



Participation and Leadership of Women in Local Self-Government Institutions in Karnataka

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Abstract

This research paper analyzes the role of women's leadership and participation in the administration of Karnataka's local self-government. The paper highlights the impact of constitutional provisions, reservation policies in Karnataka, and leadership initiatives in the decision-making process. Involvement in community-based activities will help the growth of leadership qualities in women representatives. Academic studies and recent developments in the research area highlight women's participation at the grassroots level. This paper refers to the achievements, challenges, and prospects of women's leadership in local self-government. The overall objective is to understand how women are reshaping grassroots-level democracy and contributing to the social and economic development of Karnataka.

Key Words: Leadership, Women, Local Self-Government, Governance, Representation, Economic, Participation, Election, and Empowerment

Introduction

Local self-government in India, particularly through Panchayat Raj institutions and urban local bodies, is established to facilitate political empowerment, inclusive governance, and decentralized decision-making. In Karnataka, like other states in India, local governance plays an important role in implementing welfare schemes for the poor and ensuring community development. Women participation in the governance will help the development of the state. The 73rd and 74th constitutional amendment acts ushered in a new era by institutionalizing democratic decentralization at the local level. Reserved seats for women in rural and urban local bodies: these reforms significantly expanded the opportunities in political space for women in grassroots-level administration.

The main theme of this research paper is women's **leadership** in this local self-government structure. How women can participate in the decision-making process, lead community initiatives, and develop their leadership capabilities that transcend traditional social roles

Legal and constitutional framework

The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 provided reservation of seats for women in Panchayat Raj institutions at all three levels: Gram Panchayat at the village level, Taluka Panchayat at the intermediate level, and Zilla Panchayat at the district level. It provides that not less than one-third of all seats are reserved for women and also includes the chairperson of local-level institutions. Karnataka state has increased its quota of seats by 50% in line with the broader push for gender parity in governance structures.

The 74th Amendment also strengthens opportunities for women to participate in urban local governance through compulsory reservation. Also, the focus of this research paper is primarily on rural governance under the panchayat raj system.

Women's Representation in Local Government in Karnataka

Overview

The representation of women in the Karnataka state local government is much more than in other states. According to official Panchayat Raj institution membership data, women members constitute about 42.9% of the total numbers across the three tiers of Panchayat Raj institutions in the state.

This representation reflects that the Gram Panchayat has a substantial number of women members, and also the Taluka and Zilla Panchayats are showing strong female participation, though slightly lower than at the village level.

Overall, Karnataka figures align with national analyzes trends, indicating that the participation of local government in exceeding the minimum quota exists as per law. As per national data, the percentage of elected women representatives in local government in India is 44.4%. These statistics show that India is ahead of many other developed nations.

Beyond numbers: Meaningful participation

Along with quantitative representation, there is also a very important thing: qualitative representation. So the meaningful participation goes beyond mere numbers. Active engagement in decision-making, agenda-setting, and involvement in the administrative process determines the quality of women's leadership and its impact at the grassroots level.

Women's Participation in Decision Making

Institutional decision process

Every local-government frequently holds regular meetings, such as Gram Sabha and Gram Panchayat council meetings, to make plans, deliberate, and implement various development activities at the village level. Decisions in these forums influence local infrastructure, welfare programs, resource allocation, and social priorities.

Various studies show that women elected representatives are increasingly involved in the following decision-making spaces actively, such as sanitation, women's safety, health education, and rural welfare programs. This shift has made changing community norms and recognizing the competence of women leaders in addressing various community issues.

A special initiative started by the Karnataka State Government is the women's Gram Sabha, which provides separate platforms for women to discuss priorities and influence the local governance decision-making process. This forum is designed to ensure women's active involvement in key important development issues like health services, sanitation, and women's safety.

Policy and Planning

Women leaders at the local level always prioritize policies that directly impact family welfare and community health. Research from some other context has shown that women's leadership in local governance always tends to strengthen public investment in education, sanitation, clean drinking water supply, nutritious food, and community development plans. These priorities reflect a gender-informed perspective on development and complement conventional governance agendas.

Leadership in Local Development Activities

Government Roles and Responsibilities

In Karnataka, women in local government are just not symbolic; many representatives are actively involved in implementing various state and central government schemes, overseeing community infrastructure projects, and managing various social welfare programs. Their contribution includes supervising a sanitation drive conducted at rural areas and developing public awareness among Village Council members and rural people by educating them. Implementing various health awareness programs and safety measures for women and managing government funds and community services with greater transparency and accountability

Recent examples from Karnataka illustrate how women are taking on leadership roles in community activities:

Mandya District—women are leading sanitation services at the gram panchayat level, with many women in the district now running sanitation units that involve equipment deployment and cleanliness monitoring. This reflects a strong shift towards women's leadership beyond formal meetings into operational governance and public service delivery.

Hubli Dharwad District—Initiatives like that entrustment of public park maintenance to women self-help groups in Hubli Dharwad. Women's engagement is expanding towards community infrastructure and public space management.

Chamrajnagar District—Women's self-help groups are trained in fish farming under government schemes, which is contributing to local economic development and increasing community livelihoods.

Economic and Social Empowerment Initiatives

Local government witnessed the growth of women's leadership with economic empowerment, as women leaders use their positions to facilitate livelihood initiatives:

Aakka Cafe Model—This program in Bidar promotes economic independence for women Self Help Group members, who are converting into entrepreneurs and community/social leaders.

Skill Training and Employment—Implementing MGNREGA or NRLM effectively, which will provide large-scale employment and skill training to women. Naturally, women's participation increases in the economic activities that will develop their leadership and can change the society's orientation.

Such activities demonstrate how leadership in local governance links political agency with social and economic transformation.

Development of Leadership Qualities

Training and Capacity Building

In local self-government, women have been elected in large numbers. Effective leadership should require skills in governance, public communication, decision-making, conflict resolution, and project management. To develop their skills and capacities, the government and non-governmental organizations initiated various activities and **training modules**.

Sashakt Panchayat Netri Abhiyan: Under this scheme, thousands of elected women representatives have received training aimed at strengthening governance and leadership skills. These programs include interactive learning methods and focus on empowering women to perform their roles independently and with confidence.

Networking and Mentorship

Leadership development also comes from peer networks and a mentorship program. Women leaders are participating in inter-Panchayat meetings and district-level forums, along with workshops organized by various organizations, which help them to share experiences, learn from each other, and build collective leadership capacities among women members.

Women's Self-Help Groups at the bottom level serve as natural forums for peer support and collective action, reinforcing leadership skills through collaborative decision-making and joint community projects.

Challenges to Women's Leadership

Despite significant progress on women's leadership in India, several challenges still remain:

Proxy Leadership and Patriarchal System

Research indicates that society still has a stigma, which is forcing women representatives to face social pressure to act as proxy leaders for their father, husband, brother, or other male relatives. This will undermine their authority and independent decision-making capabilities.

Limited Access to Resources and Power

Women have limited financial resources and a network of power; in such a condition, social inclusiveness was not possible, and an election campaign is also a difficult task for the women leader. These are the major challenges that hinder her from performing her responsibilities as a leader.

Digital and Administrative Barriers

Limited digital literacy among rural women and access to technology hinder women's ability to engage with the governance system effectively; today, governance increasingly relies on digital tools. Improving digital inclusion and developing digital infrastructure are crucial steps towards strengthening women's capabilities in local governance.

Despite these challenges, Karnataka is actively promoting gender-inclusive governance through targeted programs, policy support, and institutional reforms.

Impact and Prospects

The impact of women's leadership in local self-government in Karnataka is observable in several dimensions:

Enhanced Community Participation: Women's participation has helped marginalized voices and helped women leaders foster collective decision-making and community-oriented decision-making.

Emphasis on social welfare—Women's leadership placed greater emphasis on social welfare. They are giving priorities such as sanitation, education, health, and child care increased attention in rural decision-making.

Role Modeling and Social Change— Participation of women in local government and their involvement, inspiring others to participate in public life and governance, which is visible in all parts of the nation.

Looking ahead, leadership development, improved access to resources, and cultural change will strengthen women's role in local governance. Now, a greater number of women take on leadership responsibilities and opt for political careers beyond local government, it mean actively involved in the decision-making process at the top level, drastic changes will occurred in Indian society. If the women's reservation act is implemented effectively at the center and state levels, it will make possible the deeper democratic inclusion of women.

Conclusion

Women's leadership in local self-government in Karnataka represents a transformative shift in grassroots democracy through constitutional mandates, supportive policies, capacity-building efforts, and active community participation. Women are increasingly shaping the new dimension to local governance and socio-economic development.

Although there are challenges remaining, a male-dominated society still underestimates most of the time women's representatives in decision-making, community mobilization, and public administration. There is no inclusive governance structure that empowers women. If there are no opportunities for women to participate independently, she will not expand. If women's role increases in local self-government, it will contribute significantly to equitable development and democratic deepening in Karnataka.

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