

THE GENDER ROLES IN COMMUNICATION PRACTICES OF WOMEN LOCAL LEADERS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INQUIRY AMONG VILLAGE PANCHAYAT PRESIDENTS IN KERALA

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ABSTRACT: *The leadership roles demand impressive communication skills for the political existence of a women representative of local self-government. The everyday communicative actions of a woman leader often received with a stereotypical gender perspective. Irrespective of the content and clarity, the mode of communication, the context, the medium, and the presentation of the self were collaborating in its reception. The verbal and nonverbal gestures, including appearance in terms of dress, accessories, and style, take roles in presenting the self in a communicational context. The study observes how gender plays in the communicational initiatives of a Woman leader in terms of the choice of medium, time, space, and personal appearance. The communicational efforts of the local women leadership for participation and interaction in the activities to sustain their roles and responsibilities define the gender alternatives of communicative action. The study analyses the conscious attempts of verbal and nonverbal expressions of thought as well as the appearance and presentation of public interactions of women leaders. The study explores the communication habits in defining the gender and social roles of women in leadership.*

KEYWORDS: *Communicational dilemma, Women Leaders, Local Bodies, Kerala, Self-presentation, Communicative actions, Communication Crisis, Gender roles*

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1. INTRODUCTION

The south Indian states have relatively low gender disparities compared to the rest of the country; among that, Kerala ranked at the top of all major Indian states on the status of women index (Filmer et al., 1998). Through transferring funds, functions, and functionaries to the local self-governments, the idea of democratic decentralization was deepened at the grassroots level with the People's planning movement. Kerala's tradition of democratic decentralization is different from the rest of India because it initiated institutional reforms and moved ahead of others to devolve powers, responsibilities, and funds to the local governments, enlisting the support of women's neighbourhood groups to bridge the gap between the local self-government and communities (Isaac & Harilal, 1997; Mohanakumar, 2002; Oommen, 2014). Heller (1998), in a comparative analysis of the degree of democracy in different states in India with particular reference to Kerala, argues that the structure and patterns of interest representation mediate the relationship between civil society and democracy. Many of the unique state-society synergies in Kerala have been facilitated by such engagement driven by lower-class mobilization.

The democratic, decentralized institutions in Kerala now have 54.7 percent of women representation after the local body election in 2020. After more than twenty-five years of practicing devolution through people's planning with gender mainstreaming, the local governance in Kerala, a southern Indian state, witnessed a growing percentage of woman representatives for the last three consecutive elections to the Local government institutions. Having more than half the share total number of elected representatives, the women's leadership in self-ruling government bodies activates the political engagement of rural women. The fifty percent reservation for women in the state local body elections was enacted in 2009. In 2010 and 2015, the two elections held subsequently after the bill witnessed the significant participation of women obtaining 52.96% and 54.3% of the wards, respectively. With each election, the trend of incumbent women members holding on to their seats despite the ward not being reserved for them is observed (TOI report, 2020). According to recent official statistics, the state has 941 Village panchayats with 15939 elected representatives. Among those, 8735 women and 7204 men represent the ward constituencies (used gov.in).

The participation of elected women in a village's political, social, and development activities, with the responsibility of civic representation, reassures power and positions to rural women. The role of People's planning in women's empowerment was primarily studied in terms of its preferences in community development through women by building their capacities. Gender equality was a prime motive of the projects of decentralized planning under the people's planning process in Kerala (Baiju, 2022). Being the elected representative and leader of a village, the Panchayath President is a woman who holds many sorts of duties and responsibilities and is also positioned with certain political power in the society. The increased opportunities and liabilities of the position create a public appeal to the person. Being the representative of the local community requires a regular, democratic practice of communication and integration to develop an interpersonal relationship with every individual in the ward constituency. The reachability and communicational access to the person is the highest demand of the representative at the rural level.

Being the micro-level agent of development policies and projects, the ward members, and the President, are expected to be available and communicable for any matters, issues, and needs of the community members. Round-the-clock requirement of communicational accessibility is expected from the representative, especially in a crisis. Kerala's experience of facing the challenges of flood, covid pandemic control, heavy rain, and related calamities are handled effectively through the decentralized possibilities of management through local governments made a drastic change in the expectancies and accessibilities of local representatives by the public at large. The decentralized planning and management of development projects, crisis management measures, and policy implementations of the state are channelled through local self-institutions. Thus, the responsibilities

of a local body representative intensified over the last five years. The leadership provided at the ground level by local government institutions has been active in the prevention and control of infectious diseases and disaster management; they also maintained the trust-based social contract between the state and people and the active involvement of the community through local governments had played a significant role in Kerala's measures of pandemic control (Issac, Sadanandan, 2020).

The versatility of the tasks assigned to the position of Village Panchayath President, as a leader of a community, demands an active and constant involvement with social issues in terms of communication and management. With multiple roles of social engagement as a representative, leader, decision maker, and crisis manager, the local leadership functions in regular interactions with people of various interpersonal relationships. The sustainability of such a position also plays a significant role in the communicational competence and performance of the person who is flexible with the audience and community. The requirement of everyday self-presentation in the public sphere demands adaptability and understanding of the audience. Political affiliation, prior experiences in social interaction and the community, and attitude influence or determine a person's communicational and presentational skills when positioned in power. Women being mothers and homemakers are multi-tasking the duties and responsibilities of a leader of a Panchayath as well as a family. Working among the common people and mobilizing them in the planning and implementing development and welfare projects for the village, the time could not be differentiated as personal and professional because the service is expected at any time. The personal life of such leaders is merged with the service, and where the management skill is required to carry the life untroubled, especially for a Woman who is heading a local government.

The dimensions of the interpersonal and cultural relationships of the President taking the lead role in the community development initiatives are many in terms of its characteristics and requirements. The leaders of the local governance play two major communicative roles; first, being the representatives of people, a daily interaction with the public of different sizes, communities, and with different needs, to listen, solve and represent their issues to the state at large. Second, participate, and interact with the state policymakers as representatives of a village community. These two democratic powers are to be handled simultaneously by the person who holds the position. This study looks forward to the experiences of presidents as a woman to analyse the communicational approaches and challenges of their role, which requires a timeless interaction with ordinary people. The study explores the role of gender in the performances of a leader in regular interactions and communication practices.

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- [1] Exploring the lived experiences of Woman panchayath presidents, the study tries to bring out some observations regarding and related to the following objectives:
- [2] How did the gender perform in the communicational actions of woman panchayath Presidents in Kerala?
- [3] How do the social constructions of gender affect the communication approaches of a woman head of a local government?
- [4] What are the dilemmas and challenges a women panchayath president in Kerala faces in their everyday interactions with the public?

3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Several studies have been undertaken to analyze the role of women leaders of decentralized institutions in terms of rural development and effective service delivery. Palanithurai (2005) observes that the participation of women Panchayath presidents in development activities contributes to community empowerment. The leadership ability, the power to execute development programs,

activities of community engagement in governance, the coordination and cooperation skills are the determining factors of empowerment. The inquiries of Ranjith Kumar, A. & Dimitrov, G. E. B. (2022) on the impact of reservation in local democracy emphasize the idea that women leaders can achieve the self-sustainability of a rural village through people-centric and effective governance at the local level. The studies on the role of decentralized institutions in planning and implementing capacity building for women put forward a threefold strategy for empowering women with social and economic empowerment and gender justice (Baiju, 2022). A report published by PRIA (1999) on Women in Panchayat took a closer look at Women Panchayat Presidents and Members in Kerala and found that whenever the women representative of the local constituency got acquainted and experienced the new system, there was a remarkable change in their knowledge and attitude, which ultimately increased their leadership and identity

Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) observe that there is no evidence to show that reserved women Panchayath Presidents act in ways that are more congruent with the preferences of women; unlike them, A comparative study on the men and women presidents in south India finds that Reserved women Presidents are not tokens and become more effective when they acquire more political experience and when they are well educated. (R Rao ; Ban , V Rao, 2008). The study adds that there is no evidence to suggest that women Presidents are acting in a manner that is more sensitive to the preferences of women. Women with previous experience at the grassroots or in local government can manage their roles in local politics and handle interference from men more easily (Ameerudeen, 2017).

In an exclusive analysis of the experience of women Panchayath Presidents in Kerala, Devika J (2008) observes the influence of political parties and leadership in denying them the to make and implement independent decisions. The report finds different kinds of internal and external struggles that a woman Panchayath President faces to gain acceptance as a leader. This study looks explicitly towards the communicational and identity crisis of the woman in leadership after the three terms of holding the fifty-percentage portion of the position. Distinct from the existing literature, the researcher of this study takes a closer look at the gender roles in the communicational aspects of the current woman leaders of decentralization in Kerala. Continuing the approach of other inquiries, it explores the trends, practices, and challenges of day-to-day communication and the factors influencing and affecting the communicational needs and actions of Women leaders of local governments.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Exploring the everyday experiences of a woman leader needs an in-depth investigation and interaction. The study focuses on the women-elected leaders of Kerala's Local self-government, who hold the position of Presidents of Village Panchayath, in order to understand their communicational experience in the process of day-to-day social and political engagement. The study leads a phenomenological approach by employing the data collection methods of in depth interview and observation. In a phenomenological inquiry the social actors must be allowed to locate themselves in the social world by their communication, principally vocabulary. Through unfolding the nature of language in the life experiences leads to further possibilities for compiling organized data (Manen, 1990). The in-depth interview with purposively selected fifteen women presidents aged between 30 to 50 from the regions of Northern and Central Kerala.. All interviews were conducted with direct interpersonal interactions with the duration of two hours. The basic nature of the questions was unstructured and open ended to allow the participants to narrate the experiences in the everyday role as a leader and communicator.

Furthermore the researcher participated in and observed different communicational contexts, meetings, workshops, and formal and informal public interactions conducted for the women

panchayath president in the state. The data is also driven for coding from the experience sharing sessions in different training programs conducted by the Kerala Institute of local administration for empowering and equipping the women leaders for fit for the role and society. The curiosity of the study leads to knowing the similarities, differences, and uniqueness of the communicational approaches and self-presentational strategy of these representatives inquires their personal experience of societal interactions.

The observation notes and interview transcripts were analysed in terms of the differences in the communicational approaches in different categories of interpersonal communication. The respondents were assigned an identifier as R1, R2 for the smooth execution of Coding and Analysis. A coding sheet was developed for interview transcripts and observation notes and then combined the sheets in terms of the themes derived from the research objectives. A thematic coding done with the final coding sheet in terms of the research questions to theorize the lives experiences of genders in everyday communication.

5. DATA ANALYSIS, INTERPRETATIONS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Communication approaches in social interactions

Intimacy - formality, is one among the four universal dimensions of personal relationships (Triandis, 1977), which specifies the contact among the interpersonal relationship. Intimacy is identified with the possibility of touch, physical closeness, and eye contact; the other formality indicates the opposite pattern; there is no touch and eye contact, and have less chance for emotional expression. Based on the interview, the everyday communicational contexts of a Panchayath President can broadly differentiate as intimate and formal. The direct meet-ups and conversations with people from different walks of life as intimate and virtual interactions in terms of mobile phone conversations and social media chats is taken as formal. The communicational relationships of women leaders in and among people with different dimensions of relationships vary accordingly. The leaders, as active communicators, take different communication strategies to interact with people who are considered to be sharing equal positions, who are authoritative, and whom they are represented for. Communication habits, language, and body language have some connotations with the relationship between the sender (here the woman leader) and the receiver. The everyday life of a President of a local government, despite of gender, comprises numerous interactions with the public, directly or indirectly. Being the most directly approachable person for local community members, the President can expect continuous, divergent issues from common people, which requires a communicational aptitude in standing for and standing with them. The approach will vary according to the audience, space, and the density of the issue.

The respondents of the study indicate that the power position that they take has a connection with the approach of communication; much consideration lies in whom they are talking to. The communication approach cannot always be predefined according to the audience or their personal relationships; it may take dimensions according to the space and situation. Basically, the respondent of this study prefers different communicational approaches for intimate and formal conversations. The expression and performance in terms of communicative action and self-presentation fluctuate in intimate communications and formal communications. In intimate communication, whether it is interpersonal or group, the speaker makes a conscious effort to prepare for the presentation in terms of appearance, mannerisms, and content. Whereas telephonic conversations usually encounter issues, problems, and complaints from sometimes unknown people unexpectedly, such interactions are dealt with in a gentle polished, and explanatory approach to communication. The presentation of the voice and careful delivery of the content takes an active role in temporally satisfying the communicational

need of the receiver. The biggest challenge in such conversations, especially telephonic interactions, is the need for patience in listening and the presence of the mind.

5.2 The gender roles in communication and power

The gendered role in interpersonal communication is evident in the day-to-day experiences of the last two years of the Woman Panchayath Presidents. The preference for gender in the initial days as a new person in the position was evident in the office visitors' choice of person for communication. A President said, 'There are people who will be satisfied in communication when a man confirms what we said, in my experience, they will first talk to me, inquire something and I will give the reply, but they again go the vice president who is a man, to rise the same question and get the reply, then only they will be satisfied. Even though I a better answer to share people usually prefers a man's (vice president) voice in many cases ' Another President adds, 'Sometimes the staff also go the Vice president for some information, which makes me feel embarrassed and they take Man's voice as authoritative.' The general perspectives of gender, the bias, are built with such prejudices and assumptions. A woman must put extra effort into convincing the capabilities of the intimate group first and then the external public at large.

Society will observe the performance in terms of communication and management in the experimentation phase (The first few months) to trust the capacity of an elected woman, which determines the communicational attitude towards them. The so called 'well-wishers' use the initial crisis of a Woman President in handling a set of new duties and responsibilities to command and advise them regarding their appearances, behaviour and communicative actions which creates a feeling of alienation and dependency. According to Goffman (1956), first impressions are where an individual starts to define the situation through initial interaction; here, gender itself is placed as the first impression of the communicational ability. The social construction of gender and its capacity for interactions flies higher than the position that person holds. Before having any conversation to test the person's competence, the choice goes for the other gender. It indicates that gender plays the initial role in the first impression rather than the power position. Competence in performance is also secondary in such cases. Apart from power, skill, and performance, gender plays a preliminary role in initiating communicative action.

5.3 Social constructions of femininity and leadership

The presentation and performance of a woman in power have different dimensions across cultures. The public appearance of a woman leader is questioned for her self-presentation. The respondents of the research shared their experiences of getting personal comments frequently regarding their public appearances from elders and friends, and community members. Most of them are advised to wear Saree (traditional wear in the state) for public programs by reasoning that a saree makes them look mature. Especially young Presidents, as leaders, are compelled by people, sometimes popular social figures, including women, to wear Saree because they are expected to wear Saree when holding such a 'responsible power position'. Here establishes a socially constructed connection of the dress with gender and power. Saree, a traditional dress here connected with human characteristics and identity. The popular social constructions of associating dress and appearance at large pressurize women into serious identity crises in self-presentation. The stereotypical expectations of femininity and power in terms of visible performance led to identity dilemmas among the women leaders in the initial days. A President in a Panchayath in Kozhikode district states that she was advised by a popular social leader not to wear churidars when holding this position, and when she questioned that with evidence of some young presidents who wear Churidars in public appearances and got the answer that they can do it because they are 'celebrities.' The President adds that people are not bothered about what men wear, nobody will go and tell them or advise them what to wear and what not. And they are exempting

some woman those who are already established through media. Yet another Middle-aged President said, 'Even though I like to wear Saree, the lack of time for spending own preferences is very less in a day in the life of a President, the morning chaos with family, children and other household activities and frequent, time-consuming phone calls, she says 'I won't get time to press and wrap saree in the morning. But my shift into Churidars made criticisms among us itself. Stating different reasons, the women show the rejection of peer pressure on their appearances of being a public figure. Concerning gender, typically, feminine appearances are demanded through social pressure, and breaking those conventions makes interpersonal as well as intrapersonal conflicts land on independent decisions on dress, manner, and appearances. Once she started repeating the performance and mannerisms, defying the social pressure and prefer the dress she want to use or comfortable to use, will establish an unique self identity, and thus, everything became normal and accepted after that.

Exploring these experiences through the theoretical lenses of gender performativity, Butler (1990) emphasizes that the person's performance in society determines their gender. Here, the popular expectations of a woman's performance in terms of her dress, the way she walks, talks, and behaviors are not so-called feminine, which collides with their modern exposures to individuality and identity. The women here were found to be undergone a dilemma in the initial days in the new position by exposing them to such "advice" from reputed personalities around them but now overcame such inhibitions with clarity in thoughts with confidence in their self-presentations and performance. A President from Trissur said, 'People used to advise me regarding the dress, and now they realized no use in telling this to me, and they stopped; I never argued with them, I listen and ignore such comments.' Here the person is not performing with the understanding and expectations of society; they are trying to overcome the idealized impressions (Goffman, 1956) of the social status and bring a unique identity through the performance. This tendency of breaking the traditional and common associations of performance with power resulting the young leaders establishing a new perception and unique identity. But the middle-aged recall that they experienced a crisis in the initial days and underwent a psychological dilemma in rejecting the widespread expectations, then overcame by the attitude of the majority.

5.4 Identity, performance, and communicative actions

The capacity for populist communication outlines the performance of women leaders in civic engagement and activities. The performative nature of the speaker or communicator in a public sphere impacts the people's participation and engagement. The responsibility of representation and representation of people in different spheres assigns divergent platforms and requires diverse communication actions. Despite the time and space, the communicational availability of the leader makes an acceptance by the public. Rather than knowing what to speak, here, the ability needs to know how to speak. The study found that the importance lies in the presentation rather than the content. The respondents of the study firmly differentiate that the most significant change in their communicational approach after being positioned to power is a prior effort to construct or form the content for most of the public speech. Because the people are expecting clarity and authenticity in any utterances from the President, here communication becomes a conscious effort. Being answerable for different issues in a single platform, especially in Gramasabha (Ward assembly), apart from the fixed agenda, the preparations and efforts of communication are desired to satisfy the communicational need of the participants of the community.

The aptitude for communication and the approach has a vital role in controlling and managing a crowd in local assemblies where the attitude of the people varies, and responsibility lies in the position. The respondents say the language, tone, style, and presence of mind in presentations in a public sphere influence the effectiveness of the communication. A president said 'when we go near to them or be patient in listening to them on the phone, they are pleased and comfortable to share their

issues with us, but it is not easy always as a woman, unlike any professional, we do not have a private time, any time we are responsible for answering them, it is tough to handle phone calls when we are sick or indulged in any personal or family related activities. However, no one wants to know that. All respondents who participated in the study were comfortable and happy to communicate with anyone but felt satisfied when communicating with rural, ordinary people. Even though they talk rough and irritated when talking about their problems and needs, the position needs to answer them calmly and try to satisfy them with the approach because the content may not be helpful for them. This strategy mainly works in interpersonal communication, but public communication requires much more management and presentational skill rather than the content/information.

The time, space, and contexts influence the communicative performance of the President. A President shared her experience; 'I had a habit of telling everything directly if I knew it. But I was criticized that I just said it would not happen to people, and they complained against me. But then I learned that even if it is the truth, tell them in another way, a polished way.' The public accepted communicational behaviours changing the adaptation of a public communication performance which requires a conscious effort in practicing and performing it according to the people and space. Most of the respondents were afraid and irritated to get phone calls in the early morning. Even though they feel that people's needs and issues are to be addressed at any time, their mornings are action-packed with family and personal affairs, and the time sometimes impacts their communicational behavior, which creates a crisis for interactions. A respondent said, 'Time management is an illusion for us, several pieces of training we are getting, but we couldn't differentiate family and professional time. It is overlapping. We could not deny phone calls even if we were attending to the kids. That is the biggest crisis of handling the two communications simultaneously with different approaches. Phone calls are always expected at any time, especially in a crisis, mostly natural calamities; despite the intensity of the matter informed on the phone, it requires a conscious effort in the words and expressions because manipulations are possible and expected in such virtual interactions. Respondents feel that quality communication requires a conscious effort by the leader, who is expected to be authoritative, and the crisis lies in the emotional unavailability of personal engagements.

Looking at the communicational patterns of woman leaders in the context of Goffman's (1957) Presentation of self in everyday life states that when an individual appears before others, his actions will influence the definition of the situation, here the performance of the respondents with the public and family demand different performance but supposed to be handle simultaneously. Such performative dilemmas influence the interactions. The influence and experience of social constructions of some behaviors like, calmness, politeness, patience, and any-time approachability are expected from women as a leader. The efficiency in handling personal and public performances according to the need and demands is significant in the communication practice of a woman leader.

6. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

There is a significant difference in the interpersonal communication styles among the men and women (Montgomery and Norton, 1981). In Decentralised political institutions democratically electing People's representatives to perform the dual role of an agent of the Government and the leader of the community. Women political leaders of local governments play the multitasking talents to incorporate the requirements of the position and the responsibilities of the people's necessities.

Communication competence is essential for a leader who represents and re-presents a community. Based on the experience of the Presidents, communication is management. The effective performance in the presentation according to the context is more vital and effective than the content delivery in the day-to-day interactions of a Woman leader. Rather than the quantity and quality of the content, its presentation according to the audience, and their need and demand, is effective in their experience.

The effective communication approach found the emphasis on how to tell rather than what to tell. The more accepted practice is not telling the truth, Barely. It is demanded to deliver in a polished way with a presentation.

Gender plays an active role in personal and public interactions in participation and performance. Gender defines the preliminary communicational contact with the person; power and position come secondary. A Panchayath President being a woman needs deliberate attention and a conscious effort to interact with people in an intimate and formal relationship. The performance in terms of dress, appearance, and expression are watched and interfered with and warned by the public in terms of the popular social constructions of femininity. The communicational crisis of a woman president is to break the popular social constructions of gender by presenting unique attitudes and behaviors to register an exceptional identity in society. Employing different approaches to interact with people in terms of their needs and context, the woman leaders are putting more effort into overcoming the age-old stigmas of gender. The study observes the emotional struggles of woman leaders to play power by breaking the traditional perceptions of gender. It finds that gender plays a prime role in the communication initiatives of people with woman presidents rather than the position and power. Different from the male counterparts overcoming the gendered preconceptions and judgment even from female communicators is the initial phase of the communicational existence of a woman President. The public takes a dialectic attitude toward women before and after experiencing their performance. After convincing with the performance, the power also gets accepted. The study finds that a woman leader takes different approaches in direct and telephonic interactions. In direct face-to-face communication, they establish intimacy and authenticity through appearance, mannerisms, and distance, but talking to an unknown member of the community without understanding his or her emotion over the phone or social networks needs a different approach where the chances of the possibility of performance are limited.

The regularity and recurrence of performance in public spheres, alike or different, establishes an identity for the leader; unlike men, this phase is challenging and affective for a woman. The construction of such an identity is found to be helpful in overcoming the external pressures of gender concerns; only then do they get acceptance in society. The study observes that Women leaders are constantly putting an extra effort to overrule gender with power by establishing a unique identity through performance.

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