Political Participation and Empowerment of Women in Kerala

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The laudatory literature on Kerala Model Development brought international attention to Kerala Women. The government's flagship programme Kudumbashree and 50% seat reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) envisaged a complete empowerment of Kerala Women. However, critics pointed out the apparent paradox of women's empowerment by highlighting male dominance in all walks of life. Moreover, the abysmal female representation in the higher orders of parliamentary institutions and political parties demands an investigation of women's political participation and empowerment. This rapid review (RR) adopted a modified SALSA framework and incorporated expert suggestions for literature selection. A predesigned protocol guided this RR. The databases searched were SCOPUS, Web of Science and Google Scholar, and the keywords used were women's political participation and women's empowerment. The article search was further customised by setting the locality to Kerala and the date to 2013–2023. The screening process selected nine articles for review. Reviewers created a template in Microsoft Excel for data charting. Thematic analysis of charted data answered the review questions. Based on the RR result, this paper suggests that women should follow egalitarian gender ideologies to ensure their vertical mobility through the power hierarchy of Kerala's social fabric.

INTRODUCTION

The deprivation of women brought by the second sex libel gave rise to the concept of women empowerment (WE). It '... is all about allowing and equipping women to make life-determining choices across different issues in the country' (Bayeh, 2016, p. 38). Hence, WE encompass personal, psychological, financial, social, and political aspects, wherein political empowerment is vital in ensuring a space for women in the power domain of society (Fadia, 2017). The principle of gender equality enshrined in the Constitution of India is a strong foundation for women's empowerment within the framework of legislation, policies, plans and programmes. Equal representation and participation of women in the democratic process can be envisaged as a powerful strategy to realise gender equality. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments gave Panchayati raj Institutions (PRIs) a three-tier system at village, block and district levels, self-governing status, and a revolutionary provision for women's reservation in PRIs (Thomas, 2014). It was a ground-breaking policy of the Government of India to ensure equal political representation of women at the grassroots level.

Kerala, a state located in the southwestern part of India, has made significant strides in promoting the political empowerment of women. The state achieved high literacy rates, and education is crucial in empowering women and promoting their political participation. Education has helped women in Kerala gain awareness of their rights and become active participants in society and politics. Kerala Panchayat Raj Act 1994 reserved 33% of seats for women in local bodies, which later increased to 50% in 2010 (Sabu and Thomas, 2017). This statutory reservation ensured the formal involvement of women in social development through political participation and decision-making at the grassroots level, although women's representation in central and state bodies remains dismal.

However, the social and cultural environment is crucial in enabling women's political participation. Despite
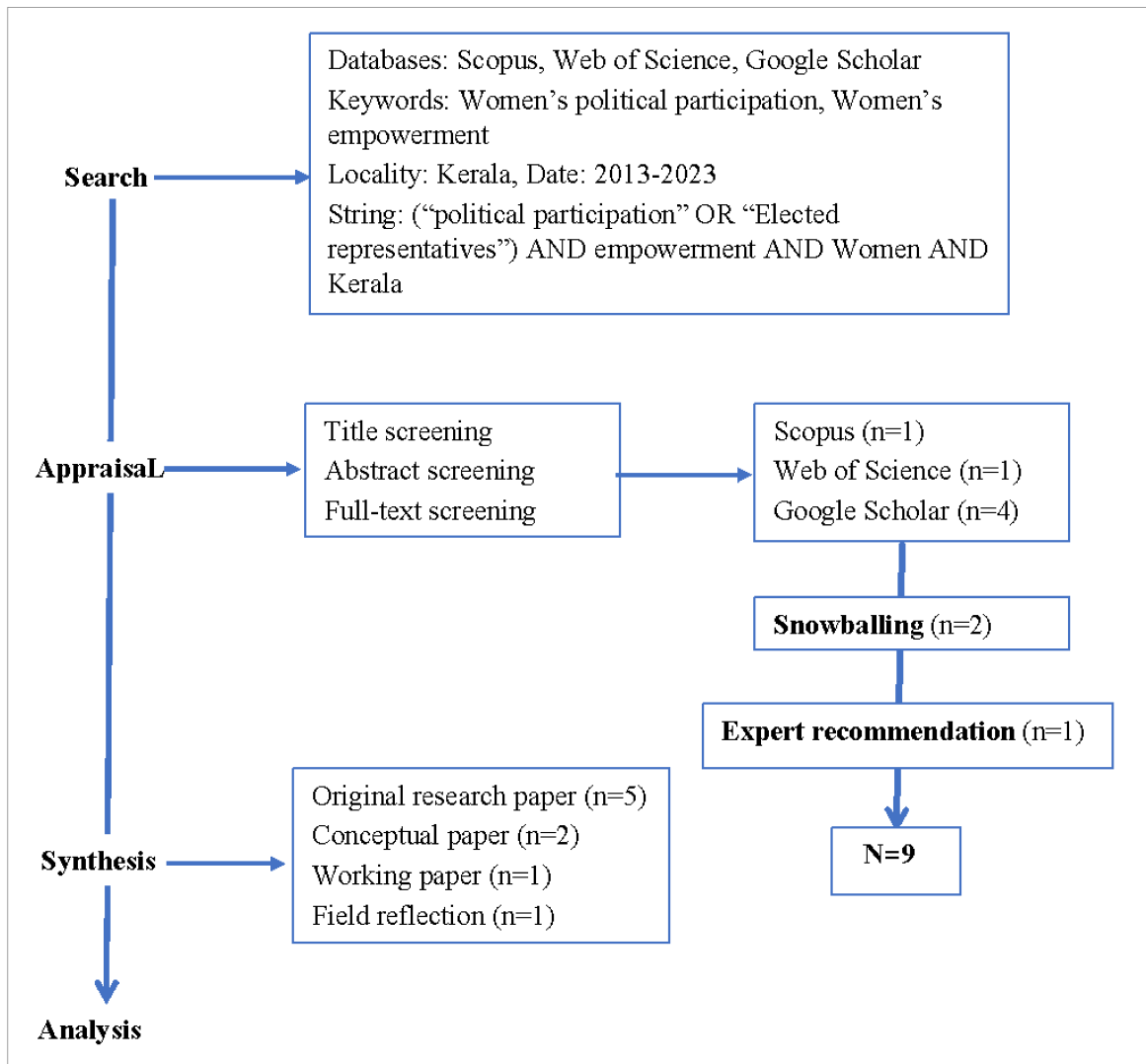
matrilineal traditions, Kerala society remains a patriarchal one. The patriarchal system is not against women entering the political arena but does not accept any change in the status quo (Navaneeth, 2020). Hence, the state's politics remains masculine with heavy feudal tendencies, and women are limited to disempowered political representation (Ameerudheen, 2017). This study reviewed scholarly articles on women's political participation and empowerment in Kerala to verify this viewpoint.

METHOD

This rapid review (RR) adopted a modified Search, Appraisa L, Synthesis and Analysis (SALSA) framework (Malinauskaite *et al.,* 2019), which incorporates snowballing technique. The process started with protocol development which clearly defined review questions, search strategy (Databases, keywords, inclusion/exclusion criteria, article screening, article selection), reference management, data synthesis, data extraction and data charting, data analysis, reporting, time frame, and division of work among reviewers. The review questions were (1) What are the promoting factors of political participation and empowerment of women in Kerala? (2) What are the impeding factors of political participation and empowerment of women in Kerala? and (3) How well does the political participation of Kerala women expedite their empowerment?

The databases that this RR searched for scholarly articles are Scopus, Web of Science and Google Scholar. Keywords used for the database search were women's

Figure 1: SALSA Flowchart of Rapid Review

political participation and women's empowerment. Reviewers customised the search by limiting the study's location to Kerala and the date from 2013 to 2023. This RR excluded studies exclusively on women of any particular religion or community. Further, a three-level article screening, title screening, abstract screening and full-text screening selected relevant articles for review. At this stage, reviewers applied the snowballing technique to identify additional relevant articles in obscure locations, following the references and citations of selected articles. In addition, discussion with subject experts in Kerala was another technique to select relevant articles for this RR.

Reviewers carried out data synthesis by reading all the scholarly articles selected, with an analytical focus and categorised according to the type of paper and research method. Another task in this stage was assigning article codes to each paper. Further, we extracted the data related to the review questions and charted it in a predesigned template in Microsoft Excel. Through thematic data analysis, this review drew answers to the review questions. Reviewers independently performed data synthesis and charting for assigned papers, and the thematic analysis and

reporting were their combined work. The time frame for this RR was one week, the second week of May 2023.

RESULTS

Search and appraisal gave out nine articles. Figure 1 shows the SALSA flowchart for this RR, and Table 1 shows the details of the articles included in the review.

Themes

The thematic analysis of the data extracted from the selected articles produced codes under three themes as follows:

Promoting factors of political participation and WE

There is a significant presence of Kerala women in local governments, made possible by the 50% women's quota (Devika, 2016; Francis and Nuimai, 2021). However, the factors that ensured access for underprivileged women to their invited spaces are imperative in their increased political participation. Women's participation in Self Help Groups/ Neighbourhood Groups helps change their outlook to prepare them to become political leaders (Varghese and

Table 1: Details of the Articles Included in RR

Article code	Year of publication	Link	Type	Research method	Study participants
A1	2019	https://doi.org/10.5755/j01.ppaa.18.3.24710	Original research paper	Qualitative	Elected women representatives in PRIs
A2	2020	https://doi.org/10.17583/rimcis.2020.4401	Original research paper	Qualitative	Elected women representatives in PRIs
A3	2014	ISSN 2320-5407 International Journal of Advanced Research (2014), Volume 2, Issue 5, 468-474 (keralawomen.gov.in)	Conceptual paper	Not applicable	Not applicable
A4	2018	Vertical_scalability-libre.pdf (d1wqtxts1xzle 7.cloudfront.net)	Conceptual paper	Not applicable	Not applicable
A5	2014	https://doi.org/10.1177/0971521514540710	Research paper	Mixed method	Households/ families
A6	2014	https://doi.org/10.1177/0971521514525156	Research paper	Mixed method	Panchayat members
A7	2020	https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3758947	Working paper	Not applicable	Not applicable
A8	2021	(PDF) gender and notions of patriarchy: analysis of political empowerment of women through Kudumbashree in Kottayam, Kerala (researchgate.net)	Research paper	Mixed method	Elected women representatives in PRIs
A9	2016	https://doi.org/10.1177/0971521516656077	Field reflections	Field study	Kudumbashree* leaders

*Kerala's Poverty Alleviation Programme

Mavoothu, 2014). *Kudumbashree*, the Kerala government's flagship scheme for poverty alleviation through women's empowerment, is the most cited programme that plays a pivotal role in facilitating the political participation of Kerala women. The *Kudumbashree* programme has successfully institutionalised women's empowerment through improved public participation (Bhaskaran, 2018), which enhanced women's social visibility (Francis and Nuimai, 2021), and *Kudumbashree* leaders found themselves in high demand to contest in elections representing political parties (Devika, 2016). Also, *Kudumbashree* enabled women to be mobilised on a large scale regardless of political connections, which resulted in women with *Kudumbashree* membership becoming a majority in PRIs and outperforming their counterparts, with excellent networking skills and social outreach at the grass-root level (Navaneeth, 2020).

Impeding factors of political participation and WE

Kerala's society still views opinioned women as outspoken and arrogant male snubs and labels them with colloquial terms associated with 'pseudo-feminism' (Navaneeth, 2020). Women have always been on the fringes of political and social power (Varghese and Mavoothu, 2014). Gender-based social structure denies women the power to make decisions (Scaria, 2014). Moreover, dominant gender roles that assign women sole responsibility for family care disrupt women's work-family balance (Francis and Nuimai, 2021). Work challenges differ between men and women. As a woman, she has to manage household chores, family and work; But for a man, his work alone is enough (Babu and Jose, 2020).

Even when women are aware of gender inequalities and injustice, the forms and goals of women's participation are ultimately determined by male preferences (Nair and Moolakkattu, 2014). In the case of many elected women representatives, the family or party runs the show with women as mere proxies (Navaneeth, 2020). Moreover, women, especially those of the privileged class, have a culturally induced sense of subordination to men (Francis and Nuimai, 2021). After all, there exists a collective failure of women to organise themselves as a political group that can effectively pressure government institutions to create new spaces, occupy existing spaces or redefine negatively labelled spaces (Francis and Nuimai, 2021).

WE through political participation

Liberal feminism promotes equality through the empowerment of individuals; Therefore, PRI policy has a significant role in the political empowerment of women (Varghese, 2019). Reservation for women in PRIs gives a second chance to those who lack political experience at a young age due to cultural barriers (Francis and Nuimai, 2021). Unfortunately, when a woman enters the unknown realm of political participation, she comes under the label of someone's wife/daughter/sister and she carries it for a long time due to the patriarchal nature of society. In contrast, elected women representatives with *Kudumbashree* experience keep their identity with greater capacity to carry the responsibilities of elected representatives, using the skills and visibility achieved through *Kudumbashree* participation (Francis and Nuimai, 2021).

However, social scientists mentioned the apparent paradox that *Kudumbashree* does not refer to actual families in Kerala but to a future family that can be truly auspicious (Devika, 2016). Social reform movements in Kerala opened the public space to women, but only on the condition that a woman's primary role is strongly associated with domesticity (Scaria, 2014). Moreover, the patriarchal social order limits women's vertical scalability in politics, and gendering at the higher levels of political power limits women's equal political participation to representation at the grass-root level (Bhaskaran, 2018).

DISCUSSION

United Nations (UN) 2030 agenda for sustainable development envisages 'A world in which every woman and girl enjoys full gender equality and all legal, social and economic barriers to their empowerment have been removed' (UN, 2015, p. 5). Moreover, international development links empowerment to multiple domains, such as education, health, political participation and economics (Venugopalan *et al.,* 2021). Equal participation of women in politics and public administration plays a crucial role in their upliftment and progress. Also, the part of women in decision-making is another critical aspect to consider in their empowerment (Varghese and Mavoothu, 2014). Studies proved that gender quotas are an effective way to overcome inequalities and contribute to giving disadvantaged women a better voice and opportunity for political empowerment (Priebe, 2017).

Of the four sub-indices of the Gender Gap Index, political empowerment has the widest gap of 78% globally (World Economic Forum [WEF], 2022). Even with 50% seat reservations for women in PRIs, India has closed only a 26.7% gender gap in political empowerment (WEF, 2022). It is a fact that the financial inclusion and political participation of women in Kerala since the mid-1990s have enabled Kerala women to become critical contributors to the development of the state (Bhaskaran, 2018). Women Self Help Groups (SHGs) like *Kudumbashree* are increasingly used for women's social, political and economic empowerment (Kumar *et al.,* 2019). However, male chauvinism in society caused male dominance in political party ranks and leadership, discouraging female political leaders' rise (Aswathi and Vijisree, 2017). At this point, Naila Kabeer's (1995) observation remains valid for Kerala that power relations can appear so secure and stable that subordinates and dominants are unaware of their oppressive implications or unable to imagine alternative ways of acting. Hence, this review calls upon women to shun culture-driven practices and practice egalitarian gender ideologies to break the glass ceiling.

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