



ISSN NO. 2320-5407

Journal homepage: <http://www.journalijar.com>

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL
OF ADVANCED RESEARCH

RESEARCH ARTICLE

**POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN KERALA THROUGH
KUDUMBASREE**

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Manuscript Info

Manuscript History:

Received: 22 March 2014
Final Accepted: 22 April 2014
Published Online: May 2014

Key words:

Political participation, Women empowerment, Rural development, SHG, Kudumbasree, women representation, upliftment

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Abstract

Women, being the integral part of every economy are primary factors for all round development and harmonious growth of a nation .In the present scenario women are to be considered as equal partners in progress with men. Empowerment of women is a multidimensional phenomenon and covers economic, political, social, cultural, personal, environmental and familial aspects. Women's equal participation in political life plays a pivotal role in the process of upliftment and advancement of women. Women's role in decision making is one of the most important aspects that need to be considered on their empowerment. Though women face handicaps in politics, their participation in SHGs/NHGs have altered their outlook and they have become political leaders in local self-government institutions in India. The concept of SHGs/NHGs have drastically changed the lives of women, especially in rural areas .On the context of 50% reservation of women in LSGL, the paper tries to focus on the revolution started by the hands with bangles marking a sea change . It has been found that large numbers of women from traditional backgrounds emerges from the cloisters of their kitchen and knock on anonymous doors, walk through the streets and argue on public platforms when they contest the elections. The SHGs/NHGs and NGOs play a major role in empowering women politically. The political participation of women is twofold. Women have always and almost everywhere been on the fringe of political and social power. The paper tries to focus on the experience of women, their representation and participation in political arena. The women's experience in the political role, the processes of change and problems of participation, support of families, communities and other social collectives and empowering effect is also looked upon.

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Introduction

The limited female participation and representation of women in national decision making has got serious consequences for women and legitimacy of the institutions. The participation of women in politics should be as equal to the population of women in the country. Or else it shows deep flaws in the political system. Representation means not just acquiring positions in the office, but the elected people has a responsibility to act on behalf of the constituents, especially women, who have elected them for filling up their ideas and aspirations .The under representation of women in the political sphere is due to the low and inferior status of women in Indian society. The declining sex ratio also has an impact on this.

India ranks a low 134 among 187 countries in terms of the human development index (HDI), which assesses long-term progress in health, education and income indicators, said a UN report released on Wednesday. Although placed in the "medium" category, India's standing is way behind scores of economically less developed countries (Hindustan Times, Sep2012). According to the Human Development Report 2011, India ranks 129 out of 146 countries on the Gender Inequality Index(GII), below Bangladesh and Pakistan, which are ranked at 112 and 115, respectively. Quoting the words of Sri.Jayaram Ramesh, "the representation of women in the Indian Parliament is very low, a meager 10-11 per cent. In Bangladesh and Pakistan, their representation is much higher. However, if we were to include in the index women's representation at the Panchayat level, then our ranking will shoot up." The comparative position of gender related development index, GDI reveals that among 177countries, India ranks 113th, indicating its low gender-equity status.(Human Development report 2007/2008). Democracy implies equality for all human persons, men and women. Contradicting this basic notion of democracy what is normally seen is that women are excluded from different walks of life, especially, politics. The U.N. observes that women constitute "world's largest excluded category". For the attainment of true democracy there should be better political participation. "In the struggle for gender justice", Usha Narayanan argues, "Political participation constitutes the first and foremost step in that direction."

Equal treatment to women in political life, to be meaningful and effective should start from the grassroots level. To provide training and practice in the process of decision-making, the rural democratic institutions are the ideal structures to begin with. One of the aims of the 73rdConstitutional Amendment Act is to accomplish this purpose. "The question of political empowerment of women in rural India has assumed considerable significance recently because of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act. The amendment provides reservation of seats and posts of chairperson for women in all grassroots level democratic institutions in the country known as panchayats. This is a historic step of far reaching implications and significant repercussions on the political process in rural India."

Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995) have defined political participation as "any activity that has the intent or effect of influencing governmental action, either directly by affecting the making or implementation of public policy or indirectly by influencing the selection of people who make those policies" (p. 38). With using this definition of political participation, participating in politics can mean a variety of activities, such as voting, attending a demonstration, signing a petition, being a candidate in elections, discussing politics, being a member of a political party, etc. Research suggests that women on some points participate less in politics than men do. Miller, Wilford and Donoghue (1999) found that women are less politically involved and more passive regarding politics than men. Men are more likely to claim that they initiate or engage in political discussions and men are more likely to express their disagreement if they do not agree with someone else's opinion. Another research indicated that women are less likely to donate money to, work for and being a member of a political party (Childs, 2004). Further, Swanee (2007) found, in a report covering 115 countries, that women enclosed only 15 percent of the gender gap when it comes to political empowerment at the highest level, which indicates that women are still severely underrepresented in governments worldwide. What could cause this gap between men and women with respect to political participation? Panchayati Raj is an important innovation and a vital conduit in independent India, for popular participation in democratic development. It is envisaged not merely as a method of implementation of rural development policies and the dispersal of developmental benefits, but more importantly, as a training ground for the promotion of local initiative with a view to increasing people's political consciousness, awareness of their rights and direct participation in self-rule.

An average Indian woman who has little control over her own fertility and reproductive health can be pictured as illiterate compared to men. Compared to men, more women drop out of school. Women workforce in paid sector is less than that of men. Women's work is undervalued and unrecognized. Along with their household work and other activities, they tend to work for longer hours outside home as well. And they don't get paid overtime even. There is even gender discrimination in wages. Women face violence inside and outside the family throughout their lives. Most women in India have very little say in decisions affecting their own lives. The cumulative effect of all this is that women tend to lack the self-confidence and skills needed to function effectively in the public sphere. (Sen, KalyaniMenon&.Shiva Kumar A.K: 2001). The under representation of women and absence of women from positions of power and decision-making reinforces their exploitation and deprivation. It is in this context that women's greater political representation becomes all the more necessary.

The women in India raised the representation of politics in 1917. Though by 1930, the women in India gained the right to vote, it remained a privilege of the elite women folk. But even after the right to vote became a reality for all women, their representation in the parliament, political parties and other decision making bodies remained low even after independence, and after the Indian Constitution came into force in 1950. (SusheelaKaushik:1993:1996, Veena Mazumdar:1993). Few women has gained access as members of parliament or legislative assemblies mostly through family dynasties or male political patronage. Women do not share the power of decision making and are not

involved in policy making process in comparison to their numerical strength. Hence there is a gap of idea of women's political participation and their meaningful use of power.

With the passage of 73rd Amendment Act, 1992, India is at a crucial structure in the evaluation of Panchayati Raj institutions- the Indian brand of rural local-self-government. It has envisioned people's participation in the process of planning, decision-making, Implementation and delivery system. The Panchayat Acts of State governments have subsequently been amended to incorporate the stipulations of the central Acts thus the constitutional mandate has heralded uniform pattern throughout Indian states.¹

Women in India generally find it difficult to go up the political ladder without male patronage or mentors. To an extent the women's wing of the political parties may have an opportunity to participate in the decision making process, but that too just pertaining to their party alone. The scope for women's public activism varies across class, caste and region in India. The effectiveness of women's participation also depends on the local configuration of power and cultural environment apart from problems of poverty, illiteracy, lack of economic resources, negative social and legal environments, family and household pressures, male dominated bureaucracy and politicians that the women face.

The most outstanding feature of the 73rd and the 74th Constitutional Amendments is the visibility and space that is provided for women. Reservation of women from all castes and class categories and all levels of administration – village, taluk and district – is an important indicator of women's empowerment through decentralized bodies that have opened up the gates of political power and status to hitherto such unrepresented sections of the society. The study seeks to explore the impact of membership and participation in SHGs on empowerment of women, especially in political scenario. Women's political empowerment, usually envisioned as political participation in elections and government, is necessary to give women a voice in the policies that affect their lives. Women's economic empowerment, which entails that women have the authority to make their own decisions regarding use of their resources, leads to prosperity for families and communities. Social empowerment, often achieved through public policy and education, liberates women from the mistreatment, exploitation, and oppression that inhibit women from reaching their full potential. The issue of women's empowerment, which enables women to assert their political power, has been on the anvil of discussion at many levels in India. As mentioned earlier, the Beijing conference (1995) drew particular attention to the neglect of women in political structures all over the world and the importance of bringing women into political arena.

Self-help groups

SHGs are forums for the collective voice of the poor against common oppression and exploitation to understand individual and common problems and improving their skills and capacities to manage resources (Dwarakanath 2002). The concept of SHG serves the principle "for the people, by the people and of the people". The origin can be traced back to the Grameen Bank initiative founded by Mohd. Yunus in Bangladesh. It was purely a social movement for social development. In the words of Sri.T.K.Oommen, an economist, "SHG is an institutionalized collective action guided by an ideology and supported by an organization structure. It is an agent for social change and is intended for that." Women SHGs are effective strategies for poverty alleviation, women development and social empowerment. The women in these groups get enhanced status as to make decisions and become beneficiaries on the democratic, economic, social and cultural spheres of women. One of the powerful approaches to women empowerment and rural entrepreneurship is the formation of self-help groups. This strategy had fetched noticeable results not only in India and Bangladesh but world over. Women self-help groups are increasingly being used as tool for various developmental interventions. As per statistics in 2006, 90% of the SHGs are run by women and 80% are rurally located. SHGs do not have clients; they have members who own these institutions.

Women in Self-help groups

Women are considered as central to the entire development process of a country and are at the precursor of social transformation. The growing social awareness across the globe has brought a number of issues to the fore among which gender equality and empowerment of women are very significant. Discrimination against women in the form of male-female differentiation constitutes the core of the gender-biased system. The World Bank has suggested that empowerment of women should be a key aspect of social development programs. The empowerment is not essentially political alone in fact; but, political empowerment will not succeed in the absence of economic empowerment.

SHGs are a boon to the women as it gives them a way to work, earn and help their family. Before the advent of SHGs even, we could see women working in various jobs of their ability and stature may be in the brick industry, rubber industry etc. But with the advent of SHG it was found that they could join together for income generating

¹SachidanandaSatapathy; Women's empowerment and panchayathi Raj: A case Study from Orissa.(India)

activities .Every power is in one way or other connected to money and hence economic empowerment was a huge achievement for the ladies in this group.

Women in Politics

Women's representation in parliament and state assemblies is roughly 10% in parliament and state assemblies. When compared with some South Asian countries, we have lesser representation in national assemblies. The women representation in assemblies in Pakistan(20%) , Nepal(20%), Bangladesh(20%) and Sri Lanka(22%) are the statistics as per 2009 elections.

Though women face handicaps in politics, their participation in SHGs has altered their outlook and these women can be prospective leaders in local political field. Nonetheless various constraints like discriminatory practices in labour, a low level of skills etc. operate to contract a woman's potential for empowerment. It may be comparatively easier to ensure material change than to cause a change in power structures and the ideologies and attitudes which accompany them. India probably became the first country to reserve 50% seats for women at local self-government (LSG) level after the Union cabinet approved a proposal for a constitutional amendment bill for increasing quota for women in panchayats at all tiers. The rationale for reservations for women and other disadvantaged groups in the rural local self-government institutions is that the system intended to give voice and therefore influence to these groups in local governance. According to political theorist Anne Phillips(1995) the 'politics of presence' can provide such groups with guaranteed representation in public institutions - such as quotas in law making bodies, so that they may effectively represent their own needs and interests. The government believes that this move will facilitate the entry of more women into public sphere and thereby, lead to their empowerment. This can also improve their decision making skills. Being a ward Member or a counselor meant more respect from the family members. The step will also make panchayats more inclusive institutions, working towards better governance.

Role of Kudumbasree in Political Empowerment of women

Formally inaugurated in May 1998 and launched in April 1999, but fully operationalized by 2003, the Kudumbashree (KDS) is 'a women-oriented anti-poverty programme cast in a mission mode under the leadership and patronage of panchayats and municipalities. Presently, 7.37 lakh poor families brought under the community based organizations (CBOs) consisting of 2.56 lakh Neighborhood Groups (NHG), 19,773 Area Development Societies (ADSs) and 1,072 Community Development Societies (CDSs) - rural urban. Kudumbasree is not a commercial institution. It is a community-based organization (CBO) of the poor identified on the basis of 9-point criteria. It has three tiers with the neighborhood groups of poor women (NHGs) at the bottom, the Area Development society (ADS) at the intermediate level and the community development society (CDS) at the apex level. By now most poor families in the state have come under the CBOs and are networked. Contrary to the income poverty approach of the Government of India (GOI), KDS has developed a holistic approach to poverty alleviation.

Participation, which can be interpreted and obtained in a variety of ways, is the most argued beneficial form of gender empowerment. Political participation, which may include the ability to vote and voice opinions, the ability to run for a public office with a fair chance of being elected, has a big role in the empowerment of people. However, participation is not limited to the realm of politics alone. It can be said that these latter participations need to be achieved before one can move onto broader political participation. When women have the agency to do what she wants, a higher equality between men and women is established. It is argued that microcredit also offers a way to provide empowerment for women. Governments, organizations, and individuals have caught hold of the lure of microfinance. They hope that lending money and credit allows women to function in business and society, which in turn empowers them to do more in their communities. One of the primary goals in the foundation of microfinance was women empowerment. Loans with low interest rates are given to women in developing communities in hopes that they can start a small business and provide for her family. It should be said, however, that the success and efficiency of microcredit and microloans is controversial and constantly debated.²The paper tries to find out whether the participation of women in the SHGs has improved the decision making skills of the women, increase the awareness and knowledge of the women, does it improve the position or influence of women in the household, does it improve the mobility and network development of women. And above all does it boost up the confidence level of these women and has the total attitude of them has been revamped. It is easy to build-in empowerment as a goal of all development initiatives. Empowerment is the most frequently used term in development dialogue today. It is

² Parmar, A. 2003. "Microcredit, Empowerment, and Agency: Re-evaluating the Discourse." Canadian Journal of Development Studies 24 (3): 461-76.

also the most nebulous and widely interpreted of concepts. Empowerment is a process of awareness capacity building, leading from greater participation level to enhanced decision making. (Murugan and Dharmalingam 2000). The process of empowerment strengthens their ability through acquiring knowledge, power and experience. Empowerment of women through self-help groups has led to benefits not only to the individual women and women groups but also to the family and community as whole through collective action in the process of development. The women SHGs have enhanced the status of women as participants and also helped in developing leadership quality through sense of devotion to work, duty consciousness, self-confidence etc. Thus SHG was a tool for empowering women in the above said sphere.

Level	CDS chairperson	CDS Vice Chairperson	CDS Members	ADS office bearers	ADS member	NHG office bearers	NHG members	Total
GramaPanchayath	101	130	751	557	596	467	2196	4796
Block Panchayath	24	9	46	15	30	34	146	304
District panchayath	2	0	1	0	1	6	29	34
ULB	12	8	44	23	42	94	101	334
Corporation	1	1	2	3	0	1	7	15
Total	140	148	844	598	669	602	2479	5485

Table 1: General Panchayat Elections 2010 - status of women participation in LSGI from Kudumbasree in Kerala

With the increased reservation on one side and empowerment on one side of the ladies, it has been seen that there has been a terrific growth of women from the SHGs in India to the political institutions. The paper tries to focus on the most prominent SHG in Kerala, which is the *Kudumbashree* and it has been seen that In the recent 2010 LSGI elections, 5485 women from *Kudumbashree* are occupying the various posts in the LSGI. The details are shown in Table 1.

The ladies who participated in the elections were very confident and they clear of their objectives. In the past women has been confined to home and children. Now, the public sphere is very wide. Citing the Hindu Dated Oct 21, 2010 , the ladies agreed on a few things . The men do not consult women on vital matters. Also they feel that as women can connect more with families, and in Panchayaths its question of family, women could do excellently well in local self-government initiatives. Most of the ladies feel that *Kudumbashree* was the driving force behind all these and it opened up an entry point to public life for them. They all feel that CDS , the Community development society , which is what *Kudumbashree* is being referred to as gave them confidence and solidarity. The *Kudumbashree* (The Kerala State Poverty Eradication Mission) which, organizationally, federates the different neighborhood groups has a larger than life presence in these polls. Over 3.7 million women in Kerala are part of this network of women's groups in Kerala.

Conclusion

The self-help groups, or the neighborhood groups as it is called in *Kudumbasree*, as a movement, have grown pretty rapidly and somewhere in the last few years, politicians have been alert enough to nurture its growth, providing it with enough policy and funding backing. So much so that critics have accused it of having political shades. Some even accuse it of being a conduit for disbursing election money. The women who are elected are not always treated with due respect. Many elected women complained that their suggestions were not considered seriously nor were they consulted while decisions were being made. Some felt that their views were ignored only because they are

women. At times they were pressurized by their husbands to approve their decisions made by the male dominated Panchayats. But over the period of time as the SHG women gained confidence, they were expected to contest in Panchayath elections. Along with the 50% reservation in LSGI, the political parties in fact resorted to picking these ladies to be part of the system.

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