

From Reservation to Representation: Assessing Women's Empowerment in Local Governance in India

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between women's participation and their actual representation in local governance in India, particularly in the context of reservation policies introduced through the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts. While these reforms have significantly increased women's numerical presence in Panchayati Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies, questions remain regarding the extent of their real empowerment and decision-making authority. Drawing on secondary data from government reports, academic literature, and international organizations, the study adopts a qualitative and analytical approach to explore this transition from participation to substantive representation. The findings indicate that although reservations have successfully ensured women's entry into political institutions, structural barriers such as patriarchy, socio-economic inequalities, and institutional limitations continue to restrict their effective role in governance. At the same time, evidence suggests that women leaders contribute to more inclusive and welfare-oriented policy outcomes, particularly in areas such as health, education, and sanitation. The study concludes that participation is a necessary but not sufficient condition for empowerment, and meaningful representation requires both institutional support and broader social transformation.

Keywords

Women's Participation, Local Governance, Reservation, Representation, Empowerment, Panchayati Raj.

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Introduction

Women's political participation in India has historically been limited due to social inequalities, patriarchal norms, and restricted access to decision-making spaces, especially at the grassroots level. A major shift occurred with the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments (1992), which introduced local self-governance and reserved at least 33% seats for women, later increased to 50% in many states. This led to a significant rise in women's representation, with over 1.4 million women participating in Panchayati Raj Institutions.

Research shows that women leaders often prioritize issues such as health, education, sanitation, and welfare, contributing to more inclusive governance. However, increased participation does not always translate into real decision-making power. Therefore, this study examines the transition from participation to meaningful representation and analyses how institutional reforms and social structures shape women's roles in local governance.

Objectives of The Study

- To examine how reservations have increased women's participation in local governance in India.
- To analyse the extent to which reservations translate into substantive political representation and decision-making power.

Review of Literature

Women's Political Participation in India

The issue of women's political participation in India has been widely studied, particularly in the context of decentralization and reservation policies. Early research highlights that women were historically excluded from political processes due to socio-cultural constraints, limited education, and economic dependency (Jayal, 2006). However, the introduction of reservations in local governance significantly increased women's numerical participation, especially in Panchayati Raj Institutions.

Empirical studies (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004; Beaman et al., 2009) show that women's participation improves governance outcomes and reduces gender bias.

More recent studies indicate that while participation has increased significantly, the level of engagement varies across regions due to differences in literacy, socio-economic status, and institutional support (Sharma, 2015). Thus, the literature suggests that reservations have been effective in increasing women's presence but does not uniformly guarantee active participation.

Reservation and Empowerment Debate

A central theme in the literature is the debate between empowerment and

tokenism. Scholars such as Naila Kabeer (1999) argue that empowerment is not simply about participation but involves the ability to exercise agency and make meaningful choices. This perspective suggests that reservation policies must be evaluated in terms of their impact on women's decision-making power.

Similarly, Bina Agarwal (2001) introduces the concept of "participatory exclusion," where women may be present in institutions but lack real influence. Ban and Rao (2008) provide a more nuanced view, suggesting that while initial participation may appear symbolic, it can gradually lead to genuine empowerment as women gain experience and confidence.

These debates highlight that reservation is a necessary but not sufficient condition for empowerment. Its effectiveness depends on supporting factors such as education, awareness, and institutional backing.

Proxy Leadership and Structural Barriers

Despite increased participation, several studies highlight the persistence of structural barriers that limit women's effective representation. One of the most widely discussed issues is proxy leadership, where elected women representatives are controlled by male family members (Dutta, 2012). This phenomenon reflects the continued influence of patriarchal norms within political institutions.

Cornwall and Goetz (2005) argue that participation must be understood in terms of power relations, emphasizing that inclusion does not automatically lead to empowerment. Similarly, Bardhan et al. (2005) point out that decentralization can sometimes lead to elite capture, which further restricts women's influence.

Recent studies also emphasize the role of socio-economic factors such as caste, class, and education in shaping women's participation (Deshpande & Chatterjee, 2021). These findings indicate that structural inequalities continue to constrain women's agency, even in the presence of institutional reforms.

Recent Studies and Emerging Trends (Post-2020)

Recent literature focuses on evaluating the long-term impact of reservation and identifying emerging challenges. Reports by Ministry of Panchayati Raj (2023) and NITI Aayog (2022) indicate that women now constitute over 45% of representatives, reflecting substantial numerical inclusion; however, institutional constraints such as limited training, financial resources, and administrative support continue to restrict their effectiveness. Empirical studies (Sharma & Gupta, 2023; Singh & Pattnaik, 2022) further show that women are increasingly involved in decision-making, particularly in welfare, sanitation, and development sectors, yet their authority is often shaped by patriarchal norms and lack of political support.

The role of education and capacity-building is emphasized by Banerjee and Saha (2022), who argue that these factors are crucial for enhancing women's agency and participation.

At the same time, structural and social barriers remain central to the debate. United Nations Development Programme (2021) and UN Women (2020) stress that participation must be evaluated in terms of agency, access to resources, and institutional support rather than mere numbers. Deshpande and Chatterjee (2021) highlight the importance of intersectionality, showing how caste and class continue to shape women's effectiveness in leadership roles. Similarly, Kumar (2021) and Dutta (2012) point to the persistence of proxy leadership, although its influence is gradually declining with increased exposure and experience.

Theoretical and empirical contributions further deepen this understanding. Rai (2011) distinguishes between descriptive and substantive representation, emphasizing that numerical presence does not guarantee influence. Earlier studies (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004; Beaman et al., 2009; Ban & Rao, 2008) demonstrate that women's participation can improve governance outcomes and reduce gender bias over time, suggesting the potential for gradual empowerment. However, critical perspectives (Jayal, 2006; Bardhan et al., 2005; Cornwall & Goetz, 2005; Agarwal, 2001) argue that structural inequalities, elite capture, and participatory exclusion continue to limit women's effective role in governance. Overall, the literature indicates that while reservations have successfully ensured participation, achieving meaningful empowerment requires addressing deeper social and institutional constraints.

Research Gap

Existing studies have largely focused on the quantitative increase in women's participation following reservation policies. However, limited attention has been given to the quality of participation, particularly in terms of decision-making power, policy influence, and substantive representation. This study seeks to address this gap by examining the transition from participation to meaningful representation.

Theoretical Framework

This study uses different theoretical perspectives to understand the gap between women's participation and their actual role in local governance. The feminist perspective explains that reservation policies have helped women enter political institutions by providing legal and institutional support. However, it also shows that social factors like patriarchy continue to limit women's independence, which is often visible in practices such as proxy leadership, where male family members influence decisions. Representation theory helps to understand the difference between women's numerical presence (descriptive representation) and their real influence in

decision-making (substantive representation), suggesting that participation alone does not guarantee empowerment. The capability approach developed by Amartya Sen further emphasizes that real empowerment depends on women’s ability to make decisions and effectively use available opportunities. In addition, the concept of intersectionality highlights that factors such as caste, class, and economic status affect women’s experiences differently. Together, these perspectives provide a clearer understanding of why increased participation does not always lead to meaningful representation and empowerment.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and analytical approach based on secondary data to examine the relationship between women’s participation and their actual representation in local governance in India. Data has been collected from government reports, academic studies, and international sources such as the Ministry of Panchayati Raj, UN Women, and World Bank. The use of secondary data allows for a comprehensive and long-term analysis of trends since the implementation of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act and the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act. The study employs comparative and thematic analysis to understand patterns of participation, decision-making power, and structural constraints such as patriarchy and proxy leadership. Overall, the methodology focuses on analyzing the gap between descriptive representation (numerical presence) and substantive representation (actual influence) in order to assess the extent of women’s empowerment in local governance.

Findings

A. Women’s Participation after Reservation

Growth in Numerical Representation

Table 1: Growth of Women’s Representation in PRIs (1993–2024)

Period	Reservation Level	Estimated Women Representatives	Key Observation
Pre-1992	No reservation	<5%	Minimal participation
1993–2005	33%	~10 lakh	Entry phase after reforms
2006–2015	33–50%	~12–13 lakh	Expansion phase
2016–2024	Up to 50%	14+ lakh	Consolidation phase

The table indicates a substantial increase in women’s participation following the introduction of reservation policies. Prior to the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act and the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act, women’s presence in political institutions was minimal. However, the provision of 33% reservation, later extended to 50% in several states, significantly transformed this scenario.

According to the Ministry of Panchayati Raj (2023), women now constitute over 45% of elected representatives in Panchayati Raj Institutions, amounting to more than 1.4 million representatives. This marks a major shift towards inclusive governance and enhanced visibility of women in public decision-making spaces.

State-wise Trends

Table 2: State-wise Women Reservation and Participation in Panchayats

State	Reservation (%)	Key Feature
Bihar	50%	Early adoption of higher reservation
Rajasthan	50%	Strong participation in rural governance
Madhya Pradesh	50%	Institutional support for women leaders
Kerala	50%	High literacy and effective decentralization
Uttar Pradesh	33–50%	Mixed outcomes

The table highlights variations across states in the effectiveness of women's participation. States such as Bihar and Rajasthan have witnessed significant growth in women's representation due to higher reservation levels. Kerala presents a relatively stronger model, where higher literacy and institutional support have enabled more effective participation.

These variations suggest that while reservation provides opportunities, factors such as education, awareness, and governance structures play a crucial role in determining

Comparative Analysis

Table 3: Women Representation – Local Governance vs National Level

Institution	Women Representation (%)
Panchayati Raj Institutions	45%+
Urban Local Bodies	35–45%
Lok Sabha	~14%
State Assemblies	~9–12%

This comparison highlights a significant disparity between grassroots and higher levels of governance. Women's participation is considerably higher at the local level due to reservation policies, whereas representation in Parliament and State Assemblies remains relatively low. This indicates that local governance serves as an important entry point for women into politics.

B. From Participation to Real Representation

Decision-Making Power

- Women's participation has increased, but their decision-making power remains uneven.
- In some areas women actively contribute, while in others their authority is limited by social constraints.
- Participation alone does not ensure empowerment; it depends on the broader socio-political environment.

Policy Priorities of Women Leaders

- Women representatives often focus on welfare issues like health, education, sanitation, and social programs.
- They tend to prioritize development-oriented policies that benefit the community.

Challenges and Constraints

- Patriarchal norms and proxy leadership often limit women's autonomy in governance.
- Male relatives sometimes control decision-making, reducing women's real authority.
- Lack of training, financial resources, and institutional support further restricts effective participation.
- These challenges highlight the gap between formal inclusion and substantive empowerment.

Case-based Insights

- Outcomes vary across states in women's participation and empowerment.
- In Kerala, initiatives like Kudumbashree show active participation and strong leadership by women.
- In some northern states, proxy leadership ("sarpanch pati") still limits women's autonomy.
- These cases indicate that while reservation creates opportunities for participation, the extent of empowerment depends on social context, education, and institutional support.

Discussion

- Reservation policies have significantly increased women's participation in local governance.
- Increased presence has not always led to equal decision-making power or independence.

- Participation has improved numerical representation, but substantive representation remains limited.
- There is a clear gap between inclusion and actual empowerment.

Reservation vs Representation Debate

The study contributes to the ongoing debate on whether reservation leads to empowerment or merely symbolic inclusion. On one hand, reservation policies have played a crucial role in:

- Reservation has helped break barriers, increase visibility, and create leadership opportunities.
- Issues like proxy leadership and patriarchal control still limit women's autonomy.
- Reservation acts as an entry point, not a complete solution.
- Without education, training, and social support, it may lead to tokenism.
- Empowerment should be seen as a gradual process, requiring both institutional and social change.

Structure vs Agency Debate

- The findings can be further interpreted through the sociological debate of **structure versus agency**. Reservation policies represent an institutional intervention aimed at expanding women's opportunities (agency).
- Reservation expands opportunities (agency) but operates within existing social structures.
- Structural barriers like patriarchy, caste, and economic inequality limit women's effectiveness.
- Key constraints include limited autonomy, dependency, and lack of institutional support.
- At the same time, women are gradually asserting their agency with experience.
- Real empowerment requires both policy reforms and changes in social structures.

Conclusion

- Reservation policies under the 73rd and 74th Amendments have significantly increased women's participation in local governance.
- India has become a leading example of women's representation at the grassroots level.
- However, increased participation has not fully led to real empowerment.

- Women's decision-making power and autonomy remain uneven and limited.
- Reservation ensures access and inclusion, but full empowerment and equal representation are still not achieved.
- Gender-based power structures and social norms still limit women's authority despite increased participation.
- Real empowerment requires both institutional reforms and broader social change.

Policy Suggestions

In light of the findings, the following policy suggestions are proposed to enhance women's effective representation in local governance:

- **Capacity Building:** Regular training to improve women's skills in governance, leadership, and decision-making.
- **Gender Sensitization:** Awareness programs to reduce patriarchal attitudes and promote gender equality.
- **Institutional Support:** Better financial, administrative, and monitoring systems to strengthen women's roles.
- These steps can help bridge the gap between participation and real empowerment.

Scope for Future Research

The present study, being based on secondary data, opens up several avenues for future research:

- **Field-Based Studies:** Use interviews, surveys, and case studies to understand real experiences of women leaders.
- **Comparative Studies:** Compare India with other countries to analyze different governance contexts.
- **Micro-Level Analysis:** Focus on specific regions or groups to study variations in women's empowerment.

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