

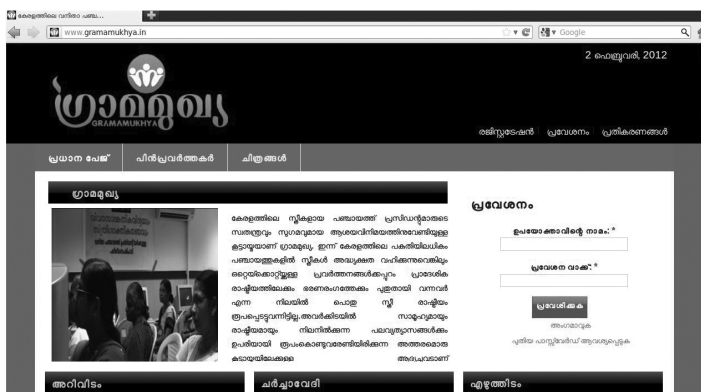


The Gramamukhya Initiative

Empowering women leaders at the local level in Kerala

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Quotas as inadequate strategy

The devolution of state functions to local level institutions of self government was effected in Kerala, a south Indian state, under the Kerala Panchayat Raj Act, 1994. This statute provided 33 percent reservation of seats in electoral positions for women in local level political bodies (increased now to 50 percent), an affirmative action instituted in the spirit of gender equality in political representation. Studies about women leaders' participation in local governance show that while they did acquire knowledge and skills appropriate to elected office during their three-year tenures, they were unsuccessful in influencing change in their spheres of action, being subjected to patriarchal domination by male members of their respective political parties¹.

Gender mainstreaming policies have thus tended to assume automatic transformation on the ground and have not taken cognisance of how the intervention interacts with existing power structures and relations. Moreover, evaluation of the participation of women in local governance has revealed that while they are competent in their role as managers of developmental programmes, they are far removed from the dynamics of local political institutions, with no effective leverage

over any real power². Therefore, an interrogation of the state-led gender mainstreaming effort is required.

Need for grassroots feminist political mobilisation

One of the key efforts of the state towards women's 'empowerment' in Kerala has been the training workshops designed and implemented by state-level institutions like Kerala Institute of Local Administration (KILA) in collaboration with women's organisations for elected women representatives in *panchayats* or local governance institutions.

The underlying assumption of these efforts has been that transformation to a gender-just society is possible in a non-confrontational manner through gender training and the development of individual skills as the principal tool for transformation. Such a framework is not conducive to the mutual exchange and horizontal networking among women from diverse backgrounds and dispersed geographies that is vital for any process of collective empowerment to address patriarchal norms and structures. In their official role, elected women representatives are not seen as active political agents. On the contrary, the wider governance system has deemed their participation in governance beneficial for achieving bureaucratic efficiency by

invoking the 'merits' of feminine nature - acquiescence to rules and regulations, convivial interpersonal relations, etc. Women leaders in local *panchayats* have thus been denied their political agency and relegated to the role of development managers.

Based on a critical assessment of such co-optation by the state of women's empowerment, an exploratory project was initiated in 2011, by a team of research scholars, supported by the CITIGEN research programme. It was felt that networking women leaders in local governance through a digital platform would provide an innovative point of departure for catalysing a sense of solidarity among themselves and a connection to the women's movement in Kerala. The potential of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) was thus sought to be harnessed to provide alternative spaces for the articulation of women's voices.

A digital platform called *Gramamukhya* (www.gramamukhya.in) was therefore created through this project as a new pathway for feminist politics and gender transformation, in the public sphere in Kerala. The main rationale of the project is to strengthen the political consciousness of women in local governance through ongoing dialogue and critical reflection to build their political subjectivities and enhance their effective participation in the political arena.

Gramamukhya brings together both serving and former women presidents from three districts in Kerala - Thiruvananthapuram, Malappuram and Kannur. As the first step in building a communication community, the project has involved networking at the horizontal level with one hundred and twenty six serving women leaders from the three chosen districts³ to formally enlist them as members of this new network. A 'support group' of nine former *panchayat* presidents has also been created. These women were selected based on their successful resistance to patriarchal attitudes and the exercise of power within their spheres of action, in their previous two to three terms in office. It is hoped that their past experience in employing specific strategies of negotiation will be valuable for new entrants.

At the vertical level, the project has entailed interactions with feminist activists, scholars and collectives, women centric quasi-government meso-level institutions and women writers. The first collaboration was with Kerala Mahila Samakhya Society, a quasi-governmental organisation engaged in mobilising and empowering women through education, and also addressing issues such as child abuse, dowry, sexual harassment etc. The second collaboration was with Centre for Development Studies (CDS), a research

institution in Kerala known for its empirical research, including in women's issues with regard to labour, self help groups, governance etc., and its faculty, in consultation with whom the content for the digital platform has been planned. The process of content generation is ongoing and women leaders who are users of the platform are also engaged in the same, along with members of the support group.

Gramamukhya has been designed as a collaborative portal to facilitate free articulation and sharing of experiences, while at the same time opening up the possibility for its members to critically engage with issues pertaining not only to governance but also to wider public life. It has been developed completely in the local language, Malayalam. The content on the digital platform has been categorised according to three main sections. Of the main features of the platform, the 'Knowledge Creation and Information Sharing' (*Arividam*) section deals with governance while the 'Discussion Forum' (*Charchavedi*) and 'Writer's Blog' (*Ezhuthidam*) are associated with wider public life, with all sections seen as mutually reinforcing. As part of the project's strategy, women leaders were encouraged to access and use existing computer and connectivity facilities both at home and in the panchayat office. Understanding the gender politics of technology use and appropriation as well as experiences of former presidents has made them gradually realise the importance of being equipped with digital technologies despite the difficulties surrounding the same. Now, all members of the support group and many of the presidents are enrolled in their local Akshaya centres⁴ to hone their basic skills in ICTs.

In contrast to the many limitations to women's effective participation in what may be called 'the invited spaces of governance', *Gramamukhya* thus represents an 'invented space' for an alternative gender politics. It offers a space outside mainstream efforts to inform and revitalise policies and programmes within the 'invited spaces' of local governance.

The Gramamukhya platform: A model for policy

The building of *Gramamukhya* as a digital platform has, in many ways, integrated the e-governance efforts of the IT mission of the Kerala state with women's representation in local governance from a progressive, women's rights perspective. The portal demonstrates the need to bring together various factors – digital spaces and the potential of ICTs; horizontal and vertical networking with women from various constituencies; changes in governance processes such as inclusion of

elected representatives within the e-governance framework; and the creation of a mechanism for articulating their concerns within state level policy platforms and decision-making bodies; for the substantive participation of women in local governance. This perspective of 'integration' reflects the true spirit of decentralisation and makes use of mutually complementary functionalities across domains, allowing various developmental projects and their planning on the ground to be more effective. Kerala's Local Self Government Department (LSGD) can possibly initiate an autonomous cell consisting of multiple experts from various fields (information technology, governance, women's movement) to evolve such integration within existing planning processes.

Gramamukhya has been designed and built through a participatory, 'design-in-use' perspective, dynamically engaging with its initiators, users and developers in a continuous dialogue. The IT policy of Kerala must take into account such an approach in developing applications for varied users, understanding the interaction between the potential use of the technology and its users in specific contexts, also exploring mobile phones or even community radio, where relevant. A primary learning for the project has been that a focus on the substantive involvement, rather than descriptive representation of women within the political arena not only helps build a new collective politics, but also empowers them to claim their rights through networking with non-state actors, specifically the women's movement and individual feminist activists and writers in Kerala. The state's commitment to women's empowerment should therefore extend to a support for such spaces and requires a different engagement with women as an autonomous political grouping rather than co-opting them within their primary agenda of gender mainstreaming.

Recommendations

1. State-level organisations and bodies

Lack of adequate exposure and use of ICTs among women *panchayat* presidents has resulted in the exclusion of women from effective participation in governance processes, which in Kerala are increasingly mediated by ICTs. Competencies in the technical sphere should hence be built by utilising existing centres of ICTs training for hands-on exposure and learning for women leaders at the time of induction into governance. KILA can take up this responsibility of providing an initial intensive in-house training, plus an additional programme for up to six months at Akshaya

centres within their *panchayats*, leading to certification by the state. KILA has been set up by the government with a sizeable fund mobilised from local governments. In order to reconfigure the goals and organisational practices of KILA that match a gendered vision of decentralisation and local self governance, it is recommended that KILA enhance the representation of women in their decision making bodies and processes. The government should come up with a policy on the Women Component Plan (WCP) under which local bodies set aside 10 percent of the grant-in-aid for projects directly targeting women. The preparation of such a plan should be through a deliberative process among current and ex-presidents of local panchayats, along with meso-level institutions engaged in grassroots mobilisation of women, employing the *Gramamukhya* platform. The State Planning Board and the Local Self Government Department should recognise *Gramamukhya* as a forum to engage with various issues of governance and to find ways of representing the same in the planning process.

The e-governance efforts of the Kerala state have so far focused on accountability and transparency in governance processes. However, these have only promoted technocratic involvement keeping elected representatives outside the purview. While such measures may provide for greater efficiency in governance processes, they are often disassociated from local concerns.

The e-governance framework of the state should therefore be reconstituted to include members from the proposed autonomous cell working on integrating the various development verticals for a more deliberative programme and policy design. It is also recommended that women in local governance be provided with individual laptops for their use, both at home and at work, to enable flexibility and mobility within their work routine.

2. Role of meso-level institutions

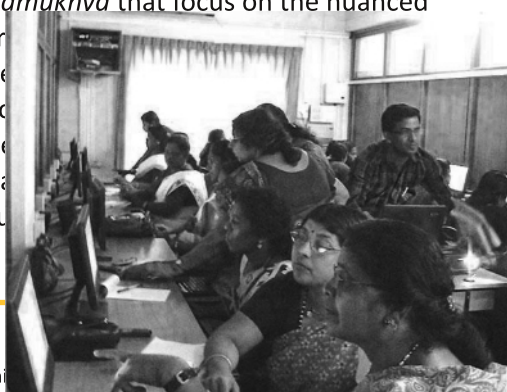
Gramamukhya can evolve into a vibrant and credible space for women's articulation of policy agenda. This calls for meso-level state institutions such as *Kerala Mahila Samakhya Society* who have a presence at the grassroots, and whose policy formulations are fed by insights from the ground, to use the *Gramamukhya* platform meaningfully. Similarly, state initiatives like the *Kudumbashree* programme and Women's Development Corporation (WDC), should initiate dialogues with members of *Gramamukhya* via the website, actively employing the outcomes of these deliberations for policy processes.

3. Building solidarity with migrant women workers

A virtual platform can also become a trans-local arena for interactions between diasporic women who have the rich experience of effectively negotiating with patriarchy gained through mobility. From the perspective of transnational women workers often subject to varied forms of exploitation in the global economy, such interaction will imply direct access to local women leaders back home during times of crisis. It must be noted that online interactions have the potential to enable radical collective action in offline contexts, as has been noted in the recent protest movements and revolutions that took place in the Arab world. This transaction between online and offline contexts holds the promise of deepening democracy and furthering citizenship. Organisations involved in safeguarding the rights of diasporic Keralites such as Non-Resident Keralites' Affairs Department (NORKA) should connect migrant women workers from different professions, to the *Gramamukhya* platform so as to help them re-establish links with their place of origin.

4. Free and Open Source Software (FOSS)

The transformatory potential of digital technology requires that social development actors forge a closer relationship with the community of Free and Open Source Software (FOSS) developers who are actively involved in democratising the use of technology. There are many 'localisation' applications and modules, such as transliteration software for local languages and flexible platforms that allow multiple customisations. Further, the common goal of creating a user-friendly interface in local language requires a number of discussions and meetings between software developers and initiators of social change projects like *Gramamukhya* that focus on the nuanced requirements for the development of varied perspectives to build a platform in the public domain.



Endnotes:

1 Chathukulum J., John M.S. (2000), Empowerment of Women Panchayat Members: Learning from Kerala, pp. 66-101

2 Williams G., Thampi B.V., Narayana D., Nandigama S., Bhattacharyya D. (2011), Performing Participatory Citizenship – Politics and Power in Kerala's Kudumbashree Programme, in Journal of Development Studies DOI:10.1080/00220388.2010.527949 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00220388.2010.527949>

3 These districts not only represent south, central and north Kerala but also cover its variation along political parties. Trivandrum is more or less equal in LDF (Left Democratic Front) and UDF (United Democratic Front) composition, while Malappuram is predominantly UDF, and Kannur, LDF. Malappuram, in spite of being a Muslim dominated district with low literacy rates, in fact demonstrated a successful implementation of the Akshaya programme.

4 Akshaya is the ICTs diffusion and dissemination project of the IT mission of the state government of Kerala, implemented through its various centres, set up in close proximity to rural households.

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