

**A DECADE OF WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT
THROUGH
LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN INDIA**

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***Women Elected Representatives in Kerala (1995-2000):
From Symbolism to Empowerment***

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Elected representatives constitute the fulcrum of the decentralization process. It is true that the ideals of direct democracy go beyond elected representatives — maximum opportunities must be created for ordinary citizens to participate in day-to-day governance. Nevertheless, there are many such statutory functions, which the elected representatives alone can handle. Besides, they have a vital role as co-ordinators. The extent and quality of participation crucially depends on the capability and attitude of the elected representatives.

A distinctive feature of electoral representation at the grassroots level is the significant presence of women. The one-third reservation for women in local self-government, among members and office-bearers, has created a new stratum of Women Elected Representatives (WER). In Kerala during 1995-2000, 35.8 percent of the elected representatives (i.e., 5,078) were women — 3,878 of them were in grama panchayats, 541 in block panchayats, 104 in district panchayats, 555 in municipalities and corporations, and, 605 of them were elected from general constituencies. The women representatives included 19 municipal chairpersons, five district panchayat presidents, 54 block panchayat presidents and 373 grama panchayat presidents.

Effectiveness: Why reservation?

The rationale of reservation for women is over time, by affirmative action that reverses the historically experienced exclusion from even nominal participation, it would lead to the emergence of a grassroots-level women leadership through the presence and higher visibility of women in the public sphere. This, in turn, should translate into a more substantive presence and trigger impulses that lead ultimately to a positive impact on gender status. To what extent have these expectations been achieved? Has there been substantial gain in the political empowerment of women, and has this led to more gender equitable outcomes in the different spheres of women's lives? What have been the inhibiting or facilitating factors — i.e., determinants of this process?

There are numerous reports confirming the hollowness of symbolic representation. Reservation need not automatically lead to the empowerment of either the representatives themselves or women at large. What has been the experience in Kerala?

The effectiveness of women's representation in local bodies is being addressed in terms of three key elements: one, the socio-economic profile and capabilities of WER; two, formidable constraints from the family, the community, colleagues, structure of political parties, skill levels, etc., that WER faced; and, three, the ways in which the Peoples Plan Campaign (PPC) and the WER sought to confront and overcome the constraints. PPC was a unique experiment in democratic decentralized planning — 35-40 % of the plan outlay was devolved to local self-government bodies, and a mass movement was run to empower them to prepare and implement local plans in a transparent, participatory and scientific manner, to generate attitudinal changes conducive to democratic decentralisation. We are not attempting a description of PPC in the present paper. A detailed analysis of the PPC may be had from "*Local Democracy and Local Development — Peoples Campaign for Decentralised Planning in Kerala*" by Thomas Isaac and Richard Franke [2000].

Our key arguments in the present paper are the following:

- The fact that panchayats in Kerala are today empowered with the requisite resources and responsibilities and have emerged as the institutions underpinning

local development, has been conducive to the emergence of a local women leadership.

- The strong thrust of gender planning and women inclusion by the PPC created a positive environment, but the outcome warrants neither euphoria nor apprehension. Reservation accompanied by capacity building and other supportive efforts challenges the constraints stemming from traditional institutions, male-dominated public space, and familial and socio-cultural factors.
- The performance and empowerment of women are related to their socio-economic, political and educational background and efforts of the PPC.
- The socio-economic factors that inhibit women’s participation in public life in general are equally relevant in our case also. Therefore, we shall briefly undertake an analysis of the socio-economic background of the WER, before we discuss the constraints, the factors that help the WER to overcome them, and their consequent success in empowerment.

Caste and Religion

It is well known that the status of women in India is determined by the caste-class configuration. In traditional society, involvement of women in activities outside the house is constrained by caste status. There is an inverse relationship between the two. The social reform movements and the spread of modern education have undermined the socio-economic influence of the traditional caste hierarchies in Kerala.

Nevertheless, it may be interesting to examine the caste background of the WER — 31.3 percent and 4.9 percent of WER are from backward castes and Christian community. They constitute around 45% of the above backward caste and community, whereas the proportion of women among the elected representatives in the forward castes and Christian community is only around 40%. However, dalit women constitute less than 30%, signifying the particular vulnerable positions of women among dalits.

It is true that the work participation of women among scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, relatively, the highest in the State. However, the work participation is mostly limited to agriculture labour and other rural wage labour employment. The dead weight of historical social ostracization hangs much more heavily on dalit women than their men. However, it is among the Muslim elected representatives that the proportion of women is the least. While nearly 23% of male representatives are Muslims, the proportion of Muslims among women representatives is less than 13%.

Table 1

The caste composition of elected representatives in Kerala (Grama Panchayats)

Sex	SC	ST	Back. Hindu	Forward Hindus	Back. Xian	Forward Xian	Muslim	NR	Total
Female	30.22	25.64	45.37	40.53	45.02	40.10	24.61	27.40	36.99
Male	69.78	74.36	54.63	59.47	54.98	59.90	75.39	72.60	63.01
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Female	7.94	2.59	31.34	20.25	4.91	18.55	12.78	1.55	100
Male	10.77	4.40	22.21	17.45	3.52	16.26	22.97	2.41	100
Total	9.72	3.73	25.62	18.48	4.04	17.11	19.20	2.10	100

Source: KILA Survey, 1996

The traditional caste-class identity and strong correlation has been eroded to a great extent in the process of economic development and the spread of education. Even though the dalits continued to be employed largely as wage labourers in the unorganized sector, the class stratification among the intermediate and higher castes have pushed a significant proportion from their ranks to wage labour.

Employment Status

Because of problems with definitions, there is significant variation in the estimates provided by different surveys regarding the occupational distribution of elected representatives. In Table 2, we have presented three different estimates of percentage of workers and non-workers among elected representatives. It must be cautioned that the three estimates are not strictly comparable. The KSSP survey covered only 5,009 elected representatives from the three tiers of panchayats. The KILA survey is a near census of all the grama panchayat members. The Election Commission estimate is the most comprehensive one, covering all the elected representatives.

Both the Election Commission estimate and the KILA survey estimate agree that the work participation among male members is around 59%. The KSSP estimate of 71% is probably an overestimate. It would appear that a significant proportion of political workers in the KSSP survey have been entered as 'service workers' (included in 'other workers' category in Table 2). Importantly for our discussion, there is significant variation between work participation of women members — 34.28 percent as per the Election Commission, and 48.2 percent as per the KILA survey. There is no way that the issue can be resolved. However, we may conclude that the proportion of WER who are employed is significantly lower than that of males.

Table 2
Estimates of workers and non-workers among elected representatives
(percentage)

Category	Election Commission Estimates			KILA Survey Estimate			KSSP Estimate		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
1 Agriculturist	19.7	6.2	14.7	23.1	9.1	17.9	26.6	7.2	19.3
2 Labourers	6.3	3.0	5.1	10.3	16.8	12.7	14.4	8.1	12.0
3 Teachers	7.3	11.3	8.8	6.7	10.0	7.9	---	---	---
4 Other Workers	24.9	13.8	20.8	19.4	11.3	16.4	30.3	28.8	29.8
5 Workers (1+2+3+4)	58.2	34.3	49.3	59.5	48.2	54.9	71.4	44.1	61.1
6 Unemployed	4.9	18.9	10.1	6.4	30.8	15.4	10.0	33.4	18.9
7 Social Workers	30.7	39.7	34.0	29.2	15.6	24.1	---	---	---

8 Others	6.3	7.1	6.6	4.9	6.4	5.5	18.6	22.5	20.1
9 Non-workers (6+7+8)	41.8	65.7	50.6	40.5	52.8	45.0	28.6	55.9	39.0

Source: State Election Commission 1996, KILA Survey, 1996, KSSP Survey, 1996

According to both the KILA and KSSP surveys, around one-third of the women elected members are unemployed, whereas the unemployed constitute only 6 to 10 percent of the male members. The estimate of unemployed among female members by the Election Commission is a much lower figure, at 18.9 percent. It is likely that a large number of unemployed women have classified themselves as social workers. According to the KILA survey, the proportion of WER who identify themselves as social workers is only 15%, against the male ratio of 29%. Students constitute 0.31% of the male members and 0.58% of the female members, while 5.56% of male members and 6.06% of female members have retired from government service, and 0.38% of female members and 0.42% of male members resigned from government service to contest the election. [State Election Commission, 1996]

Occupational Distribution

What are the occupations in which WER are employed? Teaching is the single most important vocation. More than 10% of WER are teachers. The KSSP survey, despite its misclassification of 'service sector employees', may be used for deriving some insights into the breakdown of the labourers: 3.85% of WER are agricultural labourers and another 1.58% are labourers in allied sectors; industries account for 2.63% of WER, with nearly 60% being employed in the traditional industries sector. Around 7.5% of WER are self-employed. Besides teachers, large numbers of WER are also employed in other service sectors. However, due to the misclassification that we have already noted, it is not possible to derive any firm conclusion regarding this aspect.

The occupational distribution of WER reveals certain systematic variations as we move up the tier of local bodies, or compare rural and urban local bodies. The proportion of employed rises from 34.5% for grama panchayat members, to 35.3% for block panchayat members, and 39.2% for district panchayat members. The increase is not very sharp, but it is in marked contrast to male members among whom the proportion of employed declined from 59.7% among grama panchayat members, to 49.8% among block panchayat members and 48.5% among district panchayat members.

Full time political workers constitute the majority of male members in the higher tiers. Among women, also, the proportion of social workers tends to rise from 38% among grama panchayat to 47% among district panchayat members.

The proportion of unemployed tends to sharply decline. An interesting feature to be noted is the sharp increase in the number of employed teachers as we move up the tiers from 10.8% among grama panchayat members to 19.6% among district panchayat members. The proportion of employed among the members is significantly lower in the urban areas. The proportion of social workers and unemployed is relatively higher in the urban areas.

Table 3 **Profession of WER by Tier of Local Body**

Category	Corporation	Municipalities	District Panchayat	Block Panchayat	Grama Panchayat	Total
Agriculturist	0.00	1.95	1.96	2.62	7.48	6.21
Industries	0.00	0.58	0.98	0.52	0.73	0.69
Teachers	3.85	10.70	19.61	14.31	10.82	11.30
Workers	0.00	2.53	2.94	2.09	3.20	2.97
Traders	3.85	4.09	0.98	3.49	2.74	2.93
Other Avocations	5.77	12.45	12.75	12.22	9.59	10.18
Total	13.47	32.3	39.22	35.25	34.56	34.28
Social Worker	48.08	41.63	47.06	46.95	38.13	39.72
Students	0.00	0.39	0.00	0.87	0.58	0.58
Retd. Govt	17.31	7.39	6.86	6.98	5.59	6.06
Resigned from Govt	0.00	0.97	0.00	0.35	0.38	0.42
Unemployed	21.15	17.32	6.86	9.60	20.77	18.93
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: State Election Commission, 1996

Table 4
Monthly Income of Elected Women Representatives (in rupees)

Income Group	Own Monthly Income	Monthly Family Income
0-1000	1050 (63.4)	529 (31.9)
1000-2000	266 (16.1)	362 (21.9)
2000-3000	114 (6.9)	236 (14.3)
3000-4000	88 (5.3)	130 (7.9)
4000-5000	56 (5.3)	131 (7.6)
5000-10000	82 (5)	221 (13.3)
Above 10000	-	46 (2.8)
Total	1656 (100)	1656 (100)

Source: Survey on Elected Women Representatives, 1998.

Income

The personal monthly income of 63% of the women elected representatives is below Rs.1,000. This is inclusive of the honorarium of Rs.500 per month and the sitting fees prevalent at the time of survey. Even when family income is considered, 32% fall within this low-income bracket. Another 22% have family income of 1,000 to 2,000 per month. In other words, majority of the women elected representatives hail from poor or lower middle class families. This is in contradistinction to the experience of most other states, except West Bengal and Karnataka where the opposite holds true. The increasingly non-elitist profile can be seen as the empowerment of the weaker sections in political participation.

Emergence of a Young and Educated Leadership

Age

Table 5 gives the overall age profile of male and female elected representatives, and also the distribution of WER by age groups in different local bodies. There is a significant difference between the age profile of male and female elected representatives. The latter, on the whole, belong to a much younger age group — 22% of the women elected representatives are below age 30, in contrast to the male ratio of 12%. Another 40% come within the age group 30–40. In contrast, only 31% the male elected representatives are below age 40.

This again is a very interesting finding, because most other parts of the country report a higher average age of women, as compared to Kerala, even though over time the average age of WER has been declining all over the country. The reason is that elderly women somehow shed a lot of the taboos and restrictions imposed on the visibility and mobility of younger women from the same community. A lower age profile signals the easing of some restrictions and the need for more energetic and proactive leadership due to raised expectations from panchayats.

Table 5
Age Composition of WER by Local Bodies (in years)

Age Group	Corporation	Municipalities	District Panchayat	Block Panchayat	Grama Panchayat	Total Female	Total Male	Grand Total
Below 30	30.77	21.60	15.69	21.29	22.75	22.42	12.01	15.84
30-40	30.77	33.07	33.33	36.65	41.08	39.55	31.42	34.41
40-50	13.46	28.99	34.31	27.23	24.64	25.43	34.35	31.07
50-60	21.15	10.89	10.78	11.69	9.36	9.92	16.09	13.82
Above 60	3.85	5.45	5.88	3.14	2.16	2.69	6.13	4.86
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: State Election Commission, 1995

A reduced age profile is considered a positive development and an indicator of greater empowerment. Therefore, this trend is heartening in Kerala in that it possibly reflects an increasing acceptance of women with child-bearing and domestic responsibilities, breaking out of stereotyped and patriarchal roles, instead of the traditionally accepted post-menopausal women in community roles by virtue of age and experience. This phenomenon of a reduced age profile is usually documented in those areas where women are finding greater voice through their work in PRIs and other avenues of political activism and public life.

The average age of WER tends to rise as we move up to the higher tiers. While 63% of WER in grama panchayats are below the age of 40, the ratio for the district panchayat is only 39%. Interestingly, the proportion of younger WER is relatively higher in the urban areas.

Education

The educational profile of the female elected members is relatively better than their male counterparts. While 22.3% of the former have a university degree or higher qualification, only 20.1% of the latter do so. The proportion of persons with high school or pre-degree qualification is also relatively higher among the women elected representatives.

Table 6
Educational Status of WER by Local Body

Category	Corporation	Municipalities	District Panchayat	Block Panchayat	Grama Panchayat	Total Female	Total Male	Grand Total
Professional Qualification	3.85	2.14	9.80	3.32	1.06	1.61	3.63	2.89
PG	15.38	8.56	14.71	7.85	4.20	5.35	3.65	4.28
Degree	21.15	18.29	18.63	19.55	14.22	15.36	12.78	13.73
Pre Degree	11.54	10.89	11.76	12.57	11.93	11.89	11.56	11.68
SSLC	40.38	35.99	33.33	38.22	37.38	37.28	32.04	33.97
Below SSLC	7.69	22.18	11.76	18.15	29.70	27.12	33.13	30.92
Read & Write	0.00	1.95	0.00	0.35	1.51	1.38	3.20	2.53
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Election Commission, 1995

While 28.5% of the WER have only high school or lower educational qualifications, the ratio for the male representatives is 36.33%. Another feature revealed by Table 6 is that the educational qualification tends to improve in the higher tiers. While only 5.3% of the WER have post-graduate or professional degree, the ratio for district panchayat is 24.5%. The representatives in the urban area have higher educational qualifications than rural counterparts. The higher tiers have a greater preponderance of middle-aged, better-educated WER than among the grama panchayat members.

While literacy or educational attainment by itself does not lead to a more effective functioning or a greater unwillingness to be surrogates (nor does illiteracy imply greater pliability and incapability), when accompanied with other capacity building measures, it should enhance self-confidence and skill acquisition in governance. The importance of the exposure to other facets of life through literacy cannot be over emphasized.

Party Affiliations: Dominance of the Left

The analysis of political background of the WER also reveals certain interesting features. As is well known, the political affiliations in Kerala have for the last three decades been polarized between the Left Democratic Front (LDF), led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)), and the United Democratic Front (UDF), led by Indian National Congress (INC(I)). As can be seen from Table 7, of the grama panchayat representatives elected in 1995, 47.53% belonged to the LDF and 41.86% to the UDF. The LDF accounted for a much higher share of the WER — i.e., 57.37% for the LDF and 31.35% for the UDF.

Table 7
Distribution of Male & Female Elected Representatives in Grama Panchayat and Block Panchayat by Political Parties

Political Party	Grama Panchayat			Block Panchayat		
	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total
CPI	6.39	5.10	5.58	10.12	8.40	9.04
CPM	36.26	27.44	30.70	41.53	25.70	31.57
K-Cong (Joseph)	1.27	1.46	1.39	2.27	2.07	2.15
LDF others	13.45	7.76	9.86	9.71	7.43	8.28
LDF Total	57.37	41.76	47.53	63.64	43.61	51.03
Congress (I)	20.82	30.81	27.11	19.42	36.30	30.04
Muslim League	3.52	8.20	6.47	4.75	8.89	7.36
K-Congress (M)	1.94	2.44	2.26	3.1	2.19	2.53
UDF others	5.07	6.57	6.02	3.93	4.75	4.44
UDF Total	31.35	48.03	41.86	31.20	52.13	44.37
Others	11.28	10.22	10.61	5.17	4.26	4.6
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: KILA Survey, 1996

The bulk of the women representatives belong to the dominant parties CPI(M) (36.26%) and INC (20.82%). Forty-four percent of the elected representatives of the CPI (M) were women, while only 28.8% of the INC was women. It is said that the then UDF government had gerrymandered the constituencies so as to make the preponderant majority of the Left strongholds in different localities into reservation wards. This is one of the reasons for the higher representation of women among the Left parties.

The share of LDF among WER tended to rise as we move on to higher tiers. As can be seen in Table 7, the share of LDF among Block Panchayat members was 63.64%. Our estimate is that nearly 70% of the district panchayat members belong to the LDF.

Newcomers and Political Novices – Weakness as Strength

More than three-quarters of the grama panchayat members were elected for the first time. There is a contrast between men and women in the matter of previous electoral and administrative experience. Only 8.67% of grama panchayat WER had been members earlier. The ratio is relatively higher among men at 32.74%. The proportion of elected representatives with previous experience is relatively higher in the higher tiers. However, the sharp gender contrast persists among the block panchayat members — the proportion of women with previous experience was 20.45%, while that of men was 36.73 %.

Table 8
Proportion of Elected Representatives who were Members Earlier

Local Bodies	Sex	Previous Experience		Total
		Yes	No	
Grama Panchayat	Female	8.67	91.33	100.00
	Male	32.74	67.26	100.00
	Total	23.83	76.17	100.00
	Female	20.45	79.55	100.00

Block Panchayat	Male	36.78	63.22	100.00
	Total	30.73	69.27	100.00

Source: KILA Survey, 1996

Even though 91% of the women were contesting in the elections for the first time, a majority of them were involved in one way or other in various socio-political activities: 26% of them had been working in women's organizations and 7.5% in student organisations; and, 40% had entered public life through electoral contest. The current mass organization linkage of elected representatives may be seen Table 9. While 61% of the male members are directly involved in the work of political parties, the proportion of women who are so engaged is only 18%. Women's organizations constitute the major domain of political activity by women members. Twenty-eight percent of them are not members of mass organizations or directly involved in political work.

We can safely conclude that though significant sections of the WER were involved in community management or 'social work' prior to entering electoral politics — possibly due to a significant presence of teachers in their ranks — they were not really involved in political work in the commonly understood sense of the term. The fact of there being first timers, apart from reflecting inexperience and possibly greater diffidence, also means that they have been insulated from the previous style of public functioning and power structure, and could therefore display greater motivation for and amenability to new ideas in the exercise of state power.

Table 9

Distribution of Elected Representatives by current Mass Organisation Affiliation

Mass Organisation	Female	Male	Total
Trade Union	1.89	11.92	8.13
Cultural	2.47	7.16	5.38
Karshaka	1.47	9.14	6.24
Student	0.47	0.64	0.58
Women	40.58	0.00	15.78
Political Party	18.11	60.58	44.51
Service	4.78	2.88	3.60
Others	2.36	1.92	1.93
Nil	27.87	5.75	14.13
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00

Source: KSSP Survey, 1996.

Table 10

Motivation for the Elected Women Representatives to Enter Politics

Factors	Most Important Motivation	Second Important Motivation
Family environment	517 (34.9)	135 (9.1)
Friends	219 (14.8)	208 (14.0)
Reading and ideology	200 (13.5)	133 (9.0)

Agitations	81 (5.5)	75 (5.1)
Accidental	415 (28.0)	50 (3.4)
Others	51 (3.4)	25 (1.7)
Those who have not stated the second important motivation	--	857 (57.8)
Total	1483 (100)	1483 (100)

Source: Survey of WER, 1998.

Why Politics? The Importance of Family in Politics

In Table 10, we have given the distribution of the two most important factors that motivated women elected representatives to enter public life. Household environment was the most important factor for 35% of the WER. In Table 11, we have presented the distribution of close relatives of the elected representatives who are active in politics by gender. Seventy-three percent of the men stated that no close relatives were engaged in active politics. But the proportion is only 38% in the case of women. In nearly 37% of the cases, husbands of the WER were active in political work, and in 11% of the cases it was brothers. Apart from determining the party-affiliation of the WER, it must be seen as a double-edged sword. It smooths and even affects the initial entry into public space, and facilitates a reduction in the opposition from the family. On the other hand, it might reduce the autonomy and freedom of the woman for independent and proactive local leadership through repeated interference from the already politically active males of the family.

Table 11
Gender and Close Relatives Engaged in Active Politics

Relation	Gender		Total
	Female	Male	
Father	7.43	4.66	5.71
Mother	0.58	0.02	0.36
Brother	10.86	13.69	12.62
Sister	0.74	0.61	0.66
Husband	36.74	0.00	13.93
Wife	0.00	3.26	1.90
Children	3.43	3.70	3.59
None	38.69	73.17	60.11
Incorrect	1.11	1.12	1.12
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00

Source: KSSP Survey, 1996

Motivation

Why did they decide to contest the election? Only 15% of those who participated in the survey reported that husband or family members persuaded them, while 57% of the respondents cited the decision of the party as the key factor. This to our mind seems counterintuitive, perhaps a result of a misunderstanding of the

information being elicited. It goes without saying that without a favourable decision taken by the party, no one can contest the election. For those women who had been previously active in politics, the decision by the party would have been the motivation to contest the election. But for the majority who were not so active — definitely for the 40% who were entering the public arena for the first time through the elections — persuasion by relatives and friends would have been required and perhaps even critical to take the plunge, nomination by the party notwithstanding.

Table 12
Motivation for Elected Women Representatives to Contest Elections

Factors	<i>First Important Motivation</i>	<i>Second Important Motivation</i>
Experience of being elected representative	62 (4.4)	20 (1.4)
Persuasion by husband	147 (10.4)	207 (14.7)
Persuasion by family members	70 (5.0)	97 (6.9)
Persuasion from friends	130 (9.2)	160 (11.3)
Decision of the party	807 (57.2)	173 (12.3)
Own decision	195 (13.8)	82 (5.8)
Those who have not mentioned second important motivation	--	672 (47.6)
Total	1411 (100)	1411 (100)

Source: Survey on WER, 1998.

Extent of Participation: Planning and Governance Capabilities

The newly elected members took charge of office on 2 October 1995. Reading through the narratives of the WER, we find for the next nine months nothing much happened. The budget 1997–98 had provided for a very substantial hike in the untied funds for the local bodies, and a number of government offices and institutions were formally transferred to the local bodies. However, given the flux of the transition period and the inexperience of the elected members, the activities of the local bodies were rather muted. Nearly more than half of the transferred funds to the local bodies for the year 1996 were not spent until the next financial year. The gramasabhas convened in late 1995 were not successful. The general impression has been that more than a quarter of the gramasabhas did not even formally meet, and a majority of those convened did not meet the formal quorum requirement.

The Campaign as Catalyst

The launching of the People’s Planning Campaign in August 1996 had an electrifying impact on the local bodies, as is evident from the numerous narratives of the elected members themselves. We shall attempt to briefly evaluate the participation of WER in the Campaign. Our evaluation of their participation in the first year is based on the self-assessment made by the women elected members themselves, who were asked to assess their level of participation in the different nodal activities related to the Campaign, such as convening the gramasabha, organizing the development seminar, writing the projects and preparing the plan document on a five point scale. Table 13 summarizes the findings:

Table 13
Participation of Women Elected Representatives in Plan Campaign

Response	Gramasabha	Development Seminar	Task Force	Plan Document
Unanswered	60 (4.7)	143 (11.2)	250 (16.4)	221 (17.03)
Not Participated	13 (1.0)	6 (0.5)	21 (1.6)	42 (3.3)
Namesake	10 (0.8)	39 (3.3)	122 (9.6)	148 (11.6)
Active	349 (27.4)	453 (37.9)	444 (34.9)	378 (29.7)
Very active	281 (22.1)	436 (34.2)	325 (25.5)	309 (24.3)
In Command	558 (43.8)	161 (12.6)	149 (11.7)	174 (13.7)
Total	1274 (100)	1274 (100)	1274 (100)	1274 (100)

Source: Survey of Women Elected Representatives, 1998.

Initial Enthusiasm Turns to Declining Participation

More than 90% of the WER were active in the gramasabha phase. Only 1% reported not participating in the gramasabha. Forty-four percent of the respondents claimed that the gramasabha were convened fully under their leadership. However, the level of involvement of WER tended to decline in the subsequent phases. Only around 12% of the WER claimed that the subsequent phases were organized fully under their leadership. The number who played a leadership role or had been 'very active' constituted around 66% in the gramasabha phase. By the development seminar phase, their proportion decreased to 47%, and to 37–38% during the task force and plan formulation phases. Almost all representatives must have been present while adopting the plan document, simply for the reason that it is mandatory for the elected councils to adopt the plan document. Therefore, the responses must have been with reference to actual preparation of the plan document.

Yet another trend that may be noted from table 13 is that the number of non-respondents consistently increased from 4.7% in the case of gramasabhas to 17.03% in the case of plan document. It is more likely that most of the non-respondents did not in fact participate in the planning process during the particular phase. If the two categories and those who have only participated for namesake were added together, the proportion of non-active members would rise from 6.5% during the gramasabha phase, to 15% during the seminar phase and to 27.6% during the task force phase. A total of 31.93% were not active in the preparation of the plan document.

The Problem: Skill–Time Constraints

The above trend is indeed rather surprising because one would have expected the involvement of the elected representatives to increase as the Campaign proceeded.

However, this apparent paradox would be resolved if we realize the higher technical capability demanded from the participants in each of the successive phases. The convening of gramasabha, or leading the discussions in gramasabha, did not involve any technical intricacies. Organizational and communicational skills and commitment were the key factors that would determine the level of involvement. The participatory studies and preparation of the development report required a certain level of writing skill, technical expertise and knowledge in the area. The importance of these attributes is even greater in the preparation of the projects and plan document. Given the nature of the tasks involved, it was only natural that experts and resource persons would be playing a greater direct role in these latter phases of the planning process.

It might also reflect lack of time or family opposition for sustained involvement and greater devotion of time demanded for the subsequent phases. The living conditions of our WER, from essentially non-elite backgrounds, may increase the requirement for spending more time in household and livelihood generating activities.

The role of the elected members came to the forefront once again during the implementation stage. Their involvement in the planning process also improved in the subsequent years. Before we examine the impact of the Campaign on the self-confidence and capabilities of the WER, we shall survey the various factors that constrained their full participation in the planning process and the obstacles that WER had to specifically face given their gender.

Countervailing Factors Pose a Formidable Challenge

The same factors that lead to women's subordination and subjugation in society would create hindrances to their effective participation as WER. The spaces they occupy, though not mutually exclusive, can logically be separated into the home, the workplace and the community. Each through its own mechanism contributes to and reinforces the subjugation of women, through constraints and pressures.

In addition, they would have to enter the hitherto unknown but daunting world of governance, unequipped with the requisite skills. Political structures would impede their effective participation. These constraints or countervailing tendencies would express themselves by way of intra-household tensions, economic compulsions, opposition from a patriarchal society, a hostile political system, apparently baffling and awesome methodologies in planning and development administration, etc.

Rather than seeing them as constraints, the Campaign viewed empowerment as a dynamic and dialectical process with several cataclysmic factors being sought in this 'living laboratory' of emancipatory efforts for gendered politics.

Kerala: The Joys and Fears

Kerala's apparent paradox of high social development for women, accompanied by very rigidly defined gender rules along patriarchal values, and the consequent social construction of a very inhibited, restrained and even timid 'femininity', is a topic of discussion among activists and scholars. This seeming paradox can in part be explained by the attitude, content and style — for example, pedagogy, curriculum and atmosphere in schools — of basic needs delivery, which is not subversive or transformative but reinforces patriarchy. For women emerging out of such a system, politics and governance are associated with the rough and tumble of 'male' life. For many first timers, the responsibility was one they faced with

trepidation and nervousness — often receiving contempt and condescension instead of support.

Before we proceed, two points need to be made, which offer a contrast between the experience of Kerala and most other parts of the country (except West Bengal).

- Most of the country reports ways the patriarchal rural society seeks to choose old, ‘obedient’ and not too well informed or articulate women. In Kerala, the age and educational profile of WER has the potential for being used for substantive empowerment, and the intensely contested elections to the local bodies show that the PRIs have come of age as a place for gendering politics, and for accessing control over state power and resources.
- Sometimes when WER have raised their voice against malpractice or injustice, or have asserted themselves vis-à-vis other male functionaries and refused compliance, they have had to face verbal abuse, physical violence and even rape. While Kerala reports a lot of violence against women in the private and public domain, as well as sexual crimes, there have been no reports of violence against WER, although there are reports of scattered incidents of public abuse and taunts.

Both these factors can in part be explained by the genuine devolution of powers to local bodies, the prevailing positive political climate generated by the Campaign and the patriarchal undertones of even progressive politics whereby women seek affirmation rather than overt conflict beyond the ‘Rubicon’.

Communication, Planning and Administrative Abilities

As we noted, for nearly 40% of the WER, the elections were the first serious public involvement. Among the rest, only a small proportion would have been exposed to leadership roles. As a result, most of the WER at the time of the electoral contest lacked even basic skills for public speaking or conducting a meeting. The self-assessment of the WER regarding ability for public speaking and writing, or capacities for managing officers, interacting with the public and conducting meetings at the time they stood for elections, can be seen from Tables 16 and 17. Seventy percent of the WER considered their ability for public speaking to be very bad or bad. However, it is interesting that only 8.34% considered their writing ability poor. One does not know if such a comparison is appropriate, because the respondents were not required to undertake any such comparison of the level of different capabilities.

The First Speech!

For many, their first election speech is still etched in their minds so that it was often the starting point of the narratives of personal experiences in the group discussions at the training camps. One of the leading State-level gender faculty members narrates the experience of her first speech.

‘Now our dear candidate will address us’. The organiser of the meeting handed over the microphone to me...I leaned against the van so that my shivering could be controlled. I gathered all my courage and try to address at the loudest pitch. ‘Dear....’ But no sound came

out. That was the beginning. [Omanakunjamma C.V, Vikasanathil Thuliatha, State Planning Board 2000, p. 86.]

Even at the time of contesting the elections, the WER were fairly self-confident regarding their ability to interact with the public. As can be seen from Table 20, 45% of them considered their capacity for interaction with the public ‘good’ or ‘very good’. Only less than a quarter of them considered it to be ‘very bad’ or ‘bad’. But this was not the case with the self-confidence to manage officials — 68% of them were nervous about the prospects of managing the officials, as they considered themselves either ‘very bad’ or ‘bad’ at this task.

Planning

We have already noted how inadequate technical skill and knowledge constrained WER in giving direct leadership in the latter phases of the People’s Planning Campaign. At this juncture, the extent to which WER were equipped to meet the technical requirements of planning is a relevant issue. It may be noted then that only a small minority (less than 1%) of the elected representatives received training at the state level during the first two phases. Around 25% received training at the district level. Others could participate only at block or local level training.

The exception was during the fourth phase when all the panchayat presidents participated in the state level training. It must also be noted that the duration of training was only one or two days at the block and local level. Only an introduction to the handbook for the phase could be provided in these sessions, and the participants would have to make the time and effort for self-study. Tables 14 and 15 provide the self-assessment of WER on the success of their self-study efforts.

Table 14
Percentage of Women Representatives Who Read the Campaign Hand Books

Response	Gramasabha	Development Seminar	Task Force	Plan Document
Non-response	229 (18.0)	480 (37.7)	632 (49.6)	679 (53.3)
Did not read	37 (2.9)	38 (3.0)	62 (4.9)	54 (4.2)
Partially read	34 (2.7)	21 (1.6)	0 (0)	11 (0.9)
Active	967 (75.9)	730 (57.3)	563 (44.2)	523 (41.1)
Total	1274 (100)	1274 (100)	1274 (100)	1274 (100)

Source: Survey of Women Elected Representatives, 1998.

Each phase of the Campaign had its own separate handbook that was widely disseminated. Table 14 gives the percentage of women elected representatives who had read the relevant handbook during the different phases. Seventy-six percent of them had gone through the handbook of the first phase, which focused on the gramasabha. But, the handbook relating to the development seminar was read only by 57%. The ratio declines further to 44% and 41% with reference to the handbooks on preparation of projects and formulation of plans. Only very few stated frankly that they had not read the handbook at all. Instead, they did not respond to the question.

The percentage of non-respondents rises from 18% at the first phase to 53% by the fourth phase of the Campaign.

Table 15
Clarity of WERs regarding the Activities of Different Phases of the Campaign

Response	Gramasabha	Development Seminar	Task Force	Plan Document
Non-response	258 (20.3)	509 (40.0)	649 (50.9)	692 (54.3)
No Clarity	110 (8.6)	58 (4.6)	65 (5.1)	56 (4.4)
Average Clarity	692 (54.3)	513 (40.3)	398 (31.2)	367 (28.8)
Good Clarity	203 (15.9)	187 (14.7)	157 (12.3)	155 (12.2)
Total	1274 (100)	1274 (100)	1274 (100)	1274 (100)

Source: Survey of Women Elected Representatives, 1998.

Despite the training programmes, there existed much confusion among the elected representatives regarding the planning process. Table 15 presents the self-assessment of the elected representatives regarding the clarity they had of the activities and their role in different phases of the Campaign. There existed a small group of elected representatives (12 to 15%) who had full role clarity in all the phases. But those who described themselves as having a 'general understanding' of the planning process, declined during the Campaign, from 54.3% during the first phase to 28.8% by the fourth. Once again, only a small minority confessed they did not have clarity regarding the planning process. Most of them failed to respond and, therefore, the proportion of non-respondents sharply rises by the higher phases.

Of the 1,656 women elected representatives who participated in the survey, only 41 stated that they had not even read any of the projects. Another 42 persons failed to respond to this question. Even if non-respondents are also included in the first-mentioned category, their proportion does not exceed 5%. But 41.7% had read only a few projects or projects related to their ward. Surprisingly, 28.1% claimed to have read all the projects and another 23.9%, the majority of the projects.

Development Administration and the Bureaucracy

The knowledge of WER was also regarding rules and regulations and office procedures — i.e., 73% considered that their knowledge of rules and regulations was either 'very bad' or 'bad' (see Table 16). Ignorance about administrative procedures made them helpless in the bureaucratic maze and left them at the mercy of bureaucrats who are more often unwilling to extend a helping hand. Even the more progressive bureaucrats would prefer a situation where panchayats are agencies for decentralized development administration rather than LSGIs. They found their powers eroding and WER were the easiest targets for their ire and frustration. They would often be openly uncooperative and rude.

Since I was a new entrant in all the ignorance and doubt was pervasive in all topics, it was my habit to ask some one or other clarifications. But the response from majority of the people was not encouraging.... Often, the queries were to the officials. The emotion on their face or in their sound would be on contempt. Why make ignoramus like me the

president? Couldn't I just stay back in the house? [Shobhana Chandradas, State Planning Board 2000, p.79.]

There were many occasions when women representatives had to face insults from the officials. Once a bureaucrat shouted at a woman representative. On another occasion the woman councillor wept before us, unable to suffer the shouting and humiliation from some of the bureaucrats. [Scicily Antony, State Planning Board 2000, p.50.]

The lower ranks of the bureaucracy offered less vocal opposition through manipulations, officiousness, red tape, and creating complicated and confusing procedures. This attitude was reported from all over the country. [ISST, 1996-1998]

The First File!

Just as the first speech, the first file proved to be yet another fearsome hurdle. Says Jayasree, one of the most successful block panchayat presidents:

In the beginning I did not have even an iota of confidence. My hand was shivering when I put my first signature. [Jayasree. R., State Planning Board 2000, p.62.]

Male Dominated Public Sphere

So far we have been discussing the personal capacity of the WER to perform the functions that they were assigned. We found that due to lack of experience the initial capabilities were often inadequate. At the same, it should be remembered that these capacities could be acquired if adequate facilities were provided. A more debilitating factor for women's empowerment was the nature of the public sphere, which is dominated by male chauvinism and does not provide a congenial environment conducive to women's capacity building.

Slander and Gossip

First let us examine the attitude of the public towards women who have risen to the local level leadership and have to perform certain social roles that are different from the traditional role models. One of the most common ways in which patriarchy the world over responds to women stepping out of its definition of women's roles is through personal indignities and insinuations as well as character assassination. Kerala is no exception to this. Women returning late to the house, travelling along with male members in the panchayat jeep, controlling predominantly male-attended meetings and so on, raises eyebrows and gives cause to gossip.

Initially, when we came home late inquisitive eyes followed us and barbed words greeted us. Often, it would be late after meetings and activities to return home. For our sisters standing by the hedges we were favourite topics for gossip. [Scicily Antony, State Planning Board 2000, p.50.]

All were agreed upon of male domination in the public forums. Only by debating, disagreeing, quarrelling and walking out could each right be gained. There is a general lack of confidence in the abilities of women. There is a tendency to be indifferent to women in the public forums. Many feel that mental pain of self-insult. [Opinion of members in Group IV during Group Discussions held as part of WER training, held on 1.3.2000.]

In the initial days 'Vanitha Member' was often used as a derogative term. People used to make fun and pass comments. ... After the People's Campaign, approaches from the people have changed. There is much more affection and recognition from the people. Confidences of women have increased. We gained new skills and knowledge. Women Participation is also increased. Even though most of the members have their family problems and mental tensions, they have self-satisfaction in public work. [Opinion of members in Group III during Group Discussions held as part of WER training, held on 21.1.2000.]

There is nothing innocent or harmless about a lot of the slander that accompanies the forces that resent women in the political public sphere, outside the accepted traditional boundaries of women's community-management roles.

Unlike my experience in social work, there was opposition from some quarters when I entered politics. I was forced to hear foul words that no woman should hear. I had to bear lot of mental pain within a short period. Some people tried to coerce me to withdraw my candidature. [Pushpa Nechikkad, State Planning Board 1999, p. 42.]

In the survey of WER: 43.7% reported that they were subjected to gossip and slander; 36.8% reported that main source of gossip and slander is the opposition parties; 8.5% felt that the main source was their own party. Importantly, 33.5% identified contractors and other vested interest as the instigators of gossip and slander. This confirms the point we made at the beginning of this section, that there is nothing innocent about such gossip. Nor is it harmless. It is in fact used as a weapon to settle political scores and directed to well-defined boundaries and restrictions in public office.

Elected Colleagues

Most male elected colleagues were unwilling to treat their women counterparts as equal. The smooth functioning of the local body is contingent upon co-operation and mutual respect among elected colleagues, which is often not forthcoming for WER from their male counterparts.

Many attempted to maintain mutual respect and affection cutting across political divisions, but most are unwilling to accept the rise of women. We may do everything, but the control must be with men. That is their attitude. [Kochuthresya Thomas, State Planning Board 2000, p.42.]

The attitude would border on treating WER as non-existent or insignificant. This could lead to their embarrassment and humiliation in front of their constituency, which in turn would compromise their legitimacy and undermine their authority.

Often, voice of women was ignored in the council meetings. The male elected representatives attitude was that opinion of women did not matter even in crucial decisions. There was no need to hold prior consultation with women. They would obey everything. Therefore, their support was no problem. This was the male attitude. When a woman councillor stood up in the council meeting to raise some questions, the male members including the chairman would ignore them... There was not difference in this between the ruling and the opposition parties... One incident I particularly remember. There was an important function in the municipality ... Every councillor was to bring some people from their ward. For some reason the reception was postponed. All male councillors were informed. But nobody bothered to inform the women councillors. A woman councillor who brought a large number of women from her ward three kilometres away... was embarrassed before her ward members. [Scicily Antony State Planning Board 2000, p.49.]

The opposition found in the WER a soft target. However, when such opposition and callousness from male colleagues became unbearable, the women were often able to turn the tables on them by offering resistance and asserting themselves.

Four of the six ruling members were women. The four opposition members were seasoned male politicians. Therefore, their approach from the beginning was to demoralise us by creating noise and havoc in the meeting. They must have thought that I am after all a woman with little knowledge of politics or society... A major confrontation was related to the veterinary hospital even though we were granted a hospital we could not get a rented house for the hospital to function... There was big shouting in the panchayat meeting. The meeting we started in the morning could not be adjourned even at three in the evening. One member went on at length about my ignorance and the tragedy to be a member under the harijan woman president. They tore the papers and beat on the table. I felt like crying. Nobody was willing to listen to me... In the next meeting I came with an agreement letter from the owner of a house for the veterinary hospital. Then the trouble broke out in deciding the inaugural function. Some how courage came, I pointed at the opposition and spoke for 10 minutes and forced them to shut their mouth... I will never forget when we women who so far had remained silent dared to speak up. [Sulochana.K., State Planning Board 2000, pp.79-80.]

There are several accounts of how the women no longer saw political life as a nightmare, because they dared to dream.

I felt tremendous tension during the first panchayat meeting. We were four women in the ruling front and four men in the opposition. They tried to demoralise us right from the start. I was frightened every time somebody shouted. It was not easy for me who had been used to obeying to get others to obey me. I was overpowered by a fear about how to face the opposition's onslaught. Slowly I gained courage to speak boldly in front of them. Experience was my teacher. Panchayat meeting ceased to be a nightmare. [K.Sulochana, State Planning Board 1999, p.117-118.]

Despite the reduction in casteism in Kerala, some Dalit WER found themselves at the receiving end of obscene casteist remarks and were jeered at:

As I gained confidence some members in the Board could no longer bear the Schedule Caste President. They began to raise allegations. Why elaborate? One of the members even resigned, declaring that it was not possible to be a member while a woman like me was the president. Resignation was accepted. I did not remember having consciously offended any one. The provocation was that I had signed the permission for latrine in that member's ward in his absence. [Janaki.P.P, State Planning Board 2000, pp.106-107.]

The WER often found it difficult to manage the male-dominated gramasabhas. In fact, 41% reported to be seeing themselves as 'bad' or 'very bad' at this. Conducting meetings with decorum, and dealing with disruptive elements and even open hostility, more often than not required a collective response from women as the solution.

Initially gramasabhas were dominated by men. Those who have the ability with the tongue and word and want to character assassinate the members would come and create disturbances in the gramasabha. With some liquor their enthusiasm will breach all bounds. Initially, no woman used to speak out against this ... Now things have changed. Women now participate in the gramasabha and lead the discussions more than men. The experience in my own gramasabha is an evidence of this transformation... A political leader who was annoyed with me sent some drunkard people to the gramasabha to create disturbance. The gramasabha had to be hastily called to a halt. Next time when the gramasabha met the same persons tried to create disturbances. But the women stood up and stated that they had many things to discuss and those not interested may leave. Their intervention was effective. The gramasabha was successfully conducted. [Kuttyamma Michael, State Planning Board 2000, pp.37-38.]

Patriarchal Party Structures

The political institutions and structures were also patriarchal, with a male chauvinistic style of political functioning, from timing of the meetings to idioms of political verbiage. Group discussion reports and personal accounts of the WER are replete with accounts of the insensitivity of male-dominated party structures, which

would not even think of making small adjustments in the timing of meetings, etc. These become flashpoints for intra-household conflict and create often avoidable strains between the different roles women have to perform, with political, household and livelihood responsibilities pulling them in different directions. As we discussed earlier, the only solution for conflict and burden resolution becomes retreat from the arena of politics, and WER exercise 'exit' as their 'strategy', in the sanitized language of Hirschman.

Most of the political parties normally fix their meetings in the night. If we do not participate in them they would blame us. If we reach late in the house, husband would be irritated. Many woman members have told me about their problems. These are some of the reasons why woman are unwilling to come for political work. [Sulochana.K., State Planning Board 2000, p.83.]

It is ironic that it was the very same parties that used every persuasive technique at their disposal to secure their consent to contest the elections when they were in desperate search of candidates. However, the much-promised assistance for the subsequent work was often not forthcoming. The assurances reduced to naught, the WER found themselves floundering and lost:

The woman elected representatives – almost all of us contested in the elections because of severe pressure by political parties and friends. When we expressed our unwillingness the politicians assured us 'you just contest in the election – we will do all the work'. Initially they kept their word. But after few days many had to suffer scolding from the same persons because women were not experienced and had not succeeded in studying the procedures. [Scicily Antony State Planning Board 2000, p. 50.]

For the parties, reservation was an opportunity for electoral gains and capturing seats, and irritation was writ large in their response to pleas for help later from the initially hesitant WER. Even the ones who had previous experience did not enjoy a particularly equal status in the party. As we have seen, most of the WER came to acquire their elected position not because of the rank in the political hierarchy but due to the reservation clause in the Constitution. Their elected position did not bring about any change in position in the party political hierarchy, which continued to be dominated by traditional male leaders. There was a near universal tension, both overt and covert, between party hierarchies and the newly elected women representative. This sometimes manifested itself in fairly intense conflicts, when women tried taking initiatives and being pro-active.

A women elected representative is often not permitted to function in accordance with her capability. There will also be someone applying the reins. For example I decided to call a one-day gathering of the self-help groups in my ward. A reception committee was formed and a notice was printed. But some of the male leaders insisted that such activities should not be undertaken without consulting them. Man cannot bear woman overstepping him. This is one important reason why woman is not willing to come forward. When I speak about

'political chain' I do not mean that my party is against me. It is the personal interest of some individuals that are responsible. [Shobhana Chandradas, State Planning Board 2000, p.90.]

The Family

The undemocratic and patriarchal character of the family and the unequal gender division of labour within burdens women with the sole responsibility for reproduction and family nurturing, in addition to production and community work. Whenever there are shortfalls in the family's income, it is women who subsidize it disproportionately, by working even longer hours and cutting down their own subsistence needs even more. The long and arduous hours spent on household work and the completely unequal status of women in terms of decision-making rights — including over their own time — makes it the single most important impediment for active involvement in public work.

On the other hand, stepping out of the traditionally defined roles and its consequent repercussions, opens the door to public scrutiny and forces a questioning of gender roles and the gender division of labour. This kind of involvement in politics politicizes the chauvinistic intra-household power relations, and removes the veil of silence and consent underlying the consensus of gender inequity. It forces attention to 'strategic needs'. The potential of consolidating gains from such a process depended in part on the quality of support and self-confidence that the Campaign provided.

Reports from other parts of the country point towards the following three tendencies. There is usually greater support for contesting the elections than the subsequent participation, which often invites resistance and even domestic violence. There is a tendency towards what is popularly called '*pati panches*' (i.e., the husband taking over the WER's authority with the complicity of her elected colleagues and the village community). It is also reported however that the opposition from the family often declines over time.

From Unqualified Opposition to Qualified Support

The above seems true for Kerala also, but for the relative absence of Pathi Panches. Some of the women contested the election ignoring the resentment at home. The case of Kuttyamma Michael, hailing from an upper middle class Christian background, is an instance:

When I first took the step to enter politics I had to face numerous problems from family members and the local community. Then it was considered that it was not appropriate for women from more affluent families to work in politics. My mother and brothers stoutly opposed my filing nomination... Even though, my family had political background and experience, they banned me from the family. Just two months after the election I went to my mother's house. Mother refused to speak to me in my first three visits... When I was returning after taking oath, the opposition party people followed me with insinuations linking me with my cousin and party leaders. I had to suffer abuses and foul language over the phone. I used to receive obscene letters. [Kuttyamma Michael, State Planning Board 2000, pp.36-37.]

Many men resent the public attention and the status awarded to their wives. The reactions took various forms from subtle disapproval to public shouting. The cases narrated by Sulochana, block panchayat president in Malappuram, may represent the extreme and not the norm.

I shall narrate two incidents. It was the first year of the People's Planning Campaign. The plan discussion in the block went on and on. It was 8'o clock in the night. Discussions still continued. The husbands of women block members came in search. One woman elected representative was publicly scolded in front of us. She left weeping. The husband of a Muslim women president shouted at her. 'Rice is cooked. Children have been fed. They have started sleeping. Still you have not come. Enough of your panchayat rule'. He was shouting at the top of his voice. The woman president left the meeting crying. Two of my woman member colleagues had permission only to work up to 6'o clock... Of the nine panchayats in my block, five are women presidents. In three panchayats the vice-presidents are males. It is they who attend the meetings whether far away or near by. The husbands of the three women presidents are not willing to send them for outside meetings. [Sulochana.K, State Planning Board 2000, pp.82-83.]

Even when the family co-operates and adjusts, every WER feels the tension between family duty and public duty. Training and capacity building have been very important elements in the Campaign and often require absences from home for long periods, which is strongly resented by many families.

It was a serious problem to stay away for more than a day from the house in order to participate in outside training programmes of two or three days and requiring long travel. There was significant reduction in the time I spent with my family. But my family helped me to adjust to this situation. However, in the initial period it was difficult to take along official duties and household duties. [Omanakunjamma C.V., State Planning Board 2000, p.87.]

The following narrative sums up the situation very well

Most of the women had been confined to a kitchen and children unaware of what is happening in the world. The opportunity provided by reservation did help them. Many times, though, opposite feelings are also common. Sometimes when they return home after facing innumerable problems in the panchayat and see the expression on the husband's face, they think it might have been better not to contest elections and get into these stresses and problems. There are some women representatives who are waiting for these five years to somehow be over. None of this applies to me. I am unmarried. But I also faced problems in combining my job with my work in the panchayat. [P.Sarada, State Planning Board 1999, p.116.]

Table 16
Extent of Domestic Tension due to Pressure from Public Activities

Age Group	None	Very Little	Little	Much	Very Much	Total
Below 30	39.3	15.7	37.6	2.6	2.6	100
30-39	34.2	20.5	36.8	2.7	2.8	100
40-54	38.5	16.6	38.9	2.4	1.4	100
Above 55	53.8	14.1	27.6	0.5	2.5	100
Total	40	18.0	37.2	2.4	2.4	100

Source: Survey of Elected Women Representatives 1998.

The involvement of women in public activity also often gave rise to tensions within the family and led to varying degrees of domestic discord for essentially two related reasons. With the additional responsibility of public work, the women elected representatives were forced to cut down their time allocated to the family. The call of duty, which made long and sometimes uncertain absences necessary, also led to conflict. The pressure of work and the nature of public activities create familial discord of varying intensity among 60% of the households (see Table 16). Family tensions were relatively higher in the households of elected representatives in the age group 30–39 years. Problems related to childcare and children’s education were often the sources of tension. However, only in rare instances did the family problems get out of control. Only in less than 5% of the cases were they of any serious nature. The general opinion was also that the initial tensions were getting reduced over time. More than 70% of the WER reported that the husbands and family members became more supportive and co-operative.

Triple Burden

As is evident from their socio-economic profile, the WER already carry the triple burden of: reproduction and related household responsibilities; production and related activities for livelihood generation; and, traditional community management roles. Their new public duties place an additional burden on their time and energies. More than a third the WER were engaged in formal income earning activities. Even under normal circumstances it is difficult to combine local body membership with full-time occupation, particularly if one is an office-bearer.

Livelihood Needs Clash with Participation

This difficulty is even more severe in the case of females because of the family burden. Some of the members were forced to give up their jobs or take long leave.

The first year after I took over panchayat presidentship, there was not much work. But once the People’s Planning Campaign started I had to fully concentrate in the panchayat. It was not possible to carry on the day-to-day work in the school. Therefore, I had to take leave-without-pay. [K.K.Vijayamma, State Planning Board 1999, p. 111.]

Often, forfeiting the job was not a viable option, and the WER was pulled in different directions, with balancing the demands from two full-time, high-pressure jobs becoming increasingly difficult.

Dismissal!

Often, the prejudices of the employer (usually male) against women entering politics would express itself through dismissal:

I got a job as a typist in a private company in the nearby town...Before long the owners came to know that I was an elected representative...They claimed that it was not an appropriate job for a woman, whose proper place is at home. This would give me a bad name and tarnish my image...They said I should relinquish my office...It was not possible to combine a private job with public office, they said...I was dismissed...At the same time there are many men employed in the company who are in politics...But women are not to be treated the same way...This incident pained me a lot. [P. Ramani, State Planning Board 1999, p.73.]

Only 24 Hours to a Day

In our survey of WER, each respondent was asked to indicate a rough time allocation for major activities on a typical working day. The following was the picture that emerged:

Table 17
Time Allocation for Various Activities by WERs

Activity	Time
Peoples planning and other panchayat related activities	5hrs 28 mins
Other public activities (party work, etc.)	3hrs 02 mins.
Income earning occupational activities	1hr 44 mins.
Household related self-employment activities	2hrs 07 mins.
Domestic duties	4hrs 35 mins.
Rest and leisure	7hrs 04 mins

On an average, women elected representatives continued to spend more than 4.5 hours in traditional domestic duties. Surprisingly, only three hours and fifty-one minutes were spent on economic activities. We may recall that 49% of the respondents were unemployed, and only 12% were employed for wages or salaries. The most important finding is that the WER had to spend an average of 8.5 hours for public duties and work.

Enabling Environment and Capacity Building

Our discussion, we hope, has brought out the numerous socio-economic handicaps that the newly elected women representatives faced. Most of them were young, educated up to matriculation or below, from poor or lower middle class background, and without prior experience in elected office. Forty percent of them did

not have any previous public activity background. They had to work in an unfriendly social environment, and often face slander and gossip. They had to bear the triple burden, giving rise to family tensions, even though within manageable limits. Within these constraints it is understandable that the women elected representatives involvement and leadership role in the Campaign did not rise to the desirable levels.

The Dilemma Posed

In fact, the received wisdom in such circumstances often recommends cautionary sequencing of training, and other capacity building measures, as precursors to the devolution of such far-reaching powers and resources — to the WER in particular and local bodies in general. The Campaign, on the other hand, put this logic on its head by first creating the objective conditions and consequent motivation, in fact compulsion, for seeking the capabilities to perform. In other words, capacity building was to be seen as a need by the WER for them to gain fully from it, and not seen as another imposition.

The other often-repeated criticism has been the over involvement of the State and its agencies in decentralization, which is characterized as a contradiction in terms and pejoratively described as decentralization by diktat. The Campaign steered clear of the populist and in fact took disempowering prescription of viewing capacity building as interference. The Campaign itself must be seen as an empowerment process, and the potential role of WER have to be judged in a dynamic setting.

Learning by Doing!

It was realized that one year of the Campaign had brought about a perceptible enhancement in the capabilities of a significant proportion of the WER. The Campaign was a great learning experience where the participants learnt by doing. In fact, once we see the Campaign as a dynamic process, we can easily recognize how it was able to turn the very weaknesses of the young, inexperienced, non-elite WER into their strengths, by providing an avenue for the expression of their latent energies, enthusiasm and capabilities in their exercise of State power.

“And things changed, slowly but steadily”

That the above claim of increasing self-confidence of WER is no illusion was brought out by the comparative self-assessment that the women elected representatives made of their capabilities at the time they were elected in 1995, and after nearly two years of the Campaign in 1998. Seven capacities were considered in this assessment: (i) knowledge of Act and rules; (ii) knowledge of planning; (iii) ability for public speaking; (iv) ability for writing; (v) capacity to control officers; (vi) capacity to manage a meeting; and, (vii) the capacity to interact with the public. Each respondent was asked to state her assessment of the above capabilities on a five-point scale, in 1995 and 1998. The conclusions summarized in Tables 18 to 22 are self-explanatory.

Table 18

Improvement in Knowledge of Rules and Regulations and Process of Development Planning among the Women Elected Representatives

<i>Level</i>	<i>Rules and Regulations</i>		<i>Development Planning</i>	
	1995	1998	1995	1998
Very bad	30.72	0.27	30.29	0
Bad	42.86	10.46	32.30	2.96
Average	18.91	44.87	18.60	23.04
Good	6.30	32.19	15.51	43.72
Very good	1.21	12.29	3.29	30.29
Total	100	100.00	100.00	100.00

Source: Survey on Elected Women Representative, 1998

The data shows that the WER considered that there was a significant enhancement in each of the above capabilities. The highest improvement was in the knowledge of planning techniques. Thirty percent of the elected representatives did not have any knowledge of planning in 1995, while in 1998, not a single person admitted ignorance of planning, and 74% claimed that they have a good or very good understanding of planning. In 1995, it had been only 19%. Just as in the case of planning, there was near universal legal literacy in 1998. Three years earlier, 31% admitted to having only extremely scanty knowledge of panchayat rules and regulations, and another 43% of having only scanty knowledge. By 1998, the proportion of such persons has shrunk to less than 11%, and 44% claimed good or very good knowledge of the legal framework of PRIs.

Table 19
Improvement in Abilities for Public Speaking and Writing among Women Elected Representatives

<i>Level</i>	<i>Ability in Public speech</i>		<i>Ability in Writing</i>	
	1995	1998	1995	1998
1. Very bad	27.44	0.60	8.34	1.40
2. Bad	42.72	12.10	17.56	5.27
3. Average	23.65	51.20	35.05	25.10
4. Good	4.72	25.06	24.83	37.78
5. Very good	1.46	11.10	14.22	30.44
6. Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

Source: Survey on Women Elected Representatives, 1998.

Table 19 gives the improvement in capabilities for public speaking and writing: 70% of the respondents considered that their ability to deliver speeches was very poor or poor in 1995; this proportion had reduced to less than 13% in 1998. The proportion of those who can speak well or very well, rose from 6% to 36% during the same period. However, the claim of 67% of the WER that they can write well seems to be exaggerated.

Table 20
Improvement in the Capacities of Women Elected Representatives to Manage Officers, Interact with Public and Conduct Meetings

<i>Level</i>	<i>Managing Officials</i>		<i>Interacting with Public</i>		<i>Conducting Meetings</i>	
	1995	1998	1995	1998	1995	1998
1. Very bad	39.31	2.50	4.64	0	19.34	0.13
2. Bad	29.03	14.55	19.09	0.47	32.41	4.63
3. Average	22.67	35.66	31.05	12.16	31.87	31.09
4. Good	6.70	32.14	23.86	32.00	11.32	38.89
5. Very Good	2.30	15.16	21.37	55.38	5.05	25.25
6. Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

Source: Survey on Women Elected Representative, 1998

Data presented in Table 20 indicates the confidence of the WER in managing the officials — controlling meetings and interacting with the public have significantly improved. There has been a five-fold increase in the proportion of elected representatives who claim good or very good grades for these two capabilities between 1995 and 1998. It may be relevant in this context to remember that 68% of respondents were only ordinary members of panchayats and municipalities.

Struggle for Empowerment

How were the WER able to overcome some of the inhibiting constraints to their effective public functioning? The key to the answer lies in the enabling environment created by the People's Campaign.

Favourable Initial Conditions

Undoubtedly, the initial conditions were favourable for the relative success of capacity building efforts. The educational qualifications of the WER in Kerala, especially in the rural areas, make them a class apart from the rest of the country. Their basic educational capability substantially enhances their learning capacity and responsiveness to training programmes, along with the 'externalities' that accompany school going. However, lest we be misunderstood, we see it as an enabling initial condition, neither necessary nor sufficient. The positive correlation that exists between the educational qualification and the level of self-confidence is proved by the data that is presented in Table 21.

Table 21 summarizes the information contained in the three previous tables. The following scores have been used for each grade: very poor – 1; poor – 2; satisfactory – 3; good – 4; and, very good – 5. The conclusion that may be reached from Table 21 only reinforces the discussions so far. The highest level of self-confidence is in interacting with the public. The sharpest improvement has been in the knowledge of planning techniques, followed by the self-confidence to manage officials.

Table 21

Improvement in Capabilities of Women Elected Representatives by Educational Qualification

<i>Capability</i>	<i>Educational Qualification</i>				
	< SSLC	SSLC	PDC/Diploma	Degree	Post Graduate

	1995	1998	1995	1998	1995	1998	1995	1998	1995	1998
Speech	1.5	2.5	1.8	3.0	1.9	3.2	2.2	3.4	2.5	3.7
Rules & Regulations	1.6	2.5	1.8	3.1	1.9	3.3	2.0	3.4	2.3	3.6
Handling Officers	1.5	2.6	1.8	3.1	1.8	3.1	2.0	3.3	2.2	3.5
Public Interaction	2.5	3.3	2.1	4.0	3.1	4.1	3.2	4.3	3.3	4.3
Planning	1.8	3.1	2.1	3.6	2.1	3.7	2.2	4.1	2.5	4.0
Meeting	1.8	2.8	2.3	3.4	2.3	3.6	2.6	3.8	2.7	4.0
Writing	2.2	2.8	2.8	3.5	3.1	3.8	3.2	3.8	3.6	4.2
Total	13.0	19.6	15.7	23.1	16.1	24.8	17.6	26.0	19.7	27.4

Source: Survey on Women Elected Representative, 1998

The positive correlation that exists between educational qualification and the level of self-confidence holds with respect to almost all the seven capabilities that we have examined. The overall relationship can be seen on the last row of Table 21. The overall score point of below SSLC women elected representative in 1995 is 13.03 — it steadily rises with educational qualifications until it is 19.74 for the post-graduates. Three years of experience have increased the self-confidence in all educational categories, but the basic relationship still holds. While the average score of below SSLC respondents in 1998 rose to 19.60, that of the post-graduates rose to 24.42.

However, the differences in the level of self-confidence of the different educational categories have tended to come down over the three years, which confirms our earlier point that in a dynamic setting with gendered interventions on several fronts, lower literacy is not a handicap for empowerment. The score points of the below SSLC or SSLC categories rose by around 50% each. The score points of pre-degree holders rose by nearly 53.9%. But the percentage increases in the score points of graduates and post-graduates were 48.7% and 43.3% respectively.

Training to Bridge Democracy and Gendered Development Planning

The second major factor that has to be taken into consideration is the massive training programme undertaken as part of the People's Campaign. We are devoting a separate paper to discuss the evolution of the approach and content of the training programme, particularly with reference to gender.

The Campaign's philosophy and interventions have been to institutionalize gender equity in planning through the following:

- Raised numerical inclusion or greater numbers of women participating in each stage of the plan exercise, through the constitution and activation of poor women's self-help groups, neighbourhood groups, etc.
- Giving substance to their nominal presence by devolving powers and resources as well as institutionalizing gendered planning procedures and exercise. Ensuring the participation of women in planning, implementation and execution, monitoring and audit. Building accountability and transparency into the system.
- Massive supportive capacity building measures.

- Demystification of planning and governance so that the myth of their inaccessibility can be broken.

These should lead to greater gender equity. The declining confidence and involvement of WER in the nitty-gritty of planning and administration, from project design to formulation of the plan, was therefore both disturbing and a challenge for the Campaign. It was this realization that led to the introduction of a separate gender training programme within the campaign from the second year onwards.

Transparency and Accountability

The third factor to be considered are the procedures laid down for the People's Planning process emphasizing transparency and participation. The procedures made it difficult for the traditional manipulative or closed political decision-making system to operate, and ensured a high level of autonomy to the elected members even if they are not within the higher echelons of political party hierarchy. Real financial resources rendering the powers of the members effective backed up the elaborate procedures.

In most other parts of the country, WER confess to a great reluctance to receiving and handling untied grants for decentralized planning. The fear is that these will be cornered by the elite and powerful in the rural hierarchy. In Kerala, the Campaign has been such that despite some leakages, accountability structures have been built into the system and no such fears has been expressed.

The decisions regarding 35 to 40 percent of the annual plan being taken at the grassroots level brought about a fundamental rupture in local power structures — i.e., from members of the legislative assembly and parliament to the elected members of the local body, which shifted the centre of gravity of the local development process.

Campaign as Hope: "We dared to dream!"

The fourth factor to be considered is the overall environment created through the Campaign. Two critical elements may be noted in this context. First, there was the local support that the WER received from the Campaign through resource persons and voluntary technical experts. The survey of resource persons reveals that the WER maintained close linkage with the volunteers — i.e., 59% of the resource persons reported that WER "co-operated well" or "very well" with the volunteers.

The initial fears have completely disappeared. People's Planning have given us the confidence to be active in public. There were many who frowned when a Muslim woman like me came out in public. But on the basis of experience many of them have revised their opinion. [Konari Mariam, State Planning Board 1999, p.57.]

Women's Solidarity

We also draw attention to the sense of solidarity among the women that the WER was able to evoke in their struggle for empowerment. In their own words:

We are proud to say that we have been able to overcome the adverse attitudes and opposition... A young woman ward councillor was to deliver the welcome address in a meeting. But she could not go beyond one or two sentences... In such situations we women members stood together. We used these occasions to strengthen our collective effort to gain courage and overcome the problems. We women sat together, discussed and found solutions. We wrote out short speeches for women who had difficulties in public speaking. We even trained them to say a few sentences without hesitation. Now this woman is able to speak boldly without anybody's help and conduct the meetings. We dared to courageously take up the responsibilities vested in us, study the issues, intervene in situations and react strongly. It did not take long. The picture changed. [Scicily Antony, State Planning Board 2000, p.51.]

Overall Impact

Still protected from the culture of cynicism and apathy that was a part of pre-existing local politics, due to their novice status, a WER analyzed:

Generally, women are able to function above narrow minded partisan politics more than males. They are able to view all sections of people in the ward equally and give leadership to all... [Shobhana Chandradas, State Planning Board 2000, p. 90.]

This was not missed out by the community, whose earlier reaction might have been anything from undisguised curiosity to disapproval:

...but now when they see us they greet us with lot of affection and respect 'chechi, there was a meeting today, isn't it?' [Scicily Antony, VT, p.52.]

In short, I who was merely a housewife became a woman who was appreciated by the community and the family in a period of 4 years. Even if I am forced to pull back, I have the self-satisfaction that there is now a group of women who are willing to go forward. [Jayasree.R. State Planning Board 2000, p.65.]

On the whole:

... my experience may be summarised as follows: my self-confidence increased as my anxieties about public work ceased. Organisation ability improved. I gained courage to travel alone on long distance trips. I can today express my opinions without fear. [Omanakunjamma C.V, State Planning Board 2000, p.88.]

I had no connection with politics. It was all because of the compulsion by the husband. But now I can't go back to the old state. Even if I am not a representative, there are so many forums and I can give

leaderships to task forces and self help groups. [Mariamma Simon, State Planning Board 2000]

The Campaign was able to push the dialectic between hope and despair to a resolution which brought about the realization of some opportunities, albeit over a difficult terrain of affirmation and struggle. The citing of countervailing forces and structural constraints is not to hide the shortcomings of the Campaign's efforts in conceptualization and execution, which are many. The campaigners were often too idealistic in posing every constraint as a challenge, as if they could overcome it in this short period and in this method. But society and history provided the necessary corrective and reasoned sobriety to such heady romanticism by forcing a recognition of the following — women and men make their own history.