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Women's Rights & Democracy: Role-Play by HEIs

**Dr. Sucheta Parker**

*Assistant Professor, Dept. of Sociology, Kamla Nehru College, Nagpur, (M.S) India*

Nobel Laureate **Malala Yousafzai** famously quoted "I raise up my voice — not so I can shout, but so that those without a voice can be heard...we cannot succeed when half of us are held back.", and that sentiment precisely outlines the basis of new age women empowerment. Discrimination against women is rampant all over the world even in this 21st century. Historically, women have been excluded from political life and decision making processes. Women's campaigns for participation in the public and political arena date back to the nineteenth and twentieth century have and continue today. According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, everyone has the right to take part in the government of his or her country. One of the first tasks of the Commission on the Status of Women was to write the 1952 Convention on the Political Rights of Women. <sup>1</sup>

**The right to a Nationality**

Women's ability to participate in public and political life is integrally related to their ability to claim citizenship and nationality-related rights. Article 15 requires State parties to "accord to women equality with men before the law" as well as identical legal capacity in civil matters. The Committee has further explained that any restriction in this field seriously limits the woman's ability to provide for herself and her dependants.

Participation in public life is, however, much broader than elections or being elected

to public office. The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women has explained that the Convention's article 7 extends to all areas of public and political life and is thus not limited to those specified in the article itself. According to the Committee, the political and public life of a country is a broad concept, and can refer to the exercise of political power, in particular legislative, judicial, executive and administrative powers, all aspects of public administration and the formulation and implementation of policy at the international, national, regional and local levels. Women's right to participation also includes participating in civil society, public boards, local councils and the activities of political parties, trade unions, professional or industry associations, women's organizations, community-based organizations and other organizations concerned with public and political life.

Particularly, the positive impact of increasing women's representation in public and political life will not be felt if the women who gain access are not also empowered to actively participate in the discussions and exercise influence in decision-making.<sup>2</sup>

**Why Women Empowerment is Important**

A strong patriarchal society with deep-rooted socio-cultural values continues to affect the progress of women's empowerment in the country. The need of the hour is an egalitarian society, where



there should be no place for gender superiority. Aim of Government policies should be to identify and eliminate forces that are directed towards keeping the tradition of male dominance over its female counterpart alive.<sup>3</sup>

Education is considered as the means for development of personality and awareness. An educated person can work efficiently for his/her socio-economic and political development. Education is one of the most important human rights but the position of women's education in India is not satisfactory.<sup>4</sup>

#### **Land, Property, Housing**

Rights to land, housing and property are essential to women's equality and well-being. Women's rights in, access to and control over land, housing and property are a determining factor in their living conditions especially in rural economies, essential to women and their children's daily survival, economic security and physical safety. Despite the importance of these rights for women and female-headed households, women still disproportionally lack security of tenure.<sup>5</sup>

This is often because property is registered in a man's name; the father, husband or brother. In the event of separation, divorce or widowhood, the man or his family often retains rights to the property or the land whereas the woman becomes homeless or will have to share the property with her in-laws without gaining control or rights over it. Women's disadvantaged economic position in this regard creates a structural dependence on men for access to resources, which in turn can subject women to

insecurity and violence. Cultural and religious practices, as well as customary practices, can also have an impact on women's rights related to land, property and housing. These practices often exist in parallel with statutory laws. This happens in particular in rural areas, where customs and practices still shape and influence family matters and determine the position of women. Most often, these customs or practices make women's access to or control over land, property and housing dependent on a man—the husband, father or brother. In practice, the interpretation of statutory laws is influenced by customary laws or practices to the detriment of women's rights. Women have equal rights to all relevant information, full consultation and participation throughout the entire process of eviction. In the event of eviction, remedies and compensation should be equally available to women and States should ensure that women are not subjected to discrimination or to sexual or gender-based violence.

#### **Violence against Women and Their Right to Housing**

Domestic violence has been found to be a leading cause of women's (and often their children's) homelessness and many women try to avoid homelessness by staying in abusive relationships. Women who are property owners or landowners experience less domestic violence, which points to the importance of guaranteeing women's security of tenure. Overcrowding, poverty and unemployment also have an impact on the above-mentioned rights and directly affect the level of violence and sexual abuse in homes and communities. In addition, insufficient protection for victims of



domestic violence, including insufficient shelter homes, legal aid and information to women about their rights, has an impact on the level of domestic violence and women's homelessness.

Consequently, States should address all these issues as issues of women's rights to property, land, housing, life, personal security, gender equality and being free from violence and discrimination.

"eliminating discriminatory laws and cultural practices; supporting the development of women's cooperatives; employing more women in the extension services sector; titling schemes combined with broader agricultural support; issuing titles in the name of both the husband and wife; and encouraging more diverse farming practices such as diverse crop plantings and combining cash crops with subsistence crops".<sup>7</sup>

Women in all countries, irrespective of status, class, age, caste or religion, experience violence in virtually all spheres of life, whether in the home, at work, on the street, in government institutions, or in times of conflict or crisis. Violence is also present throughout the lifetime of a woman, affecting girls and older women too. Specific groups of women suffering from various forms of discrimination, such as women with disabilities or migrant women, lesbian, bisexual and transgender women are particularly vulnerable to violence. Understanding that violence against women is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women, a human rights analysis posits that the specific causes of such violence and the factors that

increase the risk of its occurrence are grounded in the broader context of systemic gender-based discrimination against women and other forms of subordination. Vulnerability to violence is understood as a condition created by the absence or denial of rights. Women's lack of information on contraception has a direct impact on their right to decide on the number and spacing of their children, as well as on their right to health. The work of human rights mechanisms indicates that States should ensure access to abortion at least where there is a threat to the woman's life or health, or where the pregnancy is the result of rape or incest.<sup>8</sup>

#### Goal and Objectives

- 1) Creating an environment through positive economic and social policies for full development of women to enable them to realize their full potential.
- 2) Equal access to participation and decision making of women in social, political and economic life of the nation.
- 3) Equal access to women to health care quality education at all levels, career and vocational guidance, employment, equal remuneration, occupational health and safety, social security and public office etc.
- 4) Strengthening legal systems aimed at elimination of all forms of discrimination against women.
- 5) Changing societal attitudes and community practices by active participation and involvement of both men and women.



- 6) Elimination of discrimination and all forms of violence against women and the girl child; and building and strengthening partnerships with civil society, particularly women's organizations.
- 7) Mainstreaming a gender perspective in the development process. 9

### Conclusion

Training to prepare educational programmes for women's empowerment needs to integrate the four components:

gender issues, work oriented activities, literacy and numeracy skills and principles of curriculum design. It is yet too early to discuss the impact of this training programmed which could only be assessed in terms of how it influences changes at the national level. What is certain is that the seed of education for learners' empowerment has been sown. C 1 early, many problem areas arise. Better understanding of these issues will help improve the effectiveness of the programmed which will ultimately help promote women learners as "empowered" members of their society

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