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PANCHAYATS, PATRIARCHY AND PROTECTION: DIGITAL DISCOURSES ON WOMEN LOCAL REPRESENTATIVES IN RURAL INDIA

Kadambari^{1*}

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, Center for Distance and Online Education, Manipal University Jaipur, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India
Kadambari1992@gmail.com

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Corresponding Author: Kadambari
(kadambari1992@gmail.com)

ABSTRACT

Women's representation in India's Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) has expanded dramatically since the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, yet their presence remains mediated by entrenched patriarchal norms and a pervasive rhetoric of "protection". This article examines how such dynamics are discursively constructed in public texts, treating NGO manuals, policy and human rights reports, news articles and campaign materials (1993–2020) as a corpus of digital cultural artefacts that document contemporary imaginaries of rural governance. Anchored in feminist institutionalism, feminist debates on protection and paternalism, and theories of political representation, the study employs qualitative content analysis combined with critical discourse analysis to examine 127 purposively sampled documents. The findings show that women local representatives are repeatedly framed as carers, moral guardians, development brokers and, less frequently, rights advocates, with protective tropes legitimising their presence while narrowing their acceptable roles. Panchayats emerge as protectors of "weaker sections", disciplinarians enforcing moral order and male dominated arenas that continue to centre elder male authority. Gender based harms, including domestic and political violence, are acknowledged but unevenly named, oscillating between paternalistic and rights-based framings. The article argues that these digital discourses form part of the intangible cultural heritage of rural India, shaping how protection, patriarchy and women's political agency are understood. It concludes with implications for practitioners seeking to reframe protection in more agency centred, intersectional and gender just ways.

KEYWORDS: Panchayati Raj Institutions; Women Local Representatives; Protection; Patriarchy; Digital Culture; Gender Based Violence.

1. INTRODUCTION

Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) form the third tier of governance in rural India. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment mandated reservations for women at all levels of *panchayat* government, ensuring that at least one-third of seats and chairperson positions are held by women (Government of India, 1993). Over successive election cycles, more than one million women have entered elected office across *gram panchayat*, intermediate and district levels, a transformation widely recognised as a milestone in democratising local governance and advancing gender equality (Jain, 1996; Rai, 2011).

Policy narratives, donor strategies and NGO campaigns frequently celebrate women local representatives as “agents of change” who can bring transparency, responsiveness and social justice into everyday governance. Training manuals and awareness materials often frame them as natural carers and “protectors of the village”, expected to prioritise children’s welfare, basic services, environmental conservation and the needs of the rural poor. PRIs themselves are depicted as institutions that can extend protection to “weaker sections” by implementing welfare schemes, monitoring frontline officials and mediating disputes (Mathew, 1994; Johnson, 2003). These representations circulate widely online constituting a layer of contemporary digital culture and cultural heritage around rural institutions in forms of downloadable reports, organisational websites and digital news archives.

In line with UNESCO’s understanding of intangible cultural heritage as practices, representations and expressions that communities recognise as part of their living heritage, this article treats these born-digital and digitised texts as documentary traces of contemporary governance cultures rather than as neutral information records (*Charter on the Preservation of Digital Heritage*, 2025). At the same time, they fit within emerging definitions of “digital heritage” as computer-based materials of enduring value that document human knowledge and expression (*Charter on the Preservation of Digital Heritage*, 2025).

At the same time, the expansion of women’s descriptive representation in PRIs has unfolded within deep patriarchal settings. Family hierarchies, caste dynamics, party structures and community norms continue to shape who exercises authority and how that authority is interpreted (Jeffery & Sundar, 1999; Agarwal, 2001). Empirical studies document proxy leadership by husbands, brothers, sons and

fathers-in-law, the informal dominance of male elders in *gram sabha* deliberations, and the social and physical risks women face when they challenge entrenched interests (Goetz & Hassim, 2003; Ban & Rao, 2008).

Within this context, “protection” is a key term. On one hand, it evokes legitimate concern about harms that affect rural populations, including hunger, inadequate services, ecological precarity, domestic abuse and other forms of gender-based violence (UNDP, 1995; Human Rights Watch, 2017). On the other, it can operate as a paternalistic discourse that assigns women restrictive roles as self-sacrificing carers and moral guardians, while justifying limits on their mobility, speech and political choices “for their own safety” or “for the honour of the community” (Kandiyoti, 1988; Kapadia, 2002). In cases of gender-based violence, women representatives may be simultaneously expected to address harms and exposed to harassment, threats or attacks linked to their public roles (Rajan & Bhatla, 2004; Mukhopadhyay, 2005).

This article treats public textual and digital representations of women in PRIs as a corpus of contemporary cultural artefacts that document how panchayats, patriarchy and protection are imagined. It examines how women local representatives and panchayats are discursively positioned in relation to protection and harm, and how these discourses shape the perceived scope of women’s political agency.

1.1. Objectives Of the Study

The study has three objectives:

1. To analyse how women local representatives are discursively positioned in terms of protection, responsibility and care within key public texts on rural governance.
2. To examine how panchayats are framed as protective, disciplinary or contested institutions, and how patriarchal norms appear within such framings.
3. To explore how different forms of harm including, but not limited to, gender-based harms, are narrated and linked to the roles of women representatives and panchayats.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Women in Pris: Descriptive and Substantive Representation

The introduction of reservations for women in PRIs has been widely interpreted as a democratic

breakthrough. Early work charted the numerical increase in women's participation and its symbolic significance for democracy and gender equality (Mathew, 1994; Jain, 1996; Rai, 2011). Subsequent scholarship has highlighted the social diversity of elected women; many are from Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe and Other Backward Class communities, with limited education and modest economic means (Vijayalakshmi, 2002; Baviskar & Mathew, 2009).

Building on Hanna Pitkin's (1967) distinction between descriptive, symbolic and substantive representation, researchers have examined under what conditions women's presence influences agendas, resource allocation and policy outcomes (Phillips, 1995; Goetz & Hassim, 2003). Case studies describe women leaders who initiate projects in water, sanitation, health and education, or who challenge liquor outlets and child marriage. Yet many accounts also document constrained participation: women who attend meetings but rarely speak, who sign documents prepared by others, or whose decisions are overridden by male relatives or dominant caste leaders (Jeffery & Sundar, 1999; Ban & Rao, 2008).

Civil-society organisations have responded with training and accompaniment programmes aimed at increasing women's knowledge of laws and schemes, and their confidence in public speaking and negotiation. Evaluations suggest such support can enhance women's autonomy, while also revealing the continuing influence of patriarchal family structures, party networks and local power brokers.

2.2. *Patriarchy, Protection and Gender-Based Harms*

Feminist analyses conceptualise patriarchy in rural India as a system of gendered power embedded in family, caste, kinship and religion, structuring norms around women's mobility, labour, sexuality and speech (Agarwal, 1994; Kandiyoti, 1988). In local governance, this translates into expectations that women prioritise domestic responsibilities, defer to male elders and maintain modesty in public life. Proxy leadership and male "remote control" over elected women have been reported across states (Agarwal, 2001; Mukhopadhyay, 2005). Dalit and Adivasi women leaders often confront both gendered and caste-based hostility, particularly in land, water or welfare decisions that affect dominant groups (Sharma, 2004; Baviskar & Mathew, 2009).

The conceptual language of protection is central to how these relations are justified and contested. Iris Young (2003) and Wendy Brown (2010) describe a

"logic of masculinist protection" in which states and communities portray women as vulnerable dependants whose safety requires obedience and conformity. In South Asia, appeals to "protect women's honour" have long been used to restrict women's education, employment, mobility and political activity, and to rationalise violence committed in the name of family or community prestige (Chakravarti, 1993; Chowdhry, 2007).

Nancy Fraser (1997) and Naila Kabeer (2005) distinguish between paternalistic protection, which reinforces unequal power relations, and rights-based protection, grounded in recognition of women as rights-bearing subjects entitled to bodily integrity, participation and autonomy. The first emphasises obedience and respectability; the second demands institutional accountability, redistribution and support for agency. These distinctions are directly relevant to PRIs, where *panchayats* may be tasked with preventing practices such as child marriage and dowry but may also pressure survivors to "compromise" for the sake of honour or harmony (Mazumdar, 1998; Thakur, 2001; Rajan & Bhatla, 2004; Human Rights Watch, 2017).

2.3. *Feminist Institutionalism and Discursive Approaches*

Feminist institutionalism provides a framework for analysing how formal rules and informal gendered norms interact within PRIs (Mackay, Monro & Waylen, 2009). It conceptualises institutions as gendered structures, in which regulations such as reservations, rotation and mandated *gram sabhas* coexist with implicit expectations about appropriate conduct for women and men. Discourses of protection are part of this institutional environment: they help define what is considered proper for women in office (caring, mediating, maintaining harmony) and what is seen as improper (confronting powerful actors, prioritising women's rights, exposing corruption).

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) and framing theory contribute tools for examining how language encodes and normalises power relations (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak & Meyer, 2009; Entman, 1993). CDA attends to lexical choices, grammatical constructions and narrative structures that attribute or obscure agency, responsibility and blame. Framing theory highlights how texts define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgements and propose remedies. An intersectional feminist lens insists that gender intersects with caste, class, religion and region, shaping both vulnerability and capacity (Crenshaw, 1991; Yuval-Davis, 2006).

These perspectives guide the present study's focus on how public textual and digital discourses construct women representatives, panchayats and harms, and how these constructions participate in the cultural politics of rural governance.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1. Corpus Construction

The corpus comprises 127 documents produced between 1993 and 2020, purposively sampled from four categories of public texts:

1. **NGO and movement publications:** training manuals, handbooks, case-study booklets and project reports concerning women's participation in PRIs and/or gender-based harms.
2. **Policy and human-rights reports:** documents issued by national bodies, international agencies and human-rights organisations addressing women in local governance, decentralisation and violence against women.
3. **News media articles:** print and online reports from English-language national dailies and selected regional outlets covering women *sarpanches*, women in *panchayats*, violence against women leaders and panchayat interventions in gender-based harms.
4. **Campaign materials:** posters, pamphlets and short booklets for voter awareness, *gram sabha* mobilisation and anti-violence campaigns, in English or Hindi with English translations.

Documents were identified through organisational and news archives, database searches and snowballing via citations. Inclusion criteria required explicit discussion of women representatives in PRIs and/or panchayats in relation to gender and protection/harm, and accessibility in English. Given India's multilingual media landscape, the decision to prioritise English-language texts reflects both practical considerations of access and the study's focus on nationally visible, policy-facing discourses. This

choice means that the corpus largely captures how protection and patriarchy are articulated by NGOs, state agencies and mainstream media for wider publics, rather than the full range of vernacular and locally circulated framings. As such, the patterns traced here should be read as indicative of dominant, publicly archived narratives rather than exhaustive of everyday talk in all regional languages. The temporal scope captures early implementation of the 73rd Amendment, consolidation of training programmes and the post-Nirbhaya intensification of public discourse on violence against women.

3.2. Analytic Procedures

The analysis combined directed and inductive qualitative content analysis with elements of CDA. An initial subset of documents from each text type was read closely to identify recurring patterns in how women representatives, panchayats and harms were portrayed. A codebook was then developed with two levels: descriptive codes (such as "domestic violence mention", "liquor shop closure", "husband speaks for woman representative") and analytical codes aligned with the theoretical framework (such as "woman-as-carer", "panchayat-as-protector", "panchayat-as-disciplinarian", "paternalistic protection", "rights-based protection").

All 127 documents were coded using NVivo. Coded material was aggregated into thematic clusters corresponding to the research objectives, and selected texts were subjected to closer discursive analysis, focusing on lexical choices, agency assignments (active versus passive constructions), evaluative adjectives and narrative sequencing (Fairclough, 1995; Machin & Mayr, 2012). Analytic memos recorded emerging interpretations and tensions. The purpose was to map dominant discursive patterns and explore how they articulated panchayats, patriarchy and protection across genres and over time, rather than to generate statistical generalisations.

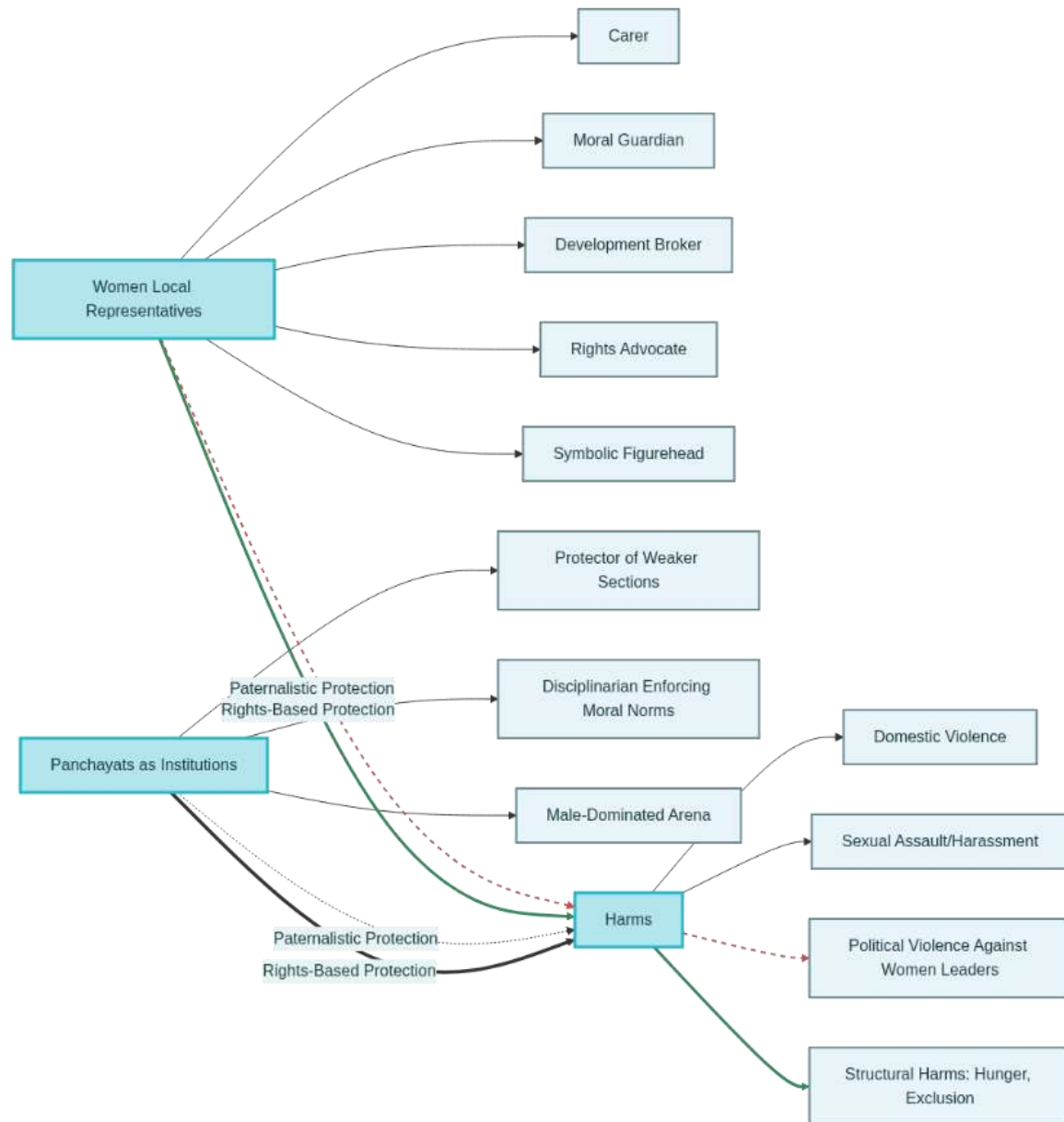


Figure 1: Conceptual Model of Protection Discourses in Pris, Linking Women's Roles, Panchayat Framings, Harms and Protection Logics. (Source Author).

Figure 1 presents an overview of the conceptual model guiding the analysis, linking roles assigned to women representatives, institutional framings of panchayats, types of harm and competing protection logics.

4. RESULTS

This section presents the main empirical patterns from the corpus. It first outlines how women local representatives are discursively constructed in terms of protective roles, then examines how panchayats are framed as institutions, and finally highlights how protection is invoked in relation to harm, particularly gender-based violence. Tables 1 and 2 summarise

these key patterns.

4.1. Role Constructions of Women Representatives

Across the corpus, women local representatives are persistently framed through a language of protection. Four overlapping roles dominate alongside the more diffuse role of symbolic figurehead. As demonstrated in Table 1 they are carer, moral guardian, development broker and rights advocates. These constructions echo feminist concerns about women's political authority being legitimated through care and respectability rather than through formal power (Phillips, 1995; Rai, 2011).

Table 1: Role Constructions of Women Local Representatives in Public Texts.

Role	Typical description in texts	Common sources
Carer	Ensures food, health and schooling; "treats the village as a family"; prioritises the poor	NGO manuals, case-study booklets
Moral guardian	Fights liquor and "social evils"; intervenes in child marriage and domestic disputes	Campaigns, NGO materials, news articles
Development broker	Secures schemes, ration cards, pensions, water; negotiates with officials on behalf of others	NGO/project reports, policy documents
Rights advocate	Insists on filing complaints; invokes laws and guidelines in cases of violence or exclusion	Human-rights reports, some NGO case studies
Symbolic figurehead	Appears in photos and brief "success stories" as emblem of women's empowerment	Policy/donor reports, organisational sites

NGO manuals and case-study booklets most frequently depict women *sarpanches* as carers. They narrate how a woman leader "makes sure no family sleeps hungry" or "personally checks on pregnant women," casting her as an extended maternal figure whose protection is directed at households and children rather than at institutional change.

Campaign materials and some NGO texts add the role of moral guardian. Women representatives are shown leading protests against liquor shops, persuading men to stop drinking "for the sake of the children," or intervening to prevent child marriages. Protection is framed as safeguarding community morality and honour, legitimising women's public presence but reinforcing expectations of respectability and harmony.

As the discourse shifts towards governance and implementation, women representatives are also portrayed as development brokers. NGO and policy reports describe them spending days in block offices, correcting beneficiary lists and ensuring widows and single women receive pensions. Protection becomes technocratic: guarding the poor from exclusion and corruption rather than explicitly challenging underlying hierarchies.

A smaller but significant strand of texts presents women *sarpanches* as rights advocates who insist on registering First Information Reports (FIR), challenge police inaction or quote specific legal provisions on domestic violence or dowry. These accounts foreground women's protective role vis-à-vis the state, but they are framed as exceptional stories of courage rather than as routine expectations.

Finally, policy and donor documents often enlist women representatives as symbolic figureheads. Photographs and aggregate statistics on women's representation are used to signal progress towards gender-inclusive governance, even when little is said about their everyday authority or constraints.

4.2. Panchayat Framings and Protection Logics

Panchayats themselves are framed in ambivalent ways. Three institutional images recur: panchayat as protector of weaker sections, panchayat as disciplinarian enforcing moral norms and panchayat as male-dominated arena.

NGO and policy documents stress the protective mandate of PRIs. They cite constitutional and legal responsibilities for social justice and encourage women representatives to "use the panchayat" to pass resolutions against child marriage and liquor sales, to monitor fair distribution of schemes and to support women facing violence. In these texts, panchayats are positioned as instruments of rights-based protection, consistent with the second model identified by Nancy Fraser (1997) and Naila Kabeer (2005).

By contrast, news reports and human-rights documents often present panchayats, sometimes statutory bodies, sometimes conflated with informal caste councils, as disciplinarians enforcing patriarchal moral order. They describe panchayat diktats restricting women's clothing, phone use or mobility "for safety", pressure on survivors of domestic or sexual violence to "compromise" for the sake of family honour, and sanctions against families engaged in inter-caste or inter-religious relationships. Here, protection is defined as preserving honour and social order rather than safeguarding women's rights, echoing the paternalistic logic critiqued by Young (2003) and Brown (2010).

Across both framings, panchayats remain male-dominated arenas. Descriptions of *gram sabha* deliberations routinely centre male elders and party leaders, while husbands and fathers-in-law who speak for women representatives are portrayed as "supportive" rather than as undermining democratic representation.

As summarized in Table 2, these competing framings correspond to two distinct protection logics that are paternalistic and rights-based.

Table 2: Contrasting Discourses of Protection in Relation to Panchayats.

Dimension	Paternalistic protection	Rights-based protection
Who protects?	Male elders, family, panchayat as moral guardian	State institutions, law, panchayat as rights-implementing body
What is protected?	Family honour, village reputation, social order	Women's bodily integrity, dignity, legal entitlements
Typical language	"Keep girls safe", "avoid shame", "adjust for family's sake"	"Right to file FIR", "entitled to benefits", "institutional accountability"
Typical panchayat role	Broker of compromise; imposer of restrictions	Enforcer of law; facilitator of access to police, courts and welfare schemes
Dominant text types	News reports; some campaign and NGO narratives	Human-rights reports; some NGO and policy manuals

The same institution can therefore be represented either as enforcing obedience and conformity in the name of safety and honour, or as a rights-oriented body tasked with ensuring justice and entitlements. Women local representatives are frequently positioned at the intersection of these competing expectations.

4.3. Protection And Harm

References to harm are uneven but revealing particularly gender-based violence. Earlier NGO and policy texts tend to refer generically to "family disputes" or "problems at home" that women representatives help to "settle," rarely naming domestic violence or marital rape explicitly. Protection in these accounts means preserving relationships and avoiding scandal.

Later human-rights reports and some NGO documents name domestic violence, sexual assault, honour-based crimes and political violence against women representatives more directly. They recount threats, assaults and sometimes killings of women leaders linked to their public roles, for example, when they close liquor shops, insist on fair allocation of resources or support survivors. In these narratives, protection is invoked to demand legal redress and institutional accountability, including stronger safeguards for women in politics and effective police action (Human Rights Watch, 2017; Rajan & Bhatla, 2004).

At the same time, many texts illustrate how the language of protection is used to contain or silence survivors. Panchayat-brokered "compromises" are framed as "protecting the woman's future" or "saving the family's name," even where serious violence is evident. Such patterns resonate with Iris Young's (2003) account of masculinist protection, where safety is traded for obedience and silence. The corpus thus reveals not a single, coherent understanding of protection but a contested field in which paternalistic and rights-based logics intersect and collide in everyday governance. Over the nearly three decades covered by the corpus, there is a

gradual shift from euphemistic references to "family problems" and "disputes" in earlier manuals and policy texts towards more explicit naming of domestic violence, sexual assault and political attacks in later human-rights and NGO reports. At the same time, the underlying tension between compromise-oriented, honour-based framings and rights-based demands for legal accountability remains remarkably persistent. Temporal change thus appears more clearly in vocabularies of harm than in the basic protection logics that structure women representatives' roles.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings highlight the ambivalent positioning of women local representatives at the intersection of panchayats, patriarchy and protection. From a feminist institutionalist perspective, they show how formal rules of reservation and social-justice mandates co-exist with informal norms that continue to centre male authority and define appropriate femininity (Mackay et al., 2009). Discourses of protection emerge as a key mechanism through which these gendered norms are articulated and justified. Figure 2 summarises these tensions, showing how protection discourses simultaneously position women as carers and advocates, panchayats as protectors and disciplinarians, and women's authority as both visible and constrained.

Symbolic images of women as carers, moral guardians and development brokers perform important political work, countering earlier stereotypes of rural women as apolitical and opening space for their participation in welfare and some social issues. However, these same images risk containing women within roles that prioritise harmony, respectability and self-sacrifice, and divert attention from structural power relations around land, contracts, party tickets and coercive force. When gender-based harms are framed as "family problems" to be mediated rather than as legal and structural issues, women representatives are tasked with managing violence without being fully

authorised or supported to confront its deeper causes.

Panchayats are similarly subject to competing protective framings. NGO and policy discourses position them as rights-oriented institutions tasked with protecting marginalised groups, while media and human-rights accounts reveal their role in enforcing patriarchal moral order. Women representatives frequently stand at the intersection of these logics, expected to protect community honour and cohesion while also, in some cases, supporting women's claims to justice.

Treating the analysed texts as digital cultural artefacts brings into focus their role in shaping broader imaginaries of governance, gender and harm. As open-access reports, manuals and news

stories are archived and circulated online, they become part of the intangible cultural heritage of contemporary rural India. They influence how citizens, activists, officials and donors imagine women's presence in PRIs and what they see as possible or appropriate.

A feminist politics of protection in this context would involve not only legal and institutional reforms but also deliberate efforts to reframe communicative practices. This would mean moving away from paternalistic language that portrays women primarily as vulnerable dependants or selfless carers, and towards agency-centred narratives that recognise women representatives as rights-bearing political actors engaged in collective struggles for justice and safety.

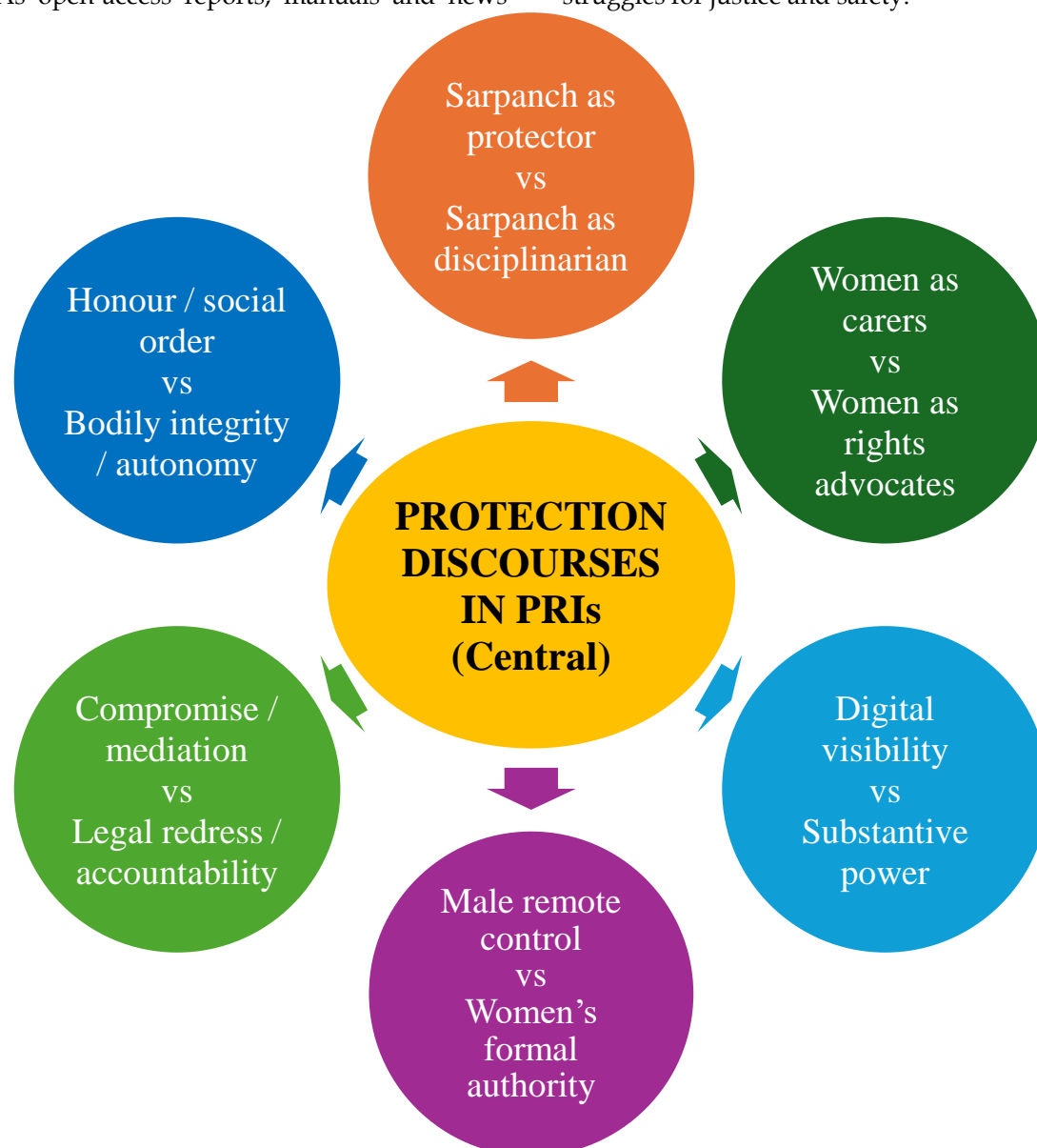


Figure 2: Thematic Synthesis: Tensions Between Paternalistic and Rights-Based Protection Discourses in Pris (Source Author).

6. CONCLUSIONS

Empirically, the article shows that publicly circulated digital texts on PRIs simultaneously celebrate women's numerical inclusion while narratively containing them within protective, caring and morally responsible roles that leave underlying patriarchal power relations largely intact. Analysing a corpus of NGO publications, policy and human-rights reports, news articles and campaign materials produced over nearly three decades, it has shown that women representatives are repeatedly cast as carers, moral guardians, development brokers, occasional rights advocates and symbolic figureheads; these roles legitimise their entry into formal politics but narrow the range of issues and strategies seen as appropriate for them.

Panchayats are depicted as both protectors of "weaker sections" and disciplinarians enforcing patriarchal moral order, with male elders and party leaders frequently re-centred as default decision-makers. Protection emerges as a central but ambivalent discourse, invoked to justify both

rights-based interventions against harm and paternalistic compromises that preserve existing hierarchies. Gender-based violence is recognised but unevenly named, often treated as a matter for mediation rather than as a structural problem requiring institutional accountability.

By reading these texts as elements of digital culture and contemporary cultural heritage, the study contributes to interdisciplinary debates on how representations of governance and gender circulate and sediment over time. For practitioners like NGO trainers, communication designers, policymakers and journalists, the analysis suggests the need to critically review language and imagery that reinforce paternalistic protection logics and to foreground rights-based, intersectional framings that recognise differentiated risks and capacities among women representatives. For researchers, the analysis points to the value of combining discourse analysis with ethnographic or interview-based work on how women leaders negotiate these circulating narratives, and of using larger-scale, multilingual text-mining to trace shifts across languages and platforms.

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