



## Women in panchayati raj institutions: A study of women pradhans in North and South 24 Parganas districts of West Bengal

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### Abstract

Panchayati Raj Institution has a significant role in the field of decentralization of governance in India. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1992) established a three-tier Panchayati Raj system across India. One of the most important aims of this amendment was to participate women in grassroot level government and a 33.33% (one-third) seat was reserved for them. Later, 50% reservation for women in Panchayat Raj Institution has been provided as per The West Bengal Panchayat (Amendment) Act 2012. These amendments brought a great opportunity for women to participate in local self-government. There is no doubt that women are participating in politics through reservation; but the question is still existed that 'are they truly empowered'? We have tried to find out that answer in this study. This study is based on elected women Pradhans in North and South 24 Parganas district of West Bengal.

**Keywords:** Participation, women, pradhans, political empowerment, panchayati raj institution

### Introduction

Women empowerment means empowering women socially, economically, educationally and politically to break the male domination and establish women rights in the society. By active participation of women in politics, a woman can become politically empowered. Women political empowerment is closely related with a nation's welfare and development. Till 1992, elected women members in Gram Panchayats in the state constituted less than one per cent of total representatives. But the picture has changed drastically since 1993 when women were elected to the reserved constituencies of the GPs for the first time. According to many, Women are better represented at the local level rather than at the state or national level. Reservation for women in local government is not just an opportunity, rather it's a responsibility to nurture their capability by effectively participating in solving the community problems and local area development process.

### Local Self-Government and Women's Reservation in West Bengal

In 1957, the two-tier Panchayat system was enacted through the West Bengal Panchayat Act. In the village level there was the Gram Panchayat and the old Union board, and in the place of the Gram Panchayat and the old Union board, there was to be formed the Anchal-Panchayat. The four-tier panchayat system (Gram Panchayat, Anchal Panchayat, Anchalik Parishad and Zilla parishad) was inaugurated in West Bengal on Mahatma Gandhi's birthday (2 October) in the year 1964 by the passage of the West Bengal Zilla Parishad Act in 1963. For various reasons the system did not work after some time and these bodies were superseded in late sixties. Replacing the earlier four-tier Panchayati Raj system, the West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1973 introduced a three-tier structure with Zilla Parishad at the district level, Panchayat Samiti at the block level, and Gram Panchayat at the Anchal (cluster of villages) level. The Act came into effect across West Bengal on 1st January 1974. The three-tier panchayat system was inaugurated in June 1973 by the West Bengal Panchayat Act passed that year. It consists

of Gram panchayats, Panchayat samitis and Zilla parishads. Through the Constitutional Amendment act (73rd) in 1992 a three - tier panchayat system was established in all over India. One of the primary objectives of this amendment was to ensure women's participation in grassroots governance and a 33.33% (one-third) seat was reserved for them. On 27th August, 2009 the Indian cabinet approved a proposal for enhancing the reservation of directly elected seats for women from one third to fifty percent in all the tiers through an amendment Article 243(D) (3) of the constitution. The proposed amendment seeks to replace this phrase of "not less than one third" with the words "not less than half". Later in West Bengal, 50% reservation for women in Panchayat Raj Institution has been provided as per The West Bengal Panchayat (Amendment) Act 2012.

### Objective of the Study

In PRIs, Pradhan or elected members - whether they are men or women, they have to do many specific tasks. But a woman cannot just work according to the rules in the management of the Panchayat. She was not elected just as a woman. She was elected to use this administrative power to lead the fight to bring forward the backward half of the society, the women who are victims of various discriminations. So, the elected women members must be more active and socially conscious. If she does not work to connect the women of her constituency with the development who elected through reserved seats are made into mere instruments to implement their party's decisions, then women are being deprived of the benefits of reservation. So, the main objectives of this study are-

- To find out how they are participating in the management of the Panchayat.
- To find out how many of them are raising issues for women and local problems.

### Conceptualising Political Empowerment

This study conceptualises political empowerment as a multidimensional construct comprising:

- 1. Institutional Knowledge:** Awareness of PRI roles, procedures, and administrative hierarchies.
- 2. Decision-Making Autonomy:** Capacity to act independently without coercion or proxy control.
- 3. Issue-Raising Capacity:** Ability to articulate constituency and gender-specific concerns.
- 4. Freedom from Proxy Leadership:** Absence of de facto authority exercised by male relatives or party actors.

### Methodology

**Research Design:** A mixed-method empirical approach combining quantitative descriptive analysis and qualitative interpretation was adopted.

**Study Area** The districts of North 24 Parganas and South 24 Parganas were selected due to demographic diversity, political significance, and rural-urban variation.

### Sampling

- 75 elected and former women Pradhans were contacted.
- 40 participated in structured interviews.
- 35 declined participations, often citing lack of administrative involvement or reliance on male relatives.

This refusal pattern itself reflects structural constraints and is analytically significant.

### Data Collection

- Structured interview schedules
- Field observation
- Informal discussions

Details of interviewers are given in the table below

**Table 1:** UP- Upper Primary; MK- Madhyamik; HS- Higher Secondary; UG- Graduate

Designation	No	Age (in Years)				Category					Educational Qualification			
		25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	UR	OBC-A	OBC-B	SC	ST	UP	MK	HS	UG
Pradhan	26	12	10	2	2	4	4	2	16	---	4	8	8	6
Members (Ex- Pradhan)	14	4	4	4	2	---	2	---	8	4	---	8	2	4
Total	40	16	14	6	4	4	6	2	24	4	4	16	10	10

### Empirical Findings

**Institutional Knowledge:** All of the interviewed women don't have proper knowledge about PRI and its functions. 35% of the interviewed women visit office and involved in various activities regularly or irregularly, but they don't have any idea about it. They and their works are manipulated by their husbands or party members. 30% of interviewed women have a little knowledge about the system, but don't have the knowledge about all of its functions. They don't know the function of all of three tiers of PRIs. They are not familiar with the government officers in their panchayat area and blocks. And the rest of the women (35%) have proper knowledge about the system and their functions. They have the idea about PRI and all of its functions of three tiers. And they also know the government officers in their panchayat area and blocks with their names and tenures.

**Election and Political Socialisation:** Any kind of activity can't be done properly without any experience. So, the first thing is to notice that how many leaders have been selected with prior experience. 60% of women Pradhans who have been elected, have previously been involved in various political activities. They also used to participate in their own political party programs. Political connections of families played an important role in the political participation of most of them. On the other hand, the remaining 40% were directly nominated with no prior political experience. In this regard, the role of party leaders in their participation in politics can be observed. However, despite coming into politics under the influence of party leaders, later on, they have fought for elections voluntarily again with political interest and continued to manage the work after winning.

**Problems and Obstacles:** Regardless of their political participation, most of them (75%) regularly visit the

panchayat office after being elected. But, Gender discrimination in workplace is not new; PRIs is not exception of that. Even after elected as Pradhan, women have faced various obstacles. Almost one-third of interviewed women experienced various problems in their own workplaces. But none of them faced any obstacle from their family members for their political activity and administrative work. One of them has been repeatedly prevented from raising issues because she is a woman and the same time belongs to the poor and tribal. A woman has taken legal action after being sexually harassed by her party member. After all of that, none of them resigned. All of them are working at their workplaces.

**Patterns of Participation:** From the interviewed women, we can divide them in four groups about their ability to raising issues in panchayat meetings and various activities. In first groups of women (20%) not raising issues in their working area and they thought they have no ability to do that. The second group of women (35%) who have not raised issues yet and they don't know their ability about it. The third group of women (15%) sometimes raised the issues for social welfare and activities. But they don't specially think for women or girls. And finally, the fourth and active group (30%) who regularly raised issues for social welfare and activities as well as actively raised gender-specific concerns such as domestic violence mediation, prevention of child marriage, welfare access for widows, sanitation and water access etc...

### Conclusion

Most of the women Pradhan in PRIs in North and South 24 Parganas are not active in their daily office and governance. But 35% of elected Pradhans have the knowledge about the whole system and activity; they are doing their work very actively. Almost one-fourth raised issues for social welfare

and activities as well as they shout for women's problems and issues. Before 1992, the number was less than one per cent of total representatives. As a result of this observation, we can say that women's reservation in rural politics is not completely unsuccessful. A section of them has been working in politics with great success.

### Recommendations

The party leaders have to focus on some issues to nominate their women representatives, like don't choose a woman (who have not any idea about politics) as alternatives of her father, husband or father-in-law; treat the women members equally. The women Pradhans also have to focus on some issues. They have to take their trainings properly. They have to visit office regularly, attending the meetings sincerely, raising issues for social welfare and development etc... They must strive to transform their socio-political status from marginalization to equality.

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