Chapter Six

CONCLUSION

The inclusion of women in the political process and the decision-making institutions has come to the central stage of all social and political discourse at the national and international levels. Gradually the recognition has dawned that the marginalization and invisibility of women in governance and decision-making has been the root-cause of their subordinate status in the family and society. This realization, coupled with the fact that the skewed nature of the political institutions resulted in lop-sided development, has led to concentrated efforts to include women in the political process.

At the international level, the United Nations has taken a lead through organizing numerous conferences focusing on women as well as by providing a platform which can mobilize resources, articulate and refine/redefine issues and concerns, and plan strategies. Beijing Platform for Action emphasizes, that women’s equal participation in decision-making is not only a demand for simple justice or democracy but can also be seen as a necessary condition for women’s interests to be taken into account. Without the active participation of women and the incorporation of women’s perspective at all levels of decision-making, the goal of equality, development and peace cannot be achieved.

At the same time, women’s rights advocates have intensified their demand for space for women to bring their vision and leadership, knowledge, skills, views and aspirations on the development agenda from
the grassroots to the international fora. Feminists have also started challenging the legitimacy of existing governance structures and institutions and their functioning in ways that perpetuate gender based discrimination. It is asserted that by bringing in a critical mass of women can facilitate ‘Good Governance’, which is also based on participatory, consensus oriented approach, wherein the government is accountable, transparent, responsive, effective, efficient, equitable and inclusive. In short, women’s qualitative and quantitative participation at all levels of governance structures is emphasized not only for their own empowerment but also for the overall sustainable development of the society. Bringing women into power is not only a matter of equity or of correcting an unrepresentative system, but a means of addressing wider social issues of poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, health, conflict situations, violence against women etc.

The women’s movement in India too recognized the need for effective participation of women in politics and all decision-making bodies to redress the existing inequalities between men and women. Indian women have a long history of political participation; their participation in the freedom struggle and in the democratic politics after independence is well recognized. Women in India have made substantial gains over the decades, yet, this has not been adequately reflected in the representation of women in positions of power. There is still a wide gap between the Constitutional guarantees and actual representation. Women’s representation has always been less than 10 per cent in the Parliament and in the State Assemblies, the picture is all the more dismal, as the average percentage of women in the combined State legislatures has never exceeded 6.0 per cent (1957) and has been as low as 2.2 per cent (1952).
The Council of Ministers has been all the more male dominated. First women are unlikely to be given a berth. If given ministerial berth, they are relegated to the ‘welfare’ departments, while the most important and influential portfolios go to men. Political parties are also reluctant to give equal representation to women in the party organization and at leadership levels. Not only this, women form the last choice for most of the political parties at the time of distributing party tickets for contesting elections. All this implies that Indian women, who constitute half of the population, have never been equally represented in the legislature, and other governmental decision-making bodies.

In an effort to reverse the tide and bring in more women into decision-making at the grassroots levels, the 73rd and 74th Constitution Amendment Acts were enacted, which provided for 33 per cent reservation for women at all levels of Panchayati Raj Institutions and at the Local Urban Governance level. These have enabled one million women to make their entry into these bodies and to prove their capacity to prioritise the issues and work for the social transformation of the society at the local level. But the demand for even 33 per cent reservation for women in the Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies as a first step is still unmet. Hence, there is still a wide gap between de facto and de jure political equality.

In this context, the present study aimed to examine and analyze the leadership patterns of women legislative elite from North-West India covering the States of Himachal Pradesh, Punjab and Haryana, as well as to identify the various physical/ cultural/ social/ role constraints on women’s representation in the State Legislative Assemblies and Parliament. Every legislator as a people’s representative is expected to be fully cognizant of the local problems and needs of the constituency, its
development requirements, and act accordingly, monitor the implementation of the government plans and programmes, act as a mediator between the people of the constituency and the Government. The present study was taken up to study with what motivations and considerations the women legislative elite entered into legislature, why and how they decided to contest elections, their sources of motivation, recruitment patterns, campaign style, role perception and performance, and the ways in which their roles as homemakers and lawmakers conflict with or reinforce each another. Further it aimed to examine whether women’s role in the legislatures accords well with the expected role of a public representative and also to study the factors that facilitate or impede their functioning.

Personality of any leader depends very much upon the family and social background from which the individual comes. In assessing the factors responsible for the personality development of the women legislative elite, the variables of age, caste, education, occupation, membership of the respondents in political party and various organizations /associations other than political ones, were taken into account.

Majority of the women legislators belonged to the middle age group. They belonged to the above 50 age group. Obviously, gender roles and socio-cultural ethos of the Indian society prevents women from entering into politics at a younger age, barring a few.

Caste plays a very vital role in Indian electoral politics. It is observed that 80 per cent of the women legislators belong to the General Castes, whereas only 20 per cent of the respondents belong to the Scheduled Castes. Even though Himachal Pradesh has a substantial tribal
population, no woman from the Scheduled Tribes of the region has ever been elected to the State Legislature or to Lok Sabha.

The education level of women legislators is quite high. 67 per cent respondents are degree holders, and the study reveals a positive correlation between education and political participation. It was observed that majority of the women legislators have never been in paid employed. Few of them were in employment before joining the legislature, but they left the service after joining the legislature. Only a minor percentage of them are able to continue with their employment even after becoming legislators. It is significant to note that most of them are quite well off. 40 per cent of the respondents belong to cultivators’ families and the second largest group to the families where the male members of the family are in service sectors or to the elite class, where families are engaged in multiple businesses. This study corroborates the findings of the previous studies and the general hypothesis that women enter into politics after marriage, with only a few exceptions. Almost 93.7 per cent of the respondents were married. It appears that married women feel more comfortable in the public domain, while unmarried women come into public focus and more often than not they were under attack, and vulnerable to character assassination.

It has been found that most of the respondents belonged to political families. Women legislators joined various social, religious and cultural organizations and were quite experienced in community work before entering into politics. Majority of them had occupied some positions in these organizations. Almost all of the respondents carried forward the political traditions of the family by joining the same political party to which their family members belonged. It was also realized that most of the respondents were ideologically committed to their party and had a
strong party identity. The study reveals that none of the respondents faced any difficulty in becoming a party member, but at the same time they experienced gender discrimination in party functioning, structure and attitude towards women’s issues. Many respondents served in the party at various leadership positions but they had to strive a lot for achieving leadership position in the party due to the patriarchal nature of the political parties and the society at large. It is easy to grow in party politics and to attain positions of power for those respondents who belonged to affluent families, while it was a challenge for others who wanted to build their political careers on their own. Most of the national and regional level parties have their women’s wings (Mahila Wings) working for the women’s issues. It has been observed that these women’s wings are just appendages of political parties. They do not play the role as a pressure group, both within the party to seek more space for women in all decision making positions, and outside the party for bringing in and providing more space to women in politics and other decision making bodies.

Making entry into politics and recruitment to the legislature is a difficult job for women. They have to cross socio-cultural boundaries and overcome many constraints such as those of gender roles and gender inequalities. Nevertheless, these women legislators managed to break the glass ceiling and enter politics. A number of encouraging factors could be identified. First, is a strong motivation received from many sources, including their family members, party ideology, party leaders, their own instinct for social service and various national leaders such as Shrimati Indira Gandhi, Shri Rajiv Gandhi, Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee etc. Family background of political activists matters a lot in inspiring women to enter into politics. It is felt that most of the legislative elite belonged to a political family.
The entry into politics was enabled and made easier through party work. Having already been politically active in party work, it became their route of entry into the legislature. Many respondents remarked that, it is easier to contest or win the elections than to get the party ticket to contest the elections. It has also been revealed that those women who have a Godfather or Godmother in politics can more easily manage to progress and get party tickets as compared to those who work on their own.

Contesting elections is another difficult task for women candidates. Handling the campaign, managing campaign style and strategies is a skill in which these legislators were well versed. They adopted traditional methods of campaigning and door-to-door campaign was the most popular method. They have identified local needs and problems of the women in particular and the constituency in general, which enabled them to influence the voters in their favour and win the elections.

Once they entered into legislative bodies they exhibited clarity of role perception and performance. They proved their abilities and knowledge and actively involved themselves in the deliberations of the legislative processes. It is felt that they, having well understood the problems and the issues, raise their demands and work for the sustainable development of the area to which they belong. Keeping in view the ground realities, they prioritize the issues and try to mobilize their limited resources to get the maximum benefits. Their main concern was to meet the basic needs of the people of the constituency. Safe drinking water, sanitation, education, health, railway, roads, social security, employment, welfare, violence against women, communal harmony, national security and good governance are some of the issues, which have been given more attention by the legislators. As far as women’s issues are concerned they
were well aware. They mentioned that patriarchal set up, gender stereotypes, gender inequality in the society as the root cause for women’s subordination and low political participation. In view of this, they mentioned that their parties are demanding 33 per cent reservation for women in the State Legislative Assemblies and the Parliament. They further stated that they are campaigning and mobilizing public opinion in favour of reservation. However, it would not be out of place to mention that it is the Parliamentarians, who in some way or the other, are mobilizing and organising themselves in support of reservation. But the members of the State Legislative Assemblies, though subscribe to the demand for reservation, are not actively campaigning for it. They are neither organising themselves on the issue, nor are working for building opinion in favour of reservation in their respective States.

It must also be mentioned that the women legislative elite lamented the lack of women’s caucus in the legislatures where women could raise their issues collectively, rising above party politics. Yet, it was observed that neither did they make any effort for creation of the same, nor were they really interested in it because of power and party hassles. The power games made ‘women’ and ‘women’s issues’ in general the loser.

Although women legislators know the importance of maintaining interpersonal relations, yet they felt handicapped in maintaining interpersonal relations with other legislators outside the legislative business. It is felt that due to the socio-cultural traditions of Indian society, women legislators generally avoid such meeting. Only 50 per cent of the women legislators participated in any such meeting. The remaining 50 per cent felt that their traditions do not permit women to stay out in late evening meetings, or they felt that it is better to avoid such
meetings, as during such meetings the environment is not very woman friendly.

In spite of all difficulties they faced, it has been observed that women legislators had different approach towards public issues and adopt different styles of working. Their issues are based on ground realities. They are less corrupt, and are less involved in dirty politics barring some exceptions. For them power is to act with others rather than power over others. They believe in good governance and also follow the rules of good governance that is accountability, transparency and responsiveness. Most of the respondents are easily approachable by their voters. They look into public grievances seriously and do their best to ameliorate these.

One of the findings of the present study is that, the women legislators were able to manage their work, regardless of role conflicts that women legislators faced due to their multiple roles as homemakers and lawmakers, very well. One thing is definite that without the support and cooperation of family members, especially husband and the other senior female members, it is very difficult for them to carry forward their duties. Most of them do feel stressed at times due to the over burdening of work and few of them were not able to give proper time to their children and family.

Undoubtedly, women are entering and effectively participating in what was previously a ‘males only’ club. They are taking up significantly social and gender issues and providing a women’s perspective to National and State politics. However, the fact of the matter is that majority of the women continue to be left out of decision-making bodies. Moreover, even the women who entered in the National and State Legislatures are not really acting as mentors and role-models for others women to enter these
bodies, for they always feel threatened and insecure. The fear of losing their space always lurks somewhere in their mind. Merely speaking and raising voices is one thing, actually carrying out the task is another. And the hard reality is that most of the women in power positions merely pay lip service to the idea of women’s empowerment.

It would also not be out of context to mention here that a debate is raging in the women’s movement about the desirability of women’s entry into politics. Should women activists enter into politics? Will women be able to cleanse the stream, or will politics pollute women? These are some of these questions, which are being raised. Nevertheless, there is a general consensus that women must enter into politics. However, the women’s movement must play an interventionist role in ensuring that the space created through 33 per cent reservation is effectively utilized. That is, women representatives are not merely regarded as token or rubber stamps but are able to put a feminist stamp on governance.

In addition to this, a few suggestions may be offered which can go a long way in promoting women’s political participation.

First, the Government should take up some initiatives to increase political participation of women at all levels of governance. One of the major steps in this direction is to ensure thirty-three per cent reservation for women in the State Legislative Assemblies and Parliament. In addition to this one-third reservation for women should be made in all other decision making bodies at the government level, with a view to involving women in areas of policy-making.

Ever since, embarked upon Planning, women’s issues have been incorporated into the Five Year Plans. With the Sixth Five Year Plan,
special focus was laid on women’s development, which has continued, it is essential to have a gender screening of the Plans to identify gaps and lapses. Further, monitoring and evaluation framework needs to be institutionalized and incorporated within the Planning process. In addition to this, various policies and programmes enunciated for women’s empowerment need to be scrutinized with a gender lens, so as to provide opportunities to women’s active participation in every sphere of the society, and to ensure their implementation with the same spirit with which they are declared. It is further suggested that there is a need for having gender budgeting both at the State and the national levels.

Allocation must be increased at a significant rate for women’s development and proper monitoring for its implementation should be made so that money allotted does not remaining unutilized. Here it is also essential to mention that funds are allocated for women’s development, but these remain unutilized or underutilized due to the technical and procedural hassles. Many a time, end of the financial year sees many departments racing to spend the funds with them, and programmes are conducted, but the goods (in the sense of women’s empowerment) remain undelivered.

Government should adopt the flexi timing approach, along with a strong network of support services like crèche facilities and day care centers, facilities for the elderly people and other services to support caring work for the working women so that more and more women can participate in public domain and engage in productive activities, which will enhance their status and empower them.

The women legislative elite should act as role models and mentors for new entrants to the political process. They should encourage other
women to participate actively and effectively in politics and other decision-making bodies. It is also suggested that women Parliamentarians should take initiatives to form women’s caucus at the legislative level by rising above party politics and interests so as to build pressure and to lobby for women’s issues collectively. This would facilitate women’s empowerment.

Capacity building programmes need to be launched on a big scale to strengthen the governance role of women at the grassroots and urban local governance level, so that women can climb the political ladder to the national level and above. Women’s Studies Centres throughout the country should take upon themselves, as many of them have already done, the task of orientation and capacity building programmes for the elected representatives from grassroots levels to the highest level. Identification and documentation of success stories will make them play a positive interventionist role in the empowerment of women.

There is a need to make the election environment more conducive for women to contest the elections. In this context it is very essential to combat the criminalization of politics, as it is a great impediment for women to contest the elections. Along with this, it is essential to place restrictions on the use of arms and money with a view to improve existing election system and to create conducive environment for women’s active participation in electoral politics not only as campaigners but also as contestants. Effective curbs must be put on election expenses and violence. Campaign styles, which are derogatory to women’s position, should be banned during the election.

Political parties can play a crucial role in encouraging women’s political participation. Keeping this in view, it is suggested that women’s
issues should be regarded as priority issues of political agenda, further it should be treated as the societal concern rather than considering them as women's issues alone. It is further suggested that for national level parties it should be made compulsory to have 33 per cent reservation for women in the party leadership position at all levels and one-third party tickets should be given to women at the time of election.

Efforts may be made by the civil society, women's groups, and other non-governmental organizations to involve more and more women and provide in the decision-making positions in their set up, such organized groups can be real training grounds and encourage an upward mobility of women in the political decision-making bodies. There is a need to have liaison between women's groups and political organizations at national and international levels to support women's issues in an integrated manner.

In order to raise the social status of women, a sustained campaign against social evils like female infanticide, foeticide, dowry, violence against women, sexual harassment at work place, etc. need to be carried on by both voluntary sector and government agencies at all levels. It is also recommended that it is time to remove gender stereotypes from the school curricula, textbooks and include gender friendly approach in school and college teaching. Girls should be taught leadership qualities and encouraged to be leaders rather than just followers. Efforts should be made to identify and popularize women leaders as role models to encourage more and more participation of women in every field of life.

Media, both print and electronic should be adequately utilized to play a catalytic role in bringing transformation in the society by projecting a positive image and leadership roles of women in different
spheres of public life. Gender sensitization training should be organized for the media personnel from time to time, so that more women are portrayed as leaders and power holders in radio, television, movies, literature etc.

The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women should be fully implemented and the reservations be revoked and necessary actions should be taken to monitor its implementation.

In the end, it could be said that there still is a long way ahead to attain empowerment of women in both public and private spheres. It is a long and arduous task ultimately to attain gender equality and justice in the society. The more difficult part of the mission is to change the mindset of the people and question the socio-cultural and religious practices that perpetuate patriarchal norms. To say, in the words of Bella Abzug, “It’s not about simply mainstreaming women. It’s not about women joining the polluted stream. It’s about cleansing the stream, changing stagnated pool into fresh, flowing waters”. Women in India have shown their ability to make a dent on the political scene, notwithstanding the obstacles in their path. At the grassroots level, women, not only through sheer weight of numbers, but equally by their enthusiasm to learn and work are making their presence felt. At the higher levels of State and National Parliament, women, though few in numbers are still making an impact on politics. Yet the path is long and thorny. Women have to unitedly transform this spiky path to a path to full, equal and effective participation in all aspects of national life.