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### **Skills for women to cope with challenges of public office**

Sangeetha Unnithan

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM: Knowing to drive a vehicle may not give you extra mileage as a candidate for the forthcoming local body elections. But, former women representatives cite driving as a top priority skill to be mastered by public representatives. Given the extent of travel, odd timings of their work and tightly packed schedule, driving can come in handy, they said when asked about the practical challenges that newly elected women representatives may face while working in the public sphere.

“It is true that not all women in the fray can afford a vehicle of their own. But it is also true that no panchayat or municipality can offer conveyance facility to every member. Depending on public transport can be very inconvenient for our schedules. So if you learn driving, it will make you feel independent,” says the former Shankhumukham councillor Mary Viji.

While there cannot be a finite working space for public representatives who have to scout around their wards, meeting people and discussing issues most of the time, ensuring basic working conditions and facilities at their respective panchayat or Corporation office is crucial, she said.

“At the Thiruvananthapuram Corporation office, for example, we have just one small room and bathroom for all the women councillors. Even to make a call, we have to go to some standing committee chairperson's office,” Ms. Viji said.

‘Ensure family support’

Written by Administrator

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The former Kunnathukal panchayat member Shalini R.S. says restrictions imposed by immediate family members can be a dampener. "I know many women members who have strict directions from their husband or people at home to be back by 6 p.m. As a public person, you are expected to be available at any hour of the day. There will be discussions and party meetings that may extend late into the evening. This can be challenging, especially when you have to juggle your responsibilities at home and work. But if you have the backing of your family, nothing is impossible," said Ms Shalini, who is also contesting this time as the CPI candidate from Kunnathukal.

"Many newcomers, especially those who have no public service background, do not know the issues confronting the State. This can be a problem when they become the voice of the people and speak for their needs and rights," said the former Amburi panchayat president Lali John.

'Stand your ground'

District panchayat member An Sajitha Ressel says most importantly the fact that they are women should not affect their work.

"The newcomers should learn to take a stand. Most of the time, it I seen women who enter the field prefer to take the party stance, even if it is an issue close to their heart, like women's issues. As long as this remains the trend, we will not achieve anything despite 50 per cent reservation," said Ms. Ressel who is contesting as the UDF candidate from Poovachal division this time.