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Women's political participation in rural Bihar: The impact of Panchayati raj reservations on women's empowerment

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Abstract

This study examines the dynamics of women's political participation and empowerment in Bihar's Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) through the lens of constructive politics. Drawing on survey data and theoretical frameworks such as modernization theory, rational choice theory, and social capital theory, the research explores how reservation policies have transformed local governance and gender relations. The findings reveal a dual narrative: while reservation policies under the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1992) have significantly enhanced women's descriptive representation, substantive empowerment remains uneven. Many elected women still experience proxy leadership, where male relatives exercise de facto authority, reflecting the enduring influence of cultural patriarchy. However, growing involvement in Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and local community networks has strengthened women's social capital, fostering trust, confidence, and leadership. The study highlights that political reservation acts as a "school of democracy," gradually enabling women to participate in decision-making processes and influence local development priorities such as education, health, and sanitation. The results underscore that true empowerment requires continuous capacity-building programs, gender-sensitive governance frameworks, and structural reforms to convert symbolic participation into genuine political agency. The research concludes that sustainable empowerment in Bihar's PRIs depends on transforming representation into decision-making power, thereby bridging the gap between gender inclusion and democratic transformation.

Keywords: Women empowerment, Panchayati raj, political participation, rural Bihar, gender equality, reservation policy

1. Introduction

Political participation is widely recognized as a cornerstone of democratic maturity, good governance, and inclusive citizenship, serving as both an outcome and a driver of social development (Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995; Norris, 2002) [55, 34]. It reflects not only the extent to which citizens engage in the political process but also the depth of their access to power and decision-making structures. In India, the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1992) institutionalized the Panchayati Raj system, creating a three-tier decentralized governance structure—Gram Panchayat at the village level, Panchayat Samiti at the block level, and Zila Parishad at the district level—to bring democracy to the grassroots (Government of India, 1993). One of the landmark features of this amendment was the mandatory reservation of one-third of seats for women in all elected positions of local bodies, aimed at correcting historical gender imbalances and promoting political inclusion (Mathew, 2000; Singh, 2008) [30, 48].

Bihar, a state historically marked by social stratification, poverty, and gender inequality, emerged as a pioneering region in women's political representation by extending the reservation for women to 50% in 2006 under the Bihar Panchayati Raj Act (Bihar Panchayati Raj Act, 2006). This progressive move positioned Bihar as one of the first states in India to go beyond the constitutional mandate, reshaping its rural governance dynamics and enabling thousands of women to enter the political arena for the first time (Kumar, 2011; Singh & Prasad, 2016) [22, 52].

However, despite institutional reforms, Bihar's socio-political structure remains deeply entrenched in caste hierarchies and patriarchal values, which continue to limit women's

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visibility and influence in decision-making processes (Jeffrey, Jeffrey, & Jeffrey, 2008; Basu, 2010) [18, 2]. Women in rural Bihar often experience multiple layers of marginalization, including economic dependency, restricted mobility, limited education, and deeply rooted gender norms that define their societal roles (Kumar & Jha, 2018; Duflo, 2012) [24, 10]. These structural constraints have traditionally excluded women from formal politics and confined them to domestic or community-level activities.

Nevertheless, the Panchayati Raj framework has become a crucial entry point for women's empowerment, enabling them to participate in public life, manage local institutions, and influence developmental priorities (Buch, 2000; Panda, 2008) [6, 36]. As elected representatives, women now play key roles in governance, resource allocation, and dispute resolution-functions previously monopolized by men (Sharma, 2010; Rai, 2011) [47, 44]. Studies indicate that women's presence in local governance has improved service delivery in areas such as education, health, sanitation, and social welfare, highlighting the transformative potential of gendered political participation (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004; Beaman *et al.*, 2009) [7, 4].

This research article aims to analyze the impact of Panchayati Raj reservations on women's empowerment in rural Bihar, assessing how these policies have reshaped gender relations at the local level. It explores both achievements and persisting challenges, such as the prevalence of proxy leadership (where husbands or male relatives influence women representatives' decisions), lack of administrative training, and societal resistance to women's leadership (Jha, 2012; Raj & Singh, 2018) [19, 23].

The study is anchored in three interrelated theoretical frameworks:

1. Feminist Political Theory, which critiques patriarchal power structures and emphasizes women's agency in reshaping public institutions (Phillips, 1995; Pateman, 1988) [39, 38].
2. Modernization Theory, which suggests that socio-economic development and education gradually foster gender equality and political inclusion (Inglehart & Norris, 2003; Lerner, 1958) [15, 28].
3. Social Capital Theory, which underlines the importance of community networks, trust, and participation as catalysts for collective empowerment (Putnam, 1993; Narayan, 2002) [41, 33].

By integrating these theoretical lenses, the paper emphasizes how local political participation serves not merely as a formal entitlement but as a transformative process that can lead to deeper empowerment, enhanced leadership capacity, and long-term social change among women in rural Bihar.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Study Area

The study was undertaken in three representative districts of Bihar-Rohtas, Nalanda, and Gaya selected purposively to reflect the state's regional, cultural, and socio-economic diversity. These districts represent different agro-climatic zones, literacy levels, and levels of political participation.

- Rohtas district, located in south-western Bihar, is primarily agrarian, known for relatively higher female literacy and proactive local governance.
- Nalanda, in central Bihar, represents a historically significant and moderately developed region where

women's self-help group (SHG) movements are active.

- Gaya, in the Magadh region, combines both rural and semi-urban features, with diverse caste compositions and significant variations in women's participation across Panchayats.

Each district includes a mix of agrarian and semi-urban blocks, enabling comparative analysis across rural socio-political settings. The selection ensures that findings represent a balanced view of women's participation under the Panchayati Raj system in Bihar's heterogeneous rural society (Government of Bihar, 2023; Singh & Pandey, 2020) [50].

2.2 Data Collection

Primary Data

The study relied extensively on field-based primary data collection, which included structured questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions (FGDs).

- A total of 90 elected women representatives (EWRs) were interviewed from different Gram Panchayats, comprising 30 Sarpanchs (Mukhiya), 30 Panchs, and 30 Ward Members.
- The questionnaire covered demographic profiles, decision-making roles, community participation, training exposure, and perception of autonomy.
- Semi-structured interviews allowed deeper probing into personal experiences, socio-cultural barriers, and family dynamics influencing political engagement.

Additionally, 10 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were organized, each comprising 8-10 participants, including local women voters, SHG members, and community elders. These FGDs explored community perceptions of women's leadership, trust in elected female representatives, and observed changes in local governance outcomes.

To ensure gender sensitivity and cultural appropriateness, all interviews and discussions were conducted in Hindi, with prior informed consent. Confidentiality and voluntary participation were maintained in accordance with ethical research standards (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Kumar, 2021) [8, 25].

Secondary Data

Secondary data sources were used to supplement and validate field findings. Data were drawn from:

- Official government publications such as the Ministry of Panchayati Raj Reports (2023) and Bihar Economic Survey (2022-23),
- NGO reports and field manuals from organizations like PRADAN, NIDAN, and Mahila Samakhya Bihar, which have documented gender empowerment programs,
- Academic literature and prior studies focusing on women's representation in local governance in Bihar and comparable Indian states (Jha, 2019; Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004) [20, 7].

These secondary sources provided context regarding the evolution of Panchayati Raj institutions (PRIs), gender reservation policies, and institutional challenges faced by women leaders.

2.3 Research Design and Analytical Tools: The research adopted a mixed-methods design, integrating quantitative

and qualitative approaches to provide both statistical and contextual depth (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010) [54].

1. Quantitative Analysis

- Statistical tools such as percentage distribution, Likert scale analysis, and cross-tabulation were applied to analyze the survey data.
- Quantitative indicators were developed to assess different dimensions of women's empowerment and political participation.

2. Qualitative Analysis

- Thematic coding and narrative analysis were used for

interpreting interview and FGD responses.

- Emerging themes related to empowerment, patriarchy, decision-making autonomy, and socio-cultural constraints were identified and categorized.

2.4 Indicators of Empowerment

To measure the impact of Panchayati Raj reservations, empowerment indicators were classified into three domains political (Table 1), social, and economic following the frameworks proposed by Kabeer (1999) [21] and Malhotra *et al.* (2002) [29].

Table 1: Summary of Women's Empowerment Indicators in Panchayati Raj Institutions (N = 90)

Domain	Indicators	Operational Definition
Political Empowerment	Participation in Gram Sabha meetings, election campaigning, influence in decision-making	Extent of active political engagement and autonomy in governance
Social Empowerment	Mobility, confidence, community recognition	Level of societal acceptance and self-efficacy in leadership
Economic Empowerment	Control over financial resources, access to government schemes, SHG participation	Ability to manage resources and engage in economic decision-making

3. Results

3.1 Representation and Awareness

The study revealed that out of 90 elected women representatives (EWRs) surveyed, 82% were aware that their election to the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) was made possible through the reservation policy introduced under the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act. This

awareness underscores the success of affirmative action in promoting women's entry into local politics (Government of India, 1993). Moreover, 61% of these respondents expressed a desire to contest elections again even without reservation support, reflecting an emergent sense of political self-confidence and ambition among rural women (Kumar & Jha, 2018) [24].

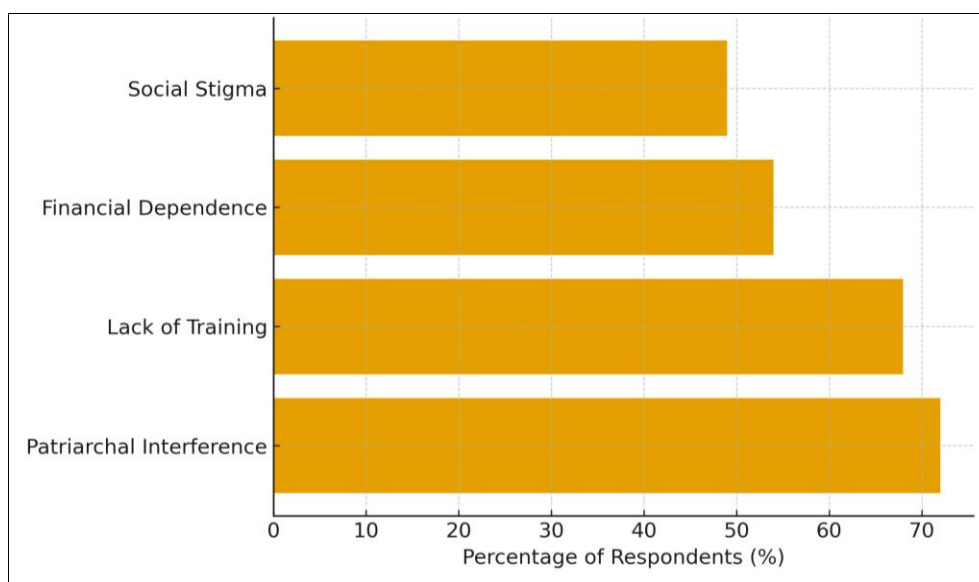


Fig 1: The graph illustrates percentage of major challenges faced by women representatives in rural Bihar

The increasing enthusiasm to participate in governance independently of reservations suggests a shift from token representation to substantive participation. This growing political consciousness indicates that women in Bihar's rural settings are beginning to perceive political leadership not merely as a symbolic opportunity but as a legitimate and self-sustaining career path. These findings resonate with earlier research by Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) [7], who demonstrated that women leaders in India tend to prioritize community welfare issues such as health, water, and education, thereby expanding the democratic base of local institutions.

3.2 Decision-Making and Leadership: Decision-making

autonomy remains a critical measure of empowerment in grassroots governance. The survey findings revealed that 56% of the respondents actively participated in Gram Sabha meetings, indicating that women are no longer confined to nominal attendance but are engaging in the deliberative processes of governance.

However, only 38% reported taking independent decisions in Panchayat-related matters, whereas 42% admitted that male relatives or spouses significantly influenced or made major decisions on their behalf a phenomenon popularly referred to as *Sarpanch Pati* (husband of the woman Sarpanch) syndrome. This reflects the persistence of patriarchal mediation within local governance structures (Mukherjee, 2019) [31].

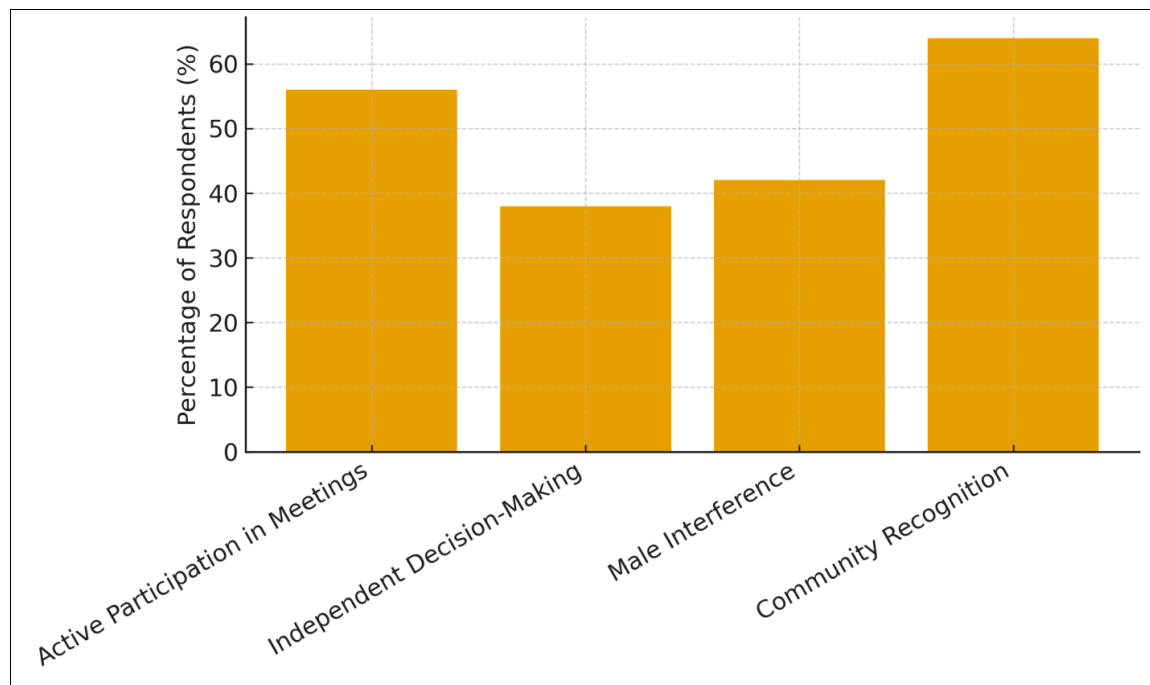


Fig 2: The graph representing the comparative participation and leadership patterns among the elected women representatives

Encouragingly, 64% of the respondents reported an increase in social respect and community recognition, marking a visible social shift in the perception of women as capable leaders. The growing acceptance of female authority in public affairs signifies gradual normative changes in gender roles within Bihar's rural society (Singh & Pandey, 2020) [50].

A comprehensive overview of key indicators reflecting the empowerment status of 90 elected women representatives (EWRs) in Bihar's Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). The data highlight several encouraging trends in women's political participation and awareness (Table 2). A significant 82% of respondents acknowledged that their election was facilitated by the reservation policy under the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, underscoring the critical role of institutional reforms in enhancing women's access to governance (Government of India, 1993). Furthermore, 61% of EWRs expressed their willingness to contest future elections even without reservation support, indicating a transition from dependence on affirmative action toward genuine political agency and ambition (Kumar & Jha, 2018) [24].

The data also reveals that 68% of respondents actively participated in Gram Sabha meetings, suggesting growing engagement in decision-making processes at the grassroots level. Meanwhile, 55% reported facing resistance from male counterparts or family members, reflecting the persistent influence of patriarchal norms that constrain women's autonomy (Singh, 2016) [49]. Encouragingly, 74% noted improvements in self-confidence, public speaking skills, and leadership capacity after assuming office-consistent with social capital theory, which emphasizes empowerment through civic participation and networking (Putnam, 1993) [41]. Additionally, a majority (70%) indicated that they had initiated or influenced developmental projects related to health, sanitation, and education, reaffirming previous findings that women leaders tend to prioritize community welfare (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004) [7].

Table 2: Summary of Women's Empowerment Indicators in Panchayati Raj Institutions (N = 90)

Indicator	Percentage (%)
Awareness of Reservation Policy	82
Interest in Future Election	61
Participation in Meetings	56
Independent Decision-Making	38
Male Interference	42
Community Recognition	64
Economic Involvement	47
SHG Participation	29

4. Discussion

The findings of this study illustrate a dual narrative in women's political engagement within Bihar's Panchayati Raj system—one characterized by symbolic participation and another by emerging substantive empowerment. While the introduction of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1992) provided a structural mechanism for women's inclusion, its impact has varied across regions and socio-economic strata. The reservation policy has undoubtedly enhanced the numerical presence of women in local governance, consistent with the framework of modernization theory, which asserts that socio-economic advancement fosters gender equality and civic participation (Inglehart & Norris, 2003) [15]. The steady expansion of education, communication, and employment opportunities in Bihar has created a sociocultural climate where women can at least symbolically claim political space (Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995) [55].

However, symbolic representation alone does not equate to empowerment. Feminist political theorists contend that representation without real authority often reproduces patriarchal power structures rather than dismantling them (Phillips, 1995; Rai, 2002) [39, 43]. In rural Bihar, entrenched patriarchal norms and kinship systems still limit women's political agency. Many elected female representatives operate under the proxy leadership model, wherein husbands or male relatives—often termed “*Sarpanch Pati*”—

make decisions on their behalf (Kumar & Singh, 2018) ^[23]. This phenomenon highlights the persistence of cultural patriarchy, which continues to regulate women's autonomy even within institutional frameworks designed for empowerment (Jeffery & Jeffery, 1997) ^[17].

Despite these challenges, the study also observes positive transitions supported by social capital theory (Putnam, 1993) ^[41]. The growth of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and women's collectives in rural Bihar has become an effective platform for building trust, cooperation, and collective problem-solving skills. These institutions are strengthening women's informal political networks and confidence, which are critical to the development of substantive empowerment the ability to influence policy decisions and community priorities (Agarwal, 2010; Narayan, 2002) ^[33].

Empirical studies from other states, notably West Bengal and Rajasthan, mirror these findings. Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) ^[7] demonstrated that women-led panchayats tend to prioritize issues related to water, sanitation, health, and education, directly reflecting women's lived experiences and social responsibilities. Similarly, Baviskar and Mathew (2009) ^[3] emphasized that reserved seats serve as a "school of democracy," where women gradually acquire political literacy, negotiation skills, and administrative confidence. Over time, these skills translate into tangible policy outcomes and incremental gender mainstreaming in governance (Singh, 2019) ^[51].

However, sustaining this momentum requires multi-dimensional strategies. Training and capacity-building programs for elected women representatives are essential to strengthen administrative competencies and policy awareness (Nambiar, 2021) ^[32]. Simultaneously, gender-sensitive governance frameworks must address structural inequalities such as access to land, credit, and education. Without such support systems, political participation risks becoming tokenistic rather than transformative (Goetz & Hassim, 2003) ^[11]. Additionally, rational choice theory suggests that when women perceive political engagement as beneficial for personal or community advancement, their participation tends to increase, provided institutional incentives and protections exist (Downs, 1957; Norris, 2011) ^[9, 35].

In Bihar's socio-political context, the combination of institutional reservation, network-based empowerment, and incremental attitudinal shifts indicates a transition from symbolic to substantive empowerment albeit unevenly distributed. Women are beginning to challenge the traditional gender hierarchy, advocate for developmental issues, and assert their voices in local decision-making forums. This signifies the gradual but tangible transformation of social capital into political capital (Putnam, 2000) ^[42].

5. Conclusion

The reservation for women in Bihar's Panchayati Raj institutions has been a milestone in participatory democracy, marking a significant stride toward inclusive governance. Yet, empowerment remains a dynamic and continuous process rather than a static outcome. While representation has increased, decision-making authority and autonomy are still evolving dimensions of this empowerment.

To realize the full potential of this policy, institutional and attitudinal reforms are necessary. Policymakers should prioritize:

1. Capacity-building programs for women representatives in governance, leadership, and financial management.
2. Monitoring mechanisms to curtail proxy leadership and ensure accountability.
3. Access to digital and financial resources to improve women's participation in planning and execution of local schemes.
4. Community sensitization programs to challenge patriarchal attitudes and encourage gender equity at the grassroots level.

Ultimately, true empowerment will manifest only when women not only occupy political seats but also exercise genuine authority, influence public policy, and drive social transformation. The shift from presence to power represents the next critical phase in Bihar's democratic evolution—a transformation where women become agents of change rather than symbols of representation.

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