
Women Empowerment Through Political Participation: A Study On Vanitha League In Malappuram District, Kerala

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Abstract

This study explores the role of Vanitha League, the women's wing of the Indian Union Muslim League, in empowering women and promoting their political participation in Malappuram District, Kerala. Drawing on primary data from 100 respondents, the research examines the demographic, educational, and economic profiles of the respondents, along with their perceptions of Vanitha League's activities. The findings reveal that Vanitha League has significantly impacted women's social and educational progress, fostering leadership qualities, critical thinking, and organizational capabilities. The organization has also enhanced women's political capacities, including representation, information access, and participation in governance. However, traditional conservative attitudes, lack of funds, and limited support from parent organizations pose obstacles. Despite these challenges, Vanitha League plays a pivotal role in reducing social, economic, and political inequalities, thereby contributing to women's empowerment and sustainable development in the region.

Keywords : Empowerment, Social Progress, Educational Progress, Political participation.

Introduction

The term empowerment is defined as “the notion of people having the ability to understand and control themselves and their environment—including social, economic, and political factors—expanding their capabilities and horizons and elevating themselves to greater levels of achievement and satisfaction”¹ (Wilson, 1996). “Empowerment is an active, multi-dimensional process which enables women to realize their full identity and powers in all spheres of life”² (Sushama Sahay, 1998). The campaign for gender equality made women's empowerment a major issue, emphasizing their political voice, economic involvement, and autonomy and control over their own bodies. By bringing up a number of issues pertaining to women's everyday lives worldwide, feminist and women's movements have helped to advance the idea of empowerment. Women have similar experiences no matter where they live—in the West or the East, the global South or the North, third world nations in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, or developed nations in Europe and America. As a result, women's movements have emerged in many different parts of the world.

In India, the largest democracy in the world, women's political participation is acknowledged as a critical indicator of empowerment³ (Sheikh, 2020). Women are still underrepresented in national and state legislatures, despite the constitution's guarantees of gender equality⁴ (Sheikh, 2020; Das, 2022). Political parties play a significant role in promoting women's participation through Civil Society Organizations and international organizations⁵ (Dey & Das, 2020). International recognition has been given to women's political participation as a key indicator of women's empowerment in any given nation. Women's representation in legislative bodies, both at the federal and state levels, is extremely low in India, the world's largest democracy. Although the Indian Constitution undoubtedly upholds the principle of gender equality, women are still notably underrepresented in entities that make decisions. Incorporating women's concerns into governance requires their participation in

decision-making bodies. Additionally, it is a crucial step in establishing gender-sensitive policies and fair opportunities for both sexes⁶.

Scholars have provided insightful analysis on Women Empowerment and Political Participation. Nazma Sultana, Abdul Awal, Mohammad Rezaul Karim⁷, in their study Women empowerment through political participation – a perception study of Indian rural women, investigates how rural women in Dinhatra Subdivision view women's empowerment via political engagement. According to the study, rural women have drastically differing opinions about women's empowerment through political engagement. Even while the majority of rural women (47%) believe that active political involvement is necessary for women's empowerment, 29% of them have a negative opinion of it, and 24% have no notion that women may be empowered by political participation. Additionally, they see certain difficulties if they are actively involved in politics, such as taking care of the children and doing home tasks, which are traditionally and culturally reserved for women in rural India. L. Dey and Narasingha Das⁸, in their study Women empowerment and political participation: a sociological study in West Bengal, India analyses how women's empowerment in West Bengal, India, can be facilitated through political engagement. The study states that enrichment in democratic governance is a necessary condition for promoting women's empowerment in any state or country. The development of a democratic framework and effective governance also depends on political engagement. In this sense, political parties are the most crucial institutions for boosting women's political engagement.

Literature

M. Das's⁹ study on Empowerment of Women in India: An Overview of Political Participation aims to characterize and assess the political involvement of women in India and talks about the several steps the Indian government has done to empower women by looking at the country's ranking on the Gender Inequality Index. P. Datta and P. Sen¹⁰ in their study Women in Urban Local Governance: Empowerment Through Participation investigates the issue of women's empowerment in urban India through their involvement in local bodies. The problem has been examined in light of the results of a few studies carried out in significant states, including Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh. According to the studies, the number of elected women in unreserved wards has increased in subsequent municipal elections, among other things. Experiences in the field also show that a variety of limitations have prevented women from effectively participating. It has been proposed that arbitrary policies like reservations might only guarantee women's quantitative participation.

S. Hegde and Dr V Basil Hans¹¹ in their study, Role of Women Organisations in the Empowerment of Elected Women Representatives of Panchayat Raj Institutions in the City of Mangalore attempts to highlight the part that women's organizations play in raising political awareness among Indian women and helping to transform the country into a fully democratic one. Banothu Indira's¹² study on Panchayat Raj Institutions and Women's Empowerment through Political Participation in Telangana State examines how women's political participation through Panchayat Raj Institutions in India can lead to their empowerment. The study also states that the most pressing requirement for women's true empowerment at this time is their involvement in governing institutions at all levels. Women's political empowerment is typically understood to include their participation in elections or the government, which is necessary to provide them a say in the policies that impact their daily lives. D. L. Chaerowati, Nova Yuliati and M. Rochim¹³, in their study Empowering Women in Politics through Women's Political Organization, examines the role of women in politics through the Indonesian Political Women's Caucus, also known as KPPI, a group of female political activists who want to guarantee that women's rights, especially those in politics, will be upheld, protected, and fulfilled by Indonesia's democratic process.

Theoretical Structure of Previous Studies

The theoretical underpinnings of women's empowerment through political participation are deeply intertwined with the principles of democratic governance and social inclusion. Dey and Narasingha Das emphasize that the enrichment of democratic governance is a vital precondition for empowering women, highlighting that political engagement not only fosters individual agency but also strengthens the democratic framework itself. This approach aligns with the notion that political parties, as primary vehicles of governance, play a pivotal role in amplifying women's voices and facilitating their integration into decision-making processes. The studies underscore the interdependence of democratic enhancement and women's empowerment, suggesting that participatory democracy is a catalyst for transformative change in gender equity.

Building on this foundation, M. Das's work explores India's political landscape through the lens of the Gender Inequality Index, offering a macro-level understanding of the strides taken by the government to enhance women's

political participation. This perspective frames empowerment as a multidimensional process that goes beyond representation, delving into the structural inequalities that hinder women's access to power. Datta and Sen extend this discourse by focusing on urban local governance, revealing that while reservations have quantitatively increased women's participation, deeper systemic barriers persist. Their analysis reflects the limitations of policy mechanisms that prioritize numerical representation over qualitative engagement, necessitating a reevaluation of empowerment strategies to address entrenched sociopolitical constraints.

Complementing these Indian-centric studies, S. Hegde and Dr. V. Basil Hans examine the transformative potential of women's organizations in fostering political awareness and participation, illustrating their role in bridging the gap between grassroots activism and institutional politics. Similarly, Banothu Indira emphasizes the critical importance of women's involvement at all levels of governance, particularly through Panchayat Raj Institutions, which serve as a conduit for grassroots empowerment. The comparative lens offered by Chaerowati, Yuliati, and Rochim on the Indonesian Political Women's Caucus highlights a parallel global narrative of leveraging collective action to safeguard women's political rights and expand their influence. Together, these studies articulate a nuanced understanding of women's political empowerment as a dynamic interplay between institutional frameworks, policy interventions, and grassroots mobilization, offering a robust theoretical base for addressing gender inequities in governance.

Methodology

The studies cited above shows how Women Empowerment is possible through Political Participation and the role of Women Organisation in empowering women. Similarly, the purpose of this study is to ascertain how the activities of Vanitha League empowers women and encourages political participation. Vanitha League is the women's wing of the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) of India formed in 1997. It is a women's wing of a party recognized in India and Kerala. As a women organisation it plays a decisive role in upbringing women in to the mainstream of the society and encourages empowerment and political participation of women. It has the aim to encourage women to enter the public arena and actively engage in politics. Vanitha League were always working to improve women, their contribution could be taken into account. It has a big impact on women's empowerment and preparing them for both formal and informal political participation and tries to increase women's political awareness and their role in transforming the society into a fully democratic one. This article uses primary data to study the role of Vanitha League in women empowerment and political participation in Malappuram District, Kerala. With the help of a survey, data were collected from 100 respondents of rural and urban areas of Malappuram district. The data include demographic profile, educational and economic status, different perceptions of Women on empowerment programmes of Vanitha League.

Demographic Profile of the Respondents:

First table categorized the survey respondents into five age groups, 18–21; 22–35; 36-45; 46-55 and above 55 Years. Out of One hundred respondents, 35 (35%) of them were belongs to 18-21 years age group, thirty-three (33%) of them belong to 22-35 age group, seventeen (17%) comes in the 36-45 age group, six (6%) in the 46-55 category and only 9 (9%) fall in the age group of above 55 Years.

| Table 1- Category-Age wise | | |
|----------------------------|-----------|---------|
| AGE | Frequency | Percent |
| 18-21 Years | 35 | 35% |
| 22-35 Years | 33 | 33% |
| 36-45 Years | 17 | 17% |
| 46-55 Years | 6 | 6% |
| Above 55 Years | 9 | 9% |
| Total | 100 | 100% |

Table 2 categorises the respondents as married, single and divorced. Among the total of one hundred respondents 56 (56%) of them are married which illustrates majority of the respondents are come under this category. Forty (40%) out of one hundred are unmarried and four (4%) of them are divorced.

| Table 2 -Category-Marital Status | | |
|----------------------------------|-----------|---------|
| | Frequency | Percent |
| Married | 56 | 56% |
| Single | 40 | 40% |
| Divorced | 4 | 4% |

| | | |
|-------|-----|------|
| Total | 100 | 100% |
|-------|-----|------|

When the nature of place of residence of the respondents are analysed, it is understood that 68% of them comes under Panchayat area, while thirty-two of them (32%) resides in Municipality area. It shows majority of the respondents lives in Panchayat area.

| Table 3 -Category-Nature of Place of Residence | | |
|--|-----------|---------|
| | Frequency | Percent |
| Corporation | 0 | 0 |
| Municipality | 32 | 32% |
| Panchayat | 68 | 68% |
| Total | 100 | 100% |

When the nature of family of the respondents are analysed, it is understood that 65% of them are belongs to joint family, while thirty Five of them belongs to nuclear family (35%) and resides in Municipality area. It shows majority of the respondents belonged to joint family.

| Table 4-Category-Nature of the Family | | |
|---------------------------------------|-----------|---------|
| | Frequency | Percent |
| Joint Family | 65 | 65% |
| Nuclear Family | 35 | 35% |
| Total | 100 | 100% |

Educational Profile of the Respondents:

None of the 100 respondents were found to be illiterate. Out of total respondents, 34, i.e., 34% have completed undergraduate courses and 32% have post graduate degree. Table 5 shows the respondents have higher level of education and majority of them were graduated and post graduated. Eighteen respondents (18%) have completed PDC/Plus two and six of them completed High School education respectively. Out of 100 respondents, 5(5%) are professionally qualified and 3(3%) are fall into the category of technical education. As the education level goes higher, however, the number of the respondents gets reduced.

| Table 5-Educational Profile of the Respondents | | |
|--|-----------|---------|
| | Frequency | Percent |
| Primary | 2 | 2% |
| High School | 6 | 6% |
| PDC/+2 | 18 | 18% |
| Degree | 34 | 34% |
| PG | 32 | 32% |
| Technical Education | 3 | 3% |
| Others (Medical, Engineering etc) | 5 | 5% |
| Total | 100 | 100% |

Employment status of the respondents:

The researcher has also made an effort to evaluate the employment status of women in the Malappuram district. It is seen that 16% of them are students, 39% of them are unemployed or homemakers, 12% are working in public sector or Government employees, 8% are Professionals, 10(10%) of them are working in private sector. The rest 15% are self-employed.

| Table 6- Employment status of the respondents | | |
|---|-----------|---------|
| | Frequency | Percent |
| Private Employee | 10 | 10% |
| Govt/Public Sector Employee | 12 | 12% |
| Professional | 8 | 8% |
| Unemployed /Homemakers | 39 | 39% |
| Student | 16 | 16% |
| Self Employed | 15 | 15% |

| | | |
|-------|-----|-----|
| Total | 100 | 100 |
|-------|-----|-----|

Economic Status of the Respondents: Average Monthly Income of the Respondents:

Level of education and employment status may affect the average monthly income of the respondents. The following table illustrates that 64 respondents (64%) have said that they have no income. They are students and unemployed. Among these 64 respondents, 33 are unemployed or homemakers, Here, we can see that eight (8%) out of the total 100 had income less than Rs 3000 monthly, while 6% of them had an income between Rs 3001 and Rs 5000. 13 out of them (13%) had their monthly income in the slab Rs 10,001 and 20,000. seven (7%) of them falls into the high category of having an income above Rs 20,000. Two of them fall under the ‘No response’ category.

| | Frequency | Percent |
|---------------------|-----------|---------|
| Nil | 64 | 64% |
| Below Rs 3000 | 8 | 8% |
| Rs 3001 - Rs 5000 | 6 | 6% |
| Rs 10001 - Rs 20000 | 13 | 13% |
| Above Rs 20000 | 7 | 7% |
| No Response | 2 | 2% |
| Total | 100 | 100% |

Property Status of the Respondents:

The following table postulates the ownership of property of the respondents. Out of the total respondents, 58 (58%) of them have no property of their own. 26% of them have ‘no response’ regarding the property status. It is found that only three of the respondents (3%) have the property of below 5 Cents, while the remaining four (4%) have 6 to 10 Cents, 4 of them have 11 to 20 Cents. 5 (5%) of them are belong to More than 20 Cents’ category.

| | Frequency | Percent |
|--------------------|-----------|---------|
| No Land Owned | 58 | 58% |
| Below 5 Cents | 3 | 3% |
| 6 to 10 Cents | 4 | 4% |
| 11 to 20 Cents | 4 | 4% |
| More than 20 Cents | 5 | 5% |
| No Response | 26 | 26% |
| Total | 100 | 100% |

Perceptions of Women on empowerment programmes of Vanitha League:

Response on reason for join in Vanitha League:

The respondents were asked the reason for join in Vanitha League, a significant portion of the respondents- 58%-opined that family tradition is the major reason. Thirty respondents opined leadership quality and reformist attitude of the organisation is the main cause. The organisation interfere actively in the issues of women is the major concern of twelve respondents.

| Reason for join in Vanitha League | Responses | |
|------------------------------------|------------------|---------|
| | Number | Percent |
| | Family Tradition | 58 |
| Leadership quality | 30 | 30% |
| Reformist attitude | 30 | 30% |
| Active in interfering women issues | 12 | 12% |
| Total | 130 | |

Response on how long the respondents have been associated with Vanitha League:

An attempt has also been made to assess the period the respondents are associated with Vanitha League. Sixty eight out of 100 are fall into the category of 11 to 15 years, and fourteen of them belong to the 6 to 10 years category. Six out of them belong to 0 to 5 years category. Twelve are included in the 15 years and above category.

| Table 10- Response on how long the respondents have been associated with Vanitha League: | | |
|---|-----------|---------|
| | Frequency | Percent |
| 0 to 5years | 6 | 6% |
| 6 to 10 years | 14 | 14% |
| 11 to 15 years | 68 | 68% |
| 15 years and above | 12 | 12% |
| Total | 100 | 100% |

Result & Discussion

From the field study, an important aspect is being noticed. Majority of the respondents-82(82%) have the opinion that Vanitha League has an influential role in social and educational progress of women. The functions of Vanitha League have improved the inclusion and participation of women. They have the opinion that social capabilities like leadership quality, sense of identity, capacity to criticize, capacity to organize etc has improved due to the activities of Vanitha League.

Majority of the people responded that the capacity to represent (55%) and access information (56%) is the major Political capabilities which have improved due to the activities of Vanitha League. Capacity to criticize (40%) is considered as an important capability of women which enhanced through this organisation. Some of the respondents opined form associations (26%), and participate in the political life of the society (36%), have improved due to the interference of Vanitha League. It is found that 87% of the respondents have the opinion that Vanitha League is actively interfere in women’s problems like poverty, low educational status, marital issues, issues related to dowry and divorce etc.

The researcher has attempted to assess the response on Vanitha League faces any obstacles in empowering Women. It is seen that 36% of them are opined that traditional conservative thinking is an important barrier in the political empowerment of women. Thirty two respondents have the opinion that lack of fund is the major obstacle. Remaining respondents have the opinion that inadequate support from the parent organisation, discrimination from male leaders etc are some of the obstacles that Vanitha League faces in empowering Women. Examining the aforementioned perceptions, it is evident that the role of Vanitha League in women empowerment and political participation in Malappuram District is very significant. Empowerment of women is possible through the Vanitha League and it helps to reduce economic, social and political inequalities. For the vast majority of impoverished people, the Vanitha League makes it possible for both men and women to provide sustainable development services including infrastructure, roads, water, education, and health care. For political empowerment, the organization recruits more people and organizes awareness classes for women. Given their on-going efforts to raise the standard of living for women, Vanitha League's contribution could be taken into consideration. They are helping to empower women and get them ready for both formal and informal political engagement. The function of this organization in raising women's political awareness is very important.

The majority of women opined that the Vanitha League had a significant impact on women's social and educational advancement. The Vanitha League's activities have enhanced women's participation and inclusion. They believe that the Vanitha League's activities have increased social qualities such as leadership quality, sense of identity, ability to critique, ability to organize, etc. The Vanitha League's efforts have strengthened women's political capacities. The majority of respondents stated that the main political capabilities that have increased as a result of Vanitha League activities are the ability to represent and obtain information. One of the key skills that this organization helps women develop is the ability to critique. According to some of the interviewees, the Vanitha League's meddling has boosted their ability to join associations and take part in society's political life.

Conclusion

The Vanitha League emerges as a transformative force for women’s empowerment in Malappuram District by addressing critical social, economic, and political disparities. Its activities have improved women’s inclusion in governance, enhanced their leadership and organizational skills, and advanced their ability to critique and

participate in political life. Respondents overwhelmingly acknowledge the organization's influence in alleviating educational and social barriers, thus fostering women's overall development. While challenges such as conservative societal norms and funding limitations persist, the League's efforts in raising political awareness and recruiting members underscore its commitment to empowering women for formal and informal political engagement. Vanitha League's contributions are vital in promoting gender-sensitive governance and equitable societal progress.

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