

Working Paper 293

**Representation and
Executive Functions of
Women Presidents and
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Grama Panchayats of
Karnataka**

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The Institute for Social and Economic Change,
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REPRESENTATION AND EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONS OF WOMEN PRESIDENTS AND REPRESENTATIVES IN THE GRAMA PANCHAYATS OF KARNATAKA

Anand Inbanathan*

Abstract

The study had examined the functioning of women representatives and Presidents of gram panchayats in Karnataka, where reservations for these seats and posts have been in place for nearly twenty years. Participation in the activities of the Panchayat as well as leadership in carrying out the responsibilities of President have been considered in seven panchayats. Most women Presidents had not functioned as de facto Presidents, and men related to them did so instead. For the most part, reservations of seats have only made women nominal representatives and Presidents, rather than effective political leaders.

I

Women have had one-third of the panchayat seats as well as one third of the office bearer positions in panchayats reserved for them following the enactment of the 73^d Constitutional Amendment, and the Karnataka Panchayat Raj Act of 1993. This is to be enhanced to 50% of all seats for women. Even when the reservations were for one third the seats, Karnataka's panchayats invariably showed a much higher proportion of seats actually being occupied by women in all three tiers of panchayats. Furthermore, before the enactment of the 1993 Act, the Karnataka Panchayati Raj Act of 1983 had reserved a quarter of the panchayat seats for women, but not for the positions of office bearers in the panchayats. The first panchayats that had the new dispensation (of reservations of seats for women) were the panchayats that were elected in 1987, which means that for just under 25 years, there have been reserved positions for women in the panchayats, and just under 20 years there have also been one third of the seats and office bearers' positions reserved for women. That makes for a fairly substantial length of time when women have been in public life, in the panchayats. Though the same people were not continuing as representatives in successive panchayats, women have been elected to the panchayats in the proportions that had been envisaged by the successive Panchayati Raj Acts in Karnataka. Notwithstanding the numbers that are involved, in terms of women being incumbents of panchayat seats and as office bearers, women were 'minorities' in the panchayats, in the sociological sense of the term, i.e. though their numbers were far from insignificant, their power and standing in the panchayats were not commensurate with their numbers.

Before the 1983 Panchayati Raj Act was enacted, there were very few women in the panchayats as representatives. The reservations had indeed set in motion the possibility that women would occupy a more substantial number of seats. Over the years, much has been said about their representation in the panchayats. First, to look more into the theoretical aspects of representation, in one view, representatives are meant to act as mirror images of the people they represent, faithfully implementing the views of the people of their constituencies. Another view of representation suggests

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that only representatives of the groups that they are from would be able to address the interests of their group. In this case, it is presumed that only women would be able to address women's interests, and not the men, i.e. men are seen as cannot or will not address women's interests (Redlund 2005; Mansbridge 1999; Phillips 1998).

The panchayati raj institutions were intended to enhance the participation in governance of diverse groups of rural people, and to make a change in their living conditions, based on their own contributions to the functioning of the panchayats. However, as several studies have shown, women have not had it easy to function in the panchayats, due to traditional views that hold that politics is not an appropriate activity for women, and also that their inexperience in politics would in any case be detrimental to the functioning of the panchayats (Tenhunen 2009; Vijayalakshmi 2008; Vijayalakshmi 2002; Vijayalakshmi and Chandrashekar 2002). Notwithstanding these hindrances, women have been elected in large numbers to the panchayats, and Karnataka has also shown that more women have been elected than the minimum required to fill the reserved seats. More often than not, women have been compelled to contest by those who expect to benefit from such an election, for instance husbands encourage their wives to contest and then they take over their political functions once the women are elected. In fact, women are very often discouraged from functioning as representatives with the view that it is not necessary, and that the husbands would be well able to carry on their political duties. Usually, women agree with such an assessment, and let their husbands do their work as representatives. All this has been going on for years, ever since women were elected to the panchayats in larger numbers than at any time in the past (i.e. since the time that seats were reserved for women). What we need to see is if there have been any changes, in the sense that women have been able to take a greater share of political work as representatives in the panchayats, given that a significant number of women are also office bearers of the panchayats. Are they able to function relatively independently, since women have also been political representatives since 1987 (when women were provided 25% of the seats in the panchayats)? Do they still have limits placed on them in their functioning as representatives, whether from their own family members, or from others of the village such as village elites? Only panchayats with women presidents were selected, with a view to looking into the functioning of women representatives in such a position. One can also note the manner of functioning of these panchayats with reference to panchayats in other parts of the country which were even "all women" panchayats (see Datta 1998). We should also recall that gram panchayat presidents in Karnataka have a term of office that is 30 months, and we should expect that two women would have served as presidents in a full five year term of the panchayat's existence. However, in actual practice, the gram panchayats have more than two panchayat presidents in the five year term of the panchayat, and women often spend only about a year or so as president. This is another aspect that would form a part of the political context in which the women are ordinary representatives or presidents.

The objectives of the study are:

1. To examine the situation of the women representatives in grama panchayats that have presidents who are women, in terms of their participation.

2. To study the situation of women presidents, and ascertain whether they are *de facto* presidents, or *de jure* or 'name sake' representatives and presidents.

Selection of Panchayats

Seven grama panchayats have been selected, with women presidents, to elucidate the conditions as set out in the objectives. Five of these grama panchayats are in Bangalore Rural District, and two are from Gulbarga district. The selected panchayats have been mainly from Bangalore Rural District because of the convenience of the distance. For such objectives as listed above, there is probably no need to look for grama panchayats that are at longer distances, and in distant districts. The numbers have no bearing or relation to the total number of grama panchayats in either district with women presidents, and the choice of panchayats was based only on the characteristic that they had women presidents. Why we selected panchayats with presidents who are women was to look into the conditions of functioning for women representatives in a woman headed panchayat, as distinct from women representatives who function in a panchayat with a man as president. All the representatives were to be interviewed. There was also a possibility to see if there were variations between the panchayats in south Karnataka, and particularly Bangalore Rural District, that have women as presidents as compared to those in north Karnataka, and in this case Gulbarga district. With a very small sample there is little that we can suggest as general statements, or generalizations. However, in a limited sense, one may perceive some differences between the grama panchayats in Bangalore district and Gulbarga district.

II

The present sample has 127 respondents, in seven grama panchayats including 72 male respondents and 55 female respondents. A break up in the number of respondents and the grama panchayats in which they are representatives indicates that the numbers were as follows:

1.	Arasinakunte grama panchayat	21
2.	Srinivasapura grama panchayat	13
3.	Yentaganahalli grama panchayat	22
4.	Budihal grama panchayat	17
5.	Basavanahalli grama panchayat	21
6.	Dangapur grama panchayat	15
7.	Nimbarga grama panchayat	18
	Total:	127

Grama panchayats being the first level of the panchayat system, are located at the village level in a more significant manner than the higher levels of panchayats, in that the representatives live in the same villages where their constituents live, and are at least in principle more accessible to their constituents. This may have been borne out to some extent, and accessibility to voters was available to them. However, this is not a direct one to one relation with the representatives and their constituents. For the most part women representatives did not interact with their constituents, but their husbands did. This seemed to suit both the representatives as well as the constituents, because the constituents

thought they were getting what they wanted, and the women representatives thought the responsibilities of representatives were better served by the husbands, or other males, rather than the women representatives themselves. This has been more or less the same condition that has persisted with small variations right from the time the panchayats started functioning in its present form. What we are stating is that the levels of participation of women representatives and Presidents have not changed to any significant extent over the years, since the early 1990s and the enactment of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, and the subsequent enactment of the Panchayati Raj Act 1993, in Karnataka. We see the participation of women representatives in terms of their activities in the panchayats, i) their interaction with their constituents (ii) their involvement in the proceedings of panchayat meetings, through their interventions in discussions of different issues, (iii) being a part of the decision making process, and being able to affect the course of deliberations and decisions.

There could be various and several factors contributing towards their participation, which we may consider, such as their educational levels, their ownership of land (giving a very rough indication of their economic condition), their political experience, and other factors.

We first consider the educational levels of the grama panchayat representatives, and compare the education of men and women representatives.

Table 1: Comparing educational levels of men and women representatives in grama panchayats

	Education							Total
	Illiterate	Primary School	Secondary	High School (SSLC)	PUC	Graduate	Post graduation	
Male	5	12	3	25	13	14	0	72
Female	7	13	6	17	8	3	1	55
Total	12	25	9	42	21	17	1	127

Table 2: Education of members, presidents and vice presidents of the grama panchayats

N=127

	Education							Total
	Illiterate	Primary School	Secondary School	High School (SSLC)	PUC	Graduate	Post Graduate	
Member	11	22	8	39	18	15	0	113
Vice-president	0	2	0	2	1	2	0	7
President	1	1	1	1	2	0	1	7
Total	12	25	9	42	21	17	1	127

An immediately striking condition is that the number of illiterate representatives in our study, which is 12 in the sample of 127 representatives, is very close to that of an earlier study, that of Subha

(1997: 53-54). However, what is most noteworthy is that the number and proportion of those with SSLC and PUC and undergraduate degree are substantially higher in the present study as compared to those in Subha's study. What we should particularly note is that women have not been very far behind the men in terms of education, with 17 having completed high school, and other women even graduating (though their numbers are less than those of men). The remarkable fact in our study is that the single case of a postgraduate is a woman, who was also President of one of the grama Panchayats. This could just be an isolated instance, but it is still significant that there is a woman post graduate among the grama panchayat representatives. Although the educational levels of women are comparatively higher than it was in earlier years, we have to state that notwithstanding this overall improvement in the educational levels of representatives, there is one grama panchayat president who was illiterate and another president was educated only up to the primary school.

There is some to expect that the educational levels will have some impact on the functioning of representatives, whether men or women. In the case of men, there are less of handicaps in movement around the panchayat area, and they are more easily able to interact with people of various backgrounds, and also men and women. In the case of women, with the traditional restrictions on women's interactions with strangers, and particularly with men who were not of their own families, they were considerably hampered in their functioning as Panchayat representatives. These cultural inhibitions have been exacerbated by other factors, such as their lack of interest in politics and lack of political experience. This is not to say that all women were not interested in politics, or that women had not had any political experience before being elected to the grama panchayats. Some of the women had indeed some political experience, and this has been indicated in these tables below. However, there were more men who indicated an inclination towards politics than women. Within the group of male representatives, there are more men who have said they were interested in politics, while within the group of women representatives, there are more women who have said they were not interested in politics than who were, at the time of being elected as grama panchayat representatives. Since by and large, women had entered electoral politics due to something other than their own interest or inclination, this may also be related to the functioning of the women representatives

Table 3: Were you interested in politics when you contested the panchayat seat?

N=127

	Were you interested in politics when you contested for the panchayat seat?		Total
	Yes	No	
Male	52 (72%)	20 (28%)	72 (100%)
Female	18 (33%)	37 (67%)	55 (100%)
Total	70	57	127

Table 4: Have you been active in politics (in any capacity) before election to the GP?

N=127

	Have you been active in politics (In any capacity) before election to the GP?		Total
	Yes	No	
Male	52 (72%)	20 (28%)	72 (100%)
Female	17 (31%)	38 (69%)	55 (100%)
Total	69	58	127

A significant feature of their candidature is that among women, a substantial number [25 (45%)] had indicated that family members had persuaded them to contest. On the other hand, none of the men had said that any family member was instrumental in their becoming elected representatives or even in the decision to contest the elections. In the case of women, this was mostly their husbands, though other males in the family were sometimes involved in persuading women to contest, even if the women had no inclination towards being political representatives. On the other hand, there were more men who had indicated that local "big men" or local elites, had persuaded them to contest. There were women too who had given the same reason. This is not an unusual feature in the functioning of the panchayats, where local leaders and village elites play a significant role in finding and persuading candidates to contest elections, and subsequently in the election of presidents as well (see also Chandrashekar 2011: 35-39, for an example of a "big man" controlling the grama panchayat).

Table 5: When you contested for this position, who persuaded you to contest?

N=127

	Who persuaded you to contest these elections?					Total
	Local Party leader	Patron (Local village "big man", Leader)	Caste group	Family members	Any other	
Male	4	31 (43%)	1	0	36	72
Female	0	18 (32%)	1	25 (45%)	11	55
Total	4	49	2	25	47	127

In any case, there was only one woman representative who had stated that she was elected from a constituency that was not at this time reserved for women. The remaining 54 (98%) women representatives had been elected from seats reserved for women.

Women representatives are predominantly from those who are housewives, i.e. not employed outside their homes. There are very few who have claimed to have an occupation that brings in an independent income. Even those who claimed to be farmers are those whose families own agricultural land. Evidently, as in a rural area, the majority of representatives has stated that they or their families own agricultural land. None of the women carried out agricultural work on their own, though they had indicated land ownership and agricultural work as a farmer. On the other hand, when men stated that

they were farmers, they had actually been involved in agriculture, most of them as “hands-on” agriculturalists, since their land holdings were relatively small, and they did not have the means or the need to cultivate their lands with hired labour.

Table 6: Occupation

N=127

	Farmer	Agricultural Labour	Unskilled Labour	Lawyer, Engineer, Doctor	Petty Business	House wife	Politics full time	Social worker	Any other	Total
Male	36	1	1	2	20	0	8	2	2	72
Female	16	3	1	0	2	32	1	0	0	55
Total	52	4	2	2	22	32	9	2	2	127

The functioning of the panchayats was meant to be gauged in the context of having women Presidents in these panchayats. The expectation was that when there is a man as President (whatever may be the group to which he belongs), women representatives may be disinclined to participate more freely, talking to men who for the most part may have been strangers (i.e. the panchayat representatives). In these grama panchayats, with women Presidents, there was greater possibility (in principle) that women may talk in panchayat meetings, and also more often to the President herself. What we saw in even these few grama panchayats of our study, is that this may have been the case (that is women participating in panchayat meetings, talking more often) only in the panchayat where the President was the one with a post graduate degree.

Looking into each grama panchayat and the functioning of the President, we will begin with Subha, the President with the postgraduate degree. She is president of the Arasinakunte grama panchayat (Bangalore Rural District). She is relatively young, 33 years old, and is a housewife. The family owns two hectares of irrigated land, and her family income is above Rs. 5000.00 a month. She has been interested in politics, and her father-in-law has also been involved in political activities. This was the first time that she had contested for the seat of grama panchayat representative, and has been President for 14 months. Among all the women Presidents in our study, she is the only one who has been able to function relatively independently, and knows what has to be done. Her education has obviously been of considerable help in her being able to function as President, and she is also heard with more respect by the other representatives in the panchayat, when meetings take place. She speaks with confidence in the Panchayat meetings according to other representatives. Being President, however, appears to have had an impact on her family life. While she was not employed outside the house, she did not have time to look after her young children, since the grama panchayat took up much of her time. Notwithstanding the fact that the grama panchayat has a woman president, other representatives did not always participate in the panchayat meetings. A few were able to speak in the meetings, but others did not, and this was the view of the President. In her view, it is probable that even those who spoke in meetings may not have done so if she had not been the president. There is a moderate increase in women's participation in the Panchayat, but not to the extent that all representatives, male and female, participated.

Booma Bi is president of Dangapur grama panchayat in Gulbarga district. She is a Muslim, and about 50 years old. She has a very modest education of primary school, and her family occupation is agriculture. The family income is above the poverty line, and she estimated that the total monthly income of the family was between Rs. 4000-5000. Booma Bi is not an unusual person in the grama panchayats in that she said she was not interested in politics when she contested, which was the first time she had contested for any political post. She is not interested in politics even now, when she is grama panchayat president. It was her husband who had persuaded her to contest. She does not appear to know how to conduct her work as President, and in this is assisted by her husband, and grama panchayat secretary, who carry out whatever needs to be done in the grama panchayat. She does not speak much in the grama panchayat meetings, and neither do the other women representatives. She has been president for 15 months.

Mallamma, president of Nimbarga grama panchayat (Gulbarga district) is a widow of 55 years. She is illiterate, has marginal land holdings, is a housewife, and her income falls below that poverty line. As she does not know how to function as grama panchayat president, she does not do anything, but her son functions on her behalf, and does whatever is necessary as president. Even in panchayat meetings, it is the son who speaks, not the president herself. While she claims she was interested in politics when she contested the elections, there is no evidence that she has been politically active in any manner, and her son manages all that has to be done in the panchayat. She has been a nominal president for 16 months.

Saraswathi, is president of Srinivasapura grama panchayat, Bangalore Rural District, and is 23 years old, and was elected from the ST woman's reserved constituency. It was the village headman who persuaded her to contest elections. This was in spite of the fact that she was not interested in politics, she was new to politics when she contested, and has been elected to a political post for the first time. She has completed SSLC, and is from a poor family that is below the poverty line. The interesting fact here is of course that even though the family is below the poverty line, she has been able to finish school. Although she was new to politics, and has no political or administrative experience, she has been able to do some work in the panchayat, though she needs help to manage, and she gets this help from the grama panchayat secretary, and other representatives. She earns a living as an unskilled labourer, and the family income is between Rs. 2000 to 3000 a month.

D. T. Dhanalakshmi, President of Yentaganahalli grama panchayat (Bangalore Rural District) is 41 years old, has completed PUC, and has a petty shop, as well as being a small farmer. Her family income is above the poverty line. She was interested in politics even before getting elected as a grama panchayat member, and then president of the panchayat. Dhanalakshmi has been involved in political activities for about 12 years. Even with this fairly long period in politics, she is not an independent president, and does only what the dominant members of the village tell her to do. A "big man" of the village had persuaded her to contest, and she also functions according to the wishes of the dominant members of the village. She has been panchayat president for 15 months.

Savithamma, 32 years, Budihal grama panchayat, Bangalore Rural District, has completed PUC, is a housewife, and has been president of the panchayat for 15 months. Her husband is reportedly the one who manages the panchayat, as the president herself is poorly informed about how to manage

the panchayat. The fact that it is the husband who manages the panchayat was not well received by other representatives of the panchayat, who have complained that the president has not even called for panchayat meetings in about five months. Savithamma stated that she was interested in politics even before contesting for elections in the grama panchayat, and had even been active in politics, though this was the first time she had contested for elections to any political post. Most people do not have anything to do with the functioning of the panchayat since it is the president's husband who runs the panchayat. Further, if the representative's claim is accurate that no meetings have been held for several months, then there is virtually no occasion for other representatives to be engaged in the functioning of the Panchayat. There is no account of why the vice president could not convene a meeting when the president did not do so. The panchayati raj act makes a provision for a grama Panchayat meeting to be convened by the vice president if the president does not do so.

Renukamma, President, Basavanahalli grama panchayat, Bangalore Rural District, 50 years old, and has studied up to secondary school. She was not interested in politics when she contested for elections to the grama panchayat, and it was the first time she contested. She is also new to politics. While the president did not volunteer any statement about her work as president of the panchayat, other representatives stated that it was her husband and son who managed the panchayat as *de facto* panchayat presidents. She could hardly speak at the panchayat meetings, and her husband and son had to answer for her in the meetings as well. Other women representatives were relatively quiet in the panchayats, but as ordinary members their silence was not considered as harmful to the panchayat's functioning.

III

To discern whether there were differences between the grama panchayats in Gulbarga and those in Bangalore Rural District, we look into the details of the grama panchayat representatives, and their profiles and functioning.

Overall, the educational levels of the grama panchayat representatives in Bangalore Rural District are seen to be somewhat better than those in Gulbarga district. However, a significant fact about the educational levels of men and women in the grama panchayats of Bangalore Rural District indicate that there is very little difference between the educational levels of men and women, and they are more or less comparable, right through the range of education levels from illiterate to graduate. While men have a slightly higher number among graduates, there is one woman who has a post graduate degree, while none of the men has a PG degree (in these grama panchayats). Further, nearly two-thirds (71.3%) of the representatives in Bangalore Rural have an education of at least high school (i.e. SSLC), and just under a third of the representatives have an education of secondary school and less (28.7%). All this would suggest that the educational levels of grama panchayat representatives have been rising in comparison with earlier years, though there are still a few members who are illiterate, which is certainly an undesirable situation in any population, and more so in the case of elected representatives. For instance, in Bangalore Rural three representatives (3.2%) were illiterate, while in Gulbarga, nine representatives (27.2%) were illiterate in this sample. Further, even among the

Presidents of grama panchayats, one of the women Presidents in Gulbarga was illiterate, which, as she herself admitted, is a great handicap for a President of a panchayat.

Table 7: Education in each district's panchayats

N=127

Name of the District	Education	Sex		
		Male	Female	Total
Bangalore Rural	Illiterate	2	1	3
	%	3.85	2.38	3.19
	Primary School	9	9	18
	%	17.31	21.43	19.15
	Secondary	2	4	6
	%	3.85	9.52	6.38
	High School (SSLC)	20	16	36
	%	38.46	38.10	38.30
	PUC	10	8	18
	%	19.23	19.05	19.15
	Graduate	9	3	12
	%	17.31	7.14	12.77
	Post graduation	0	1	1
	%	0.00	2.38	1.06
	Total	52	42	94
%	100	100	100	
Gulbarga	Illiterate	3	6	9
	%	15.00	46.15	27.27
	Primary School	3	4	7
	%	15.00	30.77	21.21
	Secondary	1	2	3
	%	5.00	15.38	9.09
	High School (SSLC)	5	1	6
	%	25.00	7.69	18.18
	PUC	3	0	3
	%	15.00	0.00	9.09
	Graduate	5	0	5
	%	25.00	0.00	15.15
	Total	20	13	33
	%	100	100	100

Going by the style of comparison as followed above, Gulbarga district has a much higher proportion of those in the educational levels of secondary school and less, i.e. 57.6% as compared to 42.42% who have an educational level of high school and above. This compares with the figures of 28.7% with secondary school of lower education in Bangalore Rural and 71.3% who have high school or higher education. Gulbarga district also displays the fact that the women representatives are relatively poorly educated, with the majority having an education of secondary school or less (a predominant

number of them are also illiterate), while just eight percent have a high school education. None of the women has an education above high school. The male representatives in Gulbarga district have educational levels somewhat higher than that of the women representatives.

Landownership among representatives of these two districts' grama panchayats was relatively low. In fact about half the representatives in grama panchayats of both districts were landless, with women representatives indicating an even higher level of landlessness than male grama panchayat representatives. Even those with land had mostly small land holdings rather than larger sized land. While the land ownership has been seen as related to a representative who is a man or a woman, we should state that we had no indication that the women owned land on their own, with the exception of the widow, who presumably could say that she owned the land, as compared to others who implied that the family owned the land, and the husband would be the owner in terms of being the holder of the land title, and not the woman herself. Even the widow who could be perceived as the landowner had only a smallholding, and it was her grown up son who managed all her responsibilities as grama panchayat President, and she could do little on her own. Women-headed households as such were not seen among our sample representatives.

Table 8: Irrigated land among representatives in each district

N=127

Name of the District	Irrigated land	Sex		
		Male	Female	Total
Bangalore Rural	0 Acre/Landless	27	27	54
	%	54.00	67.50	60.00
	0.01 to 2.50 acres	11	9	20
	%	22.00	22.50	22.22
	2.51 to 5.00 Acres	8	3	11
	%	16.00	7.50	12.22
	5.01 & Above Acres	4	1	5
	%	8.00	2.50	5.56
	Total	50	40	90
%	100	100	100	
Gulbarga	0 Acre/Landless	10	8	18
	%	50.00	61.54	54.55
	0.01 to 2.50 acres	3	1	4
	%	15.00	7.69	12.12
	2.51 to 5.00 Acres	3	4	7
	%	15.00	30.77	21.21
	5.01 & Above Acres	4	0	4
	%	20.00	0.00	12.12
	Total	20	13	33
%	100	100	100	

When we look into details regarding economic conditions of the representatives and their educational levels, there is no clear link between their levels of participation and these factors. More

often than not, it is the men who participate in the functioning of the panchayats, regardless of their educational levels or landholdings. Even less educated men speak in panchayat meetings, while women who are better educated usually do not say anything in the panchayat meetings. This is the opinion of elected representatives, who said by and large women do not speak in the panchayat meetings. Women may speak on rare occasions, if development in their constituency is discussed. In fact there were comments from male representatives to the effect that more development would have taken place if the women representatives had had some political experience, and some knowledge of administration. Having neither, development has been handicapped. Men do not at the same time say that lack of knowledge of administration, or political inexperience, would have hampered development if men were the representatives. There is always the feeling among representatives, whether men or women, that men have a greater capacity to function in political institutions, whereas women do not. Hence, whatever be the lack of education, political experience, or administrative knowledge among men, does not seem to go against the men to any significant extent, or to the same extent as in the case of women. This is due at least in part because men are mobile, and can get to the panchayat office easier than the women, interact with others, as well as move around the constituency on their own. Most importantly, politics is considered as a normal and appropriate activity for men but not so for women. Men and women mentioned all this in the course of the interviews.

The functioning of women as presidents has always had some problems even from the tenure of the grama panchayat presidents that has been fixed at 30 months in the Panchayati Raj Act, for any one group (i.e. reserved for that group for one term of 30 months). This is hardly sufficient time for the women who are mostly new to politics, and new to being President, and need time to learn how to function in a political institution, as an executive in that institution. The problem is complicated by another factor, and that is, the term in fact is reduced even more, and none in our sample has been President for more than about 16 months, the understanding being that they would have to step down as President, and someone else would become President. This is a local arrangement, and not confirmed or mandated by the Panchayati Raj Act. There is no official sanction for such a reduction of tenure, but has been so for some time, without anyone taking action to bring about such a change through an amendment in the Act. In addition to being handicapped in heading an administrative institution, and also fulfilling the responsibilities that are envisaged in the President's post, there is also the problem that women faced with grama sabhas (village assemblies). It is the President who has to convene grama sabhas, and moderate the discussions in the sabhas. This appears to be beyond the present capabilities of most of the women Presidents, who find it difficult to face larger numbers than in a typical grama Panchayat meeting. Most often, it is men who conduct grama sabhas, rather than the women Presidents.

Women have been elected to the panchayats in sufficient numbers, to meet the requirement of the one-third seat quota. However, it is not immediately related to their functioning in the panchayat, or that they can be seen to have acquired political power in the panchayats. This is where women do not form one bloc, even when their numbers are higher than the required one-third, and therefore, cannot function in a manner that they can vote as a unified group on any matter that comes up in the panchayat. Further, they do not have the requisite wherewithal to influence decisions in the panchayats.

because most of them do not know enough about these matters to be able to talk about them. Very few women representatives speak in panchayats, and they have even less interaction in their constituencies after they return from the panchayat meetings. Even when women speak, it appears that is the minimal that they need to voice, as president, or other representatives speaking about their own constituencies' development needs. As most of the Presidents of our study rarely speak in the panchayat meetings, the occasions when they influence decisions even as Presidents are less than what one may have expected from Presidents. Being incumbents of these posts, and being illiterate/poorly educated and or inexperienced, gives them less confidence to function, and they depend on others, whether willingly or otherwise, to carry out their functions for them. To the extent that women in grama panchayats have not reached the level of participation that they can claim to have been "empowered", much needs to happen before women can be seen to have achieved a space in public life that is more than just occupying the seats that have been provided through the reservations of seats. The reservation of seats is certainly needed, but that provision is a minimum to carry them forward, but it does not constitute an end in itself. The number of women who have been able to make some mark in the grama panchayats appears to be much less than their total numbers, even with the Presidents being women. For instance, it is only one President, with a post graduate degree, who is said to have been able to encourage and enable other women representatives to speak in the panchayat meetings, none of the other Presidents have been able to achieve this level of participation. Further, in most of these panchayats with women Presidents, with men (husbands, or other male representatives of the panchayats) who function as the *de facto* Presidents, women are not encouraged to consider this panchayat as a "woman headed" panchayat, where other women can get freer space to function as representatives.

What is the impact of the reduction of the President's tenure, from a possible five years, to 30 months, to about 15 months? There is every reason to expect that a President's post has more importance to the representatives, and even to those who were not able to contest (because of reservations), than seats in the panchayats. This makes it more desirable to either take over the functions of the President, or even subvert the functioning of a woman President, through whatever available means including even coercion. In our study, there is no evidence that women who were elected the Presidents resisted or tried to prevent the takeover of their positions by men of their families, or anyone else. For instance, a middle aged woman who is President, is also illiterate, and has no knowledge of how to function as President. It is her son who functions as the President, which was not only found acceptable by his mother, the nominal President, but other representatives as well. On the other hand, there is an instance where there was some disapproval of a President's husband who tried to function as the President, and other representatives did not find this acceptable, though the woman President herself did not have anything to say against it. There is every reason to suppose that the reduction of tenure to about 15 months has a more sinister reason than what is blandly put in the Panchayati Raj Act. The Act itself says (clause 46) that the tenure will be reduced to 30 months. This, evidently would give more representatives a chance to be the President of the panchayat. But rotating the President's post to as many as possible in the limited time period does not serve any useful purpose for functioning of the panchayat itself, nor does it make it possible for the incumbent to develop some skills, and the means to function as President. Hence, it seems very likely that the frequent changes is

not to improve the functioning of the panchayat but to make it possible to derive some personal benefit for the non incumbents, or even those who are not elected representatives themselves.

The politics of presence suggests that having women as representatives, and as executives, in a political institution such as the panchayats have a bearing on the overall position of women, in terms of providing more opportunities for women to function in a political institution. These would also instill greater possibilities to develop policies more beneficial to women and also enable women to have a greater control over their own lives. All this may be more of an article of faith in the present context. The quotas that have been provided do in fact get women a substantial space in the panchayats, even more than the mandated one-third, but there is no immediate evidence that women have been able to become entities with any noticeable power in the political sphere. This would include the means of participating in the panchayat meetings, running the panchayats if they were Presidents, and also functioning as local representatives in their own constituencies. Most of the effective representation, whatever it may be in each case, is generally carried out by men of their families, mostly husbands, and other men of the village who may have a prominent position in the village. This also suggests that the quotas have not been converted into the means of women's "empowerment" and there is still much to be done in this area. From what we could see in comparison with earlier panchayats, even though education levels appear to have improved among the elected representatives, there is no reason to conclude that this by itself has made any major impact on their participation as compared to the past. To this end, it appears that the tenure of 30 months for grama panchayat Presidents, and even more so the local provision of reducing the tenure to about 15 months or even less, has done considerable damage to the possibilities of women to acquire a position in the political sphere that actually gives them space to participate in politics. Whether the 50% reservation of seats for women would make any improvement in this situation is also debatable, inasmuch as the fact of the matter is that Karnataka's reservations of seats had always exceeded the one-third that was mandatory under the Act, but the levels of participation were generally low. Does this mean that the quotas are ineffective and therefore should be dispensed with? That may not be the answer to the problem. Without the quotas, there would probably be very few, if any, women in the panchayats, and their inclusion in political activities in the local government will probably be almost non-existent. Thus, while quotas are a requirement, one should also recall that going on increasing the proportion of reserved seats might have another and a more detrimental effect on democracy itself, where the quotas act to exclude and keep out various people, rather than function only in an inclusionary manner. This, as we have seen, would encourage those not eligible to contest to take over the functions of representatives from a woman who has been elected but does not or cannot function as representatives for whatever reason.

What is also clear is that women who are elected to the grama panchayats and then as Presidents, have a limited possibility of being effective Presidents, whatever be their capability. Only a few women have been allowed to function more or less independently, without somebody else (a man) virtually taking over the functioning of the panchayat President's post. Ultimately, what it all comes down to is that women still have a long way to go before they are found acceptable as Presidents. The frequent changes in the panchayat Presidents also impede the development of skills, which is another factor that hampers their functioning as Presidents.

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