

Women in Local Bodies

S. Radha, Bulu Roy Chowdhury

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Women in Local Bodies

S. Radha, Bulu Roy Chowdhury*

1. Introduction

In between 1974, the year the Committee on the Status of Women in India was constituted and 1995, the year of the Fourth International Conference on Women in Beijing came the 73rd Amendment of the Constitution of India, which endeavours to bring women to one-third of the seats of elected representatives in *panchayats* and urban local bodies. This amendment has opened a new chapter in the history of women's struggles for empowerment. It has been indefatigable updeluge swimming regarding women's efforts, which have been relentless, long-drawn, and against formidable odds. Studies made on the implementation of this constitutional directive indicated that at the initial stages, even top-level political leaders failed to appreciate the rationale for women's participation in politics. Nor did women who came to leadership positions fully understand the scope and implications of their new roles. Besides, in their attempts to discharge their official responsibilities, they had often to encounter stiff resistance from their male counterparts and, in a few cases, even to engage in fisticuffs with them.

The amendment of the Constitution has brought the *Panchayati Raj* into existence. The Act passed by the Kerala legislature based on this enactment guarantees decentralisation and devolution of powers in administration and finance. The Act calls for the setting up of a Finance Commission to propose new ways of mobilizing financial resources for the *panchayats*. As this process is not complete, the Government of Kerala earmarked 40 percent of the budgetary allotment for the *panchayats* and urban local bodies. The Planning Board has been entrusted with the task of implementation of a People's Plan for *panchayat* development. This research seeks to examine women participation in politics in *grama sabha*, the main instrument of people's decision-making and their performance in leadership positions in the *panchayats*.

The main objective of the present study is to find the manner in and the extent to which women have participated in *Panchayati Raj* in Kerala, in the discharge of financial, social, and administrative functions and to make an assessment of the impact that their participation made on local development.

The specific objectives of this study include the following:

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- (ii) an understanding of the problems encountered by women members of local bodies;
- (iii) an appraisal of the relationship that women members have with their locality and the role that they played in solving local problems;
- (iv) an assessment of the improvements, if any, made by women members in local bodies in taking, or influencing, decisions; and
- (v) an examination of the interest evinced by women members in addressing the issues and needs of children and women.

The enquiry into the socio-economic background of women members is expected to throw some light on the factors that help or hinder women's performance in the *panchayats*. For example, support from family, education, and occupational experience may be factors, which help women members acquire political stature in society.

It is considered important to study the problems encountered by women members since working women have complained about their double burden when they take up work outside home. Is it the same way women who have entered politics also feel? This question is important as there exists a general impression among the public that political parties consider women members a liability and that they give women, when pressured by bigwigs in the party, constituencies from which it is difficult to win. In addition are the problems of character assassination and sexual violence.

The activities, which the women members had taken up earlier for their neighbourhood, also are considered to be some force in gaining acceptance and approval for their political roles. This has been the experience in the four south Indian States of Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Andhra Pradesh. Whether this presumption is valid in the case of the women members of the *panchayats* has to be examined.

It is likely that their newly-acquired status would enable women to take up their responsibilities and powers in right earnest and to take effective decisions in the local bodies. They might identify issues and formulate policies in areas, which would impinge on them the most – provision of drinking water, amelioration of poverty, and education of girls – areas that would not have received adequate attention earlier. This hypothesis needs to be verified.

The objective of assessing the extent to which women members have addressed the needs of women and children is crucial as it would give a clue as to whether women's entry into local politics and leadership positions holds promise for social and economic transformation of society on equitable terms with wider opportunities for marginalised women to come up. Structural adjustment following the New Economic Policy is understood to have imposed heavy burden on the poor, and more so on poor women. Does the entry of women as elected members in *panchayats* make a perceptible change to such a situation? Have women representatives addressed the strategic gender issues in society such as violence against women, dowry deaths, and 'suicides'?

The sample *panchayats* were purposively selected after consultation with *panchayat* officials and keeping in mind the need for having samples from the representatives of the

different political affiliations. Women-headed *panchayats*, which are reportedly well performing, and those whose performance is reported to be relatively poor were included in the sample. These were the criteria adopted for selection of samples from men-headed *panchayats* as well.

Apart from the representatives of *panchayats*, the sample selected for interview included also members from the public including professionals and leaders of political parties. The study was conducted in the year 2000. The list of *panchayats* included in the sample is given below.

In order to address these questions, the study has undertaken a field survey, conducted a dialogue assessment and made a few case studies. In the field survey, a sample of elected women members of *panchayats* was interviewed. The sample consisted of 35 *panchayats* – 21 with women presidents and the 14 with men presidents and 181 elected representatives - selected in the following manner: Three women and one man each from the women-headed *panchayats* and two women and two men each from the men-headed *panchayats*. Information was collected from a few additional members - 30 women members from different women-headed *panchayats* and one male member from the Perumbavoor *panchayat* in the Perumbavoor block of Ernakulam district. Thus, in all, data were collected from 121 women and 50 men.

During dialogues held with groups of women representatives information was sought to be obtained on the process by which women entered the public domain, decided to contest election and fought for their rights in public fora. Case studies of four women representatives in *panchayats* were also made to supplement the information collected from the field survey and group dialogues. The case studies highlight the hurdles that women had to surmount in their efforts to enter the domain of public action, particularly women of backward and suppressed communities such as Muslims and Scheduled Castes.

Some difficulty was experienced at the stage of data collection. Many members were prepared to report the ground reality only on condition of anonymity. They feared political repression. However, some members were bold enough to even authenticating the information they provided with their signatures. Since this study was conducted near the fag end of their term, a few volunteered to furnish information may be because of this fact.

The field survey was conducted during January-June 2000.

The data were also collected from women members attending workshops in different parts of the State. All the questions were not of a quantitative nature. Qualitative information was also collected such as impressions, opinions, experiences, and hopes.

Structure of the report

Section 2 gives a review of the studies made on the problem and the experience in different parts of India and in Kerala in the matter of women's participation and performance in local level leadership. In Section 3, the profiles of women representatives and women in local leadership positions in Kerala are presented. The impact of women's entry and participation in local-level politics in Kerala is discussed in Section 4. In the light of these discussions, a few suggestions are made in the concluding section.

Table 1.1 List of sample panchayats

District	Block Panchayat	Grama Panchayat	
Trivandrum	Varkala	Malayinkeezhu	
	Vellanad	Karunkulum	
		Vellarada	
Kollam	Karunagapally	Karunagapally	
	Chadayamangalam	Chadayamangalam	
Pathanamthitta		Omaloor	
Kottayam		Kumarakom	
Alleppey		Muhamma	
Ernakulam		Perumbavoor Municipality	Kannikuzhi
			Cherthala (South)
			Kalady
		Edavankkad	
Thrissur		Chelakkara	
		Cherpu	
		Perinjanam	
		Mattathoor	
		Kolazhy	
		Kattoor	
Palakkad		Puthunagaram	
Malappuram	Nilambur Block	Kalikavu	
Kozhikode		Nilambur	
		Chathamangalam	
		Kunumangalam	
Idukki		Santhanpara	
		Kanthaloor	
		Marayoor	
Wayanad		Meppadi	
Kannur		Ambalavayal	
		Mayyil	
		Karivallor-Peralam	
Kasargod		Madikkai	
		Kayyoor-Chennini	

2. Women Participation in Local Level Politics: A review

Women play a subordinate role in society in most parts of the world. The problem in women's development is the rectification of the lopsided power relations between men and women in society. Men dominate both at home and outside home when they work with women; in local bodies in which women have a legal status of power, men tend to exclude them or disregard their views or, worse still, physically assault them.

Women have been walking on a tightrope since the time they took up leadership positions in local bodies (Shah, 1993). Women were being pulled in two directions – on the one side, by the political party that supported them and on the other side, by the women's organisation, which clamoured for justice. In addition, were the problems at home particularly in cases in which their husbands and members of the family were unsupportive of their public role. Political parties have seldom been supportive of women candidates or women's causes. Party directives and the discretion of women representatives often come to clash. Czech women are reported to be not interested in “the extremist political attitudes where there is a right wing and a left wing and nothing in between” (Siklova, 1998). In Sweden, women prefer to keep away from politics due to lack of faith in their own ability and impediments to their effective functioning. In Australia also, women were of the view that they could perform well only with external support, of mentors, friends, and relatives (Telecast by CNN on 18 March 2000). Strangely enough, it is in less developed countries in Asia that women have taken up, in general, the roles of national leaders, such as Presidents and Prime Ministers.

The impediments to women's entry into public life were identified by Young (1999). According to him: “Initiation and entry of women into political and legal structures are expected to transform the process and institutions of governance. However, women's entry and productive role in governance are constrained by a number of factors like lack of gender sensitivity of those concerned, poor access to basic social services like education, unfriendly legal structures and absence of mechanisms which can ensure women's active participation in developmental and political processes for advancement and which can facilitate community support to assurance of the rights of women and children”.

The Committee on the status of women in India reported that no political party had made real examination of the implications of equality for women and that in every party, apart from social reform agendas on women's education, health care, and welfare and improvement of women's position inside the family, they had little idea as to what real political equality for women meant. Their view of women was basically of a handicapped group (Shenkantha, et al. 1998).

The issue of reservation to women in political fora began to appear during the pre-Independence era. When the right to vote was given to propertied men, the question posed was whether women also should be given this right and whether the same criteria should be applied to them. A group of women leaders (Dowager Rani, Mrs. Ahmen Shah, Mrs. Chitambar, and others) went in a deputation before the Simon Commission (1929) and requested that all men who were property owners and all literate women be given the right

to vote. It was their contention that to ensure women's actual participation in the electoral process there should be reservation of seats. This dialogue continued till after the Second Round Table Conference (1931) when two opposing points of view emerged. The two nominated members, Begum Shah Nawaz and Mrs Subbarayan, took opposing positions; while the former was against reservation, the latter maintained that without reservation of seats, Indian women would find it difficult to contest elections (Mazumdar Veena, 1979).

All through the 1930s there were several occasions when women leaders raised the demand for reservation of seats especially for municipal elections because they feared that women would not be able to contest unless such special provisions were made. The Women's India Association had been also of the view that though adult franchise was the only answer for the long run, reservation of seats in the legislature was essential for a transition period.

The Nationalist Movement and its decision to pressurise Mahatma Gandhi to give up his fast against communal awards for elections had considerable impact on the thinking of women in India on the franchise question. It was with the rejection of communal awards and their decision to abide by Gandhi's wishes that all women's organisations (eg: All India Women's Council, National Council for Women in India, Women's India Association) demanded adult franchise for women with joint mixed election and no reservation of seats for women, no appointment by nomination, and no co-option.

The reservation debate surfaced again with the publication of the Report on the Status of Women in 1974-'75. Once again there was a heated debate in the 11-member committee with two of them opposing the idea of reservation, another two demanding reservation from the local to the Parliamentary level and the rest proposing reservation for women only in local elections. The paper on women in India prepared by the Ministry of Social and Women's Welfare rejected the idea of reservation and maintained that "the policy of reservation, though seeming to ameliorate the situation in the short run, may very well turn out to be counterproductive in the long run... Instead, although slow and arduous, the process of electoral participation, issue-oriented protests and a larger movement may prove to be more effective means of launching the second battle (universal franchise being the first) for political equality and effective citizenship of Indian women" (as quoted in Women and Media, 1990). No decision was taken and both the report and the paper were pigeon-holed away for a future date.

In 1988, the National Perspective Plan formulated by the Rajiv Gandhi Government recommended 30 percent reservation of seats for women in local self-government *panchayats*, *Panchayat Samithis* and *Zilla Parishads*.

The 1990s saw a resurgence of the cause of women's political representation. It was in this decade that the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution was brought about, promoting women's participation in politics by reserving one-third of the seats for them.

The following Table shows the representation of women members in the Parliament during the period 1952-1999.

Table 2.1 Women's representation in Parliament 1952-1999

Year	Lok Sabha			Rajya Sabha		
	Number of Seats	Women MPs	% of women MPs	Number of Seats	Women MPs	% of women MPs
1952	499	22	4.4	219	16	7.3
1957	500	27	5.4	237	18	7.6
1962	503	34	6.8	238	18	7.6
1967	523	31	5.9	240	20	8.3
1971	521	22	4.2	243	17	7.0
1977	544	19	3.4	244	25	10.3
1980	544	28	5.1	244	24	9.8
1984	544	44	8.1	244	28	11.5
1989	517	27	5.3	245	24	9.8
1991	544	39	7.2	245	38	15.5
1996	543	39	7.2	223	19	8.5
1998	543	43	7.9	245	15	6.1
1999	543	49	9.0	245	19	7.8
Average	526	30	6.0	238	23	10.3

Source: Centre for the Study of Developing Societies

The number of women voting in 1991 Lok Sabha elections was reported to be far lower than that of men. There was a difference of 10.22 percent in the men and women voting percentages, which may be called the 'gender gap'. It may be mentioned that this gap in 1971 Lok Sabha elections was even higher, 11.85 percent.

A landmark political achievement for women was the constitutional amendment prescribing one-third representation to women in *panchayats* in the rural areas, and local bodies at all levels not only in relation to seats but also to presidentship. Now the struggle is on for one-third representation in state legislatures and Parliament. Stiff resistance comes against this from all political parties.

At present women in Parliament in India form only a very meagre percentage (less than 7 percent). In Kerala also the situation is despicable. A study conducted by the Inter-Parliamentary Union shows that policy-making has for long remained a male terrain. In the Indian Lok Sabha, the representation of women has varied between 3.4 percent (in the sixth Lok Sabha) and 8.1 percent (in the eighth Lok Sabha). In Kerala the strength of women members in the State Legislative Assembly has never crossed 10 percent.

For women the lack of legislative power has meant lack of access to and control of resources and opportunity to use resources at their discretion.

Moves to sidestep this issue are seen also among women already in politics. Divisions within women's groups have arisen. There exists a view that elite women are over-represented in Parliament while women from backward areas and with lower socio-economic status are under-represented. It is argued in support of this contention that elite women do not understand the problems of women living in villages and urban slums. Years of experience has proved that men understood even less the problems of deprived women.

The political entry of women as part of the one-third reservation in *panchayats* has brought about a remarkable change in women themselves, their families, and their immediate community. The biggest political beneficiary of the one-third reservation for women in the *panchayats* and municipalities are women in Kerala.

3. People's Plan and Women's Entry into Local Bodies in Kerala

In Kerala the year 1996 was a landmark in decentralised planning. Local bodies in the State started functioning as institutions of self-government and agents of local development.

But for a brief period in the beginning of the 1990s when the District Councils were in place, the State had a single-tiered *panchayat* system in the rural areas. Now in addition to 990 *grama panchayats* there are 152 block *panchayats* and 14 *Zilla panchayats*. According to the 1991 Census, the average population of a *grama panchayat* is 25,199 persons and the average area of a *panchayat* is 37.83 sq. km in the State. The three-tier *Panchayati Raj* system came into existence in the State on 2 October 1995. Besides the rural local bodies there are 55 municipal councils and three municipal corporations (Thiruvananthapuram, Kochi, and Kozhikode) in the State.

The first step in local planning was the launching of a 'People's Campaign for the Ninth Plan'. This was to ensure that *grama sabhas* are held to prepare local plans in a scientific, participatory, and time-limited manner. Identification of the felt needs of the people was the next step in the decentralised plan process. It was achieved by convening the *grama sabhas*, ensuring maximum participation of people, especially women and other weaker sections. Still we find that "the average participation in the *grama sabha* was only 180". Though it was much higher than the legal quorum of 50, the fact remains that the majority of the people did not attend the *grama sabhas*. Further, women were only around 25 percent of the participants. Also the representation of SC and ST population was not satisfactory. Discussions in many of the *grama sabhas* were confined to the listing of demands rather than analysing the problems and prioritising the needs.

Women's empowerment is an integral part of any development administration. This is more so in a local level development under the *Panchayati Raj* and the devolution of new powers to it. The results of the study would indicate guidelines for strengthening participation of women in local development.

Almost all the local bodies did prepare special projects for women. But in no district the target of 10 percent was met. On an average, seven percent of the State grant-in-aid was set apart for special programmes for women. A study of these projects revealed that most of them were in the traditional mould of women development projects such as kitchen gardening, backyard poultry and garment making. There is significant scope for the overall improvement of women participation in the planning process. On the basis of systematic reviews, special measures have already been initiated to ensure greater participation in the preparation of the second annual plan, formulation of innovative programmes, and imparting of greater gender sensitiveness to the local plans in general.

The Kerala *Panchayati Raj* Act was passed on the 23 April 1994. Prior to this legislation, Kerala had only Village Panchayats, Municipal Councils, and Municipal Corporations and for a short period there existed district councils. The district *panchayats* and block *panchayats* are the two institutions newly created.

One of the novel features introduced by the Act was the constitutional guarantee provided for the entry of women to the local elected bodies. This was indeed a welcome step when seen in the light of years of socio-economic subjugation of women and their invisibility in the electoral process of the country.

The launching of participatory local governance has set up a forum for assessment of its performance through seminars and workshops in the State. One supportive mechanism for implementation was the *grama sabha* (village council). However, attendance in *grama sabha* was not high; some members had not participated in the *grama sabha* at all. Publicity was also given to the *grama sabha* process through people's campaign for attendance and participation. The *grama sabhas* were to be conducted at least eight times in all the wards. Even with all the fanfare of women's reservation, there were still women in the community who had not heard of *grama sabha* meetings. Some women who had voted in the *grama sabhas* in the initial stages did not have a concrete perception of the activities of the *panchayats*. Those who had some idea knew only that *panchayat* activities included implementation of development schemes. No specific reference was made to women or child development even in *panchayats* in which offences against women were in plenty.

The review undertaken by the State Planning Board of the special *grama sabhas* convened in connection with the plan also revealed some weaknesses. The extent of participation varied widely not only between districts but also within districts. It was found that in some *panchayats* like Pattiyoor more than 1000 persons participated in *grama sabhas*, whereas in some other *panchayats* in the same Alappuzha district, there were *grama sabhas* that barely met the quorum requirement of 50 participants. The inter-*panchayat* differences cannot be explained in terms of political affiliations of the *Panchayat* Committees alone. Generally, participation was found to be negatively correlated to the extent of urbanisation. However, the determining factor seems to have been the commitment and the interest of the elected representatives themselves.

Low level of participation was identified mostly at the level of the higher tiers. The remarkable feature of the People's Plan Campaign during the past four years has been the success in sustaining high levels of people's participation in Plan formulation and implementation. The average number of participants in the first *grama sabhas* was 159. In the second *grama sabha*, it declined marginally to 141, but in the third, the number rose back to 165. The participation in subsequent *grama sabhas* was also found not to remain this higher level. The proportions of women and SCs/STs among the attendees also increased significantly. While women constituted 26 percent of the participation in the first *grama sabha*, the proportions rose to 30 percent and 38 percent in the second and third *grama sabhas* respectively. The third year of the Plan Campaign showed an upsurge in the formation of neighbourhood groups and self-help groups. This indicated that micro-level organisations that facilitate effective participation are likely to spread rapidly to nearly all *panchayats*.

This process of participation was also reflected in the process of finalisation of annual plans. The Block and District *Panchayats* were supposed to start preparation of their annual plans only after *grama panchayats* had drafted their plans. The sequential ordering of the processes had been made in order to ensure that the plans of the previous tiers were to be

integrated and the plans of the higher tiers were prepared to complement them. A simple method of integrating the analyses and programmes of the *grama panchayats* at block and district *panchayats* was also proposed. The blocks and district *panchayats* organised seminars to discuss their draft plans. However, because of the delays in the *grama panchayat* plans, the integration of the plans of the different tiers could not be effectively undertaken. To help local level plans, task forces were set up. But an adequate number of experts for the task forces could not be attracted. The participation of officials in the micro plans was also far from satisfactory. Technical details and financial analysis aspects were lacking in the plans. This led to the new concept of Voluntary Technical Corps (VTC) and formation of Expert Committees consisting of retired technical experts to appraise the projects followed. Many of the above stumbling blocks led to many instances of duplication of planning activities and also critical gaps among the various tiers. Women representatives who had initiated projects for development with great zest became disappointed following the non-completion of projects for them.

The people's campaign for the Ninth Plan was introduced with a view of overcoming the problems of Kerala's development process. The campaign was an attempt to conceptualise, operationalise, and institutionalise a system of multi-level people-centred planning process suitable to the regional specifications of Kerala (Planning Board). Gender dimensions aiming at better quality of life of women was also given due importance in the campaign. First, special instructions were given to ensure greater participation of women in the *grama sabha* meetings. Second, women-related issues were an important theme for discussion both in *grama sabha* meetings and also in the training programmes conducted for the resource persons. Third, in the cost-benefit assessment of the projects a gender impact statement was made mandatory. Fourth, the local bodies were advised to set apart 10 percent of the grant-in-aid under women component plan (WCP) for projects directly targeting women. The WCP has been in operation for the past three years.

The WCP introduced as part of an effort for the economic empowerment of women in the community had the adverse effect of shrouding and debilitating the process of political empowerment of women in *panchayats* and thereby diverting all their energies from the issue of important policy formulation. The central space in the stage of People's Campaign was occupied by the WCP. Even so some noteworthy outcomes were identified in a workshop conducted by UNICEF.

The WCP during its operation in the past three years has many achievements to its credit which are outlined below

- (i) For the first time, through WCP, development of women was brought into the agenda of each local body. Women were treated not as mere beneficiaries but as partners in the development process. This was made possible by the decentralised planning process and the political will displayed by the State Government.
- (ii) For the first time in the history of the local self-government, these bodies were asked to set apart 10 percent of the grant-in-aid for projects that directly benefited women. Unlike earlier programmes, which were forced from above, in WCP, the local bodies formulated projects based on the felt needs of the people that were put forth in the

grama sabha. This statutory requirement of setting apart funds for WCP helped women to occupy space to intervene in the development process.

- (iii) The gender dimensions were brought into the planning process. During the second phase of planning, strategic gender needs addressing issues of violence, gender division of labour in terms of equal wages for equal work and atrocities against women came up in various local bodies.
- (iv) With WCP, there was a quantum increase in the benefits given to women. Within this broad context, the disadvantaged like widows, separated women, and families with unmarried girls, were given more weightage while selecting beneficiaries for various projects.
- (v) The 10 percent outlay was set apart by the local bodies uniformly without taking into account the percentage of people living below the poverty line. They also had the freedom to increase the percentage or integrate it with its own funds while preparing projects. Though instructions were given to the local bodies on the use of WCP funds, the local bodies had the freedom to prepare location-specific projects based on the felt needs of the people.
- (vi) Under WCP, participation of women was ensured in all spheres of activities - be it in expressing opinion, taking part in discussion, formulating project proposals, monitoring or implementation. Nearly one-third of the participants in the development seminars were women and they were active in the subject group, which discussed women development reports.
- (vii) New forms of women organisations such as neighbourhood groups and self-help groups were successfully promoted in *panchayats* under WCP. One positive outcome of this was the increased women participation in *panchayats*, which promoted self-help groups.
- (viii) There has been an improvement in the conceptualisation of WCP over the past three years. During the first year, there was no clarity regarding what all could be brought under WCP, a fact which was reflected in the nature of projects prepared by the *panchayats*. Projects on houses, roads, sanitation, etc, which in the strict sense should have been part of the general projects were prepared under WCP during the first year. But there was a marked improvement in the nature of projects prepared during the subsequent phase. There was a reallocation of resources from agriculture to industry, perceptible fall in infrastructure projects, and a shift to employment and other social welfare programmes.
- (ix) Capacity building was given due importance under WCP. The elected women members and women task force members were given training in matters related to women issues and preparation of women-related projects.
- (x) Owing to the efforts at capacity building, a positive impact was created in women empowerment such as leadership development, communication skills, group dynamics, and enhancement of their decision-making powers.
- (xi) There was considerable enhancement in confidence and decision making capacity of women. The women participants in *grama sabha* who had been mere spectators in

the early stages have turned to active participants in subsequent phases. This was made possible by the emphasis on group discussion.

- (xii) It is a remarkable achievement that all the *panchayats* documented in detail issues concerning women development at local level. There is a separate chapter on women welfare in the Development Report prepared by every *panchayat* in connection with the People's Planning Process.

The extent to which People's Plan has paved the way for people's participation especially women's participation and the impact which it had on their socio-economic status, remains to be examined.

The three-tier local bodies in Kerala, to which elections were held in September 2000, have a fair proportion of elected women representatives. Their overall proportion has risen to 38 percent from 35.8 percent in the demitted bodies.

In Municipal corporations and district *panchayats* it is around 35 percent and in *grama panchayats* nearly 36 percent. Of the total number of elected women representatives, 78 percent are in *grama panchayats*, 10 percent are in block *panchayats*, 11 percent in municipal corporations and a little more than one per cent in district *panchayats*.

The rise in the total number of elected women representatives is due partly to the increase in the total number of wards (from 14,173 to 17,074) and partly due to the increase in the number of women who contested in the 2000 elections. Since the proportion of seats reserved for women comes to only one-third, their actual strength in the elected local bodies suggests that roughly 700 women must have got elected from unreserved seats. About 70 percent of them had been members of the previous local bodies as well.

Almost 70 percent of them are less than 40 years old, roughly 25 percent being below 30 years of age. In respect of educational qualifications, women are found to be ahead of men. About 22 percent of the elected women representatives are graduates or post-graduates as compared to only 20 percent among their male counterparts. The proportion of women representatives with post-matricular education comes to about 45 percent. Almost an equal proportion had high school education. About four percent of them are post-graduates.

But figures relating to work participation rates show that women are at a disadvantage. While 38 percent of women representatives were recruited from the ranks of the jobless; the corresponding proportion among men was only less than seven percent. Among the women representatives, only nine percent are full-time political activists. Women score over men only in terms of the proportion of teachers who have opted to contest the local body elections. Among them, six percent are schoolteachers and another 34 percent *anganavadi* teachers.

The general trend appears to be one of working women preferring to stay clear of politics at

local level. The latest survey conducted by the Planning Board shows that working women as a percentage of the total number of women elected representatives came to only less than one-third.

Nearly two-thirds of the women representatives got elected to local bodies for the first time. Thirty-five percent entered local bodies because of their favourable family background; another 25 percent stumbled into it. Only 19 per cent entered the scene on account of their commitment to political ideologies or participation in socio-political struggles.

People's participation in development, simply defined as the effective role in decision-making and implementation from the stage of conception to that of execution of local development schemes, may be viewed from two angles, quantity and quality, and treated as two complementary aspects of participation.

Quantity of participation refers to the strength and the trend in participation of various groups like men, women, backward classes, etc. Quality of participation is concerned with empowerment. It refers to the level at which women, or any particular group, participates in the activities of local level planning. There are three levels at which women in Kerala participate in local level planning.

- (i) Passive participation: mere attendance in meetings of *ayalkoottams* and *grama sabhas* without taking up any leadership roles or availing decision making powers;
- (ii) Active participation: participation in the role of committee members and convenors in local level planning;
- (iii) Decisive participation: participation as participants with powers to take decisions or enforce views.

There are several socio-cultural and psychological determinants, which influence the degree and the level of participation such as

- (i) Age, sex, and family size;
- (ii) Education and religion;
- (iv) Nature of programmes, nature of benefits, and institutional arrangements for participation;
- (v) Psychological aspects and attitudes.

Women in Kerala occupy a 'pride of place' among their counterparts in the rest of the country. However, compared to the status of men in the State, they remain much lower in the ladder (Table 3.1). The literacy rate of women in Kerala is quite high. Other demographic variables such as infant and maternal mortality, general fertility, and mortality rates are extremely low. Age at marriage and expectation of life at birth are, on the other hand, high by even international standards. All these rates compare extremely favourably with those of all the rest of the State in India. However, despite these favourable factors, Kerala presents also a disturbing picture when it comes to rape, suicide, and atrocities against women.

Table 3.1 Relative status of women in Kerala

Sl.No.	Indicators	Reference Period	Women	Men
1.	Literacy	1991	86.17	93.62
2.	Life Expectancy	1991	72.00	69.00
3.	Work participation	1991	15.85	47.58
4.	Employment in enterprises	1990	25.19	74.81
5.	Enrolment in schools	1992	49.04	50.96
6.	Enrolment in colleges	1992	52.78	47.22
7.	Teachers in technical institutions	1992	14.72	85.28
8.	Small scale industrial units	1992	23.39	76.61
9.	Industrial training	1992	26.60	73.40

Source: State Planning Board, Economic Review, Government of Kerala, Trivandrum, Various issues.

Thus an overview of women's status in Kerala indicates that:

- (i) their participation in social development is remarkable
- (ii) the same degree of achievement is not recorded in the economic front as employees and entrepreneurs, and
- (iii) the socio-economic status of women is better than that of men and women in the rest of the country in certain respects.

4. Performance of Women Representatives in Local Bodies in Kerala

In this section we discuss the characteristics of the women representatives in *panchayats* and the roles they play in the discharge of their new responsibilities. Specifically, the following are the points discussed

- (i) the background of the women representatives,
- (ii) the support they get from their families and State agencies,
- (iii) the problems they face and the priorities they maintain in local governance,
- (iv) their self-perception of their various roles,
- (v) their contact with women's organisations,
- (vi) their interest in issues relating to women and children,
- (vi) their self-assessment, and
- (vii) their views on rotation of reservation seats for women.

The socio-economic background of the women representatives such as age, education, family income, marital status, size of the family, and other general details have a great bearing on their performance in local bodies.

Age

More than three-fourths of them belong to the age group of 36-45 years. Only a small proportion (of less than 7 percent) is above the age of 50 years. But it is this small segment that has remained relaxed and confident and carried out their work with authority. According to them, they are not upset by criticisms and are perfectly in command of the governance of the local bodies in their charge. They had adequate time at their disposal to devote to public affairs, approached issues with clarity of thinking and taken appropriate decisions on them.

Table 4.1 Women representatives by age group

Age group	Number	Percent
23-35	42	34.71
36-45	51	42.15
46-50	20	16.53
50 plus	8	6.61
Total	121	100

Education

The proportion of the college-educated was 43 percent, but only less than 16 percent were holders of degree or higher qualifications. All the women representatives in the sample were literate, though about 57 percent had only secondary school education. A general view expressed by the women in the sample was that the ensuing elections would bring more graduates into the political field. The present sample itself shows that all of them had the capacity to read and understand the *Panchayat Raj* Act, rules and regulations and related

matters. As the level of education of the women representatives in Kerala is far higher than that of their counterparts in other states, better management in local governance by them is naturally expected.

Table 4.2 Women representatives by educational qualification

Education level	Number	Percent
Lower primary	2	1.7
Upper Primary	—	—
Secondary	67	55.4
Pre-degree	32	26.4
Degree	12	9.9
Above degree	8	6.6
Total	121	100.0

It is found that about 87 percent of the women members are married. This is expected since marriage is universal in Kerala. This fact indicates that much of the time of women is taken by family duties. Men have remarked during the survey that women inside families particularly married women do not come regularly to the *panchayat*. Many make it a point to come only for the *grama sabha* meetings.

Even those who attended left early to attend to household chores. The unmarried constituted about nine percent. They did not have more freedom than the married as single women members reported greater difficulty to come to work, as their fathers were against the unmarried girls taking up this career. Widows and separated who together came to 4 per cent were constrained for they did not want to appear free of family responsibilities. They also stated that they faced harsh criticism from society for appearing in public roles (Table 4.3).

Table 4.3 Marital status of women representatives

Status	Number	Percent
Unmarried	11	9.1
Married	105	86.8
Separated	2	1.6
Widowed	3	2.5
Total	121	100.0

More than one-half of the women members in the sample had no occupation outside home till they entered the public sphere. They were housewives pure and simple. A housewife's work is not recognised as an economic activity; they therefore belonged to the category of 'not in the labour force'. Twenty-two percent were teachers. Women in other professions (LIC agents, advocates, etc) came to nearly one-eighth of the sample. One-tenth of them had some experience in social work. Business and agriculture accounted for only three percent (Table 4.4). Women members were found coy in answering questions on their

activities. The self-effacing nature of women was very much in evidence. It is possible that some of the women in the category of housewife had carried out some outside work also. One question that arises is the way these women would have answered the new census questionnaire. Have they considered their status as women representatives a career or have they completely overlooked this new venture that has evolved in the process of women's advancement in development and reported themselves to be mere housewives?

About one-third of the women representatives belonged to families within the income range of Rs 2000-Rs 5000 per month. Relatively well off families having monthly incomes of more than Rs 10,000 per month formed about one-fourth of the sample. Nearly 15 percent came from families with less than Rs 1000 per month. As is widely known, the incomes reported by the respondents could have been underestimates. Yet, we may infer that it is not women of the poor income groups who have come forth to take up the new public role of elected representatives. No fisherwoman, coir factory worker or woman working in the informal sector has been elected to the local bodies.

Table 4.4 Women representatives by occupation

Main Occupation	Number	Percent
Cultivation	2	1.6
Business	2	1.6
Teaching	27	22.3
Social work	12	9.9
Other	15	12.4
Housewife	63	52.1
Total	121	100.0

Table 4.5 Women representatives by family income

Monthly Income (Rs)	Number	Percent
0-1000	18	14.9
2000-5000	38	31.4
6000-10,000	35	28.9
Above 10,000	30	24.8
Total	121	100.0

We find that a political party (45 percent) a friend and the community (40 percent) or the family itself (16 percent) were the sources of confidence for the women to enter the public domain (Table 4.6). Some of them complained, however, that after their entry into the realm of public activities, the parties which had earlier encouraged them turned to be extremely high-handed and that, as a consequence, they had on occasion to disregard party dictates.

Table 4.6 Women representatives by sources of support

Category	Number	Percent
Friends & community	48	39.7
Husband & family	19	15.7
Party	54	44.6
Total	121	100.0

Nearly one-third of the women in the sample reported having experienced difficulty in doing work outside home and simultaneously performing their domestic chores. There was not much sharing of domestic work by the men in their families. On the one side these women were felt important with their public roles; on the other side, they lamented their drudgery of cleaning, cooking, and the other umpteen items of domestic work. They were worried that their energies were getting rapidly depleted and they complained of their difficulty to participate effectively in plan formulation. Women representatives belonging to the teaching community expressed relief that at least some work at home was shared by men in the households.

Though political parties was primarily the agency which brought women to activity in the world outside their homes, more than one-fourth of the women representatives began to feel after two to three years of functioning that their parties were disregarding them for the sake of vested interests. Lack of training as an impediment was reported by nearly one-fourth of the sample. Lack of knowledge of Acts and Rules, and of whom to approach for solving problems made them incapable of taking a correct stance on several issues. Some regretted their decision to take up work outside home for which they were thoroughly unsuitable. These women had to face opposition from the bureaucracy and from the community while carrying out their work. They even had to face unwarranted criticism levelled at them. Their way of dressing and the manner of speech had all come in for rebuke. Even in *grama sabhas* their views were not given due consideration (Table 4.7).

Table 4.7 Women representatives by problem encountered

Problem	Number	Percent
Adjusting work with family duties	39	32.2
Undertaking the new and difficult	21	17.4
Task of work outside home		
Encountering rivalry of political parties	33	27.3
Lack of previous exposure and training	28	23.1
Total	121	100.0

The self-perception of the women representatives about the changes that have come about in their leadership ability is reported in Table 4.8. About 70 percent considered that there was great improvement. More than one-fifth could not actually see much change; and about one-twelfth felt that their leadership abilities have deteriorated considerably.

Table 4.8 Women representatives by quality of leadership

Change	Number	Percent
Improved	85	70.2
Deteriorated	10	8.3
No change	26	21.5
Total	121	100.0

Awareness of women members regarding availability and utilisation of *panchayat* funds is reported in Table 4.9. While about two-thirds of them had full awareness, one-fourth had only awareness of a very general type; and less than 10 percent had only somewhat dim awareness. Women representatives complain that they were not consulted by men in the *panchayats* regarding fund utilisation. Some women were bold enough to admit that, to begin with, they knew only about completed works, such as roads, constructed out of *panchayat* funds. They also knew as to who had been entrusted with the works. It is only after several months of such experience that women got involved and began questioning allocation of funds on different purposes by *panchayats*.

Table 4.9 Women representatives by level of awareness about utilisation of *panchayat* funds

Level of awareness	Number	Percent
Fully aware	80	66.11
Moderately aware	30	24.80
Marginally aware	11	9.09
Total	121	100.0

According to self-perception about their level of participation in *grama sabha* meetings more than one-half of the women representatives in the sample participated only moderately; it was only about one-fourth who considered it high; in the case of more than one-fifth, it was fairly low (Table 4.10).

Table 4.11 shows the extent of solidarity among women in issues, which had come up for decision-making. In the case of about two-thirds solidarity existed, but only to a moderate extent. It was only among 27 percent of them, there existed a strong sense of oneness. However, these women came to know slowly that it was mostly outside meetings that decisions were taken. Their united stand on issues was not therefore of much effect.

Table 4.10 Women representatives by self-rating on participation in *grama sabhas*

Level of Participation	Numbers	Percent
High	30	24.8
Moderate	64	52.9
Low	27	22.33
Total	121	100.0

Table 4.11 Women representatives by assessment of solidarity observed among women members

Level of solidarity	Number	Percent
High	33	27.27
Moderate	78	64.46
Low	10	8.27
Total	121	100

More than three-fifths of the women representatives knew about NGOs and their activities in their *panchayats*; but the level of knowledge was quite limited in the case of about 13 percent. For example, they did not have a clear understanding as to whether the NGOs were engaged in activities of women's development. Those already in social work and committed to help others were the ones who knew the activities of NGOs (Table 4.12).

Table 4.12 Women representatives by views about NGOs in *panchayats*

Level of awareness	Number	Percent
Fully Aware	60	49.59
Moderately aware	16	13.22
Not aware	45	37.19
Total	121	100

Women in the community at large approached the women representatives in the *panchayat* mainly for obtaining benefits under the Women Component Plan; not many approached them for discussing women's problems as such. The proportion, which reported that several problems of a common concern for women had been discussed with them, comes to only one-eighth; another one-fourth reported that there had been occasional discussions with them on such problems; but more than three-fifths did not have any such experience (Table 4.13).

Table 4.13 Women representatives by their views about the approach of women in the community

Women's Problems Discussed	Number	Percent
Many	15	12.4
Not many	30	24.8
Not at all	76	62.8
Total	121	100.0

Problems relating to the strategic gender needs like violence, gender division of labour and dowry did not feature much in *panchayat* meetings. About 70 percent of the women representatives do not seem to have made much effort to find solutions to such problems (Table 4.14). They did not take up 'inside family' problems of women. The small percentage, which paid attention to women's issues, did so through *Ayalkoottams* and interfered in family problems like alcoholism. Most of the women representatives who did so belonged

to the Thiruvananthapuram and Malappuram districts. In a village in the Kumarakom *panchayat*, drinking habit of a husband was corrected by women representatives by taking up the issue in the *grama sabha*. These successes have perceptibly enhanced the self-confidence of women in these areas.

Table 4.14 Self-assessment of women representatives about their dealing with women's issues

Dealing with Women's Issues	Number	Percent
Dealt with women issues	20	16.5
Dealt with women's issues, but only on a general level	16	13.2
Did not dealt with women's issues	85	70.3
Total	121	100.0

Problems faced by children in society have received only low priority in local level plans (Table 4.15). All health issues and lapses in the administration of PHCs were identified as problems but not child labour, street children, and child abuse. Only less than one-fifth of the women representatives claimed that they had handled the issues of children even at a general level.

Table 4.15 Self-assessment of women about their handling of issues relating to children

Handling of Issues of Children	Number	Percent
Handled	11	9.1
Handled, but only on a general level	12	9.9
Did not handle at all	98	81.0
Total	121	100.0

The majority of the members of *panchayats*, both male and female, felt that *panchayats* did not have adequate funds. About one-sixth of the men representatives and one-fourth of the women representatives felt, however, that what is required most is effective utilisation of the available funds (Table 4.16).

Table 4.16 Views of men and women representatives on the financial requirement of *panchayats*

Financial position	Women		Men	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
More funds required	92	76.0	42	84.0
Funds Sufficient	29	24.0	8	16.0
Total	121	100.0	50	100.0

Views about corruption at the *panchayat*-level differed widely among the representatives. While 44 percent of the men and 30 percent of the women felt that corruption had decreased under people’s planning, 16 percent of men and 40 percent women felt that it had increased. A few representatives even alleged that projects were granted to favoured parties at deliberately blown up estimates. A large proportion – 40 percent among men and 30 percent among women – saw little change in the level of corruption since the introduction of people’s planning (Table 4.17).

Table 4.17 Change in the level of corruption in the *panchayat* set-up

Level	Men		Women	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Increased	8	16.0	48	39.7
Decreased	22	44.0	36	29.7
No change	20	40.0	37	30.6
Total	50	100.0	121	100.0

About two-fifths of the men representatives felt that women’s participation in *panchayat* activities was only of a moderate level and another one-fifth thought it was rather low. The proportion of men representatives who considered women’s participation to be of a high order was two-fifths (Table 4.18).

Table 4.18 Men’s perception of women’s participation

Level of Women participation	Number	Percent
High	20	40
Moderate	21	42
Low	9	18
Total	50	100

Clashes in *panchayat* meetings were frequent; sometimes they were between women and men representatives. The majority of women had complaints about the degree of support they received from their male counterparts. Only about one-tenth said they received strong support from men in their activities in the *panchayat* meetings (Table 4.19).

Table 4.19 Views of women’s representatives on men’s support in *grama sabhas*

Level of men’s support	Number	Percent
Strong Support	12	9.9
Moderate support	73	60.3
No support	36	29.8
Total	121	100.0

The question whether they would stand again for the election elicited from women the following response: more than three-fifths felt that the backlashes they received to be very repressive and therefore would not stand again; the rest felt that they would like to compete and win again as they had initiated worthwhile projects and wanted to see them completed. Some of them wanted to stand again because there was always the criticism from the public that their predecessors who were men, had shown much better performance. These women wanted to prove their worth and reverse the going impression.

Profiles of three typical women *panchayat* presidents are presented in the next section in order to gain a clearer understanding of the factors, which influence their relative performance and the travails they face in the discharge of their official duties.

Profile I Caste, Gender, and Empowerment

Shakila belonged to a poor Scheduled Caste family in central Kerala. She has two brothers. She lost her mother quite early in life and the whole burden of keeping the house fell on her shoulders. Shakila passed her pre-degree examination but could not pursue studies due to poverty at home and objections from her father. To supplement the meagre income of the family, she started taking tuition for schoolchildren. Her two brothers, who were given the opportunity to study, were not able to get through even the pre-degree examination. The boys started going for odd jobs but most of the time remained idle. The main source of income of the family was her father's work in a canteen in the locality.

Five years passed after Shakila passed her pre-degree examination. She stayed at home without much contact with the outside world. Rosy, her friend from school days helped Shakila to join a self-help group (SHG) for women. Shakila pooled her small savings and joined the group and got exposure to women's problems in life. In the SHG, from a garment-making unit functioning without much promise of success, Shakila began getting an understanding of the gender immensity of discrimination based on gender and caste rampant in the society.

Some of the women kept away from her. Her father had allowed her to join the SHG with the sole purpose making some money for getting her married. It was at this time that Shakila came into contact with Leela, a widow with a strong character. Leela slowly infused the idea of Shakila standing for election as the woman *panchayat* president. She promised to give full support because she felt that her friend should not be losing an opportunity on the ground that she belonged to the SC community. Shakila's father opposed the idea vehemently, but the idea was gaining approval in the minds of women in the locality. Shakila's father ultimately succumbed to pressure from women, particularly from Leela. Shakila also got a political party to support her candidature. As luck would have it, Shakila won and Leela also became a member.

Shakila had to encounter opposition from different quarters: her brothers, her community, and even her father created all sorts of difficulties for her to perform her jobs. Her irregular hours of work and her travel to distant places were not appreciated by the men folk in her house. Leela gave her great support for the specific reason that Shakila's community did not

accept her. Shakila's father kept reminding her that her public life was going to create problems for her marriage. And she herself was undergoing great stress of performing the double roles of a meek and modest female in the household and of the leader of the *panchayat*.

The support Shakila received from a few women members had helped her a lot. Some of the outstanding initiatives that Shakila had taken are remarkable. Her locality had several women AIDS patients who were being ostracised by the community and even their own families. Shakila would go and talk to them quite often. She also helped the children of AIDS patients to live normal lives. Her example was followed by many social workers and slowly the children got acceptance by their families and the local community. Shakila held awareness camps for educating the public in this matter.

Shakila faced several problems in her *panchayat* meetings. As she was unmarried, some men members would try to take liberties with her. They would sit unseemly close to her, breathe down her back, and prod her under the table. When such things happened often and in front of others, she was afraid that she would be branded promiscuous. There was an instance when the men members stooped even to worse things when their entreaties to her for passing an illegal work failed. They began a scandal-mongering campaign against her writing on the compound walls of her illicit relations. Leela calmed Shakila down, promised her support and brought her back to work despite her father's insistence on her resignation from office. However, she has lost all confidence and would not stand for *panchayat* election again.

Profile II Power through Reservation

Vishaka is a professor in science, active for long in the college teachers' association but had never been in direct politics. She had never participated in public activities for solution of general problems such as drinking water, employment, health care for women, family planning or dwelling places. Vishaka had dealt only with her elite peers and only in a small orbit. She later became a member in the university association with leftist learnings. Still later she became a corporation councillor and regular local committee member of a political party. She was councillor for five years; her exposure to work under strict party discipline enabled her to take up several issues of the common people in the capacity of corporation councillor.

Vishaka's husband, a retired professor and a party member does not interfere in her official work; nor does he help her with the household work. Her only son is living abroad.

Visakha has taken up the women's cause of economic empowerment quite seriously; she has organised women's enterprises of various types: repair of electric pumps, making and rectifying water meters and other reading instruments, computer programming, midwifery, training in water meter reading, production of teaching aids and pickle-making. She holds ward conventions for discussing development work with members and the public. For self-help groups, she gives loans worth Rs 3 lakh each, out of which Rs 1.5 lakh is grant. She gives Rs 2500 each to *Kudumbashree* projects, and Rs 30,000 to Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe women for construction of houses.

She has addressed long-term problems of development (such as master plans for development of watershed and conservation of water) through consultations at ward meetings and extended generous help to NGOs.

Vishaka likes to be called a political worker. She has fought for women's cause and got 14 seats for women in their party out of the total of 77 seats. She was not greatly appreciative of the functioning of *grama sabhas* or ward *sabha*, which according to her are mere centres for distributing grants through master plans. She has succeeded to some extent in converting ward *sabhas* from a doling out post to a forum for solving local women's issues. She could not turn, however, the ward *sabhas* into vibrant discussion centres for development. In her own ward all activities are transparent and corruption has virtually disappeared. Her attitude was positive about People's Planning and the Women Component Plan (WCP). However, Vishaka has not succeeded in taking up social problems such as dowry deaths, suicides, sexual harassment or abuse of children.

Profile III Political Empowerment and Self Development

Chand Beevi, a Muslim woman from north Kerala stood for election to the local body in the face of severe opposition even from her own family and community. She contested in a reserved constituency, but with population consisting of different communities and without a Muslim majority, and won with a comfortable majority. Despite her lack of previous exposure to public activity of any kind, she has been handling various economic and political issues coming up in the *panchayat* with confidence and dexterity. She is a housewife and has four children. Her husband is working abroad. She is not highly educated but has managed to reach the SSLC level. She commands respect for having come from an old reputed family and having her husband employed abroad – a symbol of high status in the local society.

Chand Beevi has contested and won elections twice, the second time in the 1995 round of women's participation. Her entry into politics has not been, however, without hurdles. The first time her husband was persuaded by other men to hold her back at home. She was even given a bad name by her opponents as she went out after evening hours to discuss problems with men. She thinks she had really taken a hazardous decision. If her husband believed the scandals he would have thrown her away and married again as was the practice in her community. She could not imagine where she could have gone with her four children in such a situation. Even if he had restricted her freedom and forbidden her from leaving home premises, she could not have taken up the public role. Family support was an essential prerequisite for effective performance of women in politics. Once she was assured that her husband had absolute trust in her, she braved all hazards out. Her second term of success was proof enough that her determination was working wonders.

Chand Beevi's husband comes home every three months. She makes the best use of his home visits by consulting him on administration of local bodies so that she gets a man's views on it. She looks after her children with great attention, as she does not want to feel guilty of neglecting her duties at home or to give room for others to find fault with her. Other women members in her family have found her audacious. Having seen the plight of

Muslim women of the older generation, she has a burning desire to do many helpful things to enable the present generation of women to live modern lives. She could not do much during her earlier term. Now she is better aware of the nuances and is confident of performing better. She listens intently and is a very effective public speaker.

During her first term, she was able to throttle a proposal of the *panchayat* to construct a road through a paddy field in the teeth of stiff opposition from the majority of members and thus avoided potential loss of fertile cropland.

In her second term, Chand Beevi is deeply involved in health programmes, family planning campaigns (for Muslim women specifically as she herself had four children), and polio vaccine drive. She disclosed that one of her aunts is the tower of strength of her. According to her, given the opportunity Muslim women, who have remained chattels at home, would blossom out and would take up and solve many a social issue for themselves and for the community at large.

Chand Beevi was found on the day of our interview, leading a group of 20 Muslim women – young and old, married and unmarried, all in *purdah* – to meet the District Collector, for submitting to him a petition for early allotment of public land already assigned to them.

Muslim women in north Kerala have begun fighting against alcoholism, child marriage, and sexual harassment of women. They have even questioned the denial to women of their right to pray inside the mosque. The clamour for women empowerment has gathered momentum in north Kerala under the able leadership of women of the genre of Chand Beevi.

Discussions with elected representatives of panchayats and other knowledgeable persons, both women and men, suggest the following broad conclusions.

Elected women representatives feel that they are not given due consideration in the *panchayats*. They do not receive communications from the *grama panchayat* to attend meetings punctually. They are prevented, in several cases, by male members of their households, from attending training camps. Both in forward and backward caste families, it is the male members who wield power. Scheduled castes are at the command of the dominant castes though within the family, the husband exercises the power of decision-making. This is true of families of elected women representatives.

Impact of political parties' influence

Rural Kerala has witnessed sweeping changes because of the new process of women's political empowerment. An outstanding instance of this political power channelled into positive aspects is found in the Karakulam *panchayat* of Thiruvananthapuram district in which a woman member has been instrumental in setting up of a Rural Study Centre for women. Several training programmes on resource management, resource mapping, and computer technology are being conducted in this centre.

Women representatives experience harassment at the hands of political parties. For instance,

in one incident in north Kerala, a woman *panchayat* President and her husband were brutally assaulted by members of her own political party only because she had questioned certain corrupt practices of the party's rank and file. Disgusted and disillusioned and for fear of the safety of her family she chose to quit her position as an elected representative.

In general, elected women function under severe constraints, which hinder their success as representatives in self-governance bodies. They are being prevented by the anti-woman customs and conventions of the society from getting together in a common platform for women. Women find no genuine efforts undertaken by agencies supposed to be concerned to empower them politically. The stakes are too many for men in authority, whether in bureaucracy, law enforcement agencies, judiciary or political parties, to permit ascendancy of women to positions of power.

Display of power, authority and courage by a few elected women representatives has sent warning signals to those in authority that stand against women's empowerment.

A few women representatives who has to defect and re-defect parties did so for various reasons such as the following:

- (i) They were barred from taking up women's issues in the *panchayat*.
- (ii) They wanted to retain their positions of power in the *panchayat*.
- (iii) They had fallen from the grace of the supporting party.
- (iv) They began questioning corruption.
- (v) They found defection relatively easy.
- (vi) Their social standing went down because of their political affiliations.
- (vii) The political party, which supported them, used them for its own ends.

This game of jumping parties for their own sake as well as the party's sake has affected adversely the chances for women representation of forming a strong and stable forum for women's empowerment in *panchayats*.

5. Suggestions

The responses from the elected women members indicate that, in general, they are influenced by opinion of male members. Even in a group of five members in which four are women, it was the only man present who was able to shape the general opinion of the group. Women participants in political arena are yet to display self-confidence, except in rare cases.

One drawback revealed by the survey was that the Financial Standing Committee in each *panchayat* is almost always presided over by men. There are of course, a few cases of women as standing committee chairpersons. But the whole proceedings are always directed by men. The Standing Committee must have the representation of the women of the different political parties of the *panchayats*. That would make the functioning more democratic and participation of women more effective.

Training should be given priority for capacity building for women members. Rigorous gender training under enlightened and progressive women is required in order to enable the women representatives to bring into the planning set-up issues such as dowry and violence. Women in politics have also to keep themselves free from the undue and undesirable influence of members of their families.

Adequate information relating to various programmes and activities of the *panchayat* should be made available to women members. Instances have come to our attention of micro-level plans prepared with great effort getting scuttled at the final stage for flimsy reasons. Groups or committees relating to various activities on a subject basis have to be formed to ensure greater participation of women members in decision-making. Awareness should also be imparted to women political leaders on their rights, powers, and duties. Many women representatives often expressed unfamiliarity with Acts and Rules in force. Lack of training has impeded meaningful functioning of most women members.

Regular interaction among women members across *panchayats*, districts, and even States should be facilitated. Such interaction would help women realise their advantages and disadvantages. Computer facilities with access to Internet should be made available to women members.

State-level seminars on women *panchayat* members have suggested several measures for their betterment. However, most women members in our sample were found ignorant of such seminars. All women members of local bodies should be made aware of the various programmes conducted for their benefit and follow up measures taken to see that their recommendations are being carried out in full measure.

Women members who are in regular employment undergo great stress because they have to bear simultaneously the burden of three roles - an employee, a *panchayat* member, and a housewife. These women find it hard to give full attention to their duties in the *panchayat*. Keeping such women away from politics would not, however, solve the problem. Supportive measures should be evolved at home and in the place of their regular employment to enable them to perform their multiple roles. There is great necessity to sensitise men members of

local bodies and men at home to share the workload of these women members. The women members must be ensured access to scientifically designed coping measures and stress releasers. Adequate steps must be taken also to provide them opportunities for entertainment at the local levels.

An outstanding linkage to be forged is between women's movements and the political activities of women. The People's Plan Campaign did introduce the *Kudumbashree* scheme and the institution of *Ayalkootums*. Implementation of these schemes and institutions need to be strengthened. It is also necessary to make them statutory.

The average number of participants in *grama sabhas* is low. The majority of the local people do not attend the *grama sabhas*. Further, women formed only about a quarter of the total number of participants. *Grama sabha* meetings are a farce; one hardly hears any voice of dissent or voice of concern in such meetings. The member of the Expert Committee, usually a male member, announces the *Kudumbashree's* list of applicants. Some *panchayat* presidents and women representatives have reported that the Expert Committee facilitating the progress of micro-plans should include members from the local public as well.

Instance of violence being perpetrated by political parties on elected women representatives also have come to our notice. Many women felt that they were being exploited by the political parties. Continued acts of violence against women would discourage them from entering the political arena. The Government should take stern steps to ensure that women are protected from onslaughts by political parties.

Elected women should be taught to lobby with the Government and the co-ordination of *panchayat* members and development functionaries need to be strengthened.

Women members may try to make use of the WCP scheme to promote enterprise and employment of women to provide social security to poverty-stricken and destitute women and to give shelter to women and girls in distress.

Local NGOs may be encouraged to help organising women at the village, block, and district levels and providing them a platform for sharing of problems and exchanging of solutions in areas such as the following:

- (i) nurturing women to develop their decision-making skills;
- (ii) identifying local women with potential for taking up responsibilities in *panchayats*.
- (iii) translating into the local language rules and regulations of local bodies and simplifying and interpreting them;
- (iv) undertaking training at the three levels for prospective candidates, for elected members and for officials and conducting refresher courses for the *Panchayati Raj* women functionaries.

Political empowerment of women and their active participation in local self-governance bodies should not be based on the 'luck' factor. Efforts to mainstream women in politics must be a continuous process by which, regardless of reservations, communities become supportive to women leaders capable of taking over the local governance functions.

The capabilities of women belonging to all communities should be built up not necessarily of those in the reserved constituencies alone. Only such an approach would provide women with the much-needed capacity to play an active role in the decision-making processes at the level of family and community and to build mechanisms to protect themselves, their children, and families.

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