

A DECADE OF WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT  
THROUGH  
LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN INDIA  
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*Women's Participation in Panchayati Raj — Case Study of  
Gurgaon District in Haryana*

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## **Introduction**

Before I begin with my presentation, I would like to thank the Institute of Social Sciences (ISS) and SAP Canada for providing me this platform to share my research findings. My presentation is a case study of Gurgaon District of Haryana, a state that has the country's highest adverse sex ratio and is a male-dominated society. The paper reflects on the nature of women's participation in the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) — from almost negligible to 33% reservation of seats for women in Haryana. The methodology to achieve the objectives of the study and parameters adopted to study participation are discussed. The findings of the study are reflected with a focus on how women's participation is perceived by the public and elected members. Specific suggestions emerge for better participation of the women, which conclude the paper.

### **From Negligible to 33%**

It is a known fact that the participation of women in the field of politics in the Indian state of Haryana has indeed been very insignificant. In fact, before the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment to the Constitution their numbers in the PRI were simply 'negligible'. From negligible to 33% of the total seats can be seen as a big shift for the women of Haryana. It thus becomes important to know the profile of the women who are elected as members, the nature and the effectiveness of their participation, their level of awareness of their rights and responsibilities, their concerns regarding issues pertaining to women, their future aspirations, and finally how the public and men members perceive their participation.

### **Methodology**

A quick reflection on the methodology used. The study has been carried out in the Gurgaon District of the state of Haryana. 'Multistage purposive sampling' has been used to select the tiers. This includes one Zila Parishad (ZP), two Panchayat Samitis (PS) and eight Gram Panchayats (GP). The PS and the GP were matched on the basis of the sex and education of the heads of the tiers. All the elected women members from the selected ZP, PS and GP were covered. An equal number of men members were selected. Further, a sample from the electorate of the eight villages was taken using convenient sampling. An effort was made to study the views of both women and men electorate.

Both quantitative and qualitative data has been collected for the purpose of the study. For this purpose, three different schedules were framed: Interview Schedule for the elected members; Interview Schedule for the public; and, Observation Schedule for observation of the proceedings of the meetings. Total elected members included in the study added to 123, out of which 116 were available for response. Men and women members were represented in equal numbers. As well, a sample of 100 was taken from the public, which covered both men and women.

### **On Participation**

The term 'participation' has been defined in various ways, such as involvement, influence, initiative, voluntary effort, etc. Attendance in meetings is one of the most

commonly used variables for studying participation in majority of the studies. Buch, MARG, Stephan and Sekaran have used some additional parameters for studying participation, such as supervision of work, meeting government officials, and handling police related matters. Participation, in the present context, has been studied on the basis of specific determinants, namely:

- functioning of the Panchayati Raj System;
- attendance of women members in meetings;
- nature of the issues handled and discussed;
- time invested in village matters;
- members' performance in meetings;
- support of the family;
- gains from participation; and,
- political aspirations of the women members

### **Findings of the Study**

The major findings of the study show that:

- The mean *age* of the elected women members is 44.5 years, with relatively more women members in the age group of 46–55 years.
- All the elected women members were *married*.
- The average *number of children* per elected women member is 4.22. The average age of the oldest child is 23.87 years and that of the youngest child is 14.72 years.
- Majority of the elected members are Hindus by *religion* and belong to various *castes*.
- As high as 55% of the elected women members have been to school, and two of the elected women members were post-graduates. This is indicative of the fact that educated women are encouraged to participate in the PRI. In comparison, a large majority (90%) of the men members has attended school. There is a significant difference in the education level of the women and men members.
- The majority of the women members are housewives, while the men members are occupied in diverse *occupations* such as agriculture, business and service.
- Almost equal number of women members belonged to the lowest *income* strata of Rs.10,000–20,000 per annum and the highest income strata with annual income of Rs.50,000 and above. A similar trend was seen in the case of women members holding land. Those without any land and those with more than five acres of land were almost the same in number.
- Regarding the political profile of the members, a large number of the women members were first time entrants into their present political positions. No one from their families had ever held any political position. They were not very active in

working towards village welfare activities prior to getting elected, and were found to be low in their political awareness (e.g., on political aspects such as Panchayati Raj Act, political parties working in the village and reservation of seats for women). The men members were certainly more aware, because of their being longer in the field of politics.

Other findings included:

- On average, 53% of the elected women members were observed to attend the meetings.
- The majority of them said that they decided who will attend the meetings.
- Sickness and personal reasons accounted for more than 50% of the reasons for non-attendance in the meetings.
- In the case of GP meetings, socio-cultural constraints and attitude inhibited some of the younger women from attending the meetings.
- Regarding the nature of issues handled by women members, it was observed that they addressed the same problems as men members, but with lesser force.
- The 'public' women public found it easier to discuss their problems with women members rather than with men members.
- The women members were not able to take up women-related issues, such as health and education, in a major way in the meetings.
- Women-related issues appeared in lesser frequency in the agenda items.
- The men member felt more positive about the participation of women than the women members themselves.
- The women members have support from their families.
- They are high on political aspiration and are politically more ambitious, in comparison to their men counterparts.

### **Opinion on Participation of Women Members**

On being asked about the perceived advantages of women's participation in the Panchayati Raj, a variety of responses were received from the elected members. A large majority of the respondents felt that it was beneficial to have women in the decision-making forums, as this would facilitate representation of matters concerning them which otherwise are forgotten in the meetings. Family development was mentioned as another positive aspect. Some of the comments given are listed below:

- the reservation for women should be increased to 50%;
- it will encourage women to come out of the four walls of their homes;
- purdah system (veil) will get abolished;
- women's issues such as dowry and divorce will be brought to the forefront;
- women can communicate with women heads/members on their problems;
- women sarpanch attend to our needs faster (e.g., lanes have been constructed, water supply is restored);
- an anganwadi has been opened in the village because of the efforts of the woman sarpanch;
- the economically poor women will benefit more as otherwise they could not think of contesting; and,
- various social issues such as dowry, education, family problems and water supply problems, which were generally being ignored by men, are more actively addressed by the women members.

Those who viewed the reservation negatively gave the following reasons:

- women are illiterate;
- they have narrow vision;
- their men work as proxy for them;
- they do what their husbands tell them to do;
- they are in veil which restricts participation and mobility;
- reservation is simply wastage of 33% seats;
- they do not come to attend the meetings regularly.

### **Suggestions**

From the study, some specific suggestions emerge. First, education and training need to be provided to the women members so that they are made aware of their rights and duties as panchayat members. It is also important that the men members are given training in ways to conduct themselves and be supportive of the women members' presence and their participation. Awareness programmes need to be organized for the public at large, family members and government officials to foster ways to enhance better participation from the women members.