



Miles to Go for Women's Effective Participation in the Grassroots Level Institutions of Planning

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ABSTRACT

The agency role of women is widely recognized as the most significant aspect of the outstanding human development of Kerala. Participatory planning, the acclaimed mission of decentralization has been propagating the involvement of grassroots institutions in local governance since 1996. Kerala witnessed a proliferation of ground level institutions in local planning and the presence of women collectives in grassroots-level institutions since the inception of decentralised planning in Kerala. The present study addresses the question of whether the local self-government institutions claiming disproportionately high participation of women could assure their active involvement in decision making and whether women could voice their needs in the grassroots institutions of planning. Whether their agency role could ever make them local actors and voice their strategic needs in local planning is a matter of concern after a quarter of a century. Although women have been given special privileges in local planning, whether, the much celebrated entry of women in grassroots level institutors of planning could make visible changes from the status of benefits recipients to decision makers is the crux of this paper.

Keywords: Local planning, Participation, GS (Gramasabha), Participatory planning

Introduction

The planners of India since independence have been pondering over novel policies and programmes intending radical shifts in the status of women in India. Rather than being treated as mere beneficiaries of welfare programmes, as envisaged by the state in the sixties, policymakers in the nineties defended economic empowerment by forming self-help groups (SHGs). However, the idea of economic empowerment of women had gone in vain in raising the standard of women. The paradoxical shifts in planning induced by the enactment of the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments during 1993 conceived decentralized planning which prepared congenial ground for the birth of grassroots institutions under the aegis of Local Self-Government (LSG). This historical amendment paved the way for reserving 33 per cent of seats in local bodies for women. The agency role of women in Kerala was greatly appreciated worldwide for the state's high profile of development indicators, which are at par with those of the developed countries. The state of Kerala took a special interest in animating women's agency in local planning in popular campaigns favoring decentralized planning during the nineties. These campaigns assigned greater priority to meet her strategic gender needs and to have her voice heard in critical bodies to validate her role as decision maker.

With much discredit to her agency role in the development platform, she has been overlooked with a noticeable decline in her work participation rate even lower than the national average. Women in Kerala have been consistently underrepresented in political bodies and have faced many challenges accessing resources. The early nineties opened discourse on the agency role of women in the attainment of high social development the state and found that their participation in decision making across sectors and occupations was woefully low even compared to the national average. NBCR (National Bureau of Crime Records) of various years has consistently reported the increasing trend in crimes against women in the state. The state undertook certain initiatives to enhance women's capabilities by encouraging their participation in local planning through various approaches. This paper seeks to explore the participatory roles of women within grassroots institutions of local planning.

Objectives of the Study

These campaigns assigned greater priority to meeting strategic gender needs and to have her voice heard in the critical decision making bodies. Although women have been given special privileges in local planning, whether,

the much celebrated entry of women into planning could make visible changes in their status from mere beneficiaries to decision makers? The primary objective of this paper is to examine the nature of women's participation and identify the factors that influence their involvement in local planning process.

Methodology of the study

Considering the reputation of Thrissur district of Kerala in tuning local bodies with women collectives, the study selected 7 grama panchayats through random sampling given the condition that they should have allocated at least 10 per cent of plan fund towards women component plan during the 10th and 11th Five Year Plan. The local planning mandates spending at least 10 per cent of plan funds under the head women component plan (WCP) which proposes to implement projects visualising exclusively women empowerment. The selected panchayats were Adattu, Engandiyoor, Poomangalam, Nadathara, Kadappuram, Mullurkara, Kodakara

Privileges to Women in Local Planning

In local planning, the state envisaged greater participation of women by enhancing their involvement in local development planning. This approach treats women as key agents of change and focuses on strengthening their social and political networks. A crucial initiative on the part of the state government was the establishment of neighbourhood groups (NHGs) and integrate them under Kudumbasree in 1998. Later Kudumbasree were brought under the purview of Local Self Government Institutions (LSGIs).

Increased Political Participation: In 2010, Kerala raised the reservation for women in local bodies from 33% to 50%, significantly boosting their political voice.

NHGs as Building Blocks: NHGs are positioned as the foundation of the three-tier local governance system. These groups play a vital role in plan preparation, implementation, and resource mobilization.

Women as Stakeholders in MGNREGAi: The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) provides ample opportunities to women by enabling them to participate in planning works, exploit their local knowledge for creating national assets. Notably, MGNREGA's focus on local governance aligns perfectly with Kerala's vision of women's empowerment.

The state of Kerala raised the reservation of women in local bodies from 33 per cent to 50 per cent in 2010. The neighbourhood groups (NHGs) of women were treated as the basic units of three tier local governance system. The state envisages women to act as stakeholders to prepare and implement plans and mobilise resources in local planning. The very exclusive feature of MGNREGS in Kerala is the local government entrusts the Kudumbasrees to plan and conduct the programme. The works under MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) was mostly planned by the women stakeholders and they are the costeffective resource for creating national assets.

WCP by concept intends to address the strategic needs of women in local planning. A zealous effort is explicit in the 14th Five Year Plan guidelines which has directed all local bodies to set apart an amount of one lakh for starting the Gender Resource Centre in their respective local body offices. This centre must scrutinise WCP proposals and make assure that the same is to be implemented rigorously without deviating from its goals.

Participation

According to Pauline Peters (2000), participation means the ability of people to share, influence or control, design, decision making, and authority in development projects and programmes that affect their lives and resources. Thus participation creates opportunities for the poor and the excluded. Participation involves, identifying problems, influencing decision making, implementing development programmes, and monitoring and evaluating the project. Participation is a process through which people influence and control planning and decision making. Rather than physical presence, participants have to engage in discourse to identify local problems, decide priorities, derive strategies, and thus influence decision making. Substantial participation in local planning enhances the capabilities of any vulnerable group. Participation of women can bring critical change in local planning as they can serve as local actors to influence the development activities of local bodies can create desired results.

Decentralised planning signifies people's participation and assures the involvement of marginal communities and women in local planning. In his seminal work, Robert Putnam (1993) the most fundamental requisite of democracy is laymen's participation in plan formulation and local resource management. Participation in plan formulation and execution inculcates skills of cooperation as well as a sense of shared responsibility for collective endeavors. Decentralized governance can make the voice of the poor especially that of the women heard and make them involved in prioritizing their needs and choose what they require for the solution (UNDP, 2004).

Participatory Planning in Kerala

Many studies have stated that the contradictions in the social development of Kerala would be a distant dream unless reconciled with gender sensitization (Eapen, M., & Kodoth, P. 2001; Bhaskaran, et al. 2006; Eapen, M., & Kodoth, P. 2007). Here, the state initiated to make paradigm shift in planning during the mid-1990s by twinning poverty alleviation programmes with women empowerment through participatory planning. Decentralised planning in Kerala propagated people's participation in fixing resource allocation and plan targets.

In local planning, participation means the following:

- Physical presence in gramasabha (GS), working group and development seminar
- Active participation by raising issues and identifying strategic needs
- Set priorities and select beneficiaries judiciously.
- Influence decision making in various bodies

The key feature of decentralised planning is excluded and the vulnerable get a platform to address their problems. During the early years of decentralized planning, participation of women in grass roots institutions of planning was low. The participation of women in development seminars, task forces and selection committees of beneficiaries was less than 10 per cent during the nineties (Seema and Mukherjee 2000). After 2000, women's participation in Gramasabha was remarkably high in Kerala compared to other states (Narayana, 2007; Government of Kerala, 2009).

Women in the Grassroots Institutions of Participatory Planning

At the outset of the planning, a working group is convened to discuss the pan fund allocation and it has to present the proposal in the subsequent GS and the approval of GS is mandatory. In the aftermath of GS approval, LSG convenes working groups to prepare a draft plan report. There are 15-18 working groups dealing with various subjects viz. agriculture, industry, health, education, women and children, road, animal husbandry, etc. A working group is said to be a fair one, provided at least 33 per cent of its participants are women.

After the preparation of the draft plan report, the LSG convenes a development seminar to discuss the recommendations in the draft annual report which is the consolidated document of various recommendations prepared by various working groups. Elected representatives, CDS and ADS members, experts, social workers, activists, political party members etc. participate in development seminars. Five standing committees each deal with five sectors such as finance, health, education, development and welfare finally consolidate the recommendations and fix plan allocations and submit to the perusal of the LSG council. Thus in participatory planning, the plan document is an output of collective effort and discourse and debates conducted from the grassroots level of NHGs and GS to LSG council, the apex body of local government.

LSGs convene a development seminar to discuss the recommendations in the draft plan document. Elected representatives, CDS and ADS members, experts, social workers, activists, political party members etc. participate in development seminars. Being the lowest tier of local governance, Neighbourhood Groups (NHGs) formulated from the collective of 10 to 20 women in the neighbourhood act as the key channel of communication between the local body and common people. Meetings among the NHG women every week facilitate discussions on their needs and priorities and help to nurture civic consciousness among them. NHG women supplement valuable inputs to the participatory planning at various stages such as GS, working groups and development seminars. Their meticulous deliberations have labelled them to be called local actors by which the grassroots institutions of planning can be moved in the pursuit of efficient governance system. The LSG convenes special GS on specific programmes or projects and this serves as an open forum for discussing various aspects of the project. The local government takes advantage of their wide social network by entrusting them to communicate information on GS conventions, applications of new schemes, programmes and beneficiary selection.

A seven member society called ADS (Area Development Society) coordinates 7 to 15 NHGs on a ward basis. Its major function is to compile micro plans of NHGs and integrate them at the ward level. The execution of MGNREGS in Kerala is distinct as the Area Development Society carries out at the ward level on behalf of the local government.

NHGs at the local government level have an apex body called Community Development Societies (CDS) which helps to conduct activities of various departments of LSG in tune with the priorities of women. CDS members, thanks to their proximity to LSG, act as agents between government and people in local planning. Having realised this agency role of CDS and ADS, the local government entrusts them to conduct, surveys, women empowerment and poverty alleviation programmes.

Gramasabha (GS)

GS is a statutory body consisting of all persons registered in the electoral roll of a ward in a grama panchayat. It is considered to be a prime pillar of local governance. GS is conceived as a statutory body to propose development programmes at the ward level. A GS turns out to be invalid if the number of participants cannot meet the required quorum of 10 per cent of voters in a ward. Ideally, GS is a platform for each voter to ascertain the needs and priorities of a ward from various dimensions. The chief functions of GS are to identify the needs of the ward, prioritise the programmes, discuss the strategies to be implemented in tune with the funds allocated, review the programmes/work done and select the beneficiaries for various schemes. It is mandatory that every decision taken at the panchayat Samithi needs to get prior approval from the GS. The approval of GS is mandatory to make any alteration in the decisions taken at the local government level.

Working Groups and Development Seminars

The working groups dealing with separate development sectors compile the suggestions drawn from GS and submit them as a draft proposal to the panchayat council. Each working group comprises elected representatives, officers and CDS women. A separate subcommittee is constituted to scrutinise the subject 'Gender and Development'. The panchayat council prepares an annual plan document incorporating the suggestions drawn from GS and working groups and presents it before the development seminar. The elected representatives, officers, CDS, ADS, and NHG women, NGOs, and social workers contribute their ideas to the seminar.

Critical Role of Women in Gramasabha (GS)

Participation is more effective when a participant is aware of the role and function of GS. However, the researcher asked certain questions to the NHG women regarding the canons of GS such as (a) The procedure for deciding on development plan in GS (b) The required quorum for GS (c) Minimum number of GS meetings in a year (d) Whose approval is mandatory for the selection of beneficiaries in a GS?

A greater proportion of them were aware of the functions and responsibilities of GS. All of them were aware of the required number of GSs to be conducted annually. Nearly 93 per cent were aware of the planning development agenda for a ward

and the procedure of selecting beneficiaries in a GS. Nearly 89 per cent could answer correctly about the stipulated quorum of GS.

Physical Participation

After compiling the GS minutes on ward basis from the selected panchayats, majority of the participants were women in the selected panchayats during the period 2007-08 to 2019-2020. Based on the minutes book and direct observation, approximately 65 per cent of participants were women. Since participation in GS is mandatory to join works under MGNREGS, women rigorously attend GS. Kudumbasree women were enthusiastic to get informed of new schemes and programmes announced in GS. Nearly three fourth of them were regular in attending GS and the rest were occasional participants who were often deterred by their gendered roles.

Active Participation

The GS guidelines instruct that the participants in the GS must be divided into groups based on development sectors such as agriculture, animal husbandry, irrigation, road, public utilities fisheries, poverty eradication, gender and development, etc. These groups may be given time to discuss and make recommendations on the respective sector allocated to them. Each group identifies the problems and needs in the respective sector and presents its recommendations in GS. The working groups consolidate these recommendations and add them to the annual plan document. This group-wise discussion has been missing in all the local bodies for a decade. The bulk of the time was spent on the political arguments and presentations by the elected representatives on either significant or insignificant issues. Participants made personal remarks on the agenda of the programme and made comments based on major talks. GS mainly focusses on general themes like road and public utilities and the gender priorities were often dipped in discussion tables. GS witnessed vibrant participation when beneficiary selection was on the agenda (Government of Kerala 2009). Participation enhances knowledge about existing schemes and programmes offered by the LSGs.

Need-based Participation

Women are more resilient while asserting common and personal needs. Nearly 82 per cent of women in the survey had broken their silence to speak on general and gender issues. Approximately 35 per cent opined that they often spoke in GS to point out the loopholes in the distribution of beneficiary schemes like housing, toilets, wells and any safety nets. In labor GS meant for MGNRES, women openly spoke about fair work distribution, appropriate selection of worksites and provision of work tools. They converge with the priorities of the grama panchayat in accomplishing the mission of each project. Their assertion in a public platform nevertheless for a personal ground is to be admired as it is the outcome of NHG schooling and deliberations with the local government.

Critical Participation

Participation is critical when a participant can influence the decision of the group. The conduction of GS often hardly abides by the written rules in the Kerala Panchayatiraj Act 1994. Since participation in GS is mandatory to avail benefits invariably it is perceived as a platform for distributing benefits and the concern of every participant is the personal benefits announced in the GS. A notable feature of GS is the selection list of beneficiaries must be evolved from the deliberations in GS and the list must be disclosed during the concluding session. However, no local body makes the effort to display the list of beneficiaries after GS and never it gives room for resourceful discussions over the selection of beneficiaries. session. However, no local body makes the effort to display the list of beneficiaries after GS and never it gives room for resourceful discussions over the selection of beneficiaries.

Role of Community Development Societies (CDS)

In every local body, CDS is given a separate office to deal with poverty alleviation and women empowerment programmes at the local body level. The CDS argued that in GS where women have an overwhelming majority, make deliberations in GS, working groups and development seminars, however, they were unable to voice the strategic needs of women in these bodies. Sometimes they, driven by the impulsive political parties were forced to vindicate the blatant violation of the procedure in these grassroots institutions of planning and arguments pre-empt discussion on key matters. Bullish arguments and abusive political dialogues reigned the entire gatherings.

The programmes with the mission of women empowerment have often been received with a tumultuous welcome in the meetings. A greater number of them were grieved by male supremacy in the decision making institutions even if women enjoyed an overwhelming majority. Rather than take advantage of the wide social network of NHG/CDS members in grassroots planning, they are perceived as participants to fill the conference hall for the meetings arranged by the LSGIs. Working groups and development seminars in many local bodies are stereotypical in functioning and some members leave the hall after signing the register.

The project scheduled under the WCP does not originate from the neighbourhood groups nor it accomplish the vision of women empowerment which is the sole aim of the WCP. The major allegation of CDS members was that planners lacked the vision of gender-sensitive approach in formulating projects under WCP and never had they consulted with CDS /ADS members before fixing the projects. The chapter on "Women and Children" in the annual plan document was mainly compiled by clerks without consulting with the CDS and the outcome was the contents in this chapter is the replica of those of previous years.

The sheer lack of knowledge of elected representatives, CDSs, ADSs and NHG women regarding the guidelines of Five Year Plans thwart its goals in functioning. Although a few of them are aware of the guidelines regarding WCP, seldom they are resolute enough to pinpoint the defaults in the proposal and its implementation. The local bodies do not conceptualise the goals of WCP in their discussion forums like GS and working group and obviously, the women component plan is destined to default to its old version.

Determinants of Women's Participation in Local Planning

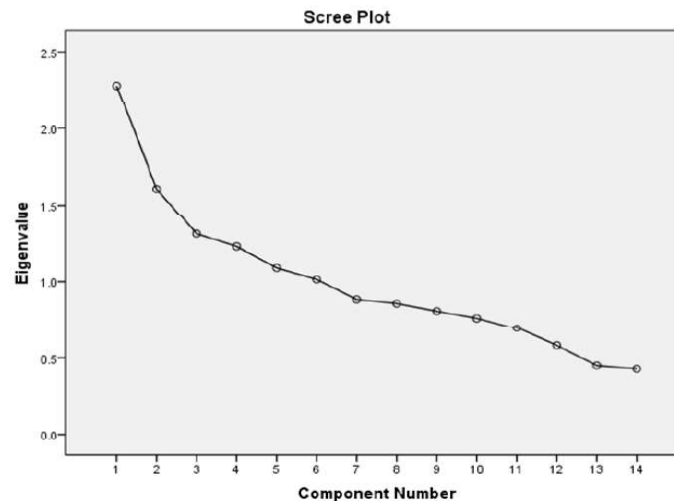
This study has applied five point scale statements for identifying the factors of participation of NHG women in planning process. The five point scale consists of strongly disagree, disagree, strongly disagree or agree, agree and strongly agree carrying scores one, two three, four and five respectively. It applied Orthogonal Varimax Rotation method of Principal

Component Analysis (PCA) to these observed variables in order to identify the critical factor or latent variables influencing the effective participation in local planning. Feasibility of factor analysis is proved by KMO statistics which is significant at 5 per cent level (Table 1). The scree plot of Eigen values was given in the figure 1

Table 1 KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.	0.619
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity Approx. Chi-Square	394.468
df	91
Sig.	.000

Figure 1



Results

Six factors which have Eigen values greater than unity were extracted from the data and they account 61 per cent of total variance in the participation of women in local planning process. The selected six factors were (1) inclusive approach of local body (2) motivation from LSG and family (3) access to information (4) transparency of GS (5) capabilities generated (6) awareness of Women

Table 2 Rotated Factor Loading Matrix

Rotated Component Matrix						
Variables	Components					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Information from ward member			0.734			
Information through NHG discussion			0.674			
Awareness about new schemes						-0.692
Discussion forum in GS				0.620		
Invitation to participate in GP meetings		0.746				
Patriarchal values	0.575					
Empowerment vision of LSG	0.838					
Attitude of family		0.653				
Communication skill					0.695	
Lack of unity in NHG					0.548	
Women's decision making power in GP	0.549					
Approach of LSG towards NHG	0.768					
Women's awareness about GS						0.772
Selection of beneficiaries in GS				0.741		
Eigen value	2.286	1.609	1.310	1.229	1.090	1.015
Variance explained (in per cent)	14.810	9.943	9.527	9.320	9.071	8.313
Cumulative (in per cent)	14.810	24.753	34.279	43.599	52.670	60.983

Discussion

The most important determinant of women's effective participation in planning process is inclusive approach of local body which scores the highest Eigen value 2.28, explains 14.81 per cent of the total variance. This factor is composed of variables such as empowerment vision of local governments, approach to Kudumbasree, lineage to patriarchal values, and women's decision making power. Gender inclusive approach of LSG is the most loaded variable of first factor. The second most

loaded factor is the motivation she received to engage with planning institutions, such as working groups, development seminars, and ward development societies. The capacity of local bodies to effectively disseminate information about scheduled meetings and agendas, as well as her family's attitude towards supporting her involvement with local governance institutions, play crucial roles in this process. The third important factor highlighted is access to information. The ward member serves as the primary source of first-hand information for the NHGs regarding new schemes and programmes initiated by the LSG. During the weekly NHG meetings, CDS or ADS members provide orientation and updates about upcoming programmes. The provision of platform for discussions in respect of beneficiary selection and plan programmes within the GS enhances transparency of GS which is the fourth factor influencing participation. NHG members can give reliable information during these discussion forums. Manifold capabilities enabled by the NHG network constitute the fifth factor in enhancing their participation in LSG institutions. The unity among NHG members has revitalized their participatory roles, enabling them to work collectively toward targeted goals. Awareness about the functions of GS emerges as the sixth major factor influencing participation. Why a voter must attend GS? The survey discloses that massive participation of NHG women in the GS is primarily driven by the MGNREGS and announcements related to beneficiary schemes. The workers under MGNREGS believe that attendance in GS is a compulsory criterion for securing employment opportunities under the scheme (Table 2).

Conclusion

The unbeatable records in the development indicators of Kerala since the late seventies have given great credit to the agency role of women. The success of this development tale is much owed to public action, the real protagonist by which the gender gaps in education and health were abated. No great effort has been invested in exploring her capabilities in the decision making bodies of LSGIs. Kerala witnessed a proliferation of ground level institutions in local planning and the presence of women collectives in PRIs since the inception of decentralised planning in Kerala. The massive participation of women in grassroots institutions of Kerala poses the question of whether there could be made concrete changes in the direction of local planning. To conclude, the active participation in the process of decision making is still a distant dream in participatory planning, even if women participate massively in decision making bodies.

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ⁱ Massive wage employment programme introduced by the government of India.