

CHALLENGES AND ACHIEVEMENTS OF WOMEN COUNCILLORS IN URBAN LOCAL GOVERNANCE - A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: Today the representation of women in politics has been increased considerably but due to their low participation in Indian politics, their issues and problems are generally unseen and unnoticed. Promoting women's participation in politics is one of the core areas of women empowerment. Active participation of women in the mainstream of political activities, political processes, decision-making and policy formulation has a strong bearing on the governance structure, nation-building and development of a country. The presence of women in the decision-making levels not only enhances their social, political and economic status, but also strengthens democratic institutions and even perhaps change the nature of the democratic process. Hence to promote gender equality in urban local governance, study investigated the challenges faced by women councilors in decision making, factors that facilitate and restrain their participation in political field, and their achievements during their tenure. Respondents were thirty women councilors in Urban Local Government of three Municipalities of Sivagangai district in Tamil Nadu, India. Purposive sampling technique has been used for the selection of sample. Structured interview schedule and case studies have been adopted for the collection of data. Study shows that women have gained only certain extent of authority and confidence. Hence research study recommended implementation of Gender park to resolve gender inequity in all developmental process and suggested strategies for the effective participation of women in urban local governance.

Key Words: Women Empowerment, Political Participation, Urban Local Bodies, Women Councillors.

Introduction: *"Success without democracy is improbable; democracy without women is impossible."*

-Madeleine K. Albright (The first woman to have become the United States Secretary of State)

In India, the principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Constitution. Our Constitution guarantees to all women the fundamental right to equality under which they get equal voting rights and equal right to political participation. Our Constitution is firmly grounded in the principles of liberty, fraternity, equality and justice, and accordingly contains a number of provisions for the empowerment of women. The political rights of women in India are thus recognized without any discrimination or distinction and, as such, they have the right to participate in decision-making process at all levels equally with men. The right to constitutional equality has been supplemented by legal equality with the enactment of a number of legislations through which the traditional inequalities in respect of marriage, divorce and property rights are sought to be eliminated. However, there is still a need for an increased representation of women in the political and legislative bodies so as to enable them to have a more effective role in decision-making processes. India has the local self-governance bodies in both the rural and the urban areas. In rural areas, they are called Panchayati Raj Institutions and in the urban areas they exist in the form of Municipalities. At present, these local self-governing institutions - both rural and urban - derive their powers and functions

directly from the Constitution. Indian constitution has two separate Parts in delineating the structures, compositions, functioning and tenure of both the rural and the urban local bodies. Further, our Constitution distinctively allocates the subjects on which the local bodies have the authority to develop, maintain and regulate.

The local level representative bodies in India have given the much needed political platform and space to women, thereby enabling them to take part in planning and development at the grassroots level. By positively impacting the representation of women, these grassroots level democratic institutions have laid a strong foundation for women's participation in decision making processes in India. Through this affirmative action, a silent revolution has taken place wherein more than a million women have entered politics across the country. Today, we have around 37 per cent representation of women in our local bodies which are higher than the mandated 33 per cent. To give more representation to women in local bodies, some of the States in India have enacted legislations providing for half of the seats for women in local bodies. Three states Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh already have 50% reservation for women as states have the power to bring in amendments in their laws to increase women's representation up to 50%. Kerala has also announced 50% reservation for women in urban local bodies along with panchayats.

Women's rights and responsibilities to participate equally in political life cannot be treated as a

'minority' issue. The political space must belong to all citizens - women and men. The value of inclusion of women in governance and decision-making institutions lies in the diversity of experiences women will bring to governance. While it is considered important to bring women to positions of power, it is equally necessary to make the people in power, whether men or women, adequately gender-sensitive. Equally important is women's economic independence, their educational advancement and their socio-economic improvement.

Gender equality is a goal which cannot be achieved only by higher representation of women in the Legislatures and other public bodies but it has to be stressed by other supportive measures. The restructuring of gender relations both within the family and in the society is an important step not only towards promoting freedom, equality and justice in favour of women but also for ensuring their increased political participation at all levels.

Feminist Perspectives On The State: Western concept feminist not only views on the theorization of gender inequality but also on the nature and role of state institutes.

Liberal Feminism: Liberal feminists assume that 'the state is a monolithic, all-seeing, all-knowing corpus, which will always act in the most advantageous way possible for existing power relations'. Gender inequality is viewed as the result of individual cases of discrimination combined sometimes with the existence of sex-role stereotyping in education and the labour market. Access to education and legal reforms aims primarily at increasing women's professional and occupational status, thus enabling women to compete equally with men. The state is regarded as a neutral arbiter in equalizing gender relations by removing discriminatory laws and policies. Thus from liberal feminist perspective it could be a prime strategy to introduce women's initiatives and representatives into local government. Therefore, liberal strategies rely mainly on legal remedies.

Marxist Feminism: Marxist feminists perceives state institutions as instruments with a dominant interest in exploiting women and tends to focus on the oppressive aspects of the state. It argues that the state participates in oppressing women through its function in protecting capitalism and racism. The strategy to overcome this oppression is the mobilization of women into economic spheres. Marxist feminist perspective contributes in challenging the liberal assumption that 'representative government is the sole sanctuary for politics and the legitimate arbiter of social change'. But, it fails in explaining convincingly just why the state should need to reinforce masculine dominance and privilege.

Radical Feminism: Radical feminist perceives state institutions with a power structure and male dominated societies are responsible for oppression and inequality. Radical feminists argue for the urgent need to keep distance from the state, instead engaging in politics by using nonconventional political strategies which emphasize the purity and autonomy of responses to women's concerns. In this strategy the separation of women and men is urgent.

Research Methodology: Rationale of the Study: Women have acquired enough space in urban local bodies, particularly in the context of 33% reservation for them; mere reservation is no guarantee for the upliftment of women in a largely male-dominated society. The reservation has to be translated into effective activities in this realm. Though women able to participate in local governance they face too many challenges right from house hold activities to political violence which affect their valuable contributions for the development of their society. Women continue to remain invisible and marginalized in decision making bodies, lead to lack of a feminist perspective in political decision making. Women's participation in political bodies at various levels is the need of the hour. Only when ways and means are evolved to promote women's participation in polity, women would able to gain equal access to control over the political process. Hence the research study finds the challenges and achievements of women councillors in socio, economic and political aspects, recommends suggestions and also provides an insight to the future research on women in politics, women in governance and gender in governance etc.,

Aim of the Study:

- To understand the socio-economic and demographic profile of the women councillors.
- To analyze the challenges faced by women councillors in decision making.
- To find out the factors that hinders the participation of women councillors in Urban Local Bodies.
- To study the achievements of women councillors in urban local bodies for the Sustainable Development.

Study Universe: Sivagangai district is the study universe. Sivaganga district includes 2 Revenue Divisions, 6 Taluks, 12 Community Development Blocks, 3 Municipalities, 12 Town Panchayats, and 1 Census Town. Three Municipalities Devakottai, Karaikudi and Sivagangai have been chosen for the study.

Research Design: Descriptive research design was adopted in this study.

Sample Size: The total number of wards in Devakottai, Karaikudi and Sivagangai Municipality is 36, 27 and 27 respectively. In Devakottai, Karaikudi

and Sivagangai Municipality the number of elected women councilors are 12, 9 and 9 respectively. Thus sample size of the study is 30.

Sampling Techniques: Purposive sampling technique has been used for the selection of sample. Since the research is on specific field and subjects for inclusion also ensure certain characteristics that relevant the study.

Research Tools: Structured interview schedule and case study have been adopted for the collection of data. Interview schedule consists of socio- economic back ground, family size , official profile , political profile, the level of awareness of women councilors about their roles and responsibilities in urban local bodies, their leadership qualities, the challenges faced by women councilors in decision making, the factors that hinders the participation of women councilors in urban local bodies and the achievements of the respondents in urban local bodies for the sustainable development. Case study method was also used for the in depth investigations of the respondents. Through simple random sampling technique three case studies from three municipalities have been carried out.

Pre-Testing: A pre-testing was done to verify the suitability and adaptability of the tool in order to satisfy the research objectives. This exercise helped the researcher to standardize the structured interview schedule with necessary modifications (both additions and deletions) so as to obtain qualitative information from the respondents.

Sources of Data Collection: Primary data has been collected through interview schedule and case studies directly from the respondents. Secondary data include documents, records available in Inter Parliamentary Union, books, articles journals, news papers and related websites.

Data Management and Analysis: Collected data has been subjected to SPSS and classified according to variables and represented in tables, diagrams and charts. Each table was analysed and interpreted according to the objectives of the study.

Limitations of the Study: The free response of elected women councilors was restricted due to the presence and interference of their male counter parts. Therefore much time was spent by the researcher to elicit original response from the elected women councilors for the study.

Major Findings:

- Almost 73% of female councillors came from families which were politically active; it means that they had close relatives in active politics.
- 53% of women councillors entered into politics to help the people in society. Thus, it can be inferred that the choice of entry into politics of women councillors are mainly to serve the people.

- 70% of the respondents were not aware about 74th CAA. Thus, it clearly indicates that respondents are to be trained and get aware about the constitutional acts which favors for their development.
- The results reveal that 67% of the respondents were fully aware about their roles and responsibilities for their urban development.
- 30% of the respondents revealed implementations of government schemes for the welfare of the society is the roles and responsibilities of ward councillors.
- 77% of the respondents respond that they need more fund for their development of their ward.
- The study implies majority of the problems (77%) brought to the councilors by women. From this finding we can infer the perception that women serving in the local level focus on women and children's issues rather than the full of issues at the grass roots.
- 63% of the women councillors' participation is high in Urban Local Body meeting. They express their views, ideas and opinion to the problems that put forth during the meeting and also develop strategy for their municipal development.
- The study indicates that 24% of the respondents revealed that a reason for low participation of women in politics is due to lack of support from family of society.
- 53% of respondents mentioned that gender equality in all sphere of life is considered as Women Empowerment.
- 40% of the respondent declared that women had not empowered socially, economically & legally. Thus, we can infer women are still lacking behind and more policies have to be redesign for the empowerment of women.

Suggestions: The research suggests following strategies for Women's Effective Political Participation

These are:

Strategies of Changing Attitudes towards Women in Local Government:

- The local government should ensure that women are treated fairly and equally and to make sure that discrimination against women is not acceptable
- Local government has a responsibility to develop awareness of gender issues through programmes for men and women.
- Local government needs to take a gender-balanced approach and ensure that women are in decision-making positions in governance and management roles, and women's issues are promoted in policy and service provision.

Strategies to Increase the Number of Women:

- Local government needs to work closely with NGOs, civil societies and women's groups to develop communities and services that take account of the needs of women.
- Women's associations to be established for women councillors and managers in local government to provide a voice for women's views and a base for networking.
- Gender-disaggregated statistics need to be collected to increase the visibility of women.
- Gender park can be implemented to resolve gender inequity in all developmental process which would promoted the increased participation of women.

Training:

- Training programmes can be established by NGOs, political parties, educational and political institutions to help women in local government to develop skills and self confidence and to enable them to learn the functions and processes within this tier of government
- Workshops on gender awareness and development for both women and men to educate people on women's rights and the importance of women's equality would pave a way for gender mainstreaming in the local governance which results in good governance .
- Implementation of gender sensitization programmes for elected male members and officials under Ministries of Panchayati Raj, Urban

Development and Women and Child Development promotes engendered governance.

Role of Media and Civil Society Organization:

- The media needs to improve the status of women by advocating that women's issues involve both men and women to hasten change in customs, beliefs and values.
- The media should be encouraged to project women in a positive way, support their election campaign(s), and act as an agent for change on gender equity through portraying women in their multiple roles, and highlighting positive achievements.

Conclusion: There is no doubt that the provision of reserved seats for women in urban local bodies helped in recognizing the voice and role of women in local governance, but also Shows at the same time that reservations do not lead to effective participation for the sustainable development. While there is an increased participation in grass root political movements, it is not getting translated into a growing share of women in the formal political structure of the country. For effective participation of women in politics for the sustainable development of the society, women councilors need training on their roles and responsibilities, awareness on laws favors for their development and importantly the attitude change of society will support and enhances women's political participation and their contributions for the sustainable development of the society.

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