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Analysing the Implications of Gender Disparity on the Political Obligation of Women

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the history of political philosophy, the Public/Private Divide has led to the exclusion of women from the political sphere, resulting in their lack of political rights and responsibilities. However, contemporary perspectives recognize women as political entities, granting them the rights and obligations to engage in the governance of their nations through voting, running for office, and holding public positions. The political rights of women have been acknowledged and codified in various legislative frameworks and international agreements. This research paper aims to investigate whether women are adequately represented at all levels of government globally, with a particular emphasis on India. In examining the degree of gender inequality in political participation, the paper concludes that, although progress is being made, more deliberate actions are necessary to expedite change and eradicate gender disparities across all aspects of life.

Keywords: Political Obligation, Women, Gender Disparity, Patriarchy.

I. INTRODUCTION

Political obligation can be succinctly defined as the moral responsibility to adhere to the laws of one's nation or state. Numerous theories exist that explore the different dimensions of political obligations; however, most of these theories tend to overlook the role of women entirely. While political obligations are inherently linked to membership in a political community, women have often been marginalized in discussions regarding their political agency. Although there have been improvements over time, gender inequality continues to persist and manifests in various forms in contemporary society.

In terms of political engagement, women frequently lack sufficient representation. Consequently, issues that specifically affect women are often neglected, and when they are addressed, the policies are typically crafted by men who may not possess the necessary insights. This situation exacerbates the challenges women face in achieving progress and gender equality. The discourse surrounding this issue is of paramount importance today, with efforts from

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international organizations and governments aimed at ameliorating the circumstances. Nevertheless, the prevailing reality remains starkly different and, regrettably, quite troubling.

This research paper seeks to explore the underlying causes of gender inequality and examine how the division between public and private spheres has exacerbated this issue. Additionally, the researcher aims to analyse the connection between gender inequality and political responsibilities by reviewing statistical data. This data provides insights into both the global context and the specific situation in India regarding women's political participation. The focus is restricted to aspects of political engagement, including election candidacy, voting behaviour, and holding public office. Ultimately, the researcher aspires to propose strategies that could contribute to the reduction of gender inequality within the political domain and, by extension, in various other facets of life.

II. THE PRIVATE-PUBLIC GAP AND THE RESULTING GENDER INEQUALITY

Western political thought and philosophy has historically marginalized women, often excluding them from critical discourse and consideration. This exclusion is evident in the works of many prominent political philosophers throughout history. Women have frequently been denied their own identities, often viewed merely as extensions of men. Consequently, they have been deprived of the opportunity to participate in political society, which inherently stripped them of political rights and responsibilities. It is noteworthy that the majority of political theories have overlooked women's contributions, resulting in frameworks that do not account for their roles. Confined to specific domestic roles, women's positions and interests have been largely shaped by the power dynamics within their families. This separation, which intentionally limits women to the domestic sphere—encompassing family, personal relationships, and bonds—while excluding them from the political realms of the state, market, and government, is known as the public-private divide. In this context, the 'private' sphere is understood as a domain free from external interference without justification, whereas the 'public' sphere is perceived as more open to state involvement.

The division between public and private spheres has taken various forms and remains a significant factor contributing to gender inequality across multiple domains, including political engagement. This divide underpins many contemporary issues faced by women, having persisted as both a concept and a reality since the times of influential political theorists such as Plato, Aristotle, and Marx. Plato's perspective on this dichotomy was primarily centered around the concept of private property. He argued that the elimination of private property would serve the best interests of his envisioned ideal city, as individuals would then be motivated by moral

virtue rather than personal avarice. Consequently, the notion of 'private wives' became obsolete, allowing women to be treated equally alongside men in the public and political arenas. In contrast, Aristotle viewed the domestic realm as the sole environment where men could enjoy leisure, enabling their active participation in politics. He believed that the subjugation of women, which was inherent to this institution, was a natural aspect of the world's order.

Marx's theories have faced criticism for overlooking the significance of sexuality and family dynamics, focusing predominantly on economic factors. He examined the sexual division of labour, highlighting how women were relegated to the status of mere 'instruments of production.' Furthermore, while men's labour in factories was acknowledged and compensated with wages, women's domestic work was dismissed as unproductive and not considered genuine labour.

(A) Is Radical Feminism the answer to this ever-increasing private-public gap?

The Second Wave of Feminism, encapsulated by the slogan 'The Personal is Political,' sought to highlight that the fundamental cause of gender inequality stemmed from the persistent confinement of women to the domestic sphere. It argued that unless women's issues were prioritized and addressed within the political domain, true liberation from oppression and gender disparity would remain unattainable.

Radical feminism provided a robust framework for critiquing the public/private divide. A thorough examination of this dichotomy reveals that nothing is genuinely private; thus, the state cannot exempt personal matters from its oversight, as this would have dire implications for women regarding issues such as marital rape and domestic violence. Furthermore, radical feminism played a crucial role in acknowledging that women, due to systemic marginalization, had been deliberately excluded from the public and political spheres, resulting in a lack of representation.

III. WOMEN AND THEIR POLITICAL OBLIGATIONS

Historically, it has been observed that women have been systematically excluded from the political public sphere, often confined to domestic roles. This exclusion has had significant repercussions on issues pertinent to women, such as reproductive rights, domestic violence, and marital rape. Furthermore, it has facilitated the entrenchment of gender inequality within political matters. As women have not been acknowledged as integral members of the political community or treated as full citizens, they have been deprived of both political rights and responsibilities. Women were traditionally perceived as having obligations solely to their families, fulfilling roles as mothers, wives, and caregivers. In this context, their duties were

primarily characterized by obedience, directed not towards the state but towards patriarchal figures such as fathers and husbands. According to the Consent Theory of political obligation, women were unable to consent to participation in the political sphere, thereby precluding them from fulfilling any political duties to the state. The political domain has long been associated with power and authority, attributes typically deemed masculine, while women have been expected to embody traits such as submissiveness and irrationality, relegating them to nurturing roles.

In recent years, however, women have begun to be recognized as vital constituents of the political community, thereby acquiring both political rights and obligations towards the state. These obligations encompass responsibilities such as engaging in governance and acting in the best interests of the country. Nevertheless, the fulfilment of these obligations is contingent upon the existence of corresponding political rights.

All individuals are entitled to participate in the governance of their nation, as stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Furthermore, the Convention on the Political Rights of Women, which came into effect in 1953, emerged in the aftermath of World War II, highlighting the international community's recognition of the necessity for gender equality. This Convention affirmed the equal right of all individuals to engage in their country's governance, select representatives, hold public office, and enjoy equal political rights. It provided a framework for gender equality, ensuring the right to vote in all elections without discrimination, the right to contest elections for all publicly elected positions, and the right to occupy public office on an equal basis with men.

In the context of the Indian Constitution, Article 326 establishes the principle of Universal Adult Franchise for elections to the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies. This provision guarantees that no Indian citizen meeting the necessary criteria can be denied the right to vote based solely on gender. Despite these constitutional and international guarantees, the question remains: to what extent have these rights been realized for women in terms of equal political participation? How effectively have women been able to fulfil their political responsibilities?

(A) What is the need for women to be equitably represented in the Parliament?

It is of utmost importance to empower women and facilitate their active participation in the political sphere, as this is crucial for promoting transparency in the governance of the nation. As previously discussed, numerous obstacles prevent women from effectively representing themselves in politics, many of which stem from existing power dynamics that create a public-private divide. Furthermore, it is vital to recognize that no nation can genuinely claim to serve

the interests of its populace when a significant portion of its citizens remains inadequately represented in the political landscape. Political participation must be structured in a manner that accurately reflects the demographic composition of society.

Additionally, it is imperative to acknowledge that without sufficient representation of women in the public domain, the advancement of women's issues will remain elusive. These issues encompass critical areas such as reproductive rights and domestic violence. Therefore, enhancing women's participation in leadership roles will ensure that these concerns receive the necessary attention from decision-makers. By incorporating women into the policymaking process, their interests can be adequately addressed, paving the way for their progress. Moreover, promoting women's engagement in voting and ensuring accessibility will empower them to elect representatives who can truly advocate for their needs. Absent these measures, achieving the societal goals of equality and development will remain unattainable.

IV. A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE PARTAKING OF WOMEN IN POLITICAL PROCESSES

The significant transformation of the global political landscape concerning women's rights to political participation can be traced back to the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, established during the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995. This pivotal document laid the groundwork for achieving gender equality across various domains and aimed to remove the barriers that women encounter daily. The Declaration serves as an international policy framework designed to empower women and girls, addressing critical areas such as poverty, education, economic opportunities, and decision-making processes. It is noteworthy that at the time of the Declaration, approximately 189 countries pledged their commitment to this important cause. Regrettably, despite these efforts, no nation has successfully eradicated gender inequality in any sector, and women continue to face disparities in numerous aspects of life. Currently, women occupy only about 10% of positions in legislative bodies and other public offices worldwide. This statistic is particularly concerning given that women represent nearly half of the electorate yet remain significantly underrepresented in the political arena.

On a more positive note, there have been some advancements in women's political participation in elections globally. However, the increase in representation within national legislatures from 2017 has been minimal, rising from 23.3% to just 23.4%. It is essential to acknowledge that electoral quotas have played a role in enhancing women's representation, with the percentage of seats held by women increasing from 22.3% to 27.1% in the past year. Although these trends are undoubtedly promising, it is crucial that women remain motivated to engage in

Parliamentary activities, which have recently been significantly obstructed by occurrences of harassment. In addition to encountering pervasive discrimination stemming from voters' doubts about their capabilities solely based on their gender, female politicians must also confront intimidation, psychological abuse, and threats to their lives. The data presented clearly indicates that progress is stagnating, which is a concerning development for a society that professes to be advancing towards equality and development.

V. THE INDIAN SCENARIO OF FEMALE PARTICIPATION IN POLITICAL PROCESSES

The Indian Constitution, upon its inception, envisioned fundamental ideals of liberty, justice, and, most critically, equality as it embarked on its journey as a nascent Republic. Regrettably, it remains a concern that full equality has yet to be realized for all citizens today. Gender discrimination persists in various forms and manifestations. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that societal changes are underway. The recognition and acknowledgment of women's agency have progressed, granting them the status of "full citizens." However, it is crucial to emphasize that enhancing women's political participation is vital, as their societal status serves as a significant indicator of national development.

The quest for equitable treatment in the political arena traces back to the pre-independence period, where women, spearheaded by figures such as Margaret E. Cousins and Saraladevi Chaudharani, advocated for women's suffrage as early as 1917. With the nation's independence, women successfully attained voting rights equivalent to those of men. It is noteworthy that initially, the state's involvement with women's issues was minimal, largely due to their limited presence in public life. However, this dynamic has transformed with the advent of the modern State, which has increasingly engaged with women's issues and has made strides toward achieving legal equality for both genders.

Constitutional provisions that advocate for equality in political participation have not significantly translated into actual representation. The participation of women in politics remains notably low. Although India has seen figures such as Mrs. Indira Gandhi serving as Prime Minister and several women holding the positions of Chief Ministers and Governors, these instances are quite rare. Predominantly, only women from the upper socio-economic classes have managed to make their voices heard, leaving the majority of women in India without adequate representation of their interests. There are very few women politicians who have attained high public office or led political parties, with notable exceptions including Sushma Swaraj, Jayalalitha, Mamata Banerjee, Sonia Gandhi, and Mayawati.

The most recent and significant data regarding women's political participation in India is

presented in the Economic Survey 2018. It is alarming that, despite women constituting 49% of the Indian population, their representation across all levels of government is in a dire state. The Survey indicates that only 9% of the 4,118 Members of Legislative Assemblies (MLAs) are women. Furthermore, a report titled *Women in Politics 2017*, published by the Inter-Parliamentary Union and UN Women, revealed that the Lok Sabha comprises 64 women (11.8% of 542 MPs) and the Rajya Sabha includes 27 women (11% of 245 MPs). These statistics place India at a dismal rank of 148 out of 227 countries concerning the representation of women in executive government and Parliament.

Women in India encounter distinct challenges that contribute to the ongoing gender inequality in political participation. The deeply patriarchal structure of Indian society restricts women's access to the 'power zone,' where critical policies and decisions are formulated. A political career is frequently perceived as conflicting with a woman's 'inherent and natural duties' as a mother and wife. Additionally, the lack of education and financial independence among the majority of Indian women significantly hinders their aspirations to contest elections. Furthermore, women politicians often face character attacks and threats of sexual violence and death, which can discourage them from pursuing candidacy for public office. Consequently, the situation regarding women's political participation in India is regrettable, particularly concerning voting rights and the reluctance of political parties to nominate women for electoral positions.

VI. REFLECTING ON THE OBSERVATIONS MADE THUS FAR

It is undeniable that gender inequality persists across various facets of life, with its manifestation being particularly pronounced in the political arena. This enduring issue necessitates urgent attention. Although the transformation required will not be swift or straightforward, specific actions can be implemented to eliminate discrimination against women in political representation.

Governments worldwide should actively promote female leadership and facilitate the appointment of women to positions of authority. The experiences of women legislators must be integrated into the legislative process and the development of policies addressing women-centric issues. Initiatives should be undertaken to educate even the most marginalized women about their rights and avenues for political engagement. Political parties ought to be motivated to have women leaders who genuinely represent the needs and interests of women. Additionally, other organizations, including non-governmental organizations, should bolster the gender equality movement by enhancing accountability and raising awareness. Lastly, men should be

encouraged to advocate for gender equality, thereby fostering greater investment in women's rights through their involvement.

VII. CONCLUDING REMARKS

It is clear from the analysis presented in this research paper that gender inequality persists in the realm of political participation. Women often lack a voice in decisions that directly impact their lives. The statistical evidence reveals a significant underrepresentation of women, both globally and specifically in India. This indicates that, although women have political obligations as members of society, particularly in relation to governance, they are not afforded corresponding rights. Furthermore, even in instances where rights and provisions are established by the State, various societal factors hinder women's active engagement in politics. This gender disparity casts a negative light on a world that professes to be advancing, especially when the concerns and viewpoints of half the population are insufficiently acknowledged. Addressing this issue will require sustained efforts from the State and a fundamental shift in societal attitudes.

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