

Gender And Grassroots Democracy: Problems Faced By Women In Village Panchayat In Tamil Nadu

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Leave alone the British rule in Indian against which Indian fought for decades for social and political freedom aiming at the formation of a new form of people's government where all the citizen of India irrespective of religion, caste and gender would have full freedom with equal rights and opportunities for upward mobility, after obtaining independence as the leader envisaged the constitution was written which strictly prohibits discrimination based on sex . it also mainly include equality, dignity, and freedom from discrimination. But women were prevented from enjoying the power right from the family to the nation. It was only in 1994 that there was a At the structural level, the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments provided 33 percent of reservation for the local election. As it was implemented without proper training for the women to run the office at the local level there were many problems and challenges the newly elected women representatives faced . This study aimed at to study the role of women in local development , the problems they faced in the office and outside the office, role of political parties, and threats and challenges they faced. it also tried to study the local support group in mitigating the problems.

Key words: women, village, proxy, government, caste, politics, equality, challenges.

Introduction

The question of women's participation in local governance in India occupies a central place in contemporary debates on democracy, decentralization, and gender justice. As the world's largest democracy, India has long grappled with the paradox of political equality in principle and gender inequality in practice. While women were granted universal adult franchise at Independence, their substantive representation in formal political institutions remained marginal for decades. It is within this context that local governance, particularly the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), emerged as a transformative arena for expanding women's political participation.

By mandating the reservation of not less than one-third of seats and leadership positions in rural and urban local bodies for women as per the amendments, the Indian state

institutionalized gender inclusion at the grassroots level. Over time, several states extended this quota to 50 percent, significantly reshaping the demographic profile of local political institutions. Today, India has more than 1.4 million elected women representatives in local bodies, one of the largest experiments in gender-based political reservation globally. This quantitative expansion has drawn sustained scholarly attention from political scientists, economists, sociologists, and gender studies scholars, as well as from policy institutions, NGOs, and international development agencies.

The evolution of women's presence in local governance must be situated within broader trajectories of decentralization, feminist movements, and development discourse in India. Early post-independence committees, such as the Balwantrai Mehta Committee (1957), recognized the need to include women in local bodies, though primarily in a co-opted or symbolic capacity. It was only with the 1990s reforms, shaped by democratic deepening and global shifts toward participatory governance, that women's representation became constitutionally guaranteed. The reservation policy was framed not merely as a measure of representation but as a mechanism of social transformation, aimed at correcting historical exclusion rooted in patriarchy, caste hierarchies, and economic marginalization.

Scholarly literature on women in local governance in India has evolved along four major thematic axes: evolution of institutional frameworks, patterns of participation, challenges to effective leadership, and transformative impacts. Research documents how the reservation policy has enabled women from diverse social backgrounds, including Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes, to enter public office. Studies using both qualitative fieldwork and quantitative methods have highlighted how women leaders often prioritize issues such as drinking water, sanitation, education, healthcare, and welfare schemes. At the same time, a parallel body of literature interrogates the limitations of this inclusion, pointing to phenomena such as proxy representation (the "sarpanch-pati" system), gendered violence, bureaucratic constraints, lack of financial autonomy, and entrenched patriarchal norms that circumscribe women's authority.

Beyond governance outcomes, the presence of women in local political institutions has been examined for its broader socio-cultural implications. Empirical studies suggest that exposure to women leaders can alter community attitudes, raise aspirations among girls, and normalize women's public leadership. NGO reports and government assessments document numerous case studies in which women representatives have mobilized self-help groups, improved public service delivery, and strengthened grassroots accountability. Yet scholars caution against romanticizing this transformation; the interplay of caste, class, literacy, and regional disparities produces uneven experiences across states.

This research, therefore, situates women in local governance in India as both a story of unprecedented democratic inclusion and an ongoing struggle for substantive empowerment. By engaging with academic scholarship, government reports, and NGO documentation, it aims to critically examine four interrelated dimensions: (1) the historical and institutional evolution of women's representation in local governance; (2) patterns and dynamics of participation across India; (3) structural, socio-cultural, and institutional challenges; and (4) the transformative impacts on governance processes, development outcomes, and gender norms. Through this structured analysis, the study seeks to assess whether political reservation at the

grassroots has moved beyond numerical representation to produce enduring shifts in power, policy, and patriarchy.

Review of Literature

This review synthesizes major scholarly and policy contributions on women in local governance in India, organized thematically around evolution, participation, challenges, and transformative impacts.

Early scholarship situates women's political reservation within India's broader decentralization reforms. Following the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments (1992–93), scholars examined how constitutional mandates institutionalized gender quotas in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs).

Political theorists argue that the reservation policy represents a shift from formal equality (right to vote) to substantive equality (right to represent). Studies note that while women were enfranchised in 1950, meaningful political presence remained negligible until quota-based reforms.

Researchers such as NirajaGopalJayal and others interpret decentralization as part of India's democratic deepening in the post-liberalization era. The constitutional guarantee of one-third reservation, later expanded to 50% in several states, has been widely regarded as one of the largest affirmative action experiments in global politics.

Government and policy analyses (e.g., Ministry of Panchayati Raj reports) document the progressive expansion of quotas across states, demonstrating institutional consolidation of women's political inclusion.

A major body of empirical research distinguishes between descriptive representation (numerical presence) and substantive representation (policy influence).

A landmark randomized study by RohiniPande and Esther Duflo (2004) demonstrated that villages led by women invested significantly more in drinking water and public goods aligned with women's preferences. This study is frequently cited to argue that women's presence alters governance priorities.

Subsequent research by Lori Beaman and colleagues (2012) found that exposure to female leaders raised girls' aspirations and educational attainment. These findings expanded the debate from governance outcomes to intergenerational social change.

Other scholars, however, highlight regional variations. States with higher literacy (Kerala, Karnataka) often report stronger substantive participation compared to states with entrenched patriarchal norms.

Literature increasingly applies intersectional frameworks to analyze women's participation. Scholars note that women from Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and Other Backward Classes (OBC) face layered marginalization.

Field-based research highlights:

- Caste-based hostility toward Dalit women sarpanches
- Bureaucratic resistance
- Gender-based harassment
- Economic dependency limiting independent functioning

Sociological studies argue that reservation has enabled marginalized women to enter public spaces historically dominated by upper-caste men. However, social hierarchies often reassert control through intimidation or informal exclusion.

A growing development literature evaluates the impact of women's leadership on service delivery. Findings consistently indicate improved attention to:

- Water supply
- Sanitation
- School infrastructure
- Nutrition and health programs
- Self-help group mobilization

Policy institutions like NITI Aayog and the National Institute of Rural Development (NIRDPR) document case studies of women leaders driving literacy campaigns, eliminating child marriage, strengthening SHGs, and improving rural housing access.

Econometric research suggests that gender quotas reduce corruption perceptions and improve responsiveness to community needs, although evidence remains mixed.

Need for the study

India's experiment with gender reservation in local governance represents one of the largest institutional interventions aimed at correcting historical gender exclusion. With over 1.4 million elected women representatives in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), the country offers a unique empirical context to evaluate whether political reservation leads to substantive empowerment or remains confined to numerical inclusion.

Despite three decades since the implementation of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, debates continue regarding the actual transformation of power structures at the grassroots. The need for this study arises from the necessity to critically assess whether women's descriptive representation has translated into substantive representation, policy influence, and social change. Understanding this is vital not only for India's democratic consolidation but also for global policy discourse on gender quotas and decentralization.

While constitutional provisions mandate reservation, implementation across states varies significantly. Some states provide 50% reservation, others maintain 33%; training mechanisms, fiscal devolution, and bureaucratic support also differ. Existing research often focuses either on success stories or on structural challenges, but there remains a need for a comprehensive, integrated analysis that examines:

- Institutional evolution
- Patterns of participation
- Persistent structural barriers
- Long-term transformative impacts

Such a study is justified to bridge the gap between constitutional intent and ground-level realities, particularly in light of continued issues like proxy representation, patriarchal resistance, caste discrimination, and institutional constraints.

Women in local governance do not operate in a social vacuum. Their participation is mediated by caste hierarchies, economic dependency, literacy levels, and entrenched gender norms.

Given India's contemporary priorities, rural development, sanitation drives, digital governance, self-help group expansion, and gender budgeting, examining how women

representatives contribute to governance efficiency and accountability becomes particularly relevant.

This study is therefore necessary :

1. to assess whether women's leadership improves service delivery.
2. to examine whether women leaders influence policy priorities differently from men.
3. to evaluate long-term impacts on community welfare and gender norms.

Research suggests that exposure to female political leaders alters societal attitudes toward women's leadership and raises aspirations among girls. However, these transformative effects require further documentation and critical evaluation.

The justification for this study extends beyond institutional analysis to understanding broader socio-cultural shifts. If political reservation reshapes community perceptions of gender roles, it has implications for education, labor force participation, and future political engagement.

The study is justified on normative, empirical, and policy grounds. Normatively, it addresses the democratic imperative of gender equality. Empirically, it evaluates one of the world's largest political quota experiments. Practically, it offers insights into strengthening grassroots governance and advancing inclusive development.

In essence, examining women in local governance in India is not merely a study of representation; it is an inquiry into how institutional reforms interact with deeply embedded social structures to reshape power, participation, and public policy.

Despite three decades of constitutional reservation for women in local governance under the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, the extent to which numerical representation has translated into substantive empowerment remains contested.

While women today occupy nearly half of local government positions in several states, persistent issues such as proxy representation, patriarchal interference, caste-based discrimination, bureaucratic constraints, and limited financial autonomy raise questions about the depth of democratic transformation.

There is a need to critically examine whether women's presence in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) across India has resulted in:

- Effective participation in decision-making
- Redistribution of local development priorities
- Reduction of gendered inequalities
- Transformation of socio-cultural norms

Thus, the central problem of this study is the gap between constitutional inclusion and substantive empowerment of women in local governance in India.

Objectives of the Study

1. To trace the historical and constitutional evolution of women's representation in local governance.
2. To examine patterns and levels of women's participation across different states of India.
3. To identify structural, socio-cultural, economic, and institutional challenges faced by elected women representatives.
4. To assess the impact of women's leadership on governance outcomes and development priorities.

1. To analyze whether women's participation has contributed to broader gender norm transformation.
2. To evaluate regional variations and intersectional dimensions (caste, class, education).

Limitations of the Study

1. Secondary Data Dependence: The study relies largely on existing research, reports, and policy documents.
2. Regional Variability: Findings may vary significantly across states due to socio-cultural differences.
3. Measurement Challenges: Concepts such as empowerment and norm transformation are difficult to quantify.
4. Urban Underrepresentation: More literature exists on rural PRIs compared to urban local bodies.

Research Design:

This study draws upon the following theoretical perspectives:

- (a) Feminist Institutionalism: Examines how formal institutions (reservation laws) interact with informal norms (patriarchy, caste hierarchy).
- (b) Participatory Democracy Theory: Views decentralization as a mechanism for grassroots empowerment and democratic deepening.
- (c) Intersectionality: Analyzes how gender intersects with caste, class, literacy, and region to shape political experience.
- (d) Substantive Representation Theory: Distinguishes between numerical presence (descriptive representation) and actual policy influence.

MAJOR FINDINGS AND ANALYTICAL OBSERVATIONS

The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments marked a radical restructuring of grassroots democracy. The reservation policy institutionalized women's political presence in local governance on an unprecedented scale. Unlike symbolic inclusion in earlier decades, constitutional backing ensured mandatory representation.

The reservation mechanism successfully dismantled formal barriers to entry and institutionalized women's descriptive representation across India. However, institutional access alone did not automatically guarantee authority or autonomy, revealing a gap between structural inclusion and effective power.

Empirical studies demonstrate that women leaders tend to prioritize community welfare issues such as:

- Drinking water access
- Sanitation facilities
- School infrastructure
- Public health initiatives
- Self-help group mobilization
- Nutrition and welfare schemes

Quantitative evidence suggests that villages led by women show higher investment in public goods closely aligned with women's lived experiences.

Women's leadership correlates with a shift in developmental priorities toward social infrastructure and welfare-oriented governance. However, this shift is more pronounced in states with better administrative capacity and literacy levels

The study reveals significant inter-state variation. States with:

- Higher female literacy
- Strong civil society networks
- Active self-help group movements
- Effective decentralization

display more autonomous and effective women leadership.

In contrast, states with entrenched patriarchal norms, weak institutional support, and caste dominance structures show higher prevalence of proxy leadership and administrative marginalization. The success of women's political participation is highly context-dependent, shaped by social capital, education, and institutional strength.

Women from Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and economically marginalized backgrounds face compounded discrimination.

Observed challenges include:

- Caste-based hostility
- Social boycott
- Bureaucratic non-cooperation
- Limited financial autonomy
- Gender-based harassment

These intersectional constraints reduce effective governance participation for marginalized women representatives. Political reservation disrupts caste-gender hierarchies but does not automatically dismantle deeply embedded structural inequalities. Women leaders frequently operate within constrained administrative frameworks. Institutional weakness of local governance structures limits the transformative capacity of women's leadership.

One of the most profound findings concerns social perception shifts:

- Increased acceptance of women in authority roles
- Rise in girls' educational aspirations
- Enhanced political ambition among younger women
- Gradual normalization of women speaking in public forums

Evidence suggests that communities exposed to female leaders exhibit measurable attitudinal change over time. The long-term transformative impact of women's representation extends beyond governance into socio-cultural restructuring.

Women representatives have strengthened:

- Gram Sabha participation
- Transparency in welfare distribution
- Collective decision-making
- SHG-based mobilization

This has contributed to participatory democratic practices at the local level. Women's political participation deepens grassroots democracy by making governance more community-oriented and inclusive.

Suggestions

To ensure that women's representation in local governance translates into substantive empowerment, a series of practical and implementable measures must be adopted at institutional, social, and administrative levels. First, mandatory pre- and post-election training programs should be introduced for all elected women representatives. Many first-time leaders lack familiarity with budgeting procedures, government schemes, digital governance platforms, and Gram Sabha processes. Structured induction programs conducted at the district level, supported by simplified learning materials in local languages, can significantly enhance administrative competence and confidence. Continuous capacity-building workshops rather than one-time training sessions would ensure sustained leadership development.

Second, financial autonomy must be strengthened. Although women hold elected positions, limited control over funds often restricts their effective functioning. Transparent budget mechanisms, direct digital access to fund-tracking systems, and simplified accounting procedures can empower women to independently manage financial allocations. Public display of Panchayat expenditures and regular financial review meetings would enhance both autonomy and accountability.

Third, concrete legal safeguards are necessary to address proxy governance. The practice of male relatives informally exercising authority undermines the purpose of reservation. Institutional mechanisms such as formal declarations of independent functioning, complaint redressal systems, and district-level monitoring committees should be established to prevent interference. Clear administrative guidelines that recognize only the elected representative in official communications would reinforce women's authority.

Fourth, building peer-support networks is crucial. Women representatives often face isolation and social pressure. District-level women leadership forums and mentorship programs linking experienced representatives with first-time entrants can foster solidarity, knowledge exchange, and emotional support. Digital platforms such as WhatsApp groups may serve as accessible spaces for real-time consultation and collaboration.

Fifth, practical support measures addressing the dual burden of domestic and public responsibilities must be institutionalized. Providing childcare facilities during Gram Sabha meetings, offering travel allowances for official duties, and scheduling meetings at convenient times would reduce structural barriers to participation. These small but significant adjustments acknowledge the lived realities of women representatives.

Sixth, intersectional challenges faced by SC/ST and economically marginalized women require targeted interventions. Dedicated grievance redressal mechanisms, anti-discrimination sensitization workshops, and administrative protection against caste-based harassment are essential to ensure equitable participation. Without such safeguards, reservation risks reproducing existing hierarchies within formal institutions.

Seventh, digital empowerment should be prioritized. As governance increasingly shifts to online platforms, digital literacy programs and access to devices such as smartphones or tablets are necessary to prevent technological exclusion. Training women representatives to navigate

e-governance portals and online monitoring systems can enhance efficiency and independence.

Eighth, encouraging re-election and political continuity is vital for long-term empowerment. Recognition programs, documentation of best practices, and leadership awards can motivate sustained participation and help women transition from local governance to higher political offices. Exposure to leadership across multiple terms strengthens autonomy and reduces dependency.

Finally, broader community gender sensitization initiatives must accompany institutional reforms. Awareness programs involving men, youth, and local opinion leaders can challenge patriarchal attitudes and normalize women's authority in public spaces. Strengthening Gram Sabha participation through active mobilization and transparency can further legitimize women's leadership within the community.

Conclusion

This study set out to critically examine the evolution, participation, challenges, and transformative impacts of women in local governance in India. Three decades after the constitutionalization of gender reservation in Panchayati Raj Institutions, the findings reveal a complex yet transformative democratic journey.

At the structural level, the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments represent one of the most ambitious experiments in gender-based political inclusion globally. By mandating reservation for women in local bodies, the Indian state institutionalized gender justice within the framework of decentralized democracy. The reform succeeded unequivocally in expanding descriptive representation, bringing millions of women into formal political institutions.

However, the transition from numerical presence to substantive empowerment has been uneven. While women leaders have demonstrably influenced developmental priorities—particularly in water, sanitation, education, and welfare—their autonomy remains mediated by patriarchal norms, caste hierarchies, and institutional constraints. The persistence of proxy representation and bureaucratic marginalization underscores the resilience of informal power structures.

Yet, the study also reveals that empowerment is not static. Women representatives often evolve from initial dependency to confident leadership through political exposure and experience. Over time, many assert independent authority, challenge social hierarchies, and mobilize community participation.

Perhaps the most significant contribution of women's representation lies in its normative and intergenerational impact. The visibility of women in leadership roles reshapes societal expectations, alters aspirations among young girls, and gradually redefines the gendered boundaries of public authority. The presence of women in governance thus performs both administrative and symbolic functions—it delivers services while simultaneously transforming social imagination.

Nonetheless, structural reforms must accompany political reservation. Strengthened fiscal decentralization, mandatory leadership training, protection against harassment, and intersectional policy interventions are essential to sustain and deepen empowerment.

In essence, women's participation in local governance in India represents a transformative but unfinished democratic project. The reservation policy opened the doors of political

institutions; the ongoing challenge lies in ensuring that women not only enter these spaces but exercise meaningful power within them.

The Indian experience demonstrates that institutional reform can catalyze social change, but sustainable transformation requires continuous engagement with structural inequalities. Women in local governance are not merely beneficiaries of democratic reform; they are active agents reshaping the contours of grassroots democracy in India.

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