring focus and female values to politics. There is an extensive research literature produced in support of the varied rationale or theoretical approaches to women's inclusion in politics. However, without debating the merit and demerit of various approaches, this paper is grounded in the broad agreement that proponents of varied approaches have arrived at - women must be included in politics.

The challenge facing all advocates of gender equality in politics today is the wide gap between shared values reflected in the national and international policies and practices. Before identifying the key strategies for the promotion of women's political participation and the vital elements in the enabling environment for women's political empowerment,

we need to strive for a deeper understanding of the structural imperatives of a society in which women's political participation is instituted.

Women's historic exclusion from political structures and processes is the result of multiple structural, functional and personal factors that vary in different social contexts across countries. However, beyond these specificities of national and local contexts, there is a generic issue in women's political participation that relates to the wider context of national and international politics, liberal democracy and development. It is, therefore, imperative to critically review these constructs and decode the gendered nature of Democracy as well as Development, which poses limitations on women's effective political participation. The elements of enabling environment for women's participation in politics and development cannot be discussed and identified without putting the current development and political paradigms under scrutiny.

Development today as Rounaq Jahan (1999) maintains has brought tremendous benefits to people all around the world who have gained in terms of education, health and income. But at the same time development leaves behind 2.5 billion people who live on less than \$2 dollars a day. There are glaring disparities among and within countries. Forty percent of world population accounts for 5% of global income while 10% richest account for 54 percent (UNDP, 2005). Presently, the mainstream development paradigms based on capitalist relations of production thrive on opportunities created by gender relations for power and profit (Connell, 1987:104). There is an intrinsic link between women's domestic labor with capital accumulation. Leacock further elaborate the same point as “...the inequalities between men and women could not be understood in isolation from polarizing tendencies of the capitalist mode of production which places the ‘peripheral’ countries of the Third World in a relationship of dependency with the metropolitan centers of the First World. Within an egalitarian world order, so called development could not release women from oppressive social, economic and political institutions; it merely defines ‘new conditions of constraints’” (Leacock, 1977:320).

It is imperative for gender equality advocates to focus on the gendered nature of development and challenge the capitalist paradigm of international development that creates and recreates gender disparities, while at the same time working towards creating an enabling environment for women's participation in development. Women's mere participation in mainstream development cannot automatically lead to their advancement and gender equality unless the contradiction in the development claim for equality and justice and the practice is eliminated. The level and nature of participation is equally important to determine whether women are able to share development gains.

Another contextual issue in women's political participation relates to the nature of politics in general and the liberal democracy in particular. Democracy has historically served men better than women. As a political system from the ancient Greece to the modern times of the 21st century, it has built on the public-private dichotomy and excluded women from citizenship. Women have been kept outside the public domain of politics as most of the political thinkers and philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau, John Lock, Thomas Hobbes and Hegel considered women fit only for

domestic roles in the private sphere and maintained that there was no place for women in politics because of their suitability in caring roles as mothers and wives. The public-private divide remains as the foundation of the various forms of world democracies (Phillips, 1998, Rai, 2000).

This is one of the reasons that the normative political theory considered private sphere as non-political and did not make any effort to explore the political nature of the private life. The ancient and modern democracies failed to recognize women as citizens. Therefore, they sidelined them and their concerns in its theory and practice (Bathla, 1998:39). It was only the liberal political philosophy of the 19th century that promoted the idea of 'free and rational' individual which was used by suffragists to demand for the right for vote. However, as Rai maintains the conceptual basis of liberal theory is inherently gendered in ways, which perpetuates patterns of patriarchy and ignores gender subordination in both polity and society (Rai 2000:2). Feminist theorists also challenged the notion of abstract individual in liberal theory and argued it is not a gender-neutral category. This is why despite women had the right to vote they were not able to impact public policy and could not bring private sphere in the preview of the public. Even western democracies left them dislocated on many fronts.

When women enter politics within this patriarchal context of modern democracies, they are unable to play a role to radically change the sexual politics rather they largely play political roles on male's terms. The fundamental assumption in liberal democracies needs to be changed in order to create genuine political space for women within.

1. Factors Hindering Women's Political Participation

Women's participation and access to formal political power structures vary across countries. There is a steady upward trend in women's political participation and representation in developed countries particularly in Nordic countries. Out of twelve countries where women representation in parliament is more than 33%, nine of them are ranked in the high human development category. However, the improvements in medium and low human development countries are not significant.

The structural and functional constraints faced by women are shaped by social and political relations in a society. The common pattern of women's political exclusion stem from (a) social and political discourses (b) political structures and institutions (c) the socio-cultural and functional constraints that put limits on women's individual and collective agency.

2.1. Ideological Factors

Patriarchy as a system of male domination shapes women's relationship in politics. It transforms male and females into men and women and construct the hierarchy of gender relations where men are privileged (Eisenstein 1984). Andrienne Rich defines patriarchy as:

“A familial-social, ideological, political system in which men by force, direct pressure or through ritual, tradition, law, and language, customs etiquette, education, and the division of labor, determine what part women shall or shall not play in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male.”
(Rich1977: 57)

The gender role ideology is used as an ideological tool by patriarchy to place women within the private arena of home as mothers and wives and men in the public sphere. This is one of the vital factors that shape the level of women's political participation globally. However, this ideological divide is not reflective of the reality. The boundaries between public and private are often blurred in the daily lives of women. Nonetheless, domestic domain continues to be perceived in the North as well as in the South as the legitimate space for women while public space is associated with men. Women have to negotiate their entry into and claim on public space according to the discursive and material opportunities available in a given culture and society. Although the gender role ideology is not static rather remained in a flux while intersecting with economic, social and political systems of a particular society, women continue to be defined as private across countries which resulted in their exclusion from politics.

2.2. Political Factors

The nature of politics is an important factor for the inclusion or exclusion of women in politics. Vicky Randall defines politics as an “articulation, or working out of relationships within an already given power structure”, which is in contrast with the traditional view of politics that defines it as an activity, a conscious, deliberate participation in the process by which resources are allocated among citizens. This conception of politics restricts political activity only in public arena and the private sphere of family life is rendered as apolitical. This public-private dichotomy in traditional definition of politics is used to exclude women from public political sphere and even when women are brought into politics they are entered as mothers and wives.

Male domination of politics, political parties and culture of formal political structures is another factor that hinders women's political participation. Often male dominated political parties have a male perspective on issues of national importance that disillusions women as their perspective is often ignored and not reflected in the politics of their parties. Also women are usually not elected at the position of power within party structures because of gender biases of male leadership. Meetings of councils or parliamentary sessions are held in odd timings conflicting with women's domestic responsibilities.

The larger democratic framework and level of democratization also impact women's political participation. Secular democracies in Europe and also in some of the developing countries have created relatively more space for women's participation in politics as compared to countries where religious orthodoxy has been shaping politics and democracy.

2.3. Socio-Cultural Factors

The subordinate status of women vis-à-vis men is a universal phenomenon, though with a difference in the nature and extent of subordination across countries. Gender role ideology does not only create duality of femininity and masculinity, it also places them in hierarchal fashion in which female sex is generally valued less than male sex because of their socially ascribed roles in reproductive sphere. The gender status quo is maintained through low resource allocation to women's human development by the state, society and the family. This is reflected in the social indicators which reflect varying degrees of gender disparities in education, health, employment, ownership of productive resources and politics in all countries. Additionally gender is mediated through class, caste and ethnicity that structure access to resources and opportunities. The socio-cultural dependence of women is one of the key detrimental factors to their political participation in public political domain.

Women also find it hard to participate in politics due to limited time available to them because of their dual roles in the productive and reproductive spheres. With their primary roles as mothers and wives and competing domestic responsibilities and care work, they are left with little time to participate in politics.

In some of the countries, particularly in South Asia, women also face cultural constraints on their mobility. The mechanisms of sex segregation and *purdah* are used to restrict their mobility. Politics requires women's exposure to interact with male and female constituents and address public meeting.

2.4. Economic Factors

Politics is increasingly becoming commercialized. More and more money is needed to participate in politics. Women lack access to and ownership of productive resource, limiting the scope of their political work.

2.5. Lack of Social Capital and Political Capacities

Women often lack social capital because they are often not head of communities, tribes or kinship groups, resulting in the absence of constituency base for them and means of political participation such as political skills, economic resources, education, training and access to information.

3. Strategies for Women's Political Participation

Due to non-availability of comparative data and time constraint this section is unable to assess comprehensively the successful strategies for promote women's political participation. The paper will focus only on two strategies: gender quotas and women's experience of networking.

3.1. Quotas

Gender quotas emerged as a global fast track strategy to redress the historic exclusion of women from the formal arena of politics. Over the last half of the 20th Century, many countries have instituted gender quotas either voluntarily or through legislation. The gender quota is marred with discursive controversy. Without debating the two distinct opposing views, this section summarizes some of the issues highlighted in comparative studies on gender quotas.

There is a clear consensus in literature that gender quota is an effective tool in addressing women's exclusion and ensuring their presence in formal structure of politics. However, the controversy starts around the vital question as to what extent women's presence in political structures has led to an effective mainstreaming of gender concerns in politics. This has raised issues on the nature and modalities of gender quotas and its limitation to empower women in politics.

Gender quotas are instituted within the context of gender disparities, which are structural and systemic. Without addressing the structural constraints to women's political exclusion, their inclusion through gender quota cannot lead to an effective representation. Rai (2005) has emphasized the same point by arguing that "while quotas are important in addressing the exclusion of women from the public political sphere, they can only form one part of a multi-faceted strategy for empowering women, which must together with increased political participation also involve a redistribution of socio-economic resources within societies." Women who lack civil and economic rights are unable to exercise their political rights fully. The gender quotas, therefore, need to be linked with the social and economic redistributive justice in the society.

Gender quotas are also riddled with essentialist assumptions of women as a distinct group with a distinct perspective and the universalization of women as a category. Women are not homogeneous groups. They are divided along the line of class, ethnicity, religion and rural/urban background. The domination of elite women in political structures due to state quotas calls for locating the gender quota within the framework of diversity and difference to ensure women's political empowerment.

The gender gap in politics cannot be redressed simply by bringing more women in the system. It is also a policy and outcome issue, which cannot be addressed unless supportive mechanisms are put in place and provided with an enabling environment to work effectively. This makes the nature and process of quotas systems central to an affirmative action measures. Experience shows that quota modalities must be direct, empowering and enable women to develop their constituency.

Lastly the wider context of politics and democracy is equally important to determine the success of gender quota. Quota debates are globally located within the framework of liberal democracy and citizenship. The extension of citizenship to all, irrespective of their color, creed and gender, has become the basis of modern liberal democracies. In the elite form of representative democracy being practiced in many countries, the electorates are

not free to exercise their right to vote. Voting behavior of the large majority of electorate continues to be determined by primordial loyalties and patriarchal relations. Within this political context when gender quotas are instituted, they do not necessarily bring gender equality because this is a way some these states negotiate with modernity and pluralism by bringing marginalized to the mainstream on the terms of male patriarchal elite. When women enter through quotas in politics on these terms, they are unable to transcend the public-private divide and are compelled to do politics only in the public arena. Women in politics have failed to make family a part of public arena, despite the fact that when they enter public space of politics they do not cease to be private individuals. My contention is that within this patriarchal context of modern democracies when women enter politics through gender quotas, they are unable to transform the sexual politics in the state institutions. Rather they are forced to play on male's terms. Therefore, it is concluded that without the transformation of the wider politics, gender quotas cannot lead to women's political empowerment

3.2. Networking of Women Politicians

There is an extensive documentation on experiences of collective power through networking. From the field of politics, I would like to share a success story from Pakistan where women councilors formed a network and later an election alliance.

Women's representation in governance structures has been extremely low during the fifty-five years of Pakistan's history. In the last National Assembly, women's representation was merely 3.2 percent. Within this context of exclusion and marginalization, affirmative action measure is seen and promoted as the key strategy to redress gender imbalance in politics.

The present regime of Parvez Musharaff took a landmark decision and ensured women's representation in political structures of the country through the reservation of 33% seats for them in all three tiers of local government and 17% in the national and provincial legislatures. Reserved seats for women are filled through direct election at the union council level and indirect election at the tehsil and district level. At the national and provincial level, proportional representation system¹ has been adopted to fill the reserved seats for women. The reservation of seats for women brought more than 40,000 women to the local government institutions and 205 in the national and provincial assemblies and the Senate.

A majority of women who entered local government were the first time entrants in local politics. They had no prior affiliation with political parties, women's groups or civil society organizations. They also lacked political understanding of Local Government Ordinance/System. Women councilors across the three tiers of local government faced similar institutional and social constraints to perform their roles effectively despite differences among them along the lines of class, rural/urban divide and political affiliations. They shared the commonality of experience of patriarchal resistance they met from male members of district, tehsil and union councils. The way male members

¹ The share of women's reserved seats for each party was determined on the basis of general seats won in the election

ignored women councilors, treated them with contempt, denied them development funds and expected them to confine themselves only to women's issues created a strong oppositional consciousness among women councilors. This resulted into increased awareness among them of their own gender identities as women. They were able to clearly see the interconnection between public and private patriarchy. Their gender consciousness, which has evolved not necessarily within any feminist framework, has brought them together as women. They realized that a lot of the problems/constraints they faced as councilors in order to perform their political role more effectively is primarily due to their gender identity as women. Therefore, women belonging to different political parties decided to create a common forum where women councilors could come together to combat these problems, share their experiences, learn from each other, find ways to become more effective in their newly assigned political roles, resist patriarchal backlash and assert themselves to have their right to access political power.

With the help of a NGO Pattan Development Organization, women councilors formed a common platform with the name of Women Councilors Network (WCN) at the provincial level to institutionalize the support functions and use it to negotiate for better working environment for women councilors.

The WCN had chapters in 16 districts in the province of Punjab with a membership of more than 2,000 councilors from UC, tehsil and district levels. The WCN worked effectively with its democratically elected working committees at district and provincial levels to articulate the problems faced by women councilors on various public for a. They resisted the reduction of seats at the UC level and raised voice against the gender biases of their male colleagues. In the absence of constituency for tehsil and district councilor, WCN as a collective body provided them with a power base. In the process, WCN helped raised the political profile of its members.

In the local government election of 2005, WCN decided to negotiate maximum seats and support from male politicians and political parties. The WCN formed an election alliance with the name of Women Unity Group. The main purpose of the establishment of election platform was to enhance women's bargaining power at the local level to negotiate with political parties and the local power elite to take women more seriously as political actors and give them more slots in the category of general and nazims seats. The four point agenda of the Group included:

- To work on violence against women
- To work for the repeal of all legislation that discriminates against women
- To work for the elimination of poverty and to work for women's economic empowerment
- To promote peace in inter-personal relations at family, community, national and international levels and to fight extremism.

There were more than 500 women who joined the Group and contested election in the first and second phase of election from this platform. Thirteen of them contested on the seats of nazim (head of local council). One of the electoral panels fielded by the Group

comprised all women just to get the point across that women are entitled to contest on all seats in the local institution.

Nearly 65% women contested on general seats on the platform of KIG won. This group of women can play a leading role in the present local government system.

4. Enabling environment for Women Participation in Politics and Development

In the interconnected world of today, external factors such as globalization, international trade and economic policies impact the development policies of the nation-states. Therefore, the creation of enabling environment for women's participation in politics and in development cannot be viewed only within the boundaries of a country. It must be linked with global factors. Thus, the responsibility to create supportive environment for gender equality and advancement of women as shared responsibility falls equally on the national and international communities.

Interlocking layer of gender inequalities are rooted in the power structures at the national and international levels. Development and the globalization policies have led to increased poverty, exclusion and marginalization. Structural forces must be challenged and transform by linking them with the rights of people. Without changing socio-cultural, political and economic structural barriers at the national and international levels, the goal of gender equality or women's equal participation in politics and development will remain impossible to attain.

Another important element in the enabling environment relates to the nature of democracy and the level of democratization in society. The participative and decentralized form of governance creates greater space for citizens to participate in governance processes and structures. It also creates space for greater interaction between the state and the society.

Human capacities are dependent on the availability of resources such as education, health and employment that build capabilities and enlarge human choices. Access to education, health and employment is directly linked with women's ability to create space for themselves in politics and development.

Women's consciousness of their political rights is another critical element for women's individual and collective agency. Political consciousness through building transformative communities is the sustainable way to transform politics and development.

A strong women's movement and civil society is another condition of enabling environment that can influence the direction of politics and development in favor of women.

Triple roles of women in productive, reproductive and community management spheres must inform the efforts for creating supportive environment for women's political

participation. Provision of childcare and care work is vital to enabling women to participate in the development processes.

5. Policy Recommendations

The United Nation should play its role to humanize globalization processes by advocating legislation that addresses imperfection of the market.

The UN should develop a system of incentives for countries that work towards narrowing the gender gap in education, health and employment.

Clear guidelines for modalities and implementation of affirmative measures that lead to empowering women and creating their ability to critically engage with the state and the society for a social change and gender equality should be developed.

Research, documentation and dissemination of successful experiences in the world is needed to promote women's participation in politics and development.

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