

## WOMEN'S POLITICAL REPRESENTATION IN PANCHAYATS: FROM RESERVATION TO LEADERSHIP

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### **Abstract**

*The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1992) transformed India's local governance by mandating a minimum one-third reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). Over time, several states have raised this quota to 50 per cent, making India one of the world's largest experiments in gender quotas at the grassroots. Today, women constitute nearly 46–47 per cent of all elected representatives in PRIs, with about 14.5 lakh elected women representatives (EWRs) across the country. This paper critically examines the journey "from reservation to leadership," asking whether numerical inclusion has matured into substantive, transformative leadership for rural women.*

*The paper first outlines the constitutional and policy context of women's reservation in Panchayats and traces the expansion of quotas across states. It then analyses empirical evidence on the impact of women's presence in local councils—such as shifts in development priorities, improvement in service delivery, and role-model effects. At the same time, it interrogates the persistence of structural constraints, particularly proxy representation by male relatives, capacity gaps, patriarchal norms, intersectional marginalisation, and gender-based violence in politics. Recent policy initiatives such as capability-building frameworks for EWRs, model "Women-Friendly Gram Panchayats," and advisory committees on the issues of women pradhans are discussed as efforts to move beyond formal quotas towards substantive empowerment.*

*Drawing on government reports, academic studies, UN evaluations, and case studies of successful women leaders, the paper argues that reservation has undeniably enlarged women's political presence and opened leadership pathways from Gram Panchayat to higher elected offices. However, the transition from "seat" to "voice," and from symbolic presence to autonomous power, remains uneven and contingent on supportive institutions, sustained training, and broader socio-cultural change. The paper concludes with a set of policy recommendations aimed at converting women's descriptive representation into robust, gender-just, and transformative local leadership.*

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**Introduction**

Democratic deepening in India has increasingly been analysed through the lens of local governance. Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) embody this process by bringing elected decision-making to the village level. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1992) made Panchayats a constitutional tier of governance and mandated reservations for Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and women. For women, at least one-third of all seats and chairperson positions in PRIs were reserved, to be rotated between constituencies.

Over three decades, this constitutional experiment has produced an unprecedented mobilisation of women into formal politics. India now has roughly **14.5 lakh elected women representatives in PRIs**, forming about **46 per cent** of all elected Panchayat representatives—one of the highest proportions of women in local government globally. In 21 states, the quota has been raised from 33 per cent to **50 per cent**, further institutionalising women's descriptive representation.

Yet a crucial question persists: has this dramatic increase in women's presence translated into substantive, autonomous leadership? Are women pradhans and ward members able to influence budgets, shape development priorities, and challenge gendered power structures—or are they often reduced to symbolic figures, with real decisions taken by male relatives and local elites? This paper explores these questions by tracing the journey from reservation to leadership in India's Panchayats.

**Reservation as a Tool for Gender Equality in Local Governance**

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1992) marked a watershed moment in India's democratic journey by institutionalising Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) as a constitutionally recognised three-tier governance structure comprising Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti, and Zila Parishad. Its core intention was to democratise rural governance and correct historic exclusions by mandating regular elections every five years and reserving seats for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and women—including at least one-third of all seats and chairperson positions for women. This reservation policy was not merely procedural; it was conceptualised as a substantive gender equality mechanism. Women's reservation was designed around three interrelated objectives. The first was **descriptive representation**, ensuring the numerical presence of women in elected institutions. The second objective focused on **empowerment and capability enhancement**, enabling rural women to

develop political confidence, negotiation skills, and public voice—domains historically monopolised by men. The third and most ambitious goal was **transformative governance**, whereby the inclusion of women was expected to shift institutional priorities towards issues deeply affecting everyday life, such as water supply, sanitation, health, education, social welfare, livelihood opportunities, and responses to gender-based violence. In essence, by positioning women as decision-makers at the grassroots, the Amendment sought to break patriarchal norms embedded within households, public institutions, and political culture. This design placed women at the centre of local governance not as symbolic beneficiaries, but as active agents capable of reshaping development agendas and redefining participatory democracy in rural India.

Building on the central mandate of one-third reservation, several states—including Bihar, Rajasthan, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, and others—progressively enhanced the quota for women in PRIs to 50 per cent. Today, **21 states** provide 50 per cent reservation for women in local bodies, thereby normalising women’s majority presence in many Panchayats. This expansion reflects the political recognition that quotas have not destabilised governance; rather, they have strengthened local democracy. The visibility of effective women sarpanches has also created public demand for more inclusive leadership, prompting political parties to treat women as serious candidates even in non-reserved constituencies.

### **From Presence to Power: Assessing Substantive Leadership**

Available data indicates that women’s descriptive representation has crossed the threshold envisioned by the 73rd Amendment. At the national level, women now hold **around 46–46.6 per cent** of all PRI seats. In some states like Jharkhand and Rajasthan, women’s share of elected Panchayat members exceeds 55–58 per cent. This sustained participation has also created a **leadership pipeline**. Case studies document women sarpanches who have gone on to become Zila Parishad presidents, MLAs, or even Members of Parliament. Research on the “upstream effects” of local reservations finds that exposure to women leaders at the Panchayat level can increase women’s political participation and candidacy in higher-level elections. In this sense, Panchayats function as a political school where thousands of rural women receive training in public speaking, negotiating with officials, understanding budgets, and managing collective projects—skills that can translate into broader leadership roles. A growing body of evidence shows that women’s numerical inclusion in Panchayati Raj Institutions has significantly shaped the substantive agenda of local governance. Comparative studies between women-led and men-led Panchayats reveal that women sarpanches tend to prioritise issues intimately connected to everyday life—such as

drinking water, public health, sanitation, primary schooling, and nutritional services—reflecting the lived experiences and needs of women and children. Evaluations conducted in states like Karnataka further indicate that Panchayats headed by women display notable differences in budget allocation, with greater emphasis on social welfare programmes, inclusivity in decision-making, and responsiveness towards marginalised groups. Similarly, assessments by UN agencies and civil society organisations highlight that trained elected women representatives (EWRs) show higher levels of institutional engagement: they convene Gram Sabhas more regularly, demand information from bureaucratic actors, question officials, and advocate for gender-responsive planning and schemes. Collectively, these findings suggest that reservation has not merely occupied seats with women's bodies, but has opened avenues for gender-sensitive governance and development transformation—particularly when supported by sustained capacity building, organisational strengthening, and leadership mentoring.

### **Role-model and social change effects**

Beyond institutional outcomes, women's political participation in Panchayats has generated powerful role-model effects and contributed to broader socio-cultural change. The presence of elected women representatives—many of whom navigate public spaces for the first time—visibly disrupts patriarchal norms that confine women to domestic roles. Studies and field reports show that when villagers witness women chairing meetings, negotiating with officials, delivering speeches, and resolving disputes, it reshapes community perceptions of female capability and authority. Young girls observing women sarpanches often express aspirations to pursue education, public service, or political leadership, signalling an intergenerational shift in ambition. Families, too, begin to reassess gender expectations, with greater acceptance of daughters' mobility, schooling, and leadership potential. Over time, repeated exposure to female leaders cultivates gradual attitudinal change among men, who increasingly acknowledge women's competency in governance. These role-model effects are particularly pronounced where women leaders serve consecutive terms or lead visible community initiatives—such as anti-alcohol campaigns, sanitation drives, school improvement efforts, or interventions against child marriage. Thus, women's reservation in Panchayats functions not only as a mechanism of institutional inclusion but as a catalyst for social norm transformation, expanding the realm of what is considered possible for women in rural India.

### **Persistent Barriers: Proxy Leadership and Structural Constraints**

Despite these gains, the journey from reservation to real leadership remains incomplete. Several structural constraints continue to limit women's autonomy in Panchayats.

One of the most widely discussed problems is **proxy representation**—situations where husbands or male relatives exercise de facto authority while the elected woman is a figurehead. Recent reviews by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj and other expert committees underline that, although nearly **46–47 per cent** of Panchayat representatives are women, many face pressure to let male relatives sign documents, attend meetings, or negotiate contracts on their behalf.

A major challenge confronting women’s political representation in Panchayats is the persistence of capacity gaps and institutional barriers, particularly among first-time elected representatives. Many women enter office with limited exposure to formal education, bureaucratic procedures, or legal frameworks governing rural development, which places them at an initial disadvantage compared to their male counterparts. Research findings from national and international agencies reveal that inadequate training in budgeting, planning, and statutory provisions restricts women’s ability to independently steer governance processes. Moreover, poor access to timely information and digital tools further weakens their ability to monitor schemes or engage effectively with administrative systems. As a result, women representatives often become dependent on Panchayat secretaries, block officials, or contractors for technical work and decision-making, inadvertently enabling others to wield real authority in their name. The lack of awareness about welfare schemes, institutional entitlements, and rights-based legislations compounds this dependence, making it easier for vested interests to manipulate their decisions. Consequently, these capacity deficits reduce women’s bargaining power, limit their institutional autonomy, and reinforce male domination within political spaces that were otherwise meant to democratise gender participation.

#### **Patriarchal norms, violence, and intersectionality**

A further layer of constraint emerges from the wider socio-cultural environment in which women leaders operate, marked by patriarchal norms, intersecting inequalities, and—sometimes—gendered violence. Even when elected, women’s authority remains contested in many rural settings where traditional expectations confine women to domestic roles, restrict their mobility, and discourage public speaking. These norms often translate into structural disadvantages: Gram Sabha meetings scheduled late in the evening, male-dominated decision forums, or social sanctions that undermine women’s confidence and legitimacy. For Dalit, Adivasi, or extremely poor women, the barriers are even deeper, as caste hierarchies and class exclusion intersect with gender to diminish their ability to command respect or influence collective decisions. In some documented cases, women sarpanches have been subjected to verbal abuse, intimidation, or physical violence when they

resisted entrenched interests or challenged corruption, especially in politically sensitive areas such as liquor control, land allocation, or welfare distribution. The disproportionate burden of unpaid care work further limits women's time for governance responsibilities, weakening their visibility and effectiveness in office. Taken together, these patriarchal pressures not only erode women's autonomy but also inhibit the transformative potential of political reservation by impeding the shift from descriptive representation to empowered, qualitative leadership.

### **Policy Recommendations: Moving from Presence to Power**

The experience of three decades of women's reservation in Panchayats shows that while representation has expanded dramatically, substantive empowerment requires deeper institutional transformation. To strengthen women's autonomous leadership, a multi-layered policy approach is needed.

First, **systematic capacity-building and continuous training** must be institutionalised rather than delivered sporadically. Structured induction training for newly elected women representatives should be mandatory, supplemented by refresher courses on budgeting, Gram Sabha procedures, digital governance, and social audit mechanisms. Partnerships with State Institutes of Rural Development, NGOs, and academic centres can create sustained learning ecosystems at the district level.

Second, **financial and administrative autonomy of elected women** must be strengthened. Women sarpanches should have access to individual login credentials for development portals, e-governance dashboards, and fund utilisation systems to reduce dependency on secretaries or relatives. Clear accountability norms should prohibit interference by non-elected family members, imposing penalties for proxy decision-making.

Third, targeted **mentorship and leadership support networks** are essential. The creation of peer-learning forums, federations of elected women representatives, and state-level leadership academies can enhance confidence, encourage mutual learning, and connect women to higher institutional structures.

Fourth, **gender-responsive institutional reforms** are needed. Meeting timings should be adjusted to accommodate women's care responsibilities, while supportive facilities—such as creches in Panchayat buildings, safe mobility arrangements, and grievance redress cells—can help women participate without social barriers. Political parties must also institutionalise women's leadership pipelines by fielding women candidates in non-reserved seats.

Fifth, **intersectionality must guide programme design**. Dalit, Adivasi, widowed, or first-generation literate representatives face compounded disadvantages

and therefore require tailored capacity-building, legal protection, and confidence development. Special resource centres and helplines for women sarpanches facing violence or intimidation can enhance their security and agency.

Finally, **strengthening Gram Sabha functioning** is indispensable. Gram Sabhas must be revitalised through mandatory quorum requirements, public disclosure norms, and participatory planning tools to ensure that women—not bureaucratic actors or contractors—shape governance priorities. The development of “Women-Friendly Gram Panchayat” models, already experimented within some states, should be scaled nationally through incentives, awards, and knowledge exchange platforms.

Together, these interventions can shift the focus from numerical reservation to **qualitative empowerment, institutional autonomy, and gender-responsive democracy**.

### **Conclusion**

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment marked an unprecedented democratic innovation by enabling millions of rural women to enter formal politics. Over the past three decades, reservation in Panchayats has accomplished its initial goal of securing women’s presence—evidenced by the rise of women’s representation to nearly half of all elected seats in many states. This has opened pathways for leadership, improved service delivery, and challenged long-held assumptions about women’s competence in public life. Yet the journey from **presence to power** remains incomplete.

While successful role models and empirical evidence indicate pockets of transformative change, pervasive barriers such as proxy representation, skill deficits, patriarchal control, violence, and caste-based inequalities continue to constrain women’s autonomy. The challenge, therefore, is not simply to reserve seats but to **democratise institutions and social norms** so that women leaders can exercise authority without coercion or dependency.

The future of gender-inclusive local governance lies in **deepening capability**, embedding **institutional safeguards**, and building **collective leadership cultures** among women representatives. Policy frameworks that nurture lifelong political learning, strengthen Gram Sabhas, ensure accountability against proxy control, and promote supportive infrastructures can transform reservation into genuine leadership. If these conditions are sustained, Panchayats will not only remain training grounds for rural women but may evolve as **catalysts for feminist democracy**, influencing state legislatures, parliamentary politics, and broader social change.

Thus, India’s experiment with women’s reservation in Panchayats has succeeded in widening the democratic base; the next task is to **convert symbolic**

**representation into substantive transformative leadership**—where women govern not because they are mandated to sit, but because they are empowered to lead.

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