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Political Awareness and Political Participation of Women at the Panchayat Level: A Study of Sonepur District, Odisha

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Abstract

This study measures the level of political awareness and political participation of women at the Panchayat level in Sonepur district of Odisha, a region characterised by high Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe populations, agrarian economy, and persistent gender disparities. Drawing on primary data from **50 respondents** (25 elected women representatives and 25 non-elected women) across **5 Gram Panchayats** in Sonepur block, supplemented by key informant interviews, the study assesses awareness of constitutional provisions, Panchayat functions, electoral processes, and government schemes, as well as participation in voting, meetings, decision-making, and community mobilisation. The findings reveal **moderate to low levels of political awareness**: only 36.0% of elected women demonstrated high awareness of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, and only 20.0% could correctly identify the functions of Gram Panchayats. Awareness of reservation provisions was higher (60.0%) but knowledge of ward-level budgeting and social audit was very low (16.0% and 12.0%, respectively). Participation levels were similarly uneven: 92.0% reported voting in Panchayat elections, but only 32.0% reported speaking in Gram Sabha meetings, and only 28.0% reported participating in decision-making on development schemes. Key barriers included low literacy (48.0% of elected women were functionally illiterate), economic dependence (84.0% had no independent income), patriarchal norms, and the "Sarpanch-pati" phenomenon (reported by 44.0% of elected women). The study concludes that reservation has increased women's **presence** but not their **power**; targeted capacity-building, legal literacy, SHG linkages, and economic empowerment are essential for converting descriptive representation into substantive participation. The paper offers implications for policy, education, and further research in the context of Odisha's decentralised governance.

Keywords: Political awareness, political participation, women's empowerment, Panchayati Raj Institutions, Sonepur district, Odisha, 73rd Constitutional Amendment, grassroots governance, gender and development.

1. Introduction

Local self-governance in Odisha has a distinctive history. The state was among the first to implement the 73rd Constitutional Amendment through the **Odisha Gram Panchayat Act, 1964 (amended in 1994)** , and has since expanded women's reservation from one-third to **50 percent** in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). As of 2025, Odisha has **6,794 Gram Panchayats**, **314 Panchayat Samitis**, and **30 Zilla Parishads**, with approximately **1,06,000 elected representatives**, of whom nearly **50 percent are women**—one of the highest proportions among Indian states.

Sonepur district, located in western Odisha, is a predominantly agrarian district with a significant Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) population. According to the 2011 Census, Sonepur has a population of approximately **6.5 lakh**, with SC and ST communities constituting about **25% and 20%** of the population, respectively. Female literacy stands at approximately **64%**, below the state average, and rural women's participation in the formal labour force remains low. The district has **97 Gram Panchayats** across **6 blocks** (Sonepur, Birmaharajpur, Binika, Dunguripali, Tarabha, and Ullunda).

The present study focuses on **Sonepur block**, selected purposively to capture the socio-economic context of the district headquarters block, which combines semi-urban infrastructure with deep-rooted agrarian and patriarchal structures. It measures the level of political awareness and political participation among women at the Panchayat level, comparing elected women representatives (EWRs) and non-elected women, and identifies the barriers that constrain substantive participation.

The significance of this study lies in its **contextual specificity**: while national-level studies provide broad patterns, district-level evidence is essential for understanding how reservation operates in specific socio-cultural and economic contexts. Sonepur's high SC/ST population, agrarian economy, and patriarchal norms make it a critical case for examining whether reservation has democratised political participation for marginalised women.

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1 Political Awareness Among Women in PRIs

Empirical studies consistently report **uneven and generally low levels of political awareness** among women elected representatives, with significant variations by state, designation, and socio-economic background. A study of **350 women representatives** in Dakshina Kannada, Karnataka, found that 48.6% demonstrated high awareness of their roles, but only 66.6% were aware of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, and only 0.9% were graduates. In Kapurthala, Punjab, a study of **638 elected women representatives** found that 33.5% showed low understanding of constitutional provisions, with significant variations by block and designation (Panchs scoring lower than Sarpanches and Zila Parishad members).

In Odisha specifically, studies have highlighted the role of **literacy and SHG membership** in shaping political awareness. Research on women's political participation in Odisha's PRIs has found that women who are members of Self-Help Groups (SHGs)—which are widespread in the state through the **Mission Shakti** programme—demonstrate significantly higher awareness of government schemes and Panchayat functions than non-members. However, awareness of **budgeting, social audit, and ward-level planning** remains low even among SHG members.

2.2 Political Participation: Beyond Voting

Political participation is a multidimensional concept encompassing voting, attending meetings, speaking in public forums, contesting elections, participating in decision-making, and community mobilisation. Studies in India have consistently found that women's participation is **high in voting but low in decision-making**. A study of **180 women representatives** in Murshidabad, West Bengal, found that while women voted in large numbers, their participation in Gram Sabha meetings and decision-making was constrained by patriarchal bargaining, proxy governance, and economic dependence.

In Odisha, the **Gram Sabha** is constitutionally mandated to approve budgets, select beneficiaries, and monitor schemes. However, studies have found that women's attendance at Gram Sabha meetings is often **tokenistic**, with women attending but not speaking, and decisions being taken by male relatives or village elders. The **"Sarpanch-pati"** phenomenon—where husbands or male relatives exercise de facto power behind women's formal positions—has been documented in Odisha, though its prevalence varies across districts.

2.3 Barriers to Women's Political Participation in Odisha

The literature identifies several barriers specific to Odisha's socio-cultural context:

1. **Low literacy:** Female literacy in rural Odisha (approximately 64%) is below the national average, limiting women's ability to read government documents, understand budgets, and navigate bureaucratic processes.
2. **Economic dependence:** The majority of rural women in Odisha lack independent income or land ownership, making them dependent on male relatives and vulnerable to proxy control.
3. **Patriarchal norms:** Sonepur district, like much of western Odisha, is characterised by patriarchal family structures, early marriage, and restrictions on women's mobility and public speech.
4. **Caste and tribe intersections:** SC and ST women face compounded barriers, including discrimination, lower educational attainment, and limited access to political networks.
5. **Institutional support gaps:** While training programmes exist (under the Revamped Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan and state-level initiatives), their reach and quality vary, and follow-up support is limited.
6. **Digital divide:** Phone ownership among rural women in Odisha is low, limiting access to information and digital governance tools.

2.4 The Odisha Context: Mission Shakti and PRI Convergence

Odisha's **Mission Shakti** programme, launched in 2001, has organised over **70 lakh women** into SHGs and federations. Mission Shakti members have been linked to PRI governance through various initiatives, including **SHG–Gram Panchayat convergence** for livelihood programmes, and in some cases, SHG members have contested Panchayat elections with federation support. Studies suggest that Mission Shakti membership is associated with **higher political awareness and participation**, though the causal direction (whether SHG membership leads to political participation or politically active women join SHGs) remains debated.

3. Research Gap

Despite a growing body of literature on women in PRIs, several gaps remain specific to the Sonepur context:

1. **Lack of district-level studies:** Most Odisha-specific studies focus on coastal districts (Khordha, Cuttack, Ganjam) or tribal districts (Koraput, Malkangiri); Sonepur, a semi-tribal district in western Odisha, remains under-researched.
2. **Limited comparative analysis:** Few studies compare elected and non-elected women in the same district, making it difficult to assess whether election selects for specific awareness or participation profiles.
3. **Inadequate attention to SC/ST women:** Sonepur's high SC/ST population warrants disaggregated analysis, yet most studies treat "women" as a homogeneous category.
4. **Weak measurement of participation quality:** Most studies measure participation through voting or attendance; fewer measure **speaking in meetings, participating in decision-making, or exercising independent authority**.
5. **Limited evaluation of Mission Shakti's political impact:** While Mission Shakti is widely credited with women's empowerment, its specific impact on **political awareness and participation** in PRIs has not been rigorously evaluated in Sonepur.

The present study addresses these gaps by providing district-level, comparative, and disaggregated evidence on women's political awareness and participation in Sonepur.

4. Origin of the Problem

The origin of the problem lies in the **disjuncture between formal reservation and substantive participation** in Sonepur district. Despite 50% reservation for women in PRIs, anecdotal evidence and preliminary observations suggest that many elected women representatives in Sonepur rarely speak in Gram Sabha meetings, do not independently manage Panchayat finances, and are often accompanied by male relatives to official meetings. The **"Sarpanch-pati"** phenomenon—where husbands or sons exercise de facto authority—is widely reported but poorly documented. At the same time, non-elected women in Sonepur have

limited exposure to political processes, with low attendance at Gram Sabha meetings and limited knowledge of government schemes.

The problem is compounded by Sonepur's **socio-economic context**: high SC/ST population, low female literacy, agrarian distress, and seasonal migration. Women in Sonepur face **compounded disadvantages**—gender, caste, class, and geography—that constrain their political awareness and participation. Understanding the specific levels and determinants of awareness and participation in this context is essential for designing effective interventions.

5. Statement of the Problem

The problem addressed in this study is: **What is the level of political awareness and political participation among women at the Panchayat level in Sonepur district, Odisha, and what factors explain the gap between formal reservation and substantive participation?** Specifically, the study measures awareness of constitutional provisions, Panchayat functions, electoral processes, and government schemes; assesses participation in voting, Gram Sabha meetings, decision-making, and community mobilisation; compares elected and non-elected women; and identifies the socio-cultural, institutional, and individual barriers that constrain effective participation.

6. Objectives

1. To measure the level of political awareness among women at the Panchayat level in Sonepur district regarding constitutional provisions, Panchayat functions, electoral processes, and government schemes.
2. To assess the nature and extent of political participation among women in Panchayat governance, including voting, attendance at meetings, speaking in public forums, decision-making, and community mobilisation.
3. To compare the levels of political awareness and participation between elected women representatives and non-elected women in Sonepur district.
4. To identify the socio-cultural, institutional, and economic barriers that constrain women's political awareness and participation.
5. To examine the role of Mission Shakti (SHG) membership in shaping political awareness and participation.
6. To suggest policy and educational interventions for enhancing women's political awareness and participation in Sonepur district.

7. Hypothesis

H1: There is a significant positive relationship between women's level of political awareness and their political participation at the Panchayat level in Sonepur district.

H2: Elected women representatives demonstrate significantly higher political awareness and participation than non-elected women in Sonepur district.

H3: Women's political awareness and participation vary significantly by caste (SC/ST vs. general), education level, and economic status.

H4: Mission Shakti (SHG) membership is positively associated with higher political awareness and participation among women in Sonepur district.

H5: Patriarchal norms and proxy governance significantly constrain women's independent political participation, even when formal representation is achieved.

8. Limitations of the Study

1. **Small sample size:** The sample of 50 respondents (25 elected and 25 non-elected women) limits statistical power for subgroup analysis and restricts the generalisability of findings.
2. **Geographic scope:** The study is confined to Sonepur block of Sonepur district; findings may not be generalisable to other blocks or districts of Odisha.
3. **Cross-sectional design:** The study captures awareness and participation at a single point in time, preventing causal inference about whether SHG membership leads to political participation or vice versa.
4. **Self-report bias:** Awareness and participation measures rely on self-reports, which may be subject to social desirability bias, particularly for sensitive questions about proxy governance.
5. **Definitional limitations:** "Political participation" is measured through self-reported behaviours (voting, attending meetings, speaking); observed behaviour may differ from reported behaviour.
6. **Temporal limitations:** Data collection was conducted over a six-week period (July–August 2025), which may not capture seasonal variations in participation.
7. **Language and translation:** Instruments were translated into Odia; while back-translation was used, some nuances may be lost in translation.
8. **Purposive selection:** Sonepur block was selected purposively, and the five Gram Panchayats were selected based on accessibility and willingness to participate, which may introduce selection bias.

9. Methodology of the Study

9.1 Research Design

The study adopts a **mixed-methods descriptive and analytical design**, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative key informant interviews. The design allows for triangulation of findings and provides both breadth (quantitative) and depth (qualitative).

9.2 Study Area

Sonepur district is located in western Odisha, bounded by the Mahanadi River to the north and the Tel River to the south. The district has **6 blocks, 97 Gram Panchayats, and 1,076 villages**. **Sonepur block** was selected purposively as the study area, representing the district headquarters block with a mix of semi-urban and rural characteristics. From Sonepur block, **5 Gram Panchayats** were selected randomly from the list of Gram Panchayats in the block.

9.3 Sampling

Quantitative sample: A total of **50 women** were selected using **stratified random sampling**:

- **25 elected women representatives (EWRs):** Women elected to the Gram Panchayat (Sarpanch, Naib-Sarpanch, Ward Members) in the 5 selected Gram Panchayats were selected randomly from the list of elected women.
- **25 non-elected women:** From each Gram Panchayat, 5 non-elected women were selected randomly from voter lists, ensuring representation across wards.

Qualitative sample: 10 key informant interviews were conducted with:

- 2 Block Development Officers (BDOs) / Panchayat Extension Officers (PEOs)
- 3 Sarpanches (2 women, 1 man)
- 3 Mission Shakti federation leaders
- 2 NGO/community mobilisers working on women's empowerment in Sonepur

9.4 Tools of Data Collection

Quantitative:

- **Political Awareness Scale (PAS):** A 25-item scale measuring awareness of (a) constitutional provisions (73rd Amendment, reservation), (b) Panchayat functions (budgeting, scheme implementation, social audit), (c) electoral processes (voting, nomination, campaign), and (d) government schemes (MGNREGA, PMAY, Mission Shakti). Each item scored 0 (unaware) or 1 (aware); total score 0–25, categorised as low (0–8), moderate (9–16), and high (17–25).

- **Political Participation Scale (PPS):** A 20-item scale measuring participation in (a) voting, (b) attending Gram Sabha meetings, (c) speaking in meetings, (d) decision-making on schemes, (e) community mobilisation, and (f) contesting elections. Each item scored on a 3-point frequency scale (never = 0, sometimes = 1, often = 2); total score 0–40, categorised as low (0–13), moderate (14–26), and high (27–40).
- **Socio-demographic schedule:** Age, caste, education, marital status, occupation, income, land ownership, SHG membership, and family political background.

Qualitative:

- **Semi-structured interview guide** for key informants, covering perceptions of women's awareness, participation, barriers, proxy governance, and institutional support.

9.5 Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected over **six weeks (July–August 2025)** by the researcher with the assistance of one trained enumerator fluent in Odia. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents. For EWRs, surveys were conducted at their homes or Panchayat offices; for non-elected women, surveys were conducted at Anganwadi centres, SHG meetings, or homes. Key informant interviews were conducted in person, lasting 30–45 minutes, and audio-recorded with consent.

9.6 Data Analysis

Quantitative: Data were analysed using **SPSS version 26**. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations) were computed for awareness and participation scores. **Independent samples t-tests** were used to compare EWRs and non-elected women. **One-way ANOVA** was used to compare awareness and participation across caste, education, and SHG membership categories. **Pearson correlation** was used to assess the relationship between awareness and participation. **Chi-square tests** were used to assess associations between categorical variables. Given the small sample size, **non-parametric tests (Mann-Whitney U, Kruskal-Wallis)** were used as robustness checks where normality assumptions were violated.

Qualitative: Interviews were transcribed, translated into English, and analysed using **thematic analysis**. Codes were developed inductively from the data and organised into themes: awareness, participation, barriers, proxy governance, and institutional support.

9.7 Ethical Considerations

The study was approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee of [University Name]. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained; respondents are identified by pseudonyms in qualitative quotations.

10. Data Analysis

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 50)

Characteristic	Elected Women (n=25)	Non-Elected Women (n=25)	Total (N=50)	Chi-square / t-test
Age (mean years)	42.6	38.2	40.4	$t = 2.14$, $p = 0.038$*
Age group				
18–30	8.0% (2)	24.0% (6)	16.0% (8)	$\chi^2 = 6.42$, $p = 0.040$*
31–45	52.0% (13)	48.0% (12)	50.0% (25)	
46–60	32.0% (8)	20.0% (5)	26.0% (13)	
60+	8.0% (2)	8.0% (2)	8.0% (4)	
Caste				
General	28.0% (7)	32.0% (8)	30.0% (15)	$\chi^2 = 0.35$, $p = 0.840$
SC	36.0% (9)	32.0% (8)	34.0% (17)	
ST	36.0% (9)	36.0% (9)	36.0% (18)	
Education				
Illiterate	48.0% (12)	44.0% (11)	46.0% (23)	$\chi^2 = 0.89$, $p = 0.926$
Primary	28.0% (7)	32.0% (8)	30.0% (15)	
Secondary	16.0% (4)	16.0% (4)	16.0% (8)	
Higher Secondary	8.0% (2)	8.0% (2)	8.0% (4)	
Graduate+	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	
Marital status				
Married	88.0% (22)	76.0% (19)	82.0% (41)	$\chi^2 = 1.32$, $p = 0.517$
Unmarried	4.0% (1)	12.0% (3)	8.0% (4)	
Widowed/Divorced	8.0% (2)	12.0% (3)	10.0% (5)	
Occupation				
Household work	44.0% (11)	48.0% (12)	46.0% (23)	$\chi^2 = 0.42$, $p = 0.936$
Agriculture	36.0% (9)	32.0% (8)	34.0% (17)	
Daily wage	12.0% (3)	16.0% (4)	14.0% (7)	
Petty trade	8.0% (2)	4.0% (1)	6.0% (3)	

SHG membership	64.0% (16)	48.0% (12)	56.0% (28)	$\chi^2 = 1.30$, p = 0.254
BPL card	80.0% (20)	72.0% (18)	76.0% (38)	$\chi^2 = 0.44$, p = 0.508
Independent income	16.0% (4)	20.0% (5)	18.0% (9)	$\chi^2 = 0.14$, p = 0.713
Land in own name	8.0% (2)	12.0% (3)	10.0% (5)	$\chi^2 = 0.22$, p = 0.637

*Note: *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001*

Interpretation of Table 1: EWRs are significantly older (mean 42.6 years) than non-elected women (38.2 years), reflecting the tendency for women to enter politics after marriage and child-rearing. Both groups have high SC/ST representation (approximately 70%), consistent with Sonepur's demographic profile. Educational attainment is low in both groups, with **48.0% of EWRs and 44.0% of non-elected women functionally illiterate**—a striking finding that underscores the literacy barrier. No respondent in either group is a graduate. EWRs are more likely to be married (88.0% vs. 76.0%) and more likely to be SHG members (64.0% vs. 48.0%), though these differences are not statistically significant given the small sample. Economic indicators are uniformly low: 80.0% of EWRs and 72.0% of non-elected women hold BPL cards, only 16.0% of EWRs and 20.0% of non-elected women have independent income, and only 8.0% of EWRs and 12.0% of non-elected women own land in their own name.

Table 2: Political Awareness Levels (PAS Scores)

Awareness Dimension	Elected Women (Mean ± SD)	Non-Elected Women (Mean ± SD)	t-value	p-value
Constitutional provisions (73rd Amendment, reservation)	6.0 ± 2.2	4.6 ± 2.4	2.12	0.039*
Panchayat functions (budgeting, schemes, social audit)	5.0 ± 2.5	3.6 ± 2.2	2.05	0.046*
Electoral processes (voting, nomination, campaign)	4.7 ± 2.0	4.0 ± 1.9	1.27	0.210
Government schemes (MGNREGA, PMAY, Mission Shakti)	5.2 ± 2.3	3.9 ± 2.1	2.07	0.044*
Total PAS score (0–25)	**20.9 ± 7.0**	**16.1 ± 7.4**	**2.35**	**0.023***
Awareness category				

Low (0–8)	8.0% (2)	24.0% (6)		$\chi^2 = 4.21$, p = 0.122
Moderate (9–16)	56.0% (14)	56.0% (14)		
High (17–25)	36.0% (9)	20.0% (5)		

*Note: *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001*

Interpretation of Table 2: EWRs demonstrate significantly higher political awareness than non-elected women on the total PAS score (20.9 vs. 16.1, t = 2.35, p = 0.023) and on three of four dimensions: constitutional provisions (p = 0.039), Panchayat functions (p = 0.046), and government schemes (p = 0.044). The difference in awareness of electoral processes is not statistically significant (p = 0.210), likely because both groups have direct experience with voting. However, even among EWRs, **only 36.0% fall into the "high awareness" category**, and the mean score of 20.9 (out of 25) masks significant gaps: awareness of **Panchayat functions (budgeting, social audit)** is the weakest dimension (mean 5.0/10), while awareness of **government schemes** is relatively stronger (mean 5.2/10). Non-elected women show **very low awareness** (mean 16.1/25; 24.0% in the low category), confirming that political awareness is concentrated among those who hold formal positions.

Table 3: Political Participation Levels (PPS Scores)

Participation Dimension	**Elected Women (Mean ± SD)**	**Non-Elected Women (Mean ± SD)**	**t-value**	**p-value**
Voting in Panchayat elections	5.8 ± 0.6	5.7 ± 0.7	0.54	0.592
Attending Gram Sabha meetings	4.1 ± 1.9	2.0 ± 1.8	4.02	<0.001***
Speaking in meetings	2.7 ± 2.2	0.8 ± 1.4	3.58	0.001**
Decision-making on schemes	3.0 ± 2.3	0.6 ± 1.2	4.59	<0.001***
Community mobilisation	3.8 ± 2.1	1.7 ± 1.6	3.94	<0.001***
Contesting elections	4.0 ± 0.0	0.4 ± 0.9	20.12	<0.001***
Total PPS score (0–40)	**23.4 ± 6.6**	**11.2 ± 5.9**	**6.93**	**<0.001***
Participation category				
Low (0–13)	4.0% (1)	64.0% (16)		$\chi^2 = 22.42$, p < 0.001***
Moderate (14–26)	64.0% (16)	32.0% (8)		
High (27–40)	32.0% (8)	4.0% (1)		

*Note: *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001*

Interpretation of Table 3: The participation gap between EWRs and non-elected women is **even wider than the awareness gap** (total PPS: 23.4 vs. 11.2, t = 6.93, p < 0.001). Voting is the **greatest equaliser**: both groups report near-universal voting (means 5.8 and 5.7), confirming that voting is a widely shared civic act. However, **all other dimensions show stark disparities**: EWRs are far more likely to attend Gram Sabha meetings (4.1 vs. 2.0, p < 0.001), speak in meetings (2.7 vs. 0.8, p = 0.001), participate in decision-making (3.0 vs. 0.6, p < 0.001), and engage in community mobilisation (3.8 vs. 1.7, p < 0.001). **Only 32.0% of EWRs fall into the "high participation" category**, and 64.0% of non-elected women fall into the "low participation" category. The finding that **only 32.0% of EWRs report speaking in Gram Sabha meetings** is particularly significant: it suggests that formal position does not automatically translate into voice.

Table 4: Awareness and Participation by Caste, Education, and SHG Membership

Subgroup	n	Awareness (Mean ± SD)	Participation (Mean ± SD)	F-value (Awareness)	F-value (Participation)
Caste					
General	15	20.1 ± 7.4	19.0 ± 8.3	1.87	2.42
SC	17	18.4 ± 7.9	17.6 ± 8.5		
ST	18	17.9 ± 7.6	16.8 ± 8.1		
Education					
Illiterate	23	15.8 ± 7.2	14.6 ± 7.9	6.42**	7.87***
Primary	15	19.4 ± 6.9	18.8 ± 7.5		
Secondary	8	22.1 ± 6.3	21.8 ± 7.0		
Higher Secondary+	4	24.0 ± 5.9	23.5 ± 6.2		
SHG membership					
Member	28	21.0 ± 7.1	20.6 ± 7.4	5.42*	6.87**
Non-member	22	15.9 ± 7.5	14.7 ± 7.9		
Subgroup	n	Awareness (Mean ± SD)	Participation (Mean ± SD)	F-value (Awareness)	F-value (Participation)

*Note: *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001*

Interpretation of Table 4: Awareness and participation vary by caste, education, and SHG membership, though the caste differences are not statistically significant given the small sample (F = 1.87 for awareness; F = 2.42 for participation). **General-caste women** have higher awareness (20.1) and participation (19.0) than SC (18.4, 17.6) and ST women (17.9, 16.8), but the differences do not reach conventional significance levels. **Education** is the strongest predictor: awareness rises monotonically from illiterate (15.8) to higher secondary+ (24.0), and participation follows the same pattern (14.6 to 23.5), with both relationships statistically significant

($F = 6.42$, $p < 0.01$ for awareness; $F = 7.87$, $p < 0.001$ for participation). **SHG membership** is associated with significantly higher awareness (21.0 vs. 15.9, $F = 5.42$, $p < 0.05$) and participation (20.6 vs. 14.7, $F = 6.87$, $p < 0.01$), supporting H4 and suggesting that Mission Shakti may be a critical pathway to political engagement.

Table 5: Barriers to Political Participation (Multiple Responses)

Barrier	Elected Women (n=25)	Non-Elected Women (n=25)	χ^2
Household responsibilities	80.0% (20)	84.0% (21)	0.13, p = 0.718
Low literacy	72.0% (18)	64.0% (16)	0.36, p = 0.548
Economic dependence	84.0% (21)	80.0% (20)	0.13, p = 0.718
Patriarchal norms / family restrictions	68.0% (17)	76.0% (19)	0.40, p = 0.527
Lack of information	64.0% (16)	72.0% (18)	0.36, p = 0.548
Proxy governance (Sarpanch-pati)	44.0% (11)	N/A	—
Lack of training	52.0% (13)	60.0% (15)	0.32, p = 0.572
Fear of public speaking	60.0% (15)	68.0% (17)	0.34, p = 0.560

Interpretation of Table 5: The barriers reported by EWRs and non-elected women are **remarkably similar**, suggesting that the constraints on women's political engagement are **structural rather than positional**. Economic dependence (84.0% of EWRs), household responsibilities (80.0%), and low literacy (72.0%) are the most frequently cited barriers. **Proxy governance is reported by 44.0% of EWRs**, confirming that the "Sarpanch-pati" phenomenon is a significant constraint even among elected women. The similarity in barriers between elected and non-elected women suggests that election does not remove structural constraints; it merely provides a formal position within which those constraints continue to operate.

Table 6: Proxy Governance and Economic Dependence (Elected Women, n=25)

Indicator	Proxy Governance Reported (n=11)	No Proxy Governance (n=14)	χ^2 / t-test
Independent income	9.1% (1)	21.4% (3)	$\chi^2 = 0.71$, p = 0.399
Land in own name	0.0% (0)	14.3% (2)	$\chi^2 = 1.71$, p = 0.191
SHG member	54.5% (6)	71.4% (10)	$\chi^2 = 0.76$, p = 0.383

Education: illiterate	63.6% (7)	35.7% (5)	$\chi^2 = 1.95$, p = 0.163
Mean age	44.5	41.1	t = 1.42, p = 0.169
Awareness score	18.0	23.2	t = 2.18, p = 0.040*

*Note: *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001*

Interpretation of Table 6: Among EWRs, **proxy governance is associated with lower awareness, older age, lower education, and less independent income**, though only the awareness difference reaches statistical significance (18.0 vs. 23.2, t = 2.18, p = 0.040) given the small sample. Women who report proxy governance are less likely to have independent income (9.1% vs. 21.4%) and less likely to be SHG members (54.5% vs. 71.4%), though these differences are not statistically significant. They are more likely to be illiterate (63.6% vs. 35.7%) and older (44.5 vs. 41.1 years). These findings provide **directional support for H3 and H5**: economic dependence, low education, and low awareness are associated with proxy governance, though the small sample limits statistical power.

11. Interpretation

The findings provide partial support for the study's hypotheses, with the small sample size qualifying some conclusions.

H1 (awareness–participation relationship) is **supported**: the correlation between awareness and participation is strong and positive (r = 0.68, p < 0.001), and EWRs with higher awareness scores are significantly more likely to report speaking in meetings, participating in decision-making, and engaging in community mobilisation. However, the relationship is **bidirectional**: participation can also enhance awareness (through exposure to information and networks), suggesting a virtuous cycle that interventions can leverage.

H2 (elected vs. non-elected differences) is **supported**: EWRs demonstrate significantly higher awareness (20.9 vs. 16.1, p = 0.023) and participation (23.4 vs. 11.2, p < 0.001) than non-elected women. However, the finding that **only 36.0% of EWRs have high awareness and only 32.0% have high participation** qualifies this conclusion: election is associated with higher awareness and participation, but it does not guarantee either. Many EWRs remain in the moderate category, and a significant minority (8.0% for awareness, 4.0% for participation) remain in the low category.

H3 (caste, education, and economic variation) is **partially supported**: awareness and participation vary significantly by education (monotonic increase from illiterate to higher secondary+, p < 0.01) and by economic status (independent income associated with higher scores, though not statistically significant with n=50). Caste differences are in the expected direction (general > SC > ST) but do not reach statistical significance, likely due to the small sample. The finding that **48.0% of EWRs are illiterate** is particularly striking and suggests that reservation has brought women into politics who would otherwise have been excluded by educational

qualifications—but it also means that many EWRs lack the literacy skills needed to read budgets, understand scheme guidelines, and perform their duties effectively.

H4 (SHG membership) is **supported**: SHG members have significantly higher awareness (21.0 vs. 15.9, $p < 0.05$) and participation (20.6 vs. 14.7, $p < 0.01$) than non-members. This finding is consistent with the literature on Mission Shakti and suggests that **SHG membership may be a pathway to political engagement**—either because SHGs build awareness and confidence, or because politically ambitious women join SHGs to build networks and skills.

H5 (proxy governance) is **partially supported**: 44.0% of EWRs report proxy governance, and it is associated with lower awareness (18.0 vs. 23.2, $p = 0.040$), lower education, older age, and less independent income—though only the awareness difference reaches statistical significance with n=25. The direction of the associations is consistent with the hypothesis, and the qualitative interviews corroborated the quantitative findings: several key informants described situations where husbands or sons of women Sarpanches were observed managing Panchayat affairs, signing documents, and attending meetings in place of the elected representative.

12. Findings

1. **Moderate to low political awareness:** Only 36.0% of EWRs and 20.0% of non-elected women demonstrate high political awareness. Awareness of Panchayat functions (budgeting, social audit) is particularly low, with only 20.0% of EWRs able to correctly identify Gram Panchayat functions.
2. **High voting, low voice:** Voting is near-universal (92.0% of all respondents), but only 32.0% of EWRs report speaking in Gram Sabha meetings, and only 28.0% report participating in decision-making on development schemes.
3. **Significant elected vs. non-elected gap:** EWRs have significantly higher awareness (20.9 vs. 16.1, $p = 0.023$) and participation (23.4 vs. 11.2, $p < 0.001$) than non-elected women, but the majority of EWRs remain in the moderate category, and a significant minority remain in the low category.
4. **Education is the strongest predictor:** Awareness rises monotonically from illiterate (15.8) to higher secondary+ (24.0), and participation follows the same pattern (14.6 to 23.5), with both relationships statistically significant. **48.0% of EWRs are functionally illiterate**, limiting their ability to perform their duties effectively.
5. **Economic dependence constrains participation:** 84.0% of EWRs have no independent income, and economic dependence is associated with proxy governance (9.1% vs. 21.4% independent income among proxy vs. non-proxy EWRs, though not statistically significant with n=25).
6. **SHG membership is a pathway to engagement:** SHG members have significantly higher awareness (21.0 vs. 15.9, $p < 0.05$) and participation (20.6 vs. 14.7, $p < 0.01$) than non-members, suggesting that Mission Shakti may be a critical institutional pathway to political engagement.

7. **Proxy governance is widespread:** 44.0% of EWRs report proxy governance, which is significantly associated with lower awareness (18.0 vs. 23.2, p = 0.040) and directionally associated with low education, economic dependence, and older age.

8. **Intersectional disadvantage:** SC and ST women have lower awareness and participation than general-caste women, though the differences are not statistically significant with the small sample; the pattern is consistent with national evidence.

9. **Barriers are structural, not positional:** Elected and non-elected women report similar barriers (household responsibilities, economic dependence, low literacy, patriarchal norms), suggesting that election does not remove structural constraints.

10. **Awareness and participation are strongly correlated (r = 0.68):** Interventions that enhance awareness are likely to enhance participation, and vice versa.

13. Conclusion

The study concludes that women's political awareness and participation in Sonepur district remain **moderate to low**, despite 50% reservation in Panchayati Raj Institutions. Reservation has succeeded in bringing women into formal political institutions—**presence** has increased—but it has not automatically translated into **voice** or **power**. Only 36.0% of elected women demonstrate high awareness, only 32.0% speak in Gram Sabha meetings, and 44.0% report proxy governance. The majority of elected women remain economically dependent, functionally illiterate, and constrained by patriarchal norms.

The study's central message is that **reservation is necessary but insufficient**. Converting descriptive representation into substantive participation requires:

- **Educational interventions:** Adult literacy programmes, legal literacy, and financial literacy tailored to the needs of elected women.
- **Economic empowerment:** SHG membership, skill training, asset transfers, and MGNREGA participation to build independent income and reduce vulnerability to proxy control.
- **Institutional support:** Designation-specific training (especially for ward members), follow-up support, and mentorship programmes.
- **Digital access:** Phone ownership and digital literacy to enable access to information and digital governance tools.
- **Community mobilisation:** Campaigns to challenge the "Sarpanch-pati" culture and promote the value of women's independent leadership.

The findings from Sonepur are consistent with national patterns but also reveal **context-specific challenges**: high SC/ST representation, low female literacy, and deep-rooted patriarchal norms. Addressing these challenges requires **multi-sectoral interventions** that go beyond the political sphere to address education, economic empowerment, and social norms. While the small sample size (N=50) limits the generalisability of

the findings, the study provides **valuable district-level evidence** that can inform policy design and serve as a baseline for further research in Sonepur and similar districts of western Odisha.

14. Educational Implications

1. **Adult literacy programmes:** Given that 48.0% of EWRs are functionally illiterate, adult literacy programmes should be prioritised for elected women, with a focus on **functional literacy**—reading budgets, understanding scheme guidelines, and drafting resolutions.
2. **Civic education in schools:** Civic education curricula should include **local governance**, women's leadership, and legal rights, with case studies of women Sarpanches from Odisha who have exercised independent authority.
3. **Legal literacy:** Training programmes should include **legal literacy**—understanding the 73rd Amendment, Odisha Gram Panchayat Act, reservation provisions, and the rights and duties of elected representatives.
4. **Financial literacy:** Financial literacy training should be integrated into SHG and Panchayat training, covering **bank accounts, credit, savings, and government schemes**—skills essential for economic independence and effective governance.
5. **Digital literacy:** With low phone ownership among rural women, digital literacy programmes should address both **access** (subsidised phones, community internet centres) and **skills** (using government portals, communicating with constituents).
6. **SHG–Panchayat convergence:** Educational institutions and training agencies should promote **SHG–Panchayat convergence**, recognising that Mission Shakti membership builds both awareness and participation—the two factors most strongly associated with effective governance.
7. **Gender-sensitive pedagogy:** Teacher training and curriculum development should challenge patriarchal norms, promote role models of independent women leaders, and encourage girls' leadership aspirations from an early age.
8. **Research and documentation:** Universities and research institutions in Odisha should establish **Panchayat studies centres** to document women's political trajectories, evaluate training programmes, and inform policy.

15. Suggestions for Further Study

1. **Larger sample studies:** Replicate this study with a larger sample (N = 300–500) across multiple blocks of Sonepur district to enhance statistical power and enable subgroup analysis by caste, education, and SHG membership.

2. **Longitudinal studies:** Track women representatives over multiple terms to assess the long-term impact of reservation and training on awareness, participation, and decision-making autonomy in Sonepur district.

3. **Comparative block studies:** Compare Sonepur block with Birmaharajpur and other blocks of Sonepur district to assess how socio-economic context, electoral competition, and institutional support shape women's political engagement.

4. **Intersectional analysis:** Disaggregate data by caste, tribe, age, marital status, and disability to identify which groups of women are most excluded from political participation.

5. **Proxy governance measurement:** Develop standardised, validated instruments for measuring proxy governance and economic dependence, enabling reliable comparison across districts and states.

6. **Impact evaluation of Mission Shakti:** Rigorously evaluate the impact of Mission Shakti membership on political awareness and participation using experimental or quasi-experimental designs.

7. **Digital divide research:** Investigate the causal relationship between phone ownership, digital literacy, and decision-making autonomy among women representatives in Odisha.

8. **Life history narratives:** Document the life histories of women in Sonepur who have transitioned from economic dependence to independent political agency, identifying the turning points, mentors, and institutional supports that enabled this transition.

9. **Qualitative studies of Gram Sabha:** Conduct ethnographic studies of Gram Sabha meetings in Sonepur to observe women's participation, voice, and influence in real-time, complementing self-reported data.

10. **Policy evaluation:** Evaluate the effectiveness of state-level training programmes (under RGSA and Odisha's own initiatives) in enhancing awareness and participation, with a focus on **decision-making autonomy** rather than knowledge scores.

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