

Abstract

Erwér Monica, 2003, *Challenging the Gender Paradox: Women's Collective Agency In the Transformation of Kerala Politics*, Ph. D. Thesis, Department of Peace and Development Research, Göteborg University, Brogatan 4, 405 30 Göteborg, Sweden
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The thesis investigates gender and power *theoretically* by linking the field of gender and development with the debates within social movement theory. It builds a framework on the concepts of *Empowerment, Agency, Political Field, Organisational Structure, Framing Processes, and Women's Interests and Identities*. The study has two central theoretical arguments. Firstly, it states that the conceptualisation of empowerment requires a *relational* and *discursive* power analysis to shape social transformation. Secondly, it argues that the crucial issue for *empowerment* concerns the individual as well as the collective constitution and perception of agency.

The thesis also explores the relationship between gender and power *empirically*. The study is based on extensive fieldwork between 1999 and 2001 in Kerala, South India. Eighty in-depth interviews with the female leadership of collective actors have been conducted. The state of Kerala is internationally admired due to the 'development paradox' or the 'Kerala Model', which reflects a high level of human development despite a low economic performance. This thesis reveals another contradiction, a *gender paradox*. It shows that, in spite of a high level of gender development, women have not gained much public influence or obtained positions of decision-making bodies within the local government or in the highly politicised civil society. Nor have their interests been formulated by the female collective agency in the political field. The thesis has analysed this disparity marked by power and its results challenge the liberal assumption that formal equality produces changes in the power relations between women and men. The thesis further questions the notion that socialist welfare-orientated states automatically fabricate gender equality in terms of female participation, including decision making, in the political field.

The research reveals how feminist politics are shaped by the emerging *autonomous political space* in contemporary Kerala. The network of autonomous feminist groups, *Sthree Vedi*, is challenging the hegemonic discourses of women's high status, by focusing on the gender paradox and the increased violence against women. *Sthree Vedi* is discovered to be a *catalyst* of asserting feminist politics in the political field. The feminist network is embedded within other actors in the *political field* of Kerala, such as the Left women's movement, the Left political parties, and the state-apparatus. The thesis concludes by indicating how 'strategic agency' can create gendered political discourses.

Keywords: Gender and Development Studies, Power/Empowerment, Collective Agency, Women's Interests, Gender Politics, Autonomous Feminist Network, Left Women's Movement, Left parties, Kerala, India