

A study on socio-political empowerment among women representatives (members) of Gram Panchayat in Puttur Taluk

Rohith AR

Total Sanitation Programme
Dakshina Kannada Zilla Panchayath
rohithanthibettu@yahoo.in

Prasanna Kumar C

P G Department of social work
Center for Post Graduate Studies and Research,
St. Philomena College, Puttur, India
cpksmsw@gmail.com

It is commonly observed fact that women, half of the human resource, have been deprived of the opportunities. Recognizing the need of involving women in the political system and ensuring their participation in political process the introduction of reservation policy in favour of women in the Panchayati Raj Institutions has, therefore, been an important government intervention for maximizing the women participation and thereby to improve their status. Hence this paper examines the role awareness, participation process of elected women members, familial support received, the way they manage their household responsibilities, possible areas of blocks and constraints in performing their roles, the awareness on the local self governance and various developmental programmes/schemes, exposure to the capacity building and its impact on their role performance, the nature of public relationship established by them in the public and also their vision on the developmental aspects and suggestions to improve their functioning. 50 women representatives (members) drawn from various Gram Panchayaths in Puttur Taluk are taken through the simple random sampling method for the study. The study revealed that most of the women representatives joined politics who lack previous experience in this domain and there by find it difficult to make balance between the household chores and tasks at Panchayath. Inadequate political knowledge in roles and communication skill deficiency add to the problem. Better political orientation and training are suggested.

Introduction :

Women constituting half of the population of our country have been an integral part of our social structure principally due to their contribution to the socio-economic sphere of life. Notwithstanding the fact, the dominant patriarchy has denied women equality of status and opportunities in socio-economic and political spheres. Rural Indian Women have still been treated as “Object” of development rather than the “Subject” of development.

Women Participation and Empowerment

In other words it refers to the process by which women acquire due recognition on par with men, to participate in the development process of the society through the political institutions as a partner with human dignity. Empowerment of women is essentially the process of upliftment of economic, social and political status of women, the traditionally underprivileged ones, in the society.

Vanessa Griffin (1987:117-18) identifies, some components to illustrate what the term empowerment indicates: Having control or gaining further control; Having a say and being listened to; Being able to define and create from women's perspective; Being able to influence social choices and decision affecting the whole society; Being recognized and respected as equal citizens in human beings with a contribution to make.

Need for Socio-Political Empowerment of Women

Political empowerment for women is regarded as a key driver for economic and social empowerment. There can be no true democracy, or no true people's participation in governance and development without equal participation of men and women at different levels of decision making. Participation of women in political life is integral to the advancement of women. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments brought about significant changes in the political scenario of the country with regard to women's participation in politics.

G. Palanthurai (2001) in his Study of Tamilnadu observed that women have come to positions in the local bodies as provisions have been made in the constitution. The outlook of the society towards the women has started changing. Author from his experience suggests that women need orientation, sensitization, capacity building, information and counselling continuously through organizations.

Amal Mandal's book "Women in Panchayathi Raj Institutions" (2003), is a report of a fact finding mission on women panchayath members of a district in West Bengal. The study indicates that the participation of women in panchayath process has allowed them to emerge as effective leaders and to act as catalytic agents by infusing confidence, assertiveness and providing stimulus for social change among other women. At the grass root level only beginning has been made and wholesome acceptance of women in every facet of life is still to come.

The Problem

In India, women have been deprived of various kinds of opportunities and advantages by our traditional society for the past several centuries.

Restrictions are imposed on participation of women in certain social and cultural programmes and even in moving outside the households for certain purposes.

Recognizing the unsatisfactory progress that has been achieved in improving the socio-economic status of women in the past it has increasingly been felt desirable that involving rural women in the political system and ensuring their participation in the activities of its institutions, including in matters related to decision making process would be instrumental in improving the socio-economic status and political empowerment of women.

Therefore, it is imperative to study all aspects of the social problems being faced by the women while discharging their responsibilities as a member (representative) in Gram Panchayath. With new scenario of providing recent administrative and financial backup and coordination, women's present mode of working as shown by their initiative, administrative acumen, leadership strengths and weaknesses, decision making and ability etc. need to be investigated in detail so as to make recommendations to ameliorate the existing deadlock and to facilitate empowerment of women as a whole.

In this light, this study has attempted to examine various issues related to the knowledge level of women members, the nature of participation of women members in decision making activities and their family responsibilities, exposure for capacity building, their vision on various development programmes of Gram Panchayaths and welfare activities.

Objectives of the study

The main objectives of the study are to investigate the Empowerment of Women Representatives in Gram Panchayaths, that this study was undertaken. Among other objectives, the specific objectives of the study are as under:

- To understand the socio-political background of the elected women representatives at Gram Panchayaths of the area under study.
- To study the participation of elected women members in Local Self Governance and to understand their role performance.
- To understand the familial support as well as the way of managing the household responsibilities being elected members.
- To enquire possible areas of blocks and constraints of women in performing their roles.

- To study and assess the level of awareness of the elected women members about the Local self governance and various development programmes/schemes
- To elicit the exposure on the capacity building and its impact on their role performance as well as the nature of public relationship, being members.
- To draw out the prescriptions done by the women members regarding their vision on the developmental aspects in Grama Panchayath and measures improving their functioning.

Methodology

The main study was conducted on a sample of 50 women representatives (members) drawn from various Grama Panchayaths in Puttur Taluk through the Simple Random Sampling method. Primary data is collected by researcher directly from the field. Researcher also collected Secondary data from books published by various publications, and the material available in internet etc. For systematic processing of data the researcher has followed both manual and mechanical systems of data processing. As the study is limited to Puttur Taluk in which the findings may not fit to have comprehensive implication and also the sample size is limited to fifty respondents, where there is possibility of the results not being accurate. The analysis is based on the opinion of the respondent and the perception of the respondents which may be biased.

Results

Socio-political background of the elected women representatives at Gram Panchayaths of the area under study

As age and educational qualification of women representatives being important factors which has greater influence on affecting political participation, majority of the respondents are middle aged women actively involved in the political system.

As far as educational qualification is concerned 58% of the respondents have attained only primary education. Caste is another parameter to guess the empowerment level among women members. Even today Caste has its hold in the Indian politics. It is evident from the study that the participation of the category OBC has been increased considerably as more than half of the respondents are from OBC caste category.

Participation of elected women members in Local Self Governance and to understand their role performance

In order to understand the empowerment process among women

representatives it is crucial to concentrate on their political background. The pre-existing political experience of women has a greater relevance with the role they perform as people's representative in political system especially at grassroot level.

As far as political background of the women representatives is concerned it has been seen that most of the women representatives joined politics particularly in the time of Panchayath elections. It is evident from the study that majority of the respondents (74%) had no previous experience as members in Grama Panchayath. Even majority of the respondents have no family history of having Panchayath membership as peoples representatives. The above table shows that as many as 64% of the respondents have contested the election by compulsion of others. This shows that the reservation policy made women members to contest election forcefully and the political parties or others have influenced on the decision of members to contest for local elections.

To understand women members' empowerment level, it is important to study the participation pattern of women representatives in Grama Panchayath activities such as meetings, Grama Sabhas and also their mode of participation in meetings, their satisfaction level etc. Most of the members informed that they always try to attend general meeting and other meetings called by Gram Panchayaths but it becomes very difficult for them due to their household activity. Time is another factor. But it is an appreciable fact that majority of them find time to attend to it. It also depends on the distance, transport cost and other cost of refreshment etc. which does not allow them to attend the meetings regularly. Sometimes this may be also due to the forced entry into politics which is against their interest.

Familial support as well as the way of managing the household responsibilities being elected members

In order to assess the empowerment of women representatives of the Panchayath and to enable them to discharge their function as Grama Panchayath members obtaining family support is crucial factor. The very attitude of their family members and their response while permitting them to contest election as well as their stand after being member, freedom in the family to take decisions etc. are essential elements in this study.

As far as the kind of family response received while contesting the election is concerned, 94% of the respondents' opined that their family members were very supportive to them which shows that these women representatives have backup from the family which is also an encouraging fact to be noted in the process of women empowerment. Again it is found out from the respondents

that most of the women members receive every support from their family to discharge their responsibilities as members in the panchayath.

Being able to influence social as well as choices and decisions in the household is a major factor in the process of women empowerment. This study investigates into women's influence in decision making and access to family resources has increased or not after being people's representatives while we look into their empowerment level. More than half of the representatives opined that they are consulted and provided good space in making family decisions and also increased their accessibility to the family resources. Though this is an encouraging reality it is also evident from the study that regardless of being people's representatives still a segment of woman members are lacking their say in the family business which is disgraceful fact to know.

The study also makes an attempt to understand how far the women representatives have been able to provide justice to their household activities as well as family responsibilities. The more over-burdened by the household duties less the performance as a member can be shown. But in the study the respondents were able to discharge their role in household activities and were able to provide justice to the family.

Inquiry on possible areas of blocks and constraints of women representatives in performing their roles

As far as major blocks to role performance of the women members in Grama Panchayath is concerned it is significant aspect to know the factors affecting/influencing/blocking their role performance, kind of cooperation received from their counterparts, the major hurdles encountered during their participation etc. From the study it is found that majority of the women members are receiving very good support from their male counterparts while performing their role as members in the Panchayath. Majority of them have attributed to the lack of sufficient knowledge as major block to perform their duty. It has also been investigated the interference of their husbands in discharging their duties. 78% respondents answered negatively indicating no such occurrences have been experienced by them. But another group answers positively by admitting the above fact. It may be concluded that, still female members either depend on their husbands or they were not able to keep out of their inference.

Again as far as gender based discrimination aspect is concerned it is clear that majority of respondents have not encountered such irregularities. But still there are respondents who admit the prevalence of gender based discrimination in panchayat system which has become an impediment to perform their duty effectively. As a matter of fact 19(38%) respondents agreed

that they are experiencing gender discrimination. These are the indications where male dominated society continues to control the subaltern i.e women.

Again obtaining constructive response from their officials is a significant element to be considered in assessing women's participation in Panchayaths thereby empowerment. Majority of the respondents receive good cooperation from the bureaucracy at Grama Panchayath.

Another interesting fact to know that majority of the respondents were unwilling to continue their political career. Only less than half of the respondents expressed their desire to contest for another term. It can be analysed that a majority of female members have no interest to be in politics. This may be due to the fact that they might have entered politics by force and not by their own conviction.

Awareness on local self governance and exposure to capacity building programmes

The knowledge of women representatives on local self governance system as well as their exposure towards capacity building programmes are also significant aspects in the study . Most of the women elected were attended to primary classes and above all the majority of women declared themselves as homemakers. The process of empowerment includes self-confidence, political awareness and affirmation of information. The first step towards the empowering process is to become aware about the roles, responsibilities and various development programmes.

It is true that with respect to different programmes, policies of the panchayat women members need to equip deep knowledge so as to initiate programmes on their own and thereby perform their role effectively. Government introducing the reservation policy for women could be an important initiative of awareness for maximizing the role, responsibilities and participation of women in Gram Panchayath.

Majority of respondents know all the schemes/facilities available in the Panchayath. Again they have the insight to their roles and responsibilities being political representatives.

It is observed that women have come to positions in the local bodies as provisions have been made in the constitution. They lack sufficient orientation and guidance. There is a need to ensure their effective participation in the functioning and decision making process at the grassroots level. Therefore women need orientation, sensitization, capacity building, information and counselling continuously through organizations. Periodical training; orientation and sensitization can help the women leaders to perform the

assigned role in a better way. Training being an important part in women empowerment process, the study reveals that majority of the members have received some sort of trainings and in turn, that has increased their participation level as well as their awareness also.

From the study it is found out that majority of the respondents have not gone on any exposure visits which clearly indicates that those respondents either have not utilised the opportunity or deprived from the exposure part.

Being people's representative women members' ability to speak publicly and there by communicate the issues/schemes pertaining to their ward to public is crucial from people's development point of view. Of course initially they may be hesitant to speak in front of public gathering particularly in Grama Sabha but slowly it may give them courage and increase their confidence level paving the way for their empowerment. But it is evident from the study that majority of the representatives were not able to speak out in public. Only a few opened their mouth in the public.

Prescriptions done by the women members regarding their vision on the developmental aspects in Grama Panchayath and measures improving their functioning.

It is well understood fact that in the village after being elected the people honour them. People recognise them as their leaders and people approach them for help. Still it is important to study the nature of the contact established by these women leaders and the mode of contact.

In addition to the above it is also crucial to understand what is there in their mind as people's representatives, which is their priority sector, their vision in the people's development etc. are also can be seen in this part.

96% respondents have established very close relationship with the public. It is also important to mention the fact that while they are engaged in domestic works, their husbands or family members take responsibility to talk with the visitors and try to meet their requirements. So their counterparts also try to establish good relationship with the public which ultimately goes into the credit of women members. As far as the mode of contact with the people is concerned all of them have direct contact with the people which is also a encouraging fact.

It is noted from the study that majority of women representatives have given importance to the activities in the panchayath which contributes to the empowerment. A large proportion of them, keen to prioritise the 'empowerment of women' as most concerned area of their involvement which is an encouraging fact to understand.

Regarding the plan and thought of the women members as responsible panchayath leaders' respondents have vision for the development of weaker section of society which is also an encouraging fact to know.

Based on the findings and experience gathered from the present study the following suggestions can be made for the empowerment of women through their effective participation in political processes. Political awareness programmes should make women understand their rights and the benefits. There is the need for regular orientation and training programmes that will help to increase the political and management skills of women in Panchayaths. Being politically skilful, they will be able to understand and assimilate diverse political opinion, participate intelligently in political debates and analyse issues to make useful decisions. Long-term solution to women's participation in political activities rests in greater awareness about their role, responsibilities and entitlements. Expansion of information, education and development of communication skills of women, Exposure Visit and Exposure Speech can enhance the confidence level as well as the capability level of the women functionaries.

Empowerment as a process requires multi-dimensional efforts and holistic interventions. This requires concerted and sustained efforts by all concerned-policy makers, Governments, NGOs, Training Institutions and by the women and men themselves. Sensitisation of men, both officials and elected members is very essential for women to be able to function effectively in PRIs. Contribution by women members should be recognized and appreciated in public spheres. Reservation for women should be continued to ensure their empowerment through greater participation in political administration and decision making.

Following few suggestions may be considered to improve future research. A larger sample size could bring in more satisfactorily, accurate findings that can be confidently generalized. Study could have been more elaborative adding some more Panchayaths of Puttur Taluk through which effect the studies more applicable. If time and economy permit, appropriate scales can be developed for future studies.

In the conclusion an integrated approach is necessary to make the panchayaths truly democratic and strengthen good governance. Despite the many problems and limitations, women have proved that given an opportunity they are capable of becoming equal partners in the development process.

Political empowerment can be better sustained if women have at least a degree of economic independence. Women have gained better status both in

family and outside. Family members and men in many instances perceive women in a more positive way. In the context of gram panchayath, more reforms and structural changes are needed that would actually delegate powers and responsibilities to elected women members. Women need to gain greater role clarity and strike a balance between their household and official responsibilities.

While men have to be sensitized to be supportive in this, women need to bring about shifts in their attitudes and outlook. There is a lot of scope and potential for women to emerge as leaders and decision makers and play a key role in the development and good governance of local institutions. It requires dedicated and committed efforts by all concerned.

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