

Political Empowerment of Rural Women through Panchayati Raj: A Karnataka Perspective

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Abstract

Karnataka has been a pioneer in democratic decentralization and women's participation in local governance. Even before the enactment of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1992), Karnataka introduced reservations for women in local bodies through the Karnataka Zilla Parishads, Taluk Panchayat Samitis, Mandal Panchayats and Nyaya Panchayats Act, 1983. Today, Karnataka reserves 50% of seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), resulting in women holding more than half of Gram Panchayat seats. According to the Ministry of Panchayati Raj, women occupied **53.48%** of local government (Gram Panchayat) seats in Karnataka in 2025, exceeding the national average of **51.60%**. This paper examines the extent of political empowerment achieved by women in Karnataka's rural Panchayats and analyses the socio-economic, institutional, and cultural barriers that continue to affect their effective participation. Based on secondary data from government reports, scholarly literature, and policy documents, the study finds that although Karnataka has achieved remarkable progress in women's representation, challenges such as proxy leadership, inadequate administrative training, patriarchal attitudes, and financial dependence continue to limit substantive political empowerment. The paper concludes with policy recommendations aimed at strengthening women's leadership and improving the quality of grassroots democracy.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Panchayati Raj Institutions, Karnataka, Rural Governance, Political Participation, Decentralization.

Introduction

Political empowerment of women is a fundamental prerequisite for inclusive democracy and sustainable rural development. Women's active participation in political institutions ensures equitable representation, strengthens local governance, and improves accountability in public service delivery. In India, the introduction of Panchayati Raj Institutions through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 marked a historic milestone by constitutionally guaranteeing reservations for women in rural local self-government.

Among Indian states, Karnataka occupies a unique position in the evolution of democratic decentralization. The state pioneered Panchayati Raj reforms through the Karnataka Panchayat Raj Act, 1983, becoming one of the first states to reserve seats for women in local bodies even before the constitutional mandate. Subsequently, the Karnataka Panchayat Raj Act, 1993 aligned state legislation with the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, and later amendments expanded women's reservation to **50 per**

cent in Panchayati Raj Institutions.

Today, Karnataka has one of the highest levels of women's representation in local governance. Government data indicate that women held **53.48%** of Gram Panchayat seats in 2025, reflecting the state's commitment to gender-inclusive governance. However, numerical representation alone does not necessarily ensure substantive political empowerment. Many elected women representatives continue to face challenges arising from patriarchal social structures, limited administrative experience, proxy leadership, inadequate political training, and socio-economic inequalities.

The present study critically examines the political empowerment of women in Karnataka's rural Panchayats by evaluating constitutional provisions, institutional mechanisms, achievements, and continuing challenges.

Objectives

The study seeks to:

- Examine the evolution of women's political participation in Karnataka's Panchayati Raj system.
- Evaluate the impact of 50% reservation on women's leadership.
- Identify socio-economic and institutional barriers affecting women representatives.
- Assess the effectiveness of women-led Panchayats in rural governance.
- Suggest policy measures to strengthen substantive political empowerment.

Research Methodology

The study follows a descriptive and analytical research design using secondary data.

Sources include:

- Ministry of Panchayati Raj
- Karnataka Department of Panchayat Raj
- Karnataka State Election Commission
- National Institute of Rural Development (NIRDPR)
- Karnataka State Finance Commission reports
- Peer-reviewed journals
- Government reports (2020–2026)

The analysis relies on qualitative content analysis supported by recent statistical evidence.

Historical Development of Panchayati Raj in Karnataka

Karnataka is widely regarded as a pioneer of decentralized governance in India. The state's commitment to democratic decentralization dates back to the Karnataka Panchayat Raj Act, 1983, which established a three-tier Panchayat system and reserved 25% of seats for women, preceding the national constitutional reforms.

Following the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, Karnataka enacted the Karnataka Panchayat Raj Act, 1993, strengthening local self-government by institutionalizing Gram Panchayats, Taluk Panchayats, and Zilla Panchayats. Subsequent amendments increased reservation for women to **50%**, making Karnataka one of the leading states in promoting gender-inclusive local governance.

Women's Political Representation in Karnataka

Recent statistics demonstrate significant progress:

Indicator	Karnataka	India
Women in Gram Panchayat seats (2025)	53.48%	51.60%
Reservation for women	50%	Minimum 33% (many states have increased to 50%)
Panchayat structure	Gram, Taluk, Zilla Panchayat	Three-tier system

Source: Ministry of Panchayati Raj (2025).

The increased representation has enabled women to participate actively in:

- Gram Sabha meetings
- Rural infrastructure development
- Drinking water management
- Sanitation programmes
- Health and nutrition initiatives
- Education
- Self-Help Group (SHG) promotion
- Social welfare implementation

Major Challenges in Karnataka

Despite impressive representation, several challenges remain:

1. **Proxy Leadership:** In many villages, elected women representatives continue to rely on male family members for decision-making, reducing independent political authority.
2. **Administrative Capacity:** Many first-time representatives lack sufficient knowledge of budgeting, public finance, e-governance, and government procedures.
3. **Patriarchal Social Norms:** Traditional gender roles continue to restrict women's independent participation in politics.
4. **Financial Dependence:** Economic dependence often limits women's autonomy in political decision-making.
5. **Digital Governance:** Although Karnataka has expanded e-governance in Panchayats, digital literacy among elected women representatives remains uneven.
6. **Multiple Social Disadvantages:** Women belonging to Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and economically weaker sections continue to face intersectional discrimination.

Most studies on women's political empowerment in India provide a national overview without adequately examining Karnataka's pioneering role in decentralized governance. Existing research has focused primarily on reservation policies and electoral participation, while relatively few studies evaluate the long-term effectiveness of women representatives in Gram Panchayat governance after the expansion to 50% reservation. Furthermore, limited attention has been given to the impact of digital governance, leadership training under the Revamped Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan (RGSA), and women's participation in local planning and financial management in Karnataka.

Conclusion

Karnataka has emerged as one of India's leading states in promoting women's political participation through Panchayati Raj Institutions. Its early adoption of reservations for women and subsequent increase to 50% reservation have significantly enhanced women's representation in local governance. Women now occupy more than half of Gram Panchayat seats, reflecting the state's strong commitment to gender-inclusive democracy.

However, substantive political empowerment extends beyond electoral representation. Persistent challenges such as patriarchal social norms, proxy leadership, limited administrative capacity, financial dependence, and unequal access to digital governance continue to constrain women's independent decision-making. Addressing these issues requires sustained investment in leadership development, institutional capacity-building, digital literacy, fiscal decentralization, and legal safeguards to ensure that elected women representatives can exercise authority effectively. Strengthening these dimensions will enable Karnataka's Panchayati Raj Institutions to serve as a model of inclusive, participatory, and gender-responsive rural governance.

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