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Author(s): Gayathri O. and Biju P.R.
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Negotiating Public and Private:
Women as Movement Actors

--- Gayathri O. and Biju P.R.

Abstract

Women’s public appearance is critical in the process of women’s emancipation. Collective action can break the ideology of misogyny that women have internalised in a patriarchal set up; the experiences of women in the South Indian state of Kerala are a testimony to this. This paper assumes that the first step in the way of emancipation should begin within the family. Consequent to the entry of women into the public domain, the traditional boundary between private and public has changed. This is true regarding women’s life in Kerala. But the question of changing the power relationship within the private domain, say the family is still unsettled. This article investigates the extent to which movement activism changed the worldview of women within the family. The attitude of members of a leading women’s organisation in Kerala – All India Democratic Women’s Association (AIDWA) forms the premise of analysis in this paper.

Key words: AIDWA, Critical Consciousness, Empowerment, Family, Identity, Patriarchy

Introduction

Women’s movements are playing a critical role in the whole process of women’s emancipation. These movements are spaces of collective action through which they question the anti-women tendencies existing in the society. One of the main hallmarks of women’s movement is their diversity, and this diversity can be seen in their ideology, nature of organisation and also on cross-cultural differences. This diversity and varied nature of the movement attracted academic attention since the inception of organised collective action for women. For instance, Shirin Hassim (2004) observes that women’s movement takes different forms in different contexts, operating at some moments as a formalised structure and at others as a loose network. This variety of organisational forms is accompanied by a variety in the range of tactics used, from assimilative to confrontational and
even violent. She also stated that women’s movements were not homogeneous entities characterised by singular and coherent sets of demands. Rather, by their very nature they tend to be diverse, embracing multiple organisational forms, ideologies which may at times even be contradictory (ibid.).

Lisa Baldez (2002) also shares an analogous opinion on women’s movement. Women organise for various reasons and protest in multiple contexts. For instance, in the work, *Why women protest: Women’s Movement in Chile*, Baldez observes that not all women organise along feminist lines. It may be in response to their interests as women either to defend traditional interests centering on children and the family or interests in achieving equality that they organise. In her opinion, what unites them is their appeal to women as a source of collective identity, thereby meaning that gender as a unifying category is important in gathering women as a movement constituency. In the same way, it is evident from a comparative analysis of women’s movements that significant differences exist between geographical locations in terms of their character, timing, influence and effectiveness (Molyneux, 1998).

But in spite of the diversity, all movements share the fact that women are an oppressed category of people and in order to change women’s social condition and marginalisation, they should be organised and form collectivities to challenge their subordination. This means that identity, once an important benchmark of women’s vulnerability, now has become a source of activism and mobilisational appeal to a large conglomerate of women of all social strata. Their movements, therefore, try to concentrate on generating awareness among women of the evil effects of material and ideological system which made them passive. It was/is also believed that the ideology of misogyny that women have internalised in a patriarchal set up could be broken by a collectivity. Theories on women’s empowerment emphasize significance of women’s transformation from a position of powerlessness to one of liberation as its inherent objective. The necessary first step in the transition of any subjugated category of people is that their subordination is not natural but it is constructed.

Therefore, transformation of women is more than acquiring capabilities and resources, rather it is about developing critical consciousness from a women’s vantage point. In a fundamental sense, empowerment is a process rather than a product. Further, there is also a near unanimity among scholars that empowerment has both individual and structural dimensions. As Shirin Rain (2007) points out
individual empowerment is conditioned by the broader social, political, economic, and cultural contexts in which it takes place and hence they also need to be arbitrated. Couple of scholars like Saraswathi Raju (2005) and Naila Kabeer (1999) have raised the same issue. For example, Saraswati Raju (2005) observes that empowerment is likely to be counterproductive when it is merely confined to enhancing individual access to resources without effecting change in the socio-cultural and political structure which include, apart from the state, social institutions like family, caste, etc. Empowerment will be incomplete without changing the attitudinal consciousness of women.

The preeminent task of organisations committed to the cause of women is, therefore, to make them aware of the unequal social system in which they are embedded. Accordingly, women’s movements across the world put more energy to raise women’s consciousness which, in the words of Bell Hooks (2000), is the process of learning about patriarchy as a system of domination and the manner in which it is institutionalised and perpetuated. It is the starting point of creating a sense of solidarity and sisterhood which is necessary for women’s politics. Investigating the extent to which movement participation facilitates women’s awareness on the gendered nature of the society is paramount in any inquiry on women’s movement.

In the light of the above theoretical proposition, the article investigates how the members of a women’s organisation responds to a couple of questions which decisively have an impact on deciding their worldview. It thus looks into how the participants of one of the leading women’s organisations in Kerala developed critical consciousness – the process by which people in movement question their inferior social position from a position of unquestioning acceptance of the social order to a critical perspective on it. The data collected by the authors from the members of a leading women’s organisation, All India Democratic Women’s Association (AIDWA), which is affiliated to CPI (M) is used for this purpose.

Before going into explaining the ideological and organisational specificity of AIDWA, it is pertinent here to take a look at the development of women’s movement in India. India had a rich tradition of women’s mobilisation in different historical periods, be it during the time of social reform movements or during the national freedom struggle. But the women’s movement in India entered into a very critical phase in its whole existence during the 1970s, especially after the publication of the Report on the status of women in India (1974). The report
unmasked the reality of women’s life in India by pointing out the failure of the constitutional guarantee of equality in addressing the problems of women and brought to discussion the deplorable conditions of women. Consequently, the political landscape in India witnessed the emergence of a strong women’s movement. This phase was different from the earlier period. Organisations of women were formed in different parts of the country which were ideologically and organisationally different from the earlier organisations of women. Ideologically they were more radical and organisationally they developed their own style of functioning and stood independent from any other institutions or political parties (Desai, 1985). In short, the country witnessed the advent of autonomous women’s activism in India. The women’s movements intervention is very significant as it intervened in issues which surround women’s existence in the domestic domain such as dowry deaths, rape and amniocentesis for selection (Basu, 1992).

As explained in the beginning of the paper, diversity is the hallmark of women’s movement and in India different types of organisations exist which can be broadly categorised as autonomous and affiliated organisations. Affiliated organisations are characterised by their affiliation with a political party or any other institutions. AIDWA comes under the second category and it is affiliated to a political party. It is the women’s wing of the CPI (M) which was formed at a meeting held on March 10-12 at Chennai in 1981. It was formed at a time when there was an atmosphere of increased visibility of identity politics in general and women’s movement in particular at the national level, which questioned state led development that relegated subaltern sections to the periphery. Interestingly, this period was also marked by the militancy of women’s movement. Therefore, formation of AIDWA has to be viewed against this changed political landscape of the country. In the initial meeting, there were members from fifteen different Indian states, who were chosen from among those who were in the forefront of various struggles across India, which aimed to alter the feudal social system and establish in its place an egalitarian social order.

AIDWA, as one of the biggest women’s organisation in the country, perceives itself as a frontal organ of Indian women which stands for emancipating them and ensuring gender parity through mobilising them, and also taking help from progressive sections among men. It has an organisational presence in twenty-three states in India with a current membership of over one crore (see, http://www.aidwaonline.org/). Though in terms of appeal it cuts across class and
related divides, about two-thirds of its membership is derived from poor rural and urban women. This is a crucial point which shows that its major constituency is constituted by that section of the oppressed gender which is marginalised. The objective of forming AIDWA was to build a broad-based movement for the betterment of women. Its focus is on mobilising women against the multi-layered oppression they confront in a capitalist semi-feudal society in India. The organisational guidelines of AIDWA claim it as a multi-class organisation in spite of its priority to address the problems of women at the lower rungs of the society. The organisation considers poor women as the worst victims of socio-economic inequalities in India. It is conceived as a mass organisation and the guidelines state that mass membership is the main method to increase its organisational reach among women. AIDWA seeks to address the problems of women from a perspective of gender, citizenship and class and by engaging in a host of activities. As a very significant women’s group in India, it has recognised the importance of women’s participation in the general democratic movement without which their emancipation or the emancipation of working people could not be achieved (Ranadive, 1990).

The Kerala unit of AIDWA, which is one of the most active units of the organisation, has been in the forefront of the women’s organisations in Kerala. Kerala unit of the organisation is one of the strongest at the national level. In the state also, it has its organisational presence in all the fourteen districts of the state and it is also the largest women’s group in Kerala in terms of membership and has its branches all over the state. The organisation has 20,741 Local Units, 1,900 Village Committees and 203 Area Committees. The Tenth Working Report, 2013 documented the size of the organisation in Kerala in terms of membership as 46 lakh which, in fact, means it has within its fold about 27 per cent of women population of the state as per the latest census data.

However, there is considerable confusion among scholars with regard to the efficacy of party affiliated organisations in addressing the issues of women because of its limitations in organising activities independent of their parent organisations. For instance, the scholars like Devika and Kodth (2011) observed that AIDWA is the largest women organisation in Kerala in terms of its membership, but it could not make its substantial presence in the political public. But the significance of the organisation lies in its ability to reach out to the women who reside even in remote areas. Devika and Thampi (2012) observed that the pre-eminence of AIDWA in Kerala is because of its success in mobilising
women at the grassroots and also its intervention in taking up women’s issues at the grassroots level.

Methodology

For the purpose of collecting empirical data on understanding the effectiveness of movement activism, convenient sampling frame of hundred members of an organisation, i.e., All India Democratic Women’s Association (AIDWA) were selected from four districts and a structured questionnaire was served to the respondents. It may be noted that rather than serving the questionnaire to the respondents in a sterile and technical fashion, in most cases they were encouraged to elaborate the responses to important questions. That means a mixed method was adopted. As already stated, four districts – Kollam, Kannur, Malappuram and Kottayam – were selected for this purpose to get a geographical representation of the state. These districts are also geographically important as they represent both the southern and northern regions of Kerala. Moreover the selection of these districts was given due consideration owing to factors such as religion, education, gender, class, ideological leniency of the respondents.

Analyses

The following section of the paper is an analysis of the data gathered from sampling frame of hundred members of AIDWA. Seven themes are used. These themes are considered an obstacle for women getting a fair role in the public sphere in Kerala. Responses of the respondents to questions based on these themes are discussed under separate sub-headings. These include: [1] Recognition, [2] Empowerment, [3] Family and Patriarchy, [4] Politics as Male Bastion, [5] Views on Women’s issues, [6] Socio-Political Awareness, and [7] Family Support and Organisational Activism.

Dilemma of Recognition

Social recognition is an important variable of empowerment. Hence, it was decided to invite the attention of the respondents on the issue of social recognition accorded to women by the society. It may be recalled that by recognition what is meant here is the preparedness of the society to accept women as equally useful members of the society like men. To understand this, therefore, a couple of questions were put across to the respondents.
From an analysis of their perception, it is clear that, overall, the respondents were dissatisfied with the unequal treatment meted out to women by the society. 71 per cent of the members held the view that society in Kerala was not giving women proper recognition. To 16 per cent there was limited recognition and to the rest – thirteen per cent – the same was fully satisfactory.

Taken together, 87 per cent of the respondents are, in some way or other, not satisfied with the society’s attitude towards women. It is clear that cutting across religious, regional, caste and economic backgrounds, there was a near unanimity of opinion in this regard and this points towards a less well-known facet of Kerala’s social reality. Women, irrespective of their differences, value social esteem. As noted by the socialist feminist Nancy Fraser, gender is a ‘bivalent collectivity’. Understanding and redressing gender injustice, therefore, requires attending to both ‘distribution and recognition’ (Fraser, 1996, pp. 15-17). This largely underscores the need for a cultural politics, rather than merely concentrating on the material redistribution of resources. The field experience also unravels this – the fact that the women’s question cannot be addressed simply by distributing material benefits, but it has also to be a politics of recognition.

The dissatisfaction of women with society’s insensitivity towards them puts a serious question mark on the so-called positive indicators of women’s development in Kerala. This study, thus, corroborates the findings of many of the earlier studies in the area, all of which vehemently questions the development paradigm in Kerala and speaks about gender paradox and the myth of Kerala Model.

**Empowerment of Women**

57 per cent of respondents related empowerment to a condition of self-sufficiency – economic, educational and social. 22 per cent others related it to participation in public affairs so that women could be visible in the public sphere. Those of the respondents who shared this perception also believed that empowerment meant gender parity in political affairs and recognition of personhood. Yet 21 per cent related it to organisational consciousness as well as awareness about the systems and structures that inhibited women’s development. In short, it is apparent from the field study that the respondents’ notion of empowerment is a mixture of acquisition of certain skills and resources and elimination of the anti-woman tendencies that permeate every walk of human life.
This shows that most of the members of AIDWA share a notion of empowerment which has more in common with the already available literature on the subject. Empowerment is freedom, opines majority of the respondents. The concept is more or less related to independence in all areas of social life: a question of choice and capacity to take decisions, opportunity for women to participate in public life, social mobility, capacity to stand on one’s own feet and courage and boldness – their understanding went like this.

From the above discussion, it is clear that the members have heard about empowerment and have some notion about it. An important reason for this terminological familiarity is the widespread use of the word in all official documents and discussions on women, especially in the micro-credit programmes which have a special appeal as far as ordinary women are concerned. It is another thing, that in reality, the term is merely meant as a strategy to incorporate women into the development process simply by making them beneficiaries. Such a simplistic notion of the term not only undermines the potential of women’s emancipation, but undoubtedly leads to the internalisation of official ideology by ordinary people which are somewhat benevolent, leaving serious gender issues unaddressed. In the case of the respondents of this study also, the situation is more or less the same.

**Family and Patriarchy**

Members of AIDWA share the view that family is patriarchal. There was a near unanimity among the respondents on the question of gender inequality in the family. It largely confirms the prevalent feminist thinking that family is an arena where women’s subordination exists in its most visible form (Jain & Banerjee, 2008). Division of labour within the family gives rise to unequal relationship between men and women in the society. Only 13 per cent of women in the survey believe that family system in Kerala is not gendered, whereas 46 per cent hold the opposite view. At the other end, 41 per cent toddler through the middle path as they speak about the limited nature of equality available within the family.

In order to probe further into their tryst with equality, the respondents were asked to narrate their experience in their own families in this regard. Their responses were absolutely different from their general impression of gender equality in Kerala society. A whopping 80 per cent answered the query positively. Only 16 per cent have the bitter experience of not having equality within their own
families. The responses were also cross-tabulated by age, education and employment status. Highest number of respondents who said that equality existed in their family came from the following categories: education-wise, 96 per cent of them are degree holders, 88 per cent having pre-degree/plus two qualification and 83 per cent of them post graduates; age-wise, 93 per cent of the older generation; and on the basis of employment status, 88 per cent of them unemployed. The lowest in this regard was that which came from the primary educated – 50 per cent. On the other side, among the 64 per cent who gave a negative response to this question, 81 per cent of the response came from the employed, followed by 81 per cent from high school educated and 56 per cent from 36 to 45 age groups.

To bring out the further ramifications of the gender relations within family, two more questions relating to decision-making power and economic independence were included in the questionnaire. The answers to these questions are really revealing. Among 80 per cent of members who claimed that there was equality in their family, only 70 per cent said that they took decisions on their own matters. Likewise, only 63 per cent said that they have economic freedom. This shows that despite a brute majority of women claiming that their family is democratic, when it comes to economic freedom and discretion in making decisions in personal matters, there is significant variation in the responses. This means that equality, which majority of the respondents claim, is more nominal than real. An interesting experience which the authors had during this field study is worth recounting here. They were witness to an active member of the organisation, a Gram Panchayat member, and one who deposed positively to the question on women’s equality, was seen consulting her husband on majority of the questions in the questionnaire. Surprisingly, even to the question as to whether women needed reservation, the respondent consulted her husband who was a Local Secretary of the CPI (M).

Interestingly, two active AIDWA members, one of whom was serving as a Block Panchayat member and the other as a Panchayat member at the time of the survey, responded to the question on identity in a manner one would have never expected them to say. Their reply was that they privileged their identity as wife of so and so rather than on their own individuality. Even after officiating as elected representatives and further working as active members of an organisation committed to the cause of women, they could not shed the influence of patriarchal ideology to which they were subjected to. To them what gave them more social recognition was not their belonging to AIDWA or their own individual standing,
but their identity as wives of somebody. This naturally meant that despite the belief of the majority of the respondents on their own distinct identity, leadership at the grassroots level, to a certain extent, was/is highly patriarchal and the ideology of male dominance was/is directly or indirectly reflected in their thinking. The reply given by these women are not in away emancipatory; but the reality is that women, who underwent a long period of socialisation process in their life, are going with the assumption that it is better to be known in the identity of the husband rather than their own individual identity, thereby reproducing the ideal women set by the society.

In yet another instance, a woman having more than 30 years of involvement in movement activism, expressed her deep dissatisfaction over the issue of gender relations within her family. In the entire question on equality in the family, she came out with negative answers. Even though she served her locality for five years as a ward member, she has only an inferior social standing in the family. In a similar vein, a respondent from Malappuram said that she could become active in AIDWA only because her husband was a party activist. All these mean that movement activism per se is not a game changer for women, as it could make only marginal changes in the life situation in which they are placed. For instance, as Devika (2012) observed that even though feminist organisations in Kerala intervened in significant issues affecting women, they were not able to contribute much on addressing the micro-politics of gender in everyday social life.

**Politics as Male Bastion**

Women in general have a clear notion that politics is a male-dominated affair. This is evident from the responses of the respondents to the question as to whether political parties give due recognition and representation to women. Many of them hold the view that political parties incorporate women only because of the compulsions of reservation at the grassroots level. This small gesture aside, male dominance is prevalent in almost all the political parties in the state. Most of the respondents were also critical about this. However, a minority among those who responded negatively to this question shared the idea that CPI (M) was an exception in this regard. This does not mean that the participants of the survey were uncritical of CPI (M) and unaware of entrenched patriarchy in the party. There are many critical insiders in the organisation who share the view that CPI (M) was also a party which has patriarchal mindset. A case in point is the opinion aired by an Area Secretary from the southern part of Kerala about the way in
which CPI (M) selected the candidate for the Alappuzha Parliamentary Constituency in the General Election held in 2014 by sidelining an able women candidate, who had a better chance to win the election than the male candidate, who lost the election subsequently.

Coming to the actual result of the survey, 56 per cent came out with the opinion that political parties are male dominated. Only 32 per cent had a different view that political parties in Kerala give due recognition to women. Alternatively, 11 per cent chose the centrist position that women are accommodated in politics to a certain extent. Interestingly, one could notice here a difference in perception of the respondents in terms of their geographical spread. The respondents belonging to the district of Kannur, which is considered as a citadel of the CPI (M), believe that the party takes care of its women more than other parties. As one moves towards the south, one could notice that the vehemence with which the respondents argue for CPI (M) mellows down. Having said this, a rejoinder is in order here. The above mentioned statement is not made on the basis of any statistical data obtained from the survey, but on the basis of field observation. Considering the nature of the CPI (M) and the party education it gives to its members, there is nothing surprising in the respondents taking such a position. But what is really surprising is that despite all this, one could hear lone voices here and there, especially in the southern districts, pointing out an accusing finger against the party.

**Views on Women’s Issues**

In order to understand the nature of the problems faced by women in Kerala and to elicit a context specific answer, an open-ended question was asked to that respect. The answers to the question having many things in common reflected a combination of problems, which can be called as strategic and practical gender concerns. They include the problems of dowry, sexual harassment and issues which arise out of the cultural and social restrictions imposed on them by the society, including lack of mobility, freedom of opinion and recognition. All these come under what could be termed as strategic gender issues. Further, there was also a common understanding that the problems of women are largely shaped by their proximity to socially ascribed roles. All these, however, do not mean that they are not bothered about their livelihood concerns. A section of the respondents pointed towards issues like price rise and unemployment as well.
At the same time, their silence on issues posed by the division of labour and unequal social relation that exists in the family is noticeable. What matters to them is only domestic violence, but they are not able to realise the invisible power that is operating in the domestic domain. This points towards a lack of awareness on their part that personal is also political. This is also an indictment on the failure of the organisation in making them aware of such issues.

To understand the members’ perception on dowry, two questions were asked. Majority of the respondents believe it to be a serious issue and 97 per cent are of the opinion that it should be avoided. They also expressed their firm resolve not to practice the system in their personal life. It is another thing that even though majority of respondents are against the system of dowry, some senior members have told that they have given gold and other material things to their daughters. Some of them even justified it by saying that they did it before they came to the organisation. This illustrates the fact that despite the organisational influence on them to take an anti-dowry position, the social environment in which they are embedded compels them to make compromises.

Regarding the question of age at marriage, 48 per cent preferred to marry their daughters at an age between 20 and 25 and 42 per cent only after 25. These people believe that only after completing their education and obtaining a job, girl children need to be given in marriage. 10 per cent of the respondents, however, got their daughters married even before the age of twenty and they did it before they became members of AIDWA. It proves the fact that the women interviewed are very particular in getting their daughters educated and making them self-sufficient and are also fully aware that education will positively change the conditions of women.

**Socio-Political Awareness**

An attempt was also made to elicit the political outlook and awareness of the respondents for which a couple of questions were asked. These questions ranged from their reading habit, awareness about institutional and legal support available for women, voting habit, and knowledge about women politicians of the state.

Reading habit of the respondents is better compared to the ordinary womenfolk. Even though many of them are not getting enough time to spare for reading because of their pre-occupation with domestic responsibilities, still most of them
make it a point to read daily newspapers. Apart from such reading, they also read women’s magazines and in particular *Sthreeshabdham*, a weekly published by AIDWA. Besides it, certain popular women’s magazines such as *Vanitha* and *Grihalakshmi* are also on their reading list. Apart from all this, they are regular viewers of television serials.

On the institutional aspects, the respondents reported that they were aware of many institutional apparatuses committed towards the cause of women. Needless to say, such awareness is considered crucial for their future involvement in the public sphere as informed citizens. The women involved in the organisation are aware of laws relating to crimes against women and the existence of institutions like the Women’s Commission, Human Rights Commission, Family Court and Women’s Cells in the Kerala Police. They are also aware of legislations such as Women’s Reservation Bill, Dowry Prohibition Act and Prohibition of Domestic Violence Act. Further, in the matter of their political participation, they testified to their taking part in the electoral process regularly.

However, some disturbing trends were also spotted. Some of the women, especially those who hail from remote areas, lack awareness. For instance, they are not able to say anything about women’s reservation. An interesting thing is that a fraction of the respondents who came to public life through the policy of reservation themselves are unaware of the controversy on Women’s Reservation Bill. Even though their number was statistically very negligible (2 per cent), this is serious considering the fact they are holding leadership positions either in the organisation or in the decentralised bodies. For example, a Panchayat member from northern part of the state has reported that she did not know anything about Women’s Reservation Bill pending consideration before the Parliament. Similarly, a CPI (M) Local Secretary belonging to this area stated in the very presence of his wife, who was also a ward member, that there was no need for reservation for women in the elected bodies. His rationale for this is lack of awareness and political skill for women. He was saying that, without basic skill in raising questions in a meeting or without any initiative to mingle with the neighbourhood, these women representatives are merely ornamental appendages.

On the whole, however, the respondents were well-informed about the institutional and legal securities available to women. This was mainly because of their involvement in the organisation.
Family Support and Organisational Activism

Women’s participation in the public life often becomes problematic, mainly due to the lack of support from their family. This is so because of the gender-specific roles they have to perform in the private sphere. Hence, it was decided to elicit the views of the respondents on this respect. 92 per cent of the respondents say that they receive support from the family to take part in the organisational activities of AIDWA. To the question as to whether they would terminate their membership in the organisation if it was opposed by the family, the responses were really vague. While 22 per cent of the members say that they would not, 68 per cent of them exude confidence that they would not face such an opposition from the family. Two observations could be made here: 10 per cent of the respondents actually skipped the question in order to hide the dilemma that might arise out of such a contingency. It is to be seen that 82 per cent of women are coming to the organisation with the whole-hearted support of the male members of the family, especially husbands, who were associated with CPI (M). Besides, the members were optimistic in continuing in the organisation as long as they were not compromising their familial role. It is another thing that dependence on husband to sustain their membership of the organisation puts a serious question mark on AIDWA’s potential to spread the ideology of women’s emancipation properly.

All these show that members in effect internalise the male-centric idea that women’s freedom consists of ‘giving out’ rather than assuming. Even this depends on the mercy of men or on the complete acceptance of their domination within the family. Here the observation made by Nivedita Menon (2009) becomes significant. She has observed that women have been incorporated into the process of development without making any kind of changes in the prevailing gender relations in which they were situated. What this conveys is that organisations are founded in a patriarchal social space in which family life, organisational activism and party go hand-in-hand. Support from the family is a pre-condition for the involvement in the organisation. In short, associational involvement in a way is the price they were getting for performing their assigned roles in the family perfectly.

Attendance of the members in organisational activism was also looked to assess its regularity and if irregular, the reasons thereof. Most of the participants (59 per cent) claimed that they had regular attendance at the meetings of the organisation. Quite a few, however, opined to the opposite and cited lack of time as the core
reason for the same. Further, the members also made a general observation that regularity of attendance in organisational activities is on the decline. Paucity of time because of the pre-occupation with domestic chores is the reason pointed out for the lack of attendance. Serious look at all these issues necessitates a deep analysis of the private domain, which in Kerala is left untouched even by the largest and strongest women’s organisation like AIDWA.

12 per cent of the members had the opinion that misconception about women’s movement and the ignorance on the part of women constitute the major obstacle in the mobilisation process. According to them, taking part in an organisation in the public arena is still a stigma and the issue of women’s location is a significant factor in deciding their entry into the public arena. This study, therefore, reveals that women who are located in the margins, women who are socially and economically backward find it difficult to come out of their socially assigned space to the public. Here, the private-public dichotomy still exists and those who emerge out of it have to prove themselves to the society that they are ideal women. The structural impediments these women face are greater than those faced by women who are situated in the mainstream. As Sreelatha Batliwala (1997) rightly pointed out, people who are oppressed somehow know that they are oppressed and only need a social environment which induces them to articulate the feelings against oppression. This study definitely corroborates this fact. And the problem here is the lack of social and political environment to give vent to their opposition. This is in spite of the best efforts of AIDWA. One of the most important problems is that the field, in which the organisation is embedded, in some way or other, restricts its potential to become effective and raise the strategic gender interests of women (Rai, 2000). What Gerson and Peiss (1985) had observed is relevant here also. Women have crossed the boundaries that have kept apart the private and the public due to their exposure to education and voluntary associational activities. But they are doing it within the confines of familial expectations of the society, thereby rationalising their public activities as just an extension of their familial role.

Discussion

An analysis of the responses shows that women are not at ease with the way society treats them. They are able to understand that women are not getting the recognition that they deserve. Even after the entry of women into the public domain and also civil society activism, societal attitudes are not substantially
changed. The movement activism in a way enabled them to look at the society through a woman’s point of view. Supplementing to this, women also developed their own perceptions on women’s empowerment and the idea of empowerment is also popular among the studied population, in spite of the divergence on their perceptions on it.

But on the other side, family and gender relations is also a cause of concern in the sense that no democratic transition has taken place in the institution of family. So here the striking point arises, women who are associating their life with family, unknowingly, view that it has decisive influence in an individual’s life in general and in a woman’s life particular. Democratic transition of family is required for realising the positive change in a society. So it points to the fact that a mere presence in an organisation alone is not sufficient in making women understand the way power operates in their everyday life. Here also women’s own internalisation of patriarchal ideas, in relating women’s subjectivity to the family rather than an independent identity, will discourage them from questioning patriarchy in all its senses.

It is also evident from the study that even though women are able to understand the fact that parties are male-dominated, but they are not capable of understanding the misogyny that is prevailing in the party to which their organisation is affiliated. This means they are in a way not developing a critical attitude towards the party, which is really problematic. Here, in spite of the existence of some critical insiders in the organisation, the affiliation of the party is really problematic in the sense that it really inhibits women from understanding the anti-women tendencies in an independent manner. As such, it is to be seen that women as a category is mobilised, but mobilisation alone will not equip them to look everything through a women’s lens. So, here the analysis shows that women who are working in the affiliated organisation have to face both patriarchy in general and also patriarchy that is existing in the institutions they are associated with. Here the problem of gender in the everyday life and also the influence the institution they are affiliated to is equally problematic in the process of women’s social transformation.

**Conclusion**

The question that is investigated in the study is the degree of critical consciousness that women get through their participation in the organisation. The
intent was to analyse the movement activism in bringing change in the worldview of women. The analysis carried on the responses of the members made it clear that AIDWA as an organisation has succeeded in reaching out to the women in the backward sections and also succeeded in inculcating some liberatory ideals in them. In other words, women have developed a sense of self along with a collective consciousness by which they are able to realise the misogyny that is existing in the society. The analyses of the various responses prove that they developed a consciousness with regard to their identity, empowerment, their social recognition, their understandings on women and politics and also with regard to their social existence.

But here also, the problem is with regard to their standing in the family and their understanding of women’s role in the family. The study also communicates that family as an institution still stands in the way of women’s full-fledged participation in the public life. It is evident from the somewhat vague responses and also the observations made during the study that the structures of patriarchy is kept intact. The movement activism has not made them capable of realising the power relationship that is operating in their domestic life. Women’s own acceptance of their familial role as taken for granted, even after their involvement in the organisation, has not changed considerably. Therefore, AIDWA as an organisation has succeeded in penetrating the mindset of women and also instilling in them women-centric ideas. But, at the same time, it has failed in addressing the issues of women that is arising out of patriarchal social relations. It can be seen that the gender relations in the family is very complex and further research is needed to understand how these women negotiate with their everyday life.
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**Gayathri O.** is Assistant Professor & Head in the Department of Political Science, Government College Madappally, Kerela.
Email id: gayubijuspeak@gmail.com

**Biju P.R.** is Assistant Professor & Head in the Department of Political Science, Government Brennen College, Thalassery, Kerela.
Email id: bijugayu@gmail.com