



Women's Political Participation and Leadership in Local Governance

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Abstract

Local governance is the level of the state that is most close to citizens, and the inclusion of women in it is crucial to the issue of the inclusiveness of democracy in practice. This paper is an examination of the participation and leadership of women in local governance in India with the aid of secondary data obtained from Election Commission of India (ECI), Ministry of Panchayati Raj and published research. It charts the development of the legal landscape, starting with the Committee on the Status of Women, moving to the Seventy third and Seventy fourth Constitutional Amendments and finally to the rise of reservation in some states to 50 per cent. It looks at the proportion of women in local bodies, the proportion of women in Parliament and state legislatures, and the shrinking and even flipping of the gender gap in voter turnout. It then examines research activities regarding the performance of women leaders and the challenges they encounter, amongst others, proxy representation, social norms, limited resources, and disadvantage due to caste. The paper suggests that reservation has catapulted women into public offices in unprecedented numbers, and created a concomitant change in priorities and attitudes, but also that a mere presence of numbers does not necessarily equal effective leadership. It calls for capacity building, devolution of real power and protection from proxy rule and safer political spaces for women's leadership to be substantive.

Keywords: Women's political participation; local governance; Panchayati Raj; reservation; leadership; empowerment; proxy representation

Introduction

India's populace comprises nearly half women and their representation in electoral bodies was minimal in the majority of the twentieth century. Political theorists have given various answers to this question. Pitkin talked about descriptive representation, in which representatives are similar to those they represent, and substantive representation in which representatives act in the interests of the represented (Pitkin, 661). A mere politics of ideas will not do if fair representation of the less powerful is to be achieved, as the presence of women is required: "The experiences and perspectives of women can only be brought into the realm of decision-making by women" (Phillips, 6). These arguments are the basis for provisions like reserving seats. The issue of women's presence started early in India. In 1974, the Committee on the Status of Women in India in its report Towards Equality reported that the equality-formula in the Constitution was not being fulfilled in the political arena and recommended that there should be statutory women's panchayats in villages and a reservation of seats for women in local bodies (Towards Equality, 305).

It was implemented in the Seventy-third and Seventy-fourth Constitutional Amendments of 1992 which stipulated for not less than one-third of the seats and of the offices of chairperson in the



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rural and urban local bodies to be held by women (Constitution of India). It was one of the biggest affirmative action programmes in the world for women in politics, with over 2.5 lakh panchayats and several thousand urban local bodies.

Local governance, in particular, is an important place for the study of women's leadership. Decisions regarding drinking water, sanitation, schools, anganwadis, rural roads, public distribution and employment guarantee works are made or taken at this level and these are issues directly faced by women on a day to day basis. Local bodies are also situated within the hierarchical village frameworks defined by caste, class and gender, influencing who is allowed to speak, stand for election and wield authority. Women's engagement in local governance thus demonstrates the potential and the constraints of formal participation. Thirty years ago, the amendments were made; and today it is possible to pose questions about what the reservation has accomplished, where it has failed and what is needed to turn presence into power.

Review of Literature

The concepts of representation and empowerment form the basis for this paper. Descriptive representation is particularly beneficial where there is mistrust, uncrystallised interests, and history of exclusion; descriptive representation: can be contingent representation of women as women. In Dahlerup's vision, a critical mass is reached once women's influence becomes influential enough to change the institutional culture, something that occurs when numbers of women become great enough to act collectively (275). Kabeer associated empowerment with the increase of strategic life choices of people who were once deprived of such choices, and highlighted the three aspects of empowerment—resources, agency, and achievements (Kabeer, 437). It is crucial to understand why elected women may not be able to act independently, and Agarwal's work on bargaining in the households demonstrates that women's role in public life is influenced by their role within the household.

Since the amendments, empirical research on India has been steadily increasing. Initial research, such as Mohanty's assessment, highlighted the potential of the reservation and its limitations in terms of women's ability to exercise power in the context of social resistance (Mohanty, 3346). Bryld explored the role of reserved seats in accessing local institutions in Madhya Pradesh and supported the notion that there had been some improvement in participation but inequitable in empowerment (Bryld, 149). Buch noted in her research that women in panchayats of several states went from silence to assertion, and that family and caste oppression were a burden for the women who were elected as panchayat members (1). Kudva demonstrated that in the state of Karnataka, local party and male leaders could mould women's candidatures and restrict their independence (Kudva, 445).

In a second set of studies, quasi-experimental designs are used to assess the impact of reservation. Chattopadhyay and Duflo discovered that the women councilors in reserved councils in West Bengal and Rajasthan allocated more resources to public goods that women reported needing, including drinking water and, in West Bengal, roads (Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 1409). Beaman et al. (1497) discovered that girls' exposure to women leaders eliminated bias against women and



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boosted the aspirations and education of girls. In Mumbai, Bhavnani demonstrated that in wards that had reserved seats, women candidates were more likely to be elected even after the reservation was removed (Bhavnani, 23). Iyer and colleagues also found that higher the women's participation in panchayats, higher the proportion of crime against women reported (Iyer et al., 165). In south Indian villages, Ban and Rao discovered that the impact of a reservation differed according to context and that women leaders tended to be less experienced (Ban and Rao, 501). Afridi et al. (1) explored women leaders' experiences in the implementation of a large public works programme and Pande and Ford (1) reviewed international experiences with quotas and found that they tend to lead to greater representation of women, and they can shift policy priorities.

Research on voting and political involvement reveals another aspect. Rai reported that the voting rate among women in India increased significantly, and that variables like education, media exposure, and context were influential in their participation. (Rai, 47) In southern India, Rao and Sanyal found that women and poor people were less likely to speak at the village level due to status inequalities (146). Ghatak and Ghatak researched the attendance at village-level activities in West Bengal, and found that political contestation had an effect (Ghatak and Ghatak, 45).

In Jayal's examination of Indian citizenship one of the points to remember is that the formal right to citizenship has not always been the same at the level of practice, with women and others being left out (Jayal, 1). This paper extends these studies by merging information on laws, representation and voting.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the constitutional and legal framework governing women's participation in local governance in India.
2. To compare women's representation in local bodies with their representation in Parliament and State Legislatures.
3. To analyse trends in women's electoral participation as voters.
4. To review the available evidence on women's leadership, participation, and performance in local self-government institutions.
5. To identify the major barriers to effective women's political leadership and suggest suitable measures for strengthening their role in local governance.

Research Methodology

It is descriptive, analytical and secondary data-based study. The information regarding law and institutions has been extracted from the Constitution of India, Government Committee Reports and Government Document of Ministry of Panchayati Raj. The figures related to representation and voting have been taken from the Election Commission of India and Parliament records. Interpretation is done from books and journal articles referenced. The three tables summarise the legal framework and the overall gender balance in elected bodies and in turnout and simple percentage differences and comparisons are utilised throughout the discussion. The drawbacks of the study are that primary data from elected women representatives is not used, figures are approximate and may change, and results of the state specific research cannot be generalized.



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The Legal and Institutional Framework

Women's participation in the governance process has been evolving over time to build a legal basis for it. The recommendations of the Committee on the Status of Women triggered experimental steps in certain States towards reservation of women in the panchayats, but a decisive step was taken with the Constitution (Seventy-third and Seventy-fourth) conferring constitutional status on rural and urban local bodies in 1992. The major steps in the legal/policy process are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Major Legal and Policy Measures for Women's Participation in Local Governance

Measure	Year	Provision
Committee on the Status of Women (Towards Equality)	1974	Recommended statutory women's panchayats and reservation of seats for women in local bodies
Seventy-third Amendment, Article 243D	1992	Not less than one-third of seats and of chairperson offices in panchayats reserved for women, including women of SC and ST categories within their quotas
Seventy-fourth Amendment, Article 243T	1992	Same provision for seats and chairperson offices in municipalities
Bihar Panchayati Raj amendment	2006	First state to raise women's reservation in panchayats to 50 per cent
Similar state laws (e.g. Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Kerala, Maharashtra)	2007 onwards	Many states, about twenty by official count, adopted 50 per cent reservation for women
Women's Reservation Act (106th Amendment)	2023	One-third seats for women in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies, to take effect after delimitation
Sashakt Panchayat-Netri Abhiyan (Ministry of Panchayati Raj)	2023	Programme to build capacity of elected women and to discourage proxy exercise of their powers

Source: Compiled by the author from the Constitution of India, the report Towards Equality and documents of the Ministry of Panchayati Raj (secondary sources).

Table 1 shows two features of the Indian approach. First, reservation has been introduced in the offices of sarpanch, president and chairperson, and in members' seats, guaranteeing that women get seats and not just the offices. Second, there was no upper limit for the one-third norm and over the years states have progressively increased it to one-half, a policy decision which drew women's representation in many panchayats near to or well beyond their population. In 2023, this principle was extended to Parliament and state legislatures – this will take time until delimitation – but it is consistent with the experience of local government. Reserved seats have been touted for their



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ability to level the playing field, but critics say they detract from the ability for women to build a following, as a woman who has been effective might lose her seat at the next election when a different category of seats becomes the rotation.

Women's Representation across Different Levels of Government

The effect of reservation can be noted from the comparative statistics of the representation of women at various levels of government. The approximate proportions of women in the key elected bodies listed in Table 2.

Table 2: Share of Women in Elected Bodies at Different Levels in India (Approximate)

Elected Body	Women's Share (%)	Basis / Remark
Panchayati Raj institutions (all tiers)	About 46	One-third to one-half seats reserved; official data of the Ministry of Panchayati Raj
Lok Sabha, 2019	14.4	78 of 543 members; no reservation in force
Lok Sabha, 2024	13.6	74 of 543 members; no reservation in force
Rajya Sabha	About 14	Based on parliamentary records; no reservation
State legislative assemblies (average)	About 9	No reservation; wide variation across states

Source: Ministry of Panchayati Raj; Election Commission of India; parliamentary records (figures approximate; percentages for Lok Sabha calculated by the author).

The difference between the table 2 is remarkable. In the states where reservations are applied, the proportion of women is about 46 per cent (well over the one third minimum) and in some states women hold the majority of elected positions. In the absence of any reservation, it is around 14 per cent in Lok Sabha and around 9 per cent in state assemblies on average. While the number of Lok Sabha members from the Lok Sabha has remained more-or-less unchanged since 2019 (from 78 to 74), it implies that political parties are not stepping up their efforts to nominate women unless they are mandated to do so. This evidence confirms Pande and Ford's thesis that quotas work to bring more women to office, while voluntary party measures have had only limited impact (Pande and Ford 1). The idea of critical mass is also applicable to Dahlerup's, as the local bodies have now reached the critical mass but legislatures have not.

The comparison also highlights an issue of pipeline. For a small number, Reservation has helped them get to the higher echelons of public life; for a lot of women, the process has only given them experiences. There is growing research that many women leaders are not interested in re-election or that they are replaced during the rotation of office and that the local level is seen as a short-term opportunity in the political party and/or family. Bhavnani's discovery that reserved seats can affect the chances of those women who would go on to win later, despite not being in the reserved category, suggests that the effect can last (Bhavnani, 23), but it has not been substantial enough to



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alter the makeup of legislatures. The linkage between local experience and party nomination practices would have to be addressed in an effective policy.

Women as Voters: The Narrowing and Reversal of the Gender Gap

Voters' participation is the simplest type of political involvement. In the first few decades of independence women participated in a much lesser extent than men, due to limited mobility, low literacy and family direction in voting. The change in turnout by gender in selected Lok Sabha elections is presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Gender Gap in Voter Turnout in Selected Lok Sabha Elections

Election Year	Male Turnout (%)	Female Turnout (%)	Gap (Female minus Male, percentage points)
1962	63.3	46.6	-16.7
2009	60.2	55.8	-4.4
2014	67.1	65.3	-1.8
2019	67	67.2	0.2
2024	65.6	65.8	0.2

Source: Election Commission of India, Statistical Reports on General Elections

An amazing transition is recorded in Table 3. In 1962, there was a difference of nearly 17 percentage points between the turnout of women and men, which narrowed to about 4 percentage points in 2009 and under 2 percentage points in 2014, and in 2019 and 2024 women's turnout was slightly higher than men's turnout. Rai attributes this shift to increased education, increased exposure to the media, more convenient logistics of voting (including photo identity cards and also having the polling stations near the voter's home), and increased mobilisation of women as a separate voting segment by parties and by the Election Commission (Rai, 47). Women are also a visible electoral category through welfare schemes of women. This reduction in the gap indicates that women's political agency has increased, and it is reasonable to assume that women's experience in local bodies has helped to foster a broader sense of political efficacy, though causal relationships would be hard to establish using aggregate data. Equal turnout does not equate to equal choice should be noted. Research has shown that in many homes women's votes can be swayed by the men, and there is a significant proportion of women who may not even know who the candidates are, particularly in rural areas. In the study of bargaining in the household, Agarwal notes that women's autonomy is limited by their economic dependence (Agarwal, 1). Turnout is thus an important but not a sufficient measure of political equality, and the capacity of women to stand for election and the capacity of women to lead must be looked at separately.

Women's Leadership and Performance in Local Bodies

Generally, evidence of the performance of women leaders is positive, but this can differ, depending on context. The study by Chattopadhyay and Duflo is the best known: the investment in drinking water and roads in reserved councils went towards the priorities expressed by women, in line with



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the idea of substantive representation (Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 1409). Iyer et al. (2016) discovered that the presence of women leaders is associated with higher rates of women's crime in local areas, implying that women leaders can make local institutions more accessible to women. Beaman et al. demonstrated the importance of visibility of women leaders on attitudes, as they found that over time, women's visibility increased girls' aspirations and decreased stereotype of women's capabilities in villages (Beaman et al., 1497). These impacts can serve as a tool for policy but also for social change, if leadership is local.

A number of women who became politically active via reservation also appear in the records of their personal transformation. Buch spoke about women who, at first, did not speak in meetings but after the first term would be able to chair meetings and deal with officials as well as challenge the male members. The Kudumbashree is a network of neighbourhood groups of women which was started in Kerala in the late 1990s, and is often used as a study case to illustrate how collective organisation and local government can work together, providing women with an opportunity to gain experience in planning and monitoring local development. Empowerment is not just about resources but about agency as in these cases Kabeer's argument (437).

Meanwhile, Ban and Rao's results warn against the generalization that all women leaders act in a similar manner to their male counterparts, and that the effects of the reservation were contingent on the community and upon the experiences of the leaders (Ban and Rao, 501). Participation had grown, but empowerment was uneven and required the help and support of civil society and the administration (Bryld, 149). Rao and Sanyal's research demonstrates the importance of deliberation in village meetings that shows the current hierarchy of status, such that a reserved office does not alone result in a shift in who is heard (Rao and Sanyal, 146). This evidence, therefore, confirms a conditional conclusion that, women's leadership can be transformative, but it is dependent on training, support, devolution and social context.

Caste, Class and Women's Leadership

Women are not one homogenous group and the nature of leadership varies from caste to class, age to religion and region to region. The Constitution has stipulated that there shall be reservation for women of the Scheduled Tribes and the Scheduled Castes in the seats reserved for those communities and thousands of women from the most disadvantaged groups hold offices in local bodies. This was a major step forward as these women were hardly known in public life earlier. But the researchers who have conducted their research have demonstrated that they suffer a double problem. Buch reported such instances as when women from Dalit communities were not allowed to sit in, or informed about meetings, or pressured to leave office by dominant groups (1), and Kudva illustrated how local power holders could ensure that women they could control were in the office due to the reservation policy they put in place (445).

Class and education are like the same. Women in land owning families may have a higher status, access to information and support from the family, and women in poorer families may feel uncomfortable challenging officials or dominant family members. This is a case of "deliberation in village meetings" as described by Rao and Sanyal (146) – a sign of the status quo. Also, consider



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age and marital status as younger women and widows may face unique limitations or, in some instances, more freedom to act. The experience of citizenship in India, as Jayal describes it, indicates that rights vary in their experience across different groups (Jayal, 1) and the experience of women within local government suggests that there is a possibility for formal equality to exist alongside substantive inequality. The presence of such differences implies that policy needs to be context-sensitive. A uniform training package or the same rule might not be suitable for a tribal woman sarpanch in a remote hill block and a newly elected woman ward member in a small town. Intersectional data will be useful to design more precise support including how many women are from the Scheduled Tribes or backward, how many complete their tenure and how many are called up for the no-confidence motion. Such data are scarce at the moment and are not published on a regular basis.

Institutional Support: Self-Help Groups, Training and Civil Society

Experience has demonstrated that women leaders work better with organisations that give them information, confidence and group support. The most universal one is the self-help group movement. Through the National Rural Livelihoods Mission, millions of rural women have been organized into self-help groups and federations, and in some states, members of these groups have challenged and come out on top in local elections. Kabeer's discussion of empowerment focuses on the need for women to have the ability to make their resources produce something, and collective groups provide the environment in which this ability can be fostered. The neighbourhood-based organisations that are connected to local government and are sponsored by Kudumbashree in Kerala are often referred to as an example of how women's collective organisation has aided in planning and political participation.

The second pillar is training. The second pillar is training. The National Institute of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj and the State Institutes of Rural Development have organized orientation programmes for elected members, while there have been programmes for elected women run by non-governmental organisations and women's networks. In an initial evaluation, Mohanty emphasized that if women were to be on the panchayats, they would struggle to wield their authority without training and information (Mohanty, 3346). Similarly, Bryld commented that the effects of the reservation were stronger when civil society organizations and the administration were present and active, and continued to support the project. (Bryld, 149) However, training is not always well done and a lecture-type one-off session doesn't necessarily develop skills like reading a budget, running a meeting or writing a proposal. Peer learning and mentoring of experienced women representatives and exposure visits to well-functioning panchayats have been found to be helpful.

There is also a monitoring function of civil society. Women's groups, rights organisations, and the media can record instances of proxy rule, advocate for measures against harassment, and highlight successful cases. The Government's Sashakt Panchayat-Netri Abhiyan recognizes the importance of engaging such partners (Ministry of Panchayati Raj). All these experiences have taught us that



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women's leadership thrives in an environment that is not only organized, but also knowledgeable and cooperative in administration and rights protecting.

Barriers to Effective Women's Leadership

The most talked about barrier is that of proxy, so called 'sarpanch-pati' phenomenon, where in a husband or male relative would attend meetings, sign on behalf of the elected woman and take decisions. Buch and Kudva both describe the various types of this practice, ranging from advice to full control (Buch 1, Kudva 445). The purpose of the reservation is negated by the proxy rule, because in the sense of Pitkin (Pitkin 61) substantive representation is missing while descriptive is present. The government's recognition of the issue is reflected in the Sashakt Panchayat-Netri Abhiyan which aims to train women representatives and discourage proxy participation (Ministry of Panchayati Raj). Another set of factors is a group of social norms and domestic duties that restrict women's mobility and time. In the bargaining literature, Agarwal demonstrates that women's bargaining power in the household is dependent on their bargaining power outside of the household, which is a product of their property rights and income (Agarwal, 1). A third is lack of training, information and administrative support. First-time representatives often lack knowledge of budgets, rules of procedure, government programs, and rely on the secretary or on men. A fourth is a lack of genuine devolution: even able women leaders can do little when the panchayats have little and little money to operate, and officials can choose to ignore them.

Fifth, women may be excluded due to educational and/or other eligibility requirements. Others have set a minimum educational requirement or other norm in contesting local elections in some states. In 2015, Haryana did so, and the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the law, although it was pointed out that norms like these rule out many women and people from disadvantaged groups since women have had unequal access to education. Sixth, statistically women from SC/ST communities have the dual disadvantage of being women and also belonging to SC/ST and are likely to be targeted for harassment, in some instances, in the form of no-confidence motion or even violence. Seventh, party control and rotation of seats prevent women from sustaining their political careers in the long-term (Kudva, 445). These barriers demonstrate that formal access is just the beginning.

Reading the Evidence Together

When taken in combination, the three tables tell a uniform story. The legal structure has evolved from a recommendation in 1974 to a state level norm of equal representation in 1992, and to a constitutional requirement in 1996. (See Table 1.) As revealed in Table 2, the percentage of women increases to almost half in the areas where such a scheme is implemented, but is lower in those areas where no reservation is in operation. As indicated in Table 3, women are now par with men in terms of voter participation. Together, they suggest that there has been a significant decrease in formal obstacles to women's political participation, while the remaining barriers are mostly social, economic and organisational. This reading backs Phillips's claim that presence is a necessary condition for fair representation (Phillips, 5-6), but it also backs up Pitkin's reminder that presence is not enough to make you a representative of those represented (Pitkin, 61). Mansbridge's



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contingent defence of descriptive representation is applicable to the Indian context as well, as the gains from reservation have been the highest in settings where women have some sort of organisational support and where they can act autonomously (Mansbridge, 628). Thus, the Indian case is significant for the overall debate on gender quota, as it is now understood that while the composition of an institution can change rapidly with the introduction of quotas, the culture of that institution takes more time and needs to be complemented by other measures.

Suggestions

On the basis of the discussion, the following measures are suggested. Capacity building should be ongoing and not restricted to a one-off orientation. Women's organisations and training institutes should provide women elected into office with training in finance, planning, legal rights, and public speaking, before and after they are elected. Second, effective measures need to be implemented to combat the use of proxies, which include having women representatives present the meetings themselves, keeping attendance and decisions at such meetings transparent, and holding those who intrude upon the functions of such representatives accountable. Third, the devolution of funds, functions and functionaries to local bodies should be realised as women leaders need to have real authority. Fourth, collective platforms like gram sabhas of women, federations and networks of self-help groups etc. should be strengthened, as collective voice decreases the feeling of isolation and boosts confidence. Fifth, the rotation of reserved seats should be rethought and, for instance, extended, giving women a chance to create a base. Sixth, political spaces need to be made safe through prompt redress of harassment and violence and special protection be offered to women of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Seventh, political parties must be encouraged to field women candidates for higher posts and include women with good experience as panchayat presidents in state and national legislatures to reap the fruits of panchayat reservation. Lastly, the timely collection and dissemination of information on elected women such as their educational qualification, caste, attendance and tenure would help in research and policy.

Conclusion

This paper has focused on women's political participation and political leadership in local governance in India with secondary data. The evidence indicates that the Seventy-third and Seventy-fourth Amendments to the Constitution, combined with the Nadu/quarterly provisions that has increased the quota to one-half, have altered the composition of local governments with women representation at around 46 per cent in panchayats, while it was 14 per cent in the Lok Sabha and 9 per cent in state assemblies. There has also been an increase in the participation of women in voting, and the gap of nearly 17% has disappeared in the last two General Elections. It has been demonstrated that women in leadership positions often turn their focus to public goods that women care about, transform community attitudes and develop confidence and capacity in the office. But "presence" has not always been "power. Proxy representation, social norms and lack of training, weak devolution, and caste disadvantage further constrain effective leadership. The central question of the paper is then answered, the reservation having been very effective in



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enhancing participation and representation, but with the need for more support and structural reform for effective leadership. Women's representation in local governance can then turn into more than just a numbers game, but a more responsive and inclusive democracy, if these conditions are fulfilled. Primary surveys of elected women, with particular focus on caste, region and age, could be used as a basis for future research to determine which supports are effective.

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