

## **POLITICAL INCLUSION AND PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE : A STUDY IN KARNATAKA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The paper examines the situation of Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) at various levels - political, social, economic and personal. More particularly, it aims to understand the ways in which the EWRs use their agency to address and negotiate issues like feminisation of invisibility, proxy governance and politics of exclusion. The paper also critically looks at the participation and performance of women and thereby attempts to understand the process of their attaining confidence in undertaking responsibilities in the public sphere. The paper, while documenting the women's participation in panchayats, discusses such criticisms levelled against these women. Examples are the beliefs and prejudices that there is proxy rule in the panchayats by these women; it is their husbands or other male relatives who exercise power and responsibility on their behalf. The findings of the study reveal that there is dearth in literature as to and inadequate understanding of, the ways by which women have succeeded in combining their multiple roles in performing their duties in the panchayats. The study on which this paper is based, significantly demonstrates that at best, these women have been inevitably travelling between genuine participation and proxy participation. It was observed that women's contribution, true to their rights, has to come from their knowledge and further empowerment and not by mere affirmative action in their favour alone. Only this inner transformation and learning can make them contribute better towards democratic decision-making and participation and also lead to substantive difference from what they are today.*

### **Introduction**

Decentralisation is a key concept in the on-going progressive reform strategies in the developing world, aiming at promoting qualitative governance (Villadsen 1999). The process is expected to contribute towards increased quality and quantity in the context of service delivery and public participation.

Decentralisation is defined as transfer of competencies and responsibilities for performing public service obligations for planning, management, raising and allocation of resources from the Central Government and its agencies to their field units and regional authorities and to democratically elected institutions (Cheema and Rondinelli 1983: Cohen and Peterson 1999: Smith 1985). In the

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Indian context, it is also seen as a process of empowerment and a way for hitherto deprived groups to reach mainstream social, economic and political life (Aziz 1996: Mathew 1995). Furthermore, democratic decentralisation is expected to facilitate expanding the space for the participation of subordinated groups and as also being responsive to their interests. Such participation becomes even more significant and critical for women as a subordinated group for two reasons: proximity and relevance of local government to the lives of ordinary people (and women) and lack of democracy in gender relations resulting in the exclusion of women from participation in governance and in considering their interests in the business of governmental decision-making.

In a country like India, where a complex set of caste-gender-class-based discrimination continues to exclude the great majority of people from the process of governance, gendering becomes one of the critical and structural pre-requisites for the democratisation of Local Self-Governance (LSG). In fact, if there is one notion that is gaining almost universal acceptance in recent times - even in the face of neo-liberal onslaught, which is devouring every inch of democratic space across the country - it is perhaps the idea that governance is being increasingly oriented towards gendering through state agenda. State agenda for gendering governance envisages political and statutory mandate to Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) and empowers them to use their agency to stamp their collective political identity in governance.

### **A Silent Revolution**

The last two decades have witnessed a silent revolution of decentralised system of governance in the country as a whole, especially after the passing of 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution. These two amendments provided the much-needed

constitutional and statutory status to the hitherto neglected and much-maligned institutions, viz., panchayats as rural local self-governments and municipalities as the urban local self-governments, and thereby enabled the process of making them an integral part of our Indian federal polity. One of the more radical and liberal aspects of these two amendments is the provision of providing reservation to Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) (in proportion to their population) and earmarking reservation of a minimum of one-third of seats to women in membership and offices of chairpersons (like president and vice-president) in all the tiers of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). As a result of this highly progressive measure, at present, there are more than one million women representatives (Panchayati Raj Ministry 2008)) on these bodies shouldering the complex responsibilities of local governance in India. As of now, in a congenial environment, more and more members of socially disadvantaged groups of the society are getting into the political process in the normal course and participating in decision-making. At the same time, they are organising themselves and lobbying for their rightful share in all walks of life - a development that has succeeded in creating political awareness among these groups.

### **Situation in Karnataka**

The 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment has greatly contributed to the political empowerment of women and marginalised communities in the rural society. It has thrown open political opportunities to these disadvantaged sections. It is well said that democratic decentralisation would be rendered meaningless as long as gender-equity is not ensured. The pace of development in any civil society would be slow if women, who constitute about 50 per cent of the population, are left out of the development process.

In the State of Karnataka also, reservation of seats and offices of Chairpersons in their favour has brought a large number of women to panchayats as members and presidents. The enhanced quota for women (compared to the previous regime) and the category-wise reservation has also brought into panchayats a large proportion of 'first generation' elected representatives (Table 1). Women membership outnumbers the assigned quota of one-third reservation. Together for all the three panchayats, 42.91 per cent (almost 43 per cent) of the membership is occupied by women. As

regards scheduled castes, they have a membership of 18.58 per cent, followed by scheduled tribes with 10.74 per cent. Of the total membership, members belonging to other backward classes (group-A) are to the tune of 26.60 per cent and to group-B 6.59 per cent. It is significant to note here that dominant castes like Lingayats and Vokkaligas come under the category of reservation called 'Group-B', though the members of these two castes also contest elections under the general category.

**Table 1: Membership Representation of SCs, STs and Women in Karnataka PRIs**

| S.No. | Panchayat               | Total members | Women | SC    | ST    | BC-A  | BC-B | General |
|-------|-------------------------|---------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|------|---------|
| 1     | Zilla Panchayat         | 1005          | 373   | 184   | 84    | 268   | 66   | 403     |
| 2     | Taluk Panchayat         | 3695          | 1555  | 678   | 361   | 983   | 248  | 1425    |
| 3     | Gram Panchayat          | 91402         | 39318 | 16997 | 9880  | 24316 | 6028 | 34181   |
| 4     | Total                   | 96102         | 41246 | 17859 | 10325 | 25567 | 6342 | 36009   |
| 5     | Percentage to the total | 100.00        | 42.91 | 18.58 | 10.74 | 26.60 | 6.59 | 37.46   |

Source : Government of Karnataka.

The increased presence of EWRs in PRIs which had otherwise been an exclusive male domain, brought about by vigorous implementation of State initiatives has given a semblance of political identity for women in the landscape of governance across the State. One of the underlying philosophies of the State towards engendering governance is to empower women – a process that will enable them to overcome the traditional barriers which place certain handicaps in their participation and performance as elected representatives.

### Women in Local Governance

The patriarchal norm that women's place is at home (private sphere) and not outside

the home in the public realm, has laid several barriers to women's political empowerment and even to members of those few families who try to overcome them. The feeling that women are meant only for home is being replaced by a feeling of equal partnership between the two sexes (Singh 2009). A significant departure from traditional notion, in the context of evolving strategies or best ways to break the barriers, is not to force women to fit into the political arena; it is rather to make the political system more women-friendly (Strutlik 2003).

The available literature on the participation and performance of women in rural governance paints both a positive and negative picture. However, there are

pronounced apprehensions that disabilities like illiteracy, continued and haunting domestic responsibilities, poverty, lack of experience, poor exposure and communication skills of women as compared to men come in the way of effective participation of women in decentralised planning and governance. Seen in terms of positive outcomes, several micro level studies point out that about 80-90 per cent of women attend panchayat meetings regularly. Given their sheer numbers, one might conclude that democracy has become more participatory than before at least at the grassroots level (Mohanty 2001; Sivanna, 1998). A study conducted in Kerala upholds that despite facing numerous problems, women's performance on the basis of qualitative and quantitative indicators is in no way inferior to that of males. A sizable segment of society has come to accept the fact that women are perhaps more suitable for running village panchayats than their male counterparts (Chatukulam and John 2000: pp 66-101). Experiences from some states reveal that "The women elected to these bodies (panchayats) have shown startling results in performance, particularly in the sectors of health, education, access to basic services and in ensuring a significant change in the living conditions of their respective communities. Even in strong patriarchal culture, one-third reservation has encouraged women to demonstrate their leadership" (Singh 2005: Kot 2007).

### **Structural and Functional Constraints**

Notwithstanding the above mentioned positive aspects of women in local governance, there are some issues which centre round the negative aspects, seen mainly in terms of constraints in the path of effective and meaningful participation of women in governance related activities. To be specific, patriarchal culture and social strictures seem to inhibit women's participation in local governance through

panchayats. A woman may access the position of a sarpanch through reservation in her favour. But her deputy is usually a man. Often, it is found that he joins hands with other members and gets a vote of no-confidence passed against her, and starts acting as sarpanch in her place. Thus, what is given by law and the Constitution is taken away by intrigue and chicanery (Baviskar 2003).

Despite the documentation of women's participation levels and leadership in panchayats, the belief persists that women in the reserved seats are there by proxy and that their husbands and male relatives exercise power and responsibility on their behalf. There is inadequate understanding of the way women combine their multiple roles and perform their panchayat functions. The epithets of 'sarpanch-pati' and 'pradhan-pati' have become part of the panchayat lexicon though there are husbands who do not interfere in their wives' panchayat work and are in fact supportive of their work (Buch 2009: pp 8-9).

The above discussion puts into perspective the major outline of this paper and its theoretical framework. A review of existing literature on the subject has enabled shedding light upon the concepts of gendering governance, empowerment of women etc. It has also led to a few questions that have been moderated into objectives of the paper. The specific objectives of the paper are as follows:

### **Objectives**

- \* To critically understand the situation of Elected Women Representatives (EWR) at multiple levels- political, social, economic and personal,
- \* To understand the ways in which EWRs use their agency to address and negotiate issues like feminisation of invisibility, proxy governance and politics of exclusion, and

- \* To critically look at the notions of the concept of 'performances of elected women representatives' and to understand the process of learning leadership roles by women in the public sphere.

### Methodology

The study on which this paper is based has used a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches. However, primarily qualitative methods were used to analyse the participation of elected women representatives. The household (HH) questionnaires comprising multiple sections were administered to 300 respondents (200 ERs and 100 HHs) to obtain both qualitative and quantitative data. Five districts, Gulbarga, Bagalkot, Bellary, Mandya and Dakshina Kannada were selected for their distinct socio-economic and cultural profiles. Similarly, two GPs in each district were selected based on the criteria, viz., Upper caste male-headed; Upper caste female-headed; OBC\_A/B/Muslim male-headed; OBC\_A/B/Muslim female-headed; OBC caste female-headed; OBC male-headed; Mahadalit/ST male-headed; Mahadalit/ST female-headed; SC male-headed and SC female-headed; in total ten gram panchayats were selected for conducting the study.

### Engendering Governance: Process and Implications

Governance needs to be considered as a means of social construction, which includes ways of inclusion, equity and equality in order to be meaningful to the lives of ordinary people. The plurality of domains in governance also suggests that governance is a process based and not structure based, and the players include a range of organisations and stakeholders, as well as complex

relationships among them. The following paragraphs will take a critical look at the status of engendering governance vis-à-vis representation of women in Gram Panchayats (GPs) and their situation in their respective democratic institution in the five sample districts of Karnataka State.

### Women Membership in PRIs

The presence of a large number of elected women representatives in the institutions of local governance in Karnataka is indeed significant. The past five years has witnessed a remarkable, if not phenomenal, increase in the presence of women in GPs. Seen across the districts there has been an increase of 10.3 per cent over the last five years in the number of HHs having EWRs. It is equally heartening to note here that most of the GPs covered by this study had EWRs in excess of the quota for women in GPs.

Despite the prevalence of patriarchy and male dominated political system, an increasing number of women are entering the electoral fray at local level in almost all the sample areas of the study. There is a significant improvement in the support extended by the families to their female members - especially in the backward district of Gulbarga to join political parties, where the support extended by HHs had shown an increase of 16.7 per cent as against an overall 10 per cent increase across the districts (Table 2). However, when we look at their participation in politics vis-à-vis their political affiliation, there has only been a marginal increase of 5 per cent in the number of HHs having female members having affiliation with political parties (see Table 3). Even those having political affiliation, a very small percentage of respondents were the office bearers of political parties either at local or district levels.

**Table 2 : Details of Households Having Female Members with Affiliation to Political Parties and Nature of Affiliation**

| Response  | Gulbarga | Bagalkot | Bellary | Mandya | Dakshina Kannada | Total |
|---|----------|----------|---------|--------|------------------|-------|
| Yes, Affiliated                                 | 6        | 7        | 8       | 5      | 10               | 36    |
| Percentage                                      | 10       | 11.7     | 13.3    | 8.3    | 16.7             | 12    |
| No  | 54       | 53       | 52      | 55     | 50               | 264   |
| Percentage                                      | 90       | 88.3     | 86.7    | 91.7   | 83.3             | 88    |
| Total   | 60       | 60       | 60      | 60     | 60               | 300   |
| <b>Nature of membership</b>                     |          |          |         |        |                  |       |
| a) Office Bearer<br>at District/<br>State Level | 0        | 0        | 0       | 0      | 1                | 1     |
| Percentage                                      | 0        | 0        | 0       | 0      | 10               | 2.8   |
| b) Active but<br>Ordinary<br>Member             | 0        | 1        | 1       | 0      | 2                | 4     |
| Percentage                                      | 0        | 14.3     | 12.5    | 0      | 20               | 11.1  |
| c) Member                                       | 5        | 6        | 7       | 5      | 7                | 30    |
| Percentage                                      | 83.3     | 85.7     | 87.5    | 100    | 70               | 83.3  |
| d) Other Specify                                | 1        | 0        | 0       | 0      | 0                | 1     |
| Percentage                                      | 16.7     | 0        | 0       | 0      | 0                | 2.8   |
| Total   | 6        | 7        | 8       | 5      | 10               | 36    |
|   | 100      | 100      | 100     | 100    | 100              | 100   |

**Table 3 : Support Enjoyed by Women from their Family Members to Join a Political Party**

| Response   | Gulbarga | Bagalkot | Bellary | Mandya | Dakshina Kannada | Total |
|------------|----------|----------|---------|--------|------------------|-------|
| Yes        | 25       | 32       | 41      | 39     | 35               | 172   |
| Percentage | 41.7     | 53.3     | 68.3    | 65     | 58.3             | 57.3  |
| No         | 35       | 28       | 19      | 21     | 25               | 128   |
| Percentage | 58.3     | 46.7     | 31.7    | 35     | 41.7             | 42.7  |
| Total      | 60       | 60       | 60      | 60     | 60               | 300   |
|            | 100      | 100      | 100     | 100    | 100              | 100   |



It is very significant to note here that despite being drawn into village politics consequent to their entry into GPs and despite enjoying a better support from the family members to join any political party, women have, by and large, remained alienated from the mainstream politics or continue to remain obscure in the larger politics. This is not to suggest that women contesting GP elections have remained non-partisan or were above political leanings; as a matter of fact a vast majority of women had expressed clear political leanings. The picture that emerges from the foregoing discussion suggests an overwhelmingly male dominated political process where women continue to play a 'useful' but non-descript or secondary role in the larger politics.

#### **Politics of Exclusion**

Since the existing legislative measures concerning the local self-governments (LSGs) have an inclusive approach towards local governance, it can safely be assumed -at least theoretically-that there can be no exclusion in the context of LSG. The field based observations and the recent developments in the politics in the State reveal a different picture.

It has been seen from the study that far from inaugurating an era of inclusive politics, the process of democratisation and decentralisation seems to be emerging as a kind of 'contra-indication' for all the ills that has been affecting this society. True, neither patriarchy nor hegemony (all kinds) can be uprooted overnight. But reinforcement of hegemonic power structures and polarisation of the society along caste and religion is the

least expected unfortunate development that has taken place during the post-decentralisation phase in Karnataka. Some of the examples can be cited here:

A complex interplay of both social and economic hegemony as witnessed during the recently concluded elections to GPs provides ample proof about politics of exclusion that present an overwhelming challenge to gendering and inclusive development. It is quite alarming to note from recent gram panchayat elections that, in the name of conducting GP elections on non-partisan and consensus basis, the seats of ERs were either put up for auction or were 'sold'. The seats were either sold or declared elected uncontested. Usually, auction takes place in the temple premises and there are reports of seats being allotted to the highest bidders. The amount of bid was in the order of ₹ 2-3 lakh (field notes). In any village of Karnataka, only the landlords and moneylenders can spend such large sums on elections. These trends can potentially preclude possibilities for women, especially from the poorer families, of having any role in the affairs of local governance.

Untouchability is still being practised in almost all the villages of the gram panchayats in Gulbarga, Bellary, and Bagalkot and Mandya districts (see Table 4). Denial of access to public places like drinking water taps, barber shops, hotels, temples, etc. are some of the caste-based discriminations that can be seen in the villages even now. Furthermore, dalit women were made to sit separately in gram sabha (GS). These practices have been noted in all the three northern districts of the State (Bellary, Gulbarga and Bagalkot).

**Table 4 : Practice of Untouchability**

| Districts           | Response   | EMR  | EWR  | Ex-EMR | Ex-EWR | Total |
|---------------------|------------|------|------|--------|--------|-------|
| Gulbarga            | Yes        | 5    | 4    | 2      | 2      | 13    |
|                     | Percentage | 33.3 | 28.6 | 28.6   | 50     | 32.5  |
|                     | No         | 10   | 10   | 5      | 2      | 27    |
|                     | Percentage | 66.7 | 71.4 | 71.4   | 50     | 67.5  |
|                     | Total      | 15   | 14   | 7      | 4      | 40    |
| Bagalkot            | Yes        | 4    | 9    | 5      | 2      | 20    |
|                     | Percentage | 28.6 | 69.2 | 71.4   | 33.3   | 50    |
|                     | No         | 10   | 4    | 2      | 4      | 20    |
|                     | Percentage | 71.4 | 30.8 | 28.6   | 66.7   | 50    |
|                     | Total      | 14   | 13   | 7      | 6      | 40    |
| Bellary             | Yes        | 12   | 8    | 6      | 5      | 31    |
|                     | Percentage | 85.7 | 61.5 | 75     | 100    | 77.5  |
|                     | No         | 2    | 5    | 2      | 0      | 9     |
|                     | Percentage | 14.3 | 38.5 | 25     | 0      | 22.5  |
|                     | Total      | 14   | 13   | 8      | 5      | 40    |
| Mandya              | Yes        | 4    | 5    | 5      | 1      | 15    |
|                     | Percentage | 22.2 | 41.7 | 62.5   | 50     | 37.5  |
|                     | No         | 14   | 7    | 3      | 1      | 25    |
|                     | Percentage | 77.8 | 58.3 | 37.5   | 50     | 62.5  |
|                     | Total      | 18   | 12   | 8      | 2      | 40    |
| Dakshina<br>Kannada | Yes        | 7    | 3    | 1      | 2      | 13    |
|                     | Percentage | 50   | 25   | 11.1   | 40     | 32.5  |
|                     | No         | 7    | 9    | 8      | 3      | 27    |
|                     | Percentage | 50   | 75   | 88.9   | 60     | 67.5  |
|                     | Total      | 14   | 12   | 9      | 5      | 40    |



### Proxy Governance and Invisibility

If we were to go by the definition of proxy governance as 'exercise of Constitutional powers by persons not enjoying the constitutional mandate' (Aziz 2002), we would end up taking an innocuous view of a phenomenon which had potentially defeated the very vision behind state initiatives towards engendering governance. There are others who contend that proxy governance is not confined to EWRs alone but could be seen

among elected male representatives (EMRs) as well. In both the cases, we are confronted with a situation where governance is getting more and more hegemonic. The entire issue of proxy governance revolves around systematic subjugation of women by according symbolic status in governance. While it is either husbands or other male members of the family who not only help the EWRs but also play the role of ERs on behalf of EWRs.

### Some cases in the above context are as follows:

#### Case 1

The female president of Perne Panchayat of Bantwal Taluk, Dakshina Kannada district belongs to a rich family of agriculturists owning about 10 acres of fertile and irrigated land. She was formerly with BJP (elected as ER with support from BJP during 2000-2005). In the second term she switched over to Cong (I) and won the GP election with support from Cong(I). She is active, knowledgeable and regular to GP meetings. She can speak fluently and authoritatively about various government programmes. She took personal interest in implementing MGNREGA - in a district where the scheme holds little appeal to the working class but- in her GP which provided employment to women who were till then dependent on seasonal work in the paddy fields. She is assertive and can dictate terms to other male members of the GP.

This is a case of a rich and successful housewife who had an almost armchair raid during her tenure as GP president on the sheer strength of her status as a rich land lady. But the sad reality is majority of women in the rural households continue to lead a non-descript and an invisible life. What makes the

situation sadder is the fact that even after becoming prominent individuals in their respective villages (on the strength of being elected as GP member and being made the office bearer), they still continue to remain alienated from the public sphere.

#### Case 2

EWR and President of Halagali GP of Mudhol taluk, Bagalkot district is a typical rustic woman belonging to ST community. She cannot work independently and is entirely dependent on her son who attends to most of the GP-related activities. She merely puts her signatures on papers placed before her. As a president of the GP she never had the opportunity to interact with the government officials. She informs that her son is well accepted in the GP and gets the necessary cooperation in discharging his mother's responsibilities. She is financially sound and has 12 acres of irrigated farm land. She is aged but not weak. But she is meek, docile and least assertive as an ER/President. She does not enjoy equal status with other EWRs who belong to upper caste Lingayath families. She was not offered a chair to sit in nor invited inside the homes of upper caste families.

This is another instance of invisibility where the president of a GP who is a well settled farmer continues to remain invisible in her participation. Both political power as head of a panchayat and economic power with farming have not given her the right perspectives and abilities to perform her roles independent of male support.

### Gender Perceptions

The EWRs and EMRs have shown progressive perception by stating that they do

not consider men to be more efficient than women (for details see Table 5). There is not much difference in the responses of ex EWRs and ex-EMRs on this. A large majority have disagreed with the statement that men are more efficient than women. The percentage of women who have disagreed is higher (83 per cent PRI women and 82 per cent ex PRI women) than that of men's on this (62.7 and 76.9 per cent, respectively).

**Table 5 : Responses to Gender Relations and Equality**

| S. No. | Response  |          | PRI-<br>Men | PRI-<br>women | Ex-PRI-<br>Men | Ex-PRI-<br>Women | Total |
|--------|---|----------|-------------|---------------|----------------|------------------|-------|
| (1)    | (2)   | (3)      | (4)         | (5)           | (6)            | (7)              | (8)   |
| 1.     | Men are more efficient than women   | Yes      | 28          | 11            | 9              | 4                | 52    |
|        |   | per cent | 37.3        | 17.2          | 23.1           | 18.2             | 26    |
|        |   | No       | 47          | 53            | 30             | 18               | 148   |
|        |   | per cent | 62.7        | 82.8          | 76.9           | 81.8             | 74    |
| 2.     | For effective functioning of society, a patriarchal structure is necessary        | Yes      | 30          | 25            | 17             | 8                | 80    |
|        |   | per cent | 40          | 39.1          | 43.6           | 36.4             | 40    |
|        |   | No       | 45          | 39            | 22             | 14               | 120   |
|        |   | per cent | 60          | 60.9          | 56.4           | 63.6             | 60    |
| 3.     | There are equal opportunities available for men and women to access the resources | Yes      | 49          | 39            | 22             | 16               | 126   |
|        |   | per cent | 65.3        | 60.9          | 56.4           | 72.7             | 63    |
|        |   | No       | 26          | 25            | 17             | 6                | 74    |
|        |   | per cent | 34.7        | 39.1          | 43.6           | 27.3             | 37    |
| 4.     | A family should have one male child   | Yes      | 38          | 48            | 26             | 11               | 123   |
|        |   | per cent | 50.7        | 75            | 66.7           | 50               | 61.5  |
|        |   | No       | 37          | 16            | 13             | 11               | 77    |
|        |   | per cent | 49.3        | 25            | 33.3           | 50               | 38.5  |
| 5.     | Men have to look after the economic matters of the family                         | Yes      | 31          | 20            | 14             | 10               | 75    |
|        |   | per cent | 41.3        | 31.3          | 35.9           | 45.5             | 37.5  |
|        |   | No       | 44          | 44            | 25             | 12               | 125   |
|        |   | per cent | 58.7        | 68.8          | 64.1           | 54.5             | 62.5  |
| 6.     | Women have to look after the domestic chores                                      | Yes      | 26          | 22            | 11             | 10               | 69    |
|        |   | per cent | 34.7        | 34.4          | 28.2           | 45.5             | 34.5  |
|        |   | No       | 49          | 42            | 28             | 12               | 131   |
|        |   | per cent | 65.3        | 65.6          | 71.8           | 54.5             | 65.5  |

(Contd..)

**Table 5 : (Contd..)**

| (1)      | (2)   | (3)                     | (4)        | (5)        | (6)        | (7)         | (8)         |
|----------|---|-------------------------|------------|------------|------------|-------------|-------------|
| 7.       | It is not advisable for men to sweep the house  | Yes<br>per cent         | 36<br>48   | 14<br>21.9 | 13<br>33.3 | 12<br>54.5  | 75<br>37.5  |
|          |   | No<br>per cent          | 39<br>52   | 50<br>78.1 | 26<br>66.7 | 10<br>45.5  | 125<br>62.5 |
| 8.       | Politics is not a woman's forte   | Yes<br>per cent         | 25<br>33.3 | 8<br>12.5  | 6<br>15.4  | 7<br>31.8   | 46<br>23    |
|          |   | No<br>per cent          | 50<br>66.7 | 56<br>87.5 | 33<br>84.6 | 15<br>68.2  | 154<br>77   |
| 9.       | Since women are not able to take-up work that demands hard physical labour, there is no problem in women having low wages | Yes<br>per cent         | 57<br>76   | 50<br>78.1 | 29<br>74.4 | 16<br>72.7  | 152<br>76   |
|          |   | No<br>per cent          | 18<br>24   | 13<br>20.3 | 9<br>23.1  | 6<br>27.3   | 46<br>23    |
|          |   | No Response<br>per cent | 0<br>0     | 1<br>1.6   | 1<br>2.6   | 0<br>0      | 2<br>1      |
| 10.      | With my given position, I would have got more acceptance had I been a man   | Yes<br>per cent         | 30<br>40   | 44<br>68.8 | 17<br>43.6 | 11<br>50    | 102<br>51   |
|          |   | No<br>per cent          | 37<br>49.3 | 19<br>29.7 | 17<br>43.6 | 11<br>50    | 84<br>42    |
|          |   | No response<br>per cent | 8<br>10.7  | 1<br>1.6   | 5<br>12.8  | 0<br>0      | 14<br>7     |
| 11.      | Only women have to look after the kids  | Yes<br>per cent         | 19<br>25.3 | 14<br>21.9 | 11<br>28.2 | 8<br>36.4   | 52<br>26    |
|          |   | No<br>per cent          | 56<br>74.7 | 50<br>78.1 | 28<br>71.8 | 14<br>63.6  | 148<br>74   |
| 12.      | Girls should not study in co-ed schools   | Yes<br>per cent         | 1<br>1.3   | 2<br>3.1   | 0<br>0     | 2<br>9.1    | 5<br>2.5    |
|          |   | No<br>per cent          | 74<br>98.7 | 62<br>96.9 | 39<br>100  | 20<br>90.9  | 195<br>97.5 |
| 13.      | Dowry is a social evil  | Yes<br>per cent         | 75<br>100  | 63<br>98.4 | 39<br>100  | 22<br>100.0 | 199<br>99.5 |
|          |   | No<br>per cent          | 0<br>0     | 1<br>1.6   | 0<br>0     | 0<br>0      | 1<br>0.5    |
| Total    |   |                         | 75         | 64         | 39         | 22          | 200         |
| per cent |   |                         | 100        | 100        | 100        | 100         | 100         |

To the question if a patriarchal structure is necessary for the effective functioning of a society, again those who have disagreed are larger in proportion than those who were in agreement (all above 60 per cent). This is again encouraging since the women who are elected to PRIs have realised that they are also important to run a democracy. They have also come to learn about male-female equality, and are clear that patriarchal structures are exploitative and oppressive of women. That such a realisation has come about among male-ERs is a welcome trend. They live in a society where women are given reserved seats to contest elections. Besides this, the self-help group (SHG) revolution has mobilised many women to come out of their homes and participate in meetings of the group.

In today's society, due to many reforms, there is equal opportunity for men and women to access resources like land, livestock, property, etc. Whether this was agreeable to men is the question. When asked about their views on this statement, 65.3 per cent of males in PRIs said 'yes' to this question and it was a lesser proportion of 60.9 per cent for the females. Taking the members who are ex-EWRs and EMRs, we find that more than males (56.4 per cent), it was the females or ex-EWRs who have answered in the affirmative that there is better equity between gender today to access resources (72.7 per cent). About 43.6 per cent of ex-PRI men however felt that it is not so which is the highest among all responses.

To the question, whether all families should have at least one male child, first of all there is consensus among all that it is so. Interestingly, taking negative answers to this question, we find that it is the young male members who have not agreed to this statement than their counterparts in the category of ex-EMRs. If not by practice, at least by perception, the ERs are concerned about gender equality. A majority of them, irrespective of sex, have appreciated that

household work is not the responsibility of only the females while men have to look after the economic matters of the household. More than 60 per cent of both men and women from both categories of present and past ERs denied that household work is the burden of women alone, and that women also should take care of economic matters. Moreover, even in the case of such notions that men should not sweep the floor, surprisingly 45.5 per cent of ex-PRI women, agreed that it is not correct to expect men to sweep the floor.

Having been exposed to reservations to women in PRIs, it is expected that majority of both males and females from both categories of current and ex-members, are very vehemently supportive of women's political participation at least for experience. To the question about wage discrimination between males and females, both men and women, irrespective of their duration of position in PRIs (past or present) have vociferously supported wage discrimination on the ground that women are not physically equally capable of hard work as men are. Therefore, giving them wages lower than that of men is nothing wrong and is quite justified.

Despite their struggles and toil, women have been longing for more empowerment and freedom from gendered discrimination. This is clear when we refer to the Table where women have felt that the ERs would get better acceptance in the position of ERs if only they were men (EMRs). Gender discrimination on grounds of one's capacity to participate was experienced by all of them. This is clear when we see that a majority have answered in the affirmative to the question and wished they were born as men to get the certificate of being good leaders.

There are three other questions as seen in the Table above that were posed to the women. All of them hint at the gender relations in the household and signify how they should

have molded the thinking of men and women. For the question of child care by both father and mother also, there was an overwhelming response involving men or father in childcare activities. While the responses of present EMRs (74.7 per cent) is lower than that of the present EWRs (78.1 per cent), it is not so in the case of former members. Here, the number of ex-EWRs is lower (63.6 per cent) than their male counterparts (71.8 per cent).

Another area of gender discrimination is in choosing educational institutions for girls vis-a-vis boys in rural households. Normally, restrictions are placed on girls by disallowing them to attend co-education schools. But this traditional practice is held as conservative and illogical by our respondents. More than 90 per cent of both men and women from both categories of old and new members have negated the statement and denied that it should be put to practice. They feel that girls should study in co-educational schools and mix with the opposite sex that helps in building their personality. It enables developing a sense of understanding between sexes, and prepares them to face life better.

Lastly, being the worst social evil of the present times, dowry system is condemned by one and all, and there is almost 100 per cent response that it is a social evil. There are no male female differences in such response.

On the whole, we find that the ERs, whether past or present, or male or female, are equally progressive. We found that social and economic processes that are in vogue in the rural areas in the last few decades have prepared men and women equally well in at least developing an opinion or attitude about gender equality.

### **Participation and Performance**

The most outstanding feature of the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendments is the visibility and space that it has provided to women. Reservation of seats to women from

all caste and class categories and all levels of administration - village, taluk and district - is an important indicator of women's empowerment through decentralised bodies that have opened up the gates of political power and status to hitherto such unrepresented sections of our society. One of the most positive outcomes from the increased representation of women in PRIs is expected to be their social elevation. Representation of women and other weaker sections apart from their ability to participate in decentralised governance and planning process is another issue that they have to tackle as soon as they are elected to power. Being novices to politics and political activities, these women needed time and support to really pick up the threads of effective participation. After more than two decades of experience in panchayat system one expects them to have picked up the art or skill of participation. Yet the ever-complex process of political administration in a regime of panchayats being shielded by party politics, it is presumed that such participation by these new entrants is still difficult. Participation involves taking right decisions at the appropriate time and place. The ERs, male or female, are expected to understand the needs of the people in their constituency better as they are elected as 'one among them' for this purpose (Gayathridevi 2004).

When asked if the ERs were interested in launching any special plans for making panchayat development more gender sensitive, 66 per cent of our respondents have replied in the affirmative. A majority of respondents in the districts of Mandya (72.5 per cent), Dakshina Kannada (DK) and Gulbarga (70 per cent) and Bellary (60 per cent) stated to make panchayati raj system gender-friendly (see Table 6). A very large percentage (73.5) of them have also informed us that women from their constituency approach them for help in solving their problems. It is the highest in Mandya with 87.5 per cent, followed by

**Table 6: Initiatives by ERs to Empower Women**

| Response  | Gulbarga | Bagalkot | Bellary | Mandya | Dakshina Kannada | Total |
|---|----------|----------|---------|--------|------------------|-------|
| a) Have you undertaken initiatives to empower women in your Panchayat?                        |          |          |         |        |                  |       |
| Yes   | 20       | 20       | 23      | 19     | 15               | 97    |
| Percentage  | 50       | 50       | 57.5    | 47.5   | 37.5             | 48.5  |
| No  | 20       | 20       | 17      | 21     | 25               | 103   |
| Percentage  | 50       | 50       | 42.5    | 52.5   | 62.5             | 51.5  |
| Total   | 40       | 40       | 40      | 40     | 40               | 200   |
| b) As an ER would you like to make the plans for Panchayat Development more Gender Sensitive? |          |          |         |        |                  |       |
| Yes   | 28       | 23       | 24      | 29     | 28               | 132   |
| Percentage  | 70       | 57.5     | 60      | 72.5   | 70               | 66    |
| No  | 12       | 17       | 16      | 11     | 12               | 68    |
| Percentage  | 30       | 42.5     | 40      | 27.5   | 30               | 34    |
| Total   | 40       | 40       | 40      | 40     | 40               | 200   |
| c) Do women folk approach you for solution to their problems?                                 |          |          |         |        |                  |       |
| Yes   | 28       | 31       | 27      | 35     | 26               | 147   |
| Percentage  | 70       | 77.5     | 67.5    | 87.5   | 65               | 73.5  |
| No  | 12       | 9        | 13      | 5      | 14               | 53    |
| Percentage  | 30       | 22.5     | 32.5    | 12.5   | 35               | 26.5  |
| Total   | 40       | 40       | 40      | 40     | 40               | 200   |
|   | 100      | 100      | 100     | 100    | 100              | 100   |

Bagalkot with 77.5 per cent and Gulbarga with 70 per cent. Thus, while nearly 49 per cent of the respondents stated that they are undertaking initiatives to empower women in

their constituencies, when it is decoded as to how they are doing so, the responses are rather skewed.

Furthermore, upon questioned as to what are the general issues of grievance that women in the constituency bring to the notice of their ERs (male or female), there were several types of problems that women in the area state to have actually encountered. These responses could be categorised for purposes of analysis here into those falling into the public and private spheres. Matters relating to availing of benefits of the government schemes meant for them belong to the former while issues like demand for dowry and sexual harassment fall into the latter domain.

Put together, about 20 per cent of all ERs in the selected and about 20 per cent of respondents (Table 7) have stated that women from their constituencies approach them for reasons of exclusion in the government programmes. Apathy and discrimination in government offices is reported to be the highest according to some of our respondents from Mandya (28.9 per cent), followed by Bellary (18.9 per cent) and others.

**Table 7 : Issues that are Generally Brought Before the ERs by Women**

| Issues  | Gulbarga | Bagalkot | Bellary | Mandya | Dakshina Kannada | Total |
|---|----------|----------|---------|--------|------------------|-------|
| a) Apathy or discrimination in government offices | 5        | 8        | 7       | 13     | 4                | 37    |
| Percentage  | 13.9     | 20.5     | 18.9    | 28.9   | 12.5             | 19.6  |
| b) Dowry  | 2        | 4        | 7       | 9      | 1                | 23    |
| Percentage  | 5.6      | 10.3     | 18.9    | 20     | 3.1              | 12.2  |
| c) Harassment at Work place                       | 9        | 6        | 8       | 8      | 8                | 39    |
| Percentage  | 25       | 15.4     | 21.6    | 17.8   | 25               | 20.6  |
| d) Sexual harassment                              | 2        | 5        | 5       | 6      | 12               | 30    |
| Percentage  | 5.6      | 12.8     | 13.5    | 13.3   | 37.5             | 15.9  |
| e) Travel Related                                 | 3        | 1        | 2       | 0      | 0                | 6     |
| Percentage  | 8.3      | 2.6      | 5.4     | 0      | 0                | 3.2   |
| f) Any Other                                      | 15       | 15       | 8       | 9      | 7                | 54    |
| Percentage  | 41.7     | 38.5     | 21.6    | 20     | 21.9             | 28.6  |
| Total   | 36       | 39       | 37      | 45     | 32               | 189   |
|   | 100      | 100      | 100     | 100    | 100              | 100   |

That problems like 'dowry system' are not very significant in few places in the State is perhaps evident when we look at the Table

where DK district has one ER saying that dowry harassment is an issue for their voters approaching them. Mandya has registered the



highest number of responses (20 per cent) followed by Bellary (18.9 per cent), Bagalkot (10.3 per cent) and Gulbarga (5.6 per cent).

Both harassment at work place and sexual harassment are stated to have been present in the selected districts. About 25 per cent in Gulbarga and DK, 21.6 per cent in Bellary, 17.8 per cent in Mandya and 15.4 per cent of the ERs in Bagalkot have admitted that their voters come to them with complaints about harassment at work place. DK has topped the list (37.5 per cent) among other districts as far as people complaining and seeking the help of ERs is concerned. The other districts also have it to some extent as is visible from the number of people who are approaching the ERs for redressal. However, panchayats have no right to solve this kind of problem. So what happens to rehabilitation problem? Just reporting will not work!

On the whole, the study has shown that the ERs are aware that legal provisions made have to reach the needed sections without fail. They are aware of the shortcomings, including corruption and other irregularities. They have also observed that funds earmarked for development works do not reach the panchayats on time and this delay also adds to the inefficiency in performing their duties. Although many have said that they were able to fulfill election promises, there is a void in the performance.

### Concluding Reflections

The foregoing analysis shows that although Constitutional provisions relating to women in rural areas have done substantial good for their exposure and empowerment, women continue to encounter a number of challenges and constraints in their participation in the social and political spheres.

Despite several years of introduction of reservation of seats in their favour, women continue to depend on male relatives and

officials in playing their roles and discharging their responsibilities. Thus, proxy governance is seen in almost all GPs under the study. Untouchability is still being practised in almost all the villages of the GPs in Gulbarga, Bellary, Bagalkot and Mandya districts. Denial of access to public places like barber shops, hotels, temples, etc., are some of the caste based discriminations that can be seen in the villages that come under the present study. Dalits are obeying an unwritten code by not daring to enter hotels run by the upper caste Hindus. The paper also highlights that women are caught between genuine participation and proxy participation.

### Policy Suggestions

The following are a few suggestions for ensuring better empowerment of women in and out of the PRIs. Leadership by women needs to be a continuous process stretching beyond the official position in the panchayats. They have been travelling between genuine participation and proxy participation. Their contribution, true to their rights, has to come from their knowledge and further empowerment. Only that can make them contribute better and make substantive difference than what they are today. Transformative politics is countered by patriarchy that is directed by issues of power, authority, hierarchy and control which affect changes in power structures and gender relations. Concerted efforts are needed to enable the above. A few suggestions in this regard are as follows:

1. Formation of EWR collectives/forums to help develop strategies to empower women as leaders.
  - a) This would provide platform for women to share their real life experiences as leaders
  - b) Creation of awareness about their roles and responsibilities

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <p>c) Awareness about right to information (RTI), right to education (RTE) etc. that would enable their further empowerment with knowledge and security</p> <p>d) Enhance their role as stakeholders in gender budgeting</p> <p>e) Self-analysis of the potential impact of women's participation on the functioning of the PR institutions.</p> <p>2. Women leaders have to understand their role in improving the living conditions of fellow women, especially women from the weaker sections. EWRs can make a difference if they are trained in understanding the constraints of poor women in accessing essential services like public distribution system (PDS), drinking water, equal wages, social security for health, children's education, child labour etc.</p> | <p>3. Training of EWRs is felt to be inadequate. The State government has to take steps to look into the contents of training modules offered both by state training institutions and the government.</p> <p>4. Organising crash programmes for illiterate EWRs is of utmost necessity.</p> <p>5. Formation of women's associations and groups at different levels to act as pressure groups on all fronts-community-education, better law enforcement and deterrent punishment for continuing social evils like female foeticide, dowry, violence on women at home and work place etc.</p> <p>6. Empowering the EWRs to implement equal wages to women is important.</p> <p>7. Ensuring equality and efficiency in gender budgeting to achieve complete gender autonomy in leadership.</p> |
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