LOCAL BODIES AND EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN: A STUDY OF WOMEN LOCAL COUNCIL MEMBERS IN AIZAWL, MIZORAM

David Zothansanga *

Abstract

The implementation of gender-sensitive policies that promote the empowerment and participation of women in the governing process is a crucial requirement for attaining sustainable development in a country like India. This issue has been acknowledged within the framework of policy reforms in both the governmental and local government sectors. It is imperative to focus on the status of women's involvement at this level to enable their empowerment, as sustainable and participatory development cannot be guaranteed without their participation and empowerment. The 73rd and 74th constitutional provisions of the Indian Constitution are regarded as a significant achievement in promoting gender equality and enhancing women's participation in the political power structure which in turn, contributes to the strengthening of local governance and the sustainable development of the country. This paper looks into the working and participation of women in the Local Councils in Aizawl under the Aizawl Municipal Corporation (AMC).Factors influencing women's participation in local government were examined. Key factors include experience, family leadership history, and facing no obstacles. All participants felt involved in decision-making, some lacked experience, faced obstacles, or lacked connections - highlighting potential barriers.The findings have practical implications which were further discussed. While some limitations exist, the study supports the importance of women in local government. Their diverse perspectives contribute to more responsive policies and ultimately, sustainable development and strong governance.

Introduction

The establishment of a robust and efficient local government is a crucial component in promoting good governance and enhancing the capacity of local governing institutions. According to Khan (2014), the promotion of greater socio-economic emancipation for the people of a country can be facilitated by local representatives of a democratic body. This is contingent upon the optimal utilization of human resources, including both men and women,

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* Associate Professor, Department of Public Administration, Pachhunga University College Campus, Mizoram University, Aizawl, India

for the purpose of overall development.

The Aizawl Municipal Council was set up in 2008 after the passing of the Mizoram Municipalities Act, 2007(Amended in 2015) notified on 20th April 2007. The Aizawl Municipal Council started functioning on 1st July 2008 and the first election was held on 3rd November 2010 in 19 municipal wards. It was upgraded from Council to Corporation on 15th October 2015. The State Government determines the number of Wards based on the population living pattern, geographical condition, and economic situation. In line with the Mizoram Municipalities Act, 2007(Amended in 2015), the Municipality may constitute a Local Council for every locality in the Ward by holding an election to be conducted by the State Election Commission. Moreover, there shall be the following number of members on the Local Council, as specified in the Mizoram Municipalities (Ward Committee and Local Council) Rules, 2010 (Amended in 2015):

a) Five (5) Members- In a locality comprising 1500 voters or less.

b) Seven (7) Members- In a locality comprising more than 1500 voters.

As per the amendment of the Mizoram Municipalities (Ward Committee and Local Council) Rules 2015, it was added that one-third of the members in Local Council shall be reserved for women, i.e., in a Local Council with five members One (1) members shall be a woman and in a Local Council with seven (7) members, two (2) members shall be women. The Aizawl Municipal Corporation currently has 83 Local Councils. The overall number of members on the 83 Local Councils is 545, with 149 women serving.

Ensuring adequate participation of women in politics is crucial in order to appropriately consider their perspectives and needs when creating public policies that have a significant influence on their lives (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2005). Political empowerment involves the ability of individuals to understand and analyses sociopolitical matters at various levels, including local, national, and global contexts. It also includes things like being able to vote, run for office, participate in campaigns, join political parties, and be represented in all branches of government. Participating actively in affairs empowers people, especially women. to influence decision-making procedures in order to further their own empowerment (Varghese, 2019). In the end, as according to Varghese, "political empowerment is a tool for capacity building that leads to increased involvement in decision-making, exercising power, and therefore more significant participation in politics" (Varghese, 2019, p. 60).

This current research is an attempt to identify the challenges faced by women representatives in Aizawl's urban local government. These challenges likely include social pressures, lack of experience, and limited access to resources. The study will examine

how these factors hinder the women's effectiveness in representing their communities and explore whether there are any existing support systems in place to empower them. In identifying these challenges, the research also aims to reveal the effectiveness of quotas in promoting women's participation. And, moreover, by understanding the challenges women face, we can create better support systems and improve policies. This knowledge can not only benefit women from Aizawl but also inform personnel from various concerned departments across India on how to strengthen women's role in local governance throughout the country.

Objectives:

1. To examine the extent of women's participation in urban local government.

2. To examine the challenges and obstacles, if any, that women representatives confront in relation to their emancipation.

Literature Review :

A commonly held belief in various societies globally is that women are primarily responsible for preparing meals, tending to the needs of children, and managing domestic affairs. Diverse societies exhibit distinct social norms and values. Certain societies allocate distinct roles and responsibilities to individuals based on their gender (Wood &Eagly, 2010). In many developing nations, women are predominantly acknowledged for their reproductive function (Mason &Malhotra, 1987; Franklin et al., 2014; Mumtaz et al.,2013). Gender stereotypes, which often portray women as lacking in the qualities necessary for political leadership (Huddy&Terkildsen, 1993) has become so deeply ingrained that such notions contribute to lower levels of political ambition among women, making them less likely to vie for elected office (Lawless & Fox, 2008). Cultural norms and societal expectations further reinforce traditional gender roles, creating a challenging environment for women who dare to forge political careers (Galsanjigmed&Sekiguchi, 2023).

Beyond societal pressures, structural obstacles and institutional biases inherent within political parties and electoral systems further hinder women's progress. Figueroa et al. (2023)highlight the significance of structural inequalities, such as disparate access to resources, professional position, and social status. Electoral systems that favour incumbents and established political networks perpetuate a male-dominated landscape, exacerbating the underrepresentation of women. Given these conditions, female involvement in the realm of public life is not so easily attainable in the political sphere.

Despite these formidable challenges, women find solace and empowerment through support networks and mentorship programs that offer invaluable guidance and encouragement (Harris, 2022). Mentorship initiatives provide fertile ground for cultivating

essential skills, fostering robust professional networks, and building unshakeable confidence and by fostering solidarity among women in politics, these support systems play a crucial role in dismantling barriers and amplifying women's voices within political institutions (Jones, 2017).Achieving gender parity in the political realm also necessitates a multifaceted approach that extends beyond policy changes. Cultural shifts akin to a paradigm shift are paramount. We must resolutely challenge antiquated notions of leadership and fervently strive to cultivate inclusive political spaces (Yeshaneh, 2023). Increased representation of women in media and public discourse can serve as a potent tool, dismantling stereotypes and reshaping public perceptions of women's inherent leadership potential (Premlata&Jukariya, 2018).

Methods :

Study Design:

The study employed a cross-sectional design to collect information on from the participants using a questionnaire specifically designed for the study.

Data Collection Methods:

A structured questionnaire was constructed specifically to gather data on the challenges faced by women at the level of the Aizawl Municipal Corporation. Also, demographic factors such as age, marital status, family composition, and educational background were collected this questionnaire. The survey was administered directly to the participants, either through face-to-face interviews or self-administration, depending on the chosen method of data collection.

Sample Size:

The study targeted a cohort of 105 female Aizawl Municipal Corporation members residing in different localities of urban Aizawl. The sample size of 105 individuals represents the population of interest for the study. Out of the targeted sample, 80 female participants provided fully completed and valid responses to the questionnaire, resulting in a response rate of 76%. This response rate indicates the proportion of individuals who participated in the study relative to those who were approached.

Data Analysis Techniques:

Descriptive statistics such as counts and percentages were likely used to summarize the demographic characteristics of the participants. To assess the challenges faced by women, various 'yes/no' items in the questionnaire were analyzed using a binomial proportion test. This statistical test compares the proportion of 'yes' responses (indicating the presence of a challenge) to the expected proportion under a null hypothesis on SPSS 16. The test helps determine whether the observed proportion significantly differs from what would be

expected by chance alone.

RESULTS:

Sociodemographic Information

The sociodemographic profile of the participants can be seen from Table 1, which includes information on the age distribution, marital status, number of family members, educational qualifications, and the occupation held before being elected as a Local Council member. The data is presented in terms of frequency and percentage, offering a brief overview of the diverse participant profile of women AMC members.

Table 1: Sociodemographic information of the participants

Variable	Group	Frequency	Percentage
Age of Respondents	25 — 30	1	1.25
	31 — 35	4	5
	36 — 40	6	7.5
	41 — 45	13	16.25
	46 — 50	12	15
	51 — 55	17	21.25
	56 — 60	11	13.75
	61— 65	12	15
	66 — 70	4	5
MaritalStatus	Married	48	60
	Unmarried	9	11.25
	Divorce	7	8.75
	Widow	16	20
Numbers of family members	2	4	5
	3	10	12.5
	4	13	16.25
	5	22	27.5
	6	12	15
	7	4	5
	8	7	8.75
	9	5	6.25
	10	2	2.5
	14	1	1.25
Educational qualification	Primary	7	8.75
	Secondary	35	43.75
	Under Graduate	17	21.25
	Graduate	14	17.5
	Others	7	8.75
Occupation before elected as Local Council member	Businesswoman	35	43.75
	Housewife	28	35
	Civil servant	3	3.75
	Unemployed	6	7.5
	Others	8	10

A binomial test was used to compare the proportion of individuals/responses in two groups per research question with dichotomous response set (Table 2). From the analyses, it was revealed that:

1) The proportion of respondents who reported having a family history in local leadership (0.20) was significantly lower (p < .01) than the proportion of respondents who did not have such a family history (0.80).

2) The proportion of respondents who had been elected to local government before (0.83) was significantly higher (p < .01) than the proportion of respondents who had never been elected to local government before (0.18).

3) The proportion of respondents who were aware of the local council composition (0.95) was significantly higher (p < .01) than the proportion of respondents who were not aware of it (0.05).

4) There was no significant difference (p > .05) between the proportion of respondents who had never been active in politics or a party before (0.58) and the proportion of respondents who had been active in politics or a party before (0.43).

5) The proportion of respondents who reported no obstacles (0.86) was significantly higher (p < .01) than the proportion of respondents who reported facing obstacles (0.14).

6) The proportion of respondents who campaigned (0.88) was significantly higher (p < .01) than the proportion of respondents who did not campaign (0.13).

7) The proportion of respondents who did not face prejudice due to gender (0.94) was significantly higher (p < .01) than the proportion of respondents who faced prejudice (0.06).

8) The proportion of respondents who regularly attended council meetings (0.88) was significantly higher (p < .01) than the proportion of respondents who did not regularly attend council meetings (0.13).

9) The proportion of respondents who participated in trainings (0.93) was significantly higher (p < .01) than the proportion of respondents who did not participate in trainings (0.08).

10) The proportion of respondents who received support from other members with priorities (0.99) was significantly higher (p < .01) than the proportion of respondents who did not receive such support (0.01).

11) The proportion of respondents who reported an increase in confidence due to political involvement (0.95) was significantly higher (p < .01) than the proportion of respondents

who did not report such an increase (0.05).

12) The proportion of respondents who believed that women should participate in local government in the future (0.88) was significantly higher (p < .01) than the proportion of respondents who believed that women should not participate (0.13).

13) The proportion of respondents who reported considering running for election again (0.64) was significantly higher (p < .05) than the proportion of respondents who did not report considering it (0.36).

14) The proportion of respondents who reported involvement of their husband/family (0.81) was significantly higher (p < .01) than the proportion of respondents who did not report involvement (0.19).

15) There was no significant difference (p > .05) between the proportion of respondents who reported the consent of their husband/family (0.58) and the proportion of respondents who did not report such consent (0.43).

Moreover, to the question "Do you feel that you were taking part in the decision making concerning the issue raised in the meeting", a ceiling effect was observed, i.e. 100% of the respondents felt that they were taking part in the decision making concerning the issue raised in the meeting.

Table 2: Results of the binomial tests comparing the proportions of the responses on the research questions

Question	Response/Category	N	Observed Prop.	Test Prop.	Exact Sig. (2-tailed)
Family History in Local Leadership?	Yes	16	0.2	0.5	0
	None	64	0.8		
Local Govt. Experience	Elected to Local Govt. Before	66	0.83	0.5	0
	Never Been Elected to Local Govt. Before	14	0.18		
Awareness of Council Composition	Not Aware of Local Council Composition	4	0.05	0.5	0
	Aware of Local Council Composition	76	0.95		
Political Party History	Never Been Active in Politics/Party Before	46	0.58	0.5	0.219
	Active in Politics/Party Before	34	0.43		
Obstacles	No Obstacles	69	0.86	0.5	0
	Obstacles	11	0.14		
Campaigning	Did Not Campaign	10	0.13	0.5	0
	Campaigned	70	0.88		
Prejudice Due to Gender	Faced Prejudice	5	0.06	0.5	0
	Did not Face Prejudice	75	0.94		

Attendance	Did Not Regularly Attend Council Meetings	10	0.13	0.5	0
	Regularly Attended Council Meetings	70	0.88		
Participation in Trainings?	No	6	0.08	0.5	0
	Yes	74	0.93		
Support from Other Members with Priorities?	Yes	79	0.99	0.5	0
	No	1	0.01		
Increase in Confidence Due to Political Involvement?	No	4	0.05	0.5	0
	Yes	76	0.95		
Should Women Participate in Local Government in the future?	No	10	0.13	0.5	0
	Yes	70	0.88		
Consideration for Running Election Again	Yes	51	0.64	0.5	0.018
	No	29	0.36		
Involvement of Husband/Family	Yes	65	0.81	0.5	0
	No	15	0.19		
Consent of Husband/Family	Yes	46	0.58	0.5	0.219
	No	34	0.43		
Contact with Civil/Government Organizations	Yes	69	0.86	0.5	0
	No	11	0.14		

Discussion :

The research findings indicate that several factors are closely linked to women's participation in government. These factors include having a family history in leadership, previous experience of working in government, being aware of the council's composition, facing no obstacles, actively campaigning for office, absence of gender bias, regularly attending council meetings, participating in training programs, receiving support from other members, gaining confidence through political involvement, believing in women's participation in local government, reporting involvement of their spouse or family members, and having connections with civil or government organizations.

Moreover, the findings also reveal that all respondents felt they were actively involved in decision-making during the meeting, which suggests that everyone possibly perceived their participation in decision-making as satisfactory. However, it would be valuable to explore whether this perception remains consistent across various topics and other contexts. It is worth mentioning that some of the findings indicated a difference in the percentage of respondents who lacked characteristics or experiences, like having a family background in local leadership, prior involvement in local government, facing obstacles, not having contact with civil or government organizations, or not reporting their husband/family's involvement. These differences might imply that these factors could pose obstacles to women's participation in governance. Therefore, it is crucial to address these barriers and

work towards enhancing women's engagement in government by addressing such nuanced issues.

The findings from this research have practical implications for policymaking and practices. To start with, the results, indicate the need to enhance women's participation and representation in the local government. It was also observed that women who possess experience and educational backgrounds are more likely to participate in local government affairs. Therefore, targeted recruitment strategies and support for women with expertise may effectively increase their presence in governance.Also, this study revealed the importance of providing support to women who encounter barriers such as gender discrimination and lack of family assistance when it comes to engaging in government activities. By implementing mentoring programs leadership training initiatives and family friendly policies these obstacles can be overcome, leading to increased participation of women in governance.

On another note, participants expressed a sense of being included in decision-making processes about issues covered during meetings. This study emphasizes the need of building participatory decision-making systems, and one way to do so is to promote transparency, provide information access, and provide opportunities for engagement in local government decision-making processes.Finally, efforts to increase women's participation in governance may have ripple effects. Fostering support for gender equality as well as increasing overall participation of women in political spheres can be accomplished through the implementation of initiatives and educational initiatives that aim to increase awareness of and encourage support for women's involvement in politics.

The limitations of the current study include its reliance on dichotomous "Yes or No" responses and self-reports, limiting its accuracy. Also, the participants were all from one location, reducing the generalizability of the findings. Future research should use a more comprehensive survey with interviews and a wider participant pool to improve the accuracy and relevance of the results. Moreover, the findings from the study can generate more questions. For instance, how does experience empower women? Does it provide them with necessary skills and knowledge, or perhaps greater confidence to navigate the political landscape? Exploring the factors beyond their responses through qualitative methods like personal interviews can provide answers to such questions. Also, the finding that some women felt excluded from decision-making processes warrants further investigation. Is this a perception specific to certain topics or contexts within meetings? In-depth interviews with participants could reveal the reasons for these feelings and help identify areas where participatory systems can be strengthened.

Despite such limitations and despite the questions that still need to be answered, the findings from these studies do support findings from the reviewed literature. Including women in local government is crucial for gender equality and developing appropriate policies. The importance of women's inclusion in local government extends beyond simply achieving gender equality. Their presence fosters the integration of diverse perspectives into policymaking. Women often bring a unique understanding of community issues, particularly those concerning women and families. This can lead to the development of more comprehensive and responsive policies that benefit the entire community, and ultimately, including women in decision-making is necessary for sustainable development and strong local government

Conclusion :

The current research investigates factors that influence women's participation in local government. The findings suggest that experience, family background in leadership, and facing no obstacles are all important factors. The research also suggests that some women may feel that they are not included in decision-making, and that efforts should be made to create more participatory systems. Finally, the research suggests that increasing women's participation in government may have positive ripple effects, such as increasing overall support for gender equality. While there are limitations to the study, the research effectively addresses key gaps in understanding women's political participation at the local level.Proactive measures are required to dismantle the labyrinthine barriers women face. Gender quotas can function as a catalyst for change, fracturing the barriers of exclusion. Electoral reforms that level the playing field and targeted support programs designed to empower women all hold immense promise. Continuous research, meticulously conducted, is essential to evaluate the effectiveness of these interventions and identify innovative strategies for empowering women to rightfully claim their place at the political decision-making table.

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