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Article

Political Empowerment of Rural Women in India: Progress, Persistent Barriers, and the Road Ahead

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Abstract:

Political empowerment is widely regarded as the cornerstone of women's overall empowerment because it determines whether women can shape the rules, budgets, and institutions that govern every other dimension of their lives. This paper examines the political empowerment of rural women in India, tracing its constitutional foundations, current status, demonstrated impact, and continuing obstacles. Since the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 reserved not less than one-third of seats and chairperson positions in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) for women, more than a million rural women have entered formal political office, and several states have since raised the quota to fifty percent. Empirical research shows that women-led panchayats often redirect public spending toward drinking water, sanitation, health, and education, and that women leaders build political confidence over successive terms. Yet the record is uneven: proxy leadership through male relatives, popularly termed "Sarpanch Pati," continues to hollow out formal representation in many states, and rural women remain almost entirely absent from Parliament and state legislatures. The long-pending Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam of 2023, which promises 33 percent reservation in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies, remains unimplemented pending delimitation, and latest legislative attempt to fast-track it was defeated in the Lok Sabha. The paper concludes that legal reservation is necessary but not sufficient, and that durable empowerment requires financial autonomy, capacity-building, protection from violence and intimidation, and a cultural shift in how communities regard women's authority.

Keywords: Political Empowerment, Panchayati Raj Institutions, Women's Reservation, Rural Governance, Gender and Grassroots Democracy

1. INTRODUCTION

India is home to roughly two-thirds of its population in rural areas, and rural women form the numerical majority of the country's female population (Anderson, 2024; Pingali, 2019). For decades after independence, the story of Indian democracy at the village level was told almost entirely through male voices, even though the Constitution had guaranteed women equal citizenship and the right to vote from 1950 onward. Formal legal equality did not translate into a proportional presence in the institutions that actually distribute resources and make decisions the gram panchayat, the block samiti, the zilla parishad, the state assembly, and Parliament (Badur, 2018).

Political empowerment can be distinguished from other forms of empowerment economic, social, or educational because it is specifically about power over collective decision-making (Dahlum et al., 2022; Roy & Samal, 2025; Ahmed, 2025): who sits at the table when budgets are allocated, disputes are resolved, and development priorities are set. For rural women, whose lives are shaped disproportionately by decisions on water supply, land records, ration distribution, school infrastructure, and local employment guarantee schemes, a seat at that table is not symbolic; it changes what gets built, funded, and enforced in their villages (Swaraj & Maheshwari, 2022).

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This paper asks three interlinked questions. First, what has changed structurally since India began mandating women's representation in local government, and how far has that change travelled toward the national legislature? Second, what does the evidence say about whether formal representation has produced substantive decision-making power? Third, what stands in the way of translating a reserved seat into genuine political voice, and what would closing that gap require?

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: WHAT DOES POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT MEAN?

Scholars generally treat women's political empowerment along at least three dimensions. The first is descriptive representation the sheer number and proportion of women occupying elected office. The second is substantive representation whether those women, once elected, are able to set agendas, allocate budgets, and influence outcomes according to their own judgment rather than functioning as figureheads (Wängnerud, 2009; Mechkova & Carlitz, 2020). The third is symbolic representation the extent to which the presence of women in office reshapes social expectations about who is entitled to lead, encouraging further generations of women to contest elections, vote independently, and engage in public affairs (Ranjan, 2025).

This distinction matters enormously in the Indian context, because reservation policy has been remarkably successful on the first dimension while remaining contested on the second (Govindharaj et al., 2023). A rural woman may legally hold the office of sarpanch (village council head) while a husband, father-in-law, or brother continues to exercise the actual decision-making authority attached to that office a phenomenon widely documented and discussed later in this paper. True political empowerment, in other words, requires movement across all three dimensions simultaneously (Akshaya, 2014).

3. HISTORICAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL BACKGROUND

3.1. Pre-Independence Exclusion

Rural women's political exclusion in India has deep historical roots. Colonial-era franchise committees debated the structure of village panchayats without seriously considering women's representation, on the reasoning that women did not yet possess the right to vote at all (Moni, 2021). Early panchayat legislation in the princely states and provinces during the 1920s therefore excluded women almost entirely, both as voters and as representatives, reflecting the patriarchal assumptions of the period (Elavarasi, K., & Leelavathi, S. 2018).

3.2. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments

The turning point came with the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, passed by Parliament in 1992 and brought into force on 24 April 1993. The amendment gave Panchayati Raj Institutions constitutional status for the first time, elevating them from ordinary state-legislated bodies to a permanent tier of India's federal structure under a new Part IX of the Constitution. Crucially, Article 243D (3) mandated that not less than one-third of the total seats filled by direct election in every panchayat at the village, intermediate, and district levels be reserved for women, with a similar one-third reservation for the position of chairperson. A companion provision reserved one-third of seats within the quotas already set aside for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes specifically for women from those communities. The 74th Amendment extended an equivalent structure to urban local bodies the same year.

Because the amendment made these reservations rotational across constituencies and mandatory rather than aspirational, it produced an immediate and measurable effect. Today, roughly six hundred district panchayats, six thousand intermediate panchayats, and more than two hundred thousand-gram panchayats give over 2.8 million people a formal position in grassroots representative democracy, a scale of devolved political office without global parallel.

3.3. States Going Beyond the Constitutional Floor

Several states chose to exceed the constitutional minimum. Bihar was the first state to raise the quota for women in panchayats to fifty percent, and it has since been followed by roughly twenty other states and union territories. As a result, women today constitute close to half of all elected panchayat representatives nationally a figure discussed further in Section 4.

4. THE CURRENT STATUS OF RURAL WOMEN'S POLITICAL REPRESENTATION

The most striking statistic in this field is the gap between local and national representation. Women now hold approximately 46 percent of elected seats in Panchayati Raj Institutions nationwide, a direct consequence of constitutional reservation and its expansion by many states. This figure stands in sharp contrast to women's representation in Parliament: the eighteenth Lok Sabha, constituted after the 2024 general election, has only about 74–78 women members, or roughly 14 percent of the House a smaller share than the panchayat level by a factor of more than three, and below the global average for national legislatures.

This asymmetry is the central empirical fact of women's political empowerment in India: the constitutional experiment of reservation, when tried, has worked at scale to place women in office, but that experiment has not yet been extended to the level of government Parliament and state assemblies where the largest policy and budgetary decisions are made.

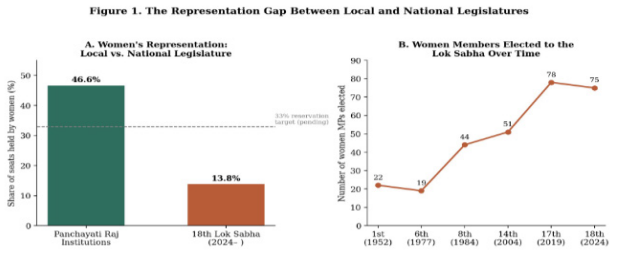


Figure 1. Panel A compares the current share of seats held by women in Panchayati Raj Institutions with the 18th Lok Sabha, against the pending 33% reservation target. Panel B shows the number of women elected to the Lok Sabha across selected terms since 1952, illustrating slow and non-linear growth at the national level despite the rapid gains achieved locally after the 73rd Amendment.

4.1. The Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam and Its Stalled Implementation

Parliament finally attempted to close this gap through the Constitution (One Hundred and Sixth Amendment) Act, 2023, popularly known as the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam. Introduced by the government in the newly inaugurated Parliament building in September 2023, the bill was passed by the Lok Sabha with near unanimity and by the Rajya Sabha unanimously days later. It provides for 33 percent reservation of seats for women in the Lok Sabha, all state legislative assemblies, and the Delhi assembly, including a sub-quota within seats already reserved for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, with reserved constituencies rotating after each delimitation exercise. The law was framed with a sunset clause of fifteen years, subject to parliamentary renewal.

However, the amendment tied actual implementation to a delimitation exercise that could only occur after the first census conducted following a condition that, on the original timeline, pushed real implementation toward the 2034 general election rather than 2029. Recently, the government attempted to bypass this delay through the Constitution (One Hundred and Thirty-First Amendment) Bill, which proposed using 2011 Census data for an immediate delimitation exercise and simultaneously expanding the Lok Sabha from 543 to a much larger number of seats, so that new seats reserved for women could be added without reducing the seats currently held by sitting male MPs. This bridge legislation was defeated in the Lok Sabha, falling well short of the two-thirds majority required for a constitutional amendment, after opposition parties argued that the linked delimitation exercise would disadvantage southern states and sideline long-standing demands for a caste census. Following the defeat, the government withdrew the associated bills, leaving the 33 percent reservation for women in Parliament and state assemblies legislated in principle but, still not operative.

For rural women specifically, this stalled national reservation matters because it is state assemblies not just Parliament that legislate on subjects with the most direct bearing on rural life: agriculture, land, panchayats, irrigation, and rural employment schemes (News On AIR, n.d.). Until the quota is implemented, the pipeline connecting grassroots political experience in panchayats to state and national legislative office remains structurally narrow for rural women (Karekurve-Ramachandra, 2025).

5. IMPACT OF WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

A substantial body of empirical research has examined whether women's presence in local government changes policy outcomes, and the answer is broadly affirmative, with important caveats.A widely cited randomized policy study by Chattopadhyay and Duflo, published in Econometrica in 2004, exploited the random allocation of panchayat chairperson reservations across West Bengal and Rajasthan to show that women leaders invest more heavily in infrastructure directly relevant to women's stated priorities, such as drinking water and roads, compared to their male counterparts (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004). Reporting from Tamil Nadu has similarly found that panchayats led by women showed improved outcomes on issues such as curbing alcohol sales and strengthening school and anganwadi (childcare centre) infrastructure, alongside a correlation between the presence of more women in local office and stronger local economic activity.

Beyond policy outputs, reservation appears to have a demonstration effect: successive terms in office tend to increase women's confidence, political skill, and willingness to recontest, while also gradually normalizing the idea of women in authority for the wider community, including for the daughters and younger women who grow up watching them govern. At the same time, researchers caution that these are not universal or automatic outcomes they vary considerably by state, caste composition, education level, and local political culture, and reservation alone does not guarantee that women exercise full decision-making authority once in office, a limitation examined in the next section (Meena, 2025).

6. PERSISTENT CHALLENGES TO SUBSTANTIVE EMPOWERMENT

6.1. Proxy Leadership: The "Sarpanch Pati" Phenomenon

The single most documented obstacle to substantive political empowerment at the grassroots is proxy leadership, commonly called "Sarpanch Pati," "Pradhan Pati," or "Mukhiya Pati" in different regions a practice in which a husband, father-in-law, or other male relative of an elected woman representative exercises the actual authority of her office while she remains a nominal figurehead. The Ministry of Panchayati Raj's own advisory committee, formed after judicial direction, has documented this as a widespread pattern, particularly concentrated in states such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Rajasthan, where patriarchal social norms are deeply entrenched.

The committee traced the phenomenon to several overlapping causes: lack of leadership and financial-management training for newly elected women; official and bureaucratic bias that continues to route paperwork and communication through male relatives; social restrictions such as purdah norms and expectations that women avoid public speaking; threats and actual incidents of violence that push women to rely on male relatives for protection; and five-year terms that are often too short for women to

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build independent governing experience before facing re-election or rotation out of a reserved seat (Mishra & Kumar, 2024).

6.2. Intersecting Barriers

Proxy leadership does not fall evenly across all elected women. Representatives from Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe, and other marginalized communities frequently face a compounded set of barriers caste-based social exclusion layered on top of gender-based exclusion that can make it even harder to exercise independent authority, attend meetings without harassment, or be taken seriously by panchayat officials and male colleagues (Mosse, 2018; Voegele, 2018).

6.3. Financial and Administrative Dependence

Even where proxy leadership is not overt, elected women often lack direct control over panchayat funds and depend on panchayat secretaries or block-level officials who are predominantly male to process budgets, sanction works, and maintain records, limiting their real discretion over local development spending (Santosh & Tripathi, 2023; Ghosh, 2022).

6.4. Limited Pipeline to Higher Office

Because national and state-level reservation remains unimplemented, the substantial pool of experienced women panchayat leaders has, so far, only a narrow route into state assemblies or Parliament. Political parties continue to control candidate selection for general (non-reserved) seats, and rural women without independent financial resources or family political networks face significant barriers in securing party tickets for higher office.

7. GOVERNMENT AND INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES

Recognizing the gap between formal reservation and substantive authority, the Ministry of Panchayati Raj has in recent years launched several targeted interventions (Sahay, 2016). The year-long Sashakt Panchayat-Netri Abhiyan is a capacity-building programme aimed at strengthening the governance, financial management, and leadership skills of elected women representatives across the country. although, coinciding with International Women's Day, the Ministry launched the nationwide "Say No to Proxy Sarpanch" campaign, using community radio, digital content, and public awareness material including a collaboration with a popular digital media producer to challenge the social legitimacy of the Sarpanch Pati practice and encourage communities and officials to recognize elected women as the genuine decision-makers in their panchayats.

An advisory committee constituted following a 2023 Supreme Court direction in a public interest matter concerning proxy participation has additionally recommended a set of structural reforms, including legal penalties for confirmed cases of proxy governance, dedicated women's help desks at the block and district levels, direct transfer of panchayat funds to women representatives to strengthen financial autonomy, simplified administrative procedures, digital literacy and e-governance training, and public swearing-in ceremonies for women pradhans modeled on practices piloted in Kerala, one of the state's most often cited for stronger substantive outcomes from women's panchayat leadership.

8. DISCUSSION: WHY FORMAL RESERVATION IS NECESSARY BUT NOT SUFFICIENT

Taken together, the evidence supports two conclusions that might initially appear to be in tension. On one hand, constitutional reservation has been transformative in a purely numerical sense: it took the share of women in rural political office from roughly four to five percent in the years before 1993 to close to half of all panchayat seats today, a shift with no real precedent in a democracy of India's scale. On the other hand, numerical presence has not automatically produced proportional decision-making power, as the persistence of proxy leadership demonstrates (Lindberg et al., 2011; Van Dijk, 2007).

This is best understood not as evidence that reservation has failed, but as evidence that reservation was always only the first of several necessary conditions for full political empowerment (Kaletski & Prakash, 2016). Formal office is a precondition for authority, not a substitute for it; authority still depends on financial control, freedom from intimidation, administrative respect, sustained time in office, and a surrounding culture that accepts women's independent judgment. The debate over the national Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam illustrates the same tension at a higher level: even a constitutional guarantee of seats can be delayed indefinitely by procedural linkage to unrelated questions such as census timing and delimitation, showing that political will to implement reservation matters as much as the law establishing it.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Delink the implementation of the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam from delimitation timelines that have historically been contentious and slow, so that the constitutionally legislated 33 percent reservation for women in Parliament and state assemblies can take effect without further multi-year delay.
- Strengthen legal and administrative penalties for confirmed instances of proxy governance in panchayats, paired with accessible grievance mechanisms such as block- and district-level women's help desks.
- Mandate direct transfer of panchayat development funds into accounts controlled by elected women representatives, reducing dependence on male relatives or officials for financial sign-off.
- Expand structured, sustained leadership, governance, and digital-literacy training for newly elected women representatives, rather than one-time orientation sessions, so that skills are reinforced across a full term in office.

- Extend targeted support including safety measures, mentorship, and campaign-finance assistance to women from Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe, and other marginalized communities contesting panchayat and higher-level elections, given the compounded barriers they face.
- Encourage political parties to voluntarily allocate a meaningful share of general-seat tickets to women with panchayat-level experience, building an internal pipeline to state assemblies and Parliament even while national reservation remains pending.
- Invest in longitudinal, state-disaggregated data collection on whether elected women representatives exercise independent budgetary and administrative authority, since the current evidence base for the substantive-representation gap remains fragmented across small studies and advisory reports.

10. CONCLUSION

The political empowerment of rural women in India tells a story of genuine, historically significant progress that remains incomplete. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment converted rural women from a nearly invisible political constituency into the holders of close to half of all elected panchayat seats in the country within a single generation, and produced measurable, if uneven, shifts in local policy priorities toward drinking water, sanitation, health, and education. Yet the same three decades have also revealed the limits of representation achieved through reservation alone: proxy leadership continues to hollow out formal office in many states, financial and administrative control frequently remains with men, and the pipeline from village-level leadership to state and national legislatures remains narrow because reservation at those higher levels, legislated in 2023, has still not been implemented. Genuine political empowerment for rural women will require sustained action on both fronts simultaneously extending reservation to the institutions that make the largest decisions, while ensuring that reservation already won at the local level translates into real, independent authority rather than a formal title held in name alone.

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Author(s) Contribution

All the Author(s) work equally to prepare the manuscript.

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Competing Interests

The author declares that there are no known financial or personal conflicts of interest that could have influenced the research, analysis, or conclusions presented in this paper.

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