



Influencing Factors of Empowerment- A Special Reference to Elected Women Representatives of Grama Panchayats, Kerala

KEYWORDS

Participation. Panchayat Raj. Empowerment. Governance

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ABSTRACT *The 73rd amendment Act, 1992 of the constitution of India have created better political space to women providing atleast 1/3 rd seats for women in Panchayat Raj Institutions. It was to improve greater participation of women in local Governance. Political participation of women is expected to improve the social life of women in general, and especially the concerned women in politics. While political empowerment leads to social empowerment, it may not be so invariably for all those participating. Their social background plays a major role in experiencing empowerment in social life. The present paper deals with social empowerment factors based on the study conducted among 219 elected women representatives of Grama Panchayats in Kerala using a structured interview schedule, has found that social empowerment varies according to age, number of times elected, years of living in the present place, religion, caste, family income, family size and highest level of education attained in the family.*

INTRODUCTION

The discourse on women's development today inevitably contains empowerment as an important issue. Though participation of women in various areas of social life is increasing, gender disparities still exist across the world. Empowerment of women is nowadays considered to be a necessary condition for the overall development of any country. Women would be able to develop self esteem and confidence and realize their potential through empowerment (Marile, 1995). Empowerment is a process through which women become able to organize themselves to increase their own self reliance, to assert their independent right to make their choices and control their resources, which will assist in challenging and eliminating their own subordination (Vijayanti, 2000). Women empowerment implies equal participation in decision making in all spheres of life. However, according to Rowlands (1997), empowerment is more than participation in decision making; it must also include the process that lead people to perceive as able and entitled to make decisions; empowerment is not just a gender issue, but also a development issue affecting both women and men. Almost all definitions of women empowerment include some reference to an expansion of choice and freedom to make decisions and take actions that are necessary to shape life-outcomes (Malhotra and Schuler 2005).

Amin et al (1998) split the concept of women's empowerment into three components each measured separately: Inter-spouse consultation index, which seeks to represent the extent to which husbands consult their wives in household affairs; Individual autonomy indexes which represents women's self-reported autonomy of physical movement outside the house and in matters of spending money; and the Authority index, which reports on actual decision-making power (which is traditionally in the hands of the patriarch of the family). A woman's level of empowerment will vary sometimes enormously, according to other criteria such as her class or caste, ethnicity, relative wealth, age, family position etc and any analysis of women's power or lack of it must appreciate these other contributory dimensions (Mosedale, 2003).

Empowerment of women in all spheres, particularly in the political sphere, is crucial for their advancement and for the foundation of gender equal society. But even today a large mass of women are kept out of political arena. Participation of women in political life is integral to the advancement of women. Luttrell and Quiroz (2009) define political empowerment as the capacity to analyze, organize and mobilize. According to Subha and Bargava (2002), political empowerment is the capacity to influence decision-making process, planning, implementation and evaluation by integrating them into the political system. It implies political participation which includes right to vote, contest, campaign, party membership and representation in political office at all levels.

Participation in political governance certainly indicates higher degree of political empowerment. However, discrimination against women in the wider society hinders the advancement of women in the political sphere. A global survey on Participation of Women in Political Life in 1999 has listed the barriers as prejudices and stereotypes, the complications of everyday life, lack of time and family responsibilities, lack of motivation and the bad image of politics, lack of resources, lack of self-confidence, obstacles within parties, lack of solidarity among women, lack of training, lack of money and insufficient media support (Inter Parliamentary Union, 1999).

Social and cultural contexts pose serious barriers. Women, if they take part in work or politics, have to perform multiple roles mostly with little or no support from other family members. A woman's level of empowerment will vary, sometimes enormously, according to other criteria such as her class or caste, ethnicity, relative wealth, age, family position etc and any analysis of women's power or lack of it must appreciate these other contributory dimensions (Mosedale, 2003). However, political participation by women may alter the social context, at least in the lives of those women who take part in politics. Political participation is expected to improve social life of the concerned women. In other words, political empowerment leads to social empowerment. It is with this understanding that the present

paper intend to assess social empowerment among the elected women members of local administrative bodies.

METHOD

This paper is based on the study, which was conducted in three districts of Kerala, namely Ernakulam, Thrissur and Malappuram. The total number of married women representatives in the Grama Panchayats of the three districts was 636. It was decided to select 212 (one-third) women as study respondents from all the Grama Panchayats. As some of the eager representatives volunteered, the sample increased to 219. Social empowerment was measured in terms of personal autonomy, family decision making and social competence.

RESULTS

The first part of analysis deals with the socio-economic and political profile of the elected women members. It covers social variables namely, Age, Marital Status, Religion, Caste, Education, Economic variables like occupation, Personal & Family Income, Highest Education in the family, and Political variables like Years of living in present place, Type of Constituency, Candidacy Affiliation and Source of encouragement to contest in Election. The second part, specifically deals with the analysis of Social Empowerment of Women. This has been done through Mean Difference Analysis, the Correlation of Social Empowerment and Regression of the correlated variables which directly influence the Social Empowerment of Elected Women Representatives.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL STATUS OF ELECTED WOMEN REPRESENTATIVES

The Local Bodies have traditionally been male dominated and for the first time women in such large numbers have contested and won positions in equal number to men in all local bodies in Kerala. Hence the socio economic profile reveals that around two-fifths (42%) of the respondents belong to the age group of 41 – 50. More than one-third (35.2%) of the respondents belong to the age group of 31 – 40. The average age of the respondents is 42. Almost all the respondents (98.2%) are leading married life.

More than half (52%) of the respondents are Hindus. One-fifth (19.6%) are Christians, and more than one-fourth (27.9%) are Muslims. Half (50.7%) of the respondents belong to the Backward or Most Backward Communities. As there are only six respondents belonging to the Backward Communities, most of the respondents in this category belong to the Most Backward Communities. Two-fifths (39.7%) of the respondents belong to the Forward Communities. Only a few (9.6%) of the respondents belong to the Scheduled Caste / Scheduled Tribe category, in which there is only one respondent belonging to the Scheduled Tribe.

More than two-fifths (42.5%) of the respondents have studied up to middle school. One-third (33.8%) have studied up to high school. Nearly one-fourth (23.7%) have had college education. Nearly two-thirds (64.4%) are housewives and are not employed. More than one-third (35.6%) are either employed (11.9%) or self-employed (21.5%) or retired (2.3%). In nearly one-fourth of the respondents' families, the highest education is middle school education. In the case of three out of ten, the highest educational achievement is up to high school level. In nearly half of the families, the highest education is found to be college level.

All are having personal income because all get hono-

riary from the local administration body. More than half (55.7%) of the respondents have personal earning (including honorarium) up to Rs.5, 000 per month. A few less than half (44.3%) of them earn above Rs.5, 000. The average income is Rs.7,431. Half (49.3%) of the respondents have their family income as up to Rs.20, 000 per month, while the other half (50.7%) of the respondents have above Rs.20, 000. The average family income is Rs.23, 891 per month. Around half (48.4%) of the respondents have up to four members in the family, around half (51.6%) of them have more than four members. The average family size is 4.5. The vast majority (86.8%) of the respondents belong to nuclear families, while only 13.2% belong to joint families.

A few more than half (52.1%) of the respondents have been living in their present place for up to 20 years, and a few less than half (47.9%) of the respondents for more than 20 years. The average duration of living in the present place is around 22 years. The vast majority (89%) of the respondents have contested from constituencies reserved for women. Very few (4.1%) have contested from the general constituencies. Some have contested from constituencies reserved for Scheduled Castes (5.9%) and Scheduled Tribes (0.9%). More than half of the respondents belong to the United Democratic Front headed by the Congress party. Around two-fifths (41.6%) belong to the Left Democratic Front led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist). Only two respondents belong to the Bharatiya Janata Party and five are independents. In the case of half (50.7%) of the respondents, it was their respective political party that encouraged them to contest in the election. More than one-fourth (28.3%) of the respondents have stated that they were encouraged by their family members to contest in the election. 14.6% of the respondents have stated that it was out of their own involvement.

For the vast majority (83.1%) of the respondents, this was the first time that they got elected to the local body. For 11.9% of the respondents this was the second time, for 1.8% this was the third time, and for 3.2% this was the fourth time. In the case of three-fifths (60.3%) of the respondents, someone in their family is member of their party or organization. In the case of two-fifths (39.7%) of the respondents, no other family member in their family is a member of their party or organization.

SOCIAL EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

The mean scores for the different age groups clearly show that as age increases the mean score also increases. These differences are significant as shown by the F value. This shows that aged respondents are more empowered than the young respondents. Social empowerment increases when one gets older.

TABLE 1
Mean Difference Analysis of Social Empowerment

		N	Mean	F	Sig.
Age	Up to 30	20	184.5500	16.670	.000
	31 - 40	77	197.9091		
	40 - 50	92	216.1522		
	Above 50	30	232.4667		
Religion	Hindu	115	210.2261	4.056	.019
	Christian	43	218.1860		
	Muslim	61	200.5246		
Caste	FC	87	213.4943	4.233	.016
	BC/MBC	111	209.0450		
	SC/ST	21	191.0476		
Education	Up to Middle School	93	205.3763	1.420	.244
	High School	74	209.8378		
	College	52	214.6538		
Occupation	Housewife	141	209.4397	.047	.828
	Employed/Retired	78	208.4487		
Personal Income	Up to 5000	122	205.6557	3.158	.077
	Above 5000	97	213.4021		
Family Income	Up to 20,000	108	199.6944	19.684	.000
	Above 20,000	111	218.2252		
Family Type	Nuclear	190	209.4158	.149	.700
	Joint	29	206.9310		
Family Size	Up to 4	106	213.8019	4.475	.036
	Above 4	113	204.6637		
Highest Education	Middle	52	200.3654	7.676	.001
	High	64	202.0781		
	College	103	217.8447		
Years of Living in the present Place	Up to 20 Years	114	199.3070	24.276	.000
	Above 20 Years	105	219.7048		
Number of Times Elected	Once	182	203.8132	33.158	.000
Affiliation ¹	More than once	37	235.0270		
	Left Democratic Front	91	211.7363	1.224	.270
	United Democratic Front	121	206.7769		

The Christian respondents have relatively more social empowerment than others and the Muslim respondents have relatively less social empowerment than others. The Hindus fall in between. The Forward Caste respondents are more empowered than others as shown by the mean scores. They are followed by the Backward or Most Backward Caste respondents. The Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe respondents are relatively less empowered compared to others.

There are no significant differences in social empowerment among the respondents having different levels of education. It does not matter whether they are housewives or employed, their level of social empowerment does not vary. Personal income does not make significant variation in social empowerment for these elected women representatives. But family income has a significant role; when it increases, social empowerment also increases. Social empowerment does not vary significantly for different family types. But family size makes a significant difference; when

it is small, social empowerment is higher. When somebody in the family has higher level of education, social empowerment of the woman increases. The longer one lives in the present place, the higher social empowerment. The longer one serves in the local body, the higher the social empowerment. Social empowerment does not vary significantly for respondents belonging to different political parties.

CORRELATION OF EMPOWERMENT WITH SELECTED VARIABLES

It is observed from the correlation analysis that age has a significant positive correlation with social empowerment; as age increases, social empowerment also increases. Education and personal income do not have significant correlation with social empowerment. Family income is positively related with social empowerment; when family income is high, social empowerment is also high. Family size is negatively related with social empowerment; the smaller the family, the higher the social empowerment. When the highest level of education in the family increases, social empowerment also increases; when somebody in the family has high education, social empowerment of woman belonging to that family increases. Years of living in the present place and social empowerment are positively related; the more one has been living in the present place, the more one is socially empowered. Social empowerment is also positively related with number of times a woman gets elected to the local body; the longer one serves in the local body, the higher one's social empowerment.

TABLE 2

Correlation of Social Empowerment with selected variables

Variables	Social Empowerment	
Age	Corr.	.456
	Sig.	.000
Education	Corr.	.114
	Sig.	.093
Personal Income	Corr.	.086
	Sig.	.204
Family Income	Corr.	.326
	Sig.	.000
Family Size	Corr.	-.253
	Sig.	.000
Highest Education in the Family	Corr.	.238
	Sig.	.000
Years of Living in the Present Place	Corr.	.350
	Sig.	.000
Number of Times Elected	Corr.	.299
	Sig.	.000

REGRESSION OF SOCIAL EMPOWERMENT ON THE CORRELATED VARIABLES

The beta coefficient for age shows that while the other independent variables are held constant, social empowerment increases by 0.297 standard units when age increases by one standard unit. The beta coefficient for family income shows that when other independent variables are controlled, social empowerment increases by 0.242 standard units when family income increases by one standard unit. The negative beta value for family size shows that one unit increase in family size results in 0.221 units decrease in social empowerment. One unit increase in the highest level of education in the family produces 0.12 units increase in social empowerment. Years of living in the present place does not produce significant variation in social empowerment when other independent variables are controlled, as shown by the beta value that is not significant. When number of times elected by one standard unit, so-

cial empowerment increases by 0.13 standard units.

TABLE 3
Regression of Social Empowerment on the correlated Variables

Predictors	Beta	t	Sig.
Age	.297	3.896	.000
Family Income	.242	4.166	.000
Family Size	-.221	-3.969	.000
Highest Education in the Family	.120	2.095	.037
Years of Living in the Present Place	.064	.861	.390
Number of Times Elected	.130	2.233	.027
R ²	.361		
F	19.924		
Sig.	.000		

CONCLUSION

Political participation by women is supposed to enhance their social empowerment. However, this varies largely according to the social background of the elected women representatives. It is found that social empowerment is greater among the older women who have been elected more times and who have been living in their present place for a longer duration. It is relatively greater among Christians and less among Muslims. While forward caste women have more social empowerment, the scheduled caste/tribe women have less of it. When the family income is high and family size is small, social empowerment is high. When somebody in the family has a higher level of education, the woman representative belonging to that family enjoys experiences greater social empowerment.

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