ROLE OF WOMEN IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE: THE KERALA EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

In the 21st century, women enjoy more independence and control. Still, they are disadvantaged when compared to male in almost all walks of life. Every individual has the right to involve in the decision making process that defines one's life. This is the fundamental right for the foundation of the idea of equal participation. The concept of democracy cannot be complete without the contribution of both the sexes. So the basis of any attempts to empower any segment of society must be political participation. There is mounting impetus among governments and civil society to promote and guarantee women's participation and headship in the political sphere, and exclusively within local power structures. Establishing quotas for women's representation at diverse levels of government has been a deliberate approach in achieving this objective in many countries. Political reservation is the first and chief step to be taken to guarantee such a surprising vision. The participatory form of enlargement ensured by decentralized planning has opened up several opportunities for women in Kerala to verify their courage in the political, administrative and economic actions of the state. Around 50 per cent of the seats in the LSGS of Kerala have been fixed to women through legislation. This paper focuses on the analysis of women empowerment and representation through the path breaking legislation to reserve 50 % of the seats in local administrative bodies in Thrissur Corporation during 2010-2015.

KEY WORDS: *Political Participation, Panchayati Raj, Municipal Corporation, Local governance, Women, Globalization*

INTRODUCTION

Democracy denotes equal opportunity for all humans, men and women. As against this central concept of democracy what is generally seen is that women are expelled from all walks of life, more evidently in Politics. Women in India constitute around fifty percent of the country's total population, but they have been treated inequitable because of the gender bias of the widespread patriarchic values of Indian society (Ahuja, 1993). The principal patriarchy has prevented women equality of status and opportunities in all spheres. During the last seventy years, numerous attempts have been made to bring about efficient decentralization, both political and economic, with limited success. Accordingly, the participation of women in the political process is vital for increasing the democratic customs and the richness of a nation. An increased political participation by women in all spheres of political life and electoral competition in particular will not only ensure political parity and equality with men, but would also serve the larger issues relating to women, ie, upliftment and empowerment of Indian women.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF DECENTRALISATION AND LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN INDIA

Decentralization' means delegation of central authority among local units close to the areas served. Authority devolves by this practice on people's institutions, and it is democratic decentralization. Grassroots level democracy is a propensity towards scheming political process where as much decision making authority as practical is shifted to the organization, whether it may a state or not. The principle is that for democratic power to be best exercised, it must be vested with local community; instead of remote, atomized individual essentially make it the opposite of national supremacy (Parnini, 2014). This type of political system differs from representative systems that permit local communities or national membership to elect representative who then go on to make decisions. Panchayati Raj is a system and practice of governance. The term was coined by Jawaharlal Nehru. Local self government is nothing novel as far as India is concerned. Ever since the Vedic period, local villagers participated in the communal decision making. Sabhas, gatherings, were popular platforms through which the common people had a direct say and control over the local affairs. The village was always more or less self dependent unit. This naturally evolved system persisted in the ancient period under the Mauryas, Guptas and Harshvardhan (Malviya, 1956). However, things began to change in the early medieval period, with the arrival of invaders and their foreign concept of governance. Shersha Suri devided the Revenue Administration and Police Administration between *'Patwari'* and *'Muqaddam'*. The Mughals introduced middlemen -'Zagirdar' – to collect revenue from the villager to the state. The British rule gave a strict blow to the local independence of the *village panchayats*. They changed the revenue system that reduced the self sufficient villages to the status of dependent units. Their centralized system of governance gave a severe blow to the rather autonomous

indigenous socio- economic system of India villages. Since their main aim was to exploit the natural resources as well as the people India to strengthen British Empire, they systematically destroyed all forms of local independence. The attempts of Lord Rippon during the last decades of British rule were the only initiative of British in the line of setting up of local governing institutions in the country (Ramshray, 1984). Many state governments set up committees to enquire into functioning of local government institutions and to suggest remedial measures. The Central government also appointed committees to this end. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 which created a uniform three-tier structure of Panchayati Raj at the district, block/mandal and village levels, provides transfer of responsibilities and tax powers from the state government to the gram panchayats (Lexmikanth, 2010). The women reservation bill (108th amendment) has been introduced in the parliament to reserve not less than 33% Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha seats for women. The decentralization of governance which is taking place for last two decades has increased the importance of measuring participation of women in decision making (Richa, 2015). Women are dramatically under-represented in India's state legislatures.

The participation of women in politics is intimately related to the position and status of women in society. Women's access to education, property, social freedom, economic independence, employment status, etc. have an impact on the degree and quality of political participation of women in a country. India has a rich history of measuring political participation of women since its independence. The decentralization of governance which is taking place for last two decades has increased the importance of measuring participation of women in decision making (Richa, 2015). Discussions of women's reservation were again introduced in 1974 by the United Nations Commission on the status of women in India, but India did not fully establish quotas in local government until 1994. Local governing bodies in India are called Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) and one third of seats and leadership position must be reserved for women states such as Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Chathisgargh, Jharkand, Kerala, Maharashtra, Odisha, Rajasthan, Tripra and Utharakhand have increased reservation up to 50%. (2014) seats reserved for women are rotated assurance that each seat has an equal chance of being reserved (Vijayakumari, 2014).

HISTORY OF DECENTRALISATION IN KERALA

Kerala is one of the smallest states in the Indian union. It occupies 1% of the total land area of India with a population of 3.33 crore, which is 3% of the total population in India in the 2011 census. The land of Kerala comprises the narrow coastal strip bounded by the Western Ghats in the east and the Arabian sea in the west (Nithya, 2013). Kerala has had a vibrant history springing from the ancient times, flowing down the medieval

running to present. Modern Kerala came into being on 1st November 1956, by amalgamating the states of Travancore, Cochin and Malabar in the basis of the State Reorganization Act (Gopa, 2013). The population distribution of Kerala according to religion is about 56.20% Hindus, 24.7 % Muslims and 19% Christians. At present this state is administratively divided into 14 districts, which in turn are divided into 75 Taluks, 152 Blocks, 1532 Villages 978 Grama (village) Panchayats, 53 Municipalities and 5 Corporation (Census, 2011).

According to Richard Frank and Barbara Chasin (1997), 'Decentralized Planning Initiative is a 'New Kerala model'. The political will to implement decentralization measures came from Leftist parties but it took a long time to reach the goal. The first Administrative Reforms Committee of the State headed by late Shri E.M.S. Namboodiripad recommended, way back in 1958 for a strong Local Government system to guarantee that the gains of freedom and democracy would flow to the disadvantaged, marginalized and oppressed sections of society. Yet, Kerala did not develop a strong local government system either in the rural areas or urban areas (Vijayanand, 2009). The 1990s witnessed an increasingly vigorous presence of panchayats in many Indian states. By this time, the LDF initiated many measures like the District Council Legislation in 1990. Once the District Councils were trivialized by the UDF government in 1991, there witnessed protests from the civil society. Once the amendments were passed, Kerala stepped into a new stage of democratic revolution (Gopa, 2013). The People's Planning programme was launched by the LDF in August 1996.

The structure and functioning of People's Planning provided sufficient scope for NGOs to engage in devolution process. Indeed, the provisions like Voluntary Technical Corps invited sharp criticism from the Congress party and UDF for recruiting leftist cadres in the mechanism, under the guise of voluntarism. Some changes were brought in but the political activism never subsided. The UDF launched its plan, *the Kerala Development Programme*, when it came to power in 2001 (Sharma, 2003). This plan also envisaged voluntarism in the arrangement and in the subsequent periods, the two alternative plans, the Peoples Plan and the Kerala Development Plan continued under LDF and UDF regimes. Much has been written since then on the role and activities of voluntary agencies in different section of the decentralization process. The LDF's People Plan Campaign and UDF's Kerala Development Programme had attracted extensive public attention. In total, women, SC and ST participation, competition for local level projects, initiatives for capacity building and above all creating local level development plans and special component plan are the major achievements of decentralization measures. Decentralization is an important constituent for achieving democracy at the bottom level (Chathukulam & John, 2002).

IMPACT OF DECENTRALISATION ON WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN KERALA

Kerala has been referred to as the "land of women". Women constitute 52% of the population -17,366,387 person (Census, 2011). Historically the state has been quite diverse from the rest of the country in terms of the indicators of women's development. Starting with the turn of the last century, the state had a positive sex ratio (1004) which gradually picked up and reached 1084 in 2011. Even during the period of the Sri Mulam Assembly in the 1930s and 1940s the women members showed their mettle through remarkable performances. Kerala is one among a few states to implement 50% reservation in local level. Though women's participation has increased in local bodies, they are still not in a position to influence decision-making process. According to T.N. Seema, Member of Rajya Sabha and former member of the Kerala Planning Board, "the real achievement of decentralized planning for women has been the creation of an enabling environment that has given meaning to reservation" (Parvathy, 2000).

The 50 % reservations in local bodies brought large numbers of women into the local bodies. The chief political beneficiary of the one third reservations for women in the panchayats and municipalities are women in Kerala. Women have been walking on a tight rope since the time they took up leadership position in local bodies. Statistics shows that, in the first post reform election to LSGIs, out of the total 14184 seats, 5078 representing 35.8 per cent were women. Out of them 452 became chair persons. The State Legislative Assembly in September 2009 amended the Panchayat Raj and Municipalities Acts of 1994 by which the reservation of seats and position was raised from one-third to 50 per cent. Consequently in the 2010 election to LSGIs, out of the 21646 seats the number of women elected representatives (WERs) exceeded 50 per cent as in many constituencies women got elected from general seats. Out of the total 1209 LSGIs more than 50 per cent are headed by women (Kuttappan, 2013).

Table 1 : Seats Reserved for Women in 2010 Panchayat Election

Local body	Total number of seats	Reserved seats for women	% of seats reserved for women
District Panchayath	332	169	50.90
Block Panchayath	2093	1106	52.84
Grama Panchayath	16627	8604	51.75
Municipality	2216	1122	50.63
Corporation	359	181	50.42
Total	**21627**	**1182**	**51.70**

Source: Economic Review 2011, Kerala State Planning Board, Government of Kerala

PROFILE OF THRISSUR CORPORATION

Thrissur is located in Kerala, known as the "Cultural capital of Kerala", due to its rich and varied heritage and archeological wealth and the presence of many important cultural establishments. Thrissur is built around a hillock on which the famous Vadakkunathan Temple is situated. Although the Zamorins and Tippu have ruled here, Sakthan Thampuran (Raja Rama Varma) was the architect of the modern day Thrissur and the one who converted Thrissur into a commercial center. Thrissur gained prominence under the reign of Raja Rama Varma in 1790. The entire credit for the rise of the modern city of Thrissur goes to Raja Rama Varma, who ascended the throne of the state of Kochi. Thrissur was for a brief period, the capital of the Kochi kingdom. Thrissur Municipal Corporation is the second largest city corporation in the state of Kerala by area, established as Municipality since 1921 under the Cochin Municipal Regulations. It is constituted by 55 wards spread in 101.42 sqkm in the District of Thrissur. Present Councilors of the municipal corporation were elected by the 2010 election. Thrissur municipal corporation came into being on 2nd October 2000 with a total area of 101.42 sq km by merging the adjoining Ayyanthole, Ollukkara, Koorkanchery, Ollur and Vilvattom panchayths and parts of Nadathara panchayth with the erstwhile municipal area. Prior to the constitution of the municipality, there was a Sanitary Board functioning in 1910 under a sergeant and the town council after 1911. In 1932 the new Municipal Corporation Building was constructed. On July 1, 1940, Thrissur Municipality was born and in October 1, 2000 it was upgraded by the Kerala governance to Municipal Corporation (corporation of Thrissur, website).

The Corporation comprises two legislative assemblies Thrissur Assembly Constituency and Ollur Assembly Constituency. The city is administered by the Thrissur Municipal Corporation headed by a Mayor. The Council is composed of all elected councilors. For administrative purpose, the city is divided into 55 wards/ councils from which the members of the corporation council are elected for five years. E-governance in Corporation focuses on improving national element of citizen services through defining service levels and outcomes; facilitating interactive interaction between local government, citizens and other stakeholders; improving quality of internal operation of local government; enhancing transparency and accountability; enhancing citizen interface and improving service delivery to citizens.

Table 2 : General Data on Municipal Corporation

District	Thrissur
Area	101.42 sq km
No of Wards	55
Population	317474 Person
Male	154188 Person
Female	163286 Person
Population Density	5897
Sex Ratio	1086:1000
Literacy	95.61%
Literacy (male)	97.26%
Literacy (Female)	94.12%

Source: www.thrissurcorporation.in

The municipal corporation is constituted by 55 wards spread in 101.42 sqkm in the District of Thrissur. The party wise distribution of Municipal Corporation is given below.

Table 3 : Party wise Distribution of Councilors

Sl. No	Party	No of Councilors
1	INC	41
2	CPI(M)	5
3	SJ(D)	2
4	KC(M)	1
5	CPI	1
6	Independent	4
Total		**55**

Source: www.thrissurcorporation.in

METHODOLOGY AND SURVEY ANALYSIS

The major methodology adopted for the research work is a combination of empirical and analytical methods. Primary data from the field were collected with the help of interview schedule among the councilors of the Thrissur Corporation (2010-2015 period). Samples are selected through random selection method. Altogether 12 female samples were selected and interviewed. The survey found that 30 percentages of the samples respondents fell under the age group of 40- 50 years. Number of samples having the age between 30 and 40 was only 1 which constitutes 10 percentages. The rest of the samples equally divided into the age groups of 20-30, 50-60 and 60 and above, which actually have 20 percentages each. The religion wise classification of respondents shows that majority of the respondents belongs to Hindus. It was followed by Christian. The samples were filled with forward castes both from Hindu and Christian outfits. There was only 10 percentages of councilors from SC and 20 percentages from OBC and the rest of the 70 percentage were from Forward castes. Majority of the samples, 30 percent were having basic educational qualification of SSLC and the same proportion of samples was qualified with PDC. 20 Percent of the samples had LLB, 10 percent passed Post Graduation while the rest were Degree holder (The Survey, 2016).

Majority of the respondents (70%), the inspiration to contest election was party pressure, only because of the seats were reserved for women. It inspires us to believe that reservation for women made the large portion of the councilors contest the election and the reason behind the assumption is that none of the elected female members were elected from unreserved seats and nobody, except one were at the battlefield before. According to Former Mayor, Thrissur Municipal Corporation, "there are many iron curtains prevailing in our society, which deny a female coming into politics. Being into politics is a process of learning for women, "to learn swimming a person has to go into water, so is politics. Attitude of family towards the participation of women in politics and their decision to contest election plays a big role. The unconditional support from the family to females to participate in party affairs can bring the potential in them out wholly. The present study pointed

out that 80 percent of the respondents get enough encouragement from their kin. It is noteworthy that all who get such support were educationally sound and were from party families (The Survey, 2016, see Figure 1).

Figure 1 : Response of family towards Politics
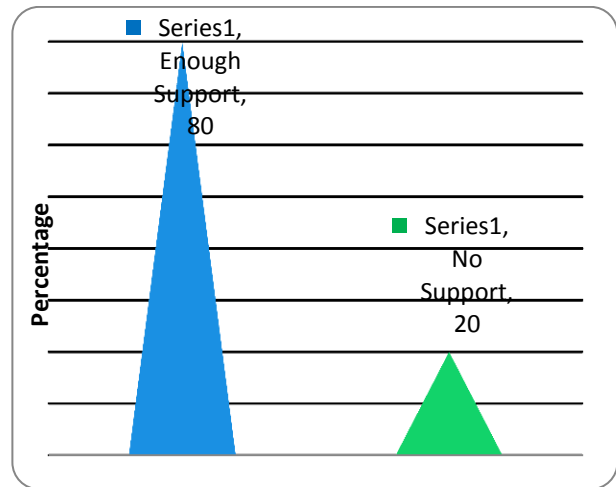
Source: The Survey, 2016

Capacity to take independent decisions in official matters is very important aspect of political participation. Majority of the respondents, ie; 80 percent opined that they could take free decision but a few (20 percent) were not able to take independent stand. Those who were not capable of shooting freely were always dominated and persuaded by male colleagues and top level office holders of the party which they belong to. Participation of women councilors in the activities of the party she represents is average level. 30 percentages of the councilors were holding some position in the party but it was restricted into the women wing of the party. Rest of the 70 percent was considered as the delegates in the party sessions in respective villages and having only basic membership of the party (The Survey, 2016, see Figure 2).

**Figure 2 : Participation of Councilors in Party Activities**
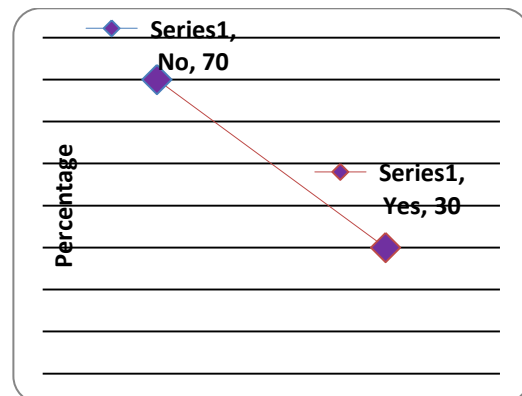
Source: The Survey, 2016

Speaking on the change in perspectives of a women due to marriage, 80 percent of the respondents commented that change in circumstances, family outlook, and the nature of people with whom a newlywed woman has to mingle have some influences on the perspectives. If a women had more freedom in her family but lacks it in the husbands family political activism and public interaction of the woman will be reduced but case will be opposite if the spouse's family is more liberal. The educational qualification of female plays a significant role in the degree of freedom they get from family. The response from better educated respondents was that they get more freedom (The Survey, 2016).

Support and corporation of colleagues is very important factor that influence the performance of the councilor. Without the support of colleagues neither the projects can be get passed nor could the fund be raised. To the question from whom they get more support and cooperation, 90 percent respondents opined that they get more support from male colleagues. The psychology of this response shall be analyzed scientifically. Another question that was asked to the respondents was whether they discuss politics at home or not? The answer was different from different respondents. 30 percent of the councilors said that they often discuss politics at home, 50 percent discuss some times and the rest of 20 percent discuss it only with husband as their children are not interested in politics. It is clear that all the councilors discuss politics at home but the magnitude varies. As most of the respondents were new at politics they did not have knowledge about 74th Constitutional Amendment Act by which they got chance to contest and win the election (The Survey, 2016, see Figure 3).

Figure 3 : Knowledge about the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act
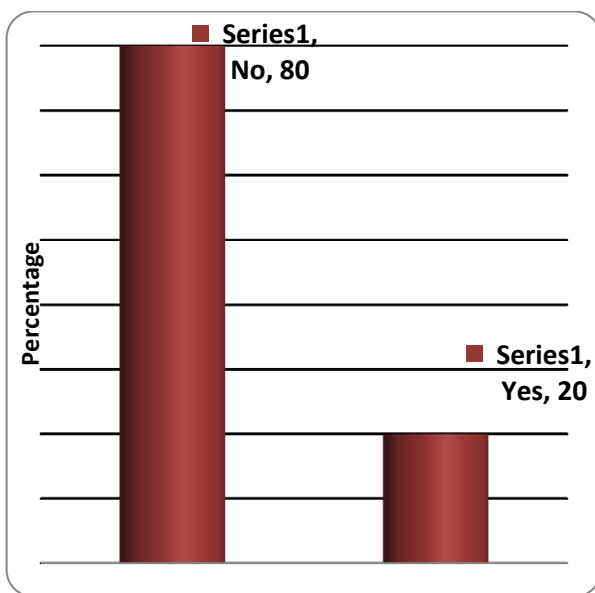
Source: The Survey, 2016

The main reason an increased number of women have come forward for election is due to the new enactment reserving 50% of seats in Local Panchayats for them. Without this they would not have entered politics. It is true that all the women councilors were elected from reserved constituencies. Everybody personally support women's reservation in state assemblies and parliament. 10% of the respondents have said that 50 percent seats should be reserved for women. Women representatives have played an important role in the development and successful implementation of programmes specifically initiated for women. Majority of the respondents, 80 percent have said that they could conduct ward council meetings so easily than males as the access of female to families is higher than that of men. The numbers of females participate in Grama Sabha / ward council meetings is also high in the wards in which the councilor is female (The Survey, 2016).

Table 4 : Women leaders and Women Issues

| Sl. No	Responces	Percentage
1	Yes	60%
2	No	35%
3	No.opinion	5%
	Total	**100**

Source : The Survey, 2016

The survey shows that women leaders can can effectively solve the women issues. Mrs. Rukiya Karim, Ward member, of Chelakkara Grama Panjayath, point out that only women leaders can effectively solve the women issue beacuse they can easly understand the heart of another women. Hence their communication reached in a better level.

On the question of hindrences to Womens entry in to politics, majority of the respondents pointout that the cultural and social factors are the main hindrens of women in political life.

People's planning campaign has helped the developmental activities in village areas. The opinion of councilors about the campaign and its impact was that the campaign had magnificent impact in village areas while the reflection of the campaign in urban areas is not that much attractive. The cause indicated by them for it was participation of people in Grama Sabhas in villages is very much higher than that of urban ward council meetings. The impact of the campaign on women is unparalleled but there are some setbacks also. The main setback is that most of the schemes are traditional economic empowerment programs like back yard gardening, poultry farming, vegetable farming and garment making. New projects with energizing women is not instigated or propagated under the schemes. 80 percent of the councilors have opined that peoples planning campaign has positive impact on local development in general and the development of women in

particular. 20 percent of the respondents said that the impact is not that much captivating (The Survey, 2016, see figure 4).

Figure 4 : Peoples Planning on Women Empowerment
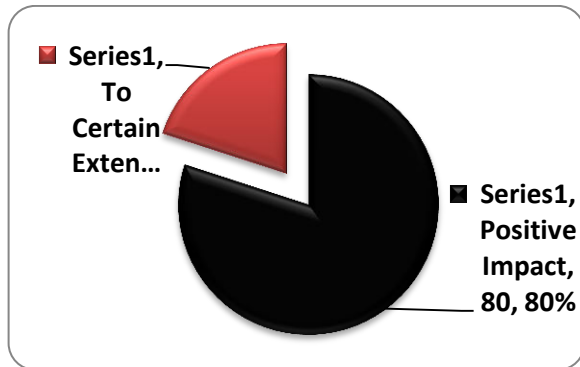
Source: The Survey, 2016

On the question of the need of women reservation, a big majority agreed the reservation schemes and those schemes are really need the women beacuse of low status of women in society. Women have got entry into politics in such a mass scale as a result of reservation of 50% seats for them in local self governments. Their entry would make some visible manifestation in our society and administration. In the opinion of majority, 70 percent, of councilors who took part in the discussion reduction in the rate of corruption was the visible change brought about by their entry into politics. Some, 30 percent has opined that Good governance is the hallmark of women's entry into politics (see figure 4).

Table 3 : Impact of Women's Reservation

Sl. No	Impact	Percentage
1	Transparency	70
2	Good Governance	30
Total		100

Source: The Survey, 2016

Women's political involvement, participation and access to formal political power structures are linked to many different structural and functional constraints which differ across countries. Several authors claim that women's absence in the political arena derives from the hindrances related to political, socio-economic, ideological and psychological barriers. The adoption of the 73rd amendment by the Parliament in 1992 had a great revolutionary potential to create genuine democracy at the grassroots village level. The most important achievement of the 50% reservation for women to local bodies is the emergence of large number of women leaders in the political field. Local governments being the grassroots level units of self-government are the most effective instrument for women participation in governance and development. 50 % reservation for women in Thrissur Municipal Corporation helped women's socio-

economic development but society's perception on women is the main barrier. However, hurdles and stumbling blocks have been and are still experienced by women representatives. The key barriers that restrict women's proactive participation in the decision process, that needs to be addressed on a priority basis. Therefore, "The achievement of democracy presupposes a genuine partnership between men and women in the conduct of the affairs of society in which they work in equality and complementarily, drawing mutual enrichment from their differences" (Inter- Parliamentary Union's Universal Declaration on Democracy).

MAJOR FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The study revealed that most important achievement of the 50% reservation for women to local bodies is the emergence of large number of women leaders in the political field. The women political leaders get more support and co-operation from male colleagues. It was observed that majority of the councilors are inspired by women's reservation to contest election, but are not open to reveal it. The study observed that large portion of the councilors get enough support from their family to involve in politics. Another important finding is that the state is one among a few states to implement 50% reservation in local body. Though women's participation has increased in local bodies, they are still not in a position to influence decision-making. Majority of the female candidates have no key position in their party. The study revealed that women leaders experience pressure from the leadership of the party. It was observed from the study that marriage changes political perception of women. All members in the survey strongly supported women's reservation to state Legislative Assemblies and Parliament. Another finding is that (50 percentage of the respondents) decisions in the ward council meetings have helped local development. The study observed that people's planning campaigns has progressive impact on village panchayaths than that of urban areas. Transparency is the hallmark of women's entry in politics. It was found that over control of the party is the most crucial problem faced by female candidates. It was observed that the corporation has failed to allocate the 10% of the state-grant-in-aid for women empowerment during the term. Over control of party, social barriers, lack of training, difficulty in getting consent from family etc are the most important problem faced by female councilors

MAJOR SUGGESTIONS

Regular interaction among women members across panchayats, district, and even states should be facilitated such interaction would help women realize their advantage and disadvantages. Serious attention shall be given to ensure regular and mandatory training on various aspects of the PRIs administrative matters to councilors. Society should be curious enough to instill confidence in female to contest even without party support in elections. It may be noteworthy that all the

independent candidates are males. Youth organizations of political parties should invest their efforts to promote young candidates. Women from non party families should get conscious support to contest elections. Encouragement by the families in the form of appreciation of their official work, their decisions and ensuring their presence in the meetings would help encourage active participation in decision making. People's Planning and decentralized Programmes through self Help Groups, Kudumbasree and Neighbourhood Groups should be encouraged to facilitate socio- economic progress of women. There should be co-ordinated efforts of police, administration, media, society and judiciary in women empowerment and political participation. Value based education for both men and women on gender equality shall make Kerala a better place for women to live in. Political parties should be sensitive enough to give significant role to women in party affairs. Society itself should be changed in such a way that a woman can think and act freely, without which their participation in politics and social life could not be qualitative. Legal and constitutional awareness camps and programmes for women empowerment and spreading social awareness about women's status and rights should be organized in rural /urban areas. The state government should conduct frequent awareness programs on recent government initiative and programs to councilors.

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