



From Reservation to Representation: Women's Political Participation in Madurai Corporation

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Abstract: Women's political representation in urban local governance has emerged as a significant indicator of democratic decentralization and inclusive development in India. The implementation of the 74th Constitutional Amendment and the reservation policy for women in Urban Local Bodies has substantially increased women's numerical representation. However, questions remain regarding the extent of their effective participation in governance and decision-making. This study examines the representation and participation of women councillors in the Madurai City Municipal Corporation, Tamil Nadu. The research adopts a descriptive and analytical approach, utilizing both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were collected through interviews with elected women representatives, while secondary data were obtained from government reports, election records, official publications, and relevant scholarly literature. The study analyses the role of women councillors in local administration, their participation in policy formulation and implementation, and the challenges they encounter in exercising leadership. The findings reveal that reservation has significantly enhanced women's political participation and visibility in urban governance. Nevertheless, several structural and socio-cultural barriers, including patriarchal attitudes, limited decision-making autonomy, inadequate political experience, and insufficient institutional support, continue to constrain their effective functioning. The study concludes that while political reservation has improved women's access to elected office, sustained capacity-building initiatives, leadership development programmes, and institutional reforms are essential to transform descriptive representation into substantive political empowerment. The findings contribute to the broader discourse on gender-inclusive governance and democratic decentralization in India.

Keywords: Women Representation, Urban Local Governance, Madurai City Municipal Corporation, Political Participation, Women's Empowerment, 74th Constitutional Amendment, Democratic Decentralization.

Introduction:

The local representatives of a local body based on democratic ideas can promote the greater socio-economic emancipation of the people of the country that largely depends upon the maximum utilization of her people, both men and women for its overall development. In India, though women comprise nearly half of the total population but the status of women is much lower than that of men in every sectors of life. But despite the existence of reserved seats and a vibrant feminist movement, the political and administrative structure, culture and norms are gender biased.

Research Objectives:

The objectives of the study include,

- To inspect the participation of women representatives in Madurai district.
- To find the real representations of women in Madurai district.



Research Methodology:

This present study covers the 100 wards of Madurai District. However, this study covers only the Jumburoopuram extension of Goripalayam District to extract the sources for this study.

This present study adopts descriptive and analytical method. Random sampling method has been adopted to strengthen the objectives by using interview method.

Historical Profile Of The Study Area: Madurai City Municipal Corporation

Madurai district ranked 9th in terms of the highest population among the districts. The district urban population was 60.8%. The population density of the district was 819 persons/sq km. The district has recorded sex ratio of 990, lower than the State sex ratio of 996. The district has recorded the literacy of 83.5%, higher than the State literacy (80.1%). The decadal population growth in the district during 2001 – 2011 was 17.8%.

Madurai was constituted as a municipality as per the Town Improvement Act of 1865 on 1st November **1866**. It was upgraded as a Corporation on 1st May, **1971** in view of rapid increase in population and extension of administrative boundaries.

Concept Of Local Government

"Local Government is an ancient institution with a new concept. It embodies the individuality of man's group activities reflecting the spirit of liberty. It is an integral part of body politic of a country, recognized, created under law for the Management of Local affairs of a human settlement with geographic boundaries".

Conceptually, the Local Government is multi-dimensional. It can basically organize social entity with a feeling of oneness. In political terms, it is concerned with governance of a specific local area constituting a political subdivision of a nation, a state or other major political unit. In the performance of its functions, it acts as the agent of the state. The Local Government is an integrant of the political mechanism for governance in a country.

The economics of a local area reflects in its local authority, can give a good account of its performance without much effort, if the locality is economically well off. A barren area, with least potentiality for growth and development, makes local development a stupendous task for the local people. The local authority will have the initial advantage in not only rendering local services but also in awarding of Government intervention.

The concept of local government has an economic dimension of great significance. It highlights two facts of local authorities, one, with a bearing on their very existence as units for local self-governance and the other, on their legitimate place in national development. Cumulatively, these facts of the concept of local government can help promote the desirable object of partnership between central government and local government for the ultimate fulfilment of common goal, namely, good life.

The most important dimension of the concept of local government pertains to its political character. It has a direct bearing on the nature of the local government which is very intriguing, giving rise to several questions. The Constitution of India, it may be interest to note, affords guidance that lends clarity for the political concept of local Government. Moreover, local government is an administrative concept not known to other levels of government with its councillors involved in making, unmaking and remaking administrative decisions in council and its committees with a direct bearing on civil services to the local people. The local government is a child of its environment. The local government is an operational and administrative organization with the confluence of politics, administration and technology.

Conceptually the local government is an integrant of democracy. The governments need to be democratic. But without democratic norms there are no self-governing local institutions. In fact, there is no real democracy without

self- governing local institutions. Municipal institutions constitute the strength of free nations. A nation may establish a free government but without municipal institutions, it cannot have the spirit of liberty.

Local Government is not only a form of administration. but also a democratic way of life. Lord Bryce concurred that the Local Government "creates among the citizens some of their common interests in common affairs.

Local authorities have greater opportunities today than ever before. The powers of the Central Government are increasing so are the powers of the Local councils.

"Legally, Government as creator of local authorities can destroy its creatures".

"A local authority can institute legal proceedings for the recovery of its property, it can ensure for the debt, to exact penalties or to obtain damages for the breach of contract. A local authority can also act as dependant in legal proceedings; it can be sued for failure to meet its obligations as employer, Land owner, debtor or purchaser".

Women's Political Representation In Madurai City Municipal Corporation:

The present mayor of Madurai Corporation is V.Indrani Ponvasanth, who is the second women mayor of the city.

Madurai has some outstanding women councillors and has reserved 50% of the wards in the city corporation to women, yet there is much circumspection as to how much the reservation serves its purpose when past experience shows spouses call the shots for a majority of them. Of the 100 wards, women councillors represented in the 50 wards in Madurai corporation. Seven out of the 100 wards of the expanded city have been reserved for the Scheduled Caste, including four for women¹.

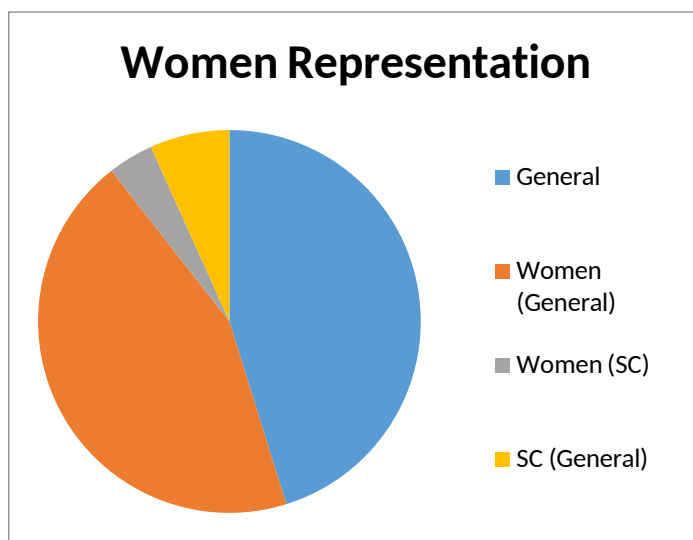


Figure 1. Women Representatives in Ward Committees²

At present, Four out of five chair persons of ward committees are women in Madurai district of Tamil Nadu.

¹ <https://www.maduraicorporation.co.in/>

² <https://www.maduraicorporation.co.in/elections2022/documents/Local%20Body%202021%20-%20Notification%20of%20Reserved%20and%20General%20wards%2021-1-21.pdf>

NAME OF THE WARD COMMITTEE	NAME OF THE ELECTED CHAIRPERSON
EAST - ZONE I	Tmt. S. Vasuki
NORTH - ZONE II	Tmt. A. Saravana Bhuvaneswari
CENTRAL - ZONE III	Tmt. P. Pandi Selvi
SOUTH - ZONE IV	Thiru. M. Mugesh Sharma
WEST - ZONE V	Tmt. V. Suvitha

Table 1. Representation of Women Candidates in the Madurai Corporation Election³

As per the data from the election commission, Of the 815 candidates contested in the 100 wards of Madurai corporation, 388 were women and two transgenders. Women contesting against men in general wards is much less as major political parties have refrained from giving women a direct chance against men. In terms of overall representation in candidature, BJP leads the list with 54 female candidates, followed by AIADMK and NTK with 52 and MDMK two. The DMK along with its allies has given seats to 52 women, but as direct DMK candidates there are 43 women in the fray mostly in wards reserved for women.

The AMMK has given seats to 46 women, MNM 43, communist parties four, Congress three, DMDK 24, PMK three and VCK one. The other candidates among the females are independents. However, there were some discrepancies in the final list given by the corporation as there was no mention of DMK or its allies contesting the 44th ward, and there were two NTK candidates listed for ward number 45.

Madurai has had some female councillors performing outstandingly. Among them was K Leelavathy of CPM, who was elected councillor of 59th ward in October 1996. She brought piped water to her ward Villapuram braving the water mafia, leading to her murder in April the next year. It has usually been communist woman councillors who have been elected many times due to their performance. M Chellam, Leelavathy's successor, became a four-time councillor.

In the case of other parties, except for a few like Kannagi Baskaran, Chinnammal and Shanmugavalli of AIADMK, the others have been controlled by their spouses. They were not very vocal when it came to ward issues in the council. This year many young females have contested and won the elections. Giving them an opportunity may help achieve the real goal of reservation.

According to Tmt.R.Uma (Ward Councilor of Jumburopuram extension of Goripalayam & Member of Health Committee) 'Without taking women's needs and interests into account and opportunity for them to participate in

³ <https://madurai.nic.in/elections-2/>



and influence decision-making, development, interventions and planning, sustainable as well as meaningful results will not come and to attain strong local government empowerment of women is inevitable. Lack of cooperation by men in the local government is a significant drawback to women's effectiveness in decision-making⁴.

Conclusion:

Women representation in local bodies in Madurai district is on equal terms with men. Though women constitute half of the total population of India, their participation in both electoral and representation in politics is insignificant but women's equal right to participate in governance is the constitutionally entrenched fundamental right. Women participation in politics shows better percentage in all the blocks. This shows that the status of women has improved in the development aspects. Apart from this, Madurai also fares reasonably well in terms of indicators such as female literacy, girls' enrolment. In terms of political participation, women are faring reasonably well. While the absolute condition of women in Madurai is getting improved men with respect in regarding literacy and education, Women still face struggle in exercising their rights. Women representation in urban local bodies can help in reducing the corruption and better implementation of government programmes, though corruption cannot be uprooted completely from society.

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