

Factors Influencing Participation of Women in Panchayati Raj Institution: A Study of Rajasthan

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Abstract: *The present study is an attempt to know the extent of participation of women elected representative in Panchayats and the factors influencing participation of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions. Purposive sampling technique was adopted for selecting the sample consisted of 41 women elected representatives from two blocks of Karauli district of Rajasthan i.e. Hindaun and Nadoti. The tool used for obtaining information was an interview schedule. Case study and in-depth interview was also done to validate the quantitative study with qualitative. This study results shows that the reservation for women can be an important impetus to women's empowerment in Rajasthan, India on local level but it is not a guarantee for participation of the elected women. Women were actively prevented from participating in panchayat activities by male family members and other members of the panchayat itself. The male members often insisted on attending meetings in place of Elected Women Representatives (EWRs). Male panchayat members took advantage of the low levels of literacy and lack of knowledge and experience to take decisions in the absence of EWRs and tried to keep them out of important meetings. Many elected women complained that their suggestions were not considered seriously nor were they consulted while decisions were being made. Some felt that their views were ignored only because they are women. Husbands handle all the work and activities and were pressurized by their husbands to approve their decisions. The goal of women's empowerment will not be accomplished by reservations alone. The study also tried to find out the factors influencing the decisions making of women elected representatives. To expedite and speed up this process it is essential to implement some supplementary policies which encourage the self-confidence of women, build women's capabilities and remove operational obstacles. To enable women to participate and function effectively at every stage, capacity building support was needed from the beginning of the election process and through the tenure of the elected representatives. An enabling environment was required for the recognition of women as leaders and the elimination of proxy candidates.*

Keywords: Participation, Panchayati Raj, Governance, Women, EWR

1. Introduction and Review of Literatures

In Indian politics the Panchayat have always a major role to play and the panchayati Raj institutions have the responsibility to give good governance in rural areas. Women representation in gram panchayat is visualized as an impact of 73rd Constitutional Amendment which advocates for one-third to 50 per cent of the seats to women members in Gram Panchayat. It was a land mark decision in different initiatives of women empowerment through political means because the socio-economic status of women in patriarchal society of India is still not improved even after six decades of Independence.

On April 24, 1993 Panchayati Raj was inaugurated, after the 73rd Amendment Act came into force it has been an uncertain and rolling journey for Panchayats. The structure and process of Panchayats are equally fundamental as they bring to bear and give the right responsibility to member therein to perform. If the overall scenario of Panchayats was largely despairing, another disquieting aspect is that almost one half of rural population (women) was virtually kept out of Panchayat arena. In the traditional Caste Panchayats, Village Panchayats and in the British Scheme of local governments women remained entirely excluded. (Nagendra 2004)

In establishing Panchayats most state government apprehend the provision of co-option of two women in case no women could come through direct elections. Prevalent practice during 1960's and 1970's was the co-option of two women at best for each PR body, as women could not come

through direct elections, even though the requirement of co-option of women was not followed uniformly for all PR bodies and in every state, for instance Uttar Pradesh Jammu and Kashmir, did not follow the scheme (*Institute of Social Studies Trust 1995*).

At the outset, women's involvement in PRIs was dominated by two inter-related themes: representation of women in these bodies and effectiveness and outcome of their participation. The co-option method, of course provided one convenient scope for the dominant caste/class leaders to install their family women such as wife; mother as their yoke and the very purpose of the policy was led to fall flat. It took 43 years to realize and recognize that women are yet another disadvantaged group and they also require a solution to their discrimination. Women have received a preferential consideration and that too only in the sphere of political representation and that again in local governments (*Rao 1996*).

The system of governance in India has undergone big changes in the last fifteen years with the implementation of quotas for women in local parliaments, the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). Today India has more female politicians than the rest of the world together. (*Srivastava & Singh: 2001*) This could be a big potential for development. However the knowledge about their possibilities to participate is scarce. India sometimes appears to be an "exception" to many accepted ideas and laws within Political Science (*Strulik 2005:1*). For example *Inkinen 2006* shows that the wealthiest people in India are the ones least likely to vote in elections, results that do not go in line

with research on most of others electoral democracies. (Sundström, Aksel: 2008).

As noted the literature on women in political bodies argues that representation of women is in itself not sufficient (Hust 2004:27). A formal seat is not the same thing as the possibilities for an active participation. In a context of poverty this situation is even more obvious. As Hust discusses, in India most women undeniably lag behind men; women are less educated, less exposed, more dependent, and command lesser capabilities than the men, (Hust 2004:31). However the theoretical response to the question of the possibilities for women's effective power is quite scarce. The term "proxy women" is often used in the same way as "token", of elected women with only formal power (for example in Omvedt 2005, Chattopadhyay & Duflo 2003, Mishra 1999). The concept has been defined as "figurehead elected women representatives who are supposed to do the bidding of male members of the family rather than take their own decisions" (SAP Network 2003). Dahlerup writes that the argument is that women are dependent on their husbands and families and/or their parties (Dahlerup 2006a:14, Dahlerup 2005:149).

Palanithuri (1997) in a case study 'New Panchayati Raj System at Work: An Evaluation of Tamil Nadu' reported that they were not informed or invited to the meetings in male headed Gram Panchayat. Women members have always projected the issues relating to women. It is common that the husbands of the members used to accompany them (women) when they come to attend the meetings.

Pai (1998) according to his field notes in Meerut District 'Pradhanis in New Panchayats' revealed that many of the Pradhanis were illiterate and only able to put their signatures on official papers. Regarding their roles, the study revealed that they were almost insignificant in the functioning of Gram and Block Panchayat bodies. As they belonged to better off families in the villages, they do not work outside their homes. They agreed to stand for elections due to family pressure and also the decision of their community and not because they were keen to do so. The reservations provided by the Government had forced them to contest elections; provision of reservation has not led them to participate in decision-making in local bodies.

Nambiar (2001) in her study of 'Making the Gram Sabha Work' noted the difference utilities in organizing the Gram Sabha. Majority of women reported that they were not informed or invited to the meetings. While other were hesitant in participating in meetings in the presence of a large number of elder members. However, they have to forego their day's wages or household duties just to identify beneficiaries as to convey what the gram Panchayat would do in future.

The **objectives** of the study were to:

- Understand the socio-economic, educational background and other demographic profile of the elected women representatives in GP's of the study area.

- Assess the level of awareness of the elected women on their roles and responsibilities and various development programmes.
- Study the involvement and problems faced by elected women representatives in decision making.
- Study the factors influencing participation of women in panchayati raj institution

2. Methodology

This study was conducted in two blocks of Karauli district of Rajasthan i.e. Hindaun and Nadoti. Purposive sampling technique was adopted for selecting the sample of 41 EWR from two blocks. The tool used for obtaining information was an interview schedule. Case study and in-depth interview was also done to validate the quantitative data with qualitative. The secondary data was collected through review of different documents.

3. Results & Discussion

The study is based on the theme of women empowerment through gram panchayat and assessment is done on the basis of their socio-economic status, representation in Gram panchayat (GP), awareness level, participation in decision and their existing problems.

Socio-economic status: Factors like low educational status (22 per cent illiterate and 51 per cent were just primary passed) of women elected representatives (WER) and marriage (85 per cent married) are not able to inhibit women from seeking a politics as career. But it is important to note that four of five (80 per cent) women were in the age group of 25 to 55 years and more than three-fourth belong to vulnerable social caste categories (SC, ST and OBC). Nuclear family culture is on rise in India, and here also 71 per cent WER are living in nuclear families. But the participation of WER in economic activities was just 49 per cent as 51 per cent were house-wife. (Refer figure 1 and 2)

Now-a-days educated young girls of the village don't want to be the candidate at Gram Panchayats. They give more importance to their own works rather than village-works. Taking any jobs outside the village is their priority rather than to be the member of village panchayats. Initially there was an intention among the educated people to stand in the panchayat election. Now highly educated women carefully avoid the works of Panchayats. Even some women do not want to join the village party politics. Some women of this village are so much educated that they are engaged in teaching or other jobs but they avoid panchayats. They think that joining panchayats means involvement with party politics. Shanti Devi, Sarpanch, Jatwara G.P. Hindaun

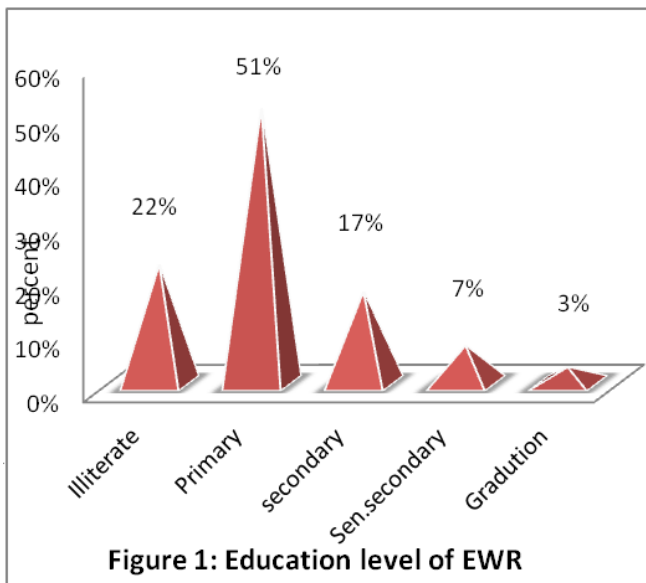


Figure 1: Education level of EWR

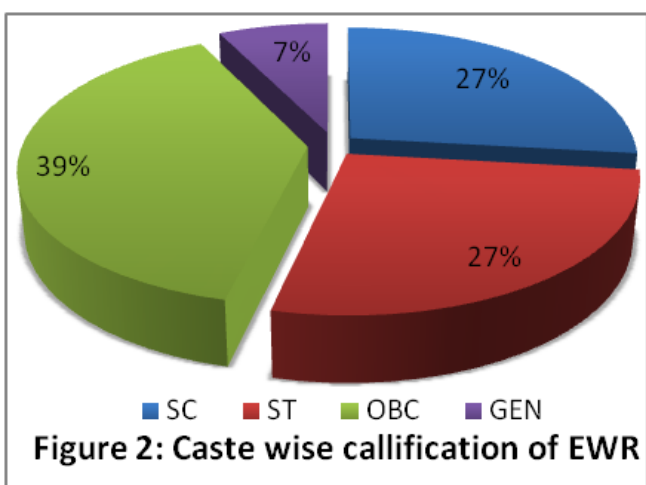


Figure 2: Caste wise callification of EWR

Source of Inspiration: Figure indicates the sources of inspiration of respondents into the public life due to the influence of varied factors, such as self interest, compulsion of family members and others. It is evident from the figure 3 that husband encouragement (44 per cent) was the principal factor responsible for large-scale induction of women into Panchayats. It is clear that, husband and family members (32 per cent) and village leader (15 per cent) played an important role in motivating women to enter in panchayat politics.

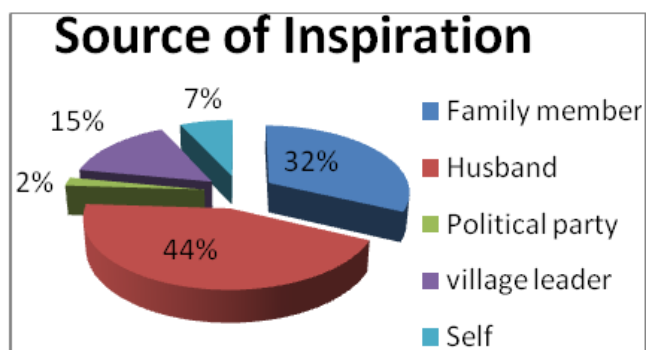


Figure 3: Source of inspiration

Table 1: Number of Times Respondents Elected to Panchayats

No. of times elected	No	Percent
first time	30	73
second time	4	10
third times	7	17
	41	100

Awareness: From the above table 1, it can be inferred that nearly 3 out of 4 (73 per cent) of the respondents are representing their GP for the first time, only 10 per cent are representing their GP for the second time and rest one fifth (17 per cent) are representing their ward for the third time. Thus majority of the members are first entrants to Panchayats and hence are less experienced. In-depth analysis prevailed that only 5 per cent were aware of the 73rd constitutional amendment. The awareness about discharging the responsibilities was also very much varied as only less than one fourth (22 per cent) shared their role in identification of the problem of the GP, though 39 per cent EWR said that they raised problem in the meeting and the problem have been solved. Around one fourth (24 per cent) opined that their role is to link people to Government Projects & schemes, whereas 6 per cent EWR thought that their role is to take initiation to complete the incomplete project.

Participation: The participation of the women was recorded in terms of members of SHG, members in the committees of GP and attendance at the meetings of GP or member of any other local organisation. Figure 4 depict that 44 per cent EWR didn't have any sort of participation and out of those who have any participation only 27 per cent participate regularly and are active (figure 5). The key causes mentioned for poor participation of EWR includes male dominance (34 per cent), lack of political experience (22 per cent) and gender discrimination (17 per cent).

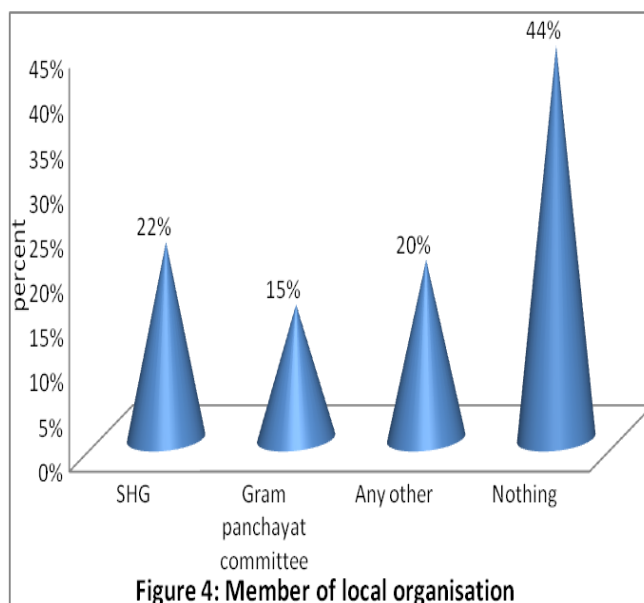


Figure 4: Member of local organisation

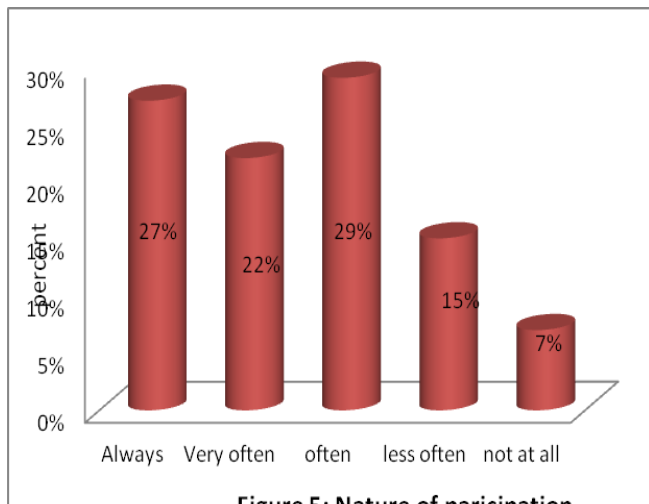


Figure 5: Nature of participation

Decision making: The ability to think and take independent decisions is an important dimension in the empowerment process. It also depends to a large extent on the social and cultural background of the individual as well as the values of the society. Better level of awareness and providing opportunities for participation in public sphere combined with an enabling environment could lead to effective decision making among women. The barriers in women participation are also hindering them in decision making due to which only one third (34 per cent) WER responded about their active involvement in decision making.

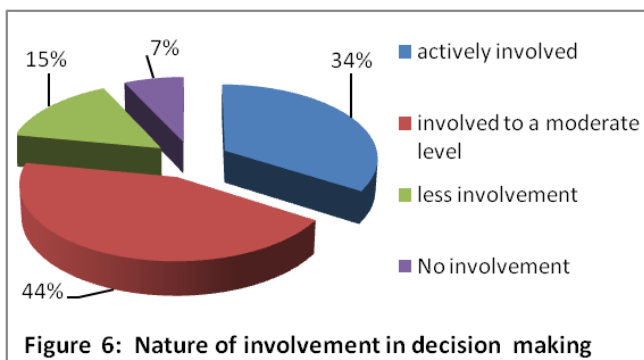


Figure 6: Nature of involvement in decision making

Male dominance: Although the male members encouraged them fighting election but once after getting elected the male members (husband of elected women representatives) take advantage by keeping them out of important meetings and attending the meetings in place of EWRs and implement their decisions. Some respondents also felt that their views are ignored only because they are women. Husbands (34 per cent) handle their work and pressurized them to approve their decisions. 17 per cent says that gender discrimination exists in panchayat. The male dominance is proved by the fact that only 56 per cent EWRs told that they are handling issues independently in wards and panchayats, while 44 per cent respondents was in the view that they don't have the capacity to handle issues independently in their constituencies.

Women empowerment: EWR are getting limited opportunities and freedom to participate in socio-cultural and educational activities. The women among upper castes and those belonging to economically well-off families have more participation in the panchayat activities as compare to other backward castes and poor women. However, on the issue of women empowerment the voice was strong as 57 per cent has favored it. Also, 56 per cent told that they are handling issues independently.

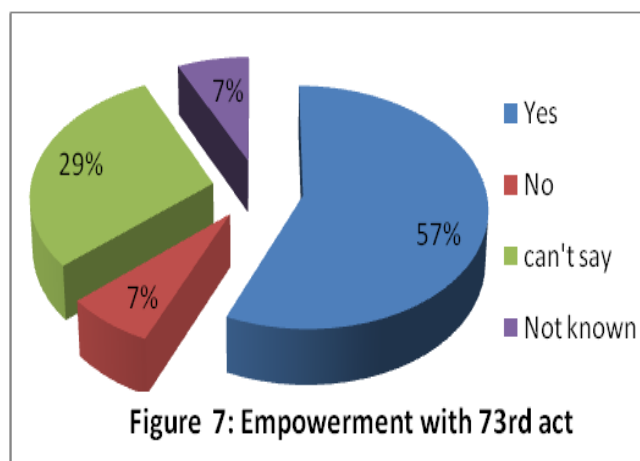


Figure 7: Empowerment with 73rd act

Table 2: Respondents handling issues independently

Handling Issues Independently	No	%
Yes	23	56
No	18	44
Total	41	100

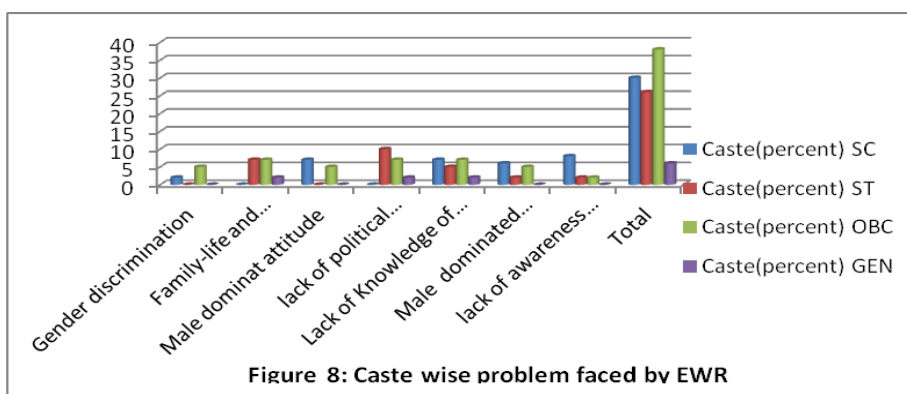


Figure 8: Caste wise problem faced by EWR

Educational level of WERs according to Caste

Education is such a powerful parameter, which is necessary for any value judgment, any political participation or any decision making. In traditional society control & access of any decision making lie in the hands of the elder people. By the study of age (figure 9) we would try to find out whether in this variant society baton of the relay race of Panchayat leadership has been handed over to the younger group by the elder group or not. This illustrates that the educational level of WERs in age group (25-35) is lower. EWR from both blocks have low level of education majority of them were only primary educated and only 2 percent member is graduated in both blocks, it clearly indicates that the participation of respondents with below secondary education tends to be more in local governance. The age group 45-55 has more percent in primary education. Age group, 36-45 yr, is average percent in all level education. It is an accepted fact that the overall educational status of female is quite low in all the GP.

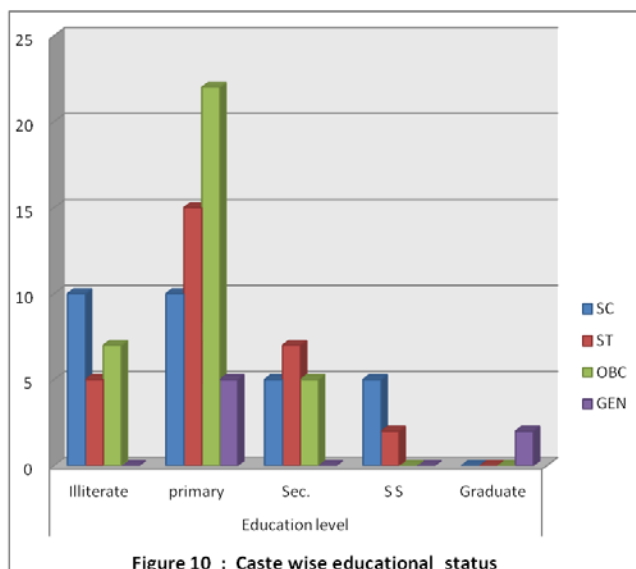


Figure 10 : Caste wise educational status

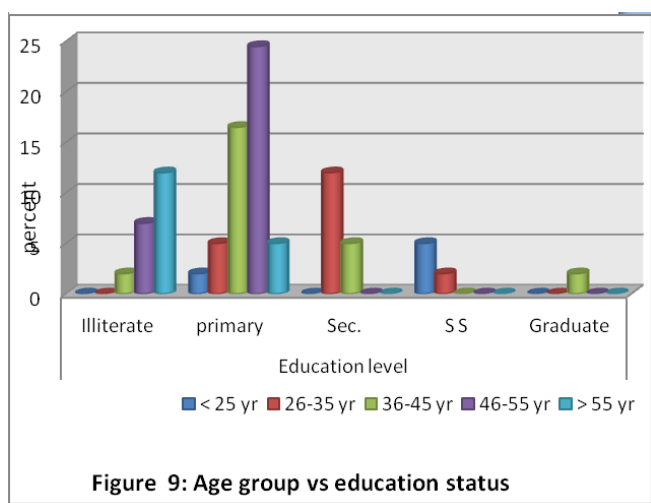


Figure 9: Age group vs education status

It is an accepted fact that the overall educational status of female is quite low in all the GP. It is further observed that participation in panchayat meeting according to caste, OBC is majority to participation in panchayat meeting 39 percent, SC and ST have same level of participation 27 percent, the GEN is less participate in panchayat meeting so that it clear that the OBC member is more participate in meeting as compare to other.

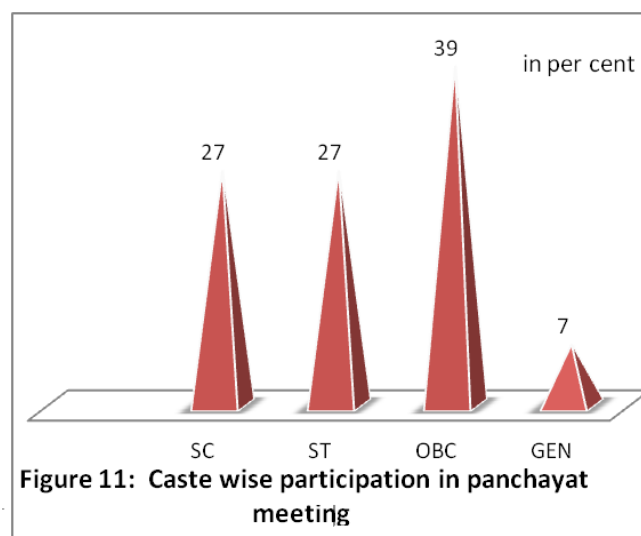


Figure 11: Caste wise participation in panchayat meeting

Does Caste influence decisions making?

Caste is another important parameter to guess the type of leadership according to social stratification. It denotes the members' placement, access and control in panchayats. Above figure 11 shows that over whelming majority of the respondents argued that they face various problems in politics. 38 percent member of OBC face problem, 30 percent SC member and 26 percent of ST. OBC face more problem as compare to other but the nature of problem is related to lack of knowledge and awareness whereas in SC member's nature of problem is related to gender, self confidence and upper caste pressures.

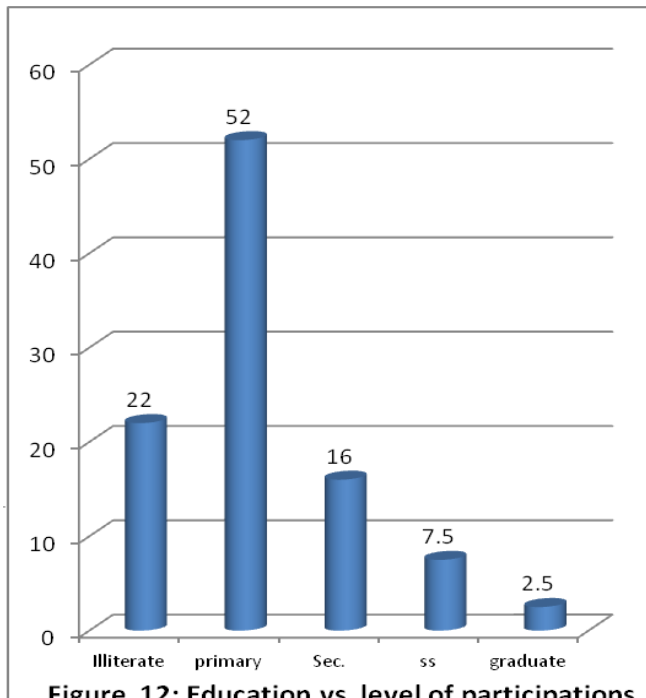


Figure 12: Education vs. level of participations

Does education influence decisions making?

Education is such a powerful parameter, which is necessary for any value judgments, any political participation or any decision making. Because decision power effected by the educational level of the member. Better understanding of rules, regulations and procedures of the panchayats and the various schemes are equally important for the women members to take proper decision at the panchayat level and these understanding from education. Fig 12 indicates that, 21 percent illiterate member involve in decision making where as half (51 percent) of them are educated up to primary level, where as 18 per cent were found to be secondary and only 3 percent are graduate. It clearly indicates that the participation of respondents with below secondary education tends to be more in a decentralized democracy. It is an accepted fact that the overall educational status of female is quite low in all the GP.

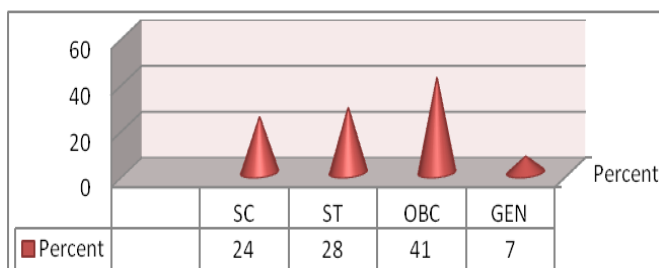


Figure 13: Nature of involvement in decisions making according to caste

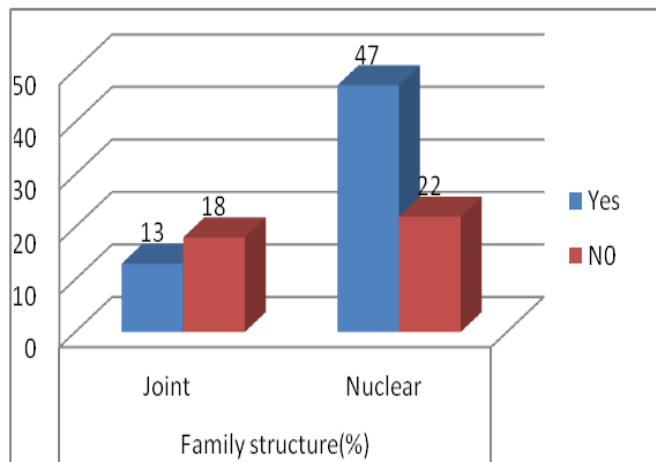


Figure 14: Family structure influencing in taking decisions

Does family structure influence decisions making?

Family is vital parameter for measuring social background of the leaders and type of family influence nature of women’s to handling issues independently because it build up one’s attitude, preference pattern and political outlook. It indicates the class in which the leader belongs to. Both parameter nature of issues handling and family type connect each other so there is an analysis of these parameter in this study. Above fig. 13 and 14 reveals that in joint family 13 percent EWR handle issues self and other 18 percent work with the support of other and same as nuclear family 47 percent work self and other 22 percent of nuclear family member work with the help of other. Hence it clearly indicate nuclear family member work self as compare to joint family because in joint family there are lot of social constraint.

4. Conclusion

The result of the above study shows that the reservation for women can be an important impetus to women’s empowerment in India in village level but it is not a guarantee for participation of the elected women. The goal of women’s empowerment cannot be accomplished only by giving reservation, the other social and demographic factors also influencing the EWR to participate and work actively in local self governance. To expedite and speed up this process it is essential to implement some supplementary policies which encourage the self-confidence of women, build their negotiation skills and remove operational obstacles in their participation and decision making. On the basis of the present study it cannot be stated that women are categorically empowered but also it cannot be denied that they have gained a certain extent of authority and confidence as a direct outcome of the women reservation in Gram panchayat.

5. Recommendations

In the light of the above study following specific recommendations can be made for the empowerment of women through their effective participation in political processes:

1. **Setting up Panchayat Resource Centres (Help-desk):** Panchayat Resource Centers in every block can be set up which can create awareness of the common people and PRI functionaries on developmental issues. This resource center should also be used as a help desk to the EWR for getting relevant information, all the Govt. circulars translated in local language and other relevant information so that the women functionaries can read it.
2. **Radio and other media as a tool for awareness creation and feedback:** A 15 minute radio programme in the local language should be broadcast every week, covering subjects like the role of panchayats in providing basic services and their monitoring, planning and budgeting, identification and verification of the BPL list, micro planning, domestic violence, legal provisions relating to the rights and protection of women, social practices and their impact on women. At the end of each programme, a dedicated telephone line can be allowed so that listeners can call with their queries. Besides that media both print as well as electronic can play an important role in creating awareness in the rural society. It can act as an agent of political socialization for inculcating the values of gender equality and gender justice
3. **Exposure visits and expansion of training:** Exposure visit to WER to the panchayats where women Sarpanch are doing good work can be visited so that they should get encouragement to do good work. Studies on women in politics have emphasized that contact with outside world makes women more alert and also active in the political process. There could be two ways of doing it. Firstly, interaction between enlightened rural women and illiterate elected one's should be encouraged. Secondly, these women could be taken out to the urban areas also and their interaction with educated urban elected women representatives be arranged.
4. **Attitudinal Change:** It is evident that men's attitude towards women's entry into politics has begun to change from that of total rejection to limited encouragement and in some cases even to active encouragement. This trend needs to be strengthened through orientation courses and training programmes for officials and elected representatives, both men and women. Besides there is a need to train the women leaders at regular intervals to enable them to manage the responsibilities assigned to them in the Panchayats at all the levels.
5. **Women Organisation:** The women should also be encouraged to organize themselves. The Mahila Mandals, Self Help Group in the village can be effective instruments to mobilize them for this purpose. Some successful women's organisations can also act as catalytic agents for encouraging the women's participation in social and political activities. The Government should provide finances and infrastructure to some of the deserving and successful women organizations to take up the responsibility of encouraging the women elected representatives. The leaders of women's movement in the country could also take up this task. They too can provide support to sensitize the rural women.
6. **Incentives:** Incentives play an imperative role in ensuring the participation of elected representatives in decision-making. It has been noticed that there are

certain very active and enlightened women leaders at all the levels of Panchayats, who have been successfully implementing the developmental schemes and have ensured overall development of their constituencies. Such leaders need to be encouraged by publicizing their leadership qualities and honoring them in public meetings. It will certainly encourage other women representatives and their success stories and good practices will get replicated.

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