

THE ROLE OF GENDER IN REPRESENTATION, PARITY AND HIERARCHIES IN THE DEMOCRACY OF THE VILLAGE-BASED FORMAL ORGANIZATIONS

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Abstract

This case study has been conducted to explore the trends in gender representation in the leadership positions of four formal organizations in two villages located in two districts in Sri Lanka, and to find the reasons for such trends. According to the results, frequently females are only selected for the secretary position because of their ability to maintain written reports and their inability to perform so called 'masculine duties related to other positions. Female leaders have been influenced by the male leaders indirectly in decision making. Also, the matured and educated female officers were respected by the other members while young female officers who have settled in the village recently have been frequently challenged by males. In conclusion, even though neither the gender equality is empowered nor gender discrimination is encouraged by the constitutions, the gender norms, unawareness, and lack of skills have created inequalities and hierarchies in representation and parity in the democracy of these village-based formal organizations.

Keywords: *Formal organizations, Gender representation, Leadership, Village*

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Introduction

According to the World Health Organization (n.d), Gender refers to the socially constructed characteristics including norms, behaviours, and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl, or boy, and relationships with each other. Kangas et al (2014), argue that gender is a medium for observing how power structures and social norms influence the lives and opportunities available to different groups of men and women. Also, they argue that women are appointed to political positions lesser than men nationally and internationally.

According to the World Development Report (2012), there is lesser participation of women in formal politics than men and they are underrepresented in the upper positions of organizations in many countries. Kushandajani and Alfirdaus (2019) conducting a study focusing on gender equality in village law in Indonesia finds that there is a tendency to limit women in supporting roles rather than the core roles, and women who have been recruited in village government organizations are more likely to be assigned to administrative divisions than strategic ones.

The objective of this study was to explore what are the trends in gender representation in the leadership positions of the four formal organizations in two villages in Sri Lanka and find the reasons for such trends. Two villages were selected from two districts: Matara and Ampara which have two different socio-economic backgrounds. The names of the villages are introduced by pseudo names; the village in Matara district is Village 1, and the village in Ampara district is Village 2. The population of village 1 consists of public and private sector workers whose additional sources of income are cultivating paddy, tea, coconut, rubber, and cinnamon. The main income of the majority of the population of village 2 is paddy cultivation. In this study four organizations were selected from each village; Village 1 - Art society, Village development society, Burrial society, and Samurधि development Society, Village 2 – Burrial society, Farmers' Society, Samurधि Development Society and Village Development Society.

Material and Methods

Mixed method was employed in this study. Primary data were collected through semi-structured and in-depth interviews conducted with former and current female and male representatives of four formal village-based organizations from both villages. Secondary data were collected from the annual reports of those organizations. Data were thematically analysed by two independent co-coders.

Results and Discussion

According to the results of village 1, the membership of these societies is mainly given to the ‘father’ of each family. The membership has been given to a woman only when her husband has died or divorced. Even though the majority of the female participants are not members of those societies, they have been elected for the leadership positions on behalf of men in their families. There is a higher number of women in leadership roles and most of them are formally educated and working women. As well as, the same females have been elected for the same post repeatedly. In Burrial society, even though women have been elected for the upper posts, only males have been elected for the post of advisor. Sometimes the decisions taken by female officers have been influenced by him. Opposed to the above situation, both the memberships and the leadership positions of the Arts society are mainly occupied by the females of the village.

In village 2, most of the members of the selected four organizations are males. Most of the posts; president, vice-president, treasurer, auditor, and advisor had been obtained by males. Females had occupied the posts of secretary and vice-secretary. However, there are a few occasions where females have been elected and served as president and vice-president in recent years. Also, females have never been elected to the posts of advisor, treasurer, and auditor in any of the above-mentioned societies of village 2.

According to the ideas of former female officers of Village 2, they have been encouraged and supported by both males and females during their working period. Also, according to former male representatives of these societies, there have been talented females who could work as hard as men. In contrast, some of the current male officers in those organizations complain that, it is difficult to work with female officers because of their inability to drive vehicles and work with men at night. When analysing the ideas of both male and female former officers, it was found that the matured and educated, female officers were respected by the members of the societies while young female officers who have settled in the village recently have been frequently challenged by male members during the meetings. As a result, some of them have given up those posts within a short period.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, neither the gender equality is mentioned nor any gender discrimination is encouraged in the constitutions of all the eight organizations included in this study. However, in Village 1, even though the females have obtained the leadership roles, since they are working on behalf of the males of their families, female identity is hidden behind the males. In Village 2, women

were elected to the positions such as secretary and co-secretary since the duties related to those posts are considered to be suitable for females and frequently men were elected for the posts of president, vice-president and treasurer since the duties related to those posts considered to be masculine.

In both villages, the trend of reserving the post of advisor only for men who influence the decisions of other female leaders can be viewed as a symbol of men overpowering women. Also, female leadership is marginalized by electing them only for the posts of secretary and deputy secretary frequently. As a solution to the lack of practical skills of women, it is recommended to empower them with necessary skills through governmental and non-governmental projects. Also, awareness programs are needed to be conducted related to gender equality which seems to be an alienated concept for them.

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