

Negotiating Autonomy in Women's Political Participation: The Case of Elected Women's Representatives from Jharkhand

Authors : Rajeshwari Balasubramanian, Margit Van Wessel, Nandini Deo

Abstract : The participation of women in local bodies witnessed a rise after the implementation of 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Indian Constitution which created quotas for women representatives. However, even when participation increased, it did not translate into meaningful contributions by women in local bodies. This led some civil society organisations (CSOs) to begin working with women panchayat representatives in various states to build their capacity for political participation. The focus of this paper is to study capacity building training by CSOs in Jharkhand. The paper maps how the training helps women elected representatives to negotiate their autonomy at multiple levels. The paper describes the capacity building program conducted by an international feminist organisation along with its seven local partners in Jharkhand. The central question that the study asks is: How does capacity building training by CSOs in Jharkhand impact the autonomy of elected women representatives? It uses a qualitative research methodology based on empirical data gathered through field visits in four districts of Jharkhand (Chatra, Hazaribagh, East Singhbhum and Ranchi) where the program was implemented for three years. The study found that women elected representatives had to develop strategies to negotiate their choice to move out of their homes and attend the training conducted by CSOs. The ability to participate in the training programs itself was a significant achievement of personal autonomy for many women. The training provided them a platform to voice their opinion and appreciate their own value as panchayat leaders. This realization allowed them to negotiate their presence and a space for themselves in Gram panchayats. A Foucauldian approach to analyze capacity building workshops might lead us to see them as systems in which CSOs impose a form of governmentality on rural elected representatives. Instead, what we see here is a much more complex negotiation of agency in which the CSO creates spaces and practices that allow women to achieve their own forms of autonomy. The study concludes that the impact of the training on the autonomy of these women is based on their everyday negotiations of time, space and mobility. Autonomy for these elected women representatives is also contextual and relative, as they seem to realize it during the training process. The training allows the women to not only negotiate their participation in panchayats but also challenge everyday practices that are rooted in patriarchy.

Keywords : autonomy, feminist organization, local bodies, political participation

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