

Gender Equality and Challenges to women`s participation in Discission Making Bodies: A Case Study on Cooperative Societies

Mahesh Senanayake

Senior Lecturer, Department of Political Science and Public Policy, University of Colombo

Correspondence: mahesh@poli.cmb.ac.lk

Abstract

Women's rights are a crucial indicator of global well-being. Despite significant progress in empowering women, persistent challenges remain across all facets of women's lives-cultural, political, and economic. Equality between women and men, and the prohibition of discrimination, are fundamental principles of international human rights law. However, a critical question arises: although comprehensive rules and regulations exist to promote women's empowerment both globally and nationally, why do women's participation in decision-making bodies remain unsatisfactory? This study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of gender equality within cooperative societies in Sri Lanka, focusing on gender roles in organizations affiliated with the National Cooperative Council (NCC). A mixed-methods approach was employed: quantitative data was collected through a structured questionnaire administered to 498 respondents, while qualitative data was gathered from 59 in-depth interviews and six focus group discussions conducted at various levels of cooperative societies. The research was carried out in four administrative districts: Gampaha, Nuwara-Eliya, Hambantota, and Jaffna. From a gender-specific perspective, the analysis revealed several fundamental issues underlying the underrepresentation of women in decision-making positions within the cooperative network. Key challenges identified include gender insensitivity, gender blindness, and gender neutrality among cooperative members; a lack of recognition of women as equal and capable stakeholders; and insufficient integration of women into initiatives aimed at addressing these issues. Consequently, the cooperative society network fails to realize its inherent potential to empower its members and serve as an effective framework for achieving gender equality. The lack of gender equality in leadership structures within cooperative societies is both a symptom and a consequence of deeper systemic weaknesses.

Keywords: gender equality, cooperative societies, gender blindness, and gender neutrality