



# “Women’s Empowerment through Panchayati Raj in Karnataka

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## 1. Introduction

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 marked a turning point for local self- governance in India, particularly for women. Karnataka was one of the first states to implement the Panchayati Raj system even before the 73rd amendment through the Karnataka Zilla Parishads, Taluk Panchayat Samithis, Mandal Panchayats and Nyaya Panchayats Act, 1983.

With constitutional backing, Karnataka has been at the forefront in ensuring women’s participation in grassroots democracy, reserving 50% of seats for women in PRIs across the state.

## 2. Objectives of the Research

- A. To study the extent and impact of women’s political participation in PRIs in Karnataka.
- B. To assess the effectiveness of 50% reservation for women.
- C. To explore how participation in PRIs translates into empowerment.
- D. To identify challenges faced by elected women representatives (EWRs).

## 3. Legal Framework and Policy in Karnataka

Karnataka Panchayat Raj Act, 1993 (as amended in 2010): Enhanced women’s reservation from 33% to 50% in all three tiers — Gram Panchayat, Taluk Panchayat, and Zilla Panchayat.

Karnataka is among the pioneering states in implementing the decentralization of power, with a strong legal basis for women’s inclusion.

## 4. Key Statistics (Karnataka)

As of recent panchayat elections:

Over 54% of elected members in Gram Panchayats are women.

Around 60% of Gram Panchayat Presidents in some districts like Mandya, Mysuru, and Tumkur are women.

High participation in Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes reserved constituencies as well.

## 5. Indicators of Women's Empowerment in Karnataka

### a) Political Empowerment

Political empowerment means enabling women to participate effectively in political processes, take leadership roles, influence decision-making, and assert their rights in public affairs. In the context of Panchayati Raj, it refers to women's active participation in the functioning of local self-government, particularly as elected representatives. Increasing participation in Gram Sabhas and Standing Committees.

### b) Social Empowerment

Social empowerment involves enhancing the status of women in society by improving their access to education, healthcare, dignity, decision-making, and equality. In rural India, the Panchayati Raj system has been instrumental in promoting women's social empowerment by bringing them into public spaces and giving them leadership roles at the grassroots level. Karnataka, being one of the pioneering states in decentralized governance, offers valuable insights into how Panchayati Raj can be used as a tool for transforming rural women's lives.

### Government Schemes and Convergence with Panchayats

- a. Stree Shakti Groups:
- b. Women-led self-help groups (SHGs) promote savings, credit, and entrepreneurship.
- c. Linked with Gram Panchayats for community monitoring.
- d. Swachh Bharat Mission (Gramin):
- e. Women leaders promote toilet construction and hygiene practices.
- f. Ksheera Bhagya and Midday Meal Schemes:
- g. Women members of School Development Committees (SDMCs) ensure nutrition standards and regularity.
- h. Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS):
- i. Women panchayat members help register rural women for work and ensure timely payments.

### c) Economic Empowerment

Economic empowerment refers to the ability of women to control and benefit from resources, assets, income, and their own labor. It enables them to make strategic life choices, participate in the economy, and reduce dependency. In rural India, the Panchayati Raj system and rural development schemes have created pathways for women to achieve economic independence and security.

Karnataka, a leader in decentralization, has implemented various rural development programs and women-centric policies that promote economic empowerment at the grassroots level.

Panchayati Raj Institutions, when effectively utilized, can be powerful engines of economic transformation for rural women. Karnataka's experience proves that integrating women into rural planning, budgeting, and enterprise development not only improves their economic status but also drives community development.

The goal must now shift from participation to leadership, from employment to entrepreneurship, and from inclusion to ownership.

## 6. Major Achievements in Karnataka

Stree Shakti Scheme: Empowering women through SHGs and connecting them with Panchayats.

Training of EWRs by the State Institute of Rural Development (SIRD), Mysuru.

Use of Mobile Governance and e-Panchayat platforms for empowering elected women leaders digitally.

Grassroots women leaders have been selected for state and national awards.

## 7. Challenges in Karnataka

- a. Proxy Participation: “Sarpanch Pati” syndrome still exists in rural belts like Raichur and Bagalkot.
- b. Education Gap: Many women representatives are first-generation learners with limited exposure to governance.
- c. Caste and Gender Intersectionality: Dalit and minority women face dual discrimination.
- d. Lack of Awareness: Limited knowledge of schemes, legal rights, and administrative procedures.
- e. Burden of Household Responsibilities: Restricts full-time engagement in public duties.

## 8. Suggestions for Strengthening Women’s Role in PRIs in Karnataka

- Provide continuous capacity-building programs in Kannada for EWRs.
- Promote peer support networks of women leaders.
- Increase monitoring of real participation and curb proxy representation.
- Integrate gender budgeting and gender audits at the Panchayat level.
- Encourage use of digital tools and mobile apps for Panchayat operations.
- Implement quota rotation policy sensitively to ensure continuity of leadership.

## Conclusion

Karnataka has made remarkable progress in empowering women through Panchayati Raj. However, the quality of participation and not just numerical representation must be the new focus. A blend of legal support, social encouragement, and administrative capacity-building is essential for deepening democratic decentralization and empowering rural women.

## References

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