



Rural Women and Local Government: Insights from a South Indian Village

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.55248/gengpi.6.0725.2657>

ABSTRACT

This research examines the participation, role, and issues of women in rural local government, particularly in the context of the Bukkarayasamudram Gram Panchayat in Andhra Pradesh. Even as the 73rd Constitutional Amendment has offered institutional space to women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), entrenched socio-cultural practices, weak support mechanisms, and limited access to education still impede effective participation. Through descriptive, quantitative methods using two samples comprising 30 women representatives and 50 voters, the research brings to the fore how social norms, support deficits, and gender prejudices adversely affect women's decision-making abilities. Statistical analysis indicates strong relationships between societal attitudes and diminished autonomy of women leaders. The study emphasizes the significance of emotional, institutional, and political support in augmenting women's leadership within grassroots democracy. Findings offer evidence-based suggestions for stakeholders such as policymakers, Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs), and political parties with the aim of enhancing women's participation in local governance through awareness, training, mentorship, and involvement in the community.

Keywords: Women, Participation, Gender, Decentralization

Introduction

Prior to formal recognition, women's involvement in local government in India was tokenistic and confined to the elite. Post-independence in 1947, political interest continued to be centered on economic and social reform at the cost of women in politics. The 1970s and 1980s, however, witnessed a breakthrough with the emergence of advocacy for gender equity, culminating in the most significant 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments of 1992. These ensured women's one-third representation in local bodies, members, and chairpersons, with some states such as Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, and Odisha later raising this to 50% [1]. The 73rd Amendment formalized Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), further consolidating them by the introduction of a three-tier model and passing on unto them 29 functional areas by way of the Eleventh Schedule [2].

Earlier research is apt to be limited in concrete, practical suggestions for addressing the reasons behind women's underrepresentation in local government, even as the necessity for their active involvement is emphasized. Empowerment has been universally accepted as a necessity, but there is a clear lack of research that suggests concrete, realistic measures towards empowering women at the grassroots level.

This study aims to investigate the problems of women representatives in the local body elections. It presents their participation and influence in local decision-making and evaluates people's attitudes towards their roles and contributions in the governance of the community.

Also, this study charts the key intersection of gender and grassroots democracy in India, with an eye to clarifying the influence of social attitudes and institutional environments on women's political engagement. In charting barriers to their engagement and assessing their role in local government, the study provides policy recommendations to policymakers, Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs), and development professionals seeking to promote gender equality in PRIs. Additionally, awareness of public opinion about women leaders can inform targeted awareness campaigns and training programs to foster greater acceptance and empowerment, thereby building more representative and inclusive local government.

The reviewed literature highlights the evolving role of women in India's local governance, especially post the 73rd Constitutional Amendment. Chhibber (2002) and Mamatha (2019) point to persistent socio-cultural and economic barriers limiting women's political participation, while Jayal (2006) and Panadan (2013) emphasize rising aspirations and collective identity as empowering forces, particularly among Dalit and tribal women. Haritas (2008) and Bonu et al. (2009) critique systemic obstacles like caste, class, and inadequate focus on inclusive development. Studies by Bryld (2010), Figueras (2010), and Kumar (2022) underline how illiteracy, lack of experience, and cultural constraints hinder effective participation, though leaders from marginalized backgrounds show promising policy shifts. Ghosh et al. (2015) and Edstrom et al. (2015) argue that true empowerment demands both affirmative action and attitudinal change, including male allyship. Recent studies by Divi et al. (2024), Lal (2024), Maji (2024), and Safira & Hilal (2024) highlight the strengthening of women's roles in grassroots governance, showing increased participation, leadership, and socio-economic upliftment, despite ongoing challenges.

Methodology

Bukkarayasamudram is a large and significant gram panchayat of Andhra Pradesh with over 19,000 electors over an area of 35.36 square kilometers. Administratively divided into 20 wards, the panchayat is governed by 18 directly elected ward members, in addition to a Sarpanch and Upa Sarpanch - both women - selected through democratic exercises in 2021 elections. Interestingly, 8 out of 18 ward members are also women. To support grassroots democracy and people's participation, 18 Gramaikya Sanghalu (village federations) have been formed for development and participative decision-making. Five Gram Sachivalayams are also functioning as significant administrative units, staffed by government-appointed officials, ensuring effective delivery of public services and acting as a critical interface between the government and the rural population [3].

This study employs a descriptive, quantitative research design in examining the social characteristics, attitudes, level of participation, and concerns of women in decision-making in local government. Stratified sampling determines constituency voters, and purposive sampling determines women representatives. Data are collected using closed-ended questions with structured schedules and are analyzed using SPSS software for objective statistical analysis.

It has two different samples: 30 women representatives and 50 voters. The women representatives were predominantly between the age group of 31–40 years, with no respondents aged below 25 years. Caste-wise, the respondents were highly diverse, with BC and other castes being the largest, and the ST category being the smallest. Leadership positions were also diverse, with the majority of respondents holding supporting positions, whereas few respondents holding leadership positions were key ones. Education-wise, the group was predominantly middle school or lower, with no degree-holders being among the respondents. The second sample of 50 voters was highly diverse in terms of age, with a slight bias towards the younger side, and was evenly divided by gender. SC respondents were the largest caste group, followed by BC and other castes. Agriculture was the largest occupation, and the sample was illiterate, with a majority being illiterates with primary education. Income levels were also primarily middle-income levels, with the majority of the respondents earning between ₹2,00,000 and ₹3,00,000 per year. Overall, the combined samples exhibit diverse socio-economic, educational, and caste backgrounds, indicating a representative sample of the study population.

Results

➤ Correlation Test

Table 1: Societal Norms and Decision-Making Ability

		Societal Norms	Decision-making Ability
Societal Norms	Pearson Correlation	1	-.317*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.041
	N	30	30
Decision-making Ability	Pearson Correlation	-.317*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.041	
	N	30	30
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).			

The value of $p = 0.041$ is also below the traditional cut-off of $p = 0.05$ and therefore determines the statistical significance of the relationship, i.e., that social norms significantly and negatively affect the decision-making capacity of women in local government.

Table 2: Decision-making Ability and Lack of Adequate Support

		Decision-making Ability	Lack of Adequate Support
Decision-making Ability	Pearson Correlation	1	-.564*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.036
	N	30	30
Lack of Adequate Support	Pearson Correlation	-.564*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.036	
	N	30	30
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)			

The negative association between poor support and poor decision-making is a statistically significant association as per the p-value ($p = 0.036$). i.e., poor support is significantly associated with poor decision-making ability in females in local politics.

➤ Independent t Test

Table 3: Difference in Attitudes between Genders Towards Women Leaders

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				
		F	Sig.	T	Df	Significance		Mean Difference
						One-sided p	Two-sided p	
Attitude Towards Women's Leadership	Equal variances assumed	.314	.563	2.380	48	.011	.021	2.16000
	Equal variances not assumed			2.380	47.725	.011	.021	2.16000

The following table indicates Levene's Test yielded a non-significant 0.314 F-value and consequently indicates homogeneity of the variances. The t-test calculation provides us a t-value of 2.380 on 48 degrees of freedom, while that of its p-value is up to 0.021 and hence less than the conventional alpha level of 0.05. The resulting statistics indicate gender differences in attitudes become significant.

Discussion

From the correlation test between societal norms and decision-making ability, the data indicate that social norms negatively affect the ability of women in local politics to make independent choices with a moderate strength of -0.317. It implies that when restrictive social norms are on the rise, the capacity of women to make autonomous decisions tends to decline. And from the correlation test between lack of adequate support and decision making, a strong and moderate inverse relationship exists between decision-making opportunities and lack of adequate support ($r = -0.564$). When support levels decline from family units and community organizations, and political institutions, women face substantial limitations in their self-governing choices.

From an independent t test, gender creates a meaningful distinction in how participants viewed women leaders with $t = 2.380$ and $df = 48$ and $p = 0.021$. This shows that gender significantly forms how people view female leadership positions. The analysis met the prerequisite of equal variances because Levene's test yielded $F = 0.314$ with $p > 0.05$. Thus, conventional gender expectations that shape public attitudes toward women leaders, leading to decreased perception of women in leadership roles.

For enabling women's participation in rural local government, a multi-stakeholder strategy involving families, communities, government, and political parties is required. Family support and a gender-sensitive mindset can encourage women to engage in decision-making with confidence. Community leaders and local institutions must recognize women's leadership potential and help remove traditional gender biases. Government-organized awareness generation, mentoring, and capacity-building training can enable women with skills and knowledge to perform well in Panchayat Raj Institutions. Political parties must also ensure active participation by issuing reserved tickets, leadership training, campaign support, and safeguarding against political exclusion. Through such collective effort, a more empowering and inclusive climate can be created for women in rural local government.

Conclusion

The study findings confirm that although constitutional provisions have enhanced women's quantitative representation in local government, their qualitative participation is still limited by social norms, absence of support, and gendered perceptions. Women members are greatly hindered from exercising autonomy and contributing to the decision-making process by deeply ingrained patriarchal tendencies, inadequate institutional and family support, and low levels of education. Statistical data in the study prove that there is a strong, negative correlation between the ability to decide and not having support or being accepted in society. Solving these issues necessitates a multi-stakeholder response: families need to promote values that are gender-inclusive; communities and institutions need to actively identify and support women's leadership; the government needs to invest in long-term awareness and capacity-building; and political parties need to transcend tokenism to provide substantive opportunities for women. Only with such a collective and encompassing effort can local government be properly representative, allowing women to not only take part, but lead significantly in rural political realms.

Acknowledgement

I would like to put on record my heartfelt gratitude to my guide and dissertation supervisor, Dr. P. Ramakrishna Reddy, for his valuable guidance, encouragement, and support in research work. I am heartily thankful to the Bukkarayasamudram Gram Panchayat for their support and cooperation in the fieldwork. I also put on record my gratitude to Dr. Babu G, Associate Dean of Research and Development, Central University of Andhra Pradesh, for his supportive hand. My heartfelt gratitude to the Hon'ble Vice Chancellor, the Dean, the Head of the Department of Political Science, and the faculty of the Central University of Andhra Pradesh for their continuous encouragement and academic support.

Authors' Biography

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