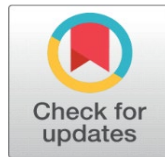


PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA: FROM POLITICAL PRESENCE TO SUBSTANTIVE AGENCY

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ABSTRACT

Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) have become one of the largest arenas of women's political participation in the world. Article 243D of the Constitution, introduced by the 73rd Amendment, reserves not less than one-third of seats and chairpersons' posts in Panchayats for women, and 21 States, including Karnataka, and two Union Territories have raised this to 50 per cent. In November 2025, women held 12.06 lakh of the 24.24 lakh elected positions in PRIs (49.75 per cent). This paper asks whether, and under what conditions, this expansion of political presence becomes substantive empowerment. Using a qualitative, analytical review of constitutional provisions, official reports and peer-reviewed research, and drawing on Kabeer's framework of resources, agency and achievements, it examines the political, social and economic dimensions of women's empowerment through Panchayats. The evidence shows that women leaders have shifted local public investment towards needs such as drinking water, reduced voter bias against women, raised the aspirations of adolescent girls and encouraged the reporting of crimes against women. These gains are limited, however, by patriarchal norms, proxy control by male relatives, caste discrimination, the frequent rotation of reserved seats, the burden of unpaid domestic work and inadequate training and information. The paper proposes measures to convert representation into leadership, including action against proxy representation, continuous training in local languages, women-centred Gram Sabha processes, networks of elected women representatives and convergence with self-help groups.

Keywords: Panchayati Raj Institutions, Women's Empowerment, Political Representation, Reservation, Proxy Representation, Local Self-Government, Karnataka

1. INTRODUCTION

Women's empowerment refers to the expansion of women's ability to make strategic life choices, to access and control resources, to exercise their rights and to participate in public life [Kabeer \(1999\)](#). Political participation is central to this process because it determines whether women can influence the rules and resources that shape their lives. In rural India, Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) are the main arena through which most women can enter formal politics.

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 gave Panchayats constitutional status and, through Article 243D, reserved not less than one-third of seats and chairpersons' posts for women, including seats within the quotas for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes [Government of India \(1992\)](#). Many States have gone further. In December 2025, 21 States, including Karnataka, and two Union Territories provided 50 per cent reservation for women in PRIs [Ministry of Panchayati Raj. \(2025b\)](#). Karnataka was among the pioneers: its 1983 Panchayat legislation, under which elections were held in 1987, reserved a quarter of seats for women, and the State now provides 50 per cent reservation under the Karnataka Gram Swaraj and Panchayat Raj Act, 1993 [Government of Karnataka \(1993\)](#).

The scale of this change is remarkable. On 25 November 2025, women held 12,06,013 of the 24,24,108 elected positions in PRIs, or 49.75 per cent [Ministry of Panchayati Raj. \(2025b\)](#). Yet numbers alone cannot measure empowerment. The central question is whether women who enter Panchayats are able to exercise authority, influence decisions and improve the lives of other women. This paper addresses that question with three objectives: (i) to examine the constitutional and policy framework for women's participation in PRIs; (ii) to assess the evidence on the political, social and economic empowerment that such participation produces; and (iii) to identify the barriers that limit women's authority and the measures needed to overcome them.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The paper draws on two bodies of theory. The first is [Kabeer \(1999\)](#) account of empowerment as a process with three interrelated dimensions: *resources*, which include material, human and social resources; *agency*, the ability to define goals and act on them; and *achievements*, the outcomes that result. Reservation can be understood as a resource that opens access to office. Whether it produces empowerment depends on the agency women can exercise in office and on the achievements that follow. Kabeer's framework also treats empowerment as a process rather than a fixed outcome, which makes it suitable for studying change over successive terms of office.

The second is the theory of political representation. [Phillips \(1995\)](#) argues for a "politics of presence", holding that the physical presence of women in decision-making bodies matters because experiences shaped by gender cannot be fully represented by others. [Mansbridge \(1999\)](#) adds that descriptive representation, by representatives who share the social characteristics of those they represent, is especially valuable where groups have been historically excluded and their interests are not yet fully articulated. Both perspectives distinguish *descriptive* representation (who holds office) from *substantive* representation (whose interests are advanced). The analysis that follows uses these distinctions to assess whether women's presence in Panchayats has become power.

3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A substantial body of research, much of it based on the random rotation of reserved seats, has examined the effects of women's reservation in Panchayats. [Chattopadhyay and Duflo \(2004\)](#) studied councils in West Bengal and Rajasthan and found that leaders invested more in public goods closely linked to the needs of their own gender; in both States, women-led councils invested more in drinking water. Women's leadership could therefore change policy, not merely the composition of councils.

Later studies examined longer-term and wider social effects. [Beaman et al. \(2009\)](#) found that exposure to women leaders in West Bengal reduced male villagers' bias in evaluating women's leadership and, after two rounds of reservation, increased the likelihood that women would contest and win seats that were no longer reserved. [Beaman et al. \(2012\)](#) found that reservation raised parents' and adolescents' aspirations for girls and narrowed the gender gap in educational attainment. [Iyer et al. \(2012\)](#) found that increases in women's representation in local government were followed by a rise in documented crimes against women, which they attributed mainly to a greater willingness to report such crimes rather than to more crime.

Studies have also tested the common claim that reserved seats produce only token leaders. Using data from South Indian villages, [Ban and Rao \(2008\)](#) found that women leaders performed no differently from men, and that they performed better when they had more political experience and lived in villages less dominated by upper castes. In Karnataka, [Kudva \(2003\)](#) found that quotas increased women's visibility and self-confidence, and that the most successful cases often involved training and support from non-governmental organisations, although shifts in institutional priorities were harder to demonstrate. [Jayal \(2006\)](#) concluded that quotas had opened a significant space for women's participation, while cautioning that social hierarchies and proxy control continued to limit their impact. [Buch \(2010\)](#) traced how many elected women moved over time from marginality towards greater assertion in public life.

The literature therefore suggests that reservation produces real but conditional gains. Less is known about how recent changes, such as higher reservation in most States, new official attention to proxy representation and expanded training, are reshaping those conditions. This paper addresses that gap by bringing recent official evidence into dialogue with the established research.

4. METHODOLOGY

The study uses a qualitative, analytical review design based on secondary sources. These include the constitutional provisions of Part IX; State legislation; official documents of the MoPR, particularly the report of its advisory committee on proxy participation [Ministry of Panchayati Raj \(2025a\)](#) and a parliamentary reply on elected representatives [Ministry of Panchayati Raj \(2025B\)](#); time-use data from the National Statistical Office [Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation. \(2025\)](#); and peer-reviewed research on women in local government. Sources were selected for relevance, credibility and the strength of their evidence, with priority given to studies using systematic quantitative or field-based methods. The material was analysed thematically using Kabeer's dimensions of resources, agency and achievements. The study does not include primary fieldwork, and much of the experimental evidence comes from particular States, so the findings should be generalised with care.

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

5.1. THE EXPANSION OF POLITICAL PRESENCE

The most visible achievement of PRIs is the scale of women's presence in public office. Table 1 summarises the key provisions and the current level of representation.

Table 1**Table 1 Constitutional provisions and current representation of women in PRIs**

Aspect	Position
Constitutional minimum (Article 243D)	Not less than one-third of seats and chairpersons' posts reserved for women, including within SC and ST quotas
States and UTs providing 50% reservation (December 2025)	21 States, including Karnataka, and 2 Union Territories
Karnataka	50% reservation under the Karnataka Gram Swaraj and Panchayat Raj Act, 1993
Total elected representatives in PRIs (25 November 2025)	24,24,108
Elected women representatives (25 November 2025)	12,06,013 (49.75%)

Sources: Government of India (1992); Government of Karnataka (1993); MoPR

Presence on this scale has both symbolic and practical value. It challenges the long-standing assumption that public authority belongs to men, gives very large numbers of women experience of elections and administration, and creates a pool of politically experienced women who may contest higher offices.

5.1. POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT

In Kabeer's terms, political empowerment requires agency in office, not merely access to it. Participation in Panchayats gives women experience of campaigning, public speaking, negotiating with officials and managing public resources. [Kudva \(2003\)](#) found that elected women in Karnataka reported greater self-efficacy, and [Ban and Rao \(2008\)](#) showed that women's performance improved with political experience. The finding of [Beaman et al. \(2009\)](#) that exposure to women leaders reduces voters' bias suggests that political presence can, over time, change the conditions under which women compete for power. In several States the share of elected women now exceeds the reserved quota, which indicates that women are also winning unreserved seats. Political empowerment also has a collective dimension. When elected women work with women's self-help groups and Mahila Sabhas, individual office can become a channel for women's collective demands, which local elites find harder to ignore.

5.2. SOCIAL EMPOWERMENT

Women representatives can bring into Panchayat discussions issues that are central to everyday village life but have often been neglected, including drinking water, sanitation, health services, nutrition, schooling, childcare and violence against women. Evidence that women-led councils invest more in drinking water [Chattopadhyay and Duflo \(2004\)](#) and that greater representation encourages the reporting of crimes against women [Iyer et al. \(2012\)](#) shows how presence can become substantive representation. Women's leadership also has a demonstration effect. Seeing women chair meetings, question officials and take decisions can change how girls and their families imagine the future, as the rise in aspirations documented by [Beaman et al. \(2012\)](#) indicates.

5.3. ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Panchayats can support women's economic participation through employment programmes, convergence with self-help groups, skill development and welfare schemes. Elected women who understand budgets and development plans can advocate for worksites close to villages, childcare facilities at worksites and support for women's livelihood groups, which in Karnataka are federated under the State rural livelihood mission, Sanjeevini. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, implemented largely through Gram Panchayats, requires that priority be given to women so that at least one-third of beneficiaries are women, and elected women can help ensure that this provision is honoured. Gender-responsive planning within the Gram Panchayat Development Plan can direct further resources towards women's priorities. Economic gains are not automatic, however; they depend on women's access to information, their control over resources and their ability to influence how local funds are spent.

5.4. BARRIERS TO SUBSTANTIVE EMPOWERMENT

Several barriers limit the conversion of presence into power.

Proxy representation. In some areas, husbands or other male relatives perform official duties on behalf of elected women, a practice popularly described as *pradhan pati* or *sarpanch pati*. Following a Supreme Court direction in 2023, the MoPR constituted an advisory committee to examine the problem. Its report recommended exemplary penalties for proven proxy leadership, gender-exclusive quotas in Panchayat committees, the public swearing-in of women *pradhans* in Gram Sabhas, ombudspersons and complaint mechanisms, a federation of women Panchayat leaders and technology-supported training [Ministry of Panchayati Raj \(2025a\)](#).

Patriarchal norms and domestic burdens. Social expectations about women's roles shape their mobility, their freedom to attend meetings and the respect they receive from officials and villagers. Women also carry most unpaid domestic work. The Time Use Survey 2024 found that women who performed unpaid domestic services spent an average of 289 minutes a day on them, compared with 88 minutes for men [Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation \(2025\)](#). This "time poverty" limits the time and energy women can give to public office.

Caste and class. Women from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes may face discrimination from dominant groups and from officials, and [Ban and Rao \(2008\)](#) found that women leaders performed better where upper-caste dominance was weaker. Women who face several forms of disadvantage at once encounter the greatest barriers.

Rotation and inexperience. Reserved seats are rotated, often every term, so many women serve only once. Because experience improves performance [Ban and Rao \(2008\)](#), frequent rotation can prevent women from consolidating their skills and networks.

Information and training. Limited access to timely information, inadequate training and dependence on officials can leave first-time representatives unable to use their legal powers fully. Table 2 maps this evidence onto Kabeer's framework.

Table 2**Table 2 Women's Empowerment Through PRIs: RESOURCES, Agency and Achievements**

Dimension	Enabling conditions	Constraints
Resources	Reservation; training; information on schemes and budgets; self-help group networks	Limited education and administrative experience; time poverty; inadequate training
Agency	Voice in Gram Sabhas and committees; direct interaction with officials; political experience	Proxy control by male relatives; caste and gender discrimination; rotation of reserved seats
Achievements	Investment in drinking water and other local public goods; reduced voter bias; higher aspirations for girls; greater reporting of crimes against women	Uneven gains across States; difficulty changing institutional priorities

Source: Author's synthesis based on [Kabeer \(1999\)](#) and the studies reviewed.

5.5. SYNTHESIS: FROM PRESENCE TO POWER

Taken together, the evidence suggests that the relationship between presence and power is neither automatic nor illusory. Reservation reliably produces presence, and presence can produce substantive change, but the pathway between them depends on three mediating conditions. The first is experience: women who serve longer, or who have prior political exposure, perform better. The second is institutional support, including training, timely information and officials who treat elected women as the legitimate holders of authority. The third is the local social structure, especially the strength of caste dominance and patriarchal control within families and villages. Where these conditions are favourable, women's leadership changes priorities and attitudes; where they are unfavourable, proxy control and tokenism are more likely. This explains why the same constitutional provision produces different results across States and villages, and why policy must address these mediating conditions rather than rely on quotas alone.

6. MEASURES TO STRENGTHEN WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

The evidence points to seven measures:

- 1) Continuous training.** Training should be practical and offered in local languages, covering Panchayat powers, budgets, development planning, government schemes, legal rights and public communication, with refresher sessions throughout the term.
- 2) Action against proxy representation.** States should implement the advisory committee's recommendations, including public oath-taking, complaint mechanisms and penalties.
- 3) Longer reservation cycles.** Reserving a seat for two consecutive terms would allow women to build experience and networks.
- 4) Women-centred meetings.** Gram Sabha and committee meetings should be scheduled and conducted so that women can attend and speak, with Mahila Sabhas held before the main Gram Sabha.
- 5) Responsive administration.** Officials should communicate directly with elected women and respect their legal authority, and Panchayat records and budgets should be easily accessible.

- 6) **Networks and partnerships.** Federations of elected women representatives, self-help groups, civil society organisations and local colleges can provide peer support, information and collective voice.
- 7) **Reducing unpaid work.** Public investment in water, childcare and other services that reduce unpaid domestic work would free time for women's public participation.

7. CONCLUSION

Panchayati Raj Institutions have created one of the most significant pathways for women's participation in democratic life anywhere in the world. Constitutional reservation, extended to 50 per cent in Karnataka and most other States, has brought more than 12 lakh women into elected office. The evidence shows that this presence matters: women leaders have shifted local investment, reduced bias against women in politics, raised girls' aspirations and encouraged the reporting of crimes against women. Yet the number of elected women alone cannot measure empowerment. Proxy control, patriarchal norms, caste discrimination, time poverty, the rotation of seats and inadequate training continue to limit women's authority.

Turning representation into leadership therefore requires attention to all three of Kabeer's dimensions: providing resources such as training and information, protecting women's agency against proxy control and discrimination, and creating the conditions for lasting achievements. Future research should combine official data with field studies in Karnataka and other States to examine how recent reforms affect elected women's authority and the outcomes of their leadership. Strong and independent participation by women makes Panchayats more inclusive and strengthens local democracy as a whole.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None .

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