

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT THROUGH PARTICIPATION **IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE: A STUDY OF COASTAL** **KARNATAKA, INDIA**

Ms.Florin Shelomith Soans*

Dr. Shripathi Kalluraya K.P.**

Abstract:

Participation of women in decision making or the local governance is finding a new way in the present world of development, Women's role in decision-making is one of the most important questions for consideration in the movement for their empowerment. Keeping in mind, the importance of women's participation in decision-making, like the other government in the world, the government of India has initiated efforts to widen the scope of women for participation in the development process, with these ideas the whole paper is discussed and analysed.

Introduction

Women constitute about half of the total population of the country. Apart from the household activities, they are contributing substantially to the national economy. In spite of these achievements, the majority of women in India have yet to be empowered to participate actively in the social, cultural, economic and political life of the country. Women's equal participation in political, social and economic life plays a prominent role in the general process of the advancement of women. Without the active participation of women and the incorporation of

* **M.A., M.Phil.,Assistant Professor, Dept. of Economics, St. Aloysius College(Autonomous),Mangalore, Research Scholar, Dept. of Economics, Mangalore University, Managalore.**

** **K.P. ,M.A.,PhD.,Professor and Finance Officer, Dept. of Economics, Mangalore University, Mangalagangothri, Mangalore**

women's perspective at all levels of decision-making, the goals of equality, development and peace cannot be achieved as it is. Systematic integration of women augments the democratic basis, the efficiency and the quality of the activities of local government. If local government is to meet the needs of both women and men, it must build on the experiences of both women and men, through an equal representation at all levels and in all fields of decision-making, covering the wide range of responsibilities of local governments. With this background the women participation in local governance can be analysed in the Coastal Karnataka, it has both the urban and local bodies and participation of women is apt.

Objectives: This research paper is more significant in context of achievement of gender equality and women empowerment. There is an attempt to measure the role of women in grassroots development. From the decentralization and from the women study perspective research is more significant. The main objectives of the study are as follows,

1. To review the women participation in local governance.
2. To access the role of women members in local governance.
3. To analyse the changing trend of women participation in local governance.

Methodology: The study is undertaken in Coastal Karnataka. The research has made use of both secondary and primary data. For the collection of Primary data 300 samples of women members is selected at random and interviewed with well structured questionnaire. Sample is selected at random giving due weightage to one of the most fastest growing district of Coastal Karnataka, Dakshina Kannada. Dakshina Kannada is district where it has both the Urban and rural local bodies and the district which is much developed in infrastructure, education, banking and health indicators. Such collected data are processed tabulated and ratios, percentages of the desired variables are worked out. Secondary information and data were procured from the relevant sources such as Annual reports of Zilla Panchayat, Taluka and Gram Panchayats, Urban local bodies related reports, books and journals.

Results and discussions: A review of the previous studies is quite essential to understand what the other research scholars have already explored through their research studies by reviewing books, journals of various scholars. The review tells us what are the different ideas of the

scholars who have already worked in that particular area and further it can be enhanced with research.

Sangeetha Purushothaman (2003) suggests that the vast literature on women and development provides the tools to analyze the social and economic status of women in Panchayats so that she can come with decisions and this decision will be helping in development process from grass root level.

G.S. Mehta (2002) reveals that proportion of women members in Panchayats had visualized at least some degree of improvements in their social standings. The changes in social standards will automatically bring women to the main stream of the society and it will be contributing for the changes from her family set up and when the changes takes place in the family automatically the changes will be taken in whole of the society so that the changes will be for the development of the economy.

Bidyut Mohanty, Joy Roy and Smita Gupta (1997) narrates that in order to make our democracy legitimate, women will have to make their full contribution in the political main stream .When women is given chance to come to the main stream then she can come out with the exact problem faced in the society because she is coming from the such system where she will be treated lower to men and when chance is given to women automatically improvement can be seen in whole of the economy.

- V. Prabhavathi (1991) states that female members found themselves immense satisfaction of their role as elected representatives in Panchayats as one of the local bodies.
- Ashok Celly (1997) analyses that women's participation in politics is necessary for holistic development.
- Soni Kaur Jasprit (2006) points out that the women are very much responsible for their condition and status they get in society.
- Ishwar C. Dhingra (2003) has stated that the Panchayati Raj or local self Government is an exercise in decentralisation of administrative authority from the centralization powers.

- Dr. Seema Singh (2003) examines that the women representatives hesitate to recognize themselves as able and useful organ of the society. The feeling of inferiority complex drags their feet back to their homes.
- N. Lalith (1997) gives that economic empowerment is not an automatic consequence of the provision of financial resources to women.

These researchers have given their view on women participation in local governance and what have paved a way for developmental activities.

Role of women members in Local Governance: Empowerment of women throughout the globe had now become a necessity. By women empowerment we mean, the power to acquire knowledge, have control and make informed decisions. It is a process of reaching one's maximum capacity and be economically, socially and politically independent. In India, there has been gender discrimination among men and women since decades. Therefore it is, important and necessary for women to have a sense of power, make decisions and actively participate and negotiate to have an equal place among men in the society. Thus political participation of women will empower them, as their opinion in any political decision will be mattered and so they can help empower all the women in the nation. By including women in politics, especially at district level or even at Taluk level may help the government provide a view point which incorporates women's issue and thus make policies which benefit women so that there will be an overall development and equality in the society.

In India various steps have been taking in order to provide constitutional safeguards and institutional framework for activities for women welfare. The main focus of the government is the development and empowerment of women in all areas and therefore the National Perspective Plan for women has recognized that political participation of women was almost invisible to before and thus a 33 per cent quota for women was introduced at all levels of elective bodies, as their contribution to the nation equally matters.

Women's participation in mainstream political activity has important implications for the broader arena of governance in any country. Direct political participation of women in local governance is a central human right in itself and enables the realization of a host of other human

rights. Political voice and decision-making power concerning basic services, economic development and social justice are critical factors in challenging and transforming structural caste-class-gender discrimination, and enabling women to realize their fundamental rights. Political participation also demands accountability from state and non-state actors to guarantee and respect these women's equal political voice and development. This requires a transformation of power relationships both within institutions of governance and in the women's social environment. Recent legal and policy reforms in India to ensure the representation of marginalized social groups in decentralized governance, including women, through constitutionally mandated reservations in Panchayati Raj institutions bring these issues to the fore. They demand analysis to determine, that the way women are enabled to claim their right to political participation in local governance, and the extent to which this participation is an effective tool for empowerment and realization of human rights for excluded social groups.

Since the 1990s decentralization has been regarded as a cornerstone of good governance. Proponents have argued that decentralization improves efficiency and transparency, deepens democracy, promotes equitable development and creates more responsive local government. It promises a closer fit between the needs and aspirations of citizens and the services and support of government, and fosters opportunities for participatory democracy and local empowerment. Decentralization is expected to benefit women, by creating greater opportunities for women to express their views and exert influence in decision-making at the local level. By extension it is assumed that decentralization processes will catalyze women's empowerment and promote gender equity.

However, with little empirical evidence to support these expected outcomes of decentralization processes, commentators have argued that there are no convincing reasons why localized forms of government should be more just, equitable and inclusive than centralized forms. Feminist scholars have raised concerns about the unequivocal ability of decentralization processes to contribute positively to the enhancement of women's rights and interests (Beall 2005). Evidence suggests that the local level is often characterized by more unequal gender relations than at the national level. Patriarchal cultural systems and masculine constructs of political authority are often dominant at the local level, strongly influencing the nature of institutions and closely

defended by local elites. These systems tend to offer little or no space for women's authority and agency, and by making it difficult for women to participate or raise controversial gender issues, they serve to exclude or minimize the effective participation of women in development processes (Mukhopadhyay 2005). In allowing these systems to continue unchecked the effect of decentralization may be to entrench and reinvigorate existing patriarchal institutions and local elites, making it unlikely that resources, institutions and sources of power become more accessible to women. Thus, many feminist scholars and other commentators would hesitate to advocate decentralization unconditionally as the panacea to promote social justice and the empowerment of marginalized groups.

In order to counteract the unintended outcomes of decentralization, it has been suggested that special measures need to be taken by government to ensure that women participate in municipal processes. These could include provisions to encourage women's participation in public meetings and council committees, facilitate caucusing on matters of importance to women, earmark funds for them to allocate, build the capacity of women councillors, and ensure that local accountability mechanisms are geared to answer to women (Mukhopadhyay 2005, Goetz and Hassim 2002). Social transformation is not only dependent upon the policy commitments and actions of political parties and government institutions, but also the pressure brought to bear on them by organised civil society (Mukhopadhyay 2005). Thus, a strong and autonomous women's movement is regarded as a necessary condition for effectively pursuing gender equity interests. Despite the achievements of the Women's National Coalition in the early 1990s, a powerful women's movement no longer exists in post apartheid South Africa. Instead, women's organisations are fragmented into three types of associations - national policy advocates, networks and coalitions, and community based organisations - but linkages between them are very limited (Hassim 2004, Goetz and Hassim 2002). Least visible but most numerous are community based organisations (CBOs). A major part of their work is concerned with women's practical needs, particularly related to health, welfare, care of dependents and income generating activities, and as such rooted strongly in a maternal tradition of household and neighbourhood responsibility. As such, they are not usually explicitly feminist in orientation and as they are weakly associated with national women's organisations and networks, they also appear to be adrift from any politically cohesive project (Hassim 2004). They are also largely isolated from

local government and thus they are generally unable to access resources and influence decision-making. To a large extent, their isolation is due to their members' lack of time, expertise and resources to engage with other organizations and structures, but it also reflects their lack of knowledge in these institutions and the opportunities that they can offer for development.

Changing trend of women participation in local governance: Women participation has changed its trend in the recent years after the struggles for reservation has taken the important place in development because even the role of women in decision making is apt in grass root level development or the local governance. To analyse about the women participation in local governance study area (Dakshina Kannada) is examined with the samples compared to other south districts of Karnataka state.

Local bodies in Dakshina Kannada

Local bodies in Dakshina Kannada is divided into Zilla Panchayat, Taluk Panchayat and Grama Panchayat.

Table:1- Local bodies of Dakshina Kannada district, Karnataka

| Sl.No. | Local Bodies | Total |
|--------|-----------------|-------|
| 1 | Zilla Panchayat | 01 |
| 2 | Taluk Panchayat | 05 |
| 3 | Grama Panchayat | 206 |

Source: *District at a glance 2015-16, D.K .(Dakshina Kannada)*

In table 1, depicts the total no. of local bodies in Dakshina Kannada district of Karnataka. In this district we can see that there is three tier system of grass root level development among them one is Zilla Panchayat , five taluk Panchayats and 206 grama Panchayats . Dakshina Kannada district is one of the fastest growing district with higher growth indicies in Coastal Karnataka, India.

Table: 2- Zilla Panchayat of Dakshina Kannada

| Zilla Panchayat | Women members | Male members | Total members |
|------------------|---------------|--------------|---------------|
| Dakshina Kannada | 18 | 17 | 35 |

Source: District at glance 2014-15,D.K.

In table 2, Zilla Panchayat of Dakshina Kannada is analysed. Here we are able to see 18 are women representatives and 17 are male members and total strength of this local body is 35.

Table: 3- Local bodies in Dakshina Kannada

| Sl. No | Taluks | Grama Panchayat | Inhabited Villages | Taluk Panchayat | Town / Urban agglomeration | Town municipality |
|--------|-------------|-----------------|--------------------|-----------------|----------------------------|-------------------|
| 1 | Bantwal | 47 | 79 | 1 | 2 | 1 |
| 2 | Belthangady | 43 | 80 | 1 | - | 1 |
| 3 | Mangalore | 52 | 88 | 1 | 10 | 4 |
| 4 | Puttur | 37 | 67 | 1 | - | 1 |
| 5 | Sullia | 27 | 40 | 1 | - | 1 |
| 6 | Total | 206 | 354 | 5 | 12 | 8 |

Source: District at a glance 2014-15.D.K.

Table 3, reveals the idea of total no. of local bodies in Dakshina Kannada ,here it comprises of five taluks namely Bantwal, Belthangady, Mangalore, Puttur, Sullia. Analysis of local bodies have been even done with further division of local bodies into grama Panchayat, inhibited villages, taluk Panchayats, town or urban agglomeration and town municipalities for the purpose of development.

Table :4- Details of Taluk Panchayat in Dakshina Kannada

| Sl.No. | Taluk | Women | Total |
|--------|-------------|-------|-------|
| 1 | Mangalore | 17 | 37 |
| 2 | Bantwal | 14 | 32 |
| 3 | Belthangady | 12 | 24 |

| | | | |
|---|--------|----|----|
| 4 | Sullia | 08 | 13 |
| 5 | Puttur | 13 | 23 |

Source: *District at a glance 2014-15, D.K.*

Table 4, examines the total no of taluk Panchayat in Dakshina Kannada along with the women representatives. In Mangalore taluk there are 37 members out of which 17 are women representatives, in Bantwal its 14 out of 32, Belthangady it is 12 out of 24, Sullia it is 8 out of 13 and in Puttur it is 13 out of 23.

Table: 5- Details of Zilla Panchayat members in Dakshina Kannada

| Taluk | Total | | | SC | | | ST | | | OBC | | | General | | |
|---------------|-------|----|----|----|---|---|----|---|---|-----|---|----|---------|---|----|
| | M | F | T | M | F | T | M | F | T | M | F | T | M | F | T |
| Bantw | 4 | 5 | 9 | - | 1 | 1 | - | - | - | 4 | 3 | 7 | - | 1 | 1 |
| Bltgdy | 2 | 4 | 6 | - | 1 | 1 | - | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | - | 2 | 2 |
| M'lore | 6 | 4 | 10 | - | - | - | - | - | - | 3 | 1 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 6 |
| Puttur | 3 | 3 | 6 | 1 | - | 1 | 1 | - | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Sullia | 2 | 2 | 4 | 1 | - | 1 | 1 | - | 1 | | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 3 |
| Total | 17 | 18 | 35 | 2 | 2 | 4 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 9 | 7 | 16 | 6 | 8 | 14 |

Source: *District at a glance 2014-15, D.K.*

In this table 5, tells about the details of members in Dakshina Kannada Zilla Panchayat. Here we see that representatives belong to male and female genders and they are elected based on the reservation given to them as per their caste and creed like SC, ST, OBC and general. (*Bantwal, Belthangady, Mangalore, M-Male, F-Female, T-Total*)

Role and Status of Women in Local Governance

There is growing momentum among governments and civil society to foster and ensure women's participation and leadership in the political arena, and specifically within local governance structures. Establishing quotas for women's representation at different levels of government has

been a strategic tactic in achieving this goal in many countries. In India, the Constitution (73rd Amendment Act), enacted in 1992, mandated the reservation of a minimum of one-third of seats for women (both as members and as chairpersons) within all of India's locally elected governance bodies commonly referred to as Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). The amendment also entrusted Panchayats with the responsibility of furthering the agenda of economic development and social justice. Affirmative action to ensure women's political representation is an important step in democratizing and engendering local governance. However, it does not guarantee effective participation or ensure that issues of concern to community and women will automatically be addressed by local governance structures. Such issues reflect women's practical gender needs as well as their strategic gender interests. Practical gender needs are immediate needs such as water and healthcare, which fall within women's socially defined roles. While the importance of these issues cannot be undermined, attention to only these does not necessarily challenge women's status in society, transform power and gender relations to enable gender equity and social justice. There is a need then to better understand how PRIs can become more engaged and proactive around strategic gender issues and provide spaces to promote gender equity within an overall framework of gender responsive governance. By gender responsive governance we mean a process that occurs at different levels with a clear purpose to impact issues that foster women's empowerment and promote gender equity and social justice.

Women are increasingly becoming conscious of their existence, their rights and their work situation. With the change of times, cultural norms, socio-economic needs and increase in the literacy level, more and more women are entering the field of entrepreneurship, which was earlier considered masculine. A major factor determining the socio economic status of women is concerned with education and occupation, which is different for those in developed and developing countries. Role and status of women in local governance may be assessed in terms of their membership and various other positions held in the PRI. It is highly debated that women should be given reservation in the political participation; more specifically 33 per cent of the total members in the PRI should be reserved for women. In the study area it is noticed that women representation is more than the proposed reservation for the women in PRI's. Table 6, gives details of women members' ratio in PRI in the study area.

Table- 6: Women membership in PRI (Dakshina Kannada)

| Sl.No. | Zilla | | Taluk | | Grama | |
|--------------------|-------|---------------|-------|---------------|-------|-----------------|
| | Total | Female | Total | Female | Total | Female |
| Bantwal | 9 | 5 (55.55) | 23 | 8 (34.78) | 833 | 376 (45.13) |
| Belthangady | 6 | 4 (66.66) | 14 | 3 (21.42) | 618 | 282 (45.63) |
| Mangalore | 10 | 4 (40.0) | 37 | 18 (48.64) | 938 | 410 (43.71) |
| Puttur | 6 | 3 (50.0) | 22 | 13 (59.09) | 563 | 251 (44.58) |
| Sullia | 4 | 2 (50.0) | 13 | 8 (61.53) | 319 | 156 (48.90) |
| Total | 35 | 18 (51.43) | 129 | 70 (54.26) | 3271 | 1475 (45.09) |

Source: District at a glance 2014-15 (Figures in parenthesis indicates per centage)

In Dakshina Kannada district, the proportion of women members is more than 45 per cent in all the three PRI institutions. In fact it is more than 50 per cent in Zilla Panchaya and taluk Panchayat and little less in Grama Panchayat (45%).This implies that role of women in local development is significantly more than what is expected.

Number of membership alone may not indicate the level and effectiveness of their participation in the local development. To examine the effectiveness of their participation in local governance and local development, analysis of the nature of leadership and its effectiveness would be useful.

Participation in Discussions:The main problem of women representatives in working for the political administration is participation in discussions. In this regard an attempt is made to analyse the meetings organized and sample women representative participation in discussions.

Table: 7- Meetings organized in a year

| Meetings | Total | Percent |
|-------------|-------|---------|
| Weekly | 18 | 6 |
| Fortnightly | 245 | 81.66 |
| Monthly | 37 | 12.33 |
| Total | 300 | 100 |

Source: *Primary data*

The local bodies represented by the sample respondents organize meeting fortnightly (81.66%) , monthly (12.33%) and weekly (6%). Total number meetings organized in sample local bodies in a year is given in a table 4.8 as follows,

Table- 8: Total number meetings organized in local bodies in a year

| Meetings held (Number) | Total | Percent |
|-------------------------|-------|---------|
| 7-12 | 5 | 1.66 |
| 13-15 | 245 | 81.66 |
| 16-20 | 13 | 4.3 |
| 21-24 | 37 | 12.3 |
| Total | 300 | 100 |

Source: *Primary data*

Attending meeting of local bodies is an important indicator of their participation. The frequency of attending meeting by the sample representatives is given in table 9.

Table- 9: Frequency of attending meeting

| Meetings | Number | Percent |
|------------|--------|---------|
| Regularly | 289 | 96.33 |
| Sometimes | 11 | 3.66 |
| Not at all | Nil | Nil |
| Total | 300 | 100 |

Source: *Primary data*

Table 9, indicates that more than 96 per cent of the respondents are attending the meeting regularly. Involvement in discussions at local bodies meeting by the sample women representatives is given in table 10.

Table -10: Involvement in discussions at local bodies meetings

| Involvement | Number | Percent |
|--------------------|---------------|----------------|
| Very much | 74 | 24.66 |
| Much | 100 | 33.33 |
| Moderate | 73 | 24.33 |
| somewhat | 45 | 15 |
| Very less | 8 | 2.66 |
| Total | 300 | 100 |

Source: Primary data

Table-11: Women representatives by Self rating on participation

| Level of participation | Number | Percent |
|-------------------------------|---------------|----------------|
| High | 195 | 65 |
| Moderate | 75 | 25 |
| Low | 30 | 10 |
| Total | 300 | 100 |

Source: Primary data

Assessment of solidarity observed among women members

Solidarity observed among the women members is to see the developmental progress taken in their representative area compared to male representative constituency. Solidarity here implies about what can be done best for their area of representation which is examined in table 12.

Table-12: Respondents assessment of solidarity observed among women members

| Levels | Number | Percent |
|---------------|---------------|----------------|
| High | 190 | 63.33 |
| Moderate | 75 | 25 |

| | | |
|-------|-----|-------|
| Low | 35 | 11.66 |
| Total | 300 | 100 |

Source: *Primary data*

To Conclude, Women participation in local governance is growing like a trend after the task of struggles by various institutions which strive hard for empowerment of women is the outcome of women representatives are taking part in decision making process in grass root level development. With this its indication that so called physically deprived section of any society that is women is emerging out and even taking part in the process of administration which is positive sign of empowerment.

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