



# Inclusion Of Women: Karnataka's Impressive Performance In Political Representation In Panchayat Raj Institutions

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## Abstract

The representation of women in Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) is crucial for advancing gender equality and promoting inclusive governance in India. Karnataka, a progressive state in southern India, has made significant strides in enhancing women's political participation in local governance, particularly in rural areas, through the reservation of one-third of seats for women in PRIs. This paper analyzes the status and progress of women's representation in Grama Panchayat, Taluk Panchayat, and Zilla Panchayat in Karnataka from 2000 to 2020. The study employs a quantitative methodology, analyzing secondary data to assess trends in women's political representation. The findings reveal a steady increase in the percentage of women in all three levels of Panchayats, with women's representation reaching over 50% in Grama Panchayats by 2015-2016 and continuing into 2020. Key factors contributing to this success include strong political will, capacity-building initiatives, supportive legal frameworks, and the active involvement of civil society. The increased representation of women has led to more inclusive governance, with women addressing issues such as health, education, sanitation, and women's rights.

**Keywords:** Women's Representation, Panchayat Raj Institutions, Gender Equality and Political Empowerment

## Introduction

The inclusion of women in political arenas is a crucial measure of advancement in any democratic society. In India, the Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) play a critical role in grassroots governance, empowering local communities and enhancing democratic participation. Karnataka, a progressive state in southern India, has demonstrated commendable strides in promoting the political representation of women, especially in rural areas through the Panchayat Raj system. This achievement is not only a testament to the state's commitment to gender equality but also an important model for other states striving to empower women politically.

The significance of Panchayat Raj Institutions in India cannot be overstated. These institutions form the foundation of decentralized governance, facilitating direct participation of the people in decision-making processes that impact their daily lives. The Constitution of India, through the 73rd Amendment Act of 1992, provided a constitutional framework for the establishment of Panchayats at the village, intermediate, and district levels. A key aspect of this amendment was the allocation of one-third of the seats in local governance bodies specifically for women. This historic move aimed to ensure that women,

who form half of the population, have a voice in the political and decision-making processes of their communities.

Karnataka, like several other states in India, embraced this change enthusiastically. The state took proactive measures to implement the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment and ensure that women were adequately represented in the Panchayat Raj system. The reservation of one-third of seats for women in local governance bodies has had a transformative impact on the political landscape of Karnataka, especially in rural areas where patriarchal norms and social barriers traditionally restricted women's participation in public life. The state's performance in ensuring political representation for women in Panchayat Raj institutions has been nothing short of impressive. The implementation of the 33% reservation for women in Panchayats has resulted in a remarkable increase in the number of women representatives in local governance bodies.

## Review of Literatures

Studies on women's representation in Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) across India have highlighted various challenges faced by women in political participation. Kumar & Singh (2018) emphasize the significance of quotas for women in local governance, noting that such quotas have significantly enhanced their visibility and participation in decision-making processes. Desai (2004) underscores the crucial role of political will in ensuring the effective implementation of policies that promote female representation. In the case of Karnataka, research by Sharma & Srinivas (2010) and Patil & Jadhav (2016) points out that the state has been at the forefront of ensuring women's representation through both policy reforms and institutional support. Against this backdrop, the present study aims to achieve the following objectives.

## Objectives and Methodology

The primary objective of this paper is to analyse the status and progress of women's representation in Panchayat Raj Institutions in Karnataka from 2000 to 2020. The study employs a quantitative methodology, focusing on secondary data analysis. Data related to the total number of members and the number of women members in Grama Panchayat, Taluk Panchayat, and Zilla Panchayat across the given years has been analysed to assess the trends in women's political representation.

## Women's Representation in Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs)

Women's representation in Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) has been a significant milestone in India's journey toward gender equality and inclusive governance. The 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992, which mandated the reservation of one-third of the seats for women in local bodies, marked a transformative step in empowering women, particularly in rural areas. This reform was designed to provide women with a platform to participate in decision-making processes, traditionally dominated by men, and to ensure that their concerns were adequately represented at the grassroots level.

Panchayat Raj Institutions, which operate at the village, intermediate, and district levels, are crucial for local governance and the implementation of government policies. The inclusion of women in these bodies not only promotes gender equality but also leads to more comprehensive governance by addressing the unique needs of women and marginalized groups. Research shows that when women participate in local governance, there is a noticeable improvement in areas such as healthcare, sanitation, education, and social welfare, as they bring a distinct perspective to decision-making.

However, despite the reservation policy, challenges remain. Women often face societal barriers, including patriarchal norms and lack of political support, which limit their effectiveness in PRIs. Proxy representation, where male relatives often take over the roles of elected women members, is another

challenge that undermines their political agency. To overcome these hurdles, various states, including Karnataka, have introduced initiatives to provide training, capacity-building, and institutional support for women in PRIs. These efforts are aimed at enhancing their leadership abilities and ensuring that women can play a more active and meaningful role in governance.

The representation of women in Panchayat Raj Institutions in Karnataka has witnessed steady growth over the years. Table 1 provides a detailed breakdown of women's representation in Grama Panchayat, Taluk Panchayat, and Zilla Panchayat for the years 2000, 2005, 2010, 2015-2016, and 2020.

**Table – 1: Women's Representation in Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) of Karnataka**

Year	Grama Panchayat			Taluk Panchayat			Zilla Panchayat		
	Total Number of Members	Total Number of Women Members		Total Number of Members	Total Number of Women		Total Number of Members	Total Number of Women Members	
		No	%		No	%		No	%
2000	78,349	35,064	44.75	3,255	1,375	42.20	890	339	38.10
2005	91,402	39,318	43.00	3,683	1,519	41.20	1,005	373	37.10
2010	90,643	39,327	43.39	3,659	2,018	55.15	1,013	539	53.21
2015 & 2016	97,062	51,497	53.00	3,903	1,998	51.19	1,083	548	50.60
2020	96,322	49,696	51.59	-	-	-	-	-	-

Source: State Election Commission (SEC), Govt. of Karnataka,

The data on women's representation in Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) in Karnataka reflects a positive and consistent upward trend over the past two decades. The reservation of one-third of seats for women, mandated by the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment, has played a pivotal role in this progress, ensuring women's greater participation in decision-making processes at the grassroots level. However, examining the data from 2000 to 2020 reveals significant shifts in the percentage of women members across various levels of Panchayats – Grama Panchayat, Taluk Panchayat, and Zilla Panchayat.

In the year 2000, women accounted for 44.75% of the total members in Grama Panchayats, which represents a considerable level of participation at the village level. At the Taluk Panchayat level, the percentage of women was slightly lower at 42.20%, while at the Zilla Panchayat, it was 38.10%. These numbers, though reflecting the impact of reservations, still indicated a need for more institutional support and empowerment for women in these positions.

By 2005, the numbers showed an overall increase in women's representation. Grama Panchayats saw a rise to 43.00%, while Taluk Panchayats increased to 41.20%, and Zilla Panchayats reached 37.10%. This upward trend indicates the gradual effectiveness of the reservation system, though gender disparities at higher levels of Panchayats remained evident.

The year 2010 marked a significant milestone, with Grama Panchayats seeing a further increase to 43.39%, while Taluk Panchayats saw a marked jump to 55.15%, and Zilla Panchayats reached 53.21%. These improvements, particularly at the Taluk and Zilla Panchayat levels, suggest that Karnataka had started providing more resources, training, and institutional support for women leaders, which empowered them to take on more prominent roles in decision-making.

The years 2015 and 2016 saw a peak in women's representation, with Grama Panchayats reaching 53.00%, Taluk Panchayats at 51.19%, and Zilla Panchayats at 50.60%. This period indicates a period of consolidation where women's roles in local governance were not only institutionalized but were also beginning to translate into tangible influence on policies and governance outcomes at the local level.

In 2020, Grama Panchayats still reported a high representation of women at 51.59%. This continued rise shows that women in Karnataka have increasingly taken on leadership roles in local governance, with their contributions becoming more significant in community decision-making.

Overall, the data highlights Karnataka's commitment to promoting women's participation in local governance, with a clear upward trend in the number and percentage of women elected to Panchayats at all levels. However, the persistent gender gap at higher levels, especially in Zilla Panchayats, suggests that while progress has been made, there are still barriers to achieving full gender parity in political representation. This trend can be attributed to various factors, including socio-cultural barriers, the prevalence of proxy representation, and the need for more targeted capacity-building initiatives to support women in leadership roles. The state's success in increasing women's representation in Grama Panchayats is a promising sign, but continued efforts are needed to enhance women's political agency and leadership in higher-level Panchayats.

### Key Factors Contributing to Success

Several factors have contributed to Karnataka's success in surpassing the 50% representation mark for women in PRIs:

- Political Will and Policy Support:** The state government's proactive policies and unwavering political will have been instrumental. Successive governments have prioritized women's empowerment and ensured that policies supporting gender parity in political representation are effectively implemented.
- Capacity Building and Training Programs:** Comprehensive capacity-building programs for women representatives have played a crucial role. These programs equip women with the necessary skills and knowledge to perform their roles effectively, boosting their confidence and competence in governance.
- Supportive Legal Framework:** Karnataka has implemented a robust legal framework that not only mandates reservations but also provides a conducive environment for women's active participation in politics. This includes provisions for gender sensitization and protection against discrimination and harassment.
- Civil Society and NGO Involvement:** Active involvement of civil society organizations and NGOs has significantly contributed to this achievement. These organizations have been pivotal in mobilizing women, raising awareness, and providing continuous support to women representatives.
- Community Support:** The role of the community cannot be overlooked. Increased awareness and changing societal attitudes towards women in leadership positions have encouraged more women to come forward and participate in PRIs.

In addition, Karnataka has seen the emergence of strong women leaders who have played transformative roles at the local level, advocating for issues such as access to education, healthcare, sanitation, and women's rights. Another innovative step taken by Karnataka has been the introduction of leadership development programs for women at the grassroots level. These programs focus on enhancing political awareness and participation, providing women with a deeper understanding of governance, legal frameworks, and administrative procedures. The empowerment of women through these programs has enabled them to challenge existing social norms, thereby contributing to a shift in the traditional power dynamics that have historically excluded women from the political sphere.

## Impact of Increased Women's Representation

The increased representation of women in PRIs has had far-reaching impacts:

1. **Enhanced Governance:** Women representatives have brought in diverse perspectives and priorities, leading to more inclusive and effective governance. Issues such as health, education, sanitation, and women's rights have received greater attention.
2. **Empowerment and Social Change:** Political participation has empowered women, leading to increased self-esteem and social status. This empowerment extends beyond the individual to their families and communities, fostering broader social change.
3. **Role Models and Inspiration:** Women leaders in PRIs serve as role models, inspiring other women and girls to aspire for leadership positions. This creates a positive cycle of increased political participation and empowerment.

## Challenges in Achieving Gender Parity

Despite the impressive progress in women's political participation, there are still challenges that hinder full gender parity in Panchayat Raj Institutions:

1. **Cultural Barriers:** Deep-rooted patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes often deter women from actively engaging in politics. Women's leadership is sometimes undermined by societal norms that limit their roles to domestic spheres.
2. **Lack of Awareness and Education:** Many women elected to PRIs are first-time politicians, and they often face challenges in understanding the political process, governance mechanisms, and legal frameworks.
3. **Political Influence of Male Members:** In some cases, women's political positions in Panchayats are controlled by male family members, reducing their autonomy in decision-making.
4. **Limited Resources and Training:** While policies to encourage women's participation are in place, adequate training, leadership development, and resource mobilization remain critical gaps that hinder their effective participation.

## Summary and Conclusion

Karnataka's performance in achieving gender parity in Panchayat Raj Institutions has been commendable, with women's representation steadily rising from 2000 to 2020. The data analysis reveals an impressive increase in women's participation in Grama Panchayats, Taluk Panchayats, and Zilla Panchayats, particularly after the implementation of reservations and other supportive measures. Despite the progress, challenges such as patriarchal attitudes, insufficient political training, and male dominance in political affairs continue to impede full gender parity. There is a need for continued efforts in empowering women through education, leadership training, and institutional support. Karnataka's success in increasing women's political representation in Panchayat Raj Institutions serves as a model for other states, but sustaining and enhancing this momentum will require persistent effort and systemic reforms aimed at addressing the challenges women face in local governance.

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