

Empowerment of Women Through Urban Local Governance With Special Reference to Guwahati Municipal Corporation, Assam

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Abstract

Empowerment of women is a global issue and discussions on the political rights of the women and their place in decision making processes are at the fore front of most of the countries of the world. Undeniably women possess the capacity and quality of leading the society in right and developmental path, if given a chance. The concept of women empowerment has become a centre point in the larger political scenario. The participatory politics has been immensely contributed by it.. Unfortunately, not many women are aware about their empowerment, their social and political rights and also about the workings of urban local governance though they constitutes half of the urban population. The effective participation of women can strengthen the urban governance. So, it is pertinent to study the issue of women empowerment through urban governance. This research paper attempts to study the empowerment of women through urban governance and also to examine the challenges or constraints if any faced by women related to their empowerment.

Keywords: Empowerment; Women; Participation: Urban Governance; Challenges.

INTRODUCTION

Women Empowerment is a multidimensional active process which enables women to realize their full identity and powers in every aspects of life such as social, political, economic and basically in decision making institutions. In the context of India, basically after the Indian independence various developments have taken place in the field of participatory politics of women. Very recently, the 108th Constitutional amendment bill of 2008 proposed to 33% reservation of seats for women in Lok Sabha and all State Assemblies. The bill was passed in Rajya Sabha on 9th March 2009 but never voted in Lok Sabha. The truth is that empowerment should entail a power to participate in the decision making process in all spheres of society, with no separation of the public and private and in all social, economic, political and cultural processes. The capacity and capabilities of women mostly remain unrecognized and their

contributions remain unnoticed. . In present India, although local government is a subject of the state government, the 73rd and 74th Constitutional amendments make it obligatory for the state governments to organize local bodies, to hold regular elections to them and to give them appropriate finances. After the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution of India, one-third of the wards were to be reserved for women candidates and in the recent amendment fifty percent of wards would be reserved for women candidates. Apart from the reservation of women candidates, some other wards were reserved for candidates from socially backward sections.

Empowerment of women is the need of the hour to ensure all round growth in contemporary society. Fundamentally, empowerment of women is the process of developing the economic, political and social position of women. Contextually, it means possession of

assets, knowledge and know-how, will and capacity that enables one for independent decision making which is quintessential for advancement. Basically, participation of women in political activities can contribute a lot for the cause of women empowerment.

Understanding of Urban Local Government:

In India the urban local government functions in towns and cities through municipal institutions which include municipal corporations, committees, councils, municipal town and notified area committee. It somewhere serves as a reservoir of talents for local and national leadership (Shakun Sharma, 2015, pg: 30). It was only during 1980's that the Central government had taken momentous decisions in setting up the Ministry of Urban Development, appointing National Commission on Urbanization and introducing Nagarpalika Bill in 1989 and 1991 in the country.

The state conformity legislations provide three types of Urban Local Bodies as per the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act- municipal corporations for larger urban areas, municipal council for smaller urban areas and nagar Panchayats for transitional areas (Article 243 Q(1). In case of nagar Panchayats, the nomenclature varies. In the states like Kerala and Tamil Nadu, they were called as Town Panchayats and in Odisha, they were called as Notified Area Committees (Prasad & Pardhasaradhi, 2020, pg:4).

Conceptual Framework: Political Participation

The concept of Political Participation can be considered to the activities related to electoral politics like voting, campaigning, holding party offices and contesting elections. The social status of women mostly depends upon the political participation, representation and share in decision making bodies. The active and effective political participation of women is a constitutional right and is a significant precondition for inclusive growth and sustainable development. The active and equal participation of women at all levels of decision-making processes and political involvement is essential to the achievement of equality, sustainable development, peace and democracy and the inclusion of their perspectives and experiences into the decision-making processes. Though political participation is a constitutional right and Article 15 of the Constitution of India

prohibits discrimination on the ground of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth, still the women are facing obstacles in their political participation especially in India. Moreover, women around the globe at every socio-political level find themselves under-represented in parliament and far removed from decision-making levels. As noted in the Millennium Development Goals (United Nations, 2019), women's equal participation with men in power and decision-making is part of their fundamental right to participate in political life, and at the core of gender equality and women's empowerment. Strategies to increase women's participation in politics have been advanced through conventions, protocols and international agreements for gender mainstreaming, but they are yet to prove effective in achieving gender parity in the highest government.

Review of Literature:

Rao (2012) in the paper "Empowerment of Women in India" published in the edited book "Reservations for Women in Rural and Urban Bodies in India" emphasizes the importance of empowerment of women in India's inclusive growth and development. Rao mentions that recent societal changes has occurred creating preconditions favourable for women empowerment and of trends indicating growing empowerment of women though the pace is still low and some barriers persist. Analyzing Rao's argument it can be considered that enabling legislation and reservation of seats for women in the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies would add thrust to the process of empowerment of women and also for achieving inclusive growth and development in contemporary India.

Prasad (2014) in the article "Women Empowerment in Urban Governance in India" published in "Indian Journal of Public Administration", Vol. IX, No. 3 argues that reservation for women would provide opportunity to widen the basis of individual participation in electoral process and contribute to the democratization of the electoral process. It is hoped that urban local bodies would act as training grounds of democracy and leadership particularly for women who with experience gained over time, can climb the ladder and occupy positions of power at the state and national levels. Political empowerment of women is the

key element for improving the societal status of women and also for achieving all round development.

Bannerjee (2017) in the paper “A Study of Participation of Women in Urban Governance” published in “Space and Culture”, Vol. 4(3) argues that women as a local representative try to secure the demands of the citizens particularly women of their local area. They tried to implement the policies related to the needs of the common people giving special reference to women. Bannerjee is also of the view that women were capable of devising new ideas, approach to the governance and put the women’s issues forward in public forum. As per the views forwarded by Bannerjee, it can be assumed that the participation of women in urban governance will unlock the potentials and opens up more spaces for women in governance for the efficient and maximum utilization of resources.

Narashimhay (2020) in the book “Empowering Women” pointed out that there was a myth that empowerment is necessary only for rural women. The situation of urban women is comparatively better than rural women. Several changes have been made in women’s daily lives. Reservation of seats of women in local bodies has enabled women both in rural and urban areas to participate actively in decision making bodies. But the irony is that most of the women representatives were illiterate and proxy representatives.

Objectives of the Study:

1. To study the level of participation of women in urban local governance
2. To examine the challenges and obstacles, if any face by women representatives related to their empowerment.

Research Questions:

What are the challenges or obstacles faced by women related to their empowerment?

Significance of the Study:

Women empowerment is the need of the hour to ensure comprehensive growth in present society. Urban governance is an important platform for

empowering women politically. In fact, women representatives are recognized as an important part of the urban local bodies. Unfortunately, not many women are coming forward to take part in local decision making bodies. Unless and until women representatives are empowered politically, urban governance cannot be strengthened. Thus, it is very important to study the empowerment of women through urban governance.

The Study Area:

The investigation of the proposed work is mainly based on the empowerment of Elected Women Representatives of Guwahati Municipal Corporation (GMC), Assam and the only urban local body in Guwahati, responsible for administering 216 sq.km. of areas.

The GMC Act of 1969 provides that the Corporation shall not consist of more than 60 members. The minimum number of members has not fixed. The Government of Assam has been empowered to fix the number of members to be elected proportionate to the population of the city. The State Government on 13th April, 2013 adopted the Nagar Raj Act, 2007 which approved the re-demarcation of the GMC areas. As per the Nagar Raj Act adopted by the Assam Government, the population of each ward should be around 20,000 and the total of 60 wards has been reduced to 31 wards thereby increasing the area of each ward. According to Mukul Gogoi, former Additional Commissioner of GMC, this is the first time that GMC will have area sabhas within the wards with an aim to give more power to people to raise voices against their grievances.

Research Methodology:

For the present study 20 women representatives (ex-councillors) of GMC were selected on simple random basis. An interview schedule was prepared to collect the primary data. Government records were also collected to gather the primary information. Secondary data was collected from the, literary writings of scholars, journals, newspaper, magazines, internet, etc. in order to extract the detailed information.

Table No.1 *Awareness Levels of Women Representatives about Urban Local Governance (GMC)*

Sl. No	Awareness	Respondent's View Yes/No	Percentage %
1.	Are you aware about the powers & functions of GMC	9/11	45/55
2.	Are you aware about the sources of funds of GMC	7/13	35/65
3.	Are your aware about the problems of urban areas	9/11	45/55
4.	Are you aware about the Urban Developmental Programmes or Schemes	7/13	35/65
5.	Are your aware of your powers, functions and role after being elected	14/6	70/30

Source: Interview with the respondents

Table 1 reveals the awareness level of women representatives about the urban local governance. 55 percent of the women representatives are not aware about the powers and functions of GMC. Majority of the women representatives are not aware about the sources of funds and the programmes or schemes about the urban development. During the field study, we found that most of the women representatives have been elected for the first time as the seat was reserved for women. Earlier

these seats were occupied by their husbands or any other male members of the family. But after the 74th Amendment Act, these seats were reserved for women. As the women representatives are proxy representatives and are controlled by their husbands or fathers, they do not find it necessary to extract detailed information of the functions of GMC. Thus, we found less awareness level of the women representatives about various issues of urban local governance.

Table No.2 *Participation level of Women Representatives in Urban Local Governance (GMC)*

Sl. No	Participation Level	Regularly	Sometimes	Never
1.	Do you attend the meetings of GMC	17(85%)	3(15%)	0
2.	Do you participate actively in the meeting	10(50%)	5(25%)	5(25%)
3.	Do you offer any suggestion to solve any problem or issue	4(20%)	4(20%)	12(60%)
4.	Do you raise any issue in the meeting in regard to the problems of your ward	11(55%)	4(20%)	5(25%)
4.	Do the people of your constituency approach you with their problems	5(25%)	5(25%)	10(50%)
5.	Are you able to solve the problems of the people alone	4(20%)	6(30%)	10(50%)

6.	Are you dependable upon your family members or party workers to solve the problems of the people	12(60%)	5(25%)	3(15%)
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Source: Interview with the respondents

Table 2 pointed out the participation level of women representatives in GMC. Majority of the women representatives regularly attended and participate actively in the meetings of GMC. It has been found that majority of the women representatives do not offer any suggestion to solve any issue but majority of them raised the problems or grievances of their respective wards in the meeting. The table also shows that very few people approach the women representatives with their problems; rather the people approach

the husbands of the women representatives or other male family members. Majority of the women representatives are not able to solve the problems of the people. As most of the women representatives are new and inexperienced and do not possess any formal training to enhance their capacity, the women members have to depend either their husband or other male family members or party workers to solve the problems of the people.

Table No.3 *Obstacles or Problems of Women Representatives in the participation in Urban Local Governance (GMC)*

Sl. No	Problems	No. of Respondent	Percentage
1	Burden of Household activities	3	15 %
2.	Dominating/bias attitude of the male counterparts	3	15 %
3.	Lack of people's cooperation	2	10 %
4.	Work done by their family members	7	35 %
5.	None of these	5	25 %

Source: Interview with the respondents

Table 3 indicates the obstacles faced by women representatives in the participation in GMC. The table shows that majority of the women representatives were of the opinion that their family members extended full support and help to participate actively in the works of GMC. 25 percent of the women representatives were of the opinion that they did not face too many problems or obstacles that hinder them to

participate actively in the functioning of the governance. It has been found that the women members belong to joint family has less problem in administering her duties as representative as the household chores are looked after by her family members. It has been also found that the women members belong to politically background family do not face any kind of biases especially from the male counterparts.

Table No.4 *The main hurdles in the development of your ward*

Sl. No	Hurdles in the development of ward	No. of Respondent	Percentage
1.	Lack of experience	5	25%
2.	Lack of party members cooperation	3	15%
3.	Lack of GMCs officials cooperation	3	15%

4.	Lack of public cooperation	3	15%
5.	More political interference	6	20%

Source: Interview with the respondents

The table 4 indicates the viewpoint of the women representatives regarding the hurdles in the development of their respective wards. During the interview we have found that most of the respondents have been elected for the first time in the GMC and majority of the respondents were of the opinion that lack of experience was the main problem in the development of their wards. 20 percent of them

felt that political interference was the main problem for the development of the areas. 15 percent of the respondents were in favour of lack of party member's cooperation, 15 percent lack of cooperation of GMCs officials and 15 percent lack of lack of cooperation. They felt that besides public, male counterparts as well as officials doubted on their efficiency in developing their areas.

Table No.5 *Awareness level of Women Representatives about the Reservation Policy of Urban Local Governance*

Sl. No	Awareness	Respondent Yes/No	Percentage %
1.	Are you aware about the reservation policy for women in urban local governance	14/6	70/30
2.	Do you properly understand the provisions of reservation policy	8/12	40/60
3.	Do you think that reservation policy has created space for women to participate actively in urban governance (GMC)	15/5	75/25
4.	Have you contested the election on the basis of reservation policy	18/2	90/10

Source: Interview with the respondents

The table 5 shows the awareness level of women representatives about the reservation policy in urban local governance. Majority of the women representatives were of the opinion that they were aware about the reservation policy. Majority of them viewed that the provision of reservation policy has created space for women to participate actively in urban local governance.

It has been found that no women candidates were elected in the GMC election before the enactment of the 74th Amendment Act. 90 percent of women have contested the election on the basis of reservation policy. The reservation policy has opened up spaces for women in urban governance.

Table No.6 *Suggestions for improving empowerment of Women in Urban Local Governance*

Sl. No	Suggestions	No. of Respondent	Percentage
1.	Increased in reservation quota	3	15%
2.	Awareness about their rights	4	20%
3.	Improvement in socio-economic status of women	4	20%
4.	Change in thinking attitude of society	3	15%

5.	Training programmes to enhance the capacity of women representatives.	6	30%
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Source: Interview with the respondents

The table 6 shows the suggestions for improving empowerment of women in urban local governance. Majority of the women representatives were of the opinion that increased in reservation quota (15 percent), awareness about their rights (20 percent), improvement in socio-economic status of women (20 percent), change in thinking attitude of society (15 percent) and training programmes to enhance the capacity of women representatives (30 percent) would be helpful for women to improve empowerment in urban local governance.

Major Findings of the Study:

a) The elected women representatives were aware about the powers and functions of GMC but majority of them was not aware about the sources of funds of GMC. Majority of women representatives were not aware about the problems of urban areas also about the urban developmental programmes or schemes. Majority of women representatives were aware of their powers, functions and role after being elected to the urban local bodies. Thus, we found less awareness of the respondents about various aspects of urban local bodies.

b) Majority of the women representatives attend and participate regularly the meetings of GMC and also raised issue related to the development of their areas. The local people very rarely approach the women representatives with their problems; rather they approach the husband or other male members of the women representatives' family. Most of the time, the women representatives were dependable upon their husband s or party workers to solve the problems of their areas.

c) Most of the women representatives felt that they did not face too many problems from their family members or male counterparts in the participation in urban local governance.

d) Majority of the women representatives were of the opinion that more interference from the political leadership was the main problem in the development of the areas.

e) One of the major findings of this study was that majority of the women representatives have been elected on the basis of reservation policy. No female candidates were elected on the first two elections of GMC held on 1974 and 1979 respectively. It was only after the enactment of the 74th Amendment Act,1992 women were elected on the GMC elected bodies on the provisions of the reservation policy.

f) Majority of the women representatives felt that separate training programmes for women would enhance their capacity in participating effectively in urban local bodies.

Suggestions:

a) Political education should be imparted amongst the women representatives. Training and guidance on administrative work must be provided to them so that they understand the role and procedure of urban local bodies.

b) Women representatives (local or national), women activists, women organizations and women academics should work in close collaboration for women empowerment.

c) More awareness campaign on comprehensive impact assessments of empowerment policies for women should be organized regularly.

d) Last but not the least, to sensitize the thinking attitude of men towards the women empowerment and to extend full support and cooperation for active participation in local governance.

Conclusions:

Women's participation in decision making bodies plays a very significant role in the process of enhancing women's participation in public life. Reservation policy for women in local governance has provided women a chance to participate in political arena. It would lay the way for acquiring political power at the local level and enabling participation in decision and policy making at the higher levels. Women

would be a part in the project of planning, execution and implementation of development schemes if they were empowered politically. But, still lots of work have to be done related to the women empowerment in a plural society like India; if history's longest oppression is to be seriously tackled.

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