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WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT THROUGH POLITICAL REPRESENTATION: A STUDY OF GRAMA PANCHAYATS IN DAKSHINA KANNADA

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ABSTRACT

Women's involvement in local government is very important for building strong, democratic communities and helping women gain power in India, but how much they are actually involved and how empowered they feel is not well understood yet. This study tried to understand the social and demographic background, how much they are involved, their skill growth, and how empowered the women who are elected as Gram Panchayat members are in Dakshina Kannada district, Karnataka. A survey was done between January and March 2024, talking to 114 women who were elected representatives in Mangaluru, Bantwal, and Ullal areas. These women were chosen using a two-step method called stratified random sampling. Most of the people involved were middle-aged, married, Hindu, had only basic education, and came from families that lived below the poverty line. The majority of them lived in nuclear families and either had no job or worked in low-paying jobs. While 80.7% said they made decisions on their own in their official jobs, only 24.6% took part in training for women, and just 21.1% felt economically empowered, mostly through Self-Help Groups. Leadership and problem-solving skills were developed by 44.7%, but wider community involvement and economic growth stayed limited, with only 42.1% saying their family's financial situation improved after getting involved with the Panchayat. Even though women are well represented in local government, their real power and economic progress are still not enough. This shows that there is a need for special efforts and training programs to help women take part more actively and gain more power in Panchayati Raj Institutions.

KEYWORDS: Women, Leadership, Community Participation, Decision Making, Socioeconomic Factors, Gender Identity, Social Change.

1. INTRODUCTION

Women's empowerment is now a key topic in talks about development and fairness, especially in rural areas of India. Political representation is commonly seen as an important way to help women gain power, take part in making decisions, shape policies, and break down old ideas about gender roles (Kabeer 2016). The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 was a major step in India. It required that one-third of the seats in Panchayati Raj Institutions, like Grama Panchayats, be reserved for women. This gave women a proper chance to take part in local decision-making. (Kumar and Kidwai 2018; Buch 2018)

Studies in Karnataka, especially in Dakshina Kannada, show that while many women are part of Grama Panchayats, how much they contribute and how deeply they are involved differs a lot. Important things like local beliefs and customs, support from family and the community, and the availability of training and resources play a key role in how much women are empowered (Nambiar 2020; Ministry of Panchayati Raj 2022). So, even though the policy framework has helped create more chances for women to get involved in politics, turning those chances into real empowerment and leadership roles is still a big challenge. It's also an important area that needs more research and study.

Even though there have been important policy changes, like the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act that requires setting aside seats for women in local village governments called Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), turning this political presence into real power and influence for women is still not fully achieved and varies a lot from one part of India to another (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004; Rao & Sanyal, 2018). Studies show that there are ongoing problems, like leaders not being fully in charge, limited power to make decisions, and how getting involved in politics connects with other social and economic issues that make it hard for people to participate (Nambiar, 2020; Sharma Singh, 2021).

These issues are often dealt with in pieces, and there aren't many studies that fully explain the real-life experiences of women in leadership roles, especially in places like Dakshina Kannada, which is a varied and changing area.

Despite the expanding body of literature on women's political participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions, there is a scarcity of empirical studies that specifically explore the multidimensional nature of empowerment among elected women representatives in Dakshina Kannada district. Most existing research tends to focus either on political

representation or isolated aspects of empowerment, often neglecting the interconnected social, economic, and decision-making dimensions. Given the unique socio-cultural context of Dakshina Kannada, it is crucial to understand how political representation translates into actual empowerment to inform policy and strengthen grassroots governance. Therefore, this study aims to assess the socio-demographic profile, participation levels, and empowerment outcomes of elected women representatives in Gram Panchayats of Dakshina Kannada, thereby addressing a significant regional and conceptual research gap.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study looked at a group of women who were elected as representatives in Gram Panchayats in the areas of Mangaluru, Bantwal, and Ullal, which are parts of the Dakshina Kannada district in Karnataka. The research used a questionnaire to gather information.

A Stratified random sampling technique was used in a two-step process to select 114 participants, who were chosen for their roles involving problem-solving and decision-making. The inclusion criteria covered all women elected as representatives, regardless of caste, religion, education level, political party, or tenure. Individuals with criminal charges, those who were suspended, or those unavailable during data collection were excluded from the study.

Data was collected using a pre-tested, structured, and validated questionnaire. The questionnaire included sections on socio-demographic details, pre-election experiences, awareness and participation in Panchayat activities, dimensions of empowerment, and challenges faced. Statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS version 27, and descriptive statistics were applied.

3. RESULTS

Table 1 shows that most people in the survey are members, making up 87.7% of those who took part. The age distribution shows that 6.3% of people are middle-aged, which means they are between 31 and 50 years old.

Most of the people, which is 91.2%, are married, and the main religion practiced is Hinduism, followed by 81.6% of the group. Most people have only finished primary school, and about 43.9% of them have reached that level of education. About income, 42.1% of people make less than ₹5000 each month, and 40.4% earn between ₹10,000 and ₹15,000

every month.

Table 1: Distribution of the Study Participants Based on Their Socio-Demographic Variables (N = 114).

Variables	Categories	Frequency (%)
Position	Member	100 (87.7 %)
	President	7 (6.1 %)
	Vice President	7 (6.1 %)
Age (Year)	21-30	8 (7.0 %)
	31-40	45 (39.5 %)
	41-50	42 (36.8 %)
	51 and above	19 (16.7 %)
Marital Status	Married	104 (91.2 %)
	Un married	2 (1.8 %)
	Widow	8 (7.0 %)
Religion	Hindu	93 (81.6 %)
	Muslim	15 (13.2 %)
	Christian	6 (5.3 %)
Education	Primary	50 (43.9 %)
	High school	34 (29.8 %)
	Pre university	22 (19.3 %)
	Degree and above	7 (6.1 %)
	Other	1 (0.9 %)
Monthly Income	Below 5000₹	48 (42.1 %)
	10000 to 15000₹	46 (40.4 %)
	15000-20000₹	17 (14.9 %)
	20000₹ and above	3 (2.6 %)
The data of the empowerment of elected women members expressed as frequency (f) and (%).		

Table 2: Distribution of the Study Participants Based on Type of Family (N = 114).

Variables	Categories	Frequency (%)
Type of family	Nuclear family	73 (64.0 %)
	Joint family	40 (35.1 %)
	Extended family	1 (0.9 %)
No. of members in family	<3	16 (14.0 %)
	4-6	87 (76.3 %)
	>6	11 (9.6 %)
Ration card category	APL	19 (16.7 %)
	BPL	89 (78.1 %)
	Antyodaya	6 (5.3 %)
Nature of employment	Unskilled/Day labourer/ petty job	9 (7.9 %)
	Service sector	2 (1.8 %)
	Self-employed/own business	4 (3.5 %)
	Agriculture	12 (10.5 %)
	Beedi roller	30 (26.3 %)
	Unemployed	44 (38.6 %)
Others (specify)	13 (11.4 %)	
The data of the empowerment of elected women members expressed as frequency (f) and (%). Abbreviation: APL=Above Poverty Line, BPL=Below Poverty Line.		

Table 2 shows that most of the people in the study are part of nuclear families, which make up 64.0% of the group. These families usually have between 4 to 6 people, which is 76.3% of the total, indicating that many people prefer having smaller families. Most of the people surveyed have a Below Poverty Line (BPL) ration card, which is 78.1%, showing that many are facing financial problems. When it comes to jobs, the biggest group is people who don't have work (38.6%), then there are Beedi rollers (26.3%), showing that many rely on low-paying or traditional types of work. Other jobs, like farming (10.5%) and manual work (7.9%), are not as

common, and they are even less seen in areas like service jobs (1.8%) or being your own boss (3.5%).

Table 3 shows that when looking at how empowered elected women representatives are, it's clear that their skills and involvement in Panchayat activities vary a lot. About 44.7% of the people involved showed strong abilities in leadership, working together as a team, communicating effectively, and solving problems. However, many people said they had low or moderate progress in these areas. Only 27.2% of the people involved showed strong abilities in leading, making decisions, and managing tasks, but most 57.9% had

low levels of these skills, which suggests there is a need for more training and development. Most people had low levels of sociability traits like being friendly and working well with others, with about 58.8% falling into that category. Only a small number, around 7%, said they had high sociability. Even though some women thought their opinions mattered a lot in Panchayat decisions, only 17.5% said they felt their influence was strong. A large number of members, specifically 35.1%, were actively involved in planning, carrying out tasks,

and bringing the community together. However, the majority of the members had either a low or moderate level of participation. More than half of the people surveyed still made few economic choices on their own and did not take part much in the Panchayat support programs. Interestingly, even though 48.2% played an important part in helping local government get involved, most faced big difficulties, as 71.1% said they had trouble solving problems.

Table 3: Distribution among Empowerment of Women Representatives (N = 114).

Variables	Low level	Moderate	High level
Leadership, teamwork, communication, and problem-solving are commonly developed qualities among Gram Panchayat members.	49(43%)	14 (12.3 %)	51 (44.7 %)
Participants developed leadership, decision-making, and administrative skills through panchayat involvement.	66(57.9%)	17(14.9%)	31(27.2%)
Participants developed sociability traits, such as friendliness, approachability, and teamwork, through their involvement in the panchayat.	67(58.8 %)	39(34.2 %)	8(7%)
Most participants felt that their opinions positively influenced decision making in panchayat meetings.	52(45.6 %)	42(36.8 %)	20(17.5 %)
The participants noted that they performed roles such as planning, implementation, supervision, and community mobilization as GP members.	56(49.1 %)	18(15.7 %)	40(35.1 %)
Participant Involvement in Major Family Economic Decision	60 (52.6%)	43 (37.7 %)	11 (9.6 %)
Participant Distribution by Panchayat Support Programs	55 (48.2 %)	41 (36.0 %)	5 (4.3)
Participants by Role in Promoting Local Government Participation	51 (44.7 %)	8 (7.0 %)	55 (48.2%)
Participants by their Reasons for Facing Problems	81 (71.1 %)	3 (2.6 %)	30 (26.3%)
Participants by their Type of Election Involvement	102 (89.4 %)	7 (6.1 %)	5 (4.3%)

Table 4: Distribution of Participants by Involvement in Panchayat Activities and Socio-Economic Empowerment (n=114).

Variables	No	Yes
Participants by Independent Decision-Making in Official Roles	22(19.2 %)	92 (80.7 %)
Participants by Women's Training Programmes	86 (75.4 %)	28 (24.6 %)
Participants by Independent Work in Panchayat	16(14%)	98(86%)
Participants by Experience in Tackling Social Problems	38(33.3%)	76(66.7%)
Participants by Current Local Institution Involvement	79(69.3 %)	35(30.7 %)
Participants by Community Welfare Programmes	95 (83.3 %)	19 (16.7 %)
Participants by Improvement in Family Economic Status After Participation	66 (57.9 %)	48 (42.1 %)
Participants by Personal Income	86(75.4 %)	28 (24.6 %)
Participants by Decision-Making on Income Utilization	16 (14.0 %)	98 (86.0 %)
Participants by Initiation or Assistance in Local Programmes	13 (11.4 %)	101 (88.6 %)
Participants by Women's Economic Empowerment	90 (78.9 %)	24 (21.1 %)
Participants by Economic Development Schemes	71 (62.3 %)	43 (37.7 %)
Participants by Problem-Resolving Ability	11(9.6 %)	103(90.4 %)
Participants by Problem-Facing Status	29 (25.4 %)	85 (74.6 %)
Participants by Election Process Activity	11(9.6 %)	103(90.4 %)

Table 4 shows how the participants are spread out depending on their involvement in Panchayat activities and their level of socio-economic empowerment. The data shows that most female representatives said they make their own decisions in their official roles (80.7%) and work independently in the Panchayat (86%). However, their involvement in women's training programs was 24.6% and in community welfare initiatives was

16.7%, which is much lower. Most of the people surveyed had experience working on social problems (66.7%) and were busy starting or helping with local programs (88.6%). Even though this was the case, only 21.1% of people felt they had economic power, and just 24.6% said they had their own income. Even though 86% were part of decisions about how to use income, less than half (42.1%) noticed that their family's money situation got better because of their work with the Panchayat.

Also, not many people took part in economic development programs, with only 37.7% involved, and just over a third, or 30.7%, interacted with other

local organizations. Most people showed good problem-solving abilities (90.4%) and were actively involved in the election process (90.4%).

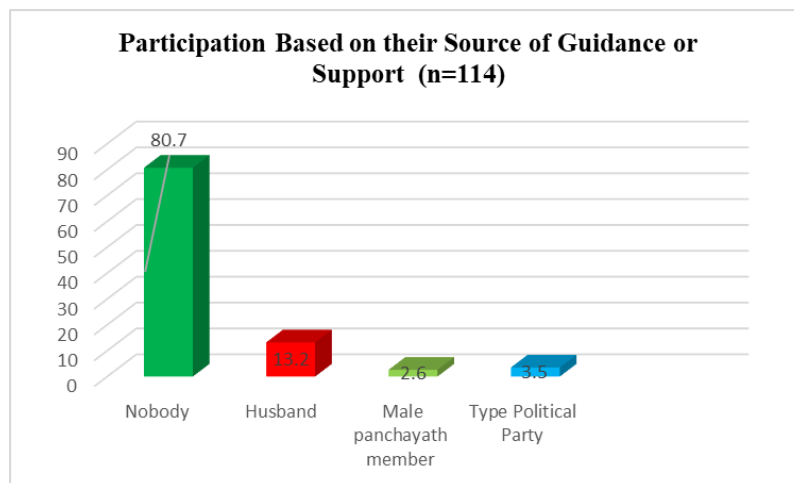


Figure 1: Participation Based on their Source of Guidance or Support (n=114).

Figure 1 shows among those unable to make independent decisions, 80.7% report no external influence. Husbands influence 13.2%, reflecting

traditional dynamics, while 3.5% each are guided by male Panchayat members or political parties.

Table 5: Participants based on their Family Decision-Making Role (n=114).

Variables	Categories	Frequency (%)
Marriage of her children	No	15(13.1%)
	Yes	99(86.8%)
buying property	No	16(14%)
	Yes	98(86.0%)
family dispute	No	17(14.9%)
	Yes	97(85.1%)

Table 5 illustrates the significant involvement of elected women representatives in key household decision-making roles among the participants. A substantial majority reported active engagement in major family decisions, with 86.8% participating in arranging their children's marriages, 86% involved in property acquisition decisions, and 85.1%

engaged in resolving family disputes.

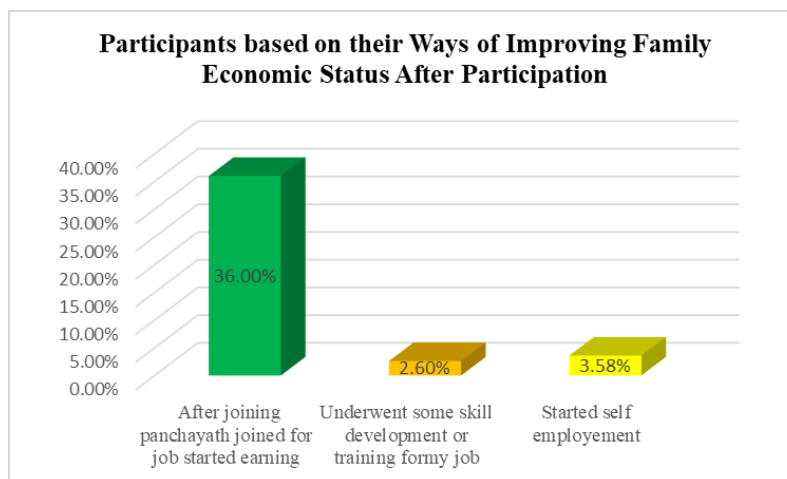


Figure 2: Participants based on their Ways of Improving Family Economic Status after Participation (n=114).

Table Figure 2 shows that most of the GP members who saw economic improvement started making money after joining the Panchayat. This could be because they got new jobs or became more involved in local governance. A smaller group

(2.6%) worked on improving their skills or getting training to get a better job, while 3.5% started their own businesses.

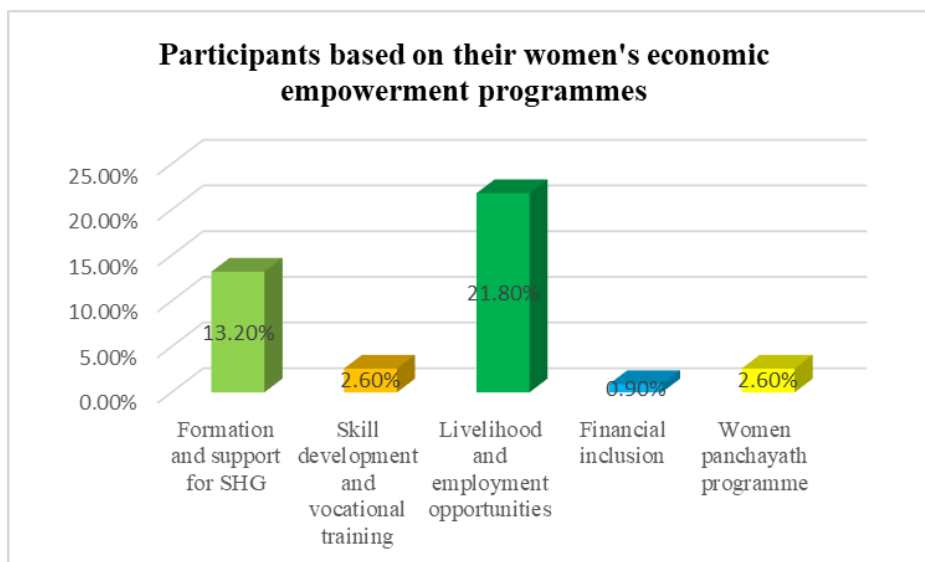


Figure 3: Participants Based on Their Women's Economic Empowerment Programmes (N = 114).

Figure 3 illustrates that among the 21.1% of GP members who advocated for economic empowerment programs for women, 13.2% concentrated on the establishment and support of Self-Help Groups (SHGs), underscoring a substantial effort to cultivate community-based

support systems. Smaller proportions of members were engaged in skill development and vocational training (2.6%), livelihood and employment opportunities (1.8%), financial inclusion (0.9%), and women's Panchayat programs (2.6%).

Table 6: Association between Socio-Demographic Variables and Level of Empowerment among Elected Women Representatives (n = 114).

Socio-Demographic Variables	χ^2 Value	df	p-value	Significance
Age	12.48	6	0.041	Significant*
Marital Status	2.16	4	0.706	Not Significant
Religion	3.82	4	0.431	Not Significant
Education	18.73	8	0.016	Significant*
Monthly Income	14.29	6	0.027	Significant*
Type of Family	3.11	4	0.539	Not Significant

Table 6 shows that there is a statistically significant association between age ($\chi^2 = 12.48$, $p = 0.041$), education ($\chi^2 = 18.73$, $p = 0.016$), and monthly income ($\chi^2 = 14.29$, $p = 0.027$) with the level of empowerment among elected women representatives ($p < 0.05$). This indicates that women who are middle-aged, better educated, and economically stable tend to have higher empowerment levels.

However, marital status ($p = 0.706$), religion ($p = 0.431$), and type of family ($p = 0.539$) did not show a

significant association with empowerment,

4. DISCUSSION

This study explored the multifaceted empowerment of elected women representatives in Gram Panchayats, concentrating on their autonomy in decision-making, socio-economic empowerment, leadership development, and community engagement. The findings underscore both significant advancements and ongoing structural challenges.

One of the study's key findings was that 80.7% of

participants reported a high level of independent decision-making. This figure exceeds the results reported by Kumar and Kidwai (2018) in Uttar Pradesh and Singh *et al.* (2020) in Rajasthan, where women's autonomy was often constrained by patriarchal norms. The relatively greater autonomy observed in this study may suggest increasing awareness, support from localized governance, or gradual shifts in gender norms within the Dakshina Kannada context.

Despite this autonomy, a significant number of participants reported being influenced by husbands or male political figures. This observation is consistent with Chaudhary (2017), who noted the ongoing issue of proxy representation in local governance. The simultaneous presence of autonomy and male influence indicates that political inclusion does not necessarily equate to full empowerment, supporting the argument that representation alone is not enough.

The study also revealed that a significant majority of women were actively involved in household decision-making, especially in areas like marriage arrangements, property decisions, and dispute resolution. These findings align with Rani and Sinha (2019), who observed similar trends in Bihar. Nonetheless, the persistent exclusion of a minority of women highlights ongoing cultural and structural barriers, as also noted by Desai and Joshi (2016).

The findings indicate moderate progress in leadership and personality development. While some participants reported high levels of leadership and administrative skills, a significant number showed only low or moderate development. This observation aligns with Buch (2018), who highlighted that participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions boosts confidence and leadership skills, though the degree of empowerment is heavily influenced by education, exposure, and institutional support.

In the present study, economic empowerment emerged as the most constrained dimension of empowerment. Only a small number of participants reported generating personal income or experiencing significant improvements in their

family's economic status. These findings align with Jha and Mathur (2017), who identified structural barriers such as limited access to economic resources, training, and livelihood opportunities for elected women representatives. The low participation in economic development schemes further highlights the gap between political representation and financial independence.

The findings reveal a strong commitment to addressing social issues and grassroots initiatives, with many participants actively supporting community programs. This level of social engagement surpasses that reported by Patel and Sharma (2015) in Gujarat, indicating a positive trend in grassroots activism among women representatives. Nevertheless, the relatively low involvement in organized welfare programs suggests that institutional participation remains limited, despite high levels of individual engagement.

5. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that although elected female representatives in the Gram Panchayats of Dakshina Kannada district exhibit substantial involvement in decision-making and family matters, their overall empowerment, particularly in the economic and community domains, remains constrained. The majority of participants originated from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, characterized by low levels of education and income, with a significant proportion being unemployed or engaged in traditional, low-paying occupations. While the majority reported independent decision making in their official capacities and active participation in family decisions, only a minority benefited from training programs or experienced significant economic advancement following their involvement in the Panchayat. Efforts towards women's economic empowerment have primarily focused on the formation of Self-Help Groups with limited engagement in skill development or livelihood initiatives.

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