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**GENDER ACCOUNTABILITY
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REPRESENTATION IN
LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

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GENDER ACCOUNTABILITY AND POLITICAL REPRESENTATION IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT*

V. Vijayalakshmi**

Abstract

The representation of women in the institutions of local government has been facilitated through affirmative action, where one-third of the seats have been reserved for women. This raises issues related to the representation of gender interests and the constraints on such representation. The paper focuses on the complexities of political representation of women's interests. Lack of effective participation, multiplicity of identities, and the absence of the consolidation of gender specific concerns, prevent women's interests from being an issue in their political representation.

Democracy is most fully manifested through the representation of diverse groups, including women, in governance. The representation of interests and deliberation on issues of concern to women are the most vital factors in the political consolidation of women. Affirmative action and the reservation of one-third of the seats for women has made it possible for a significant presence of women in the local government.¹ In principle, increasing the presence of women would mean that there is not only greater gender equality in opportunity but also that the interests and experiences specific to women would find representation.² It implies that women have a greater empathy for women's problems than men. A critical mass in representation is expected to produce 'deliberative synergy' (Mansbridge, 1999:10). The representation of individuals belonging to one's own group has a greater possibility of facilitating communication between the representative and the constituent, and enhance the deliberative process.³ While there are arguments both in favour of and against pursuing group specific interests, women's interests as they exist are not an articulation of any political agenda, but are programmes designed by the bureaucracy and targeted at women. A change in gender proportion in the elective positions in local government has not resulted

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in the representation of women's interests even after more than a decade of affirmative action. Women's representation in political institutions of local governance has remained a mere symbolism.

Gender accountability, a concern and responsiveness that representatives are expected to have about issues related to development and empowerment of women, remains an area that received limited political attention. The mechanism of representation is less effective on issues of representation and deliberation of women's concerns and interests. The assumption that women's inclusion in elective positions implies representation of their interests is only a part of the problem. As we shall see the level of success of the reservation of seats as an empowering tool is related to the socio-political environment in which it takes place (see also Bacchi, 1996). The articulation of women's political claims is a combination of the effectiveness of the mechanisms of deliberation within the political system, the power relations, and the capabilities of the representatives to influence or effect outcomes that concern women. This also includes the nature of deliberative participation of the citizens and interaction between the representatives and the constituents. The construction of women's interests is expected to evolve in the process of interaction with specific political and social institutions and sites of power that define particular interests. If deliberation in panchayats and within the party remains confined to elites (political and economic), reinforcing the asymmetrical power structures, then the scope for the representation of interests of specific groups (other than the ones to which the elites belong) would be limited.

The paper examines issues related to gender and representation of women's interests in the panchayats of Karnataka. The purpose here is to understand the constraints on the deliberation of women's interests in a social and political environment which does not encourage women's participation in politics. Rethinking of women's interests requires a shift away from the paradigms that perceive the pursuit of women's interests as essentialising, and adversely affecting the interests of others. First, the conceptual issues that are related to women's interests and their representation in political institutions are discussed. The gender quotas in panchayats and their implication for women's interest are also examined. Secondly, the extent of gender accountability and the constraints in taking up women specific interests is examined. Finally, considering the gender differences in opportunities, the significance of taking up women's issues is discussed.

Women's Interests and Identities

The notion that women's interests are distinct because of the asymmetrical gender relations is fundamental to feminist conceptualisation.⁴ However, theoretical and practical issues arise when we consider the question of

women's interests. First, pertains to what constitutes women's interests, and can they be universalised as something that is acceptable to women as a group. How and to what extent does this conception of women's interests assimilate the concerns of women from different groups. Are there effective deliberative mechanisms to enhance the consolidation of interests? Second, is it essential that women should represent gender interests? Also, can women alone represent women's interests? Finally, can one address interests specific to women and still avoid essentialism?

A shift is visible in the feminist position regarding the necessary levels of women's involvement in participatory democracy—from mere suffrage to holding elective positions in political institutions. The presence of women in decision-making positions is considered as vital if women are to make an impact on the political process.⁵ Feminist theorists are polarised, with one group emphasising equality and the other group the differences between the genders. The former asserted that if there is to be equality in opportunity, women, who comprise nearly half the population cannot be excluded from the political process. Equality in opportunity, one of the basic principles of democracy, would be demonstrated only if women were representatives. The differences argument was divided. The interests theorists argued that the political interests of women were distinct and they need to be represented in the decision-making process. Further, since women's interests were different from that of men and often in conflict with them, only women could effectively represent their interests.⁶ A greater proportion of women in politics and governance is considered important to engender public policy. It was also assumed that the quality of politics and governance would be enhanced from the attributes such as love for peace and concern for welfare issues that women are said to bring into public decision-making.

There has also been a view opposing gender specific protective legislations, and a conflict in ideological positions between the 'maximizers' and 'minimizers' in feminist theory.⁷ The critics of the binary opposition between the sexes wanted to avoid essentialising sexual difference.⁸ Despite the support for the idea of women's representation, there is little consensus over what would entail 'representation' or what should be their constituency. It was argued that representing women should not essentialise their identity. Representation is considered desirable without undermining the differences among women.⁹ The problem was the manner in which to draw a balance between gender differences while taking into consideration differences among women. One of the main problems in addressing women's interests was that it was debated within the conventional feminist dichotomy of equality and differences between the genders. The arguments in favour of the representation for women do not, however, successfully eliminate the essentialist bias since the emphasis is on the interests and values that are distinct to women.¹⁰

The basic premise of gender distinct interests is that men and women function within gender value systems that are different in specific ways. Since women's activities and responsibilities in the private sphere are not identical to that of men, they affect their development and progress in activities that have an exchange value in the public sphere. Politics and political institutions structured around male interests and capabilities resulted in the gendering of organisations. The dominant presence of men in public life and politics implies that their interests, needs and preferences take precedence in political institutions. Women's representation of interests, therefore, is essential, since the politically relevant situations of men and women are different and as Sapiro (1981) asserts, it can be done without going against the general demands of group interests.

We need then to discuss the question of what constitute women's interests. Women's interests arise from the way women and men are placed in the activities of different domains of life space, with differential values attached to their work and time. Sapiro (1981) refers to women's issues as public concerns that impinge primarily on women's private sphere of social life. And Peterson (1981, quoted in Jonnesdottir, 1988) sees gender concerns as an outcome of the conflict between the reproductive against the productive, defined through the cultural value system. Women's interest is the articulation of a concern to be a part of the state's decision-making process and challenging the implications of ignoring gender interests in the development and political processes. While interests related to one's position, roles and experiences may have elements of commonality among both men and women, women's interests are derived from the hierarchical gender relations. Most of these distinctions have underpinnings in the gender based division of labour and gender neutral political institutions. Despite claims of gender neutrality, gender asymmetry has been a significant factor in the functioning of political institutions and women's political participation (Jones, 1993; Phillips, 1991).

The phrase 'women's interests' has had several interpretations. A distinction has been made between interests as an *agency* and *achieving* specific goals. The two dominant articulations on the subject have been that of Sapiro (1981), and Molyneux's (1985) concept of *practical* and *strategic* interests. These two different conceptions of women's interests are relevant in the context of the panchayats, not just because of their emphasis on the representation of women's concerns. They are also important because the construction of women's interests as it is envisaged by Sapiro (1981) and Molyneux (1985) highlights the complexity of analysing women's political interests within conventional feminist political theorisation.

Discussing the need for a change in public policy on women, Sapiro points out that women's politically relevant situation is different

from that of men, although to assume reproductive practices in private life as the basis of conflicting interests can be contested (Sapiro, 1981). Women share certain common interests irrespective of their social and class differences. Analysis of women's political interests and how the state responds to it requires renewed attention to the limitation of politics and government, and the boundaries of public/private spheres (Sapiro, 1981: 712). Women's representation would make governance more responsive to the interests of women and alter the androcentric perception of politics. Sapiro refers to women as a single group for representation. One of the main problems with Sapiro's view of representing women's interests is in trying to conceptualise it within conventional paradigms of political theory. Any attempt to ascertain women's interests 'involves one in the difficult problem of understanding objective social situations and their relevance to political interests' (Diamond and Harstock, 1981:717).¹¹

While stating that there does not exist a unified concept of women's interests, Molyneux brought in the perspective of the multiplicity of interests that women as a group may share. Practical interests are the needs that require immediate attention and are more often related to women's social roles and the difficulties arising out of the gender division of labour. The 'strategic' interests address constraints arising out of rigid gender norms and conditions under which women live. It aims at the systematic empowerment of women by transforming legal and institutional arrangements that perpetuate women's subordination. Strategic interests take up issues related to women's fundamental condition (arising out of one's position in the gender structure), rights and entitlements and seek to bring in legislations to safeguard them against different forms of discrimination.

Molyneux conceives women's interests as a two-step approach, and the achievement of the strategic interests requires the prior fulfilment of the practical needs. Such distinctions have problems both in method and practice. If there are differences of interests among women and there are multiple layers of interests fulfilment, Molyneux's method has limitations, and addressing interests is not an isolated phenomenon but is related to access and control over resources. Multiple strategies are required to address various patterns of domination and subordination. The evolution of gender interests is not only through the identification of interests but also by their construction within the specific context of identity and power relations (Ray, 1999). Later theorists resolved some of these issues by linking both the components of the interests.¹² Drawing from the experience of the Chipco movement, Agarwal (1992) was of the view that interests, strategic or practical, evolved in the process of participation, and not something which is top-down. While practical interests are addressed within broader welfare and development programmes, and need not be gender specific, there is every reason to argue that some of the interests (strategic or practical) need special focus and emphasis.

Women are considered to be naturally more interested in these issues than men, and it is also more to do with 'division of labour in political attention' (Sapiro, 1981:713).

Despite the awareness of the importance of representing women's interests there is little consensus on the priority of specific claims of women. The generalisation of women's interests is contested because the interests of women are based on their identities and social positions and hence they are diverse as well as situational. There are differences on whether women can be considered as one social collective with identical interests. While gender is an important factor in political relations, it cannot be seen in isolation from other identities such as caste, class, race and ethnicity. A concept of sisterhood based on a shared gender identity was rejected in favour of gender within racial or class positions (Ferguson, 1991:114-15).¹³ Women's interests were seen in conjunction with experiences of women constructed in the context of social relations (Spelman, 1988; Mohanty, 1991).¹⁴ According to Mohanty (1991) it would be too narrow to conceive of women as a monolithic group that implies all women are equally powerless and oppressed. Instead of blanketing women's interests and regarding women as powerless, interests should emerge out of experiences in the context of discrimination and other constraints that women encounter. Identifying different levels of discrimination is essential in the articulation of women's interests.

Articulation and assimilation of diverse concerns of women, however, are related to the inclusiveness of political systems and the effectiveness of discursive practices. In the context of local institutions, the concern is not so much about the representation of different groups but is related to the effectiveness of discursive mechanisms. There are two immediate problem areas. To what extent is there a consolidation of interests among women representatives? And what is the 'transformative capacity' (Giddens, 1979:91) of the representatives to achieve certain outcomes, given the marginalisation of women in the political process? Politics, as Yeatman (1990) rightly emphasises, is principally a set of debates and struggles over meaning. Influencing political deliberation is dependent on how power works in a given situation and the ability of the individuals involved in articulating the diverse, changing and conflicting interests. The representation of women's interests in local institutions of government, consequent upon the inclusion of women, depends largely on the range of power relations that define, or are associated with, the representation of particular interests.

While considering gender accountability as essential in the context of panchayats, the conditions within which interests can be articulated need to be mentioned here. Gender accountability requires committed engagement in the activities of the panchayats and active political involvement. The scope and flexibility of the planning process is important in addressing women's concerns. The expectation of the women

Constituents that women representatives should address issues specific to their gender largely determines whether or not representatives take up gender specific issues. The de facto politics considerably reduces the scope of articulating women's concerns.¹⁵ Women representatives engage in political deliberation within a framework of practices that often does not permit the expression of women's concerns.

De Jure and De Facto Politics

Gender difference in the election to panchayats was evident from the fact that the overwhelming majority of the women were elected to the panchayats only on seats reserved for women. The crucial nature of affirmative action to ensure women's election to the panchayats was evident in both Mandya and Udipi districts.¹⁶ The position of the women based on their caste and class contributed to the variations in women's political participation. There were greater constraints on the participation of women belonging to Scheduled Castes, and often in the case of Scheduled Tribes too. There were no instances in our study where any Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe woman was elected to a woman (*general*) constituency. At all levels of local government, there was little evidence of political parties supporting women candidates to contest general seats, which were considered as a male domain.¹⁷ Nineteen per cent of the women elected in the 1993 grama panchayat election and 1995 zilla and taluk panchayats elections wanted to contest panchayat elections in the year 2000. They could not contest in the elections as the party did not support their candidature to general seats (seats that are not reserved for women), and they did not have any chance of winning elections as 'independents'. In the case of 97 per cent of the women representatives their political representation was a one-time affair. The remaining three per cent had had a longer tenure in politics as they had earlier either contested panchayat elections or had been panchayat representatives. The alienation that women experienced was because of their marginal participation in the larger political space, in political parties and civil society.

The reservation of seats for women is a positive step to provide them an opportunity in politics. In practice, however, the reservation of seats has turned out to be inefficacious in nurturing a political culture among women, producing one timers who went into political obscurity once their term was completed. Five years as members in local government did not enable women to develop political contacts or a political base that could have facilitated their continuation in politics. With less than three per cent of the women representatives contesting for a second term, the development of individual capabilities and overcoming constraints in political participation are important issues in the context of women's interests.

Women's disinterest in the functioning of the panchayats hindered the process of the consolidation of gender issues in the political agenda. On a five-point scale of very low to very high, the political interest score of women representatives was 16.24, which is a medium score, compared to a very high score of 27.95 for men. Women showed a general disinterest in politics, and that also contributed to their lower stakes in political affairs. The t-test shows a significant difference in the political interest between men and women, and between interest as a factor during entry into politics (see Table 1). This was further manifested in their low participation in the activities of the panchayats. The association between political interest and level of participation in the panchayats was .809, which is significant at 0.01 level. Women were not interested in politics and were less inclined to pursue a political career after their term in the panchayats. Twenty two per cent were interested in pursuing a political career if there was support from the family and political party; 31 per cent were ambiguous about their course of action since it was not they who could decide on the matter; and 47 per cent were not interested in politics at all. The lack of political orientation of women representatives can be gauged from the fact that 52 per cent had not thought of contesting panchayat elections until their nomination papers had been filed. This not only reflects that women had not even thought of entering elective politics, but also the over bearing attitude of the men who pushed them into politics without even consulting the women before persuading them to sign (or place their thumb impression) on the nomination papers. Since women were reluctant entrants, they were quite content to leave politics after their tenure. Those who were interested did not see the possibility of contesting elections again because their home constituency would not be reserved for women in the following elections, and the party will not support them for a general seat. In comparison, the majority of men (74 per cent) were keen contenders. In taluk and zilla panchayats, male aspirants lobbied for party tickets. Their association with party politics was with the aim of securing party support to contest elections to panchayat institutions.

Table 1: Political interest score, gender and nature of entry into politics

	N	Mean	t-value
Gender			
Men	123	27.9512	14.171*
Women	86	16.2442	
Nature of entry into politics			
Out of interest in politics	11	20.0909	2.160*
Out of compulsion	75	15.6800	

* Significant at 1 per cent

The perception of women's role in politics was to a large extent determined by the gender norms and values pertaining to public space. While it was acceptable for women to be nominal representatives, active participation in politics was not considered proper. Women with traditional gender views, who were not in favour of active involvement of women in the activities of the political sphere, also had low participation scores. The association between gender perceptions and participation in panchayats was $-.578$, which is significant at 0.01 level. In the absence of change in gender attitudes and hierarchical social relations, political representation had a limited effect on changing women's status in politics. Although women members believed that the reservation of seats can have a positive influence on participation they did not consider that getting elected to reserved seats implied taking up gender specific interests. The ambiguity about women's responsiveness to gender specific concerns was manifest in the limited extent to which women's issues were taken up. The association between women's perception of gender accountability and taking up women specific issues during their term as representatives was $.849$, which is significant at 0.01 level.

The widely held view among representatives and the constituents was that general seats were exclusively for men. Although male representatives accepted the likelihood that women needed the reservation of seats to be represented in panchayats, there was disagreement on the percentage of seats to be reserved. They were of the opinion that the reservation of one-third of seats for women and the process of rounding off of proportions of reservation to different categories of women has resulted in over 40 per cent of seats in panchayats being occupied by women.¹⁸ In their opinion the reservations in panchayats were excessive, and also restricted the choice available to the electorate. Quotas were seen as antithetical to an efficient system of representation where qualified individuals were elected to institutions of governance. There was a strong view that reservations lead to de facto politics where women were elected as proxies of male family members or elites. The widely shared perception among both men and women was that although women were elected to panchayats, men controlled the functioning of women representatives. De facto politics negatively affected women's political participation, and also the scope of addressing gender interests.

The predominant opinion among women was that the rigid gender norms were major constraints to women entering politics and the reservation of seats was a pull factor that brought them into panchayats. A small section (8 per cent) of the women members considered that the reservation tag weakened women's position in politics. Women, in their opinion, were not taken seriously as the common perception was that they were elected to a reserved seat and not elected because of their merit. This does not appear convincing because nearly 70 cent of the seats in the panchayats are reserved, with a large proportion occupied by

men of one category or the other. In the case of women, their absence in political parties makes it difficult to make equal claims of political inclusion.

The reservation policy in itself was not a sufficient condition to overcome the rigid social and cultural barriers that women faced. The 'deep core' (Lotherington, 1991:100) comprising the attitudes and beliefs has not changed significantly to enable women to participate to a greater extent in the functioning of panchayats. Attitudes and beliefs that constrain women's participation in the panchayats are sustained through social approval of women who confine their behaviour to traditional gender norms. Slow change at the deep core level hinders the process of the crystallisation of women's interests.

Differences, interests and representation

Caste, class, and party differences were factors which inhibited the consolidation of women's interests. For women who belonged to the Scheduled Castes and the wage labour class there was a triple disadvantage in panchayats because of their social and economic status and the hierarchical gender relations. Not electing Scheduled Caste candidates to women general seats, and circumventing and adopting subversive techniques to prevent Scheduled Castes occupying the posts of panchayat president which were reserved for Scheduled Castes were some of the visible aspects of the cleavages between different caste groups. Women who belonged to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes did not contest seats reserved for women (general) and contested only the seats reserved for 'Scheduled Caste women' and 'Scheduled Tribe women' categories. A combination of factors such as lack of party support, and inadequate resources to compete with candidates who were at a socially and economically advantageous position contributed to the exclusion of women belonging to disadvantaged castes. Differences were more evident in Udipi district than in Mandya. For example, during the 2000 panchayat elections in Udipi district there was a controversy over the reservation of the president's post for Scheduled Castes in two grama panchayats. The dominant caste representatives in one of the grama panchayats succeeded in coercing the only Scheduled Caste woman representative in the panchayat to desist from contesting for the president's post. In the other grama panchayat, the election to president's post was not conducted in the specified time. Even seven months after the elections to grama panchayats (when we last visited the grama panchayat) the elections to the president's post had not been held. In both the cases the vice presidents who belonged to the dominant caste wanted to manage the functioning of the panchayats. In the latter case, the Dalit Sangarshana Samithi (DSS) filed a case against the elections not being held, and the panchayat was under the supervision of the Tehasildar. The other representatives (also belonging to upper castes) stated that they preferred

that the panchayat was run by the Tehasildar than letting a Scheduled Caste representative become the president.

While Scheduled Caste women were discouraged from contesting seats reserved for women (general) they could not usually contest even in predominantly Scheduled Caste areas. Scheduled Caste women stated it was difficult to win in a contest with women from economically well off families and belonged to a dominant caste. There were instances in Mandya and Udipi where the Scheduled Caste candidates (both men and women) had filed nomination papers for general seats but were later made to withdraw them. Alienation from the political space was an immediate outcome of differential access to political opportunities. A similar pattern of preferential access of women from specific caste groups was seen in seats that were reserved for BCM (B). Women who belonged to dominant caste groups, for example, the Vokkaligas in Mandya district and Bunts in Udipi district contested the seats reserved for 'BCM (B) women' category. An anomaly was that women who were elected to seats reserved for BCM (B) were not always from economically weaker sections of the population.¹⁹

The institutional mechanisms to a certain extent aggravated the problems of the disadvantaged sections of the population. In grama panchayats there were several instances where areas that did not have Scheduled Caste populations were notified as reserved constituencies (Scheduled Castes) and a predominantly Scheduled Caste area was categorised as a general constituency. Officials were of the view that in a system where the reservation in constituencies was rotated, such a phenomenon was inevitable. Although in principle a person from a Scheduled Caste can contest from a general seat, in practice it was not usually feasible. The dominant caste groups who were denied a chance to contest in the previous term would not accept a Scheduled Caste candidate contesting again.²⁰ Instances where Scheduled Caste candidates filed their nomination for a general seat in an area where the Scheduled Caste population was numerically preponderant was not uncommon. But they were forced to withdraw by the elites belonging to dominant caste groups [such as Vokkaligas in Mandya district and Bunts and Moghaviras in Udipi district]. Scheduled caste candidates found it difficult to mobilise support in an electoral contest with dominant caste candidates. One solution worked out by caste leaders was by forging support with other caste groups. For example, in a predominantly Scheduled Caste area when the constituency was 'General' and had a non Scheduled Caste candidate, and vice versa (where a non Scheduled Caste constituency was reserved for a Scheduled Caste), caste leaders decided to extend mutual support for the candidates of different castes.

There was a difference in the way women perceived what most hindered their political participation. Most women belonging to dominant castes (Vokkaligas, Lingayats, Bunts) considered gender as a constraint

while women belonging to weaker sections (Scheduled Castes) considered the caste hierarchy as a major disadvantage. While issues such as gender sensitive planning and budgeting has a long way to go in panchayats, there was also limited evidence of women trying to overcome social differences, which is essential for empowered participation and exercising political power. Dominant caste and upper class women did not choose to identify with women who were socially and economically disadvantaged. The sense of identification is important in the representation of gender interests. The 'we' factor was non-existent among women, and their activities were isolated actions that were part of the broader agenda of the party, or patron.

Individual capability

Personal attributes such as higher levels of educational qualification and an inclination towards political activities were not factors in the selection of women as candidates, although there was a relation between the levels of education and the participation and interest scores of the representatives. The t-tests show that there is a significant difference in the political interest levels and participation among representatives who were illiterate and those above school level (see Table 2). The political construction of women was closely tied to the family status, economic and political standing of the male members of the family, and not the individual capabilities or personal achievements of women. As 18 per cent of the women representatives were illiterate and 33 per cent had only a few years of schooling, their lack of education was a handicap to their functioning in the panchayats. We asked the women about their perception of the importance of education in their functioning as representatives. Except for 4 per cent of the women, the rest of them considered being literate important for the representatives. Women who were illiterate stated that there were times when they felt greatly handicapped because they were not literate. While acknowledging the importance of education to improve their functioning as representatives, 40 per cent of the women stated that the main objective of reservation is to bring women into politics. Hence, educational qualifications need not be a criterion in the choice of candidates. Twenty two per cent were of the opinion that there should be a minimum level of education as a selection criterion.

Table 2. Relationship of education, interest in politics and participation

	Illiterate/lapsed into illiteracy	Above school level	t-value
Political interest	23.63	26.85	-2.629*
Participation in panchayats	20.96	23.55	-2.951*
Number	57	84	

*Significant at 1 per cent

The views of elites who were also involved in the selection of the candidates are particularly interesting in this context. They were of the opinion that political parties could use educational levels as a criterion to select party candidates. Generally, the factors in the selection of candidates were the caste composition of the constituency, and the support the candidate was able to mobilise. Education was never a consideration in the selection of the candidates. The selection process rarely considered merit as a sole criterion.

Gender Accountability

Gender accountability as it is seen here is the responsiveness and sensitivity to the issues that concern women the most. It was evident that poor interaction among the representatives, and between constituents and representatives hindered the consolidation of gender concerns. We used three criteria to examine whether women were oriented to gender interests. These include, (i) the perceptions of women representatives about women's problems and their representation, and the interaction among women (both between the constituents and representatives and among representatives); (ii) whether women representatives considered themselves as a group, sharing a common identity and concerns; and (iii) participation in the functions of local governance.

There was an anomaly in the responses of women on two related issues, i.e., women's perception of gender discrimination in panchayats and their idea of women specific interests. Women were conscious of the gender differentiation in the functioning of local institutions and in party forums. Across the tiers they were of the view that there was gender discrimination in the attitude of the officials, in the selection of candidates, and nomination to standing committees (see Table 3).

Table 3: Gender problems in political participation (N=86)

(All in percentages)			
	Always	Sometimes	Never
Differential attitude of the officials	66.3	25	4.7
Selection process is discriminatory against women	98.8	1.2	—
Selection process to standing committees is discriminatory against women	98.8	1.2	—
Gender discrimination in the party forums.	93.2	6.98	—
Difficulty in accessing information	93.4	6.6	—

A majority of them also stated that accessing information was a major problem for women. Despite agreement on the problems that women confronted in politics there was no unity of perception on any action to overcome these constraints, and there was a low orientation to gender accountability (see Table 4). Women did not perceive that getting elected to a woman's reserved seat implied gender accountability. Although the indifferent attitude of officials, and gender discrimination within the parties affected most women there was no deliberation of these issues within the panchayats or outside it. There was no mobilisation of women on common issues as they were not able to counter the divisive impact of some of their multiple identities. There was a difference in the construction of the political identities of men and women. The identities and interests of men were intertwined with parties and activities of the public space. Despite the shortcomings in carrying out functions of governance, men were symbolized as political beings. Politically inclined and active women on the other hand, were not encouraged and women did not get organizational or psychological support. Cultural devaluation of the political role of women by attributing undesirable reasons for their political success discouraged most women from being seen as 'political'.²¹ A part of the problem also lies in the fact that women did not perceive these issues as gender specific concerns that required focused attention.

Women in panchayats were entangled in identities (such as class, caste to a large extent and party to a lesser degree) and the manifestation of any particular identity of women is situational. They did not consider themselves as a group, where despite differences, common concerns can be addressed. The conditional and relational nature of the identities makes it untenable for women to acknowledge interests which are related to only one group of women. Representatives who belonged to different groups, whether political parties or caste or class categories, expected that their individual benefits would be adversely affected by an appeal to women's interests. They were of the view that their bargaining power would be considerably reduced if they took up gender specific issues which were not supported by other members or political functionaries.

For a majority of women, representing gender interests was untenable in practice since the elections are constituency based and the representatives have to take into consideration the interests of the constituency (which include different groups) that voted them to power. The problem here is not about giving more attention to the constituency's needs, but about the notion that pursuing gender specific interests is antithetical to the interests of the constituency. Although the institutional mechanisms do not give the elected representatives much choice to follow a particular course of action or to take up group specific issues, there is always a possibility to mobilise support on what should form a part of planning and budgeting.²²

Table 4: Perceptions of women representatives on representation of interests

(N= 86)

Perceptions of women representatives on representation of interests (All in percentages)									
	Grama Panchayat			Taluk Panchayat			Zilla Panchayat		
	Do not Agree	Cannot say	Agree	Do not Agree	Cannot say	Agree	Do not Agree	Cannot say	Agree
Getting elected on a women's seat implies taking up their interests	67.5	32.5	--	55.6	33.3	11.1	57.9	31.6	10.5
There are gender interests common to all women	62.5	32.5	5.0	55.6	33.3	11.1	57.9	31.6	10.5
There is scope for pursuing women specific interests in panchayats	62.5	32.5	5.0	55.6	33.3	11.1	57.9	31.6	10.5
More women in panchayats means that there is better consolidation of interests	62.5	32.5	5.0	55.6	33.3	11.1	57.9	31.6	10.5
Reservation has reduced the differences among women	75.0	25.0	--	81.5	18.5	--	84.2	15.8	--

An important factor in the functioning of women representatives was the limited communication between members (see Table 5). The communication among the representatives and between the constituents and the representatives was weak in the upper tiers compared to the grama panchayat. A high level of interaction between grama panchayat representatives and constituents in Table 5 is contradictory to the low participation levels of women in panchayats. We have observed that the quality of interaction in grama panchayats was poor in terms of responsiveness and accountability to the constituents. Meeting the constituents in the street and exchanging greetings (which was common considering the small geographical area of a grama panchayat constituency) was often described as interaction with the constituents. Even on the only occasion when all the women were present (at the meetings) there was hardly any interaction between them. In the absence of any communication between the women members there was hardly any discussion of issues related to panchayats or women. One of the assumptions at the beginning of the study was that panchayats with women presidents would manifest a greater participation of other women representatives in the functions of governance. However, contrary to this expectation women presidents hardly influenced the functioning of other women. Since their participation in the activities of political parties was also minimal, the party affiliation did not enhance interaction among women (see Table 5).

The alienation from the political process has contributed to the divisions between women at the grass-roots levels on issues of political empowerment. The inclusion of women in local government was not an outcome of any demand from women. Since parties sponsored their candidature, women identified with the party agenda rather than with gender related issues. And the major parties in India do not have a gender agenda or demands that further gender equality. Cultivating constituencies was probably the weakest part of women's political participation. While the few politically active women were not keen to be identified only with women's issues, the problem with the majority of women representatives was non-participation.

The pervasive de facto politics in panchayats was a hurdle not only in developing a woman's constituency but also in the construction of a group identity. Women played a marginal role in the functioning of the panchayats. The widely held perception was that women's political career was short, limited to one term in panchayats, and there was no point in giving high priority to their short political role. Active and effective participation of women is important if they are to represent the interests of women.

Table 5: Interaction among women in the panchayats

Interaction among women in the panchayats (All in percentages)									
	Grama Panchayat			Taluk Panchayat			Zilla Panchayat		
	Always	Some times	Never	Always	Some times	Never	Always	Some times	Never
Do you interact with women representatives in your panchayat?	7.5	27.5	65.0	—	25.9	74.1	—	21.1	78.9
Do you interact with women representatives in other tiers?	5.0	10.0	85.0	7.4	18.5	74.1	—	26.3	73.7
Do you interact with constituents in general?	11.5	53.5	35.0	—	28.3	71.7	—	21.1	78.9
Do you interact with women constituents?	17.5	47.5	35.0	—	33.3	66.7	—	21.1	78.9
Do you interact with women in your party?	10	15	75	3.7	14.8	81.5	5.3	26.3	68.4
Do you discuss panchayat related issues with other women?	2.5	25.0	72.5	3.7	3.7	92.6	—	21.1	78.9

Constituents' Expectations

Certain common patterns were evident in the absence of orientation to women's interests. Lack of effective ways of communicating the expectations of constituents was also a major contributing factor in not pursuing women specific interests by both men and women representatives (see Table 6). The association between women constituents' expectations and representatives taking up women specific issues was .865, which is significant at 0.01 level. In the grama panchayats a significant proportion of representatives stated that women of their constituencies bring to them issues specific to women (see Table 6). The issues that were labelled as women's concerns by the representatives were street lighting, drinking water, and sanitation, which in any case are important community services and not specific gender interests. Women constituents did not vote for women representatives with the expectation that they would represent their interests. Constituents (69 per cent) asserted that they had voted for a particular candidate due to the party identity and the individual canvassing for the party; 11 per cent related voting to the personal attributes of the candidate; while 20 per cent stated that elites played a vital factor.²³ Since the seats were reserved, the option for them was to vote for one of the women candidates. Even in a rare case where a woman zilla panchayat member was elected to a general seat, the constituents voted keeping in view her good performance in her previous term as panchayat representative, towards the entire constituency and not for women's interests. The other important factor that contributed to her electoral victory was the support of high ranking party functionaries. Elites were a major force in the candidate winning elections in grama panchayats, while in the upper tiers the party identity and the support of prominent party functionaries were more important in the election of the representatives. The main factors that facilitated the election of women were their affiliation to party, political connections of the male family members and their identification with members of the elite.

In panchayats the political parties and elites played a significant role in defining the interests and priorities of the representatives. The parties rather than the individual representatives were perceived as agents of the interests of the constituents. Gender issues were not a consideration of any party and there was no instance when the parties took up interests specific to women. Women were not considered a political constituency for parties to take cognisance of their interests. In panchayat meetings, women's issues were not discussed, or were given lower importance.

In the absence of the crystallisation of interests, women constituents did not feel that there were issues which only women representatives could take up. If one were to look at the various groups for which seats were reserved, the crystallisation of interests was at different levels. It was lowest among women and comparatively better

Table 6: Expectations of Constituents

[N = 86]

	(All in percentages)											
	Grama Panchayat			Taluk Panchayat			Zilla Panchayat					
	Always	Some times	Never	Always	Some times	Never	Always	Some times	Never	Always	Some times	Never
Was gender interests a factor in your election to panchayats	—	17.5	82.5	—	—	100	—	5.3	—	—	5.3	94.7
Do constituents bring to you issues specific to women	32.5	40.0	27.5	—	18.5	81.5	—	21.1	—	—	21.1	78.9
Are women constituents more comfortable meeting women representatives	—	30.0	70.0	—	7.4	92.6	—	5.3	—	—	5.3	94.7
Initiated activities that benefited women	17.5	52.5	30.0	11.1	18.5	70.4	00	21.1	—	—	21.1	78.9

among Scheduled Caste constituents. A point to be noted here is that the Scheduled Caste constituents did not approach the women of Scheduled Caste background for the representation of their interests, or even to seek any favours. Obviously, the consideration here was whether the Scheduled Caste woman member was able to give the constituent what she wanted. In such cases where they thought the representative could not provide what was asked, the constituents approached the community elders or prominent male party functionaries belonging to these caste groups. Other castes were approached on the basis of their constituency and caste background. Caste as a factor was not entirely relevant if the representatives in their constituencies were of other castes. The reluctance to approach women members was, however, a common feature among different groups and at all levels of panchayats.

It is important to note here that the elections to local institutions was not issue based. As we observed in our election study in 2000, representing the interests of any specific group never figured as an election issue as women looked for the support of different sections of the constituents to win the elections. The candidates were of the opinion that there was no necessity for a gender appeal when they were contesting a women's seat.

The representatives stated that they had a fairly good idea of what their constituents expected, although it was not immediately clear how this was possible, keeping in view the low level of interaction women had with their constituents, and local party functionaries (see Table 5). It would also be less feasible, for example, at taluk and zilla panchayats for the constituents to meet their representatives personally.²⁴ Women did not have any perspective of gender planning, and taking up issues that were specific to women and group interests were not in their scheme of activities. Addressing women's issues was not a part of their constituency interests. Women or their patrons were more concerned about strengthening their position, and taking up the constituency interests served their purpose better. What is not discerned is that gender interests and constituency interests need not be mutually exclusive. Since gender interests were not an electoral issue in politics, at all levels, the representatives did not take positions on the matter or act for women. A small section (3 per cent) of women who were more favourable to the idea of addressing women specific interests, expressed their inability to do so. The main constraint, however, was that women were not clear about issues they should take up. What comprised women's interests varied between grama panchayats and upper tiers. In the lower tier, basic needs such as attending to water problems and sanitation were considered as women's specific interests. Women representatives were also involved in the family welfare programmes to disseminate department programmes. There were also instances (two cases) where women representatives were instrumental in starting Mahila Mandals (women's groups) and

micro credit groups. In the upper tiers there was no effort made to take up women's issues. At the taluk and zilla panchayats, there was no feminisation of specific interests.

Why Women's Interests Matter in Representation

The assumption in the paper has been that once women have been elected as representatives they should address issues specific to their gender and bring women's concerns into the planning process. However, as the evidence strongly indicates, women do not consider themselves as representing gender interests. Insofar as gender issues continue to be accorded low priority in the panchayats, pursuing women's interests assumes even greater importance. But addressing women's interests involves, as Diamond and Harstock (1981) pointed out, understanding social situations, the perception of women's status in society and their relevance to political interests.

Several factors have contributed towards women representatives not taking up women specific issues. First, the constituents did not have any expectation of women's interests being addressed by women representatives. Second, clientelism and patronage, which were pervasive in local institutions, controlled the way women were engaged in political relations. Thirdly, de facto politics, where the male family members and elites played an important role in panchayats (i.e. acting for women representatives) reduced the possibility of gender accountability. High levels of de facto politics had a negative impact on the interaction among women in panchayats and prevented their evolution into political entities of substance. Fourthly, the social and economic disparities among women had a bearing on any conception of common gender interests. The social inequalities also inhibited deliberation. Fifth, gender sensitivity was not a significant part of the government policies and planning. Gender sensitivity cannot be assumed as a part of women's representation in local government, but has to be developed through concerted effort. Finally, there were few organizations which were involved in helping women to coordinate their efforts towards addressing gender interests.

Given the many disadvantages that women as a gender group faced in panchayats, what is essential is the crystallisation of opinion on issues that are related to the structure of opportunities, as well as working towards government policies that are gender sensitive. Gender interests should be seen as an integral part of the overall constituency interests which representatives need to take up. What is required is the synthesis of specific needs (water, sanitation), with women's interests such as gender sensitive social sectors, access to various development resources, and inclusion in political organisations and other areas of civil society.

The 'needs' as Jonasdottir (1985) puts it is a core concept in participatory democracy that should be mediated by gender interests. There are problems that are common to most women, such as gender hierarchy in political institutions, low representation of women in political parties and civil society, gender blind policies, and lack of adequate supportive institutional mechanisms to facilitate participation. These have adversely affected the development of the capabilities of women, access to resources, women's role in natural resource management, and effective participation in elective positions. Differential access to information and weak links to political networks undermine the advantages of political inclusion of women.

There is no basis, however, to suggest that the interests of women can be universalised (seen as common) and that these interests can be served by women members alone. Given that these interests have to be addressed, if there was also the implication that only women have the necessary experience or empathy to be able to carry them out, then only a part of the panchayat representatives (i.e. women) can address these interests. What we have seen through the course of studying the panchayats is that little attention has been given to gender concerns even by women representatives. It is evident that election of women to the panchayats was a necessary but not a sufficient condition to ensure that women's interests were addressed. It is perhaps necessary to think in terms of legislation that would make it obligatory for all representatives to take up issues that concern women. Various standing committees already exist in the panchayats. We can envisage the creation of a new standing committee to look into the problems and concerns of women in rural society such as low levels of literacy, poor access to and control over development resources, and weak information networks. Alternatively, there could be a women's development cell in each panchayat which could plan for each panchayat's activities related to women's interest and contribute to gender budgeting. Women should be encouraged to participate in associational activity where awareness is created regarding concerns specific to women. Thus, the obligatory nature of addressing women's interests, once it is so provided for through some form of legislation, not only makes it mandatory for men, women, political parties and functionaries, to arrive at plans and decisions that improve the condition of women, but it may also succeed in bringing about a change in attitudes about women. It is the change in attitudes that is not going to be easy, considering that men and women share many ideas about the place of women in society, and particularly in politics.

Political parties generally neglect gender interests in their political agenda. Under the circumstances, women representatives chose to project the interests of the political party over that of any other (such as women's interests). Since women are not usually represented in decision-making positions in parties they are not in a position to bring women's issues into

the party agenda. The marginalisation of women representatives in local institutions is related also to the absence of a constituency of women's interests in local politics.²⁵ Apart from being a part of electoral politics, it is important to have effective forums for the deliberation of women's interests at the local level. Deliberation is essential in representative democracy, not only to represent particular group interests, but also for transforming interests and creating commonality'. And effective principal-agent mechanisms increase the probability of good representation (Mansbridge, 1999:4, 5).

What is important to the discussion here is not in subscribing to the 'equality' or 'differences' view, but to the possible contribution that women as a major group in the panchayats can make to bring gender interests into planning and budgeting at the local level. The core issue is that women's situation in politics is affected differently from that of men because of their respective social positions. Sapiro (1981) had envisaged the probability that women's representation would change the androcentric perception of politics. However, in the Indian context this has not occurred.

Debates on gender inclusiveness cannot be confined to the reservation of seats alone. They should also include strategies to make local institutions more responsive to practices of social and gender equity. Interventions should focus on enhancing the participation of women, and making the agenda of governance more gender sensitive. A commitment to women's interests is essential considering that gender representation in Indian politics is at an early stage of achieving political equality. While the debate is not a closed one, strengthening forums of deliberation, gender budgeting, and gender sensitive policy will be positive steps in the direction of improving the overall social condition of women.

Notes

- 1 Karnataka was the first state to reserve a significant proportion of seats for women—25 per cent through the 1983 Panchayati Raj Act. On the provisions entailed in the Act, and their functioning in the panchayats, see Satishchandran, 1994, 2000; Chandrashekar, 1984,1989; Manor, 1999; Crook and Manor, 1994; Inbanathan 1992, 1997, 1999.

In India there is a wide disparity between the political representation of women in local institutions and other political space such as in national and state politics, and political parties. There are only 48 women members in a house of 543, i.e. 8.8 per cent, in the XIII Lok Sabha (1999).

- 2 An additional motivation may have also been for political parties to develop a grass-roots base and to impart greater legitimacy to democratic institutions, which are meant to include virtually all social groups.

- 3 See Mansbridge, 1999, for a discussion on descriptive representation. According to Mansbridge, descriptive representation reduces communicative distrust between the representatives and the constituents.
- 4 The ways of representing women's interests, and the strategies adopted to achieve them have been the focus of feminist political discourse. See, Lister, 1997; Phillips, 1991, 1995; Hernes, 1987; Stacey and Price, 1981.
- 5 See Phillips, 1992 for a discussion.
- 6 The validity of the interest theory, however, does not have universal acceptance and has been questioned. For example, see Diamond and Hartsock, 1981; Jaquette, 1984.
- 7 The minimisers are the feminists who want to undermine the category 'women' to minimize the gender differences. The maximizers on the other hand want to keep the category (or feel they cannot do otherwise), but they want to change its meaning, to reclaim and further elaborate the social being woman, and empower her'. (Snitow, 1989:41).
- 8 For a discussion see Phillips, 1991, 1995; Young, 1990.
- 9 Phillips, (1991, 1995) and Young (1990) argued in favour of the elimination of essentialism and emphasised democratic representation in political institutions.
- 10 For a discussion on women's interests and interest theory see Jonasdottir, 1990; Pringle and Watson, 1992.
- 11 Diamond and Harstock were critical of the interest theory and favoured a needs perspective.
- 12 For example see Chinchilla, 1990.
- 13 There has been concern of over stretching the argument against the conceptualisation of women as a single group as it would work towards the benefit of privileged categories based on race and class (Bordo, 1989 cited in Young, 1994).
- 14 There is a radical view among Dalit feminists belonging to Scheduled Castes that their interests can only be represented by feminists of similar social background.
- 15 'De facto politics' refers to a political situation where despite being the elected representatives they do not actively participate in the functions of governance. In the case of women, the male family members and/or elites who were politically active managed the functions of the panchayats 'on behalf' of women members.
- 16 The rare case was a woman representative in Udipi zilla panchayat who had contested a general seat and won. It was a significant win because she defeated the other contestant by a margin of 2989 votes.
- 17 Although political parties were not officially involved in grama panchayat elections, their role was significant in the selection and support of candidates.

- 18 The higher percentage of women in local institutions than the mandatory one-third of seats reserved for women was due to the rounding off of the seats reserved. For example, if one seat was reserved for Scheduled Caste it became a women's seat as there is a requirement that one-third of seats should be reserved in each category.
- 19 The same can be said about the men elected to BCM seats.
- 20 Rotation of reservation of constituencies was a practice in the panchayats, but not so at higher levels of governance (legislature and parliament constituencies), where certain constituencies were permanently reserved for Scheduled Castes.
- 21 Women who were successful were labelled as having personal relationships with male patrons or male party functionaries. See V. Vijayalakshmi and B.K. Chandrashekar, 'Authority, Powerlessness and Dependence: Women and Local Governance in Karnataka,' forthcoming working paper, Institute for Social and Economic Change.
- 22 This raises questions related to the autonomy of panchayats and whether local institutions always have to rely on the state and central funds. However, whatever the source of funds, the members cannot do very much for their own group because of the top down planning.
- 23 Elites also influenced the constituents' choices through party forums, see Vijayalakshmi and Chandrashekar, (2001 b).
- 24 One of the possible mechanisms could be that constituents expressed their preferences through party functionaries and workers who were living in their area, which was subsequently conveyed to the representatives.
- 25 The situation is no different at higher levels of governance.

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