



E-ISSN: 2664-603X  
P-ISSN: 2664-6021  
IJPSG 2023; 5(2): 280-283  
[www.journalofpoliticalscience.com](http://www.journalofpoliticalscience.com)  
Received: 13-11-2023  
Accepted: 16-12-2023

**Dr. Avneet Kaur**  
Mata Sundari College  
University of Delhi, Delhi,  
India

**Dr. Jagir Kaur**  
SGTB Khalsa College  
University of Delhi, Delhi,  
India

**Corresponding Author:**  
**Dr. Avneet Kaur**  
Mata Sundari College  
University of Delhi, Delhi,  
India

## Reconceptualizing women's political participation at the grass root level: Challenges and Prospects

**Dr. Avneet Kaur and Dr. Jagir Kaur**

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.33545/26646021.2023.v5.i2d.348>

### Abstract

The article seeks to understand the role of Governments and public society that are becoming committed ensuring that women need to participate in leadership in the political sphere, particularly in structures of local government is ensured. Within India, the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitution Act of 1992, passed into law, required that a minimum of 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the seats be set aside for women (as chairpersons as well as members), locally elected government entities, known as Institutions of Panchayat Raj (PRIs). A crucial first step toward democratization and the establishment of local governance is affirmative action aimed at securing women's political representation. Women were granted political status by the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act, which reserved one-third of the seats for them. In fact, 19 states have implemented a 50% reservation policy for women. Even if the reservation policy helped women become more politically aware and empowered, it is important to consider whether elected women representatives can carry out their duties on their own. The significance of women's political involvement in Panchayati Raj institutions lies not only in their numerical representation but also in the ways in which their political leadership has facilitated social and economic advancement. In order to empower women and enable them to function as true leaders, certain social, economic, and political circumstances must be established. This paper seeks to examine the obstacles and difficulties that women participation in PRIs have experienced over the years, as well as their leadership journey.

**Keywords:** Panchayati raj, political participation, women representation, leadership, empowerment

### Introduction

A woman is a man's partner and has equal intellectual ability. She is entitled to equal freedom and liberty with man, and she has the right to take part in each aspect of his activities.  
-Mahatma Gandhi.

While most democracies have a system where all societal segments elect their government, it is questionable if this government truly represents all of the diverse societal segments and, more importantly, whether it serves all of the citizens of the democracy. In this context, democracies are particularly concerned about the low participation rate of women, and true democracy can never be realized without addressing this issue. Engaging in politics entails more than just using one's right to vote; it also involves sharing authority, making decisions, and formulating policies at all governmental levels. Political participation is the real engagement in these volunteer endeavours whereby society's members either directly or indirectly contribute to the selection of laws and the creation of public policy (UN, 1995) [24]. India had recognized the importance of keeping track of gender data on politics involvement ever since its independence. The procedure for recording women's involvement at the community level is a developing field and initiatives are taken to ensure their empowerment and integration in decision making approach.

### An Indian history of women's political participation

Nonetheless, there is a long history of hardship and mistreatment for women. The women continued to endure suffering and becoming the targets of violent acts. many forms of exploitation, discrimination, and torture both mental and physical. In every aspect of life, women in ancient India were accorded equal standing with males. The Rig Veda's Hymn XXI extols the qualities of women as superior to those of men.

The narrative of women's equality throughout the Vedic era is portrayed in the notion of Ardhanari-Swara, where the God's head is described as half human and half woman. The destructive power and supremacy of women are also central to the Shakticult. However, the deterioration in women's standing started with the Samhitas, particularly the Manusmriti. Women's religious rights and privileges were being curtailed. Women started to be viewed similarly to the Shudras. In addition to losing their property rights, their situation worsened. Sati spread throughout the warrior classes. As a result, a historical analysis of women's positions in ancient India reveals that these roles remained subordinate to men and that women did not hold an equal standing with men. (Chadha, 2014, p. 91-108)<sup>[4]</sup>.

The eleventh-century scenario took a turn for the worse when Muslims conquered India. That was the time when the women were taken away by force. Consequently, one may refer to the eleventh century as the lowest point in time, where the woman never attained the equality and freedom of the Vedic era. Therefore, the examination of women's historical positions indicates that the women in India did not have a common comparable standing to men. The exclusion of women from positions of power in all its forms made a major effect on their ability to challenge subordination. They had to be in politics in order to participate as women and to change the fundamental framework of that power that excluded them. (Chadha, 2014, pp. 91-108)<sup>[4]</sup>.

Women's political participation in India has its roots in the reform movements of the 19th century. At the start of the Colonial Era, the woman's status was likewise in a poor state. But the fight for women's political engagement did not become a major component of the Indian women's movement until the British era, or the early 20th century. A number of later movements, including Sikhism, Buddhism, Jainism, Vaishnavism, and Veerashaivism, attempted to elevate the status of women. Indian women's involvement in politics began during the independence movement. The Indian National Congress was founded, and women were now eligible to join. Women's participation into the independence movement was noted by the Swadeshi Movement in 1905. The Indian National Congress saw the election of its first female president, Annie Besant, in 1914, which expedited the process of women's association. In the Indian National Movement, Sarojini Naidu also got involved. As a result, Gandhi ji was successful in inspiring a sizable number of women to actively participate in the independence fight movement, despite differences in caste and class. Gandhiji's personal views on women changed with time, and in the end, he exhorted them to resist exploitation, both at home and inside the Congress Party. (Gandhi MK, (1982)<sup>[7]</sup>. Therefore, it may be claimed that the push for women's equal political participation was split into two stages. The first phase aimed to provide women the right to vote and the ability to run for seats in legislature between 1917 and 1928. The issues of increasing women's representation in the legislature and easing limitations on their equal right to vote were the focus of a second phase which ran from 1928 to 1937. In order for women to have their electoral demands fulfilled, women had to appeal to both the British Government and nationalist politicians, who were created by the colonial conditions in India. The study is imperative to understand the women 's political participation at the grass root level, therefore it is important to discuss on the given issues.

- To examine the level of local female political participation.
- To examine the factors that negate women to participate in the political setup at the rural level.
- To evaluate and understand the challenges faced by women counterpart to ensure democratic sustainability.
- To understand the prospects of their active participation for democratic mobilisation.

### **Challenges to women's political participation'**

Since the PRIs were implemented, nearly five elections for PRIs have been held in the majority of the States, with around 46% of the elected members being women. As of 2016. It is debatable if these women, even after 25 years, are still genuinely representative. There are numerous instances of their accomplishments. However, in comparison to the high percentage of women's representation, these represent a very small fraction. Women's participation in PRIs is laden with restrictions in a patriarchal system. These limitations are of an institutional and social origin. The socioeconomic aspects of women's leadership in PRIs become increasingly significant components. The most obvious challenges are the social conventions and views that still persist in Indian society against women serving as leaders and decision-makers, as well as traditional and cultural impediments. However, given the high proportion of female elected officials, they still lack opportunities and, in addition, family and societal support are necessary for women to become real leaders.

Women's voices are still being silenced by the strong party control at the local level. At a party meeting, the local officials determine how women's husbands can help the party according to the party and caste. In general, male family members play a key role in enabling women to contest for office. These women are typically never given any choice in the matter and are always portrayed as someone's wife, mother, daughter, or sister. Gender, class, and caste all have a significant impact on the exclusion of women from decision-making positions. The primary reason for the exclusion of Dalit and tribal women is their marginalized status and due to limitations based on caste and status, upper caste women also struggle to speak up for themselves (Datta, 2003)<sup>[5]</sup>. Women's ability to successfully engage in panchayat is further impeded by the severe Purdah norms that exist in higher caste societies. Even if reservations for seats aid in representation, they are insufficient on their own.

### **Challenge of Financial Difficulties**

The primary problem is PRI financial shortages. Merely allocating seats for women in politics won't be sufficient to advance their status and right past wrongs against them. If the state is really about giving the panchayats more responsibility and implementing the actual spirit of the reservation for the underprivileged, particularly women, then piecemeal and half-hearted initiatives would not work. The state legislature must specifically grant the authority to impose taxes, even for topics covered by PRIs. Governments have not moved to increase financial devolution despite the efforts of financial commissioners at all levels. Since PRIs are reluctant to take on projects that involve any kind of major financial investment, they usually find it difficult to solve even the most basic local governance challenges. The male family members perform

the majority of the work, so the representation of men predominates. Women members find it challenging to function at the panchayat level and take longer to demonstrate their qualifications than male representatives because male representatives predominate in the structure. It was also found that male representatives devote more of their time to political activities than do female representatives to household duties. Overall, the 73rd Amendment's affirmative action policies have strengthened women's and marginalized communities' voices, even though they haven't quite reached balance. (Thirupathi, 2022, p. 677-682) <sup>[22]</sup>. Experts predict that in the next ten years or so, women, Scheduled Castes, and Scheduled Tribes will make significant progress in terms of their political awareness and accomplishments, economic status, social standing, leadership roles, and educational attainment.

### **Lack of active participation in the debate and Gram Sabha meetings**

The study found numerous factors that contributed to the low levels of participation in panchayat and gram Sabha meetings and decision-making. It is notable that the majority of attendees at gram me panchayat meetings in are men, despite legislation designed to empower women by reserving half of the seats. Attendance at the meetings was discovered to be incredibly low. It was found that many panchayats and Gram Sabha meetings were merely formality recorded only in the records, even though they were not organized. It was found that a large number of the meetings were called without prior notification to the Gram Sabha and were categorized as proxy meetings (Tiwari 2012, p.39) <sup>[23]</sup>. Within his research in Orissa, Patnaik (2005) also discovered male domination, a lack of female delegates, proxy Gram Sabha meetings, etc. Additionally, the careers of local-level politicians are expected to advance, which poses a challenge to the MLAs and MPs. Hence the conflict between the decentralisation process and the local politicians (Thirupathi, 2022, p. 677-682) <sup>[22]</sup>.

### **Lack of leadership abilities**

Recent studies show that, 77% of women are employed to improve the mobility of rural places through infrastructure development, eradicate poverty, and demolish the patriarchal mind-set of society. For a variety of reasons, women have not taken part in development despite being elected to panchayat posts. Before subjects are handed over to the panchayats, it must provide panchayats with all the funding, materials, and personnel they require. It must also assist them in building their capacity by providing training programs for female representatives that are especially suited to the requirements of Muslims, SC, and ST EWR. However, The Sarpanch Pati System's existence of their spouses needed to be checked after they were elected. The government should evaluate the degree of participation of elected women MPs in order to provide equal opportunities for women and ensure their engagement in the political process. The Bureaucratic Predominance of the SC and ST women's representatives have found it challenging to operate as legitimate democratic entities with active public participation due to the bureaucracy's indifference (Tiwari N, (2012) <sup>[23]</sup>.

The study finds that there are many barriers for their participation in the local governance one of them was also the problems that they faced inside their home (domestic

violence), traditional attitude mind-set as well as deeply entrenched patriarchal setup. The issues are not discussed in the meetings and considered to be private affair. The findings indicate a variety of changes must be made before PRIs are effective as a useful instrument for gender-responsive governance. First and foremost, the government and all parties engaged with gender responsive governance have to do an in-depth evaluation of the local governance bodies' mandates as well as the social justice procedures and structures currently in place within the local governance framework. Such focused investigation will pinpoint the operational and structural changes needed for local governing structures that act as platforms and puts for addressing social and economic and gender inequality. Second, state governments require to do a better job of providing new panchayat members with the resources required to carry out their duties. As basic concepts of panchayat functioning, these trainings must center on the ideas of gender equity, social justice, and equitable development. They have to encourage all elected officials to adopt gender-equitable attitudes and learn how to effectively tackle strategic, critical gender issues. Electoral bodies and its members must play an active part in making sure the responses comply with rights and justice frameworks and object to biased and patriarchal tasks, given the community's high demands and need for solutions on these concerns. At the grassroots level, women in leadership roles have a responsibility and ability to influence their society through their leadership, particularly when provided the backing they need.

### **Findings of the study**

- At the grassroots level, women representatives mostly act as substitutes for their male family members.
- The majority of rural women lack the political consciousness, information, awareness, education, and training necessary to engage in politics. The majority of them are unaware of how institutions of government work or how politics functions.
- A set of obstacles posed by established social and cultural norms that lead to specific patterns of privilege and disempowerment, such as caste, gender, sexual orientation, religion, disability, and many more. Several a long-standing social, cultural, and traditional norms prohibit women from taking part in the political process as voters or candidates.
- The male-dominated political structure and culture are seen in the religious activities. Due to established systems and sociocultural rules, politics is thought to be an area dominated by men, and women are not allowed to engage in political activities. There is gender discrimination in the workplace, in school, in the workplace compared to men's salary, in common civil rights, and in sexual harassment.

### **Conclusion**

Rural Women Political engagement and empowerment offer plenty of room for them to grow as leaders, gain self-assurance, and become aware of their legal and political rights. It is also essential for women to take on leadership roles in their communities, especially for young girls and other women. In recent years, political engagement and empowerment offer plenty of room for them to grow as leaders, gain self-assurance, and become aware of their legal

and political rights. It is also essential for women to take on leadership roles in their communities, especially for young girls and other women. The findings of the research also confirm the various gender-specific barriers that women elected officials must overcome. As the number of women looking for positions of governance grows, it is essential that all institutions-state, family, and community-respond to the unique needs of women by finishing gaps in education, redefining gender roles, redistributing work based on gender, and preventing discriminatory attitudes. Using this combined with a discourse focused on creating institutional and operational frameworks to center governance processes on strategic female interests will greatly boost the potential of panchayats as centers of democracy and equitable development.

## References

1. Ansari I. Women participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions: A case study of Barak Valley. *Pratidhwani the Echo*. 2014;3(2):2278-5264.
2. Arora B. Women in politics: Governance in patriarchal and non-participatory culture. *Guru Nanak Journal of Sociology*. 1999;20(1-2):111-18.
3. Bhora OP. Women in decentralised democracy. *Journal of Rural Development*. 1997;16(4):637-683.
4. Chadha A. Political participation of women: A case study in India. *International Journal of Sustainable Development*. 2014;7(2):91-108.
5. Datta PK, Sen P, eds. *Women in Panchayats in West Bengal: An exploratory study*. Delhi: Dasgupta & Company; c2003.
6. Deshpande R. How gendered was women's participation: Women in Election 2004. *Economic & Political Weekly*. 2004;39(51):5431-36.
7. Gandhi MK. *Collected works of Mahatma Gandhi, VXIV*. Ahmedabad: Navajivan Mudranalaya; c1982, 165.
8. Ghosh BN. *Rural women leadership*. New Delhi: Mohit Publications; c2002.
9. Pandit LA. Political leadership of women: Constraints and challenges. *The Indian Journal of Political Science*. 2010;71(4):1139-1148.
10. Kaushik L, Hooda K. Political participation of elected women at grassroots level. *Indian Management Studies Journal*. 2002;6(1):52-53.
11. Jayal NG. Engendering local democracy: The impact of quotas for women in India's Panchayats. *Democratization*. 2006;13(1):15-35.
12. Rai P. Electoral participation of women in India: Key determinants and barriers. *Economic and Political Weekly*. 2011;46(3):47-55.
13. Khanna M. Political participation of women in India. *The Indian Journal of Political Science*. 2009;70(1):55-64.
14. Kishwar M. Women and politics: Beyond quotas. *Economic & Political Weekly*. 1996;31(43):2871.
15. Kumar J. *Women in Panchayati Raj Institutions*. New Delhi: Anmol; 2004:198-199.
16. Sharma M. Women's participation in Gram Panchayats: A study in Haryana. In: *Public Administration in the New Millennium-Challenges and Prospects*. New Delhi: Anamika; 2003:216.
17. Mishra R. Devolution of power to women in Panchayati Raj in Orissa: Challenges and opportunities. *Kurukshetra*. 1998;47(2):19-24.
18. Ministry of Panchayati Raj. *A study on EWRs*. New Delhi: Indian Women Press Corps; c2008.
19. Deshmukh N. Women's empowerment through Panchayati Raj Institutions. *Indian Journal of Public Administration*. 2005;1(2):194.
20. Ravi RV, Raj PS. Decentralisation and development in India. *Man and Development*. 2006;28(4):49-50.
21. Sree Kumar SS. Representation of women in legislature: A sociological perspective in the Indian context. *Indian Journal of Political Science*. 2006;67(3):617.
22. Thirupathi L. The issues and challenges to women leadership at grassroots level democracy in India: An Evaluation. *Merdigital*. 2022;21(11):677-682.
23. Tiwari N. *Women and Panchayati Raj*. Yojana; c2012, 39.
24. United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women. *The United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women (September 1995)*. Accessed April 18, 2024. Available from: <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/decision.htm>
25. Vyasulu P, Vyasulu V. *Women in Panchayati Raj: Grassroots democracy in India, experience in Malgudi*. Background, United Nations Development Programme, Paper No 4. New Delhi; c1999.