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Women in Power: Assessing the political background of Elected Women Representatives of local bodies and its impact on their performance

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Abstract

Political empowerment of women is the most important element for promoting inclusive governance. Improving the efficiency of women representatives who are working at the grassroots is the need of the hour as it provides direct solutions to the problem that affects majority women force. In India, the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts provided for the reservation of seats for women in local self-government, and this initiative have led to a tremendous increase in the number of elected women representatives (EWRs) throughout the country. However, simply holding a position of power does not translate into effective performance or genuine political empowerment. This research paper aims to analyse the political background of EWRs and examine how an EWR's political background - including her family's political legacy, prior involvement in political meetings, or political party affiliation - shapes her ability to perform effectively after getting elected as a representative.

Keywords: Political empowerment, Political lineage, Family legacy, Party affiliation, Decision making

Introduction

The participation of women in political institutions is considered as a crucial step towards achieving gender equality and strengthening democratic governance. Local self-government in India, particularly the Panchayati Raj system, has opened new avenues for women's political empowerment by reserving one-third of seats for them. 21 states in India have gone one step ahead by enacting legislations that ensure 50% reservation for women in local bodies alone. This structural reform, guaranteed by the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts, has not only increased the number of women leaders in local bodies but has also raised thought provoking questions on the effectiveness of their performance in decision-making processes. The political background of EWRs plays a significant role in shaping their effective functioning in grassroots. While most of the women enter politics with already existing exposure to some form of political activity, the rest assume office as first-generation leaders with little or no experience. These differences influence the level of confidence, women's leadership style, decision-making capacity, and their overall performance. In Tamil Nadu, Coimbatore district which is known for its industrial advancement, educational development, and cultural diversity, the city has emerged as a prominent hub of women's participation in political spheres. This study tries to analyse the political background of EWRs of local bodies in Coimbatore district and try to establish a link about how such backgrounds shape their functioning. By doing so, it aims to contribute to the ongoing debates on women's empowerment, democratic decentralization, and inclusive governance, while also providing policy-relevant recommendations to strengthen the capacity and performance of women leaders at the grassroots level.

Review of Literature: Various studies across India on participation of women in grassroot governance have revealed both empowering experiences and structural constraints, shaped by gender norms, institutional support systems, etc. However, while national and state-level evidence is substantial, there remains a paucity of micro-level inquiries that link women leaders' political background with their actual performance in specific contexts.

This review therefore synthesizes the existing literature on women's political participation, leadership performance, and the interplay of political background on their performance.

Eyogavee and Gengiah (2022)^[8] identified that the mobile numbers of male family members are provided in the nomination papers. Those mobile numbers either belonged to fathers or husbands. Male members of the family (either husband or father) attended the call when the author contacted the young elected women Panchayat presidents for the first time for the study. Male family members acted as Presidents of the gram panchayats even though they were not elected, and women who filed the nomination for the position got elected. Still, they were mute spectators in panchayat functioning. Husbands or fathers run the office of the gram panchayats on their behalf, and women members sign wherever their signature is sought. The major issues that the researcher identified were proxy (Eyogavee & Gengiah, 2022)^[8].

Kumar and Sthanislas (2020)^[10] conducted research and observed that India's 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, which empowered local self-governments (Panchayati Raj Institutions) and reserved one-third of electoral seats in these bodies for women, has elevated women's participation in rural governance. They found that India is among the foremost countries for women's participation in local governments, with over 1.45 million women shaping local decision making. They also added that women leaders are a critical link between local governance, sustainable development, and gender equality. However, across the country, their contributions to local governance remain undervalued (Kumar & Sthanislas, 2020)^[10].

A detailed analysis of the 2019 Rural Local Body Election in Tamil Nadu throw limelight on four major components that determine women's political participation: (1) the mandate of reservation; (2) the family background of the women representatives; (3) level of influence/ inspiration from party ideology and its leaders; and (4) the active involvement of educated young people who show active interest in community service. These components, including the work cited by Gunasekaran (2016)^[9], confirm that political participation of women is closely linked to their level of personal empowerment and engagement. George Dimitrov (2018)^[12] also pointed out that women panchayat presidents are mostly nominated by their male counterparts just because the ward was reserved for female and, after winning the election, they are often not allowed to carry out their duties with independence and autonomy. Unnamed research on rural governance found that the panchayat is often controlled by the EWR's husband and panchayat officials (Gunasekaran, 2016)^[9]. Bhatt and Parekh (2015)^[3] conducted a panel/longitudinal analysis using staggered policy implementation. They studied whether quota-elected women move up to higher offices; finds mobility depending on prior experience, party support and constituency ties. The study established a link between local-body performance to future political trajectories and positions political background as predictor of both performance and mobility (Bhatt & Parekh, 2015)^[3].

Chandrasekhar (2015)^[5] conducted a state-level analysis of the Tamil Nadu's 2019 local elections and recorded the socio-economic and political background of elected women, their pattern of participation and major hurdles they faced during their participation. The study highlighted how the family dynastic ties shape women's entry into politics and the impact it has on shaping public perceptions. The study

also revealed that women who enter political arena through their family legacy may have greater initial support including networks and resources but they all face legitimacy questions in the long run (Chandrasekhar, 2015)^[5]. Conducted cross-district/regression analyses using administrative outcomes. They tried to measure the leader background (education, prior political experience) as moderators of impact. They found that women leaders affect local investments and women's empowerment indicators, but effects vary by context and leader characteristics.

Chattopadhyay, R., & Duflo, E. (2004)^[6] exploits exogenous reservation of village head seats to women through landmark randomized-evidence. It shows that female gram-panchayat heads shifted spending toward public goods preferred by women (water, roads) and altered policy priorities. The study demonstrates a causal link between the gender of leader and the subsequent changes in policy priorities and performance metrics. The study also reviews multiple outcomes of female reservations and concludes that effectiveness depends on capacity, local norms and whether women are mere agents of their male proxies or acting as puppets (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004)^[6]. Access to political power, particularly in urban local bodies (ULBs), is often reinforced by strong social networks. A study on the election of Kalpana Anandakumar, Coimbatore's first female Mayor in 2022, noted her connection to a politically influential family, reinforcing the importance of established networks in accessing power. Research synthesized by the International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW) Report (2012) confirms that the family remains a key determinant of success and participation for women in politics.

Statement of the problem

The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 marked a significant step in India's democratic decentralization by ensuring women's participation in local self-governance through mandatory reservations. While this legislative measure has significantly increased the numerical representation of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), questions persist regarding the substantive nature of their performance. In the Tamil Nadu context, particularly in the Coimbatore district, there exists limited empirical evidence linking the political background of elected women representatives with their actual governance performance. Most existing studies have focused either on the general challenges faced by women in politics or on the outcomes of reservation policies, without systematically examining how a woman's prior political exposure, education, family support, or socio-economic position influences her functioning within local bodies. This gap in the literature obscures our understanding of whether women leaders with strong political background perform more effectively than first-generation entrants, and what institutional or societal factors facilitate or hinder their leadership. Therefore, the present study seeks to analyse the political background of elected women representatives of local bodies in Coimbatore district and assess how this background factors impact their future interest to continue in politics.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the political background of elected women representatives of local bodies in Coimbatore District of Tamil Nadu, with particular focus on factors such as family political lineage and prior political experience

- To analyse the relationship between the political background of elected women representatives and their interest to continue in politics.

Research Methodology

Sample design: Tamil Nadu has 38 districts and among them, Coimbatore district was selected as the study area using Simple Random Sampling and Purposive Sampling method. Also, Coimbatore comprises a highly heterogeneous population. So, choosing samples from this district would provide a better representation of the entire Universe of the study. Thus, elected women representatives of local bodies in Coimbatore district of Tamil Nadu constitute the Universe. The total number of elected women representatives is 1754, including 469 representatives from urban local bodies and 1285 representatives from rural bodies. The sample size for the study is 350 elected women representatives, justified based on the Krejcie-Morgan Table on Sample Size justification. Multistage Stratified Random Sampling technique was used to arrive at the number of samples which will be representative of the whole universe.

Data Collection Techniques: The study used both primary and secondary sources of data. Primary data was collected using quantitative methods, especially survey method and distribution of questionnaire among the elected women representatives. In-depth interview technique was also used for quantitative data collection to gain in-depth understanding about the functioning of women representatives. Secondary data that were used include government records, statistical figures, records of local body administration, etc. Other sources including journals, research studies, etc. that were earlier conducted about the performance of women representatives in other parts of the country were also used to arrive at generalisations.

Analysis of the data

Table 1: Duration in Politics

Duration in Politics	Frequency	Percent
No experience	165	47.0
Less than 3 years	6	1.8
3 - 5 years	46	13.2
5 - 10 years	63	18.0
More than 10 years	70	20.0
Total	350	100.0

Table 1 represents the duration of Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) in politics. While the majority of

respondents (47%) express that they had no previous political experience, a significant proportion (20%) say that they have more than 10 years of political experience in one form or another. The remaining 33% of representatives have been in politics for a time span of 3 to 10 years.

Table 2: Political Party of the respondents

Political Party	Frequency	Percent
DMK	120	34.2
AIADMK	159	45.3
Congress	30	8.5
Communist	12	3.4
BJP	11	3.1
Independent	13	3.8
Others	5	1.7
Total	350	100.0

Table 2 shows the spatial variation of the respondents' party membership, covering all the major regional and national parties in the state of Tamil Nadu. While 45.3% of them belong to the regional party AIADMK, the second largest membership (34.2%) is held by another regional party DMK. This shows the impact of the regional Dravidian parties among the people of Tamil Nadu. While 15% of the respondents are distributed widely among the three national parties viz., Congress, Communist and BJP, 3.8% of the respondents have got elected to their position as independent candidates, purely based on their local influence in their respective jurisdiction.

Table 3: Reason for being in the party

Reason for being in the party	Frequency	Percent
Family lineage	120	34.5
Husband belongs to the party	92	26.2
Ideology of the party	76	21.7
Strong leadership	41	11.6
Self-interest	8	2.2
Not part of any party	13	3.8
Total	350	100.0

Table 3 explains the reason why EWRs hold membership in their current political party. The highest percent (34.5%) are members of a political party because of their family lineage and 26.2% of the respondents said they chose their party because husband belongs to that party. Comparatively lesser women (21.7%) have chosen their party based on the party's ideology and 11.6% belong to the party because of strong leadership.

Table 4: Political Party and Reason for being in the party Crosstabulation

		Reason for being in the party						Total
		Self-interest	Ideology of the party	Husband belongs to the party	Strong leadership	Family lineage	Others	
Political Party	DMK	3	28	39	15	35	0	120
	AIADMK	5	29	42	23	60	0	159
	Congress	0	4	5	0	21	0	30
	BJP	0	2	6	3	0	0	11
	Communist	0	12	0	0	0	0	12
	Others	0	1	0	0	4	0	5
	Independent	0	0	0	0	0	13	13
Total		8	76	92	41	120	13	350

Table 4 represents a cross tabulated representation of the different political parties that the EWRs belong to and the

reasons for them being in that particular party. The majority of EWRs who are members of DMK party say that they are

in the party because their husband belongs to the party. AIADMK representatives are members of a party largely because of the family lineage factor, representing the party's sound legacy in the state. Surprisingly, all the EWRs of Communist party are members of the party only because of the party's ideology and this shows the party's commitment as well as of all its members to the founding principles.

Table 5: Duration of family members in politics

Duration of family members in politics	Frequency	Percent
No experience	23	6.6
Less than 3 years	8	2.3
5 - 10 years	82	23.4
More than 1 generation	237	67.8
Total	350	100.0

Table 5 shows the duration of the EWR's family members in politics. A huge majority of respondents (67.8%) say that their family is involved in active politics for more than 1 generation. This shows how the political legacy is carried through generations in a family that has political alienation. While 23.4% say that their family is involved for 5-10 years, 2.3% say that the involvement is less than 3 years. Only 6.6% of the EWRs say that their family members are not involved in politics and that they are the first generation to enter politics from their family.

Table 6: Reason for contesting this election

Reason for contesting this election	Frequency	Percent
No other female candidate in the family	66	18.8
Pressure from family/ political party	49	14.0
To enjoy power and authority	10	2.8
To help people	135	38.7
Ward reserved for female	90	25.6
Total	350	100.0

Table 6 explains why the EWRs contested in the election. The data showed a satisfying message because the majority of respondents (38.7%) said that they contested election to help people and render service to the society. The second largest majority of respondents (25.6%) agree that they contested the election only because the ward was reserved for female and that the male members of the family influenced them to contest election on the latter's behalf. Also, 18.8% of the respondents have revealed that they contested the election because there were no other female candidates in the family to contest the election. 14% have even agreed that they contested the election because of pressure from their family/ political party to which they belong.

Table 7: Influential factors that forced to contest election

Influential factors that forced to contest election	Frequency	Percent
Father	32	9.1
Husband	53	15.2
Political party	30	8.5
No influence	235	67.2
Total	350	100.0

Table 7 shows data on the various influential factors that forced EWRs to contest the election. While 9.1% of the

EWRs say that their fathers forced them to contest the election, 15.2% of them have said that, it was their husbands who forced them to contest the election. This also implies that most of the women who contest elections are married and are bound to listen to their husband/ in-laws after their marriage. 8.5% of the EWRs say that the political party they belong to forced them to contest the election, as there were no other women candidates to represent their party in the election. Also 67.2% of them said that they were not influenced/ forced to contest election and that they contested out of their own interest.

Table 8: Reason for continuing in politics

Reason for continuing in politics	Frequency	Percent
Can serve the people	74	21.1
Own interest	62	17.7
Politics suits my nature	34	9.7
Wish to be in power	30	8.5
Not going to continue	150	43.0
Total	350	100.0

Table 8 shows the respondents' reply when they were asked if they wish to continue in politics after their current tenure. While the majority of the respondents (43%) opined that they don't wish to continue in politics after their tenure, 21.1% of them have responded that they would continue in politics to serve the people and render services to the society. 17.7% opined that it is out of their own interest and 9.7% said that politics suits their nature and it is the best suited profession for them. Also, 8.5% of them have said that they want to continue in politics just to enjoy that power and authority.

Table 9: Reason to quit politics

Reason to quit politics	Frequency	Percent
Economic constraints	10	6.7
Health issues	41	27.3
Not interested	99	66.0
Total	150	100.0

Table 9 shows the reasons why those who don't want to continue in politics said so. While 66% of them said that they are not interested in politics as a profession, 27.3% of the EWRs said that their health constraints pose a hindrance to continue in politics. 6.7% of them are not interested to continue in politics because of their family's financial constraints doesn't provide them a scope to spend money for political/ social causes.

Major findings of the study

- It is interesting to know that 62% of the overall respondents have attended some form of political meetings in their life, which is a higher percentage than those having previous experience in politics. This indicates that many women who were not connected to politics attended such meetings because of the presence of their family member in any one of the political parties.
- While 93.4% of the respondents' families had a political legacy, only 6.6% of the EWRs were 1st generation politicians. This indicates a fact that in most of the cases, women who had a sound political background only choose to enter into politics. Among the 93.4%, more than 70% of the respondents' families

were in politics for more than 1 generation which indicates that family hierarchy plays a role in determining the representatives for a ward or any jurisdiction.

- Majority of the EWRs who say that this is not their debut election also opine that they are continuing in their position for more than a decade and they say that they started contesting the elections from the very first time their ward was reserved for female candidates.
- Representatives from families with a political background have higher decision-making confidence than first-time entrants. Family support was frequently cited as a positive factor influencing women's confidence and ability to carry out responsibilities. Those without family or political backing were more vulnerable to political and social pressure.
- Women who actively participate in political meetings have stronger decision-making power in governance. Representatives from major political parties face more interference in decision-making than independent candidates.
- Women elected through reserved seats face more challenges in being taken seriously compared to those elected from general seats. This indicates the social stigma that revolves around reservation-based leadership.
- A large percentage of women have agreed that they entered politics just because of the fact that the ward was reserved for female. This shows that politics was neither their personal choice nor their aspiration. This suggests that mere political representation does not get converted to political empowerment of women as many of them are "silent representatives" who act as proxies for their husband or other family members.

Conclusion

The study tries to highlight the close relationship between women's political background and their impact on the functioning. The findings of the study reveal that prior political exposure play a significant role in shaping the level of confidence, ability to make wise decisions, and overall administrative efficiency of women representatives. While the family's political legacy makes it easy for certain women to enter into politics, it must be noted that individual calibre and level of social responsibility is the major determinant for success and credibility in the long run. Despite the mandatory reservation policies and constitutional safeguards that aim to ensure women's political emancipation, structural barriers act as a hindrance against the active participation of women in politics. However, many women representatives in Coimbatore have showcased extraordinary leadership qualities, especially in areas related to education, social welfare, and public health, signifying a steady transformation in leadership dynamics. The research highlights the need for awareness building initiatives, mentorship programmes, and gender-sensitive policy frameworks to enhance women's political performance. Ultimately, political empowerment of women is not just increasing the numerical representation of women in politics but it lies in creating an enabling environment for women where their voices are heard and the society moves towards creating an inclusive, equitable, and sustainable governance at all levels.

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