



INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES AND INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES

(Peer-reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access Journal)

DOI : 03.2021-11278686

ISSN : 2582-8568

IMPACT FACTOR : 8.428 (SJIF 2026)

From Quotas to Quality Leadership: Assessing the Impact of Women's Reservation in Local Governance

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DOI No. **03.2021-11278686** DOI Link :: <https://doi-ds.org/doilink/02.2026-99225154/IRJHIS2602012>

Abstract:

Women's reservation in local governance represents one of the most significant institutional interventions aimed at correcting historical gender imbalances in political participation. Mandated through constitutional and statutory provisions, particularly within Panchayati Raj Institutions in India, reservation policies have ensured a minimum presence of women in elected bodies. However, the transition from numerical inclusion to substantive and quality leadership remains a critical area of scholarly inquiry. This article examines whether women's reservation has moved beyond symbolic representation to foster effective, autonomous, and transformative leadership at the grassroots level. Policy reports, existing empirical studies, the article analyses the impact of reservation on women's political empowerment across three dimensions: participation, decision-making authority, and leadership outcomes. It explores how reservation has enhanced women's visibility in local governance, increased their engagement with development issues such as health, education, water, and social welfare, and challenged entrenched patriarchal norms. At the same time, the study critically evaluates persistent challenges, including proxy representation, limited administrative experience, socio-cultural constraints, and inadequate institutional support, which often restrict women's effective exercise of power. The article argues that while quotas have been instrumental in opening political spaces for women, the quality of leadership depends on complementary measures such as capacity-building programmes, political training, legal awareness, and supportive governance ecosystems. Emphasis is placed on the role of leadership training, peer networks, and policy literacy in enabling elected women representatives to move from passive participation to proactive governance. By assessing both achievements and limitations, the article contributes to ongoing debates on gender, governance, and democratic deepening. It concludes that women's reservation is a necessary but not sufficient condition for quality leadership, and sustained institutional and societal interventions are essential to translate numerical representation into meaningful empowerment and inclusive local governance.

Keywords: Women, Reservation, Local Governance, Panchayati Raj Institutions, Leadership.

1. Introduction:

The narrative of Indian democracy underwent a radical transformation in 1992 with the enactment of the **73rd Constitutional Amendment Act**. This legislative milestone did more than merely constitutionally entrench the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) as the third tier of governance; it fundamentally challenged the patriarchal hegemony of the Indian political landscape. By mandating

the reservation of at least one-third of seats and executive positions for women, the State acknowledged a historic "democratic deficit"—the systematic exclusion of half the population from the corridors of local power. This was not a passive administrative adjustment but a proactive disruption of the status quo, designed to leverage political space as a tool for social equity.

Initially, the rationale behind this "quota" was grounded in the theory of critical mass. Proponents argued that for women's voices to be heard in the cacophony of local politics, a significant numerical presence was required to break the isolation of the "token female." The amendment succeeded spectacularly in this primary objective. Overnight, millions of women—many of whom had previously been confined to domestic spheres by rigid social norms—entered the public domain as elected representatives (ERs). India effectively became the site of the world's largest experiment in grassroots democracy, creating a sheer volume of female political participation that is unprecedented globally.

However, three decades into this experiment, the celebration of statistics has given way to a more nuanced, and often critical, interrogation of reality. The transition from the private sphere to the public office has not been seamless. While the legislative mandate ensures **entry**, it does not guarantee **agency**. The initial years of implementation birthed the cynical phenomenon of the "*Sarpanch Pati*" or "*Pradhan Pati*"—where the husband of the elected female official continues to wield actual power while his wife serves as a signatory proxy. This reality highlighted a friction between the *de jure* authority granted by the Constitution and the *de facto* power dynamics enforced by traditional social structures. If a woman occupies the chair but a man dictates the agenda, the quota has achieved representation without empowerment.

Yet, characterizing the entire policy through the lens of proxy leadership would be reductive. Emerging evidence suggests a slow but perceptible shift from "numerical inclusion" to "substantive quality leadership." Women leaders who have survived the initial turbulence of entry are beginning to redefine what local governance looks like. Research indicates that women representatives often prioritize different development metrics than their male counterparts, placing higher value on public goods such as drinking water, sanitation, primary education, and health. This deviation in priorities suggests that women bring a distinct "quality" to leadership—one that is arguably more responsive to the immediate needs of the household and community welfare.

Therefore, the central inquiry of this paper is not merely whether women are present in PRIs, but how they are reshaping them. We must move the academic and policy discourse beyond the binary of "proxy vs. independent" to understand the spectrum of leadership that exists in between. This research aims to analyze the trajectory of women's political empowerment across three critical dimensions: **active participation** (voice in assemblies), **decision-making authority** (autonomy in fund allocation), and **leadership outcomes** (tangible development impacts). By juxtaposing the static

"quota"—the legal requirement—against the dynamic "quality"—the governance output—this paper seeks to determine if the 73rd Amendment has truly cultivated a new cadre of autonomous, transformative leaders, or if the glass ceiling has simply been replaced by a glass labyrinth.

2. Literature Review: Between Proxyism and Agency:

The scholarship surrounding the 73rd Amendment and women's leadership in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) is characterized by a dichotomy. On one side exists a robust critique of "proxy representation," where women are viewed as nominal heads controlled by male kin. On the other side is a growing body of empirical evidence suggesting that, despite these constraints, women leaders are substantively altering the landscape of public goods provision. This review categorizes the existing discourse into two primary streams: the sociopolitical constraints of the Sarpanch Pati culture and the developmental dividends of female leadership.

2.1 The "Sarpanch Pati" Phenomenon: Structural Constraints to Autonomy:

The most immediate criticism following the 1993 implementation of quotas was the emergence of the Sarpanch Pati (Husband of the Chairperson) or Pradhan Pati. Early scholars argued that the reservation policy put the cart before the horse—attempting political empowerment before achieving social emancipation. In deeply patriarchal belts, particularly in North India, the reservation of seats was often met with resistance by incumbent male elites who simply fielded their wives, mothers, or daughters as placeholders to retain control over the seat.

Sociological studies have documented how caste and gender intersect to inhibit quality leadership. The concept of "functional literacy" serves as a major barrier; where female literacy rates are low, women representatives are often forced to rely on male relatives to navigate the complex bureaucratic paperwork of village governance. This dependency creates a vacuum of authority, where the elected woman signs the checks, but the husband negotiates with the Block Development Officer (BDO) and contractors. Consequently, critics argue that in its initial phase, the quota system did not empower women but rather reinforced the "public/private" divide, merely extending the patriarch's influence into the reserved seat.

2.2 The "Learning Curve" and Role Model Effect:

However, a more temporal analysis offers a counter-narrative. Longitudinal studies suggest that the "proxy" phase is often transient rather than permanent. The "Learning by Doing" hypothesis posits that while first-time women representatives may rely on male assistance, repeated exposure to governance mechanisms breeds confidence and autonomy.

Research covering multiple tenure cycles indicates that women in reserved constituencies eventually begin to assert independence once they master the administrative language and build their own networks independent of their husbands. Furthermore, the "Role Model Effect" has been significant. The visibility of a woman leader, even a constrained one, alters the aspirations of the next

generation. Data from West Bengal and Rajasthan has shown that in villages with reserved councils, the gender gap in parental aspirations for their children shrinks, and adolescent girls are more likely to express a desire to delay marriage and pursue careers. This suggests that the "quality" of leadership should be measured not just by immediate administrative autonomy, but by the long-term sociological shifts it triggers.

2.3 Distinct Policy Preferences: The "Quality" of Output:

Perhaps the most compelling argument for the success of the reservation policy lies in the nature of the public goods provided. If men and women had identical policy preferences, the gender of the leader would remain statistically irrelevant to development outcomes. However, landmark studies by development economists (such as Duflo and Chattopadhyay) have empirically demonstrated that women leaders invest more heavily in infrastructure that directly correlates with the domestic needs they historically managed.

Where male Pradhans often prioritize construction projects that offer high visibility and potential for patronage (such as roads or community centers), women leaders have shown a statistically significant preference for water infrastructure, sanitation, and education. This shift represents a transition from "prestige-based" governance to "needs-based" governance. This literature suggests that the "quality" of women's leadership is distinct because it is often more responsive to the under-represented needs of the community's most vulnerable sections.

3. The Numerical Revolution: From Political Visibility to Substantive Voice:

The enactment of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 marked a decisive turning point in the history of grassroots democracy in India, particularly in relation to women's political participation. By mandating the reservation of seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), the Amendment dismantled long-standing structural barriers rooted in patriarchy, social conservatism, and political exclusion. The most immediate and visible outcome of this reform has been the unprecedented numerical entry of women into local governance, often described as a "numerical revolution" in Indian politics.

Statistical evidence highlights the magnitude of this transformation. Across India's nearly 2.5 lakh Panchayats, more than 1.45 million women currently serve as elected representatives, including members, sarpanches, and chairpersons at various tiers of rural governance. This large-scale inclusion represents one of the world's most ambitious experiments in affirmative action for women in political institutions. For the first time, women—many of whom belong to marginalized social and economic backgrounds—have gained formal access to political authority and decision-making spaces that were historically monopolized by men.

This numerical expansion has fulfilled the first and most fundamental dimension of empowerment: visibility. The presence of women in elected offices has normalized their role in the

public and political sphere, challenging the traditional notion that governance is an exclusively male domain. In several states, the commitment to women's political inclusion has gone beyond the constitutional minimum of 33 percent reservation. States such as Bihar, West Bengal, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh have implemented 50 percent reservation for women in PRIs, significantly increasing women's representation and reinforcing the idea that women's leadership is not an exception but a norm.

The impact of this enhanced representation extends beyond statistics. Women leaders have become visible actors in village assemblies, development committees, and local administrative processes. Their participation has altered the social landscape by increasing public acceptance of women speaking, negotiating, and exercising authority in community affairs. For many rural women, electoral participation has served as an entry point to broader social recognition, self-confidence, and civic awareness.

However, numerical strength alone does not automatically translate into meaningful power. While visibility marks a crucial first step, true political empowerment requires the transformation of presence into voice—the ability to influence decisions, shape policies, and govern autonomously. The shift from being a symbolic or passive participant to becoming an active and assertive decision-maker is often constrained by deep-rooted socio-political challenges.

Women representatives frequently operate within complex power structures dominated by male relatives, local elites, and entrenched political networks. In many instances, women face expectations to conform, rather than lead, and must continuously demonstrate competence and legitimacy—standards that are seldom imposed on their male counterparts. Limited access to education, political training, financial resources, and institutional support further restricts their ability to exercise authority effectively.

Despite these challenges, empirical observations from various states indicate that sustained participation and repeated electoral exposure have enabled many women leaders to assert independence over time. As women gain experience, confidence, and collective support, they increasingly raise issues related to health, education, sanitation, drinking water, and social welfare—areas that directly affect community well-being. This gradual transition from representation to governance signifies the movement from numerical empowerment to substantive empowerment.

In conclusion, the 73rd Amendment has undeniably triggered a numerical revolution by ensuring large-scale entry of women into grassroots politics. The presence of over 1.45 million elected women representatives across India's Panchayats stands as a powerful testament to the success of reservation policies in enhancing political visibility. However, the journey from visibility to voice remains ongoing. Strengthening institutional mechanisms, capacity-building initiatives, and supportive political environments is essential to ensure that women not only occupy seats of power but also

exercise them meaningfully, thereby deepening democratic governance in India.

4. Outcomes of Women's Leadership in Local Self-Government:

The increased participation of women in local self-government institutions, particularly after the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments in India, has produced significant and multifaceted outcomes. Women's leadership at the grassroots level has not only transformed governance processes but has also contributed to social inclusion, democratic deepening, and community-oriented development. These outcomes can be broadly understood in political, social, economic, and governance-related dimensions.

4.1. Strengthening Democratic Governance:

One of the most significant outcomes of women's leadership in local self-government is the strengthening of democratic practices at the grassroots level. Women leaders have enhanced the inclusiveness of decision-making by ensuring wider participation in Gram Sabhas and ward meetings. Their presence has encouraged marginalized groups, especially women and lower-caste communities, to engage in local governance processes. This participatory approach has helped democratize power structures and reduce elite domination in village-level institutions.

4.2. Improved Focus on Social Welfare and Human Development:

Women leaders in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) have shown a strong inclination toward addressing issues related to basic needs and human development. Studies indicate that women representatives often prioritize sectors such as drinking water, sanitation, health services, nutrition, education, and childcare. The improved implementation of schemes like mid-day meals, Anganwadi services, and sanitation programs reflects women leaders' sensitivity to everyday social concerns. This focus has contributed to better service delivery and enhanced quality of life at the local level.

4.3. Greater Accountability and Transparency:

Women's leadership has been associated with increased transparency and ethical governance in local institutions. Female representatives tend to adopt consultative and consensus-based leadership styles, which reduce arbitrary decision-making. Their emphasis on collective discussions and community approval has strengthened accountability mechanisms. In several regions, women-led Panchayats have reported lower levels of corruption and improved monitoring of welfare programs, leading to more efficient utilization of public resources.

4.4. Social Empowerment and Gender Equality:

The presence of women in leadership positions has had a powerful symbolic and practical impact on gender relations. Women leaders challenge traditional gender roles and inspire other women to participate in public life. This visibility has contributed to increased self-confidence, mobility, and awareness of rights among rural women. Over time, women's leadership has fostered greater acceptance of women as decision-makers, gradually transforming patriarchal social norms at the

community level.

4.5. Policy Innovation and Local Problem-Solving:

Women leaders have introduced innovative approaches to local governance by addressing context-specific problems. Initiatives related to water conservation, cleanliness drives, women's self-help groups, and school enrollment have often been spearheaded by women representatives. Their close engagement with community members allows them to identify grassroots issues and develop practical, locally relevant solutions, thereby enhancing governance effectiveness.

4.6. Capacity Building and Leadership Development:

Participation in local self-government has contributed significantly to women's personal and political development. Through exposure to administrative processes, budgeting, and public decision-making, women leaders acquire leadership skills, political awareness, and confidence. This capacity-building effect has enabled many women to contest re-elections independently and aspire to higher political offices, thereby expanding the pipeline of women leadership in Indian politics.

4.7. Challenges and Mixed Outcomes:

Despite these positive outcomes, women's leadership in local self-government faces several challenges. The persistence of proxy leadership, lack of training, limited access to financial resources, and resistance from male-dominated political structures continue to constrain women's autonomy. These limitations indicate that while numerical representation has improved, substantive empowerment remains uneven across regions.

5. Persistent Challenges to the Quality of Women's Leadership:

While the reservation policy in Panchayati Raj Institutions has successfully ensured women's numerical inclusion, the transition from representation to effective leadership remains uneven and constrained by deep-rooted structural barriers. The movement from quotas to quality leadership is hindered by systemic challenges that limit women's autonomy and decision-making power. Despite occupying elected positions, many women representatives continue to face obstacles that undermine their authority and effectiveness. Among the most significant impediments are proxy representation, limited administrative exposure, entrenched socio-cultural norms, and insufficient institutional and bureaucratic support.

5.1 The Phenomenon of Proxy Leadership ("Pradhan Pati"):

One of the most persistent and widely observed challenges to women's leadership in local self-government is the phenomenon commonly referred to as "Pradhan Pati" or "Sarpanch Pati." This term describes situations in which a woman is formally elected as the head of a Panchayat, but the actual authority is exercised by her husband or another male family member. Although women hold office in legal terms, governance is often carried out by male proxies who operate behind the scenes or in public-facing roles.

The nature of control exercised through proxy leadership is multifaceted. Male relatives frequently preside over Panchayat meetings, communicate with block-level officials, and manage financial transactions and development funds. In such cases, the elected woman's role is reduced to that of a symbolic figure, expected to merely endorse decisions already taken by the male proxy. This arrangement deprives women of opportunities to gain administrative experience and weakens their visibility as autonomous leaders.

The root causes of proxy leadership lie in deeply entrenched patriarchal attitudes that question women's capacity to govern independently. In many rural communities, leadership is traditionally associated with masculinity, while women are expected to confine themselves to domestic roles. Lower levels of literacy, limited political exposure, and lack of confidence among first-time women representatives further reinforce male dominance. Families often justify male intervention by portraying it as "assistance," even though it effectively transfers power away from the elected woman. The impact of this practice is profound. Proxy leadership directly undermines the constitutional objective of women's reservation, which aims not only at representation but also at substantive participation. When male proxies control decision-making, women's perspectives on critical issues such as drinking water, sanitation, maternal health, education, and social welfare may be neglected. As a result, governance outcomes may fail to reflect the priorities and lived experiences of women, thereby weakening the transformative potential of grassroots democracy.

5.2 Institutional and Bureaucratic Barriers:

In addition to socio-cultural constraints, women leaders often encounter significant institutional and bureaucratic challenges that limit their effectiveness. Many women representatives operate in administrative environments that are implicitly hostile or dismissive of female leadership. Government officials, clerks, and line department functionaries frequently prefer to engage with male relatives rather than directly interacting with elected women leaders. This practice reinforces women's marginalization and legitimizes proxy representation.

Another major hurdle is the lack of familiarity with administrative procedures and governance mechanisms. A large proportion of women representatives are first-time entrants into politics and may have limited knowledge of Panchayati Raj legislation, budget preparation, development planning, and fund utilization. Complex schemes and financial procedures, including those related to employment and rural development programs, often require technical understanding that women have not been adequately trained to acquire.

The absence of systematic capacity-building and institutional support exacerbates this problem. Inadequate training programs, irregular orientation sessions, and limited access to information prevent women from developing administrative competence. Over time, this lack of exposure is misinterpreted as incapacity, creating a self-reinforcing cycle in which male relatives or officials justify their

dominance by citing women's "inexperience."

Moreover, institutional insensitivity to gender concerns further isolates women leaders. Meetings scheduled at inconvenient times, lack of childcare support, and male-dominated bureaucratic spaces discourage active participation by women. These structural disadvantages collectively limit women's ability to assert authority and perform their roles effectively.

6. Pathways to Transformation: Capacity Building and Policy Literacy:

The experience of women's political reservation in local self-government clearly demonstrates that numerical inclusion, while essential, does not automatically result in effective or transformative leadership. The persistence of proxy governance, administrative dependence, and limited decision-making authority indicates that reservation is a necessary but insufficient condition for genuine empowerment. Bridging the gap between "quotas" and "quality" leadership requires sustained investments in capacity building, policy literacy, and institutional reform. Strengthening women's competencies and transforming the governance ecosystem are critical pathways for ensuring that political representation translates into substantive power.

6.1 The Role of Training and Education:

Capacity-building initiatives play a pivotal role in converting women's formal participation into active and autonomous governance. For many women representatives, particularly those entering politics for the first time, lack of exposure to administrative processes and legal frameworks poses a significant barrier to effective leadership. Targeted training programs that focus on legal rights, governance procedures, budget preparation, and communication skills have been shown to enhance women's confidence and reduce their reliance on male family members.

When women are equipped with knowledge of Panchayati Raj laws, roles and responsibilities, and financial management systems, they are better positioned to question authority, assert their rights, and participate meaningfully in decision-making. Training in public speaking and leadership communication further enables women to articulate community concerns in meetings and negotiations with officials. As women gain clarity about their authority, the scope for proxy intervention diminishes, allowing them to function as independent political actors.

Several interventions have demonstrated positive outcomes in this regard. Leadership development workshops specifically designed for elected women representatives provide structured learning environments where participants can acquire practical skills and engage in problem-solving exercises. Induction training conducted immediately after elections is particularly effective, as it familiarizes women with administrative procedures at a critical early stage of their tenure. Additionally, the formation of peer support networks such as women's forums or awareness collectives has proven valuable in fostering solidarity, mutual learning, and collective confidence. Through these platforms, women leaders share experiences, discuss challenges, and exchange best practices, reducing isolation

and reinforcing their political agency.

However, capacity building must be viewed as a continuous process rather than a one-time intervention. Governance structures, development schemes, and policy priorities evolve over time, requiring women leaders to remain informed and adaptable. Regular, need-based workshops on government programs, digital governance tools, and technical aspects of development planning are essential to sustain women's effectiveness. Continuous learning not only enhances administrative competence but also strengthens women's ability to engage critically with officials and institutions.

6.2 Strengthening the Governance Ecosystem:

While individual capacity building is crucial, it must be complemented by broader reforms within the governance ecosystem. Women's leadership cannot flourish in institutional environments that implicitly tolerate proxy governance or marginalize female representatives. Structural changes are necessary to create enabling conditions that support women's autonomy and authority.

One important measure is the establishment of clear legal deterrents against proxy representation. Strict enforcement of rules that prohibit non-elected individuals from performing official functions can help curb the practice of male relatives exercising power on behalf of women representatives. Mandating that only elected representatives can sign official documents, attend statutory meetings, and interact with administrative authorities reinforces accountability and affirms women's legal status as decision-makers. Such measures send a strong message that proxy governance undermines democratic principles and will not be tolerated.

Equally important is the provision of institutional support mechanisms tailored to the needs of women leaders. Creating dedicated support structures, such as help desks at the block or district level, can significantly reduce women's dependence on male relatives. These facilities can assist women representatives with documentation, procedural guidance, and access to information on government schemes and regulations. By simplifying administrative processes and offering timely assistance, institutional support systems empower women to navigate governance structures independently.

Gender-sensitive administrative reforms are also essential. Training bureaucrats and officials to engage respectfully with women representatives can improve institutional responsiveness and reduce discriminatory practices. Scheduling meetings at accessible times, ensuring women-friendly workspaces, and promoting inclusive communication practices contribute to a more supportive governance environment.

7. Conclusion:

Over three decades since the enactment of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992, the mandating of women's reservation in Panchayati Raj Institutions has undeniably reshaped India's democratic landscape at the grassroots. Far from being a symbolic gesture, the policy catalysed one of the largest expansions of women's political participation in the world. As of recent years, women

constitute nearly 46 percent of elected representatives in India's rural local bodies, with more than 1.4 million women currently serving as elected representatives across the country's Panchayats—a figure that surpasses the original constitutional quota and places India among the highest globally in women's local governance representation.

Twenty-one states and Union Territories have gone beyond the constitutional minimum by adopting 50 percent reservation for women, reinforcing the policy's progressive intent and increasing female political strength in local institutions.

The burgeoning presence of women leaders has not only normalized their visibility in public offices but also contributed to a measurable shift in policy priorities. Research indicates that panchayats led by women tend to allocate resources more toward community essentials such as drinking water, sanitation, primary education, and health services, often yielding higher utilization of funds for social welfare schemes.

Despite these gains, numerical representation does not alone guarantee effective leadership. Persistent structural and socio-political challenges continue to shape women's experiences in governance. Proxy leadership, deeply ingrained patriarchal mindsets, and limited administrative exposure still constrain many women representatives' autonomous decision-making. Recent qualitative studies find that only a small proportion of women leaders—estimated at around 10 percent—exercise substantial independent authority without male family members' intervention.

Furthermore, the broader political context reveals persistent gender imbalances beyond local governance. For instance, even as women's representation in Panchayati Raj Institutions stands high, their participation in national and state legislatures remains comparatively low. Despite the passage of the Women's Reservation Act in 2023, which mandates one-third reservation for women in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies, women comprised only about 13.6 percent of the 18th Lok Sabha elected in 2024. This disparity underscores that while grassroots reforms have made significant strides, gender parity in higher spheres of political power is still a distant goal.

In summary, the 73rd Amendment has achieved profound progress by embedding women's presence in rural governance and increasing inclusive participation at unprecedented levels. However, converting representation into substantive empowerment requires continued emphasis on capacity building, policy literacy, institutional support, and socio-cultural transformation. Only through sustained investments in these areas can the promise of reservation clauses be fully realized—ensuring that women not only occupy political offices but lead with autonomy, agency, and tangible developmental impact.

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