

Reservation Policy and Women's Participation in Grass-roots Politics: A Study of Panchayati Raj Institutions in Bankura District, West Bengal

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Abstract: The political reservation policy for women in India has been a significant step toward promoting gender equality in governance. This study examines the impact of the reservation policy on women's participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in Bankura District, West Bengal. The study focuses on the level of political engagement, decision-making roles, challenges faced, and socio-economic determinants influencing participation. Data were collected using structured interviews and questionnaires from elected women representatives (EWRs) across selected gram panchayats. The study reveals that while reservation has increased women's numerical presence in local governance, active participation is influenced by socio-economic status, education, social norms, and party support. Policy implications suggest the need for capacity-building programs, awareness campaigns, and institutional support to enhance meaningful participation of women in grassroots politics.

Keywords: Reservation Policy, Women Empowerment, Grass-roots Politics, Panchayati Raj Institutions, Bankura, Political Participation

I. INTRODUCTION

Women's participation in political processes is widely recognized as a fundamental requirement for inclusive governance, democratic deepening, and sustainable development. Active involvement of women in decision-making not only ensures equitable representation but also brings diverse perspectives to policy formulation, particularly in areas such as health, education, sanitation, and social welfare. In India, a major institutional effort to enhance women's political participation was undertaken through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992, which mandated one-third reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). This amendment aimed to correct historical gender imbalances in political representation and to empower women at the grassroots level by providing them with formal access to local governance structures.

West Bengal presents a significant context for examining the outcomes of this reservation policy due to its long history of decentralized governance and active Panchayati Raj system. Within the state, Bankura District stands out as a predominantly rural and socio-economically diverse region characterized by traditional social structures, varying literacy levels, and deep-rooted patriarchal norms. At the same time, the district has witnessed a gradual increase in women's political awareness and participation following the implementation of reservation policies.

However, mere numerical representation does not automatically translate into meaningful participation or empowerment. Several studies have highlighted that women representatives often face socio-cultural barriers, limited autonomy, lack of political experience, and resistance from family members and political parties. In many cases, women's roles remain symbolic, with actual decision-making power exercised by male relatives or party leaders.

Against this background, the present study seeks to examine the impact of the reservation policy on women's participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions in Bankura District. It explores the extent of women's involvement in governance activities, identifies the challenges faced by elected women representatives, and analyzes the socio-economic and political factors influencing their effectiveness in grassroots decision-making processes.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Studies (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004) suggest that political reservation increases women's representation in local governance but does not automatically translate into empowerment unless accompanied by social support and capacity-building.

Research (Beaman et al., 2009) highlights education, income, caste, and community support as major determinants of women's participation in PRIs.

Studies from West Bengal (Banerjee & Sengupta, 2016) emphasize that patriarchal norms, family resistance, and party politics often limit the scope of women's active involvement.

Programs designed to improve leadership skills and governance knowledge significantly increase women's effectiveness in PRIs (Kumar, 2018).

Research in Bankura and other districts of West Bengal indicates a gradual increase in women's political engagement post-reservation, but meaningful participation varies widely across socio-economic backgrounds (Ghosh, 2020).

Objectives of the Study

- To assess the level of women's participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions in Bankura District.
- To examine the socio-economic factors influencing women's political engagement.
- To analyze the challenges faced by elected women representatives in grassroots governance.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of reservation policy in promoting meaningful participation of women.
- To suggest measures for enhancing women's role in local governance.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Study Area: Bankura District, West Bengal, covering 4 selected blocks.

Population: Elected women representatives (EWRs) of gram panchayats.

Sample Size: 100 EWRs selected through stratified random sampling.

Data Collection: Structured interviews, questionnaires, and observation of gram panchayat meetings.

Data Analysis: Quantitative data analyzed using frequency, percentage, and cross-tabulations; qualitative responses analyzed thematically.

IV. DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

This section presents a detailed analysis and interpretation of the data collected from elected women representatives (EWRs) of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in Bankura District, West Bengal. The discussion focuses on socio-demographic characteristics, nature and level of political participation, decision-making roles, challenges encountered, and perceptions regarding the effectiveness of the reservation policy. The findings are interpreted in light of existing literature and the broader objectives of women's political empowerment.

1. Socio-Demographic Profile of Respondents

Understanding the socio-demographic background of women representatives is crucial for assessing their political engagement and effectiveness.

Table 1: Age-wise Distribution of Respondents (n = 100)

Age Group (Years)	Frequency	Percentage
21–30	22	22%
31–40	38	38%
41–50	28	28%
51 and above	12	12%
Total	100	100%

The majority of respondents (38%) fall within the 31–40 age group, followed by 41–50 years (28%). This indicates that women participating in grassroots politics are largely in their middle adulthood stage, which is often associated with greater social exposure, family stability, and community recognition. Younger women (21–30 years) constitute 22%, reflecting the gradual entry of younger women into politics following the reservation policy. The relatively lower participation of women above 51 years may be attributed to health issues, household responsibilities, or limited political ambition.

2. Educational Status of Women Representatives

Education plays a significant role in shaping political awareness, leadership ability, and confidence.

Table 2: Educational Qualification of Respondents

Educational Level	Frequency	Percentage
Illiterate	14	14%
Primary	36	36%
Secondary	34	34%
Higher Secondary and Above	16	16%
Total	100	100%

The data reveal that a majority of women representatives possess primary or secondary education. While reservation has enabled even illiterate women to contest elections, limited educational attainment restricts their understanding of administrative procedures, financial planning, and policy formulation. Women with higher educational levels were found to participate more actively in discussions and decision-making. This finding supports earlier studies which argue that education enhances substantive political participation rather than mere representation.

3. Nature of Political Participation

Participation is assessed not only by holding office but also by involvement in meetings, discussions, and implementation of development schemes.

Table 3: Attendance in Gram Panchayat Meetings

Attendance Pattern	Frequency	Percentage
Regular	62	62%
Occasional	28	28%
Rare	10	10%

A significant 62% of respondents reported regular attendance in Gram Panchayat meetings, indicating that reservation has successfully ensured women's physical presence in governance spaces. However, 38% attend meetings only occasionally or rarely, suggesting constraints such as household duties, lack of confidence, or disinterest caused by limited decision-making power.

4. Participation in Decision-Making Processes

Active participation in decision-making is a key indicator of political empowerment.

Table 4: Level of Involvement in Decision-Making

Level of Participation	Frequency	Percentage
Active involvement	32	32%
Partial involvement	41	41%
Passive / symbolic	27	27%

Only 32% of women actively participate in decision-making, while 41% are partially involved. A notable 27% remain passive or symbolic representatives. This highlights the persistence of proxy representation, where male relatives or party leaders influence decisions. The data indicate that reservation has improved access but not necessarily authority.

5. Role in Developmental Activities

Women's involvement in local development initiatives reflects their practical engagement in governance.

Table 5: Areas of Active Involvement in Panchayat Activities

Area of Activity	Frequency	Percentage
Health and sanitation	58	58%
Education and ICDS	46	46%
Rural housing schemes	34	34%
Financial planning and budgeting	29	29%
Infrastructure development	31	31%

Women representatives are more actively involved in social welfare sectors such as health, sanitation, and education. Their lower involvement in financial planning and infrastructure development reflects gendered role expectations and limited access to technical knowledge. This pattern reinforces the argument that women are often confined to "soft" sectors within governance.

6. Influence of Family and Political Parties

Family support and party dynamics significantly affect women's political roles.

Table 6: Influence on Decision-Making

Influencing Factor	Frequency	Percentage
Self-driven decisions	35	35%
Influenced by husband/family	45	45%
Influenced by party leaders	20	20%

Only 35% of respondents make decisions independently, while a majority rely on family members or party leaders. This underscores the dominance of patriarchal control and party hierarchies, which limit women's autonomy in grassroots governance.

7. Challenges Faced by Women Representatives

Identifying barriers is essential for understanding the gap between representation and empowerment.

Table 7: Major Challenges Encountered

Challenges	Frequency	Percentage
Patriarchal family control	52	52%
Lack of education and training	44	44%
Political interference	38	38%
Social hesitation and low confidence	30	30%
Time burden due to household work	41	41%

Patriarchal family control emerges as the most significant barrier, followed by lack of training and household responsibilities. These challenges limit women's ability to participate actively and independently. The findings align with feminist political theories that emphasize structural and cultural constraints on women's leadership.

8. Training and Capacity-Building Programs

Training is a crucial factor in enhancing women's political effectiveness.

Table 8: Participation in Training Programs

Training Status	Frequency	Percentage
Received training	48	48%
No training	52	52%

More than half of the respondents have not received any formal training related to governance or leadership. Women who received training demonstrated higher confidence, better understanding of schemes, and greater participation in meetings, highlighting the importance of capacity-building initiatives.

9. Perception of Reservation Policy

Women's perceptions provide insight into the effectiveness of reservation as a policy tool.

Table 9: Opinion on Reservation Policy

Opinion	Frequency	Percentage
Very effective	46	46%
Moderately effective	34	34%
Not effective	20	20%

A majority of respondents perceive reservation positively, acknowledging its role in opening political space for women. However, one-fifth of respondents believe that reservation alone is insufficient without real power, training, and social acceptance.

10. Overall Discussion

The findings demonstrate that the reservation policy has been successful in increasing women's numerical representation in Panchayati Raj Institutions in Bankura District. Women from diverse socio-economic backgrounds have entered local politics, breaking traditional barriers to political participation. However, the transition from descriptive representation to substantive representation remains incomplete.

Education, training, family support, and political autonomy emerge as key determinants of effective participation. Women continue to face patriarchal norms, proxy representation, and limited authority in decision-making. The study confirms that reservation is a necessary but not sufficient condition for women's empowerment. Complementary measures such as leadership training, gender-sensitive political environments, and social awareness are essential for achieving meaningful participation.

V. CONCLUSION

The present study examines the impact of the reservation policy on women's participation in grass-roots politics through Panchayati Raj Institutions in Bankura District, West Bengal. The findings clearly indicate that the reservation policy has played a crucial role in increasing women's numerical representation in local governance and providing them with formal access to political institutions that were traditionally male-dominated. Women from diverse socio-economic backgrounds have been able to enter the political arena, thereby challenging long-standing gender barriers.

However, the study also reveals that increased representation does not always translate into meaningful participation or effective decision-making power. Many elected women representatives continue to face socio-cultural constraints, patriarchal family control, limited education, lack of training, and political interference. These factors restrict their autonomy and often confine their roles to symbolic participation. Education, awareness, and capacity-building emerge as significant determinants of active and confident political engagement.

The study concludes that while reservation is an essential step toward gender-inclusive governance, it must be complemented by sustained institutional support. Regular training programs, political sensitization, and efforts to challenge patriarchal norms are necessary to transform reserved positions into platforms of genuine empowerment. Strengthening women's decision-making capacity at the grassroots level will not only enhance democratic functioning but also contribute to more responsive and inclusive local development.

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