

## THE RIGHT TO VOTE AND WOMEN: A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

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### **ABSTRACT:**

In the 'era of globalization' women's participation and their representation are the issues that need to be discussed within a wider global context. The representation of women in a political system is a good test of its claim to democracy. The claims that women make for representation are claims for their citizenship and at the heart of their engagement with politics. Therefore, the suffrage campaign by women was an explicit movement for political participation and representation of women.

Today, people often take for granted that women have the right to vote, but this was not the case across the globe just a century ago. Since the time of the world's first democracy in ancient Greece through the mid-1800s, political thinkers excluded women from notion of citizenship and male lawmakers from the extension of democratic rights. Politics was the domain of men, and women were thought to lack the qualities of capability necessary for equal citizenship. Furthermore, religious doctrine or practice and cultural traditions regarding women's proper place in society served as barriers to women's political participation. Women were gradually barred from speaking in public life and also denied the right to vote. In this context the French Prime Minister Edith Cresson has well observed that "there are three places where women have always been excluded the military, religion and politics...today still in politics they have least access". Therefore, for women the struggle for voting rights had been long and hard.

Thus right to vote has been relatively a recent phenomenon for women. Women's political rights have spread all over the world in the past one hundred year. Thus women's modern day participation in politics begins with the acquisition of voting right (**suffrage**). This paper examines the women's struggle for the right to vote and also compiles the granting years of right to vote for women in different years by countries of the world. This paper also emphasised on the status of women's representation in the national parliament of the world.

Key words: Enfranchise Movement, World conferences, Gender equality, Gender Quotas

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The possession of right to vote is within modern liberal democracies a defining characteristic of a person who participates in the polity as a political actor. Liberal democracy set up voting as the main, or even only mechanism through which we can voice our need and interests and women have the distinctive interests which need to be expressed through their vote (Steven, 2007). The vote had been seen as a means to number of ends, such as better condition for children, women and the poor. On these ground Millicent Fawcett a leader of the non violent suffragist movement in UK 'for whom winning the right to vote' was the greatest movement of her life, nonetheless recognised that right to vote was only part of much border changes in the position of, and opportunity for women (Steven, 2007). As women were not considered citizen in ancient Greece and Rome, they neither participated in politics nor did them to vote (Gunheild and Solheim 2006).<sup>13</sup> In Roman society, women were forbidden from taking part in the political process; they could not vote, hold offices, or became citizens (Mountjoy, 2008).

The various system of government in the ancient world was gradually based on the theory that women were incapable of participating in the affairs of the state. Throughout the history, women have been subjected to unequal treatment from legal codes within various societies and culture. One author summed up the plight of Roman women this way: throughout her life a women was supposed to remain absolutely under the power of father, husband, or guardian, and to do nothing without her consent (Mountjoy, 2008). Although, at that time a great philosopher Plato in his great work Republic gave women the right to share all the duties of the state, military and civic. Plato contended that women was weaker physically but not of kind (Nehru, 1988).

Right to vote has been relatively a recent phenomenon for women. Women's political rights have spread over the world in the past one hundred year. Women's emergence into political life began in the non catholic western state and in their most Europeanise colonies as product of far reaching changes economic, social and ideological in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century (Siddiqui, 2009).

As democracy began to emerge in Europe the situation was not different for women. Argument for women enfranchisement has been around since 1600s but clearly took time to take effect on the sympathies of the male public (Gunheild and Solheim, 2006).

History has globally witnessed many movements and revolutions for liberty, equality, freedom and democracy of women. The French Revolution and movements for the abolition of slavery, emancipation of the working class and independence of people from colonial

domination was landmark in mankind's arduous quest for a better world. All these radicals happenings in the world by passed the women ,without substantially improving their position in society and women becoming more and more assertive for their rights with the help of the then emerging feminist movements and struggles. The movements and struggle launched for the women causes particularly gender justice and socio economic, political and cultural equality are generally termed as the feminist movement (Letha, 2006).

Despite French women involvement in the French revolution of the French republic of 1848, French women were prevented from full participation. But the 1800s also offered opportunities, the fight was on, and women suffrage movement arose (Gunheild and Solheim, 2006).

The right of women to vote, throughout the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was also an important phase of feminism. It was first seriously proposed at Seneca Falls on July 19<sup>th</sup>, 1848 in a general declaration of the rights of women prepared by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott and several others (Letha, 2006). The National Women Suffrage Association (NWSA) led by Ms. Anthony and Ms. Snton were formed in 1896 to agitate for women suffrage (Letha, 2006). For women the struggle for voting rights had been long and hard. However by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century women's movement were active to secure equality of representation throughout the world (Lovenduski, 2005).

Women's suffrage movement also pursued different tactical strategies especially in the west. Across the country, suffragist used both outsiders tactics- parades, fair booths, leaflet distribution, canvassing, attempting to vote- and insider tactics such as legislative lobbying and candidate campaigning. Suffragist often avoided visible outsider tactics, such as large public demonstration (Paxton, 2007). Thus one of the most significant and peacefully struggles of the last 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century was the campaign by women to secure the vote. This campaign was long and a vigorous one. Women suffrage came as thunderclap. And the early history of women suffrage is a story of slow building and initial defeat.

The first country to fully enfranchise women, and the only country to give women's suffrage in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was Newzealand in 1893 (Paxton, 2007). Australia was the second country to give women suffrage in 1902 and was followed by a variety of Western and Eastern European states (Paxton, 2007). Finland was the first European country granting the right to vote and elected 19 women in Parliament. Norway granted right to vote to women in 1913. Denmark

and Iceland granted right to vote prior to end of the First World War (Gunheild and Solheim, 2006) (see table.1)

In Britain attempts to enfranchise women before World War First were unsuccessful. During the First World War in 1918 a limited suffrage was granted with an age limit of 30, and by 1928 all women over 21 were enfranchised (Letha, 2006). In France women had to wage relentless struggle for equal political rights and secured their suffrage right in 1944 (Letha, 2006). In Germany women were enfranchised by the Weimar constitution of 1919. As evident in table 1, there was a great deal of variation in the years countries granted female suffrage.

The struggle for female enfranchisement was one of the largest and well documented in the United States. The women suffrage movement in the United State was spearheaded by a number of passionate and influential women. Two especially prominent women in the struggle for suffrage were Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. Stanton and Anthony fought for women's suffrage in number of ways (Paxton, 2007). For the next 20 years, Anthony and Stanton worked tirelessly for women's suffrage. Stanton wrote speeches and Anthony travelled the country and delivered them. Through their efforts, in 1978, supporters introduced in congress the first female suffrage amendment to the constitution. Twelve years later, in 1980, Wyoming became the first state to allow women the right to vote (However the year after it became a U.S. territory in 1868, Wyoming had granted the right to vote) (Mountjoy, 2008). The long fight finally ended for Elizabeth Cady Stanton. She died on October 26, 1902, at her home in New York City. In the course of her life tremendous change took place for American women. She did not live to see women win the right to vote, but at the time of her death, several states did allow women some voting rights. The battle was over for this reformer, but others continued waging the war on her behalf. Finally, in August 1920, with the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment to the constitution, some ten million American women finally become the full political equals of men, eligible to vote in all local, state, and federal elections (Amar, 2005).

Since the end of the Second World War, women in most of the countries of the world have been granted the right to vote. In China women only got the right to vote after the establishment of people Republic of china in 1949 (Gunheild, 2006). Interestingly, it was sometimes countries with longer histories of democratic principles that held out, continuing to deny women rights. Switzerland, for example, did not allow women to vote in federal elections

until 1971. Switzerland was the last European country to granted right to vote to women in 1971 (Gunheild, 2006) (see table.1).

Most countries had small or incipient women suffrage movement; the United State and the United Kingdom were the only countries to reach the mass movement level. In the U K, anti suffrage organizations were formed, while in countries like Australia and Newzealand, women faced much less opposition. In the final stage of the struggle for women suffrage, the major opposition came from the South, where the expansion of voting rights was hindered by opposition to suffrage for Black women (Paxton, 2007).

Another group of holdout countries resided in gulf region of the Middle East. Yet these countries often had not extended political right to men or women. Whether women would be allowed to vote when democracy was first instituted was question that remained to be answered. In 1999 women secured voting rights in the country of Qatar, followed by Bahrain in2001 and Oman in 2003. Women's most recent success took place in Kuwait, when following a drawn out battle and several failed attempts, women were finally granted the right to vote in may 2005 (Paxton, 2007). One of the most recent jurisdictions to acknowledge a woman's full right to vote was Bhutan in 2008.

Recently, in Saudi Arabia king Abdullah has announced, that the women there will gain the right to vote and run as a candidates in local elections to be held in 2015 (The Hindu, 2010).

**Table.1- Countries and years in which women won full suffrage**

Countries	YEAR
Newzealand	1893
Australia	1902
Finland	1906
Norway	1913
Denmark, Iceland	1915
Canada	1917
Russia, Germany, Ireland, Austria, Georgia, Poland	1918
Sweden, Netherlands, Belgium, Ukraine	1919
United States	1920
United Kingdom,	1928
South Africa, Turkey	1930
Spain, Sri Lanka	1931
Maldives, Thailand	1932
Myanmar	1935
Philippines	1937
France	1944
Italy, Japan, Indonesia	1945
Argentina, Pakistan, Singapore	1947

Israel, South Korea	1948
China, Costa Rica Syria	1949
India	1950
Nepal	1951
Bhutan, Syria	1953
Malaysia, Zimbabwe	1957
Iran	1963
Sudan	1964
Afghanistan	1965
Yemen Arab republic	1970
Switzerland	1971
Bangladesh	1972
Bahrain	1973
Iraq	1980
Kuwait	2005
Bhutan	2008

**SOURCE: Data from Pamela Paxton and Melanie M. Hughes (2007)**

Once women had the vote, they had a voice in politics for the first time. They were formally represented in power, having the legal right to participate in politics on an equal basis with men. However it was only a first step towards politics, women now needed to fight for achieving equal representation in public offices (Paxton, 2007).

At present Female representation in parliaments across the world is currently lower than 20%, on average 19.6% (Inter Parliamentary Union 2012). While this is a small minority of all representatives, and the degree of women's exclusion from political office varies enormously across the globe. Thus in the vast majority of the countries, political power- legislative, judicial, and executive are still rests in the hands of men.

Women constitute half of the world population and their contribution to the social and economic development of societies is also more than half as compared to that of men by virtue of their dual roles in the productive and reproductive spheres. Yet their participation in formal political structures and process, where decisions regarding the use of societal resources generated by both men and women are made, remain insignificant. Most of the countries in the world have failed to give due space and representation to women in public offices. Even in societies where women exercise relatively more freedom in day to day living but they remain politically marginalised. Globally, women are still vastly under representation in politics.

According to the feminist movement as well as to feminist theory this shortage of women in political institutions may have serious consequences for the political agenda, for the articulation of women interests and for the legitimacy of democratic institutions

For getting better female representation in public offices many efforts has been taken by most of the countries in the world. And one of the efforts to realise this objective is the gender quotas. Gender quota is one of the most common reform, now has been adopted by many countries to address this inequality in public life. It is the one type of legislation which has been used as an instrument to increase the female candidates in political office. Thus quotas present one such mechanism to increase, and safeguard, women's presence in Parliament and are now being introduced all over the world.

### **Women's Political Right and United Nations**

The international women's movement does not work alone in trying to influence states to increase women's political representation. Instead, women works with the international bodies that connect the world to make sure women's interest are served. Although women and women's movement were active prior to the formation of UN, its creation gave women a place to focus their efforts on influencing large number of countries. Therefore women and women group have targeted the UN from its inception as a place to work on gender equality. For example during the UN formation suffragette and her world women's party lobbied for inclusion of the phrase "the equal right of men and women" in the UN charter preamble (Paxton, 2007). Ultimately the United Nation convention on the political right of women adopted by the general assembly in 1952 provides that "women shall be entitled to vote in all elections on equal terms with men without any discrimination" (Haq, 2005). The convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women adopted in 1979 by the UN general assembly is often described as an international bill of rights for women. The UN also established committee on the Elimination of discrimination against women: convened for the first time in 1982, CEDAW is the treaty monitoring body for the convention on the elimination of all form of discrimination against women.

## The Globalisation of International Women's Movement

The 1970 were especially important for women's global organising at the UN Motivated by the demands of the women's international democratic federation, the UN declared 1975 international women's year. In the Same year, the UN general Assembly declared the decade for women. The United Nation has concentrated on securing equality, development and peace for women and all members of society. The United nation has held global conference on women: Mexico City 1975 Copenhagen 1980 Nairobi 1985 and Beijing 1995. These conferences have helped to achieve gender equality and action needed to overcome them. In Beijing, at the fourth women's conferences in 1995, representative of 189 governments adopted a new five year global action plan, aimed at equality, development and peace. More than 100 governments have made formal commitments to carry out such specific actions as allocating additional funds for education and health, changing health, changing laws and increasing women's participation in decision making (Nisar-al-haq 2005). The Beijing conferences also constitute a comprehensive action plan for economic and political empowerment of women for achieving of full equality for women.

During the 1990s and beyond, the international women's movement and women's organisation continued to place women on the international agenda. As women's suffrage was attained and the goals of the international women's movement shifted, in the fourth world women conference on women in Beijing (1995) international women organisation drew the attention towards other women issues including the incorporation of women's right into conception of human rights. Furthermore, struggle for voting right is continues into the present in some places: multiple votes were taken before women got the vote in Kuwait in 2005, proof of education is required for a woman to vote in Lebanon, and women still cannot vote in Saudi Arabia.

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