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# Gender and Participation in Governance of Panchayat Raj Institutions in Karnataka

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## Abstract

The inclusion of women in Panchayat Raj Institutions through constitutional enactments aimed to foster an environment of equality and social inclusion. As we approach 30 years since the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, which empowered women in Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs), it is essential to evaluate its impact. Karnataka pioneered this initiative by reserving 25% of Zilla Parishad and Mandal Panchayat seats for women in 1983, emphasizing gender-inclusive power distribution. This paper assesses whether this representation has led to effective and accountable participation across caste, religion, region, and class. Combining statistical data and qualitative insights, the study analyzes women's participation in decentralized governance and planning, highlighting both positive and negative aspects. This paper explores the theoretical framework of decentralization, which argues that it enhances governance quality and service delivery through broad participation, aiming to empower marginalized classes, including women. However, patriarchal norms, gender-related violence, household duties, and male bias often restrict women's public participation. Despite these challenges, elected women representatives (EWRs) have gained socio-economic and political empowerment, improved self-perception as leaders, and increased ambition. The study collected data from four Zilla Panchayats in Karnataka namely Kolar, Dakshina Kannada, Haveri, and Yadgir and covered 40 GPs selected based on Human Development Index (HDI) values. The analysis is structured around four key objectives: Elected Women Representatives' access to decision-making, political and financial autonomy, accountability to pre-election promises, and effectiveness in sustained planning and development. Preliminary findings reflect on elected women representatives' participation in grassroots political leadership, highlighting progress and ongoing challenges in achieving meaningful and impactful political empowerment for women in decentralized governance.


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## 1. Introduction

The constitutional provisions for the inclusion of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) were envisioned to promote equality and strengthen social inclusion at the grassroots level. As India approaches three decades since the enactment of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, which mandated women's representation in local governance, it is an opportune moment to assess its outcomes. Notably, Karnataka was a frontrunner in this initiative, having introduced a 25% reservation for women in Zilla Parishads and Mandal Panchayats as early as 1983 well before the national mandate; demonstrating a progressive approach to gender-inclusive governance. Now, we must assess whether this representation has translated into effective and accountable participation across caste, religion, region, and class. Understanding this is vital for gauging the success of decentralization in Karnataka and beyond, ensuring women's political leadership is both meaningful and impactful.

This paper looks at and analyzes the preliminary findings obtained from the field [2] – a combination of statistical data and qualitative insights that characterize the grass roots reality about women's participation in decentralized governance and planning – in both positive and negative forms. It attempts to present the tentative results/findings based on the parameters of the study [3] and the theoretical bases of decentralization.

### Gender, Decentralization and Social Inclusion through Affirmative Action:

Development aims to foster an environment where diverse population groups participate in and benefit from its outcomes, particularly through equality and social inclusion. It creates structures ensuring all citizens, regardless of age, sex, caste, religion, region, or class, can easily access critical resources for sustainable livelihoods. Including women in Panchayat Raj Institutions through Constitutional Enactment was a pivotal step toward their empowerment and development. True development, based on equality, liberty, and justice, is achieved by empowering marginalized women. Political empowerment of women is essential for their economic participation, asset ownership, education, and capacity building (Sivanna et al., 2012).

Historically, attention to women's needs was minimal until the late 20th century. Women's exclusion from mainstream economic activities, resource control, decision-making, and public participation, despite their significant contributions, was only recognized in the late 1970s (GoK, 2013). The women's liberation movement and studies by social scientists highlighted their low status and representation, leading to legislative and welfare initiatives addressing women's unique challenges (Gandhi and Shah, 1992; GoI, 1974).

Over 33 years, constitutional amendments regarding PRIs have significantly boosted political and social representation for lakhs of women, especially from vulnerable groups like Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), Muslims, and Christians. These provisions have enabled women not only to become members but also to attain higher positions as heads of panchayats and various Standing Committees across all three tiers. Researchers, bureaucrats, and analysts have praised the law's effectiveness in enhancing women's representation in decentralized governance. However, concerns remain about their active participation. Many elected women representatives (EWRs) come from poor, rural backgrounds, are often illiterate, and are new to politics. Efforts by

[1] *Issues regarding women's participation and related matters have been discussed in all other chapters from the standpoint of gender mainstreaming. This chapter presents the findings from field data, capturing Elected Women Representative's perceptions and difficulties encountered in the process of participation and devolution of their functions.*

[2] *Access to decision making; political and financial autonomy; accountability; and integrated area development planning framework and sustainability.*

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Abdul Nazir Sab State Institute for Rural Development (ANSSIRD), Mysuru, and various Non-Government Organizations, along with the Women's Liberation Movement, have focused on empowering EWRs through training and capacity building. Studies (Bharathy et al., 2010) show that positive discrimination in PRIs has improved women's socio-political status and social recognition, reducing centuries-long social exclusion through active political participation.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Decentralization of planning and governance in developing societies is argued to enhance governance quality and service delivery through broad participation (Villadsen 1999; Cheema and Rondinelli 1983). In India, it is seen as a strategy to empower marginalized classes in political leadership (Aziz 1996; Mathew 1995). This inclusion aims to empower and improve women's overall situation. However, decentralization often clashes with traditional patriarchal norms that restrict women's public participation. Gender-related violence, household duties, feminization of poverty, poor literacy, and male bias hinder women's freedom of movement and role-play. Studies indicate that caste and patriarchy still silence women in public spaces (Bharathy et al., 2010; Baviskar, 2003). Women in public roles face political conspiracy and manipulation, raising doubts about whether constitutional remedies alone are enough for effective participation.

However, representation has brought benefits (Sivanna et al., 2012). EWRs have gained socio-economic and political empowerment, improved self-perception as leaders, and increased ambition. Mass media and technology have aided their empowerment, and their leadership is recognized by families and communities. Women in the electorate are increasingly interested in political activities, such as attending Gram Sabha meetings. The role of building the capacities of EWRs to take on leadership roles efficiently cannot be underestimated here, however limited its impact has been in this regard. Now that the elected women representatives (EWRs) have been in 'power' due to their political leadership conferred from more than three decades through affirmative action in Karnataka (and elsewhere in the country), question arises as to their performance with reference to specific indicators. The analytical framework used for this chapter bases itself on the four objectives that the research project set before itself, which are as follows:

- How much of access do EWRs have to decision-making in PRIs?
- What is the status of EWRs' political and financial autonomy?
- How are the EWRs ensuring accountability towards their pre-election promises to their electorate? and
- How effective is their participation in matters of sustained planning and development?

With these four questions or parameters in view, this paper proceeds to reflect upon the findings of the study on 'Devolution and Performance Index for PRIs in Karnataka' to present our findings on EWRs' participation in grassroots political leadership through the Grama Panchayats.

This paper explains the Gender and Participation in Governance of PRIs in Karnataka. Four Zilla Panchayats from Karnataka were selected based on Human Development Index (HDI) value (2015). To cover all the developmental categories, under-developed districts were selected. They are Kolar, Dakshina Kannada, Haveri and Yadgir respectively. In the second stage, from each Zilla Panchayats, one low performing taluk and one high performing taluk were selected. Thus, two TPs from each Zilla Panchayats were selected based on Human Development Index value. In the third stage, 10 Grama Panchayats from each district or totally 40 Grama Panchayats were selected. Household data was collected from the selected Gram Panchayats through structured

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questionnaires during the year 2020–21. This data is the basis for case studies analysis in this paper.

## 3. Result and Discussions

### 3.a. Participation in Capacity Building Programme

Table 1 shows that a large majority (97.5%) of the EWRs in the sampled area have attended one or the other training program organized for Gram Panchayat Members, by the government and NGOs. It is surprising that 4.3 % of women and 5.6 % of male members from the general category have not received any training. Not only the need for training but 67.9 % are women members and 80.6 % of male members have expressed the need for an additional training, so as to be able to speak in the public. Notice that political participation is equally tough to both genders; and there seems to be no gender-based difference as far as this lacuna is concerned. The share of members representing different categories expressing the need for additional training, is as follows: 63 % were from Scheduled Castes, 50 % from Scheduled Tribes, 68.6 % from Other Backward Class (OBC) and 69.6 % were from the General category.

***Table 1***

*Details of Attendance in Training to improve Participation and Speaking in Public Place*

| | Training Programmes | | | Additional Training | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Gender** | **Yes** | **No** | **Total** | **Yes** | **No** | **Total** |
| Men | 94.4 | 5.6 | 100.0 | 80.6 | 19.4 | 100.0 |
| Scheduled Castes Women | 100.0 | 0.0 | 100.0 | 63.0 | 37.4 | 100.0 |
| Scheduled Tribes Women | 100.0 | 0.0 | 100.0 | 50.0 | 50.0 | 100.0 |
| Other Backward Class Women | 98.0 | 2.0 | 100.0 | 68.6 | 31.4 | 100.0 |
| General Women | 95.7 | 4.3 | 100.0 | 69.6 | 30.4 | 100.0 |
| Total | 97.5 | 2.5 | 100.0 | 67.9 | 32.1 | 100.0 |

*Source: Field Data*

### 3.b. Participation in Meetings of the GP

The table 2 shows that participation in the General Body meetings of the GP by its members is good, with high attendance rate. Impressively, the members from the SC and ST categories have shown 100 % attendance, followed by a high incidence of participation by those hailing from the OBC (96.1%) and General categories (91.3%). Absenteeism in meetings is not only by the women members; 5.6 % of male members have also stayed away from participation in GB Meetings. A total of 96.2 %of members have stated that they have participated in the meetings. Among them we have all from the SC and ST categories, while participation from the remaining categories is varying between 91.3 % (General Category), 96.1 %(OBC) and 94.4 % (by Males). Table 2 also shows participation in Ward and Gram Sabha Meetings, put together, 86.8 % of GPMs (Grama Panchayat Members) participated in Ward and Gram Sabha Meetings. If we analyze category-wise, we find the highest participation by male members (94.4%), followed by those from the OBC (90.2%) and General categories (86.8%). There is comparatively low participation by members from SC (77.8%) and ST (77.3%) categories.

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***Table 2***
*Details of Participation of Members in General Body Meetings*

| Gender | General Body Meetings | | | Ward and Gram Sabha Meetings | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Yes | No | Total | Yes | No | Total |
| Men | 94.4 | 5.6 | 100.0 | 94.4 | 5.6 | 100.0 |
| Scheduled Castes Women | 100.0 | 0.0 | 100.0 | 77.8 | 22.2 | 100.0 |
| Scheduled Tribes Women | 100.0 | 0.0 | 100.0 | 77.3 | 22.7 | 100.0 |
| Other Backward Class Women | 96.1 | 3.9 | 100.0 | 90.2 | 9.8 | 100.0 |
| General Women | 91.3 | 8.7 | 100.0 | 87.0 | 13.0 | 100.0 |
| Total | 96.2 | 3.8 | 100.0 | 86.8 | 13.2 | 100.0 |

*Source: Field Data*

**3.c. Constraints/Hurdles Faced in Taking People's Problems to the Ward & Grama Sabhas**

Table 3 depicts a large number of GPMs (OBC (92%), ST and General (90.9%) categories) have stated that they faced hurdles in taking/ raising people's problems to/in the Ward and Grama Sabhas. There is not much difference across caste categories in this.

***Table 3***
*Details of Taking Problems of the People to the Grama Sabha*

| Gender | Yes | No | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Men | 97.1 | 2.9 | 100.0 |
| Scheduled Castes Women | 84.6 | 15.4 | 100.0 |
| Scheduled Tribes Women | 90.9 | 9.1 | 100.0 |
| Other Backward Class Women | 92.0 | 8.0 | 100.0 |
| General Women | 90.9 | 9.1 | 100.0 |
| Total | 91.6 | 8.4 | 100.0 |

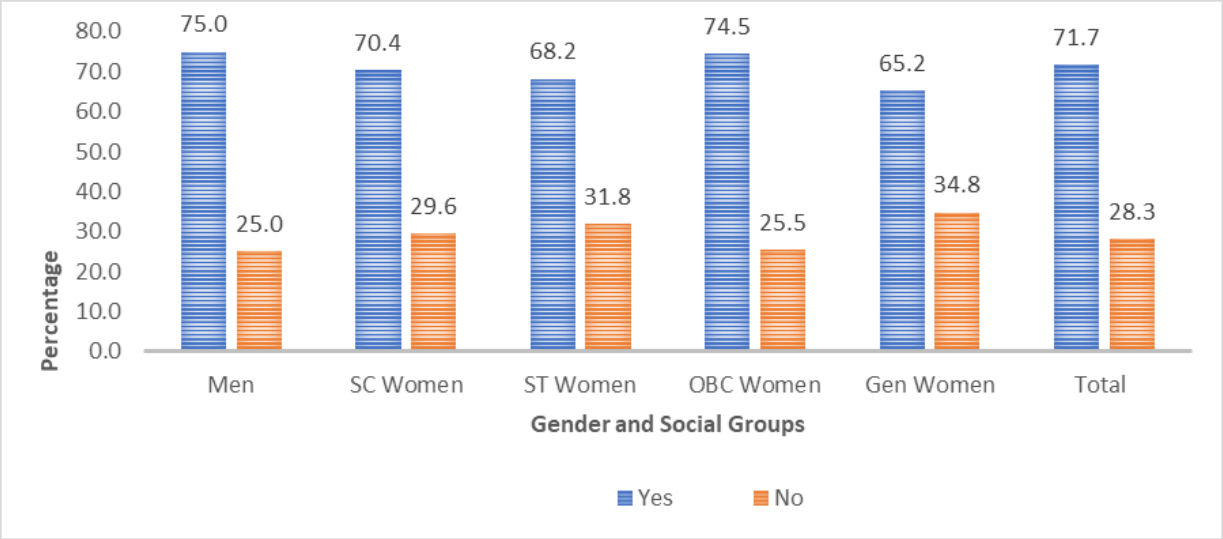
*Source: Field Data*

**3.d. Inclusion of Suggestions from the Meetings in Plans for Implementation**

What happened to the issues or plans raised/suggested by the respondent women members in the Ward and Gram Sabhas? Were they considered for acceptance and to pass resolutions? Figure 1 depicts about 72 %of total respondents have experienced positive ending of their intervention, i. e., by way of being accepted for passing resolution. Women from the OBC category top the list with a high of nearly 75 %, followed by 70.4 % of women from SC, 68.2 % from ST and 65.2 % from General category whose interventions have resulted in positive results.

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***Figure 1***
*Inclusion of Suggestions from the Meetings in Plans for Implementation*

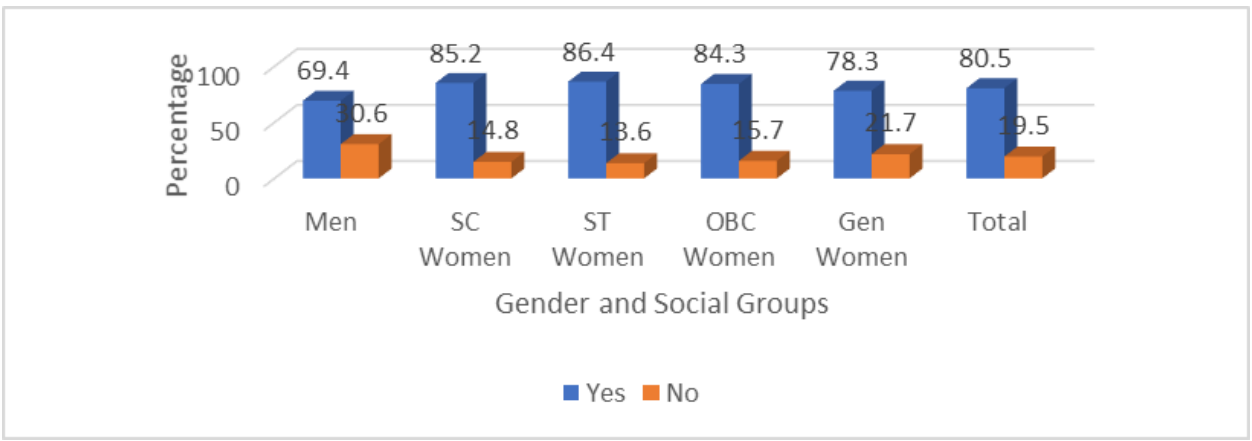



*Source: Field Data*

**3.e Support by Fellow Members while speaking/ making a point in Meetings**

An interesting issue here is to know if other women members present in the meetings offered encouragement or support to their counterparts when the EWRs tried to make a point or speak in the Ward and Gram Sabha meetings? 80.5 % of the EWRs have answered that they have received such support from other women, when they tried to talk in these meetings. But the responses in the negative, are significant, because they mirror the continued challenges for participation by women in decentralized governance and planning. The table below gives the details: 14.8 % of SC, 13.6 % of ST and 15.7 % of women from the SC, ST and OBC categories have stated about not receiving support or encouragement towards their active participation in meetings of the Ward and the Grama Sabha, from their women counterparts. The same situation exists for women from the General category (21.7 %) and even for 30.6 % of male members (see figure 2).

***Figure 2***
*Support/encouragement from fellow EWRs*



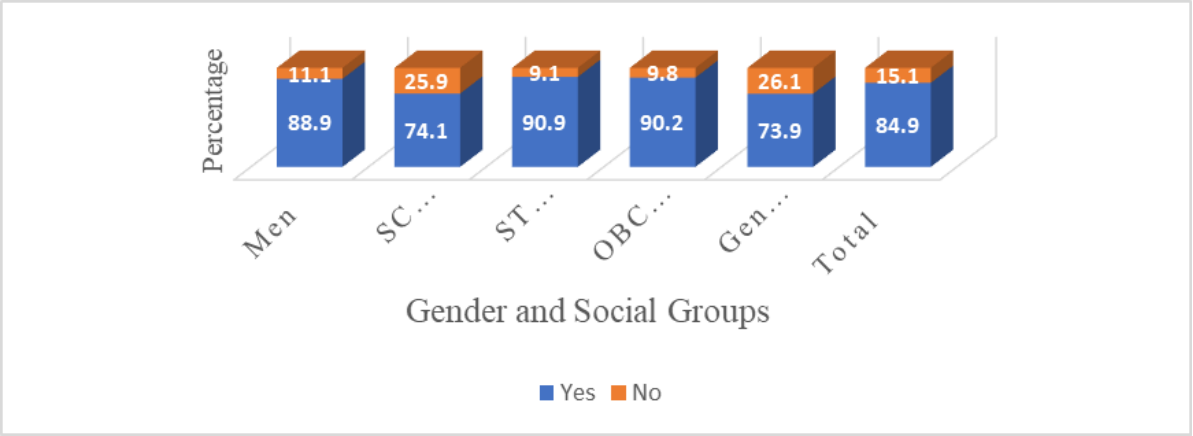

*Source: Field Data*

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### 3.f. Speaking in Panchayat Meetings

When questioned whether the chairperson allowed the participation by EWRs wholeheartedly, again, the response in the affirmative is only about 85 %. Majority of members from SC (74%) and ST (91%) categories agreed to have been allowed wholeheartedly by the chairperson to speak in meetings (refer to figure 3).

***Figure 3***
*Allowed to Speak in the Panchayat Meetings*




*Source: Field Data*

### 3.g Faced Obstructions/ Snubbing/ Degradation by Male ERs in Meetings

Although more than 90 % have stated that there were no obstructions placed during the time when they were talking in the meetings, by way of snubbing etc., we have to take note of those members who have experienced such behaviour during their participation in Ward and Gram Sabha meetings. About 15 % from SC category have faced such a negative reaction to their talking in these meetings. However, when we find that nearly 12 % of members from OBC category, 4.5 % from ST and even from General category (8.7%) have similar experiences, this has to be analyzed more as a gender rather than caste -based issue (see table 4).

***Table 4***
*Obstructed/Snubbed/Degraded by Male ERs*

| Gender | Yes | No | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Men | 5.6 | 94.4 | 100.0 |
| Scheduled Castes Women | 14.8 | 85.2 | 100.0 |
| Scheduled Tribes Women | 4.5 | 95.5 | 100.0 |
| Other Backward Class Women | 11.8 | 88.2 | 100.0 |
| General Women | 8.7 | 91.3 | 100.0 |
| Total | 9.4 | 90.6 | 100.0 |

*Source: Field Data*

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**3.h. Socio-Economic Backwardness influencing Lack of Encouragement to participate in Meetings**

Table 5 shows that, more than 18 %of them have opined that the continued social and economic backwardness is the cause of lack of encouragement for them to take part in meetings. Such a situation is truer not only of women from SC category (37%) but 26.1 %of women from the General category have also faced discouragement, owing to their economic backwardness. 22.7 %of those from ST and 15.7 % of the women from OBC categories have similar constraints. While ordinary male members do not obstruct women's participation in meetings (93.1%), influential males do obstruct according to 29 % of total respondents (among whom we find 11.1 % of male members – meaning males obstructing other male members' participation. Participation is not taken seriously that is when the women members try to raise any question or even to talk in the meetings. 24.5 % of the total sample members have felt so. When we look into their social background, we find that nearly 30 % are SC members, 18.2 % are ST members and 21.6 % OBC members. The situation has not excluded those from the General category (24.5%) and Male members (33.3%).

***Table 5***

*Poor Socio-Economic Status and Encouragement for Participation*

| Gender | Yes | No | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Men | 0.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |
| Scheduled Castes Women | 37.0 | 63.0 | 100.0 |
| Scheduled Tribes Women | 22.7 | 77.3 | 100.0 |
| Other Backward Class Women | 15.7 | 84.3 | 100.0 |
| General Women | 26.1 | 73.9 | 100.0 |
| Total | 18.2 | 81.8 | 100.0 |

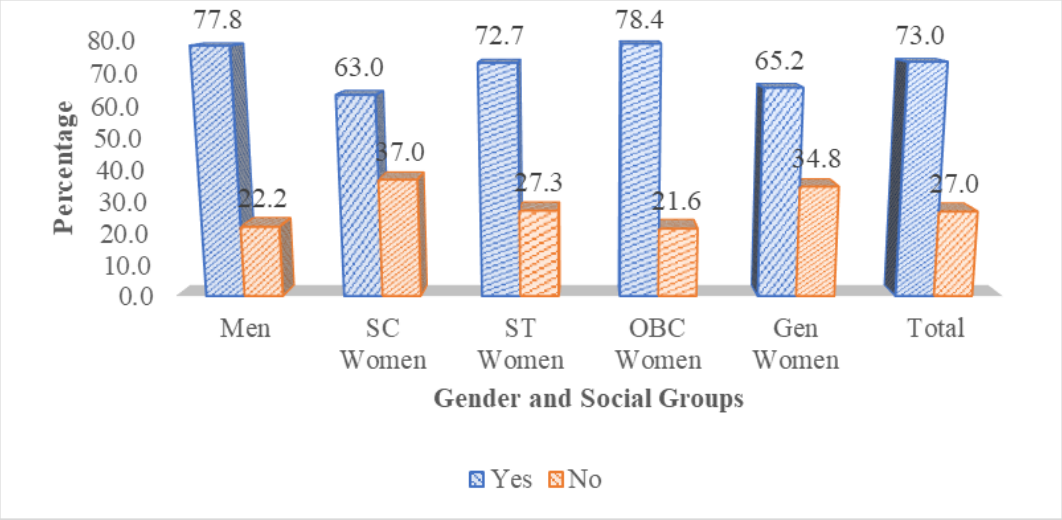
*Source: Field Data*

**3.i. Consideration of Suggestions for Passing Resolutions**

Despite their active participation in Ward Sabha, Grama Sabha and Panchayat meetings, it is sad to note that the suggestions for improvement of people's socio-economic conditions, by way of plans have failed to be considered while passing resolutions by the GPs. This is true of 27 % of the total sample (see figure 4). Highest rejection is faced by EWRs from SC (37%) and General (34.8%) categories. This suggests that more than caste influencing such a denial, it is their gender that has weakened their ability to see that their suggestions are respected for planning. However, when we see that 22.2 % of Elected Male Representatives (EMRs) are also in similar situation, then it is a combination of caste, gender and political party related factors that have influenced it.

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***Figure 4***
*Consideration of Suggestions while Passing Resolutions*




*Source: Field Data*

**3.j. Nervousness to Speak in Meetings**

The paper shows that despite three factors, viz., being elected to the PRIs from nearly three decades, capacity building to strengthen their participation and socio-economic and legal opportunities to participate freely in local administration as leaders, there is still a lingering nervousness among the women members to raise questions in Ward and Grama Sabha meetings. Table 6 explains, it is not a progressive sign to find 34.6 % of the total number of respondents to find that they felt nervous to raise questions in these meetings. Among them there are nearly 14 % of male members also. Such a fear or tendency is surprisingly high even among the OBCs (49%), and expectedly among the SC (37%) and ST (22.7%) categories.

***Table 6***
*Nervousness to Talk or Raise Questions*

| Gender | Yes | No | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Men | 13.9 | 86.1 | 100.0 |
| Scheduled Castes Women | 37.0 | 63.0 | 100.0 |
| Scheduled Tribes Women | 22.7 | 77.3 | 100.0 |
| Other Backward Class Women | 49.0 | 51.0 | 100.0 |
| General Women | 43.5 | 56.5 | 100.0 |
| Total | 34.6 | 65.4 | 100.0 |

*Source: Field Data*

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### 3.l. EWRs Speaking in Meetings Presided over by EMRs

There seems to be no barrier to women's participation to speak in the meetings even when they are presided over by men. Only less than 15 % of total respondents have felt so. Of them 22.2 % are from the SC category, 17.6 % of OBC (17.6 %) and 13 % from General categories (refer to the table 7).

*Table 7*
*Women Members Given Chance to Speak in Meetings Presided Over by Men*

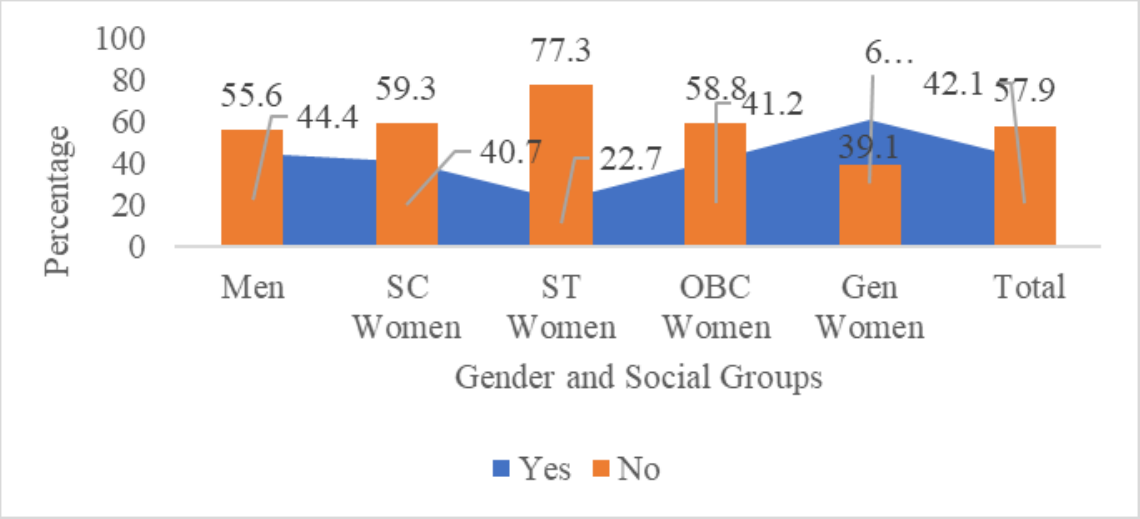
| Gender | Yes | No | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Men | 8.3 | 91.7 | 100.0 |
| Scheduled Castes Women | 22.2 | 77.8 | 100.0 |
| Scheduled Tribes Women | 9.1 | 90.9 | 100.0 |
| Other Backward Class Women | 17.6 | 82.4 | 100.0 |
| General Women | 13.0 | 87.0 | 100.0 |
| Total | 14.5 | 85.5 | 100.0 |

*Source: Field Data*

### 3.m. Woman Chairperson Facilitating EWRs Participation in Meetings

Regardless of whether they are EWRs or EMRs, figure 5 depicts that about 42 % of all members in the paper have felt that the presence of a woman as the chairperson of meetings would facilitate better and easy participation for women members. Women from general category are the largest group to express this opinion (60.9%); followed by 41.2 % from OBC and 22.7 % of ST EWRs. Interestingly, 44.4 % of male members do have consensus on this point.

*Figure 5*
*Better Choice to Speak in Meetings Presided by Women*




*Source: Field Data*

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**3.n. Low Social Status of Adhyaksha Causing Inability to Manage, Lack of Chance to Speak by EWRs**

The table 8 shows that the low social status of the Adhyakshais not the cause for failure to obtain a chance to speak in the meetings. More than 90 % of the total respondents have negated the statement. 9.4 % (the SC EWRs being the largest with 18.5% followed by 11.8% of OBC EWRs) have opined that low status of Adhyaksha does matter in allowing women members to speak because of her/his inability to manage meetings.

*Table 8*
*Adhyaksha's Low Social Status and Managing Meetings*

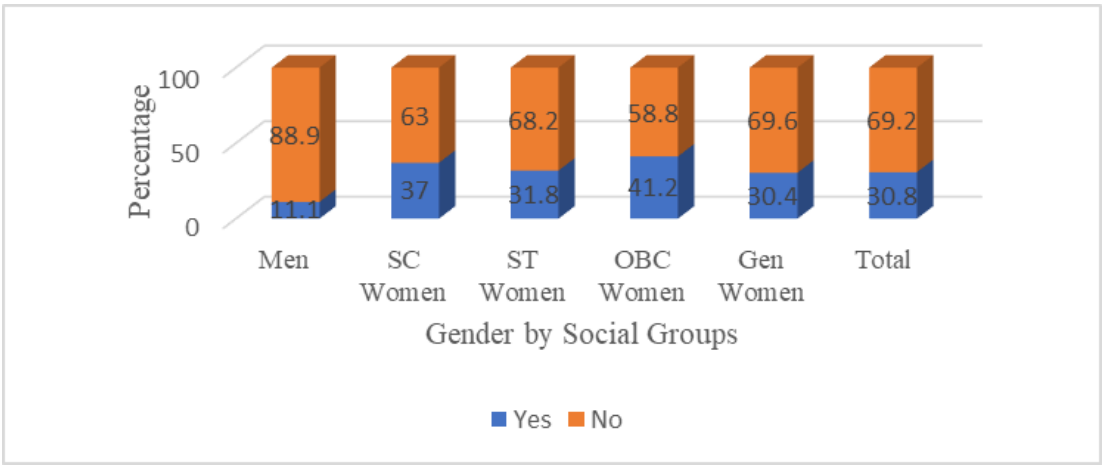
| Gender | Yes | No | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Men | 2.8 | 97.2 | 100.0 |
| Scheduled Castes Women | 18.5 | 81.5 | 100.0 |
| Scheduled Tribes Women | 4.5 | 95.5 | 100.0 |
| Other Backward Class Women | 11.8 | 88.2 | 100.0 |
| General Women | 8.7 | 91.3 | 100.0 |
| Total | 9.4 | 90.6 | 100.0 |

*Source: Field Data*

**3.o. Forbidden from Participation in Meetings due to Dearth of Knowledge about Government Schemes**

One cannot attribute 30 % of respondents blaming lack of information about government programs, because nearly 70 % of respondents have expressed that for them, there is no dearth of information about the various government schemes. Hence, there is no such thing as absence of knowledge leading to poor participation in meetings. Despite transparency in the decentralized system, and the wide publicity given about schemes, 37 % of EWRs who are from SCs, 41.2 % from OBC category and 30.4 % and 31.8 % of women respectively from General and ST categories, are finding it difficult to participate in meetings, due to paucity of sufficient information about government schemes.

*Figure 6*
*Participation and Lack of Information*




*Source: Field Data*

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## 4. Participation in Women Related Priority Areas and Development of the Village

### 4.a. Important Factors for Village Development

Studies carried out in the past have stated that EWRs generally prefer to attend to developmental works close to women's well-being and strategic needs like basic amenities - sanitation, drinking water, fuel, etc. It is true of our study also. However, interesting it is to find that even while doing so, EWRs can be classified based on their own backwardness choosing a certain element in these development works. Their choices are related to benefits that they are also deprived of. For example, women members from the SC category have stated that their choice in taking up development works are basic services such as providing toilets, drinking water and housing, which they themselves are lacking (see table 9). In addition to these, the EWRs from ST group worked (as their first priority), for making provision for education (9.3%), drinking water (9.1%), employment (8.6%), hygiene (5.9%) and so on. Women from the OBCs have preferred attention towards housing (40 %), health avenues (37.3%), drinking water (33.3%), employment (32.8%) and so on. For women from the General category, providing housing to the needy is of utmost importance (18.3%) followed by drinking water (16.7%), health (16.4%), education (14%) and so on. Male members have worked for providing jobs as they thought it was very important (32.8%), but hygiene (31.4%) and health services (31.3%), education (29.1%) is not less important. What is interesting to note is the link between socio-economic background of the respective category and the choices they have made in choosing the most important things for the development of the village.

***Table 9***

*Priority Areas and Development of the Village*

| Gender | Men | SC Women | ST Women | OBC Women | Gen Women | Group Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Education | 29.1 | 15.1 | 9.3 | 32.6 | 14.0 | 100.0 |
| Health | 31.3 | 10.4 | 4.5 | 37.3 | 16.4 | 100.0 |
| Drinking Water | 21.2 | 19.7 | 9.1 | 33.3 | 16.7 | 100.0 |
| Hygiene | 31.4 | 19.6 | 5.9 | 29.4 | 13.7 | 100.0 |
| House | 18.3 | 18.3 | 5.0 | 40.0 | 18.3 | 100.0 |
| Job | 32.8 | 13.8 | 8.6 | 32.8 | 12.1 | 100.0 |
| Others | 25.0 | 25.0 | 0.0 | 25.0 | 25.0 | 100.0 |

*Source: Field Data*

### 4.b. Conflict Resolution

Conflict resolution is an important duty of the decentralized bodies, especially at the grassroots level, to ensure peaceful participation of people across all sections and conducting grama sabhas meeting and ward sabhas meeting, selection of beneficiaries, implement development programmes and so on. Against this aspect, we find that nearly 85 % of all members (male and female and across categories) have stated about their involvement in handling conflict in their respective constituencies. However, among those who have not involved themselves, we have EWRs from STs (27.3%) followed by males (19.4%), women from General and SC categories (13% and 11.1% respectively).

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***Table 10***
*Handling Public Conflicts in the Ward*

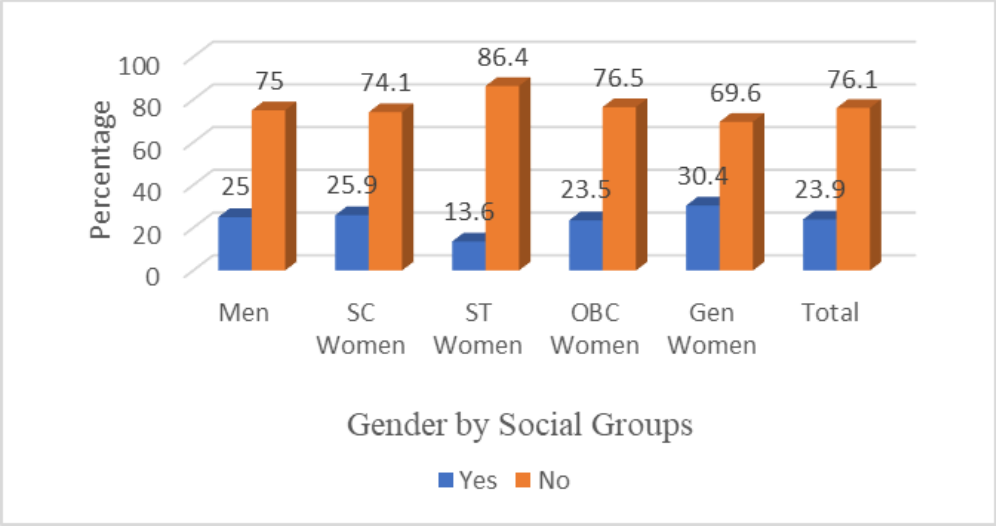
| Gender | Yes | No | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Men | 80.6 | 19.4 | 100.0 |
| Scheduled Castes Women | 88.9 | 11.1 | 100.0 |
| Scheduled Tribes Women | 72.7 | 27.3 | 100.0 |
| Other Backward Class Women | 90.2 | 9.8 | 100.0 |
| General Women | 87.0 | 13.0 | 100.0 |
| Total | 84.9 | 15.1 | 100.0 |

*Source: Field Data*

**4.c. Informal Meetings to Solve People's Problems**

It is a known issue that decentralization has provided certain status and roles to the EWRs and EMRs to solve people's problems. The respondents were questioned whether they conducted meetings beyond the regular and formal, official meetings to address the people's problems? The answers have been largely in the negative (76.1%). It is the elected women representatives from the General category who had organized informal meetings with the people, (30.4%) and those from the ST category form the highest number not to have done so (86.4%) followed by OBC and SC women (76.5% and 74.1% respectively).

***Figure 7***
*Conducting Informal Meetings to Solve People's Problems*



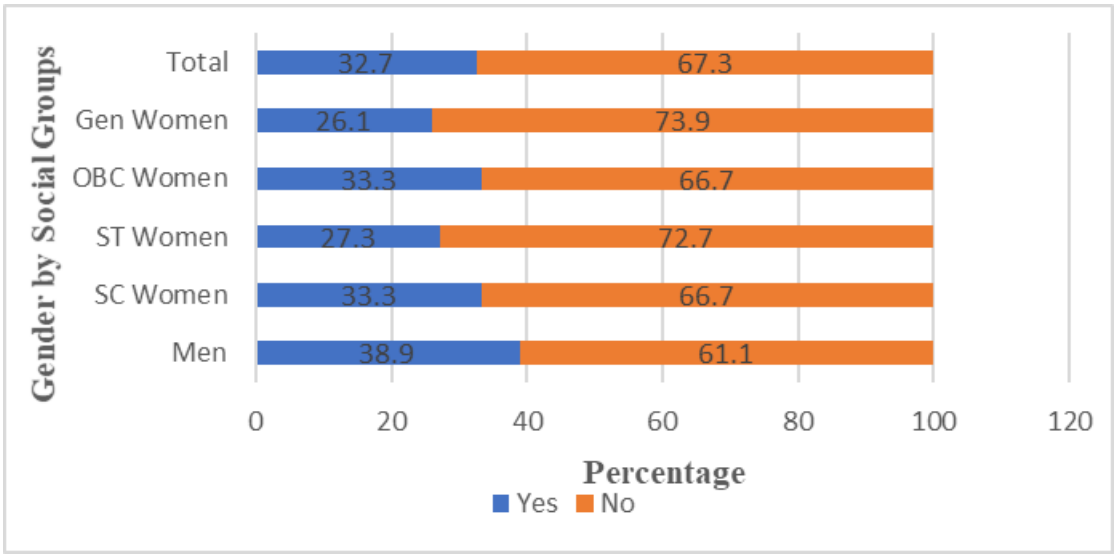

*Source: Field Data*

**4.d. Efforts to Address Problems of Women and Children**

Although it is held by a few studies that EWRs are leaders addressing problems of only women and children in their constituency, it is disproved when we find that, across various categories, (more so by EWRs from SC and ST groups) negating the statement (67.3%) (see figure 8). The largest number having declined any such 'women and children only attention' are the EWRs from the General category (73.9%). However, 38.9 %of EMRs believed that the women members generally attend to solving the problems of women and children in their constituency are the male elected members (38.9%).

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***Figure 8***
*Addressing of Problems of Women and Children*




*Source: Field Data*

**4.e. Information Flow**

There seems to be no problem about receiving information about the general body meeting as evidenced in the table 11 that shows more than 80 % of total respondents happy about receipt of such information. What is worrisome is the lack of or failure to obtaining meeting notice for 18.9 %, the highest among them being women from general (26.1%), OBC (23.5%) and ST (22.7%) categories.

***Table 11***
*Information Flow*

| Gender | Yes | No | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Men | 88.9 | 11.1 | 100.0 |
| Scheduled Castes Women | 88.9 | 11.1 | 100.0 |
| Scheduled Tribes Women | 77.3 | 22.7 | 100.0 |
| Other Backward Class Women | 76.5 | 23.5 | 100.0 |
| General Women | 73.9 | 26.0 | 100.0 |
| Total | 81.1 | 18.8 | 100.0 |

*Source: Field Data*

## 5. Concluding Remarks

The presence of a large number of women in decentralized governance through Panchayat Raj institutions, empowered by the 73rd constitutional amendment in 1993, has significantly advanced women's political participation. Despite the persistent barriers of patriarchy and a male-dominated political system, reserved seats have enabled women to transition from voters to active political participants. However, they face challenges such as lack of knowledge about government schemes, administrative processes, literacy, prior political experience, patriarchal restrictions, and economic poverty. These difficulties often necessitate the accompaniment of male relatives, earning them the term 'sarpanchpathi'/ husband of the women president. Additionally, traditional panchayats pose challenges for both women and vulnerable men.

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Household responsibilities, domestic chores, and the need to earn a livelihood further hinder their political effectiveness. Despite these obstacles, grassroots support from women's organizations, NGOs, and government initiatives have empowered elected women representatives. Violence in political participation, proxy governance, and tokenism remain significant issues, but many EWRs now participate independently and effectively. Progressive measures like Mahila Sabhas have enhanced their leadership skills and enabled them to address issues such as domestic violence, female foeticide, and education. Over the decades, there has been notable progress in the economic and political participation of women, leading to substantial social development.

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