



Assessing the Political Participation of Women in the Panchampatti Gram Panchayat: A Comprehensive Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Political participation encompasses citizens' engagement in electoral and policy-making processes, serving as a means to represent the aspirations and needs of the people. It encompasses a range of voluntary activities that enable members of society to influence the selection of leaders and participate directly or indirectly in the formulation of public policies. These activities encompass voting, information-seeking, discussions, meeting attendance, protests, demonstrations, and communication with legislators, among others. Women constitute a significant portion of any country's population, and recognizing and addressing the constraints that limit their participation is crucial. Collective awareness and critical analysis of these limiting factors are essential for women to effect change within the unequal power structures they often face. Collaboration between families, communities, and the state is pivotal in creating an environment where elected female representatives can effectively contribute to Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). Empowering them with the necessary skills and incentives to address emerging challenges within the panchayat system is imperative.

Keywords: Women's Political Participation, Decision-Making, Influence, Gram Sabha, Participation

Introduction

Political participation refers to the means by which a country's citizens engage in both electoral processes and policy-making. In essence, it serves as the conduit through which the aspirations and needs of the people find representation. Broadly speaking, political participation encompasses voluntary activities through which members of a society take part in selecting their leaders and directly or indirectly influence the formation of public policies. These activities encompass voting, seeking information, engaging in discussions, attending meetings, organizing strikes and demonstrations, and communicating with legislators, among others.

Women make up a significant portion of a country's population, but their involvement in politics often lags behind that of men. Various psychological, social, and physical factors hinder women's active political engagement, particularly at the state and national levels. In a democratic society, progress is hindered when a substantial portion of its population remains confined to traditional roles.

Political participation is the cornerstone of a functioning democracy. It signifies the active involvement of citizens in the political processes of a country. Herbert Mc. Closky's statement underscores that participation is the primary way citizens grant or withdraw their consent to be governed. It ensures that those in power are accountable to the people. Philosophers like J.S. Mill, Rousseau, and Bentham have long argued for the importance of citizen participation in shaping public policies and decisions. They believed that active participation is essential for safeguarding individual rights and promoting the common good. Noorjahan Bava's perspective highlights that direct and indirect participation of citizens in public affairs is the lifeline of a participatory democracy. In a participatory democracy, citizens are not mere spectators but actively engage in civic activities. This includes voting in elections, attending public meetings, joining discussions, and interacting with elected officials. Such active civic engagement ensures that government remains responsive to the needs and preferences of the populace.

Local Governance and Empowerment:

Gram Panchayats serve as a critical link between the government and rural communities. Their decentralized structure allows for localized decision-making and tailored solutions to address specific local needs. The active involvement of Gram Panchayat members empowers rural communities to take charge of their development and address their unique challenges. Through their diverse roles, these elected representatives contribute to improving the socio-economic conditions and overall quality of life in their respective areas.

Objectives

1. To evaluate the extent of women's participation in the electoral process and the activities of Gram Panchayats

2. To gauge the level of awareness among women regarding the electoral process, including knowledge of women in Gram Panchayats.

Study Area

N. Panjampatti is a village located in the Athoor Block within the Dindigul District of Tamil Nadu, India. Within its jurisdiction, N. Panjampatti Gram Panchayat oversees a total of 1 village and is further divided into 12 wards. The village covers a geographical area of 722.76 hectares. In terms of population, Panjampatti is home to 6,393 individuals, consisting of 3,154 males and 3,239 females.

Methodology

The present study primarily relies on empirical methods for its research. Data collection involves the use of schedules to gather information from a sample of respondents. Additionally, personal interviews were conducted with women respondents to obtain in-depth insights.

Furthermore, the study supplements primary data collection with information obtained from secondary sources. These sources include census reports, government documents, gazettes, district handbooks, and various published literature.

Given the practical constraints of studying the political participation of all women in the district, the study has focused on one specific Gram Panchayat, namely Panjampatti in the Dindigul district. Data has been gathered from a sample of 80 respondents within this Gram Panchayat to facilitate the research.

Sl. No.	Age	Group Number	Percentage (%)
1	20 to 35	25	28
2	35 to 50	45	50
3	Above 50	20	22
4	Total	90	100

Source : Computed

The above table shows that majority of the women were the middle-aged category (50%) followed the young age category (28%) those who participated in panchayat elections and panchayat affairs. Only 22% were from aged category. It is quite clear from the above data that the aged women have some sort of apathy toward politics where as young and middle-aged women are more interested in politics.

Sl.No.	Did you participate in the electoral process of the last panchayat election?	Yes	No	Yes (%)	No (%)
1.		90	0	100	-

Source :computed

Through Gram Panchayats are created as grass root democratic institutions and election to these bodies is the first political experience for the women, there is 100% electoral participation of women can to be more than satisfactory, it is found that 93.75% of women participated in panchayat election where as 0% of women remained as nonparticipant. Political awareness is the stepping stone of political participation. Awareness creates interest and interest creates involvements. So, the study investigate to what extent the women are aware about the electoral process.

Sl.No.	Age	Group Number	Percentage (%)
1.	Are you aware that citizens who are 18 years of age can vote in elections?	90	100
2.	Do you know that elections are conducted every five years?	90	100
3.	Are you aware if there is a Gram Panchayat in your locality?	90	100
4.	Do you know that seats are reserved in Gram Panchayats?	70	78
5.	Do you know that seats are reserved for General category candidates in Gram Panchayats?	70	78
6.	Do you know that seats are reserved for women in Gram Panchayat	80	89
7.	Do you know that seats are reserved for women in Gram Panchayats?	90	100
8.	Are you aware of the symbols used by candidates in Gram Panchayat elections?	70	78

Source : Computed

Analysis of the Table:

The data from the table indicates that women in the surveyed area possess a moderate to satisfactory level of awareness regarding the electoral processes of Gram Panchayats. Notably, they demonstrate good knowledge concerning essential aspects, including the eligible voting age, the election cycle, and the reservation of seats for women in Gram Panchayats. This survey highlights a positive trend: long after India's independence, women are steadily gaining awareness about the country's electoral processes.

It is evident that a segment of women rarely engage in either the electoral process or the activities of the Gram Panchayats.

Sl. No	Particulars	Yes (%)	No (%)
1.	Do members of the Gram Panchayat meet with you?	33	67
2.	Do you attend Gram Sabha meetings?	38	62
3.	Have you ever presented your demands to the Gram Panchayat?	22	78
4.	Do you believe that your demands are consistently fulfilled by the Gram Panchayat?	11	89

The data presented in the table indicates that women express lower levels of satisfaction with the performance of the Gram Panchayat. Additionally, when it comes to their participation in Gram Sabha meetings, the data reveals a notably low level of involvement among women. The study reveals that women generally possess a moderate level of awareness when it comes to the electoral process.

Major Findings

5. Women express reservations about the relevance and effectiveness of attending Gram Sabha meetings. They highlight concerns that certain dominant groups tend to exert significant influence during these gatherings, often resulting in decisions that align with their preferences. This perceived imbalance in decision-making can lead to disengagement among other participants.
6. Women's interaction with the Gram Panchayat is noticeably restricted. They rarely proactively communicate their demands for essential facilities and privileges to the Gram Panchayat authorities. This limited engagement can be attributed to factors such as lower levels of awareness about their rights and entitlements and relatively lower educational levels.
7. Several underlying factors contribute to women's apathy, diminished interest, and indifferent attitudes toward political participation:
8. The prevalence of illiteracy among women in the community acts as a barrier to their active involvement in local governance processes.
9. Economic constraints and financial struggles may hinder women's ability to engage actively in political activities.
10. Deeply rooted traditional norms and gender roles within society can limit women's participation and engagement in public affairs.
11. The narrow perspectives of family members, who may prioritize traditional roles for women, can discourage their active involvement in political activities.
12. Women perceive negligence on the part of the Gram Panchayat, which may not adequately address their concerns or respond to their needs, further eroding their interest in political participation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the survey findings underscore the complexity of women's participation in the electoral process and Gram Panchayat affairs. While some women actively engage, others remain disengaged due to various challenges, including limited awareness, concerns about Gram Sabha dynamics, and inadequate interaction with the Gram Panchayat. The root causes of this apathy encompass illiteracy, poverty, deeply ingrained traditional norms, family attitudes, and perceived negligence by the Gram Panchayat.

Efforts to enhance women's involvement must be comprehensive and targeted, focusing on awareness-building, education, and fostering a more inclusive and responsive Gram Panchayat environment. Empowering women to play an active role in local governance is not just a policy goal; it is essential for societal progress and equitable development.

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