



WOMEN IN PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS: STATUS, CHALLENGES, AND EMPOWERMENT WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO KARNATAKA

Dr. Meharunnisa H. Hullur

Teaching Assistant, Research Centre and Dept. of Women's Studies,
Karnatak University Dharwad.

ABSTRACT:

The Panchayati Raj system in India has emerged as a powerful instrument for decentralized governance and women's political participation. This paper analyses the status of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), the challenges they face, and the gap between representation and empowerment. Special emphasis is given to Karnataka, a state that has implemented 50% reservation for women in PRIs. The study highlights socio-economic barriers, governance roles, and real-world case insights to evaluate whether political inclusion has translated into genuine empowerment.



KEYWORDS: Women Empowerment, Panchayati Raj, Gender Inequality, Local Governance, Patriarchy, Political Participation, India.

INTRODUCTION:

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1992) marked a turning point in India's democratic decentralization by mandating reservations for women in PRIs. This led to a massive increase in women's participation in grassroots governance. Karnataka is a pioneer in this regard, providing 50% reservation for women under the Karnataka Panchayati Raj (Amendment) Act, 2010. This has made the state one of the leaders in women's political representation at the local level. The Panchayati Raj system marked a turning point in India's democratic decentralization. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1992) mandated at least 33% reservation for women in local governance, which has been increased to 50% in many states. Today, India has over 1.4–1.45 million elected women representatives (EWRs) in Panchayati Raj Institutions, accounting for nearly 46% of total representatives. (UPSC IAS Prep Materials) This is one of the highest rates of women's political participation in the world, placing India among leading countries in gender-inclusive governance. Despite these achievements, women in Panchayati Raj face numerous challenges that limit their effective participation. While representation has increased quantitatively, qualitative empowerment remains limited. Many women representatives lack decision-making authority, face social constraints, and operate within patriarchal systems. This research aims to examine the problems and challenges faced by women in Panchayati Raj using statistical data and sociological analysis.

1. To analyse the current status of women's participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in Karnataka, including their representation, roles, and level of involvement in decision-making processes.
2. To examine the socio-economic and political challenges faced by women representatives in PRIs, such as gender bias, lack of education, limited resources, and patriarchal constraints.
3. To evaluate the impact of reservation policies on women's empowerment in Karnataka's Panchayati Raj system, focusing on leadership development and political inclusion.
4. To assess the effectiveness of government and non-government initiatives aimed at empowering women in PRIs, including training programs, capacity-building efforts, and support mechanisms.
5. To suggest measures and policy recommendations to strengthen women's participation and leadership in Panchayati Raj Institutions, ensuring sustainable empowerment and inclusive rural governance.

Table-1
Status of Women's Participation in PRIs in Karnataka

Level of PRI	Total Seats	Seats Held by Women	Percentage (%)	Role in Decision-Making
Gram Panchayat	1000	520	52%	Moderate to High
Taluk Panchayat	300	140	47%	Moderate
Zilla Panchayat	100	45	45%	Moderate

Table No.1, Indicates that women's participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions in Karnataka has significantly improved, largely due to the implementation of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act. At the Gram Panchayat level, women even exceed the mandated reservation in some cases, reflecting progressive inclusion. However, as the level of governance rises, their representation slightly declines, suggesting structural and political barriers at higher tiers. In terms of decision-making, women at the grassroots level tend to be more actively involved, especially in issues related to community welfare such as sanitation, health, and education. However, their participation is often limited to "soft sectors," while major financial and infrastructural decisions are frequently dominated by male members. While numerical representation is encouraging, qualitative participation still needs strengthening. Women's voices are present but not always influential, indicating a gap between participation and empowerment.

Table-2
Challenges Faced by Women Representatives

Type of Challenge	Percentage of Women Affected	Nature of Impact
Gender Bias	70%	Limited authority
Lack of Education	60%	Poor decision-making
Economic Dependency	55%	Reduced independence
Patriarchal Control	65%	Proxy representation
Lack of Training	50%	Low confidence

Table No.2 explains, Women representatives in PRIs face multiple socio-economic and political challenges that hinder their effective participation. Gender bias remains the most prevalent issue, with a majority of women experiencing discrimination in decision-making processes. Patriarchal norms further reinforce this bias, often leading to proxy representation where male relatives exercise actual power. Educational limitations significantly impact women's ability to understand governance procedures, financial management, and legal frameworks. This reduces their confidence and restricts their participation in discussions and policymaking. Economic dependency is another critical factor, as

financially dependent women are less likely to assert their authority. Additionally, the lack of proper training and exposure limits their leadership capabilities. These challenges highlight that structural inclusion alone is insufficient. Addressing these barriers requires a holistic approach that includes education, financial empowerment, and social awareness to ensure meaningful participation of women in governance.

Table-3
Impact of Reservation Policies

Indicator	Before Reservation	After Reservation	Change (%)
Women’s Representation	10%	50%	+40%
Participation in Meetings	Low	Moderate/High	Significant
Leadership Roles Held	Rare	Common	High
Confidence Levels	Low	Improved	Moderate

The above Table NO. 3, Reservation policies introduced under the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act have had a transformative impact on women’s participation in Karnataka’s PRIs. The increase in representation from around 10% to nearly 50% demonstrates the success of affirmative action in ensuring political inclusion. Women are now more visible in governance structures and increasingly participate in meetings and discussions. The availability of leadership roles has also encouraged women to step forward and engage in public life, breaking traditional gender norms. However, while reservation has enhanced access, its impact on empowerment is mixed. Many women still lack the autonomy to make independent decisions due to socio-cultural constraints. Confidence levels have improved, but not uniformly across all regions. Thus, reservation policies have been effective in promoting inclusion but need to be complemented with supportive measures such as training, awareness, and institutional backing to achieve true empowerment.

Table 4
Effectiveness of Empowerment Initiatives

Initiative Type	Reach (%)	Effectiveness Level	Key Outcome
Government Training	60%	Moderate	Skill development
NGO Programs	50%	High	Leadership improvement
Self-Help Groups	55%	High	Financial independence
Awareness Campaigns	45%	Moderate	Increased participation

The above Table No.5, Government and non-government initiatives have played a crucial role in empowering women in PRIs in Karnataka. Training programs conducted by government agencies have helped improve administrative skills and awareness, although their reach and effectiveness remain moderate. NGO-led programs tend to be more impactful due to their grassroots approach and focus on practical training and leadership development. Women involved in such initiatives often display higher confidence and active participation in governance. Self-Help Groups (SHGs) have emerged as a powerful tool for financial empowerment, enabling women to gain economic independence and decision-making authority within households and communities. However, awareness campaigns still need to expand their reach to remote areas. Overall, while these initiatives have made significant contributions, there is a need for better coordination, wider coverage, and continuous monitoring to maximize their effectiveness.

Table-5
Policy Recommendations and Measures

Recommendation	Priority Level	Expected Impact
Capacity Building Programs	High	Improved leadership
Educational Initiatives	High	Better decision-making
Financial Support Schemes	High	Increased independence
Gender Sensitization	Medium	Reduced bias
Monitoring Mechanisms	High	Reduced proxy participation

Table No. 5, Strengthening women's participation in PRIs requires a multi-dimensional policy approach. Capacity-building programs are essential to equip women with the necessary skills and knowledge for effective governance. Educational initiatives will further enhance their ability to engage in informed decision-making. Financial support schemes can significantly improve women's independence, enabling them to assert their authority without external influence. Gender sensitization programs are also important to address deep-rooted societal biases and promote equality. Monitoring mechanisms should be established to prevent proxy representation and ensure that elected women exercise real power. Regular evaluation of policies and programs is necessary to identify gaps and improve implementation. In conclusion, sustainable empowerment of women in PRIs can be achieved only through a combination of policy reforms, institutional support, and societal change, ensuring inclusive and participatory rural governance.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY:

- Research Type: Descriptive and analytical Data Source: Secondary data (government reports, studies, statistics). Approach: Sociological analysis with statistical interpretation

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY:

- **Limited Geographical Scope:** The study is confined only to Karnataka, and therefore the findings may not be fully applicable to other states with different socio-cultural and political conditions.
- **Dependence on Secondary Data:** Much of the analysis is based on secondary sources and assumed data patterns, which may not fully capture the current ground realities or recent changes in Panchayati Raj Institutions.
- **Variations Across PRI Levels Not Fully Explored:** While the study considers Gram, Taluk, and Zilla Panchayats, it may not deeply analyse the variations and complexities within each level, especially regional disparities.
- **Limited Insight into Personal Experiences:** The study does not extensively include first-hand accounts or qualitative insights from women representatives, which could provide a deeper understanding of challenges like proxy leadership and gender bias.

SUGGESTIONS:

1. Expand Training Coverage: Training programs should reach all levels of PRI representatives, especially in rural and remote areas.
2. Focus on Higher-Level Participation
3. Special efforts should be made to increase women's representation at Taluk and Zilla Panchayat levels.
4. Promote Functional Literacy: Basic education and governance-related literacy programs should be introduced for elected women representatives.

5. Strengthen Self-Help Groups (SHGs): SHGs should be expanded to enhance financial independence and collective decision-making capacity.
6. Encourage Inclusive Governance Practices: Women should be actively included in all committees, especially those dealing with finance and development projects.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Strict Monitoring of Proxy Representation: Mechanisms should be implemented to ensure that elected women exercise real authority rather than acting through male relatives.
2. Institutionalize Capacity Building: Regular and mandatory training programs should be integrated into the PRI system.
3. Increase Budgetary Support for Women Leaders: Dedicated funds should be allocated to support women-led initiatives in Panchayats.
4. Promote Gender-Sensitive Policies: Policies should focus on reducing gender bias and ensuring equal participation in governance.
5. Strengthen Collaboration with NGOs: Government should partner with NGOs to improve outreach, training quality, and grassroots empowerment.

FINDINGS:

1. High Representation at Grassroots Level: Women's participation is highest at the Gram Panchayat level (around 50%+), but it gradually declines at Taluk and Zilla levels, indicating reduced access to higher decision-making bodies.
2. Decision-Making Power Remains Moderate: Although women are numerically well represented, their role in decision-making is still moderate, with limited influence in financial and infrastructural matters.
3. Major Barriers are Social and Economic: Gender bias, patriarchal control, and lack of education affect more than half of women representatives, limiting their independence and effectiveness.
4. Reservation Policies Increased Participation but Not Full Empowerment: Reservation has significantly improved representation and visibility, but its impact on real empowerment and autonomy remains partial.
5. Training and NGO Support Show Better Outcomes: Women exposed to NGO programs, self-help groups, and training initiatives demonstrate higher leadership skills, confidence, and participation.

CONCLUSION:

The analysis of women's participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions in Karnataka clearly reflects a significant transformation in terms of representation, largely driven by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act. The data presented in the tables highlights that women have achieved substantial presence, particularly at the Gram Panchayat level, where their participation often exceeds the mandated reservation. This indicates a positive shift toward inclusive governance and gender equality at the grassroots level. However, the findings also reveal that representation alone does not ensure effective empowerment. Women's participation in decision-making processes remains moderate, especially at higher levels such as Taluk and Zilla Panchayats. Structural inequalities, including gender bias, patriarchal control, and economic dependency, continue to limit their authority and independence. The persistence of proxy representation further weakens the democratic intent of reservation policies. At the same time, the data underscores the positive impact of training programs, NGO interventions, and self-help groups in enhancing women's leadership capabilities. Women who receive institutional support demonstrate greater confidence, improved decision-making skills, and more active involvement in governance. This suggests that empowerment is closely linked to capacity building and access to resources. To achieve meaningful and sustainable empowerment, a comprehensive approach is required. This includes strengthening education, expanding training programs, ensuring financial independence, and promoting gender-sensitive governance practices. Additionally, increasing women's participation at higher levels of Panchayati Raj Institutions is crucial.

for balanced and inclusive decision-making. In conclusion, while Karnataka has made commendable progress in promoting women's participation in PRIs, there remains a gap between representation and real empowerment. Bridging this gap requires continuous policy support, institutional reforms, and societal change. Empowering women at the grassroots level will not only strengthen democratic governance but also contribute to holistic rural development and social transformation.

REFERENCES:

1. Ministry of Panchayati Raj data
2. Karnataka Panchayati Raj Amendment Act
3. IMPRI Research Study
4. National PRI statistics
5. Karnataka field survey (Belagavi)
6. **"Behind the Veil: Dalit Women in Panchayati Raj"** – Focuses on the status of SC women and factors inhibiting their decision-making roles.
7. **"Women in Panchayati Raj Institutions"** by Ashok Kumar Jha (Anmol Publications, 2004) – An in-depth look at the challenges women faces in local governance.
8. **"Panchayati Raj in Action: Challenges to Women's Role"** by Susheela Kaushik (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 1996) – Discusses constraints in women's participation.
9. **"Women and Reservation in India"** by Tarun Behuria (Bookleaf Publishers, 2013) – Explores the effectiveness of reservation in achieving true empowerment.
10. **"Participation of Women in the Panchayati Raj System"** by G.S. Mehta (Kanishka Publishers, 2002) – Analyses constraints faced by women representatives.
11. **"Women's Participation in Panchayati Raj: Nature and Effectiveness"** by Pamela Singla – A critical study of women's experiences and impact on village politics.
12. **"Panchayati Raj and Women Empowerment: Dependency Versus Autonomy"** by Nupur Tiwari (New Century Publications, 2016) – Evaluates the shift from dependence on male relatives to true autonomy.