



WORKING PAPER

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GENDER INEQUALITY, DIFFERENCES, AND IDENTITIES : WOMEN AND LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN KARNATAKA

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ISBN 81-7791-028-0

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Bangalore

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Gender Inequality, Differences, and Identities: Women and Local Governance in Karnataka¹

V. Vijayalakshmi and B. K. Chandrashekar

Cultural and social exclusion from the political system resulted in women and other disadvantaged sections of the population being alienated from politics and governance. The reservation of seats in local governance has offered women new political space and an opportunity to participate in governance. Equality in opportunity, however, does not guarantee effective participation of women. Non-participation of women in local governance is a consequence of many interrelated factors. Socio-cultural constraints manifested in the gender inequalities, and differences among women, resulted in the construction of a non-political identity. The multiple identities of women and the resulting dilemmas they faced, only contributed to limited participation.

Political representation of women is no longer a contested issue in the context of local governance in India. Over the past one-and-a-half decades there have been significant changes in the proportion of women in local governance. With the enactment of the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution, one-third of the total seats are reserved for women². Equal opportunity to

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1. The paper is based on data collected for the ongoing Ford Foundation financed study, 'Democratic Decentralisation and Participation of Women in Karnataka'. An earlier version of this paper was presented at a workshop in December 1999. D. Taramathi and M. Mangalagowri, researchers on the project, helped in collecting the data.

We are grateful for the suggestions and comments made by Mark Robinson, M Govinda Rao, Poornima Vyasulu, and other participants at the workshop. We would like to thank Anand Inbanathan for reading and making several helpful suggestions on earlier drafts of this paper.

2. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment enacted in April 1993 has certain important features such as the reservation of one-third of seats for women and reservations for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Reservations were also effected for the executive positions in the panchayats, i.e. for President and Vice President. The subsequent Karnataka Panchayati Raj Act 1993 in addition to the provisions made in the 73rd Constitutional Amendment also reserved one - third of the seats for Other Backward Classes (OBCs).

was given to the capabilities of the women, it was often suggested that the solution to avoid such a situation was to have education as an eligibility criterion for women candidates. It is an irony that male members of the elite who were involved in selecting weaker candidates also made this suggestion.

Political parties played a significant role in the selection of candidates at all levels of local governance. Women representatives automatically followed the political party affiliation of prominent male family members. Women from the families of party workers were chosen as candidates irrespective of their interest in politics. Political parties build their local base by ensuring that their 'supporters' are elected to panchayats. The intention behind such a practice was to have control over panchayat matters and funds and expand the local base of the political party. Ignoring their ability and interest in politics was an important factor in the poor performance of women members.

III

Representation and Participation

Institutional factors such as the reservation of seats and rotation of executive positions were factors facilitating women's representation. The change in the proportion of women in local governance, however, did not result in any corresponding transformation in the perception that 'politics is a male bastion'. The difficulty for women stemmed from the fact that they were new to the political arena and as a consequence inexperienced in politics as well as administration. Although it was evident that women representatives perceived panchayats as a male sphere of activity, we tried to examine the extent of women's participation in local governance.

The question most often asked is: Are women members perceptive of the problems of women? Although women representatives were sympathetic to the problems women faced, there was considerable difference in the issues that were taken up at the three levels. At the gram panchayat, women were concerned with immediate and basic necessities.¹⁷ The concern of women about the 'basic needs' before proceeding to address other issues was often not seen in the right perspective by male representatives. Women were ridiculed for limiting themselves to the water problem and not being concerned about wider issues.

17. It needs to be noted that the functions and money related to Gram Panchayats are local and on a small scale. The representatives therefore took up the problem of water supply (drinking water) which was limited to drilling bore wells. At the Taluk and Zilla Panchayats, these issues were on a much larger scale and involving a much wider area.

There was no effort made by women representatives to organise women and work for their development. Women were represented in the Social Justice Committee and Village Education Committee at the gram panchayat. At taluk and zilla panchayats they were represented in the Social Justice Committee.¹⁸ There was a perception that unless mandatory, women members were never a natural choice for the standing committees. Women executives, because of their position, were chairpersons of different committees. As per the requirements each committee should have six members and no member should be in more than one committee. So women cannot be excluded even if the men so desired. Women were not usually the first choice for the Finance Committee. Also, women who were in the standing committees because of their executive positions had a token status. In the assessment of women representatives, over a period of time there was a difference in their understanding of the various issues concerning the functioning of panchayats. But the short tenure of 20 months for presidents and vice-presidents (in zilla and taluk panchayats) was insufficient to acquire skills and use them.

The nature of participation of women draws our attention to the importance of the social and political environment. It was evident that various forces predetermined the nature of women's participation in panchayats. Women representatives did very little to overcome such a predetermined role for them. To begin with, most women members had a low self-esteem. They were of the opinion that men were better administrators. Dependence on men was perceived as inevitable if women were to be in politics. The belief among most women was that it was a disadvantage being a woman in male dominated politics, which made transition into the political sphere more difficult. One perception was that affirmative action alone could not enhance their status in politics. Women's political role was perceived as antithetical to the family and there was no attempt to balance both the roles.

Women's own perceptions about their limited abilities adversely affected their performance in panchayats. We assessed women's political performance with the following indicators: women's assessment of how successful they considered themselves; their effectiveness in the functioning of panchayats, public relations; decision-making ability; and their role in meetings and committees. This was gauged through in-depth interviews and a scoring method where the respondents made a self-assessment of their performance. As indicators of success, women were asked to respond on their negotiating

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violence, as essential features of politics. These attributes are then labelled as unfeminine which women should not emulate. In such a normative culture, women are not formally excluded from effectively participating in political institutions, but very few concessions are made to the existence of any different set of values and behaviour patterns (Cunnison and Stageman, 1995).⁶ In a rigid masculine culture of this nature, most women find it difficult adapting to the political norms and practices. At different levels of politics and governance, women find the values and behaviour that do not fit their experience in the private realm.

Although dominating gender relations are common to most women, there are some obvious differences too. All women do not share a common gender identity or common political interests. Their social and material circumstances make their experiences of gender significantly varied. And these differences and experiences should be valued and respected rather than denied in the interest of gender equality (Pateman, 1988). The concept of 'difference,' as understood here, is among women than between the two genders. Although the dualism of men and women explain gender inequalities, it does not point out the 'diversity-of-experience' (Maynard, 1994). The pluralistic conceptualisation of women explains these differences of experience in the polity and how social conditions in which they live create them. The heterogeneity of caste, class, and religion, in addition to gender differences, has consequences where women's political participation is concerned.⁷

Caste and class identity affect women's political grooming and participation or non-participation. While caste is an ascribed status, class is more of a perceived one. The acknowledgement of such pluralities among women means that the disadvantages of all women representatives are not identical. Some women have greater disadvantages than others. The circumstances and conditions in which these women participate in the political process also indicate the arenas of resistance to equality in power. To a certain extent, conceptualisation of this nature subverts the unity and meaning of

6. Effectiveness is related to power. In one dimension it is through the exercising of authority. Thus, 'being effective' becomes related to performance. It is measured in terms of one's ability to influence decision-making but there is little consensus on the accepted indicators/definition of effectiveness. Effort has been made here to assess women's effectiveness on the basis of their role in organisational and development work, awareness of panchayat functioning, crisis, and conflict management.

7. On caste system in India, see M. N. Srinivas, 1987, 1996a, 1996b

8. See, also. Maynard, 1994; Hooks, 1991.

'women' as an analytical category in political participation.⁸ However, an analysis of both gender inequalities and differences addresses the similarities and contradictions in the political participation of women, giving a holistic perception of the problem.

'Differences' also point out the multiple identities of women. Identity is the perception of the self and where one belongs (Afshar, 1994). Women representatives live in social and political relationships with 'a variety of potentially contradictory identities' (Weeks, 1990: 88). Their identities are wide ranging, as wife and mother, member of caste and class group, members of panchayat and political party, and many more.⁹ While some of these identities are ascribed, others are acquired. The division of women along these lines points to the loosening of the gender identity. It also indicates the complexity of political relations that has resulted in the fragmentation of women who are not any more a coherent group.

Various factors influence the choosing of a particular identity.¹⁰ We would have a two-fold categorisation of identity viz., conventional and changing identities. Conventional identities are the ones that are based in the traditional structures such as gender, family, and caste. Changing identities are those that are not constant, for example, class and political identities. The construction of identities within a specific power relation provides a framework of choice (Afshar, 1998). The empowerment of women representatives depends to a large extent on the possibility of choice in the identities. This can be double edged, as they can be empowering or disempowering under different circumstances.

II

Women in Local Governance

The analysis of women's political participation is carried out in three stages. First, we examine briefly the socio-economic and political profiles of women members. This also includes the nature of women's entry into politics. Second, the participation process and a typology of women's participation in panchayats is discussed. Finally, we analyse the constraints that made women's role in local governance less effective. We discuss the differences between

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9. Bradley (1996) identifies three levels of social identity. They are passive (class, gender, ethnicity), active (discrimination) and politicised identities.
 10. Although identities can be seen as situational (Allen, 1998) we assume that there may be occasions when women 'consciously choose' among the many identities.

women, powerlessness and dependence of women representatives to understand the constraints. The assessment of the potential and actual performance distinguishes between women's 'representation' and 'participation'.

The analysis is based on interviews with representatives of four gram panchayats (Athguru, Bandur, Chunchunahalli, Bharathinagar), two taluk panchayats (Maddur and Nagamangala), and the zilla panchayat (Mandya). Thirty-one zilla panchayat, 38 taluk panchayat, and 59 gram panchayat representatives (including both men and women) were interviewed. Mandya district is a politically sensitive place mainly because of its proximity to the state capital and also because several prominent politicians (including the present Chief Minister) were from this district. The Vokkaligas are the dominant caste group in Mandya and are well represented at different levels in politics. Although an economically developed district, the gender indicators of Mandya are rather low.¹¹ Reservation of seats for women in the panchayats has changed the gender composition in the local politics of Mandya. Although women's representation in local governance is tolerated, the political elite (almost entirely male) do not accept their active participation. All the women representatives were elected to seats reserved for women. Their election to the posts of president and vice president was also determined by the reservation of seats.¹² Two of the gram panchayats studied had women executives i.e., president and vice president. At the taluk and zilla panchayats, where the rotation system has been in force, the election to the executive position was conducted thrice during the entire five year term.¹³ Women were elected twice to the post of vice president at the zilla panchayat. They were elected once to the posts of president and vice presidents at each of the selected taluk panchayats.

There were perceptible differences in the socio-economic profiles of the women representatives of the three tiers. Among others, there were differences in their education levels and economic status. Women at the higher tiers were comparatively better educated than women at the gram panchayats. Women representatives in the taluk and zilla panchayats were also from a

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11. Human Development in Karnataka, 1999, Planning Department, Government of Karnataka.
 12. Through a recent Amendment to the Panchayati Raj Act, Grama Panchayat Presidents and Vice Presidents would have a thirty - month tenure.
 13. Each President and Vice President has a tenure of twenty months. The conventional reservation principle for different groups works here too, and the post is not reserved for the same group for two successive twenty-month terms.

better economic background. Variations in education and economic status existed between women at each tier. There was no instance where a Scheduled Caste woman representative got elected contesting a women (general) seat. Vokkaligas contested in both OBC and general constituencies.¹⁴ Women representatives were in the age groups of 30-35 years (17 per cent), 36-40 years (46 per cent), 41-45 years (24 per cent) and 46 and above (13 per cent). Out of the 37 women representatives we interviewed, 12 contested from the SC women constituencies, 11 from OBC reserved seats, and 14 from women constituencies. Except for one woman member who was separated, the remaining members were married. One of the reasons for the high proportion of married women could be that the eligible age for contesting elections is 21 years. Most rural women would be married by this age.

Gram panchayat women representatives were poorly educated, with 74 per cent having studied less than upto the 6th standard. Twelve per cent of the women representatives were illiterate and 14 per cent were educated above the high school level. There was a gram panchayat member who was a science graduate. Among the taluk and zilla panchayat members, a much smaller section was illiterate. Fifty eight per cent of the women had completed schooling. Men were comparatively better educated and fewer male representatives than women were illiterate.

Low education levels of women representatives was perceived as a possible factor in women representatives' marginal participation. The representatives (both men and women) emphasised the importance of education in effective political participation. Male representatives went a step further to suggest that there should be a minimum level of education as an eligibility criterion for a woman candidate.¹⁵ In their opinion, this would facilitate the independent functioning of women. Such a suggestion, although feasible, is unlikely to be implemented for political reasons. Encouraging a minimum education standard for the candidates (men and women) is important because representatives are supposed to be 'leaders' and they have to be evaluated on a higher scale of performance. Illiteracy is a definite handicap for the executives. A minimum education criterion comes in for criticism mainly on two grounds. First, the low female literacy level in rural areas would disqualify a large section of women; and second, the level of participation was not always better among literate members. That there were better educated representatives who

14. Vokkaligas (men and women) comprised 56 per cent of the Gram Panchayat seats in the district. Source : State Election Commission.

15. Although there were male representatives who were illiterate, the eligibility criterion of education was not mentioned by anyone.

performed poorly should not, however, be construed as evidence suggesting that education is not a significant factor in political participation.

Gram panchayats had women representatives who worked as wage labourers. It was difficult for these women to be actively involved in panchayat affairs while simultaneously earning their living. At taluk and zilla panchayats most women representatives were from a relatively secure economic background. The economic status of the women candidates assumed greater importance in the higher tiers since it had a bearing on their selection as candidates, the exception being Scheduled Caste women candidates. Election expenses to taluk and zilla panchayat seats were high, and candidates had to spend substantial amounts on political campaigns.

Barring a few representatives, women were unwilling candidates. They entered politics either as surrogates for male family members who could not contest as the constituency was reserved for women, or contested at the behest of male incumbents of political/party positions. As a result most of them could not function independently. They owed their allegiance to caste leaders, local elites and party functionaries, without whose support they would not have contested and won elections. Such loyalty to the members of the elite did not in any way help the political careers of women members, as patronage was not extended to contest for seats not reserved for women. When women members were asked who would have contested if there had been a choice, most of them said that some male member from the family would have been the first option.

In the political ethos of the panchayats, women members had a less significant position. With a few exceptions, the interaction of these women with patrons, constituents, and officials was minimal. The level of participation can be gauged from the attitude of officials and constituents who were more comfortable interacting with the male family members rather than with women representatives.

Selection of women candidates

At least two factors were important in the selection process of women candidates: affirmative action and choice of the candidates. Women representatives of all panchayats stated that if it were not for the reservation system they would not have contested in these elections. They were sure that they would most likely lose if they contested against male candidates. The fact that there was no instance where women candidates were preferred over male candidates indicates that, given the social circumstances, reservation of seats was the only way to enable women to get elected to the panchayats.

In panchayats, one of the reasons for the limited participation of women was in the selection process itself. Women who belonged to the families of male incumbents in political positions/elites were often the first choice.¹⁶ In the case of the constituency being reserved for Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes greater conformity determined the choice. While selecting women candidates, their abilities and positive personality traits were rarely a requisite factor. The most common route to becoming a panchayat member was through belonging to a political family or being docile to the demands of male elites and faction leaders. The choice of candidates was a precursor to the inequality in local governance. There was little effort to select women candidates who were educated and were in a position to devote time for panchayat matters. Despite this manner of selection there were a few women representatives who acquired administrative and political skills and wanted to function without interference. This transformation from docile women to active functionaries was perceived as an affront to their 'mentors'. These women had to face a backlash as they were seen as jeopardising the interests of the dominant male individual/s.

While selecting candidates for gram panchayats, the factors contributing to greater dependence on male members and/or party representatives was considered. These factors included women candidates who were economically backward; the numerical preponderance of the caste to which the candidate belonged; and the political background of the family. Women from the families of party workers who would not go against the views of dominant individuals were preferred. Also, it was mentioned that it was easy to keep weaker candidates dependent. At the taluk and zilla panchayat levels the selection of candidates was based on considerations such as political influence and higher economic status of the families of potential women candidates.

The selection of relatively weak candidates should not be construed as a lack of stronger women candidates. It only indicates that elites (male), political party functionaries and incumbents of political positions influenced the selection process. Such a selection process proved to be disadvantageous for women who may have been better candidates. Evidence suggests that male elites were concerned about ways of controlling power, even when they are not representatives of panchayats. Male respondents were asked if they would support a woman candidate who was assertive and independent. A majority of them were against supporting such candidates. Although less importance

16. The term 'elite' is used in a broad sense in this paper. 'Elite' includes all those who occupied privileged positions in hierarchies, whether in terms of wealth or prestige (Aron, 1970 : 154).

was given to the capabilities of the women, it was often suggested that the solution to avoid such a situation was to have education as an eligibility criterion for women candidates. It is an irony that male members of the elite who were involved in selecting weaker candidates also made this suggestion.

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The nature of participation of women draws our attention to the importance of the social and political environment. It was evident that various forces predetermined the nature of women's participation in panchayats. Women representatives did very little to overcome such a predetermined role for them. To begin with, most women members had a low self-esteem. They were of the opinion that men were better administrators. Dependence on men was perceived as inevitable if women were to be in politics. The belief among most women was that it was a disadvantage being a woman in male dominated politics, which made transition into the political sphere more difficult. One perception was that affirmative action alone could not enhance their status in politics. Women's political role was perceived as antithetical to the family and there was no attempt to balance both the roles.

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capability, political manoeuvring skills, conflict resolution, crisis management, information gathering, problem solving, organising ability, overcoming opposition and taking new initiatives (in the panchayat). They considered themselves as less efficient on these indicators, and the reasons for not being successful varied. A large section considered socio-cultural constraints as discouraging them from fully participating in the panchayats. A few of them attributed political inexperience as the important reason and were of the opinion that a longer training period might help them overcome their shortcomings. These perceptions were found across all the panchayats.

The indicators for effectiveness in development work include perception of the situation, prioritisation of issues, innovative initiatives and completion of projects. Some of these indicators were not found to be relevant in the case of gram panchayat members. The women representatives in taluks and zilla panchayats admitted that male family members managed the panchayat activities on their behalf. Gram, taluk and zilla panchayat executives considered that their lower effectiveness was related to their limited role in the panchayats since they were not allowed to function at all. However, these women were not particularly concerned that they were not involved in development work. They attributed preoccupation with their family, and administrative inexperience as reasons for keeping away from development work. There was a small section of representatives at the taluk and gram panchayats who took an active interest in development work. We tried to ascertain the traits that distinguished these women from others. It was found that they were better educated, willing entrants to politics, were keen to learn, and wanted to create an impact. Most importantly these women were interested in a political career. It was also a pertinent fact that their male family members were not politically inclined. The families extended their support to further the political interests of these women members.

Considering the importance of public relations in the political sphere an assessment of women representatives' relations with other members, officials, elites, patrons, members of the upper tiers, MLAs and MPs, and the general public was sought. They considered themselves as having 'good public relations' which according to them was the avoidance of controversies and conflicts. They tried to build a favourable image by adopting an approach that enabled compromise. It was in a way a reaction to the demands of the gender norms, which discouraged individualism. We also observed that, barring a few, the interaction of most women with officials, elites, and constituents was very low. Officials discussed panchayat matters with the male family members who in turn informed the women members. Similarly, the elites/patrons did not directly interact with women members. Such a pattern was seen at all the levels of local governance, the only difference being that women in the zilla panchayat were

better informed even though they did not actively participate in panchayat activities.

The interaction or the lack of it should not be interpreted as only the shortcoming of women. It highlights the rigidity of the gender norms. Irrespective of the tiers, women were constantly concerned about how they were perceived by others and what impact that would have on their domestic life. There was no demarcation of their political and private lives and both were seen as related. It was considered improper and not respectable for a woman to visit the panchayat office unescorted. Both men and women held such a view. Since the officials and elites were men the constraints were even more. A few women members who ignored prevalent gender norms and practices were not 'respected'.

A related pattern was seen in the organisational effectiveness of women. The indicators used to assess their organisational effectiveness were awareness of rules and regulations, involvement in the panchayat activities and standing committees, participation in the meetings, budgeting and fund management, selection of beneficiaries and problem solving. They were, by and large, less effective in organisational matters. On indicators for decision-making, the role of women representatives was limited. There were various reasons for their non-involvement. For most it was their first term as representatives and they were politically inexperienced. There were a few women members who thought they had a choice whether to participate or not. The reason for such an attitude was the acceptance of the functioning of male family members on behalf of women representatives.

There were women representatives and executives who were competent and effective although their number was small. The self-esteem of these women was high and they were of the opinion that women can be good leaders and administrators. Being a woman was not a major handicap for them, and they were of the opinion that a woman's active role in panchayats should get wider acceptability. They had a sound understanding of the functioning of the panchayats, financial management, and other administrative procedures. These women were regular in attending panchayat meetings. Their involvement in the activities of the panchayats was without any intermediaries, although at times they sought the suggestions of others. They had firm views on issues and they did not let others persuade them to vote against their inclinations. There were instances where women executives in taluk and gram panchayats took the initiative to bring in changes that brought positive benefits to the panchayats. In one case, the woman taluk president issued cheques to the beneficiaries, to minimise commissions at various stages. Some at the gram panchayats and taluk panchayats carried out road repairs, electrification of streets, and made

arrangements to lessen the drinking water problem. One of the gram panchayat executives was involved in organising women's thrift groups. Although this did not come under the purview of panchayats she was of the opinion that women should be more involved in group activities to be able to actively participate in panchayats.

An important indicator of the level of involvement was the lack of interest to attend panchayat meetings. Women representatives were neither regular nor interested to attend panchayat meetings. At the gram panchayat the sitting fee was the motivating factor for a few who attended the meetings. These were the only occasions when most gram panchayat women representatives went to the panchayat office. At taluk panchayats the reason given by most women for not attending meetings was the lack of transport facilities. Women found it difficult to get transportation to their village when the meetings were delayed (late evenings).

Not all women participated in the deliberations of the panchayat. Some of them raised issues related to their wards. Women at the three levels of panchayats participated in discussions only if they were related to their own constituency. The panchayat meeting was one of the sites where gender inequalities and differences came to the fore. The rigid gender ideologies were apparent in these meetings. Women who actively participated faced disapproval. The 'token' presence of women was appreciated and representatives who did not participate were cited as examples to emulate. In exceptional cases when the panchayat had an active woman representative, very little was done to encourage her. The irony was that it was the other women representatives not favouring active participation who sought to silence her. The problems of dalit women were even more pronounced. Their active participation in deliberations was often considered offensive by both men and women. The dominant perception of how women should behave was always from the men's point of view. The actions and behaviour of women were guided by the dominant ideology that women should not talk back, contradict men, and do anything that might adversely affect family prestige. The panchayat role of women was entwined with 'womanliness' and 'family prestige'. The notion of 'honour' ('gourava' or 'dignity' and 'maryade' or 'decency') was so strong that several women opted out of active participation.

Perceptions about women representatives

There were no major variations in the perceptions of women representatives across the zilla, taluk, and gram panchayats. Their perception was that women were neither confident in their newly acquired political role nor did they make any effort to acquire administrative skills. Men and women

respondents were of the view that women representatives were indecisive and dependent on men. This was attributed to the political and administrative inexperience of women. Women rarely took independent decisions, as they did not want to risk making a mistake and disconcerting their families. Women were considered as easily subject to persuasion when compared to men. Family, social, and political compulsions influenced the decision-making of women, whereas men were more influenced by their own political considerations.

The carry over of gender role expectations into the political life of women was evident in most responses. It was expected that women remained subservient to men within and outside family and such an expectation came from both the sexes. For women who did not attach importance to their political role (the number of such women being significant), the situation was not conflicting. However, for those representatives who wanted to work out a balance between their dual roles, the carry over of the asymmetry in the private sphere to the political realm posed problems. These women walked a tight rope, being fully aware of their limitations in a male dominated political culture.

It was also evident that gender differences were taken for granted in the participation on panchayat matters. Although there were several male representatives who did not participate in the deliberations it remained under an assumed unity of male experiences. Unless it was probed their performance was not evaluated. On the other hand, the political experiences of women were constantly scrutinised and linked to their domestic roles. Women's limitations in political participation were seen as the result of the demands of their domestic roles. However, the representatives (men and women) underplayed the consequence on the political roles of the gender asymmetry in the private sphere. The imbalance of power in the private realm affected the political experiences of men and women representatives in different ways.

The contradiction in being 'feminine' and 'politically shrewd' were explicit in the responses of the representatives. If women adhered to the gender role conventions as expected of them by their family and community, it would be hard for them to be politically astute. On the other hand, active involvement in the functioning of panchayats was perceived as unfeminine. Most women liked to be identified as 'feminine'. This is a consciously adopted strategy by many women representatives to avoid giving an impression that they challenged the prevailing gender hierarchies. For most women this was very important, as their political managers were men from their family.

Men considered it natural that woman should comply with the gender norms. The widely held attitude was that politics is not an appropriate career choice for women. The reasons for such a belief was that politics involves spending more time in the public sphere, and greater interaction with men,

which was not desirable. The lack of respectability of politics when it concerned women was evident in most responses. The solution to this in their view was encouraging women to follow a dependent role in panchayats. In such a situation women representatives did not fully relate themselves to panchayat achievements or problems, as they perceived their role as nominal. The alienation that women felt has other consequences too. Women executives in particular did not hold themselves accountable for panchayat mismanagement.

Women representatives reported the contradictions in the role expectations of male and female members. Since women did not display the behaviour or traits that were traditionally associated with politics they were perceived as not effective. The very traits that made men representatives successful in panchayats had negative consequences for women. Therefore, a predominant section of women representatives expressed a preference to blend with the gender culture in panchayats without questioning the asymmetries of power.

IV

Typology of Women Representatives¹⁹

A typology of women representatives has been developed on the basis of how women coped with the contradictory expectations on them in the private realm and the political role. Women representatives are classified as 'traditional', 'progressive' and 'in transition'. The paths women took during their panchayat tenure depended on their awareness of the matters related to panchayat management; the degree to which women accept, conform or reject the gendered segregation within the political system which also includes their understanding of equality; the extent to which they were able to draw a balance between their domestic and political roles; their ability to transcend the barriers in the 'male dominated politics;' and finally the socio-cultural expectations of women's role and priorities that shaped their political participation.

Women who belonged to the 'traditional' category were the larger group (62 per cent). They accepted the prevalent gender norms about 'women's place' in the family, community, and society. They considered the total involvement in male dominated politics of panchayats as challenging the existing gender structure. Equality was perceived as opposing male authority within the family and community. Conforming to the existing gender structure and traditions was important because male family members often managed the panchayat

19. The typology developed at this stage is not meant to be restrictive of the possible patterns that might emerge in the course of the study.

functions on behalf of the women. These women were uneasy about 'effective participation of women', as they did not see the need for it. In their view, others (male members from the family) effectively carried out their responsibilities in the panchayats and their non-participation was not an issue.

Women representatives who were 'traditional' did not believe that as elected representatives and executives it is essential that they participate in the panchayats. They justified their non-participation stating that the male surrogates managed the panchayat functions better and there was no need for their involvement. Most women who belonged to this category contested because their husbands could not do so as these constituencies were reserved for women. A similar reason was attributed to women contesting for executive posts. Women presidents in all tiers admitted that they could contest for executive posts because male members were not eligible as the posts were reserved for women. The opportunity to participate in local governance, however, was not seen as a learning process. By being dependent on others, women perpetuated the asymmetric power relations in local governance. Thus, they also indirectly supported the gender structure that encouraged male dominance in politics.

These women representatives did not want to pursue a career in politics. Their awareness of the panchayat functioning was also limited. There was a modicum of unity among women representatives sharing the traditional viewpoint. They were extremely critical of women who were active participants. Among the women who were traditional, there were a few who had a fairly good grasp of the situation and who gave an impression that they could have been good administrators if the male family members and panchayat representatives allowed them. They justified their non-participation by giving priority to their family roles.

'Progressive' women members comprised hardly six per cent. Nevertheless, they were significant as a category because of their urge to participate in the panchayat with minimum support of male (family and panchayat) members. They did not like being passive spectators in the panchayat management. They were clear about their dual roles and were able to balance both. These women were aware of the disadvantages of being a woman in the political sphere. There were certain common features among these women. What distinguished them from other women was that while identifying the reasons for women's subordinate position they simultaneously tried to overcome them. These women were keen to contest future elections and considered politics as a possible career. They had the support of their families to pursue a career in politics.

Women who were unconventional and progressive succeeded in making a dent in the stereotypical image of women representatives- i.e., being docile and compliant. They were analytical and reflective in describing what differentiated men and women in the participation process. The differences in decision-making between men and women were attributed to earlier gender inequalities in panchayats. Women's approach concerning various issues was perceived as unprofessional, less calculative, and sometimes emotional. Women were considered as over cautious in the panchayats because they were more concerned about how they were perceived by others. Women's limitation in grasping the implications of their decisions was the reason for taking the help of male members. These women tried to overcome these shortcomings.

'Progressive' women representatives were of the opinion that awareness of their disadvantaged position was important to overcome their difficulties. Although in most cases they lacked the support of other women members, they did not like the idea of just 'being there'. It was a painful realisation for these women that the traits of independence and assertiveness of women representatives were not always accepted. Women presidents at gram panchayats and taluk panchayats had unpleasant experiences of their patrons (male politicians) trying to weaken their position by bringing in a motion of no-confidence against them. Their experience of non co-operation from both men and women representatives made them realise that idealism is not always practical.

Having recognised the inequalities in panchayat politics these women evolved strategies to overcome them. Some of their strategies were: developing contacts with powerful patrons and acquiring administrative skills. Although they realise the vital role of patrons in their political career they do not want to succumb to the often-generalised powerlessness of women. They made an effort to contest the stereotypes of women representatives being passive. Unlike the traditional women, progressive women gave importance to their identity as panchayat members. In the process, some of them were perceived as defying the norms of womanhood. By attaching equal importance to their political role they often risked being branded as unfeminine. Non compliance of these members to the gender structure within the panchayat was perceived as contesting male authority. The backlash was evident in three cases where women resisted male dominance. Women presidents were usually pressurised through male family members to support the dominant members. In the event that these women held an independent view there was a possibility that they would face a no-confidence motion and lose their post.

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and were pessimistic about the future of women in panchayats. The ideal situation for them would be equality of power among men and women in local governance. Although they owed their presence in panchayats to the reservation policy, they also pointed out its disadvantages. They considered reservations as one of the reasons for women being perceived as less competent and as secondary members.

The dilemma between the primacy of domestic and panchayat roles was also evident. These representatives were from families that discouraged their active participation. A nominal representation of these women was acceptable to their families, but they did not support active participation. These women were unhappy about the non-cooperation of the family members. To them, encouragement from the family and community was an important factor in the effective political participation of women. Reservation per se would be of little help if there were no corresponding change in the attitude of the family and community. Since they did not see any future in politics, they gave priority to their domestic role.

V

Dealing with Differences

Gender inequality in panchayats is only one among the many constraints that were responsible for differential participation. Women representatives had to reconcile themselves to other differences such as the manifestation of caste and class in the public sphere. The way women's role in local governance was perceived and constructed was to a large extent also influenced by caste and class factors. To begin with, there were certain perceptible divisions among women representatives which were difficult to reconcile. First, in all the tiers of panchayats, women members were never united as a single group. Gender interests were not important enough to bring them together. Second, women perceived caste and class factors as having a direct bearing on their status and the power relations in panchayats. Conscious of these differences, they did not consider the interests and goals of all women as identical. Third, the perception of women members about these differences and how they dealt with them was distinct. The social reality of the plurality of women also included the reality of living as women. Each of these differences is discussed here.

Women representatives are broadly seen as belonging to dominant caste, backward caste, and Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe. The problems of dalit women representatives were intense, as they had to confront not only structural differences of gender but also the hegemonic caste relations. The marginalised status of most dalit members was reflected in their skepticism

that reservation alone will improve their position in local politics. They were of the opinion that dominant caste women representatives commanded respect because of their caste. The usage of language was also stated to be different, as women belonging to Scheduled Castes were addressed in a less polite manner. The identification of Scheduled Caste women with their caste group did not give them enough leverage to change the power relations in their favour. They were always perceived as different, inexperienced, and ill equipped for the post they occupied. The discrimination was particularly pronounced in the case of Scheduled Caste women occupying executive positions. In a few instances where these women (ordinary members) were 'independent', the backlash was evident. We found that the male respondents used abusive language while referring to these women.

The significance of caste in political participation can be discerned in the entire process. It influenced their nominations, actual election, contesting for executive positions and participation. There were many instances where dominant caste and prominent family women who had no noticeable attributes that distinguished them from others, succeeded in getting support for their candidature and won elections in constituencies reserved for women (general). Dalit women under similar circumstances found it difficult to secure candidature for such constituencies, sometimes even when they were better equipped. The problem could be the reservation of seats. When a seat was reserved for 'Scheduled Caste woman' there was less inclination to encourage a Scheduled Caste woman to contest for a women (general) seat.²⁰ In unusual cases we found women succeeding despite the caste disadvantage. Such women needed many things to favour them in order to win against women from a dominant caste.

Politically inclined individuals (men) who could not contest because of the reservation system consider women representatives as weakening the institution of panchayats, while the optimists regarded it as justice being done to those who were hitherto kept out of the realm of political power. Although they were disappointed at the inequality of power sharing, the women representatives from disadvantaged sections were optimistic about the statutory provision to effect their inclusion. They expected upward social mobility for the group over a period of time.

The experience of inequalities in the panchayat influenced the relations among women representatives in panchayats. It is a paradox that identifying these concrete differences did not unite members belonging to marginalised-

20. And the same applies to the reservation of seats for women in general. Women were not considered as candidates for unreserved seats.

castes into a single group. The division among the Scheduled Castes into 'left' and 'right' was one of the constraints in uniting them as one group. In an instance where a 'left' Scheduled caste woman was a possible candidate, another woman belonging to the 'right' category was preferred.²¹ The substantive differences between various castes, and the unequal status of Scheduled Caste women representatives prevented the challenging of the dominant caste members or structures of power. On the contrary, they joined different factions to consolidate their personal positions and maximise the profits of office even if it meant a subordinate status in the panchayat power structure.

The advantages of the convergence of class and caste positions that was evident in the case of dominant caste men was not seen favouring women. Although in principle all members irrespective of their social class have an equal status as representatives of panchayats, there was considerable disparity in the distribution of power. An analysis of the data revealed that the weak members (from a participatory point of view) in panchayats often belonged to disadvantaged groups. It is a possibility that the incumbents of higher ranked political positions want to support 'weak candidates' so that they could have control over the functioning of panchayats (see Inbanathan, 1999). The choice of candidates from the wage labour class and Scheduled Castes for reserved seats followed a similar pattern. Educated and assertive women of the Scheduled Castes were not preferred, as it would be difficult to get their easy compliance in the management of the panchayats.

This predicament of having authority and not sharing in the power was found to be common among both men and women of the wage labour class. These representatives interpreted the 'authority' and 'being there' as social mobility, which they perceived as the first step to achieve social mobility. Panchayat members belonging to disadvantaged caste and class groups attributed the 'outward equality' to their political status. The relatively higher caste members and incumbents in political positions allowed the Scheduled Caste members to enter their houses and there was less hesitation among those of his/her class/caste to visit the colonies of Scheduled Caste and wage labour members.

The consequences of such mobility were different at the gram panchayat compared to taluk and zilla panchayats. This is because the economic disparities were greater at the gram panchayat than at higher tiers. Social mobility through

21. There is a social categorisation (not by the Government) of the castes included within 'Scheduled Castes' as belonging to 'right hand' and 'left hand'. The castes belonging to the 'right hand' are considered ritually superior.

politics was more demanding for some members particularly in gram panchayats. A woman gram panchayat president who had earlier earned a living as a wage labourer stopped going for wage work, as it was perceived to be below the dignity of her panchayat status. She intended to take up wage work after her term in the panchayat ended.²² Male representatives were also emphatic that it would be difficult to accept as President one who worked in an occupation that was considered low.²³

There were also other differences among women of different classes. First, most women belonging to the 'better class' had the advantage of the socially prominent status of their family, economic position, and political background of the male members of the family. On the other hand, women representatives belonging to the wage labour class had to spend a major portion of their time in earning a living. Second, the occupations in which these women were engaged were low in prestige. Third, most of the 'upper class' women representatives were there to consolidate the political position and power of male representatives from their own families. Women from the wage labour class were often victims of manipulations in local and factional politics.

There was no similarity in women's approaches in dealing with differences and disadvantages. Although women members perceived the differences, the idea of organising as a single group did not appeal to them. To put it in the words of one of the women members, "there is no benefit in collaborating with women who are generally powerless." Instead it would benefit them if they individually collaborated with powerful male patrons. Scheduled Caste women representatives expressed similar views. In the construction of political realities the importance of their gender, caste, and class identities did not matter to most women. Instead, most women found it advantageous to relate to identities such as the political party or the faction they supported.

VI

Beyond Pluralities: Powerlessness and Dependence

Viewing women's success in local governance in terms of representation alone would be inadequate. As the foregoing sections suggest non-participation

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22. Wage Labour was an indication of the lowest economic level. As such those who were in this position were not respected due to their poverty.
 23. There were reports of similar instances elsewhere too. There was a press report about a Gram Panchayat President who was actively engaged as a sweeper, which was considered as demeaning to the office of President.

of women is a consequence of many interrelated factors. First, the socio-cultural constraints, which were, manifested in the gender inequalities, differences among women, and how they deal with their multiple identities. The differences pointed to the problems of women belonging to disadvantaged caste and class groups. The multiple identities of women and the resulting dilemmas contributed to limiting their participation in panchayats. Second, the constraints were also related to their multiple roles as women in private and public spheres. The significance of the private sphere for all women representatives resulted in the construction of an identity with non-political activities. Third, the individual constraints originating from their family background, lack of interest in politics and poor political abilities were factors that restricted their political participation. Women representatives more often had a weak orientation to 'power' and 'authority'; and adopted a greater willingness to compromise in their style of functioning, which did not help them to effectively participate in panchayat matters. Since women considered their presence in politics as a short-term one they did not see the necessity to develop administrative and political skills.²⁴ And finally, males in political and elite positions and dominant roles were responsible for women's limited participation. Women faced the predicament of having to be 'different' to fit the male dominated politics. The need for such a transformation was conflicting to most women representatives, as it did not have societal acceptance. Although nominal representation of women has been acceptable, their total participation is yet to find societal endorsement.

The social roles women performed in non-political areas (private sphere) promoted a value system that did not act as a facilitator in their political role. Women members found it difficult to comprehend faction politics and the intricacies of power brokerage. As they did not perform any decision-making role in community life, associations or other areas of civil society, they found it difficult to adjust to the newly acquired political role. Power equations in panchayats were perceived as between faction leaders, members of the rural elite, political parties, and male family members. The lower quantum of power for women members stemmed from within and outside family. Leaders or dominant members had a patronising relation with women members. To begin

24. Such indifference can be better explained with game theory. If the game were an ongoing one, women would be interested to learn skills, develop strategies and even form a group. Since they see it as a one-time game (single shot one) it is a hit or miss kind of an approach. There is no long-term commitment that would sustain their interest in governance.

with, they encouraged women to contest elections, assuring their support to the women. However, the motive behind supporting their candidature was to place their own followers in the local institutions and thereby control panchayat activities. Although not stated, the precondition to extending support was that the woman representative would accommodate the interests of the dominant member/and or local leader who supported her candidature. The economic and social status of the women representatives also determined how far the 'mentors' would go to get the work done their way. The powerlessness arising out of such a situation also contributed to women refraining from participation.

Another source of power inequality was from within the family itself. Women were supported because male family members could not contest elections as the constituency was reserved. The motive was similar as in the case of patrons. Men were interested in politics and wanted to have a say in the functioning of the panchayats. Although they may claim legitimacy based on their wife's/mother's membership to be involved in panchayat affairs, it was not in the interest of women's status or local governance. Most women neither found such a situation disturbing nor did they perceive it as powerlessness. They considered men's involvement as benefiting the panchayats since their performance was better. While it was loyalty to patrons that made women accept the powerlessness, it was political aspirations of male family members that made them compromise on their own (women's) political career. They were relieved that they did not have the burden of the political role. Power was not considered as forfeited as it was within the family. The notion of 'individuality' or 'I' was not important in the evolution of 'political women' in local governance. They thought and acted in terms of 'we' which represents the family, political party, faction leaders, and others. Women members are yet to progress from 'we' to 'I' which is important if they are to have a distinctive and significant participatory role.

The distribution of power indicated that women did not have any role in the decisions taken. There was a gender order that approved the role of intervening forces in decision-making and effecting the dependency of women. The practice of the husband or any other male member of the family being involved in local governance was tolerated and supported. A small section of women representatives expressed some unhappiness about their token role in the panchayats. But the predominant view and attitude of both men and women disapproved women's involvement in politics. Claiming a greater role invited a backlash in the form of no-confidence motions, allegations of corruption, and talking disrespectfully about those women. The gender norms and values not only discouraged participation but also located women outside the realm of politics.

To a certain extent, lack of resources to contest elections perpetuated the asymmetry in power relations. In the reserved constituencies, faction leaders and political parties supported candidates who lacked resources, which resulted in a dependency relationship. Contesting elections needed funds, which many could not afford. While supporting a woman candidate a crucial criterion was the woman's pliability to the sponsor's wishes. A higher degree of compliance was one of the ways of getting support. When women representatives were expected to be a 'figure head' or 'approvers', their participation in governance was bound to be inefficient.

Women members did not want to transcend the gender norm in order to maximise their power position. Idealising their role in the private sphere was common among most women representatives. They considered their term in the panchayats as a transitory one and did not want to disrupt their family relationships. Men talked of women as all-powerful, and symbolised them as 'shakthi'. The symbolic power, however, was a construct of the private realm. It was the perception of most men that women would be 'honoured' if they exercised their power in the private sphere. Exercising power in the public sphere or in politics would bring dishonour to women and family. 'Women power'- a power of the private realm was not seen as complementary to political power. The symbolic power ascribed to women was of an informal nature unlike the institutional authority that gives them more visibility. Men and women venerated the 'symbolic power' of women in the private sphere and justified male hegemony in governance and politics. In a social construct that viewed male dominance in politics as natural, women representatives have only two options. One, is to come to terms with the powerlessness despite having the authority, and two, to assume roles and identities that are germane to political participation.

A wider conceptualisation of women's participation should therefore recognise the constraints that women faced. In the process of strengthening the political participation of women, it is important to emphasise the two categories of differences, i.e., between men and women, and between women arising out of their social status. The differences in the positions of women have implications for women's disinterestedness and exclusion from the political power structure. We conceptualise that the solution to limited political participation of women lies in reducing these constraints and initiate ways to enable fuller integration of women in local governance.

This entails a change in the perspective that political functioning is thinking and doing like men. There should be a reversal from the stance that an active political role is unfeminine. The solution to gendering of the political participation as masculine does not lie in the mere entrance of women into local governance. The solution lies on an alternative discourse to authority and

Women who were unconventional and progressive succeeded in making a dent in the stereotypical image of women representatives- i.e., being docile and compliant. They were analytical and reflective in describing what differentiated men and women in the participation process. The differences in decision-making between men and women were attributed to earlier gender inequalities in panchayats. Women's approach concerning various issues was perceived as unprofessional, less calculative, and sometimes emotional. Women were considered as over cautious in the panchayats because they were more concerned about how they were perceived by others. Women's limitation in grasping the implications of their decisions was the reason for taking the help of male members. These women tried to overcome these shortcomings.

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