

PARTICIPATION AND REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN ACTIVE POLITICS: GROUND TRUTHS OF WEST BENGAL, INDIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper measures the Political participation and representation of women in Assembly elections for over all West Bengal. Exploration of their representation and participation in Panchayat election and municipal bodies have been conducted in Purba Medinipur and Purulia districts of West Bengal. It is assumed that literacy may play a key role behind women political participation. As these two districts have a wide gap in literacy, they are selected as case study to find out if there any differences are created in political participation based on literacy.

Keywords: Global technological societies, overuse of technology, psychology in the era of technology, multidisciplinary approach

Introduction

“For me, a better democracy is a democracy where women do not only have the right to vote and to elect but to be elected” - Michele Bachelet. Many feminists focus on this issue that not only women participation in politics is satisfactory but also their representation in administrative body is anticipated. Without representation, participation may be affected because representation in Parliament, Assembly or in local bodies inspires women to participate in numbers. In the past decades women’s participation in active politics was like salt in the flour, though India had a glorious history of women participation in freedom fighting. In democracy we generally mean ‘political participation’ as just ‘right to vote’ while actually the term ‘political participation’ has a wide meaning. It has not only relation with ‘right to vote’ but also participation in decision making process, political activism etc. Women travelled a long way from just voters to leaders. Presently, India is well known for women leadership. Leadership is not management or directing. Leadership is the ability to inspire or influence others towards the leader’s goal. Leaders are people who do the right thing; managers are people who do things right (Bennis, 1985). Women have historically been severely under-represented in ‘political arena’ (Karp and Banducci, 2008). Women’s presence in political decision-making has never been equaled with men. Recognizing that this underrepresentation poses a threat to democracy, political equality, and justice, more and more people—including male politicians and opinion leaders – have endorsed measures to increase women’s presence in power (Htun and Jones, 2002). Gender inequality and disparity is commonly seen in the case of political representation. Males are far ahead from female in political arena. Several studies show that women are not free to participate in politics at her own decision. They are oppressed in society and always dependent on husband or any male family member to become a participator in politics. Thus, family members especially male members play a determining role behind women’s political participation.

According to 2011 census female population is almost 49% but their representation in Parliament and Assemblies is not in the level as expected. Gender gap in political representation is too wide. One positive dimension is that the situation is gradually changing. Women participation and representation is gradually increasing day by day. The revolutionary 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act introduced in 1992 to accelerate the process of women’s political empowerment through participating and representing in Indian politics. This act ensured the reservation of one third of total seats for women including schedule categories in three tier election system of Panchayati Raj. This three-tier system consist Gram Panchayat (G.P) at bottom, Panchayat Samity (P.S) at middle and Zilla Parishad (Z.P) at top. Reservation of seats for women in municipality is also truly preserved under 73rd Amendment Act. Through this three-tier system women participation in politics has dramatically

increases in grass root governance. The women representation has been very encouraging in states like West Bengal, Haryana, Maharashtra and Rajasthan (Hazra, 2017).

Panchayati Raj system brings women in political arena successfully all over the country. But there is a question on the nature of participation of women in grass root governance. Apparently, it depicted that women have highly participated in politics through Panchayati Raj but are they actually in power? Or they are just used as dummy of males? Several studies try to investigate the proxy participation of women in local self-government. In general, what we think about the political participation? Casting votes and contesting election? No. Political participation does not end with in these two words. Political participation and engagement widely mean to be involved in politics in dynamic roles as party organiser, meetings organiser, acting as counting agents in election, party member etc. Thus, this study mainly focuses on participation of women in active politics not only as contesting candidate in election but also as party organiser, election campaigner, polling agent or counting agent and member or leader in women cell of any political party.

Objectives of the Study

Concerning all these matters, the present study focuses on those following objectives:

- First, to assess the nature of women's participation and representation in politics of West Bengal.
- Second, to assess the ground truth of women's participation in active politics and reality behind this participation.

Literature Review

This study goes through an intensive literature survey to meet its objectives at maximal level of expectation. These following literature surveys directed this study to an unerring path.

In the words of Kumud Sharma (1998), "The process of democratisation has been resisted by the changing dynamics of class, caste and gender relations pursuing their different and at times conflicting interests". The works of J.A. Karp and S.A. Banducci (2008), "When politics is not just a man's game: Women's representation and political engagement" puts some light on women's parliamentary representation, sex difference in political engagement and political attitude in different countries of the world. Study of K. Mumtaz (2005), stated that women's participation in governance in South Asia has the lowest rate, with only nine percent of seats in government cabinets and seven percent of parliamentary seats. The numbers are much lower than prescribed 33 percent level of their representation.

Susheela Kaushik's study, (1996) 'Panchayati Raj in Action: Challenges to Women's Role' focuses on the women's experience in the election process, major constraints that they faced and kind of support in terms of remedial measures to overcome, etc. as per the provisions of the Panchayat Acts. It was also found that the elections in some of the states like West Bengal, Karnataka and Orissa experienced a positive turnout of women participation in politics not only as candidate but also as voters. The study further states that the elected women had proved their potentiality as representatives and as well as administrators.

M Gupta's study (2016) stated that the reservation of seats for women through the PRIs will provide them with an opportunity to ventilate their grievances and ensure active participation of women in active politics but women are less interested in politics and they have a minimum knowledge on politics. A number of studies have found that women are generally less interested (Jennings and Niemi, 1991; Verba et al., 1995) and less knowledgeable than men about politics (Carpini and Keeter, 1996).

Karat and Agnihotri's, (1998) survey on Beri block of Rohtak district of Haryana illustrate that only 20 to 30 women attend Gram Sabha meetings on regular basis among 300 women Panches. Participation of all other women is replaced by their respective male family members. This scenario remains unchanged for the women Sarpanches too, only few attend the meetings. This proxy politics has created a new political culture in the villages. Male domination continues in this political sphere also, same as in the land holdings, property sharing, decision making etc. within patriarchal society. The study further revealed the ground truth that wherever men attend meetings, they sign the register in the names of their wives, mothers, or daughters-in-law. This fake political culture is a significant threat to the democracy as well as women independency.

The study of Shakuntala Sharma, (1994) in Himachal Pradesh throws some light on the gender disparity within the Panchayats where it has been found that not even a single woman is a member of Panchayat by virtue of her victory in elections. Women are less active as Panchayat functionaries compare to the male functionaries. Women do not attend Panchayat meetings or political march to a desirable expectation. Their signatures are obtained later on, and the fact is that their husband does the job on the spot instead of a married female Panchayat member. Even in the case of casting vote, their husbands always manipulate and direct where to vote. Mumtaz Ali Khan and Noor Ayesha's study (1982) reported that participation of rural women in the political institutions is very much rare in terms of attending the gram Panchayats meetings.

From the above said literature it is clear that women participation and engagement in politics is somehow challenging in several countries. It is very common to Indian context too. Women are less participator than men in all tiers of political hierarchy. Women are oppressed in every situation. It was believed that politics is just a man's game (Karp & Banducci, 2008) and may not be handled by women. Political involvement of women can create a free environment for women as political activities are not possible within the four walls. Thus, a group of males opposed female participation in politics from history, as they believed themselves as administrators of patriarchal society. This is the area of concern about women's political independence. So, the prior area of this study is that reservation of seat may be the only solution to increase women's political participation and empowering them.

Methodology

This study is completely based on exploratory analysis. The study follows its pre-defined path of its methodology throughout the entire research period. In the earlier phase of this study a pilot survey was conducted between 05/08/2017 to 10/08/2017 to justify the basic assumptions on women political engagement. This small scale preliminary study helps a lot to design the present study. A hint of proxy participation was revealed in this study area. It helps to define a proper questionnaire. Purba Medinipur and Purulia districts of West Bengal have been selected for micro level primary survey because these two districts are two opposite faces of same coin in terms of human development indices. The first one is the enlightened part where as the second one is the ignorant part.

In the next phase of the study, a planned questionnaire was formulated to make a detailed investigation in the study area. During this phase personal interview was conducted with present councillors and Panchayat members from both the districts who were elected in last election. Interview of some male Panchayat members are also taken to know their views on women political participation and direct representation in local self-government which is narratively discussed in this paper. Both villagers and urban dwellers of the selected study area are also surveyed to cross examine the feedback of the women on their active participation in the Panchayat and Municipal bodies. This study continues through the phase of data tabulation and data analysis.

Sampling Techniques

Stratified random sampling technique is applied for this study. Samples are stratified into three categories mentioned in the following table. Random sampling techniques has been followed to conduct some personal meetings with the male Panchayat members and councillors of municipalities to visualise their opinions on women participation in politics and working experience with them.

Table 1: Sample Distribution for Primary Survey

Sample Strata	Sample Size	
	Purba Medinipur	Purulia
Elected women candidate	300	300
Women villagers and urban dwellers	300	300
Villagers and urban dwellers	300	300
Total	900	900
Grand total	1800	

Measurement Techniques

Coefficient of Equality (C.E) --- To measure the male female disparity of political participation, coefficient of equality method has been applied in this study. Gender disparity measures based on the following formula of C.E.

Where C.E stands for Coefficient of equality and $X_2 > \text{or} = X_1$. Here two groups of population are the key variable i.e. male participators (X_2) and female participators (X_1) in the Assembly elections and Panchayat and Municipal elections of West Bengal. The value of C.E is always range between 0 and 1. In case of perfect equality i.e. no disparity, C.E will be 1. In case of maximal disparity C.E value will be 0 (Amartya Sen et.al., 1973).

Coefficient of Variation (C.V)

This measurement has been done by using following formula-

Where C.V stands for Coefficient of Variation, $\bar{x}$ is the mean, x_i is the i th observation (i.e. $i = 1, 2, 3, \dots, n$) and n stands for number of observations. Among the two single series observations which one having lower value of C.V, has been considered as more consistent group in political participation (N. G. Das, 2008).

In very simple words Coefficient of Variation is nothing but the ratio of Standard Deviation and Mean. Thus, in other way formula of C.V can be written as-

Lorenz Curve

Lorenz curve is widely used as statistical technique to measure inequality. Here, in any distribution this method has been applied in to delineate gender inequality among the gender wise overall participation and participation in non-women reserved seats in Panchayati Raj elections of 2013. Lorenz curve highlights visual characteristics of inequality. As the curve going wider from line of equality, inequality increases and vice versa (N.G. Das, 2008).

Correlation and Regression

In case of parametric (dependent and independent variables) bivariate data, linear regression analysis is the most useful method. 'Correlation' is used to denote the degree of association between variables (N.G. Das, 2008). Thus, correlation coefficient (r) by Karl Pearson is used in this study.

Where x is the independent variable (literacy rate) and y is the dependent variable (contesting women candidate) within a bivariate data set. n is the number of observations in the data set.

Sources of Data

This present study is based on both the primary and secondary data. Secondary data are mainly collected from the Election Commission of India and West Bengal State Election Commission. West Bengal assembly elections since 1972, has been collected from the Election Commission of India and data on three-tier Panchayat election and Municipal election has been collected from West Bengal State Election Commission. District administrative map has been collected from Purba Medinipur and Purulia Zila Parisad. Block wise literacy rate has been derived from district census handbook, 2011 of both the districts.

On the other hand, to justify the women's participation in active politics, this survey relies on its primary data base. A well-planned data base has been developed through interviews with the help of a structured questionnaire schedule.

Study Area

For meeting the objectives of the study, West Bengal has been selected as study area. Political participation and representation in Assembly election of women has been measured for over all West Bengal. Representation and participation in Panchayat election and municipal bodies have been conducted in Purba Medinipur and Purulia districts of West Bengal. It is assumed that literacy may play a key role behind women political participation. As these two districts have a wide gap in literacy, they are selected as case study to find out there any difference is created in political participation based on literacy.

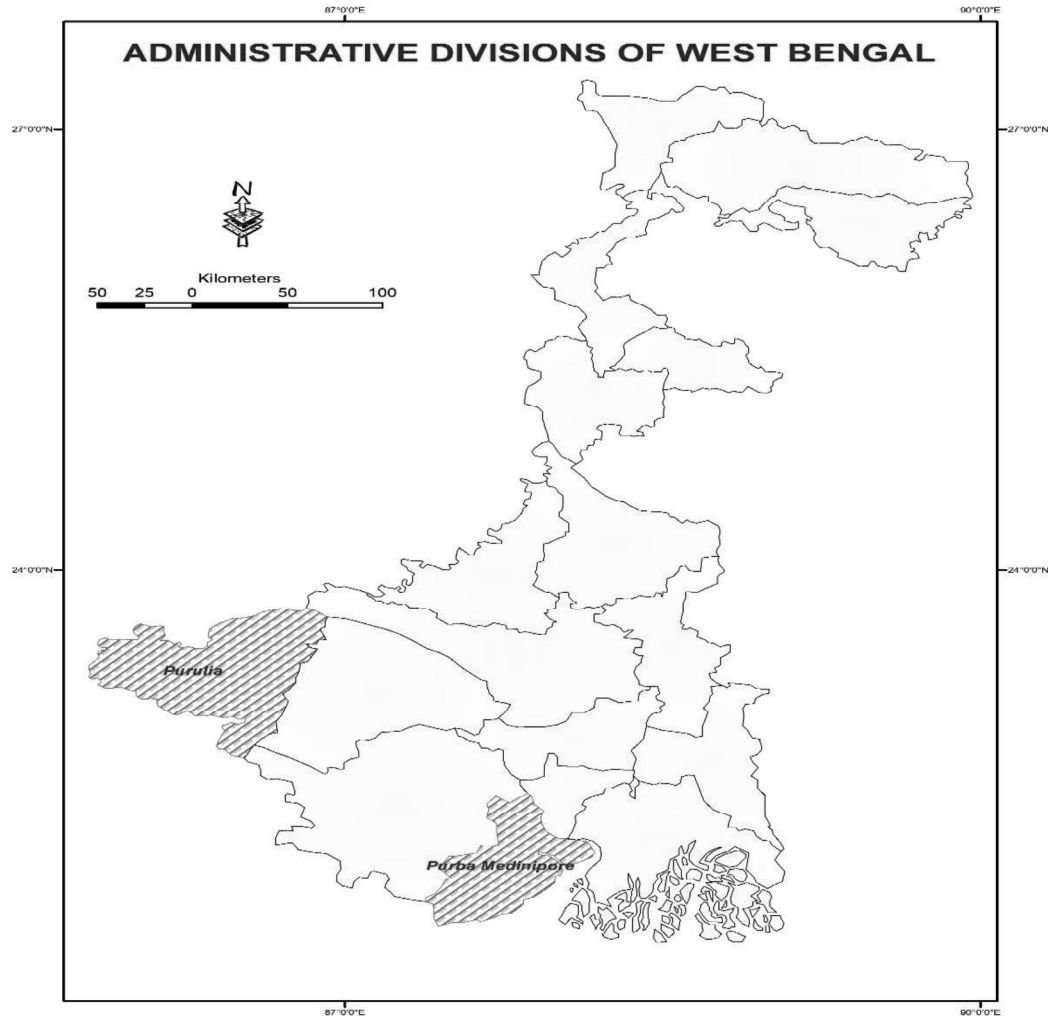
Table 2: Administrative Framework of Purba Medinipur and Purulia districts.

Electoral Bodies	Number of Electoral Bodies	
	Purba Medinipur	Purulia
Gram Panchayats	223	170
Panchayat Samity	25	20
Zilla Parisad	1	1
Municipalities	5	3

Source: West Bengal State Election Commission, 2013.

It has been already mentioned that these two districts are totally opposite to each other in terms of literacy, ethnicity, income etc. Purba Medinipur district is one of the most developed districts in West Bengal whereas Purulia is still backward. Therefore, to observe the differences in political participation and awareness level, these two districts have been selected for micro level perception survey.

Figure 1: Administrative Divisions of the Study Area.



Limitations of the Study

Like all other researches this study also faced a lot of obstacles to reach its ultimate goal.

- i) The major problem faced was in the case of tabulating data, as some information was missing from the published document by the Election Commission of India. For example, in a Panchayat, seat category shows the reservation for women but contesting candidates are male. In some documents 'votes secured' column left vacant while there are more than one contesting candidates exist which create difficulties to identify the winning candidate.
- ii) This study had required some detailed information like caste, age and educational qualification of contesting female candidates, which was not published by the Election Commission of India. Those data are collected from field study to fulfil the pre-defined objectives of this study. If those data were available for all candidates then this study can lead to more detailed investigation and uphold more significant result.
- iii) This study also required a database on district wise and gender wise list of Panchayat Pradhan, Block Sabhapati or Zilla Sabhadhipati of West Bengal, elected through 2013 Panchayat election.
- iv) Two major problems have been faced during collection of primary data. Firstly, women respondents were not so much comfortable during interview. They were continuously hesitating to answer due to fear of unwanted hazards. Secondly, the survey was interrupted a little bit due to the political instability in few areas. However, those limitations are rectified by using proper techniques and collection of data in alternative way during primary survey.

Women in Active Politics

Analysis of participation of women in active politics in Assembly election, as candidate and voter, gender wise consistency of political participation, temporal trend of representation of women, gender inequality of political participation at Panchayati Raj elections, gender inequality in non-women reserved seats and comparison in gender inequality of participation in non-women seats between Panchayat and Municipal elections have been vividly discussed in this paper.

Participation of Women in Active Politics

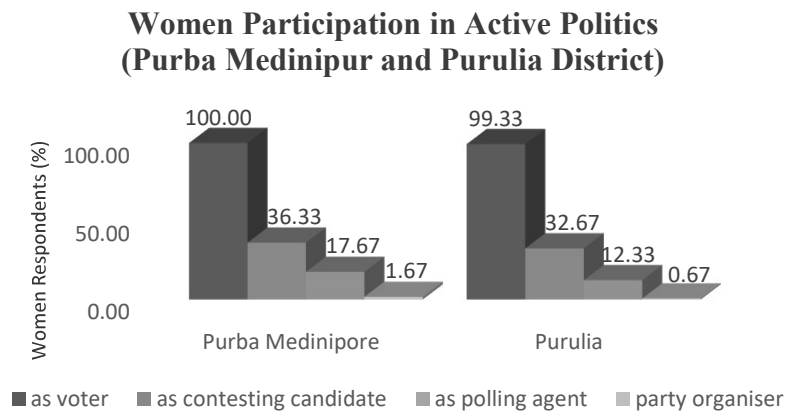


Figure 2: Women Participation in Active Politics in Purba Medinipur and Purulia District.

Source: Field Survey, 2019.

Concept of participation does not limit in the sense of participation as voter or contesting election only. This study focuses on women's activity as polling agent and party organiser too. It seems to be very natural in a patriarchal society that women are mainly active in household activities and child rearing practices. From this point of view, it is very difficult to enter in political arena as well as in active politics.

From the primary survey it has been found that women participation as voter is in significant level in both districts. All the women enjoy her voting rights. They replied that they cast their vote almost in all kind of elections. But in the case of political representation situation gets changed. Proportion of participation as polling agent has been dropping down in both districts. Very few women are involved in the role of party organiser who are leading from the front. This can be interpreted as women participation in active politics is simply limited in voting and representation. However, this proportion of representation is somehow determined by the reservation system in local self-government.

Participation in West Bengal Assembly Election as Candidate

Women participation in Assembly election since 1972 is not satisfactory level which is quite natural. Less than two percent women were female contesting candidate. Remaining 98 percent were male. Women participation as candidate has been continuously increases with time. In last assembly election this proportion had increased only up to ten percent. This scenario tells the story women backwardness in political arena. For a time span of 44 years (figure: 3), there is an increase of nearly eight percent participation of women only. It is very disappointing that women participation is still doubtful even in 21st century when we talk on women progresses and modernisation of society. This is very clear that women participation in higher political arena is still low in proportion and there is still need of huge social reformation as well as change in the attitude of male political

leaders on women political participation. However, male political leaders are often worried on the issue of reservation of seats for female in Parliaments and Assemblies. They are worried about loss of power which might be against their habit of supremacy.

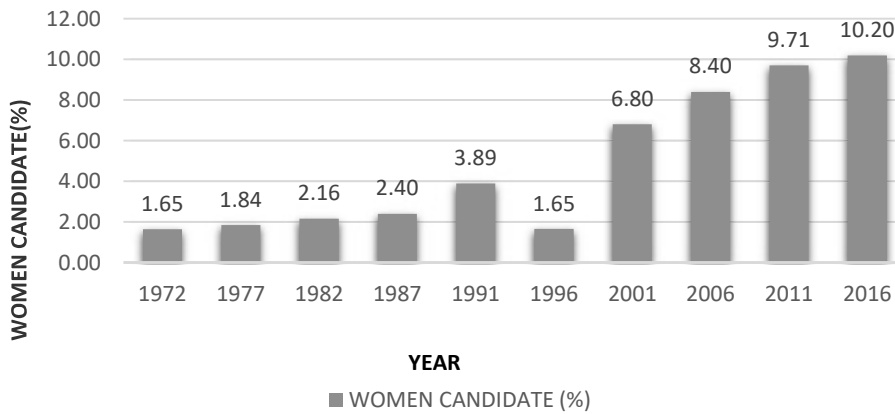


Figure 3: Temporal Participation of Women as Candidate in Assembly Election of West Bengal (1972-2016)

Participation in West Bengal Assembly Election as Voter

As it was stated earlier that participation does not have a single dimension. Casting of own vote is also a parameter to political participation. In this regard, it is observed that women sharing in the list of voters, who voted, have not too changed since 1972. This is because from the past women shared a good proportion in the list of voters who voted in Assembly elections of West Bengal. It is good to see that women voters have increase significantly. In last Assembly election of West Bengal, women comprise almost half of the total voters (table: 2). Thus, it can be stated that women enjoy their voting rights in West Bengal at the level of expectations.

Table 2: Percentage of Female Voters in West Bengal Assembly Election (1972-2016)

Assembly Election Year	Female Voters	Total Voters	Female Voters (%)
1972	5674084	13718535	41.36
1977	6115143	14591546	41.91
1982	10431785	23010681	45.33
1987	12157707	26741774	45.46
1991	14633583	31783210	46.04
1997	17714887	37837831	46.82
2001	16939511	36653026	46.22
2006	18507048	39294971	47.10
2011	22589207	47684515	47.37
2016	26472289	54742413	48.36

Source: Computed in percentage value on voters who voted as published in Statistical report on Assembly election of West Bengal (Election Commission of India, 1972-2016).

Consistency in Political Participation between Genders

Since 1972, it has been noticed that participation of women has gradually increased. But the question is how much they are consistent in their political performances in the issue of contesting Assembly election in West

Bengal. In this regard it has been observed that women are less consistent than male regarding contesting in Assembly election of West Bengal, as the value of C.V is higher in women category rather than male (table:3).

Table 3: Year Wise Contesting Candidate in Assembly Election of West Bengal

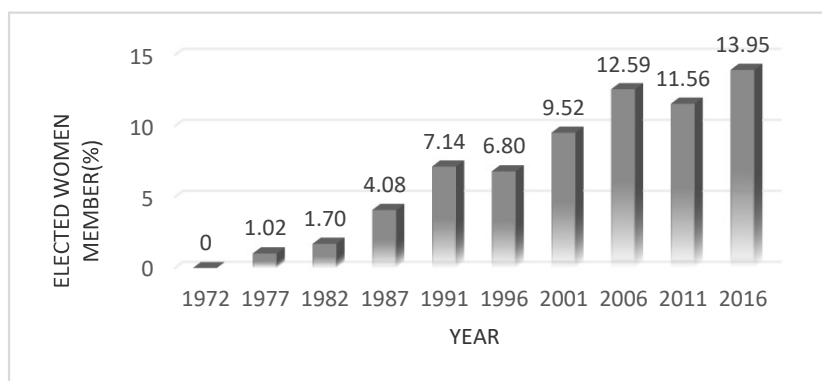
Year	Male Contesting Candidate	Female Contesting Candidate
1972	1372	23
1977	1543	29
1982	1179	26
1987	1461	36
1991	1829	74
1996	1012	17
2001	1562	114
2006	1515	139
2011	1618	174
2016	1761	200
<i>N</i>	10.00	10.00
Mean	1485.20	83.20
SD	247.90	68.70
C.V	16.69 %	82.57 %

Source: Computed from Statistical report on Assembly election of West Bengal (Election Commission of India, 1972-2016).

Temporal Trend in Representation of Women in West Bengal Legislative Assembly

This study also tries to find out the nature of representation of women in West Bengal Legislative Assembly. The post of Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA), brings responsibility as well as the power of decision making. It has been noticed that almost fourteen percent women enjoy this power since 2016 (figure: 6.3). It is very shocking to see that there were no female representatives in West Bengal Bidhan Sabha from 1972 to 1977.

This scenario has been changed in last 44 years but not as per the prediction it was a failure of last Left Front of West Bengal that they never showed a positive attitude to raise women's representation in Bidhan Sabha. Although Left Party had strength of 'Mahila Samity' but their representation in mainstream had been ignored. Sex ratio among the M.L.A's of West Bengal is still under marking. West Bengal is blessed by her first woman Chief Minister (C.M) in 2011. It has been anticipated that women must get inspired by present C.M, where as in reality in second AITC (All India Trinamool Congress) government, women participation has been raised by only 2.39



percent in five years. Thus, it's a hope that women may come forward in active politics and all the political parties of West Bengal will show a positive attitude to increase women representation in West Bengal Legislative Assembly by promoting more women contesting candidate in forthcoming

Assembly election in West Bengal.

Figure 4: Temporal Trend in Representation of Women in Assembly Election of West Bengal (1972-2016)

Source: Computed in percentage of women elected members to total women elected members; Statistical report on Assembly election of West Bengal (Election Commission of India, 1972-2016).

Gender Inequality in Political Participation

Tremendous gender inequality is present in West Bengal in terms of political participation in higher tier i.e. Participation in Assembly election. No disparity denotes when Coefficient of Equality (C.E) value is 1. Thus, as in all cases, there is very high inequality exists in every Assembly Elections. All the values are near to zero, while 0 value of C.E indicate absence of equality. In positive sense it is the matter of mental satisfaction that gender inequalities in political participation have a declining trend found from 2001 to 2016. C.E value touches the height of just 0.1 in 44 years (table: 4). It's a long way to go to achieve perfect gender equality in political participation in West Bengal.

Table 4: Gender Inequality in Political Participation (1972-2016)

Year	Total Contesting Candidate	Male Contesting Candidate (%) (X₂)	Female Contesting Candidate (%) (X₁)	C.E Value
1972	1395	98.35	1.65	0.02
1977	1572	98.16	1.84	0.02
1982	1205	97.84	2.16	0.02
1987	1497	97.60	2.40	0.02
1991	1903	96.11	3.89	0.04
1996	1029	98.35	1.65	0.02
2001	1676	93.20	6.80	0.07
2006	1654	91.60	8.40	0.09
2011	1792	90.29	9.71	0.11
2016	1961	89.80	10.20	0.11

Source: Calculated by using Coefficient of Equality; Statistical report on Assembly election of West Bengal (Election Commission of India, 1972-2016).

Gender Inequality in Political Participation in Grass Root Governance

Table 5 : Gender Inequality in Total Seats

District	Tiers of Local Govt.	Total Candidate	Male Candidate (%) (x_2)	Female Candidate (%) (x_1)	C.E Value
Purba Medinipur	Gram Panchayat	8509	52.76	47.24	0.90
	Panchayat Samity	1927	56.51	43.49	0.77
	Zilla Parisad	295	54.92	45.08	0.82
Purulia	Gram Panchayat	6311	51.54	48.46	0.94
	Panchayat Samity	1570	51.59	48.41	0.94
	Zilla Parisad	223	58.30	41.70	0.72

Source: Computed from Detailed Panchayat Election Result 2013 (West Bengal State Election Commission).

Equality in gender is very much significant expectation to all segments of society. In political sphere gender equality is also an important development index. Inequality in gender creates supremacy of a particular gender and makes other oppressive. In democracy each gender has equal right to participate in political activities. Therefore, this study focuses on the issue of gender inequality in contesting election of three-tier Panchayat election of West Bengal in 2013.

In this concern Coefficient of Equality (C.E) technique has been used. C.E value of 1 denotes perfect equality while 0 represent maximal degree of inequality. From the statistical analysis it is found that in both Purba Medinipur and Purulia district scenario of gender inequality among contesting candidates is quite similar. In Purba Medinipur district, gender equality is near to perfect equality in all three tiers of PRIs. In Panchayat Samity degree of inequality is high compared to other two tiers as C.E value is lower than others i.e. 0.77 in P.S of Purba Medinipur district. In Purulia district G.P and P.S having almost perfect gender equality among the contesting candidates (C.E value=0.94). But in Z.P, gender inequality among contesting candidate is quite higher than G.P and P.S of Purulia district (table: 6.4). It may be mentioned that a good proportion of gender equality exists regarding overall participation in PRIs election in West Bengal with special reference to Purba Medinipur and Purulia. Such high quantity of gender equality mainly exists only because of reservation of seat for women in PRIs not by the sudden increase in political awareness and empowerment of women.

Gender Inequality in Non-Women Reserved Seats

It has been noticed that there is less gender inequality exists among overall participation in PRIs in West Bengal (table: 6). But there is a question in mind that is such kind of equality exists through attitude people or only by the policy of reservation of seats for women? To get answer of this question this study throws a light on the degree of gender inequality in non-women reserved seats. It has been observed that scenario of gender inequality is totally reverse of gender inequality in overall participation in PRIs. In both the districts of Purba Medinipur and Purulia, it is very disappointing that there is an extreme gender inequality in all tiers of PRIs where C.E value is extremely near to zero (table:6.5). Thus, it can be inferred from the above fact that the question of women empowerment in politics is not accomplished in true sense.

Table 6: Gender Inequality in Non-Women Reserved Seats

District	Tiers of Local Govt.	Total Candidate	Male Candidate (%) (x_2)	Female Candidate (%) (x_1)	C.E Value
Purba Medinipur	Gram Panchayat	4674	96.04	3.96	0.04
	Panchayat Samity	1118	97.41	2.59	0.03
	Zilla parisad	165	98.18	1.82	0.02
Purulia	Gram Panchayat	3442	94.51	5.49	0.06
	Panchayat Samity	879	92.15	7.85	0.09
	Zilla parisad	134	97.01	2.99	0.03

Source: Computed from Detailed Panchayat Election Result 2013 (West Bengal State election Commission).

Comparison of Gender Inequality in Participation in Non-Women Seat between Panchayat and Municipal Election

It has already been stated that gender inequality exists in those seats which are not reserved for women in both Panchayat and municipal elections. In this concern this study also throws a light on the magnitude of gender inequality between Panchayat and municipal election.

It is very surprising that gender inequality among the participators in non-women reserve seat is higher in municipal election than Panchayat election in Purba Medinipur district (figure: 6.4). This situation depicts that rural women's participation is higher than urban women in non-women reserved seat. Why this situation occurs? This is because, most of the urban women are interested in economic activities rather than political activities in Purba Medinipur district. In Purulia district, this situation is totally reverse. Gender inequality among the participators in non-women seat is higher in G.Ps rather than municipalities (figure: 5). Purulia district is one of the backward districts in West Bengal. The economy is totally agriculture based. The occupational variations are more in rural areas rather in urban areas. Urban women in this district take part in elections because they consider it as the means of their livelihood earning.

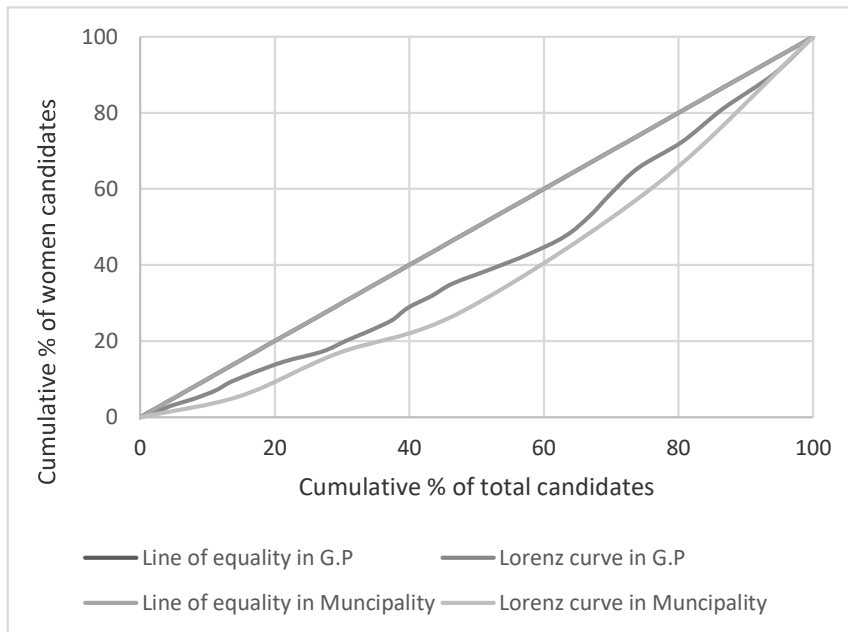


Figure Error! No text of specified style in document.: Comparison of Gender Inequality in Non-Women Seat between Panchayat and Municipal Election of Purba Medinipur (2013) and Detailed Panchayat Election Result 2013 (West Bengal State election Commission).

Source: Computed from Detailed Municipal Election Result 2015-2017 and Detailed Panchayat Election Result 2013 (West Bengal State Election Commission).

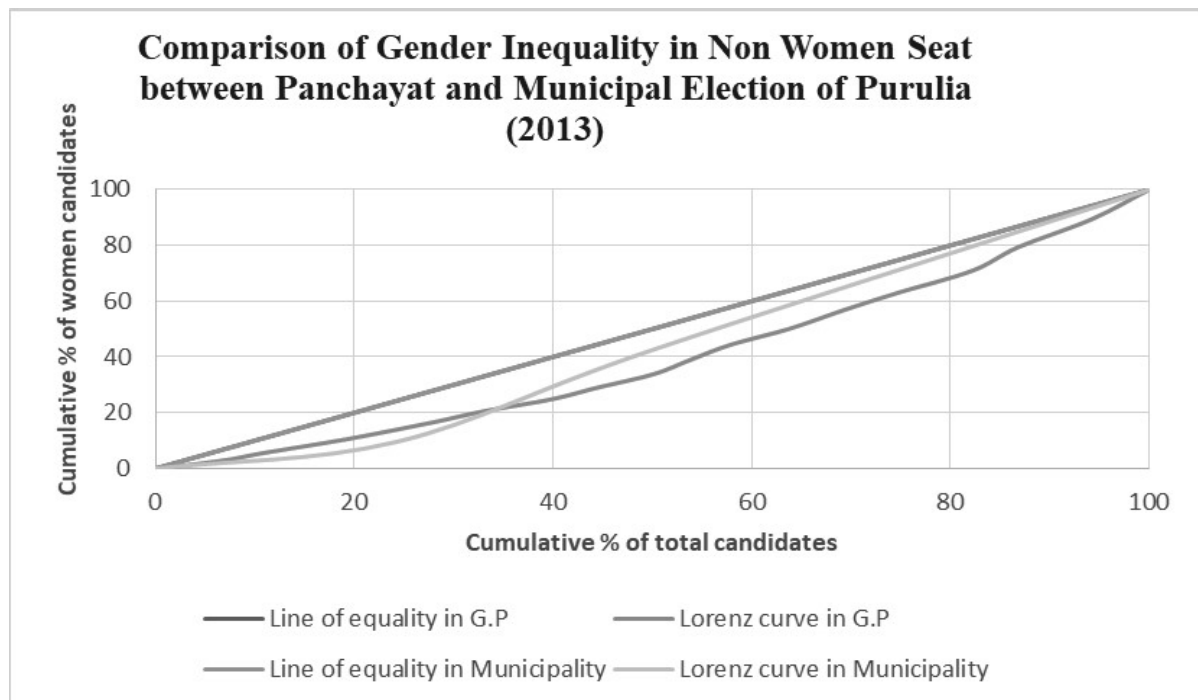


Figure 6 Comparison of Gender Inequality in Non-Women Seat between Panchayat and Municipal Election of Purulia

Source: Computed from Detailed Municipal Election Result 2015-2017 and Detailed Panchayat Election Result 2013 (West Bengal State Election Commission).

Proxy Participation vs. True Participation of Women in Grass Root Governance

There are many debates on women's actual political participation in PRIs. Several studies have revealed that the volume of proxy participation in India is quite high. But there is no clear evidence behind such circumstances. It is believed that idea of proxy participation has emerged when 73rd and 74th amendment acts was implemented. It was also believed that politics is just for men and not for women. PRIs reserved women participation in one third seats of total local self-government which opens a new window towards women empowerment. The winning male candidates lost their seats for this kind of reservation. The researchers astonishingly observed that in most of the cases the female family members of those winning male candidates were contesting on those seats so, that those males can hold the power in their own hands. These are actually the proxy cases. Here, the female winning candidates act like the puppets of their male counter parts.

Officially, the female member of the family is the representative member of PRIs but all the decisions are taken by her husband or son or in-laws and so on. So, the researchers are tried their best to find out the level and nature of this dummy or proxy participation and obviously, the reasons behind their participation in elections.

Reasons for Contesting Election

Through the primary survey, 300 women Panchayat members were asked why they participate in PRIs. In Purba Medinipur district almost 76 percent women answered, they take part in PRIs because seat was reserved for women. In Purulia this proportion is extremely high i.e. over 85 percent. In both the districts women take part in PRIs because of desire of her husband or son. A very few women contested by her own decision in both the districts of West Bengal (figure: 7). If women take part in politics just to maintain formalities or fulfil her husband's desire then it can be easily interpreted that there is a big chance of proxy participation in local bodies.

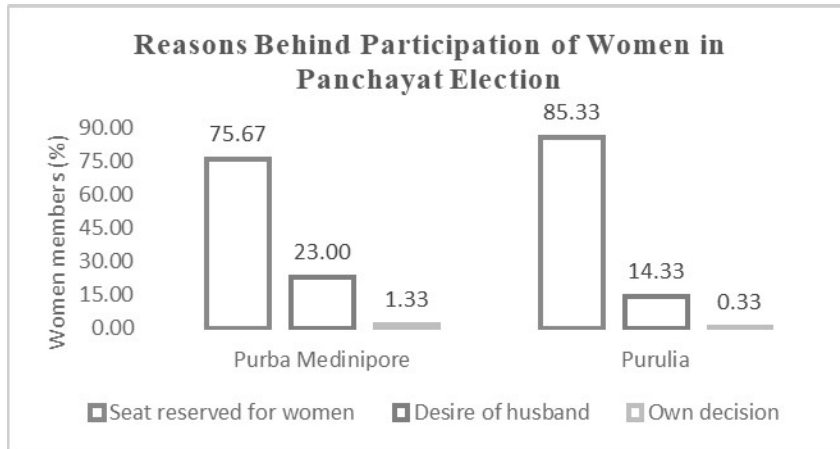


Figure 7: Reasons behind Participation of Women in Panchayat Election

Attendance in Gram Sabha Meetings

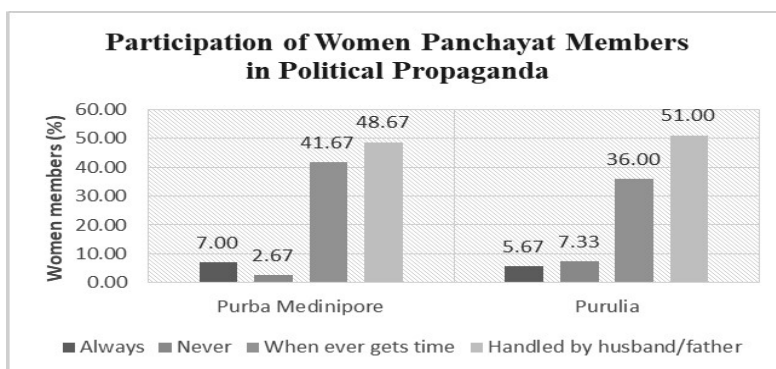
This study investigates on the attendance of women Panchayat members in Gram Sabha meetings. In Purba Medinipur only 18 percent women were always present in Gram Sabha meetings while 46 percent and 36 percent women confessed that they attended Gram Sabha meeting whenever they got time and meetings were handled by their husband and relatives.

In Purulia district this scenario is quite similar as Purba Medinipur. Only just nine percent women Panchayat members attended Gram Sabha meetings regularly. Four percent replied that they never attended the meetings in Gram Sabha as they don't know what to do in those meetings. Everything has been regulated by the party from which they belong. They just put thumb nail on the papers whenever or where ever directed to do so. 44 percent and 43 percent women confessed that they remain present in Gram Sabha meetings whenever got time and meetings were handled by their husband respectively.

From the above statement it is clear that there is proxy participation exists in West Bengal. It must be pointed out that some women members confessed that they can't participate in any meeting. Her husband or father handled it. She had nothing to worry about it.

Attendance in Political Propaganda

In both Purba Medinipur and Purulia districts nearly half of the Panchayat members replied that they didn't participate in political march or protest gatherings and it had been handled by her husband. Nearly 42 percent women members in Purba Medinipur and 36 percent in Purulia district attended political march whenever they got time after completion of her household activities. Only seven percent women were active in politics as they told that they attended political agendas on regular basis. In Purulia, this proportion is just six percent only



(figure: 7).

Situation of proxy participation is similar as attendance in Gram Sabha meetings by women PRIs members in West Bengal. Though, it is not mandatory for women to take part in political agendas on regular basis. But it has been noticed that women

members are usually replaced by their husband or other male members in most of the political agendas.

Involvement of Husband in the Function of Women Elected Candidates

In both the districts of West Bengal it has been found that husband interfere a lot in his wife's political functions. Nearly 52 percent people of Purba Medinipur and 58 percent people of Purulia district claimed that husband maintains all the functions of Panchayats instead of his wife. Those women elected members were busy mainly in household activities. On other hand 48 and 42 percent women Panchayat members did their works by themselves in Purba Medinipur and Purulia districts respectively. The number of active women members is lower in Purulia because of low literacy, lack of knowledge, experience

Activeness in Panchayat Functionaries

The researchers find a number of spontaneous active participation of female members of PRIs to run the day to day functions as per the responses of villagers. In Purba Medinipur district almost 58 percent respondent responses were in the favour of inactive participation of women members while nearly 42 percent replied in the favour of them. In Purulia district the number of inactive women Panchayat members is higher than Purba Medinipur. Almost 62 percent people replied in the favour of inactiveness of women PRI members. Actually people responded as they saw how much their elected women candidates were active in their political work and also how much their husbands or fathers were involved in their work. In Purulia, low literacy rate among females forced them to be dummy representatives.

Proportion of Women Panchayat Members Whose Husband Is/Was in Active Politics

In Purba Medinipur district it has been observed that in G.P level the husband of 35.33 percent women representatives is associated in active politics. Towards the upper tier this proportion shows a declining trend. Still in Z.P the number is 28.13 percent whose husbands are engaged in active politics. In Purulia district this scenario is similar as Purba Medinipur. Therefore, the influence of politically active husbands on the political activities of their female counter part cannot be ignored.

Spending of Allotted Funds by the Elected Women Members

We can say a woman as politically empowered when she can able to execute her political power properly. In this regard the researchers try to reveal how much elected women members spend their allotted funds for development of her constituency in last tenure. A majority of elected women spend their fund up to 80 percent in both Purba Medinipore (67%) and Purulia (63%) districts. More than 25 percent female Panchayat members in Purba Medinipur district has spend their allotted fund fully in last tenure while this proportion is very low in Purulia district. But they claimed that they actively participated in decision making process and put their opinions. A ray of hope has been found from this statement regarding some kind of political empowerment of women.

Involvement of Elected Women Members in Decision Making Process in Local Governance

Women's involvement in decision making process is one of the most vital aspects of women's political empowerment. It has been observed that in Purba Medinipur district, 58 percent women members stated that their opinion had always been accepted in local governing bodies whereas 41 percent felt that their opinion did not get priority not regular basis. In Purulia district, 55.33 percent women Panchayat members replied that their opinions had always been accepted in local bodies and 43 percent women's opinions were sometimes granted. A very few women claimed that their opinions were neglected in the local bodies of both the districts (figure:8). However, it

is cleared that women start to get priority in decision making process of local self-governance. It is obviously a great achievement of women's political empowerment by participating in political administrations of West Bengal.

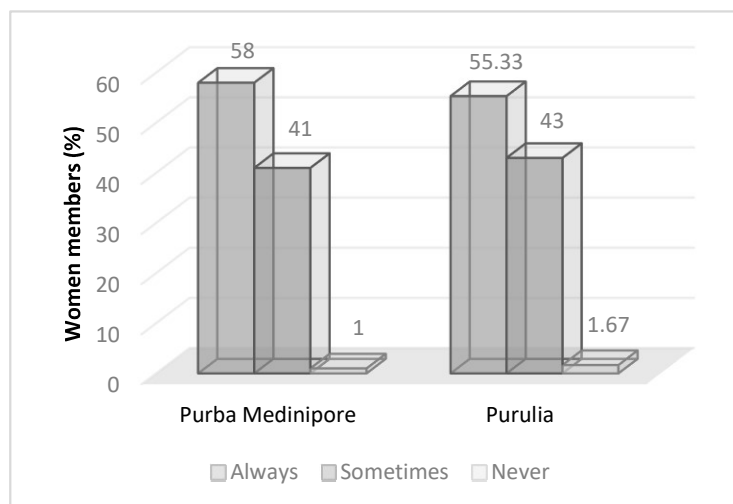


Figure 8: Involvement of Elected Women Members in Decision Making Process in Local Governance
Source Field Survey 2019

Major Findings

The major notable findings are listed below:

- xi) Participation of women in active politics is one of the major propositions of this study. It has been found that as a voter their participation rate is satisfactory (48.06% in 2016 Assembly Election) but at the time of voting, they are not willing to act as polling agents, voting workers or voting organizers, etc.
- ii) The participation rate as a candidate in Assembly elections is very low (10.20%, 2016) probably due to avoidance of unwanted hazards, male dominance in power centres and overall lack of knowledge and skill.
- iii) Women are less consistent than men regarding contesting in Assembly elections. In 2016 Assembly election in West Bengal, the number of women contesting candidates were only 200 compared to 1761 men candidates.
- iv) Temporal trend in representation of women in West Bengal Legislative Assembly shows an annoying picture. Only 1.02% women in 1977 represented to the Assembly whereas in 2016, the number has increased but the rate is only 13.95%.
- v) A tremendous gender inequality has been observed in participation of M.L.A or M.P elections. The Coefficient of Inequality (C.E) value touches the height of just 0.11 (2016) in 44 years (1972-2016).
- vi) On the other hand, the opposite scenario has been visualized in the case of PRIs and Municipality elections. More than 45% female candidates participated in all three levels of Panchayat election as well as Municipal election. The C.E value of 2013 Panchayat election of the two districts is on an average of more than 0.80 which denotes the nearly perfect gender equality. Anyone can think this fact as a tremendous achievement of women's political empowerment. But the reality speaks another story. This is happened only because of the reservations of one third seats of three tier Panchayat and Municipal governance.
- vii) The last statement drawn in the above paragraph is proved by the gender inequality value in non-women reserved seats in local body elections. The C.E value is near to Zero (average 0.05). The women participation in unreserved seats is almost nearly zero. So, the issue of women's political empowerment is now a big question mark in front.

- viii) An interesting fact has been revealed from this research. The women participation in unreserved seats of Panchayat election is greater than the Municipal election. It is in contrary to general notion that the urban women are more politically conscious than rural folk. Here, the dominant determinant is economy. Urban women are more engaged in economical professions and have no such time to engage in political activities.
- ix) Another important aim of this study is to find out the proxy participation which is now a major issue of PRI elections not only in West Bengal but also in whole India after the reservation of one third of total seats.
 - a) More than 80% women candidates claimed that they take part in election only because of the reservation.
 - b) Average 15% female members of PRIs always attended the meetings, political march or protest. The male members of their families (husband, father in law, father, son etc.) do these jobs on behalf of them.
 - c) More than 55% female members affirmed the involvement of their husband in the functionaries of Panchayat mainly due to their low literacy, ignorance and family engagements.
 - d) 33-35% women members asserted that their husbands were engaged in active politics and members of the PRIs before them. Their male family members actually encouraged them to contest the election so that their involvements have been intact as before. Actually, the husbands present their wives as dummy.
 - x) On an average 65% female members declared that they spend 60% of funds allotted to them for development to their areas. This is somehow a good sign.
 - xi) More than 55% female members stated that their opinions have been accepted in local administrative bodies. Their participation in decision making process is also a hope for women's empowerment.

Conclusion:

From the above discussion we may conclude that whatever the reason is, women now participate in active politics which was beyond imagination for rural backward women before the revolutionary 73rd Amendment of Indian Constitution. Now they are gradually habituated to participate in the administrative functions, financial functions, political functions of PRIs and Municipalities. There are enormous instances in our society where many female Gram Panchayat Pradhans work hard with confidence and handle all difficulties in their own ways. The researchers agree that there is a threat to proxy participation but it is also a silver line for women to act as Panchayat members. The monitoring from government level about proxy participation is utmost necessary. It is also important to increase the practical knowledge, interest of women and support from government, society and family.

Women need to actively participate in politics and governance to maintain an unbiased, comprehensive and sustainable democracy. It has been found that women are underrepresented as leaders, officials and even voters due to social and cultural constraints which also limit their participation in active politics. To establish women's rightful place in society, to enable them to decide their own destiny and for the growth of genuine democracy both government and society have to secure women's participation and representation in active politics.

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