

Knowledge and Responsibilities of Women Representatives in Gram Panchayats

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Abstract

Background: This study examined the awareness levels of elected women representatives regarding their roles, responsibilities, and the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, along with their socio-demographic profile in Dakshina Kannada district. **Methodology:** A quantitative cross-sectional design was adopted, and 350 women representatives were selected from 88 Gram Panchayats using multistage stratified random sampling. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire and analysed using descriptive statistics and chi-square tests. **Results:** Most respondents were ordinary members (87.4%), married (91.4%), and aged between 31–50 years (78.2%). The majority belonged to nuclear families (66.0%) and economically weaker sections, with 78.3% holding BPL ration cards. Educational attainment was generally low to moderate, with only 0.9% having a degree or higher education. Nearly half of the respondents demonstrated high awareness of the roles of women representatives (48.6%), while 55.4% showed high overall knowledge of elected women members in Panchayat governance. Although 66.6% were aware of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, awareness regarding its focus and specific functions of Gram Panchayats remained limited. Significant associations were observed between knowledge levels and demographic variables such as age, education, income, position, and religion ($p < 0.001$). The study concludes that despite active participation, elected women representatives require enhanced institutional support through systematic training and capacity-building programmes to improve awareness and strengthen grassroots democratic governance.

Keywords: *Gram Panchayats, Women Representatives, Awareness, Constitutional Amendment.*

INTRODUCTION

The participation of women in local governance has been widely recognized as a crucial component of inclusive and equitable development. In India, the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act marked a major milestone by mandating the reservation of seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), thereby creating opportunities for their meaningful involvement in grassroots decision-making (Buch, 2000). As a result, millions of women have entered local political spaces, often for the first time, taking on roles of leadership, representation, and community development. However, the extent to which these representatives understand their roles, responsibilities, and constitutional mandates remains an important area of inquiry.

Awareness of governance processes and institutional functions is essential for women leaders to participate effectively and contribute to local development. Studies have shown that while women's participation has increased numerically, limitations in knowledge, training, and institutional support often restrict their effective engagement in governance activities (Jayal,

2006; Singh, 2014). In particular, understanding the provisions of the 73rd Amendment, the functioning of Gram Panchayats, and the expectations associated with leadership roles is central to strengthening the impact of women representatives at the village level.

The participation of women in local governance has long been viewed as a critical step toward achieving gender equity and inclusive development. In India, this recognition gained constitutional backing through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992, which mandated a minimum of one-third reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs).

This reform opened new avenues for women to enter political decision-making spaces, enabling them to influence community development, social welfare programs, and local administrative processes (Government of India, 1993).

The present study examines the awareness and responsibilities of women representatives in Gram Panchayats, focusing particularly on their understanding of their mandated roles and the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act.

By surveying 350 women representatives, this study seeks to identify gaps in knowledge, variations in perceived responsibilities, and the extent to which women are prepared to fulfill their governance duties. The findings contribute to ongoing discussions on strengthening women's leadership in PRIs and highlight the need for targeted training and capacity-building interventions to enhance their participation in local governance and development.

Objective:

- 1) To assess the level of awareness among elected women representatives regarding their roles, responsibilities, and the provisions of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act in Gram Panchayats.
- 2) To describe the socio-demographic and family profile of elected women representatives in Gram Panchayats of Dakshina Kannada.

METHODOLOGY

The study was used a quantitative, questionnaire-based cross-sectional design conducted across three Taluks of Dakshina Kannada, selected for their rural–semi-urban diversity and relevance to women's political participation.

Using multistage stratified random sampling, lists of women-elected members from 88-gram panchayats (total 742 members) formed the sampling frame, from which 350 elected women representatives were selected based on a sample size calculated using a 72% expected prevalence, 5% precision, and 10% non-response rate.

Data were collected using a structured, validated questionnaire after obtaining permission from the Taluks panchayats, providing participants with information sheets, ensuring informed consent, and giving adequate decision-making time.

Inclusion criteria covered all elected women representatives regardless of caste, religion, education, or political affiliation, including single- or multi-term members, while exclusion criteria eliminated those facing criminal charges, suspensions, or unavailability during data collection.

RESULTS

Table 1: Distribution of participation based on their Socio-demographic variables

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Position		
Member	306	87.4
President	25	7.1
3Vice-president	19	5.4
Age		
20-21	22	6.3
31-40	137	39.1
41-50	137	39.1
51 and above	54	15.4
Marital status		
Single	6	1.7
Married	320	91.4
Widow	24	6.9
Religion		0.0
Hindu	291	83.1
Muslim	45	12.9
Christian	14	4.0
Education		
No formal education	64	18.3
Primary	112	32.0
High school	150	42.9
Pre university	21	6.0
Degree and above	3	0.9
Monthly income		
Below 10000	128	36.6
>10000 to 15000	154	44.0
>15000 to 20000	61	17.4
>20000	7	2.0

Table 1 shows that most participants were ordinary members (87.4%), predominantly middle aged (78.2% between 31–50 years), and largely married (91.4%). A majority were Hindus (83.1%), followed by Muslims (12.9%) and Christians (4.0%). Educational status was generally low to Average with most having high school (42.9%) or primary education (32.0%), and 18.3% having no formal education, while very few were graduates (0.9%). In terms of income, most earned between ₹10,001–15,000 (44.0%) or below ₹10,000 (36.6%).

Table 2: Distribution of participation based on their family details

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Type of family		
Nuclear family	231	66.0
Joint family	116	33.1
Extended family	3	0.9
Family Size		
>3	47	13.4
4-6	260	74.3
6 and above	43	12.3
Ration card category		
APL	58	16.6
BPL	274	78.3

Antyodaya	18	5.1
Nature of employment		
Unemployed	27	7.7
Sales/petty job	4	1.1
Unskilled/laborer	12	3.4
Service sector	32	9.1
Self employed	101	28.9
Professional	4	1.1
Agriculture	37	10.6
Beedi roller	137	39.1
Class Category		
General class	166	47.4
Backward class	86	24.6
Scheduled caste	55	15.7
Women reservation	43	12.3
Term of representation of GP		
1st time	284	81.1
2 nd time	51	14.6
3 rd time	15	4.3

Table 2 most participants belonged to nuclear families (66.0%), with a majority having 4–6 family members (74.3%). A large proportion held BPL ration cards (78.3%), indicating economically weaker sections.

In terms of occupation, the highest share was Beedi rollers (39.1%), followed by self-employed (28.9%) and those in agriculture (10.6%), while 7.7% were unemployed. Nearly half were from the general class (47.4%), with others from backward classes (24.6%), scheduled castes (15.7%), and women reservation category (12.3%). Most were first time representatives in the Gram Panchayat (81.1%).

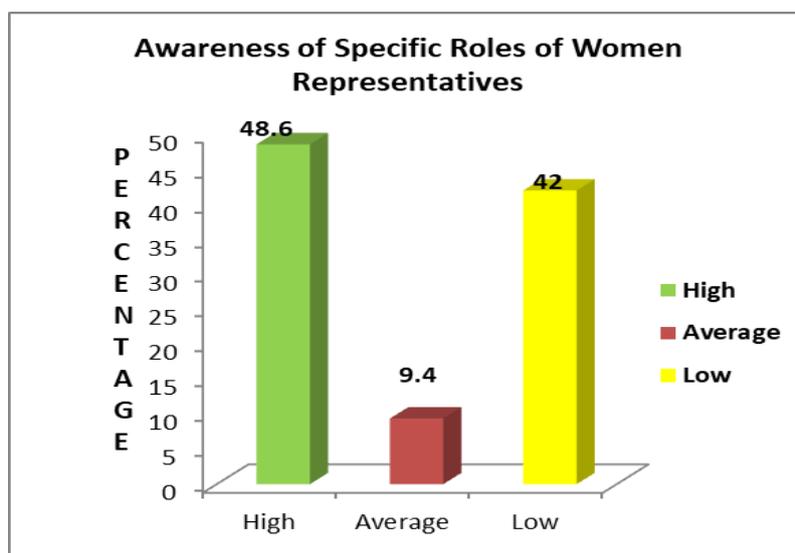


Figure 1: Distribution of Respondents by level Awareness of Specific Roles of Women Representatives in Gram Panchayats

Figure -1 shows the distribution of respondents based on their level of awareness regarding the specific roles of women representatives in Gram Panchayats. The findings reveal that nearly half of the respondents 48.6% have a high level of awareness.

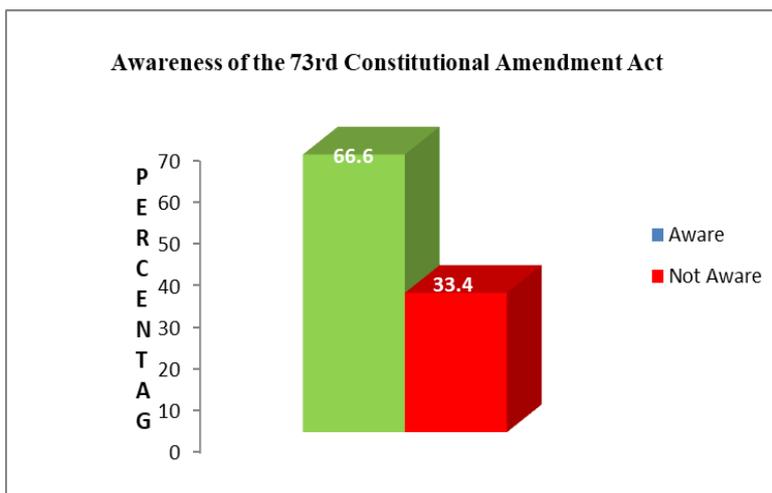


Figure 2: Awareness of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act Among Gram Panchayat Women Representatives

Most women representatives 66.6% were aware of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, while about one-fifth 33.4% reported not being aware of it.

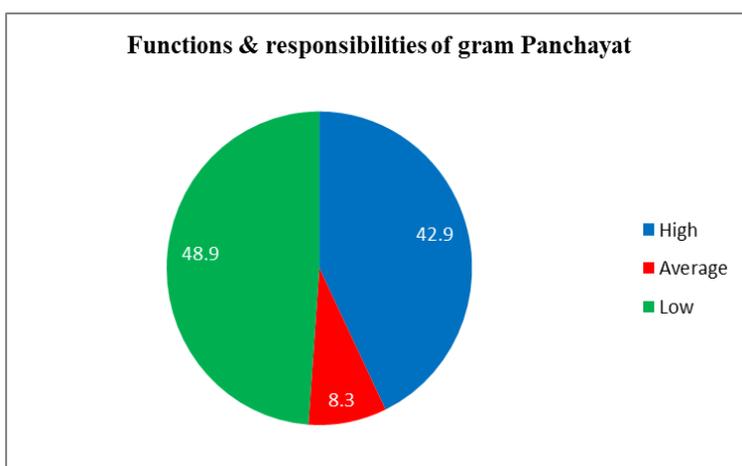


Figure 3: Functions & responsibilities of Gram Panchayat

Figure 3 shows that nearly half of the respondents 48.9% have a low level of awareness about the functions and responsibilities of the Gram Panchayat, while 42.9% possess a high level of awareness. Only 8.3% have an Average level of awareness.

Table 3: Distribution Levels of Knowledge Elected Women Members in Panchayat Governance among Respondents

Variables	Frequency	Percentage	Mean ± SD
High	194	55.4	8.70± 3.310
Average	82	23.4	
Low	74	21.1	

Table 3 reveals that more than half of the respondents 55.4% have a high level of knowledge regarding elected women members in Panchayat governance, followed by 23.4% with Average knowledge and 21.1% with low knowledge.

Table 4: Association between demographic variables with Knowledge about Panchayat elected women Members

Demographic Variables	X ²	P
Position	30.1	< .001
Age	80.1	
Marital status	45.7	
Religion	41.3	
Education	46.2	
Monthly income	174.9	

The table shows a significant association between demographic characteristics and knowledge levels of elected women members in Panchayat governance ($p < 0.001$). Position, age, marital status, religion, education, and monthly income all showed strong statistical significance. Members, women aged 31–50, women members, those with higher education, and belonging to Hindu religion demonstrated better knowledge.

DISCUSSION

The present study provides a comprehensive picture of respondents' awareness, attitudes, and knowledge regarding the roles and responsibilities of women representatives in Gram Panchayats. Overall, the findings indicate a mixed level of awareness, with encouraging trends in some areas and significant gaps in others.

Compare other study a study by Behera (2016) found that while women representatives actively participate in Panchayat activities, their awareness of constitutional provisions and administrative responsibilities remains Average to low. Similarly, Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) reported that women leaders often prioritize women-related issues, which supports the current study's finding that all respondents believe women representatives have extra responsibility toward women.

With regard to constitutional awareness, about two-thirds of the respondents (66.6%) were aware of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, as well as its focus. While this indicates a reasonably good level of awareness, the fact that one-third (33.4%). Similar study found by Kumar and Singh (2018) observed that awareness about the 73rd Constitutional Amendment was higher among elected women representatives than among the general public, but gaps still existed due to lack of training and capacity-building programs. This aligns with the present study, where one-third of respondents were not aware of the Amendment and its focus.

In a present study indicate a statistically significant association between demographic characteristics and knowledge levels of elected women members in Panchayat governance ($p < .001$). Women holding the position of member, those aged 31–50 years, married women, respondents with higher educational attainment, and those with better monthly income demonstrated higher levels of knowledge, whereas poorer knowledge was observed among women with no formal education, lower income groups, and widows.

These results are consistent with earlier studies which report that education, age, and socio-economic status play a crucial role in enhancing awareness and effectiveness of women representatives in Panchayati Raj Institutions. Similar study, Behera (2016) found that women with higher education and longer exposure to Panchayat functioning exhibited better understanding of governance roles and procedures.

Similarly, Kumar and Singh (2018) reported that economically stable and middle-aged women representatives were more confident and knowledgeable in decision-making processes compared to younger or economically disadvantaged members.

Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) also emphasized that women leaders' effectiveness improves with experience and social support, reinforcing the present study's observation that demographic advantages significantly influence knowledge levels among elected women members in Panchayat governance.

CONCLUSION

The present study highlights those women representatives in Gram Panchayats largely belong to middle-aged, married, and economically modest backgrounds, with limited formal education and predominantly first-time political participation. While a considerable proportion of respondents demonstrated high awareness and knowledge regarding elected women members and acknowledged the extra responsibility women representatives hold toward women, substantial gaps remain in understanding the specific roles, functions, and constitutional provisions related to Panchayat governance.

Awareness of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act and the functions of Gram Panchayats was Average overall, with a notable section still lacking clarity. Importantly, knowledge levels were found to be significantly associated with key demographic factors such as position, age, education, income, marital status, and religion, indicating that socio-economic and educational advantages play a crucial role in shaping effective participation and awareness.

Limitations of the study

- The study was conducted in a specific region, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other areas with different socio-cultural or administrative contexts.
- Responses were based on self-reporting, which could be affected by recall bias or social desirability bias.
- The study captured data at a single point in time, making it impossible to assess changes over time or establish causal relationships.
- Few participants had higher education, which may have influenced the overall knowledge levels
- The study did not examine the actual performance, decision-making power, or challenges faced by women representatives, limiting a comprehensive understanding of their effectiveness in Panchayat governance.

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