

WOMEN AS PROXIES IN INDIAN LOCAL GOVERNMENT: IMPACT ON DEMOCRATIC REPRESENTATION, GENDER EQUALITY AND EFFECTIVE GOVERNANCE

Abstract

The practice of "Women as Proxies" in Indian local government, where elected women representatives delegate their roles and responsibilities to male family members, has significant implications for local governance, democratic representation, and gender equality. Despite affirmative action policies, women's underrepresentation in politics persists in India. The reservation of seats for women in local government institutions was intended to enhance gender representation and promote women's participation in political decision-making. However, the emergence of proxy representation raises concerns about the authenticity of women's involvement. The study seeks to bridge the gap between policy intent and actual ground-level practices, examining the practical implementation of reservation policies and the influence of proxy representation on decision-making, women's interests, accountability, policy outcomes, and services in local governance.

Through a mixed-methods approach, the study reviews existing literature, conducts qualitative interviews, group discussions, and quantitative analysis of voting trends and policy outcomes. By investigating the phenomenon from multiple angles, the research aims to provide comprehensive insights into the complex dynamics of proxy representation in Indian local government. The study also explores strategies to promote genuine representation of women in local governance, offering valuable recommendations for policymakers, stakeholders, and advocates fostering inclusive decision-making processes and equitable governance systems.

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This research contributes to the ongoing discourse on women's political participation and its impact on local governance. By delving into the implications of proxy representation, the study highlights the challenges that hinder the empowerment of elected women representatives. Moreover, the findings shed light on the need for effective strategies to ensure that women's voices are heard and respected in the decision-making processes of local governments. Ultimately, the research aims to contribute to the advancement of gender equality, democratic representation, and effective local governance practices in India.

Keywords: Democratic representation; Gender equality; Effective governance; Proxy representation

I. INTRODUCTION

India is the world's largest democracy, and gender has been a significant issue in Indian politics. Despite constitutional guarantees and affirmative action policies, women are underrepresented in politics, and gender inequality persists. In India, the reservation of seats for women in local government institutions, as mandated by the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts of 1992, was a significant step towards enhancing gender representation and promoting women's participation in political decision-making. The objective behind these reservations was to empower women, enable their meaningful engagement in governance, and address gender disparities in the country. However, the implementation of these quotas has given rise to a complex phenomenon known as "proxy representation," it refers to a scenario where women elected to local government positions ostensibly hold power, but in reality, their roles and responsibilities are delegated to male family members. Despite the intent of the reservation policy to empower women, this practice effectively reduces women representatives to symbolic placeholders, while decisions are actually made by others, typically men.

The gradual implementation of women's reservation in local government began with reserving one-third of seats, and in some states, this increased to 50%. Although this policy improved women's representation, it becomes ineffective when women are treated like "puppets" by male family members. In certain cases, women in rural areas, even if educated, act as proxies for male-dominated members. In places like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, husbands replace wives as panchayat heads, known as 'Pradhan Pati'. In these scenarios, husbands make decisions, attend meetings, and speak for their wives. Some bizarre instances show male dominance, like husbands' names being highlighted on campaign banners more than their wives', even though the wives are the candidates. These practices underscore unfortunate gender inequalities where women's achievements are overshadowed or attributed to their husbands.

The topic of studying "Women as Proxies in Indian Local Government: Impact on Democratic Representation, Gender Equality and Local Governance" is of great significance due to its relevance to gender equality, democracy, and effective governance. The relevance of this study is rooted in the larger context of gender equality and democratic representation. Despite efforts to increase women's participation in politics through reservation policies, it's essential to understand whether these policies are leading to meaningful representation and decision-making power for women. The study focuses on the practical implementation of these policies at the ground level, where women's roles might be taken over by others, raising questions about the authenticity of their involvement. This research seeks to address the gap between policy intent and actual ground-level practices, offering insights that can contribute to enhancing women's meaningful participation and decision-making influence in Indian local government, particularly in the context of Ghaziabad District.

Prior research in Indian local government focused on women's challenges and proxy representation, where others act for elected women officials. Yet, understanding the full impact on local governance is lacking. Our study investigates proxy representation effects on decision-making, women's interests, accountability, policy outcomes, services, and overall governance. It examines if proxy representation truly limits women's influence in shaping policies and community needs.

Furthermore, this study seeks to identify strategies to promote genuine representation of women in local governance. By exploring best practices, policy interventions, and institutional reforms, we aspire to pave the way for eradicating proxy representation in local governments. Ultimately, the findings and recommendations derived from this study can serve as a valuable resource for policymakers, stakeholders, and advocates in fostering inclusive decision-making processes and creating more effective and equitable local governance systems.

Our research will use a thorough mixed-methods approach. First, we'll review existing literature to understand proxy representation, placing it in the context of gender, politics, and governance. Then, we'll use qualitative methods like interviews and group discussions to learn from women representatives and their male proxies. Additionally, we'll analyze quantitative data like voting trends and policy results. This combined approach will give a deeper insight into how proxy representation affects local governance.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

- 1. J.S Mill (1869), the Subjection of Women.** Written by John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor Mill, is a significant work in the history of feminism and women's rights. Published in 1869, this essay argues passionately for the equal rights and status of women in society. John Stuart Mill, a philosopher and political economist, collaborated closely with his wife Harriet Taylor Mill on this work, drawing from her insights and experiences as well. "The Subjection of Women" not only criticizes the legal and societal norms of the time but also proposes specific changes to achieve gender equality. The authors advocate for equal access to education for women, opportunities for employment, and the right to participate in political decision-making. They contend that the liberation of women would not only benefit women themselves but also society as a whole, fostering progress and individual development.
- 2. Simone de Beauvoir (1949), The Second Sex.** Stands as a seminal work in feminist literature. In this groundbreaking text, de Beauvoir undertakes a comprehensive exploration of women's place in society, dissecting the historical, philosophical, and societal forces that have shaped women's identities and experiences. The book delves into the concept of "otherness" imposed upon women by a male-dominated world and challenges the essentialist notions that have confined them to passive roles. "The Second Sex" critiques the patriarchal structures that have perpetuated gender inequality. De Beauvoir argues that women must break free from societal molds and assumptions to claim their agency and subjectivity. Her work resonates across generations and remains relevant for its exploration of gender roles, sexuality, and the search for women's true selfhood.
- 3. Hanna Pitkin (1967), the Concept of Representation.** An American political theorist is known for her work on the concept of representation. She developed the idea of symbolic representation, which emphasizes the role of elected officials as symbols of the people they represent. Her influential book "The Concept of Representation" explores different dimensions of representation and the complexities involved. She argues that representation in principle implies the "making present" what is not, as well as an "acting for." The representative should be responsive to the represented. At the same time, a

representative cannot be that when it purely executes orders or demands. He or she is not a “mere instrument” (Pitkin, 1967, p. 126) or servant, but the represented should be present in the representative. Thus, the much-studied distinction between representatives being “trustees” or “delegates” is somewhat irrelevant. A representative, by definition, should be both.

4. **Phillips A. (1995). The Politics of Presence:** Political representation of gender, ethnicity, and race. A prominent political theorist who has contributed significantly to the field of political representation. In her works, such as "The Politics of Presence: The Political Representation of Gender, Ethnicity, and Race," Phillips discusses the challenges and possibilities of achieving substantive representation for marginalized groups, including women. She examines the structural barriers and biases that hinder effective representation and explores ways to enhance the quality of representation, such as inclusive policy-making processes and empowering marginalized groups within political systems. Overall, Anne Phillips' theory of representation highlights the importance of going beyond mere symbolic representation and emphasizes the need for representatives to actively engage with and advocate for the interests and concerns of marginalized groups, thereby promoting more inclusive and substantive democratic governance.
5. **A Literature Review of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Act 1992 in India:** In India, women's reservation in politics is implemented primarily at the local government level, specifically in Panchayats (rural local bodies) and Municipalities (urban local bodies). However, at the central and state government levels, there is no specific provision for women's reservation and a women's reservation bill is still pending which was first introduced in the Parliament in 1996, and several subsequent attempts were made to pass it. In 1992, the Indian government passed the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, which aimed to decentralize power and promote local self-governance through Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and urban local bodies. The 73rd Amendment introduced a provision for reserving one-third of the seats for women in PRIs, including Gram Panchayats (village-level), Panchayat Samitis (block-level), and Zilla Parishads (district-level). Similarly, the 74th Amendment mandated the reservation of one-third of seats for women in urban local bodies, including Municipal Corporations, Municipal Councils, and Nagar Panchayats. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts, passed by the Parliament of India in 1992, are landmark amendments that brought about significant changes in the governance structure at the grassroots level. These amendments aimed to decentralize power and empower local self-government bodies, known as Panchayats (in rural areas) and Municipalities (in urban areas), to facilitate participatory democracy and enhance socio-economic development across the country. This literature review is based on an extensive search of academic journals, research papers, books, and other relevant sources that discuss the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts. The review aims to summarize and analyze the key findings, debates, and impacts of these amendments on India's governance and rural-urban dynamics.

Key Themes and Findings:

- **Decentralization and Empowerment:** The primary objective of the 73rd and 74th Amendment Acts was to decentralize governance and empower local

institutions. Studies have highlighted the importance of devolving powers, functions, and finances to Panchayats and Municipalities to make them more effective and accountable in addressing local issues.

- **Reservation of Seats:** One of the notable features of the amendments is the reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and women in Panchayats and Municipalities. Researchers have analyzed the impact of these reservations on political representation and the socioeconomic development of marginalized communities.
- **Financial Devolution:** The literature emphasizes the need for adequate financial devolution to local bodies to ensure their autonomy and functional capabilities. Studies have evaluated the effectiveness of financial transfers from the state and central governments to Panchayats and Municipalities and how it influences their development initiatives.
- **Role of Women in Local Governance:** The 73rd and 74th Amendments aimed to increase women's participation in local governance. Research has explored the challenges and opportunities faced by women representatives in Panchayats and Municipalities and the transformative potential of their inclusion in decision-making processes.
- **Participatory Democracy and Social Inclusion:** The amendments sought to promote participatory democracy and involve citizens in the decision-making process. Scholars have investigated the extent of citizen engagement in local governance and its impact on social inclusion and equitable development.
- **Challenges and Implementation Issues:** Several studies have examined the challenges faced during the implementation of the 73rd and 74th Amendments, including administrative capacity, financial constraints, political resistance, and bureaucratic hurdles.

The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts have been critical in reshaping India's governance structure and promoting grassroots democracy. Despite challenges, these amendments have provided opportunities for social inclusion, women's empowerment, and local development. However, there is a need for continuous research and policy adjustments to address implementation issues and maximize the potential of decentralized governance in India.

6. **Jharta (1996) in her book "Women and Politics,** examines the role and impact of family and education on women's participation in politics in the state of Himachal Pradesh. She considers these two factors as major determinants of women's political involvement, as they can both boost and hinder their participation. Jharta's study explores how family and education influence the nature and scope of women's political engagement and how these variables affect the level of their participation. She argues that the traditional value system, which promotes gender inequality and places women in subordinate roles, needs to be replaced.

According to the author, women's participation in politics goes beyond merely mobilizing power to solve their own problems. It also involves incorporating women's perspectives into policy-making processes, as these policies have a significant impact on society as a whole. She emphasizes that the issue of women's participation in politics cannot be viewed in isolation from the overall status of women in society. Socio-cultural practices play a crucial role in the development and empowerment of women in this domain.

Overall, the book advocates for greater gender equality and the inclusion of women's voices in political decision-making processes to challenge the male-dominated patriarchal politico-cultural structure prevailing in society.

7. **Goel (2001) in his book "Good Governance: an Integral Approach"** discusses the concept of good governance from a broad perspective. The introductory part of the book delves into the meaning and scope of good governance. Part II focuses on people's participation, while Part III addresses women's empowerment. The issues of women's empowerment are particularly significant as they make up 50 per cent of the population. The book highlights the need to treat women on an equal footing and recognize their valuable contributions to society. Slowly, there is a growing realization of the importance of empowering women and acknowledging their role in various spheres of life.
8. **B.S. Baviskar (2003), Impact of Women's Participation in Local Governance in Rural India** highlights that the participation of women in panchayat work has led to empowerment, although the degree of empowerment varies across regions and situations. When a woman actively engages in panchayat affairs, participates in decision-making, and effectively interacts with external agencies to benefit the community, she experiences almost full empowerment. On the other hand, if a woman remains confined to her house, dependent on her husband who acts as the primary decision-maker, her empowerment is nonexistent. There are varying degrees of empowerment between these two extremes. For instance, a woman who steps out of her house visits the panchayat office, and sits alongside men and women, even if she remains silent during meetings, is taking initial steps towards empowerment. Along with the gains and achievements of women in local government through reservation, he also focuses on the obstacles in the way of their progress so that we can identify the difficulties women are facing to strengthen democracy at the grassroots level.
9. **Omvedt, G. (2005). Women in Governance in South Asia**, despite having powerful women leaders, overall political participation by women in South Asia remains low. Socio-cultural patterns and the competitive nature of politics contribute to the obstacles faced by women in attaining equal participation. This article explores women empowerment initiatives such as community management, local governance, and reservations. It also analyzes women's representation in parliamentary bodies and advocates for the consideration of effective forms of reservations, rather than abandoning quotas. Additionally, increasing women's representation in bureaucracy and within political party structures is necessary.

10. Rai, P. (2013). Political Representation and Empowerment: Women in Local Government Institutions in Bihar, India The study aimed to investigate the impact of increasing women's numerical representation in political decision-making through gender quotas on women's political empowerment. It developed a theoretical perspective on the effects of gender quotas and identified facilitating and restraining factors for women's entry and participation in politics. The impact was evaluated using nine concepts, including political knowledge, interest, participation, trust, contacts, protests, gender role attitude, public projects, and confidence. The findings revealed positive effects on political knowledge, interest, and confidence, but limitations in areas like political participation, trust in political parties, and political contacts.

The study also highlighted areas where the reservation system seemed to have limitations. While women were eager to learn about participation techniques, there was still a significant gap to be bridged regarding their participation in the decision-making process. The study also found that the gender quota system did not result in increased political trust in political parties, despite women expressing trust in the political system itself. This discrepancy was attributed to the process where political parties were obligated to nominate women due to reservation, which resulted in distrust for the party. Similarly, the gender quota system did not seem to have a positive effect on women's political contacts, indicating that further improvement is needed in this area.

In conclusion, the study's findings suggested that the gender quota system had several positive impacts on women's political empowerment, particularly in terms of increasing their political knowledge, interest, and confidence. However, there were areas where the system showed limitations, such as women's participation in decision-making, political trust in parties, and political contacts. These insights provide valuable information for policymakers and advocates seeking to enhance women's political empowerment through gender quotas and other supportive measures.

11. Ghosh, R., Chakravarti, P., & Mansi, K. (2015). Women's Empowerment and Education: Panchayats and women's Self-help Groups in India highlight that Affirmative action plays a role in increasing the number of women in politics, but it does not guarantee their active participation and effectiveness as elected representatives. Similarly, literacy and education alone are insufficient to empower women. In Mizoram, despite high literacy rates, women are excluded from positions of power, resulting in minimal participation in politics and the Church structure. In West Bengal, affirmative action and organizational support have granted women access to political and economic spaces, but their lack of education limits their ability to exercise power effectively. Merely attending school does not guarantee empowerment, as it fails to challenge societal norms that oppress women. Likewise, economic and political opportunities do not fully empower women, as their earnings are often controlled by men, and women's elected positions tend to reflect male decisions in village councils. Affirmative action in Panchayats (local self-government bodies) and the establishment of self-help groups (SHGs) have increased women's confidence and mobility, but these measures alone are not sufficient.

12. S.K Tripathi (2022) Proxy Participation by Women in Panchayati Raj Institutions, Evidence shows that some women elected through reservation policies act as mouthpieces of their male family members, possibly inflating on-roll women's participation.

Awareness programs and female education are improving women's active involvement. Micro-level data is needed to identify proxy participants. Quantitative data on women's political participation is available, but qualitative data on their decision-making utilization is lacking. Though women's presence has increased, their valuable essence in the system remains to be established. Data on women's sensitization and rights usage is missing. Efforts are needed to assess women's performance in debates, legislation, and democratic processes.

- 13. Saumya Jyotsna (2022), women in local politics in Bihar, India, being rendered puppets by their husbands,** In 2022, a Bihar-based freelance journalist and member of 101 Reporters, a pan-India grassroots network of reporters, highlighted the issue of proxy representation. This issue affects women elected to positions like ward councillors and panchayat members in local self-governance bodies. Despite their election, these women are unable to perform their roles due to male family members taking over their responsibilities. In 2006, the Bihar government introduced a 50% reservation for women in panchayats to boost their participation. However, the reservation hasn't translated into real power. In cases like the Muzaffarpur Municipal Corporation, female councillors lack authority while husbands make decisions, reducing elected women to rubber stamps. Specific instances are cited, like husbands openly claiming to be in charge and dominating their wives' roles. While some women representatives like Councilor Ranju Sinha are effective, lack of education, awareness, and confidence hinders many. Education and confidence-building are considered key to change. However, most female representatives lack education and often stand for elections under family pressure. Government officials declined to comment, reflecting hesitancy to address the issue. The article exposes the predicament of women who, despite being elected, struggle to assert their rights in Bihar's male-dominated political landscape.

- 14. Uttar Pradesh-based Mundona Rural Development Foundation:** A petition was filed against the influence of male members hindering active participation of elected women in panchayat raj institutions. The organization's lawyer, Swati Jindal, expressed frustration that constitutional provisions for women's reservation in local bodies are undermined by men taking control. Proxy selection of panchayat pradhans and male manipulation of elected women were noted. The Supreme Court acknowledged the issue but stated it's not their jurisdiction to issue orders; it's an executive matter. The court suggested the Panchayat Raj Ministry address the petitioner's concerns and consider better mechanisms for implementing women's reservation.

Previous research in Indian local government has primarily explored the challenges faced by women and the factors contributing to their difficulties in this domain. Additionally, studies have delved into the concept of proxy representation, wherein individuals act as representatives on behalf of elected women officials. However, there remains a critical gap in understanding the full implications of proxy representation on local governance. The questions of women's true political participation, the extent of their influence in decision-making, and the broader impact on governance and community development demand further investigation.

To address this research gap, our study aims to examine the effects of proxy representation on crucial aspects of local governance. Specifically, we will focus on how

decision-making processes are influenced, the representation of women's interests, the level of accountability observed, the outcomes of policies, service delivery, and overall governance within local government contexts. It aims to shed light on the authenticity of women's political involvement, exploring whether proxy representation undermines their actual influence in shaping policies and addressing community needs.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

I used a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods. I tried to capture both the breadth and depth of the topic impact of proxy representation of women on Indian local governance.

- 1. Primary Data:** Conducted surveys and questionnaires among elected women representatives, community members, and local government officials. Conducted semi-structured interviews with elected women representatives, community leaders, and policymakers to understand their experiences, perspectives, and challenges related to proxy representation and its effects on governance processes. Organized focus group discussions, direct observations of local government meetings, community gatherings, and interactions between elected representatives and their constituents to observe the role of proxies in the decision-making process. Reviewed official documents, government reports, and policy documents related to local governance.
- 2. Secondary Data:** Reviewed scholarly articles and research studies published in academic journals that focus on women's political representation, local governance, and proxy representation in India. Consulted reports published by government agencies, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Examined news articles, media reports, and editorials that highlight issues related to proxy representation and its effects on Indian local government.

IV. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results of the research shed light on the multifaceted implications of the practice of "Women as Proxies" in Indian local government, offering insights into its impact on democratic representation, gender equality, and effective governance.

- 1. Democratic Representation:** The study revealed a concerning pattern where women elected to local government positions are often relegated to symbolic placeholders, with their roles and decision-making authority being taken over by male family members. This phenomenon compromises the authenticity of democratic representation, as women's voices are overshadowed by proxy decision-makers. The findings suggest that proxy representation undermines the principles of participatory democracy and dilutes the genuine representation of women in local governance structures.
- 2. Gender Equality:** The research highlighted the paradoxical nature of proxy representation in the context of gender equality efforts. While reservation policies were designed to empower women and enhance their participation, the practice of proxies perpetuates traditional gender norms and stereotypes. The study found that proxy representatives often reinforce patriarchal norms, which not only hinders women's

political agency but also contributes to the perpetuation of gender inequality within political spheres. This challenges the intent of reservation policies and highlights the need for more comprehensive approaches to addressing gender disparities.

- 3. Effective Governance:** The analysis indicated that proxy representation has significant repercussions on effective governance. Proxy representatives are often unequipped to actively participate in decision-making processes, leading to a lack of understanding of community needs and priorities. This deficiency can hinder the formulation and implementation of effective policies that cater to the diverse requirements of the community. Consequently, the quality of governance may suffer due to the limited engagement of proxy representatives who lack the necessary knowledge and commitment to promote community welfare.

Overall, the research demonstrates that the practice of "Women as Proxies" has complex and far-reaching consequences that extend beyond mere representation. It challenges the principles of democratic governance, undermines efforts towards gender equality, and may hinder effective governance practices at the local level. The findings underscore the importance of addressing this issue holistically, by not only ensuring the representation of women but also creating an enabling environment that empowers elected women representatives to actively and meaningfully engage in decision-making processes.

The research concludes that meaningful progress in addressing the challenges of proxy representation requires policy interventions, awareness campaigns, and capacity-building initiatives. These efforts should aim to enhance the role and agency of elected women representatives, thereby contributing to the authenticity of democratic representation, the advancement of gender equality, and the overall effectiveness of local governance structures.

V. CONCLUSION

The study on "Women as Proxies in Indian Local Government: Impact on Democratic Representation, Gender Equality, and Effective Governance" illuminates the intricate dynamics surrounding proxy representation and its implications. The research underscores that the practice of women serving as proxies for elected positions hinders the core principles of democratic representation, perpetuates gender inequalities, and poses challenges to effective governance.

The analysis of proxy representation's impact on democratic representation reveals that the practice subverts the authenticity of elected positions, leading to a disconnection between elected officials and their constituents. This compromises the fundamental tenets of participatory democracy and raises concerns about the transparency and accountability of decision-making processes. Moreover, proxy representation emerges as a barrier to achieving gender equality within political spheres. Despite reservation policies designed to empower women, proxy representatives often reinforce traditional gender norms and stereotypes, limiting the potential for meaningful engagement and leadership by women. This underscores the need for policy interventions that not only ensure representation but also create an environment conducive to women's active participation.

Effective governance is also hindered by proxy representation, as proxy representatives may lack the knowledge, commitment, and understanding required to make informed decisions that serve community interests. This gap in engagement undermines the efficacy of governance mechanisms, leading to potentially suboptimal policy outcomes.

VI. FUTUR RESEARCH NEEDS

The exploration of "Women as Proxies" in Indian local government opens avenues for further research to address the complexities of this practice and its implications. Future studies could delve deeper into specific regions or districts to capture nuances and variations in proxy representation dynamics. Investigating the influence of proxy representation on policy outcomes, community services, and development projects could provide a comprehensive understanding of its far-reaching consequences.

Furthermore, exploring strategies to mitigate proxy representation's negative impact and promote genuine representation is crucial. Investigating the effectiveness of capacity-building initiatives, awareness campaigns, and legal reforms in enhancing the role of elected women representatives can guide policy recommendations and interventions.

The role of local culture, societal norms, and the role of political parties in perpetuating proxy representation requires further investigation. Examining the role of men who act as proxies and their motivations, as well as the views of women who are represented by proxies, can provide a well-rounded understanding of the issue.

In conclusion, the study sheds light on the need for concerted efforts to address proxy representation's implications on democratic representation, gender equality, and effective governance. Moving forward, research and policy action should be guided by a holistic approach that empowers elected women representatives, challenges traditional norms, and fosters inclusive governance mechanisms to create a more equitable and representative political landscape in India.

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