

Role of Digital Media in Women's Empowerment: A study of Panchayat Raj Institutions in Southern Karnataka

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Abstract

Digital media technologies have become integral to local governance in India, particularly within Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs). This study investigates how digital platforms—including mobile phones, social media, messaging applications, and e-governance systems—affect the empowerment, participation, and administrative capacity of women representatives in the Gram Panchayats of Ramanagara, a district in Southern Karnataka. Using a mixed-methods approach that integrates surveys, interviews, and field observations, the research highlights both the transformative potential of digital media and the persistent structural constraints that limit women's full participation in rural governance. Findings indicate that digital tools enhance access to information, transparency, mobility, and citizen engagement, yet barriers such as digital illiteracy, gender norms, and infrastructural limitations continue to restrict the depth of empowerment.

Keywords: Digital media, Panchayat Raj Institutions, Women empowerment, E-governance, Social media, Citizen engagement

1. Introduction

The Panchayat Raj system constitutes the foundation of India's decentralized democratic governance, enabling grassroots participation in decision-making and local development. Over the past decade, rapid digitalization driven by national initiatives such as *Digital India* has significantly reshaped the functioning of rural local bodies. Digital media—including smartphones, internet connectivity, social networking platforms, and online government portals—has transformed modes of information dissemination, administrative communication, and public service delivery at the village level.

In districts such as Ramanagara, where a substantial proportion of elected representatives are women owing to constitutional reservation policies, digital media assumes particular significance in shaping women's leadership experiences. Access to digital tools enables women representatives to independently obtain governance-related information, communicate with government officials, monitor development programmes, and engage more effectively with local communities. By facilitating timely information flow and administrative transparency, digital media has the potential to enhance women's participation, visibility, and agency within Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs).

However, the relationship between digital media and women's empowerment is neither linear nor uniformly positive. While digital technologies can help overcome traditional constraints related to mobility, access, and information asymmetry, women leaders often confront persistent challenges such as limited digital literacy, unequal access to devices, patriarchal control over technology use, and exposure to online harassment and misinformation. These barriers can restrict meaningful engagement with digital platforms and limit the empowering potential of digital governance initiatives.

Against this backdrop, the present study examines how digital media influences the empowerment of women leaders within the Panchayat Raj system of Ramanagara district. By situating women's digital engagement within their socio-political and institutional contexts, the study seeks to understand both the opportunities and constraints associated with digital governance at the grassroots level.

2. Theoretical Framework

Critical scholarship in the field of ICT4D (Information and Communication Technologies for Development) emphasizes that digital technologies are not inherently neutral or emancipatory. Rather, their social impact is shaped by existing power relations, institutional structures, and socio-cultural norms. Feminist and gender-focused ICT studies argue that digital interventions can inadvertently reproduce or even intensify gender inequalities if issues such as access, control, skills, and safety are not adequately addressed.

From a gendered perspective, empowerment through ICT is understood as a multidimensional process encompassing access to resources, agency in decision-making, and the ability to transform structural constraints. This framework highlights that women's engagement with digital governance platforms must be examined in relation to factors such as education, caste, class, family support, and political experience. Moreover, concerns related to online safety, surveillance, and digital misuse further complicate women's participation in digital public spaces.

By adopting a critical gender-sensitive ICT framework, this study analyses digital media not merely as a technological tool but as a socio-political process that interacts with existing governance structures and gender relations. Such an approach enables a nuanced understanding of how digital governance practices can both enable and constrain the empowerment of women representatives in Panchayat Raj Institutions.

3. Review of Literature

3.1 Women in Panchayat Raj

Scholars have highlighted that the 73rd Amendment has significantly increased women's representation in local governance. However, mere representation does not guarantee actual decision-making power. Social norms, patriarchal structures, and limited administrative experience can constrain women's participation.

3.2 Digital Media as a Tool of Governance

Digital media is increasingly recognized as an enabler of transparency, communication, public accountability, and administrative efficiency. Studies note that digital tools allow faster information sharing, reduce dependency on middlemen, and support data-driven decision-making.

3.3 Digital Divide and Gendered Access: Literature on the gender digital divide indicates that women, especially in rural areas, have less access to devices, internet, and digital skills. Language barriers, fear of misuse, and social surveillance further reduce internet adoption among rural women.

3.4 Digital Platforms and Women's Empowerment

Research indicates that digital media contributes to women's empowerment in multiple interrelated ways. However, the empowering impact of digital platforms is not automatic and depends on access, digital literacy, infrastructural support, and a supportive socio-cultural environment.

Increased Self-Confidence: Digital platforms enhance women's self-confidence by enabling independent access to information, self-expression, and visibility in public spaces. When women use smartphones, social media, or e-governance portals without intermediaries, they experience a sense of autonomy and competence. For women representatives in Panchayat Raj Institutions, using WhatsApp groups, video conferencing platforms, or government apps to communicate with officials and citizens reinforces their leadership identity and decision-making confidence.

For example, women PRI members who regularly use digital platforms to disseminate information about Gram Sabha meetings or welfare schemes report increased confidence in public speaking and administrative roles, as digital familiarity reduces dependence on male family members or officials.

Economic Opportunities: Digital media opens avenues for women's economic empowerment by facilitating access to markets, skills, and income-generating opportunities. Platforms such as WhatsApp Business, Facebook Marketplace, and government portals like GeM (Government e-Marketplace) allow women to promote products, connect with buyers, and participate in local entrepreneurship. In rural contexts, women engaged in self-help groups (SHGs) use digital platforms to market handicrafts, agricultural produce, or home-based services, thereby expanding income sources beyond local markets. Digital payment systems such as UPI and DBT (Direct Benefit Transfer) further enhance financial inclusion by enabling women to control and manage their own earnings.

Social Networking: Digital platforms strengthen women's social capital by expanding their networks beyond immediate geographical and social boundaries. Through social media groups, online forums, and messaging platforms, women connect with peers, civil society organisations, government officials, and advocacy networks. For elected women representatives, digital networking facilitates peer learning and collective problem-solving. For instance, WhatsApp groups of women Panchayat members at the taluk or district level serve as spaces to share governance experiences, clarify procedural doubts, and mobilize collective action. Such digital networks reduce isolation and enhance solidarity among women leaders.

Better Awareness of Rights and Schemes: Digital media significantly improves women's awareness of constitutional rights, welfare schemes, and governance processes. Government websites, mobile applications, YouTube channels, and social media pages disseminate information related to schemes such as PMAY, Ujjwala Yojana, MGNREGA, and Digital India initiatives. Women who are digitally literate can independently verify eligibility criteria, application procedures, and grievance redressal mechanisms, thereby reducing misinformation and exploitation. For example, women PRI members who regularly access state e-governance portals or follow official government social media handles are better equipped to inform beneficiaries, monitor scheme implementation, and demand accountability at the local level.

3.5 Gender and Political Representation

Recent scholarship critically examines not just the quantitative increase in women's representation resulting from the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, but also the quality and impact of that representation. One comprehensive review observes that women now constitute nearly half of elected representatives in PRIs, positioning India as a global leader in gender-inclusive local governance. Yet, meaningful empowerment remains uneven due to enduring socio-cultural and institutional barriers that constrain women's autonomy and decision-making authority. These include patriarchal norms, limited training

opportunities, proxy representation, and inadequate digital literacy — all of which complicate the translation of numerical representation into substantive political influence.

Moreover, studies show that women’s participation in PRIs has led to improved attention to public goods and service delivery, especially in sectors like water, health, education, and sanitation. However, the extent of such impacts is mediated by local power dynamics and the individual capacities of women leaders.

3.6 Women’s Leadership and Local Development

Such as empirical analyses argue that the presence of women in PRIs contributes to inclusive governance and sustainable development outcomes. For instance, research on rural areas in India shows that women’s reservation and political participation in PRIs have led to greater emphasis on community-centric issues such as education, health, sanitation, and infrastructure—areas that directly affect local welfare and inclusion. Women representatives are found to bring diverse perspectives and priorities into decision-making, resulting in more responsive and equitable governance that addresses the needs of women and marginalized groups.

Moreover, region-specific studies have documented how women’s participation in local governance enhances environmental governance and community engagement. For example, an empirical study in Rajouri District found that women elected to PRIs play active roles in environmental governance practices—linking political empowerment with stewardship of natural resources and broader community mobilization around sustainability goals.

3.7 Digital governance and Gendered Engagement

The intersection of digital governance and women’s political engagement has become a growing focus in recent literature. Research on digital literacy and rural women shows that while digital technologies can significantly enhance access to information and government services, the benefits are mediated by political trust and self-efficacy. Digital literacy not only improves women’s ability to navigate e-governance platforms but also strengthens their confidence and trust in governance systems, leading to higher civic participation.

Additionally, analysis from Karnataka **Akkamahadevi Women’s University, Vijayapura**) conducted a study titled “*Digital India Programs: Assessment and Awareness among Women Members of Panchayat Raj Institutions of Bagalkot District, Karnataka.*” highlights that awareness and utilization of ‘Digital India’ programs among women PRI members vary widely, with many women lacking adequate exposure to digital initiatives despite their potential to improve governance engagement.

3.8 Digital Inclusion and Social Change

Beyond governance, studies focusing on digital literacy’s role in economic empowerment provide valuable insights relevant to your research theme. For example, research in rural Rajasthan finds that enhanced digital skills significantly improve women’s access to financial services, entrepreneurship, and income opportunities, indicating that digital inclusion has multi-dimensional impacts on women’s empowerment.

Systematic reviews of digital inclusion in unorganized sectors further show that digital financial services, mobile banking, and e-commerce can sustainably elevate women’s economic participation—and by extension, their social agency—but these gains remain contingent on addressing persistent barriers like illiteracy and socio-cultural constraints.

3.9 Case Studies and Contextual Evidence

While macro-level data is useful, several case studies illustrate how digital tools have been applied by women leaders in local governance. Examples from rural governance contexts (e.g., innovative use of

mobile platforms for communication and service delivery) demonstrate that when women leaders proactively adopt digital media, they can enhance transparency, citizen engagement, and administrative responsiveness — offering evidence of incremental yet significant shifts in governance practices

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

The study adopts a mixed-methods research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of digital media in women's empowerment. Quantitative data were collected to capture patterns of digital access, usage, and literacy, while qualitative methods explored experiences, perceptions, challenges, and empowerment outcomes of women representatives. The combination of these methods enabled triangulation of data, enhancing the validity and depth of the study.

4.2 Study Area

The study was conducted in Ramanagara district, Karnataka, which comprises four taluks: Ramanagara, Channapatna, Kanakapura, and Magadi. The district was selected due to its significant number of women elected representatives across various Panchayat levels, providing an ideal setting to investigate digital media usage, governance participation, and empowerment outcomes at the grassroots level. The study area also reflects a mix of urban, semi-urban, and rural contexts, allowing for analysis of digital access and infrastructural disparities among women representatives

4.3 Sampling

Sample Size: 120 women representatives from Gram Panchayats. The study adopts a sample size of 120 women representatives from Gram Panchayats. This sample size was deliberately chosen based on the scope and objectives of the research, which focuses on understanding the behaviour, experiences, and patterns of digital media and social media usage among elected women representatives at the grassroots level.

The researcher has already conducted preliminary and related research in the same field, which indicated that a sample of 120 respondents is adequate to capture diverse experiences, attitudes, and behavioural patterns relevant to the study. Since the research is exploratory and descriptive in nature, an in-depth understanding of respondents' experiences is prioritised over a very large sample size.

Further, the sample ensures manageable data collection, accurate responses, and effective analysis, considering practical constraints such as time, accessibility of respondents, and availability of women representatives. The selected sample size is sufficient to provide reliable insights and meaningful conclusions regarding digital media usage among women representatives in Gram Panchayats.

Sampling Technique: Purposive and stratified sampling. The study adopted purposive sampling to deliberately select women representatives of Gram Panchayats, as they are the most relevant respondents for understanding the role of digital media in women's empowerment. Since the research focuses specifically on their experiences, behaviour, and usage of digital and social media, purposive sampling ensured the inclusion of information-rich participants.

Further, stratified sampling was employed to ensure adequate representation across different categories, such as age groups, educational levels, or tenure in office. This helped in capturing diverse perspectives and reducing sampling bias, thereby improving the reliability and validity of the findings.

Participants: Elected presidents, vice-presidents, and ward members

4.4 Data Collection Tools

The study employed multiple data collection tools to ensure comprehensive and reliable findings. A structured questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data on digital media access, usage patterns, and levels of digital literacy among women representatives.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain deeper insights into the participants' experiences, perceptions, and challenges related to digital media usage and empowerment. In addition, focus group discussions (FGDs) facilitated collective reflection and interaction, enabling the identification of shared experiences and community-level issues.

Further, observation of WhatsApp groups, digital communication patterns, and e-governance activities was undertaken to understand the actual practices and behaviours of women representatives in real-life governance contexts. This triangulation of tools enhanced the validity and depth of the study.

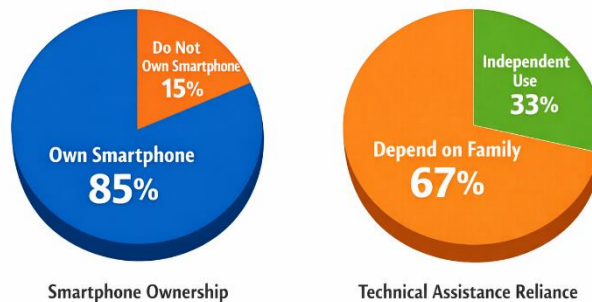
4.5 Data Analysis technique

Quantitative data collected through the structured questionnaire were analysed using descriptive statistical techniques, including frequencies and percentages, to summarise patterns of digital media access, usage, and literacy among women representatives.

Qualitative data obtained from semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and observations were systematically coded and analysed thematically. This process helped identify key themes related to women's empowerment, challenges and barriers, and digital media adoption in governance, providing deeper contextual understanding and supporting the quantitative findings.

Data analysis and Interpretation

Access to Digital Media Among Women Representatives



4.6 Access to Digital Media

- 85% of respondents owned a smartphone, indicating a high level of basic digital access among women representatives, largely due to the increasing affordability of smartphones and government initiatives promoting digital inclusion.
- 67% of respondents relied on family members for technical assistance, primarily because many participants had limited formal digital training, low digital literacy, and lack of confidence in using advanced features of smartphones and social media platforms. Family members, especially younger relatives, often acted as immediate and accessible support.
- Internet connectivity was stable in Ramanagara town but inconsistent in interior rural areas due to infrastructural limitations, including fewer mobile towers, weak network coverage, and power supply issues in rural regions, highlighting the persistent digital divide between urban and rural areas.

4.7 Level of Digital Literacy

- Only 40% of respondents were able to operate government applications independently, indicating limited functional digital literacy among women representatives. This limitation can be attributed to insufficient training, complex app interfaces, and language barriers, as many official applications are not fully user-friendly for first-time or semi-literate users.
- Most respondents were comfortable using WhatsApp, as it is simple, widely used, and requires minimal technical skills. However, they were hesitant to use official digital portals such as e-Gram Swaraj and Panchatantra due to lack of hands-on training, fear of making errors in official work, and concerns about accountability and data accuracy.

4.8 Role of Digital Media in Governance

Digital media played a significant role in strengthening the governance functions of women representatives at the Gram Panchayat level. The use of smartphones and digital platforms enabled women leaders to access timely information about government schemes, eligibility criteria, and implementation guidelines, thereby improving their awareness and decision-making capacity.

Digital media also facilitated effective communication with Panchayat officials and local citizens through phone calls, WhatsApp messages, and group interactions, reducing delays and enhancing coordination. The formation of WhatsApp groups emerged as an important tool for sharing grievances, disseminating information, and mobilising community participation.

Further, women representatives reported using photographs and videos to document village-level issues such as damaged roads, sanitation problems, and infrastructure gaps. This digital documentation helped in reporting problems to higher authorities and in monitoring the progress of development works, ensuring greater transparency and accountability in local governance.

4.9 Empowerment Outcomes

The use of digital media contributed significantly to the **empowerment of women representatives** in Gram Panchayats. Respondents reported increased **confidence during Panchayat meetings**, as access to information through digital platforms enabled them to speak with greater clarity and preparedness.

Digital media also enhanced their **ability to interact with government officials**, as regular communication through phone calls and messaging platforms reduced hesitation and hierarchical barriers. Increased exposure to **government policies, schemes, and guidelines** through online sources improved their **policy awareness**, allowing them to engage more meaningfully in discussions.

Improved access to information and communication tools strengthened women's **participation in decision-making processes**. Digital platforms supported timely sharing of information, grievance reporting, and coordination, thereby enabling women representatives to assert their roles more effectively in local governance.

4.9 Challenges and Barriers

Despite the increasing use of digital media, women representatives faced several challenges and barriers that limited its effective utilisation. Limited digital skills remained a major constraint, as many women lacked formal training in using smartphones and official digital platforms. This was closely linked to the fear of making mistakes on government portals, where errors could lead to administrative issues or accountability concerns.

Social restrictions on mobile phone usage within families and communities further constrained women's independent access to digital media, reflecting persistent gender norms. Some respondents also reported

experiencing online trolling or negative comments, which discouraged active participation on public digital platforms and reduced their confidence.

Additionally, the lack of content in local languages made official portals difficult to understand and use effectively. Poor network connectivity in remote and interior areas further restricted timely access to information and communication, reinforcing the digital divide between urban and rural regions.

Findings

The findings of the study indicate that digital media functions both as a supportive tool and as a constrained resource in the process of women's empowerment within the Panchayat Raj system. While digital technologies offer new opportunities for participation and communication, their empowering potential is shaped by existing social, institutional, and infrastructural conditions.

Positive Impact: Digital tools were found to enhance women's autonomy in accessing information, reducing their dependence on intermediaries such as male family members or Panchayat officials. The availability of real-time information on government schemes, policies, and development activities strengthened women representatives' preparedness and confidence during meetings. Women who actively engaged with digital media demonstrated higher levels of participation in governance processes and exhibited a stronger sense of leadership identity, reflecting improved instrumental empowerment.

Limitations: Despite these advantages, several constraints limited the transformative impact of digital media. Gaps in digital literacy, combined with patriarchal attitudes and social restrictions, restricted women's independent and confident use of official digital platforms. Infrastructural limitations, including poor internet connectivity in rural areas, further reduced consistent access. Although digital media improved communication efficiency, it did not automatically translate into greater administrative authority or decision-making power, unless supported by institutional backing and changes in social norms.

Overall, the findings suggest that digital media primarily facilitates instrumental empowerment, manifested through improved skills, efficiency, information access, and communication. However, transformative empowerment, which involves greater control over resources, enhanced decision-making authority, and freedom from restrictive social norms, remains limited. This indicates that digital media alone cannot ensure comprehensive empowerment without parallel capacity-building initiatives, institutional support, and socio-cultural transformation.

Conclusion

Digital media has emerged as a significant catalyst for the empowerment of women representatives in the Panchayat Raj Institutions. The study demonstrates that digital platforms enhance access to information, support administrative functions, strengthen communication, and improve public engagement, thereby contributing to more effective and participatory local governance. At the same time, the findings clearly indicate that digital empowerment is neither automatic nor uniform, but is shaped by structural, social, and technological conditions. Continuous digital literacy training, user-friendly and language-inclusive e-governance platforms, awareness of digital safety and online risks, supportive family and community environments, and reliable network infrastructure collectively determine the extent to which women representatives can use digital tools confidently and independently.

In this context, the study underscores the need for a comprehensive and gender-sensitive digital empowerment framework within Panchayat Raj Institutions. Regular digital literacy and capacity-building programmes at the Taluk Panchayat level, supported by local-language instructional resources and peer-

level technical assistance, can significantly enhance women's functional and administrative competencies. Simultaneously, initiatives addressing digital safety, online harassment, and privacy concerns are essential to ensure secure and sustained engagement with digital platforms. Strengthening mobile connectivity and internet infrastructure in rural and interior regions, along with focused training on key e-governance portals such as e-Gram Swaraj, Panchatantra, and Mission Antyodaya, can further bridge the digital divide. Together, these measures can enable women representatives to participate more effectively in decision-making processes and contribute meaningfully to rural development and decentralised governance.

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