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**Women’s Political Participation and Leadership in India: Examining the Challenges**

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**Abstract.** *Women's political participation is regarded as an essential element in all forms of development; however, the gender equality policies of India remain under scrutiny. After independence in 1947, there have been many initiatives to increase the political representation of women by the decentralization of power in various local self-government institutions of India. The act of Panchayati Raj Institutions has increased the engagement of marginalized segments of society, including women, into the decision-making role in political institutions. Therefore, this study attempts to explore the political leadership of women in Local Self Government institutions, through the use of qualitative methods, such as document analysis of the Panchayati Raj Institutions amendment act and expert interviews with elected women representatives in one district of the Kerala state. The paper seeks to identify the challenges of women in political leadership positions in India, the largest democratic nation. Findings from the study reveal that there is considerable progress in women's equality in the leadership role; however, there are certain crucial obstacles that still exist for women to be active in the political realm.*

**Keywords:** *women rights, political participation, democracy, empowerment, Kerala.*

**Raktažodžiai:** *moterų teisės, dalyvavimas sprendimų priėmime, demokratija, įgalinimas, Kerala.*

### **Introduction**

The World Bank identifies women's empowerment as the main element for overall social development. The Millennium Development Goal (2019), highlighted gender equality and women's empowerment as a means of bringing significant improvements in emerging countries. Therefore, every country requires different programs to balance its gender and empower the political lives of women. Empowerment should be seen as an element of perceiving oneself as an active decision-maker (King & Mason, 2001). Empowerment of females allows them to transfer their own life put together their agenda, arrange and demand the assistance of the state and community for the transition. Like in many cultures, it can be seen that a women's role is inseparable for growth, but it sometimes does not highlight the same position that counts for males. Consequently, it is believed that females require more assistance for their enormous position in decision-making and social development. The term empowerment captures the feeling of acquiring power and involvement in decision-making (Naz, 2006; Karl, 1995). The Beijing Declaration (1995) stressed that women's empowerment and full involvement on the grounds of equality in all areas of culture, including involvement in decision-making processes and authority, are essential to achieving inclusion, growth and harmony. Therefore, the UN proclaimed women's empowerment as the fifth of its Millennium Development Goals

implemented during 2000-2015. According to Alexander et al. (2016), women's political empowerment is understood as the improvement of women's resources, capacities and accomplishments to obtain equality in influencing and practicing political power.

Political empowerment is a method that allows females to boost their mobility and crack their isolation, create self-confidence and self-image, create their government presence by taking part in decision-making in an increasing context of consciousness and critical assessment to monitor and impact growth progress. Thus, in most instances, the national government arises as a significant player in promoting women's involvement in the political sphere by attempting to modify the mindset of society and establishing more platforms for women as part of political decision-making (World Bank, 2001; Oxaal 1997). Therefore, it is essential to encourage the decentralization of authority and power to provide support for the voiceless segment in the cultural fields. Consequently, it is essential to promote the marginalized section's involvement in decision making for empowerment. Inequality not only reduces women's capacity to enhance but also inhibits their personal growth and ability. There is a definite absence of discussing women's inequality as violating human rights and in Scandinavian parliaments, women's under-representation was very noticeable (Randall, 1987; UN, 2019).

There are various studies on female empowerment. Scholars such as Kabeer (2001), Devika & Thampi (2007), KB (2005), and Menon (2009) noted that there is always a structural inequality between women and men in the political arena, particularly in the aspects of reduced organizational and decision-making influence. The concepts of power and gender are central to understand the empowerment of women in political leadership. Power explains how female oppression and patriarchy perpetuate, and gender highlights the hierarchical social order that privileges men and considers women as a disadvantageous section of the society. Sharma (2010) views women's empowerment on a cultural basis and criticizes that women's empowerment cannot be interpreted as the same in every part of the world, especially since the Western country's ethnographic condition is much distinct from Asian subcontinents such as India. Nevertheless, there is a lack of sufficient research on the decision-making capacity (mainly the challenges they face for policy implementation) of elected women leaders in their institutional structure. Thus, this paper focus on analyzing the research question, 'are the women leaders successful in their political participation in a democratic way at the panchayat level'.

The research object of this article is women's political participation.

The article aims to analyze women's political participation in Indian democracy.

This article sets the following tasks:

1. To address the importance of women's political participation in democracy.
2. To identify the challenges for women's political leadership.

To identify the specified aim, it is essential to conduct an empirical study based on the participation and democracy theory. The article demonstrates that although the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) policy has increased women's political participation in decision-making, there are particular challenges to endure the leadership. The article extends the results of factual research based on the primary data collected by interviews from 25 elected women panchayat presidents, who have been in their positions from 2015 until present, from the Idukki district of the Kerala state in India.

### **Theory for the research – Participation and Democracy**

Pateman's (1970) theory of participatory democracy's fundamental assumption is that people and their organizations cannot separate from each other. The presence of democratic institutions only at the national level is not sufficient for successful governance without the full inclusion of all citizens. The socialization or institutional conditioning will occur in various domains for developing human perceptions and cognitive attributes towards democracy. The whole advancement arises through the active participation of its citizens into public policy mechanisms. Participation in representative government is an intellectual aspect, including the improvement of political skills and

techniques of leaders. Thereby, representational program's stabilization and sustainability through the participatory system could actively work for social growth. Participation develops and promotes the attributes it requires, especially, more individual's interaction between citizens and governing bodies. If all political institutions democratize and increase its social interaction in a culture, it could also be a key area for the economic sector advancement. When people are having full control of their own lives or environment, governance structures can increase the citizen's participation in decision-making. Even though males and females come into consideration of the same preferences and equal legal rights, the excessive focus of such privileges for men undermines women's political and civic role, especially in leadership positions. This situation led the female community to be stigmatized as a group, which therefore is still not equivalent in democracy. Such a result has direct consequences between political philosophers about questioning the legitimacy of the government. They questioned whether the careful consideration and justice principle is implemented, or they compromise the hierarchical group member's opinions and segregate women empowerment.

A democratic theory describes participative governance as a philosophy that is explicitly oriented to the principle of consideration. Whenever the objective was of increasing the standard of society, it turned out to have been inconsistent with both the goal of enhancing minority representation by upper-class involvement. Hence, at the core of the participative democratic government, the concept of a common motive is essential. To eradicate such inequality among women and men, the government of India implemented its Panchayati Raj Institutions Policy act in 1992. This act provides 50% of seat reservation for women in its Local Self Government (LSG). Through this policy, more women can gain power and control over government institutions by their decision-making capacity. The equal social rights required by law to individuals enhance the sovereignty and security of its citizens through power structures. Therefore, the elimination of the perpetual differentiation around administrators and people will be possible. Modern participatory theories of democracy are center to the participation of the citizens, focusing on the political significance of the minority community rather than aiming at the elite class. Sartori et al. (2017) stated that 'which ordinary citizen's lack of activity is no one's responsibility and use the facts as provided for the hypothesis forming reason'. The legitimate involvement framework would still not extend even within a participatory society. Karpowitz et al. (2012) found a significant gender gap in the power structure. However, as postulated, it disappears under the common rule, and very few females had the opportunity to be the representative of the government. Participative development may eliminate inequality by adapting institutional procedures to a social environment.

As Chant & Gutmann (2002) explains, the legal practice of political authority requires justification for those people who are bound by it, and decision-making through deliberation by free will. Whether the decisions made in the legislature, in the administration of the courts, they have to bear the marks of our ways of caring and our ways of thinking. However, in order to fulfill this legitimizing function, institutional involvement has to meet strict standards. In the opinion of Bryld's (2001) in the early 1990s, most policy theorists and practitioners confronted the deprivation and disempowerment that followed the emphasis on modernist development and turned away from promoting macroeconomic growth as the only means of sustainable progress. This discussion turned to more women-centered advancement, emphasizing a person's role in their very own growth and implies more accountability. Increased power involves changing the contemporary society system of governance, including through its role of civil society in development. Correspondingly, the way people governed and the participation in governance of the internal society, consequently the world has become the main focal focus of advancement. India is the second-largest most populated country, with an estimated one billion people. Across all fronts, this is a diverse population of various religions and many languages. Diversity highlights the incredible challenge of decentralizing democracy development. Despite India's global progress after independence, the situation remains one of the most deficient in the world, not just financially but culturally.

Palacios (2016) stated that perhaps the gender ratio of work and capacity throughout organizations is an aspect that gets in the way of participation. The question is not the quota itself,

but whether reserving women is appropriate in a patriarchal society like rural India if women are to have any power whatsoever. Participative governance, a most influential form in modern political discourse, is based on the notion that political decisions will be of the right consistency if those involved in the political discussion participate in true reason-giving. Ferguson (2011) stated that any failure to acknowledge a feminist movement itself is vulnerable to attack those it should also include unfairly. Relevantly, Urbinati & Warren (2008) stated that political representation could provide politics an idealizing dimension that can resolve the boundaries of segregation and formal participation in the political sphere. The theory of participation and democracy gives focus on the development of leaders and thereby increasing the successful governance. In this article, the leaders are elected women representatives in the panchayat. Hence, it is essential to identify the challenges of women leaders for their successful leadership using the theory of democracy and participation.

## Methods

In order to analyse women's political participation as a leader in a democratic nation, this paper analyses the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) policy of 1992 in India. It describes the various challenges for women leaders in the Local Self Government (LSG). In order to address women's political participation in democracy, this paper analyzed the various existing literature on women's political empowerment, participation and leadership. The challenges of women leaders in the decision-making process are identified by conducting an empirical study based on primary data from 25 women as Panchayat Presidents who were elected through a voting mechanism in one district in Kerala, known as Idukki. A semi-structured interview with open-ended discussion was conducted in the Malayalam language, which is the official language of Kerala state. The discussions with women politicians led research to explore the specific barriers for participating in the democratically evolving nation. The characteristics of the respondents are given in Table 1.

*Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents*

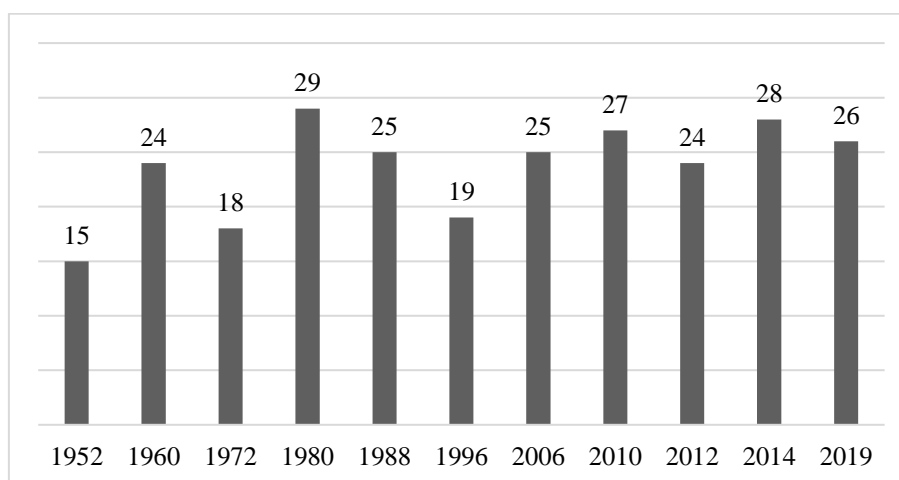
<i>Socio-demographic characteristics</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>Total number of the sample</i>
Gender	Female	25
Age	Age Under 30 years	2
	30-39 years old	2
	40-49 years old	10
	50-59 years old	10
	60 years old or more	1
Education	Up to high school	7
	Secondary school Diploma	10
	University education	5
	Professional training	3
Income (monthly)	Under € 250	3
	From € 250 to € 500/	20
	From € 500 to € 1000	2
	Over € 1000	0
Family status	Married with children	24
	Married without children	0
	Unmarried	1
	Widow	0
Employment	Employed	12
	Un-Employee	13
	Pensioners	0
	Other	0

<i>Socio-demographic characteristics</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>Total number of the sample</i>
Any political party affiliation	Yes	25
	No	0
Religious group affiliation	Yes	18
	No	7
Other organizational leadership	Yes	22
	No	3

*Source: author*

### **Women in Indian Politics**

Irrespective of the fact that women's political empowerment is perceived as the core for all other advancements in any society, it experiences many obstacles, notably in developing nations, including India. While in developed countries, females have more possibilities and liberty to engage actively in political lives, however, in the developing world, owing to deeply integrated cultural, religious and social beliefs about the position of females in a culture, it generates many constraints for females to be a component of decision-making in developing nations. Therefore, women's participation in the power structure and their political empowerment is still not adequate enough to analyze women's position in a political system. In order to improve their involvement at the political stage, it is essential to empower females through multiple programs and through the action scheme at the local, national, and societal levels.



*Fig.1. Number of women members in Rajya Sabha (Council of States)*

*Source: Women Members in Rajya Sabha*

Fig.1 shows the percentage of women in the Indian Parliament. However, the introduction and implementation of the Panchayat Raj institutions act did not bring significant improvement and political participation at the national level. This is mainly due to the patriarchal mindset and the hindrance towards women in the northern part of India, which leads to the overall percentage decline of women in Parliament, which is the main reason for not showing a significant statistical difference in the pre- and post-implementation of the Panchayat Raj institutions. By the 1980s, researchers and social activists started to highlight the issue of women empowerment, and by the 20th-century research and debates on women's freedoms and gender equality began to be discussed in the Indian political arena. Political participation involves the right to vote, the right to compete, the right to stand for candidacy, and their position as campaigners and the members of the legislature.

## Case study

As the world's second most inhabited nation, India has more than 50% females as its population, and it is therefore essential to enhance the women's positions, which is under-represented. There are numerous explanations why females in Indian society are marginalized as a politician, primarily because they are repressed by tradition, faith, race, and family status. Patriarchy's presence still holds females away from accessing political power, especially in political parties where the head is a man and the female has less chance of becoming the most significant leader because of the lack of sharing of opportunities. Besides, structural obstacles through discriminatory legislation and organizations restrict the chances for women to run for office. It is also noticeable that females in the political sphere face different types of violence, not only physical or sexual violence but also mental and psychological violence (Nanda, 1999). The lack of sufficient encouragement for women in politics and permanent exclusion of them to the higher levels of power politics (Hughes & Dubrow, 2018) is also visible in Indian politics.

Traditionally in India, a women's role is restricted to household activities rather than becoming an active citizen. Therefore, due to family neglect and lack of aid, females did not have enough time to be politically inclusive. The Panchayati Raj system is a three-tier structure consisting of village/town, intermediate, and district level institutions. To politically empower women in India, Mahatma Gandhi advocated a system of decentralizing the administration in villages and local levels. This system is known as the *Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI)*. The government implemented this advocacy as an essential act by the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act in 1992. The meaning of '*Panchayat*' is a '*village council*,' and '*Raj*' means '*Rule*.' So that *Panchayati Raj* means '*Rules in a Village Council*.' In India, villages consist of a panchayat (council of five persons), which have various powers to deal with the administration of the panchayat. Every state in India had accepted the policy, and thus empowerment of panchayat had become a vital division of the state. The female officials come from the same village/town. They can tackle different development problems and participate in the fight against abuse against females in the village/town due to the knowledge of the region and locality. Consequently, Kerala is renowned for its development systems, however it is essential to note that Panchayati Raj institutions in Kerala are working in contrast to all other Indian states. With the enactment of the Kerala Panchayati Raj Act in 1994, the decentralization of resources and responsibilities, along with power, has transformed local bodies into robust administrative centers. Today, LSG in Kerala is composed of 941 Grama Panchayats, 152 Block Panchayats, 14 District Panchayats, 87 Municipalities, and 6 Corporations. The Local Self Government Department is responsible for coordinating the activities of these 1200 local bodies.

## Findings of the study

Created on 26 January 1972, Idukki is one of the 14 districts of the state of Kerala. There are 52 Grama Panchayats in Idukki District for Development Activities and Social Security Schemes. The functions of the panchayat are mainly associated with evaluating the utilization of various funds, monitoring the process of raising funds for the panchayats, arranging all births and marriages, approving by-laws created by the village/town level panchayat and overseeing distribution. Since the implementation of the PRI, there has been a considerable increase in the activities of the village panchayat. Thereby, due to the decentralization of power, the day-to-day running of the village panchayats to a higher level of local governance and responsibilities. As Idukki district is one of the districts with proven developmental activities, this paper aims to explore governance in this district. In order to identify the challenges of elected women representatives, this article made an empirical analyzes from direct interviews with 25 women leaders (presidents) in the panchayat. As shown in Fig. 2, the article analyzes various forms of challenges met by the respondents, such as personal and professional life balance, economic barriers, gender stereotyping, administrative training, solidarity between representatives, the requirement of having a political party affiliation, and gender-based violence.

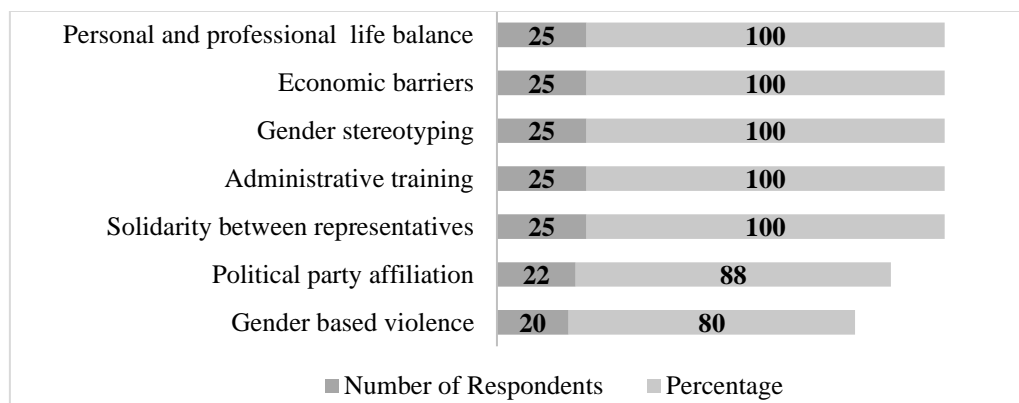


Fig. 2. Challenges for women in politics

Source: Author

While family-work conflict is the topic of both sexes, many writers concentrate only on women (Poelmans, 2001). Predominantly, women have far more conflict given the sheer volume of responsibilities they undertake, although parental involvement is a significant impediment to a woman's career development. Hochschild (1997) argues that both men and women may prefer to spend more time at the office and escape parenting responsibilities. However, females spend more time with their children whilst men are more driven to work than women at the office. Most women maintain professions, family responsibilities in an era where male colleagues spend more and more time working separately (Figes, 1994). Table 2 shows how balancing personal and professional life interferes with the political career of women. Though there are many initiatives and projects in India, it is one of the countries in the world that lacks women's equality. While discussing the challenges to be in political participation, all respondents agree that holding the responsibility of home and children is a significant barrier for them to be active in a political career. As most of the elected women representatives of the Panchayati Raj system are married and have children, the interview results show that the co-operation of husbands and husband's parents is essential for a woman's political career.

Table 2. Personal and professional life balance

Indicators	Strongly agree	Agree	Uncertain	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Household responsibilities	25	0	0	0	0
Time management	25	0	0	0	0
Working under stress	25	0	0	0	0
Family support	24	0	0	1	0
Family in politics	22	1	0	2	1
Decision making in house	18	3	0	2	2

Source: Author

Various household responsibilities limits the woman to spend more time on social development, especially as sometimes they are required to work at night. All respondents said that during the time of the flooding of 2018 in Idukki (New Indian Express), they were supposed to coordinate various departments to avoid further loss of life in their local self-government and thus required an immense amount of traveling, with other colleges and other party members at specific times, such collaboration seems to be complicated. However, a more significant part of the

respondents (18) agree that after entering into a political career, they gain more confidence, power, self-esteem in their personal life, including more freedom to make decisions in their home and community. While reviewing the importance of family support, a women politician (31 years old) with a professional degree explained:

“I was a person with no interest in politics before marriage. However, after marriage, my husband, who is active in politics and his family, supported me to be the candidate for the LSG election, and then I joined a party. I am very sure that without the support of my husband, I will never be able to have a political career”.

(Anonymous 1, 2019)

A report by the World Economic Forum (2018) shows that a complex strategy should concentrate on overcoming the fundamental, systemic obstacles women encounter in running for public office and managing effective campaigns. Lack of exposure to funding and institutional pressures that render stressful and volatile working environments creates more challenges for women. These systemic inequalities require a robust plan to help women candidates. Capital is among the most potent resources, and in several nations, lobbying costs are impractically high to most candidates, regardless of gender and background. Women were reportedly even less likely than men to have ties to family finances (Knight et al., 2004). Table 3 represents various economic barriers for a woman to be an active political leader. All interview participants explained that a lack of financial security is one of the greatest concerns for entering into political careers. Such a situation pushes them to seek other jobs. Apart from that, most of the respondents agree that the monthly salary they receive for the leadership position is comparatively less and insufficient to meet the ends. For women who do not have a strong financial base in their family, entry into the political arena is even harder, especially if they want to participate in an election or to conduct an election campaign.

*Table 3. Economic barriers*

<i>Indicators</i>	<i>Strongly agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Uncertain</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly disagree</i>
Low salary	25	0	0	0	0
Lack of funding for campaigning	24	1	0	0	0
Travelling in non-working hours	23	1	1	0	0
Lack of economic stability in election	22	2	1	0	0
Inability to have different jobs	20	1	1	2	1
Spending from own	16	4	2	1	2

*Source: Author*

As a women leader in a panchayat, they must carry out government projects promptly. However, there are situations, regardless of their financial security, where leaders sometimes spend money from their own hands to engage in social development (of traveling purposes). This kind of economic inability consistently counter women leaders from working in politics. When addressing various economic challenges of leaders to be in politics for longer terms, one respondent (53 years) with a high school education added:

“I am from a middle-income family which requires to take care of two kids and husband's parents. My husband is a farmer. Hence, I am also a part of the agricultural tasks. After being elected as the LSG president, I merely get time to support my husband in farming jobs. This has resulted in lesser revenue than before. So, I strongly believe that if a woman would like to have a successful political career, she must have a stable income or must have the affluent financial status”.

(Anonymous 2, 2019)

Gender stereotypes represent expectations of what people do in real life, like other social stereotypes. If perceivers also encounter a similar community of individuals engaged in a physical



task, they are apt to assume that these people's abilities and personality traits are shared. Some stereotypes may represent the separation of classes into broader social system elements, such as the social class (Eagly & Steffen, 1984). For retaining or improving disparities among men and women, the position of the social institutions is crucial (Lopez-Saez et al., 2008). Table 4 represents the various gender stereotypes faced by women in politics. Gender discrimination is one of the greatest problems faced by women in politics. Although Kerala has successfully implemented various development initiatives in the state, patriarchy is still persistent in Kerala. All the leaders who participated in the interviews fully acknowledge the fact that women have less access to higher positions at meetings of their party and decisions. Although the PRI policy ensures equality in a panchayat governing body, sometimes the lack of co-operation of male colleague's limits women leaders to implement various development strategies.

Table 4. Gender stereotyping

<i>Indicators</i>	<i>Strongly agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Uncertain</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly disagree</i>
Patriarchy	25	0	0	0	0
Less opportunity for higher positions	23	2	0	0	0
Society expects higher standards	23	2	0	0	0
Less voice in upper level party meetings	2	22	1	0	0
Male representatives support	20	3	1	1	0
Not tough	19	4	1	0	1
Women are weaker	17	2	2	0	4
Less decision-making capacity	15	3	2	1	4

Source: Author

Nearly 17 women representatives acknowledge that such an in-equality results in creating a stigma of women in the society that they are weak, or not tough enough to lead the society (19). Hence, it is imperative to change the mindset of the Kerala society to stigmatize women from incapable to capable. While discussing the acknowledgment from society about the leadership of women, one respondent (41 years) with a Bachelor's degree disclosed that:

“As a women leader, I had to undergo various stigmas of our society daily, especially when it comes in terms of decision-making in our panchayat. A part of men in locality thinks that a woman is not rational or brave to take serious policy measures as of a man. Hence, sometimes I had to behave like a powerful woman, even in my voice modulation, to make others think that I am a serious and strict leader. Such kinds of misinterpretations must get rid of society”.

(Anonymous 3, 2019)

The perceptions of men and women vary in several respects, owing to their specific social positions and responsibilities. The traditional gender roles of men and women mean that women usually have multiple tasks at home and on the job in society. However, females are still left with less ability to engage economically throughout the competition of time and labor, together with pervasive societal limitations on the right of women to engage in public action. It renders women voiceless in their lives and, in general, in their capacity to play a significant role in sustained growth (Makhabane, 2002). Table 5 shows the importance of knowledge on administrative tasks for women's successful leadership and explains how it affects their careers. A panchayat leader should have skills for development activities and fulfilling responsibilities. As most of the women representatives were not having prior experience in administration tasks, the delegation must receive specific training. In addition, 23 respondents agree that to gain the ability to provide services and reach out to the people, they require technical skills along with administration.

Table 5. Administrative tasks and training

Indicators	Strongly agree	Agree	Uncertain	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Leadership	25	0	0	0	0
Convincing ability	25	0	0	0	0
Equal distribution of services	25	0	0	0	0
Technical skills	23	2	1	0	0
Project implementation	22	3	0	0	0
Party influence of decisions	0	20	0	0	3

Source: Author

Writing new projects to the state government based on the development requirements in their panchayat requires expertise. Most of the respondents agree that one of the greatest challenges that women leaders face when implementing development initiatives is the influence of their parties in decisions, such as when some parties force a woman leader to do as they please. Women leaders must receive government-level training in order to ensure that it is the responsibility of a representative to serve the people equally and transparently, without compromising the constraints of these various parties. However, 3 respondents completely deny that they face any party influence or pressure on making decisions in their administration. One of the respondents who neglect the party influence argues:

“There were times when I was asked to obey the higher political leader in terms of sanctioning certain licenses for building construction, in areas where there must not have any building according to the environmental protection law. Nevertheless, as a leader elected by the society, I denied such external push factors. Hence, I believed that no matter which party or whom you represent, as a leader, I must serve society with equal terms and obligations”.

(Anonymous 4, 2019)

As in every profession, solidarity and working in collaboration is an essential element of a successful political career. Kabeer & Lopita (2010) stated that feminist discourse emphasized the value of widening women's social connections, establishing a partnership with other women, and increasing their capacity for collective action to pursue gender equity. A significant aspect of such a phase of social progress seems to be the transformation of partnerships, especially in the lives of women beyond the given community and sense of belonging relations, where they hold a submissive role to the partnerships they have selected. However, due to various ideologies of parties, constant invisible and visible fighting over power and positions, women representatives face a lack of solidarity of members, as shown in Table 6. In this study, most of the respondents strongly agree that for the successful functioning of the governance in a democracy, the collective action of all governing body members, despite their party differences, is an essential factor.

Table 6. Solidarity between representatives

Indicators	Strongly agree	Agree	Uncertain	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Collective action	25	0	0	0	0
Judgmental	22	3	0	0	0
Trust	18	1	3	3	0
Compassionate	16	5	2	2	0
Liberty in decision making	14	8	2	1	0

Source: Author

At times, prejudicial acts from colleagues regarding the decisions of women representatives seems an essential challenge for them to be in the political realm, as such prejudices tend to undermine the confidence of women. In a public institution, it is essential to work together for the development of society through collective action. The lack of mutual collaboration between the administrative department and political parties is a significant barrier for women to develop trust in politics. Therefore, all respondents affirm that solidarity is one of the most critical factors for them to improve their governance tasks, carry out policies efficiently, and enable significant social development in their panchayat independently and compassionately. While evaluating the necessity of having a compassionate attitude, one respondent (48 years) with a Bachelor degree explains that:

“As a women leader, many women and girls had the trust and freedom to meet and talk to me directly about various kinds of personal issues, including violence they face. They tend to hide their problems with a male ward member or higher official since some times, the issues are related to sexual abuse. Hence, assisting them with compassion is essential to be a successful leader”.

(Anonymous 5, 2019)

Table 7 shows various indicators related to political party affiliation and its importance in women's political life. Clark (1979) suggests that the campaign discourse has strategic attributes that justify a particular purpose. It is an unwritten law that without membership of any political party, it is a very challenging task for anyone to have a seat in the next election, especially those with no previous political experience.

Table 7. Political party affiliation

<i>Indicators</i>	<i>Strongly agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Uncertain</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly disagree</i>
Seat in election	22	0	1	0	2
Engagement in political activities	21	1	2	1	
Acceptance in society	19	1	1	3	1
Funding for election	18	1	2	1	3
Support for election propaganda	18	2	0	2	3
Human right advocacy	16	2	1	1	5
Lobbying	16	2	4	1	2

Source: Author

In most cases, women kept away from various political leadership positions. However, by membership of a political party, a woman can engage in social issues and human rights activities organized by the political party and gain more attention in public. Therefore, the majority (22) of respondents agreed that being a member of a political party is one of the most critical channels for women to enter leadership and act as a mediator for supporting various marginalized sections. Nevertheless, 2 respondents firmly said that they do not require any political affiliation to be a political leader as they are already established leaders in their own way, which covers various social movements and activities. As a response on the importance of party affiliation, one leader (40 years) with a higher secondary education revealed that:

“I was a housewife with mere knowledge about politics. It was challenging for me to have a firm voice in the party during initial periods. However, through continuous social mobilization and participation in protests, I gained more fame, and people started to notice me, which eventually helped me to win in the LSG election. Hence, I believe that without my party support, I will not be able to serve society as a politician”.

(Anonymous 6, 2019)

Other significant hurdles women face in entering the political arena are the variety of gender discrimination and violence issues against women in politics. UN Women (2018) identifies that

violence against women in politics (VAWP) is Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and a human rights violation that impacts on the whole society. This also discourages women's political participation, democratic rights, and increases under-representation of woman policy-makers. Table 8 shows various forms of GBV faced by women in politics. Such humiliation in their personal lives puts an end to women in long term political careers. Twenty respondents revealed various forms of gender-based violence they face. Most notably, sexual harassment, abuse, and the unnecessary dissemination of their images via social media. Sometimes, women representatives or their families have been subjected to public abuse or criticism if there is a lag in policy implementation. Due to these scenarios, there are situations where even the most powerful women in the leadership decide to leave a political career and lose interest in the contest in the next election.

Table 8. Gender-based violence

Indicators	Strongly agree	Agree	Uncertain	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Threat to personal dignity	20	2	0	3	0
Verbal Threatening	6	8	9	1	1
Cyber bullying	6	8	10	1	0
Sexism	5	20	0	0	0
Harassment	4	21	0	0	0
Objectification	3	11	8	1	2
Threat to personal dignity	20	2	0	3	0

Source: Author

Social media and internet harassment are not very prominent at this time; however, the respondents mentioned their insecurity in such platforms. While discussing such insecurity, one of the respondents (43 years) with a secondary education shared an experience:

“As part of my job, I require to travel sometimes at night time. During the last year's flooding, I had to stay with people in the flood relief camp to make sure the safety and security of my panchayat residents and co-ordinating facilities, including health care, shelter, food, and sanitation. Such crisis times requires collaboration with various NGO's, co-ordinating various political parties and government institutions services. However, after that, I had faced criticism over sexism and personal dignity threats due to the association with other males. This has unnecessarily created rumors and led to some conflict within my family, and this challenged my confidence in continuing a political career for long”.

(Anonymous 7, 2019)

## Conclusions

The implementation of the Panchayat Raj Institutions act has a significant role in the devolution of power to the local levels of administration and for enhancing self-reliance and empowerment of women. Although the South Indian state of Kerala shows higher participation of women at LSG level, findings from the primary data collected from the Idukki district shows the various challenges faced by elected women representatives. Cultural barriers and patriarchy still stagnate women's participation in the political spectrum and democratic governance. The higher level of responsibility in household activities impedes more women to seek a career in politics for longer terms. In most cases, to have further social skills and communication in society, women are required to affiliate with a political party and in their activities, which sometimes seems to be an additional commitment for them to obey or act according to the party interests.

The lack of sufficient financial stability inhibits women leaders from focusing on establishing their space in politics. Patriarchy and gender segregation for higher political powers, even after working for party activities for many years, is an essential catalyst for hindering women from

maintaining their compliance in politics. Various developmental projects require expert opinion and self-reliant practices; hence women need to be competent in managing governance with ease. Various forms of gender-based violence against women in politics in the form of verbal harassment, challenges in personal dignity, and sexism restrain women from progressing in political participation. Finally, since the co-operation of male colleagues is an integral part of successful governance, women representatives tend to adopt various mechanisms for increasing mutual trust. The experiences from the women politicians reveal that in order to increase more women's participation into politics and to maintain their participation in governance, it is essential to formulate feasible policy measures at the state and national levels.

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Titty Varghese

**Moterų politinis dalyvavimas ir lyderystė Indijoje: Iššūkių nagrinėjimas**

*Anotacija*

Moterų politinis dalyvavimas laikomas esminiu darnaus vystymosi elementu; tačiau Indijos lyčių lygybės politika vis dar nagrinėjama. Po nepriklausomybės 1947 m. buvo imtasi daugybės iniciatyvų didinti politinį moterų atstovavimą decentralizuojant valdžią įvairiose Indijos savivaldos institucijose. Panchayati Raj institucijų aktas padidino atskirtų visuomenės segmentų, įskaitant ir moteris, dalyvavimą priimant politinius sprendimus įvairiose institucijose. Taigi šiame tyrime bandoma išaiškinti politinę moterų lyderystę vietos savivaldos institucijose. Taikant kokybinius metodus, tokius kaip Panchayati Raj institucijų pakeitimo akto dokumentų analizė ir ekspertų interviu su išrinktais moterų atstovais viename Keralos valstijos rajone. Šio tyrimo metu buvo siekiama įvertinti iššūkius su kuriais susiduria moterys būdamos politinio lyderio pozicijose didžiausiose demokratinėje šalyje pasaulyje - Indijoje. Tyrimo išvados rodo, kad padaryta nemaža pažanga užtikrinant moterų lygybę užimti aukštas vadovaujančias pozicijas, tačiau vis dar yra esminių kliūčių, trukdančių moterims aktyviai reikštis politinėje arenoje.

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