



# Local Government, Women Participation, and Natural Resource Management

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## 1. Introduction

Women are inherent caretakers of nature, being the natural life-givers and main victims of resource degradation (Elmhirst and Resurreccion, 2008). These deep connections are demonstrated by the vigorous involvement of women in various environmental movements across time and spaces. The policy initiatives on decentralized management of natural resources in India acknowledge this enduring connection and include women as crucial stakeholders in natural resource management (NRM). In addition to the community-based and co-managed natural resource management groups, women are also included in the local government. The 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act (hereafter the Act) devolves the responsibility of NRM to the local government. These include various functions relating management and rejuvenation of land, water, and forest resources, and maintenance of community assets. Importantly, the Act also reserves one-third of the seats in local government for women and mandates all the voters of a village, men, and women, to be Gram Sabha members, where they can share their concerns and preferences regarding resource management. Given the enduring connections between women and nature, these provisions are significant as they strengthen the hopes for better decision-making on resource management by the local government, ensuring local resource conservation and sustainability.

This policy brief summarizes key findings of the research, examining how inclusion of women, as elected representatives of the Gram Panchayat (GP), and as participants in Gram Sabha, influence the local government's decision-making on resource management, particularly related to land, water, and forest resources. It provides policy suggestions to

improve women participation in local government decision-making on resource management.

## 2. The Study

The study, which examined decentralized natural resource management, was undertaken in Madhya Pradesh<sup>3</sup>. In conformity with the Act, the Madhya Pradesh Panchayati Raj Avam Gram Swaraj Adhiniyam, 2001 transfers all the resource management functions to the local government. Further, it reserves 50% seats in the local government for women.

Of the three selected Gram Panchayats, one was headed by a Brahmin woman, an OBC male in the second, and a SC male in the last one. Data were collected from 210 households in 13 villages and focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with elected representatives (2011-2015 term) of the sample GPs. Two FGDs were conducted in each GP, one, with all the elected representatives together, and the other, with the elected women representatives only. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the officials of the Panchayati Raj and rural development department at the village, block, district, and state levels. Gram Sabha meeting minutes were examined to collect the information on agenda and attendance.

## 3. Key findings

### 3.1 Participation of the Women in Gram Sabha

The Gram Sabha has a crucial role in the management of natural resources in Madhya Pradesh, where many resource management functions are transferred to the Gram Sabha. The Gram Panchayat functions as an executive body to carry out the recommendations of the Gram Sabha in this regard. GP representatives have to

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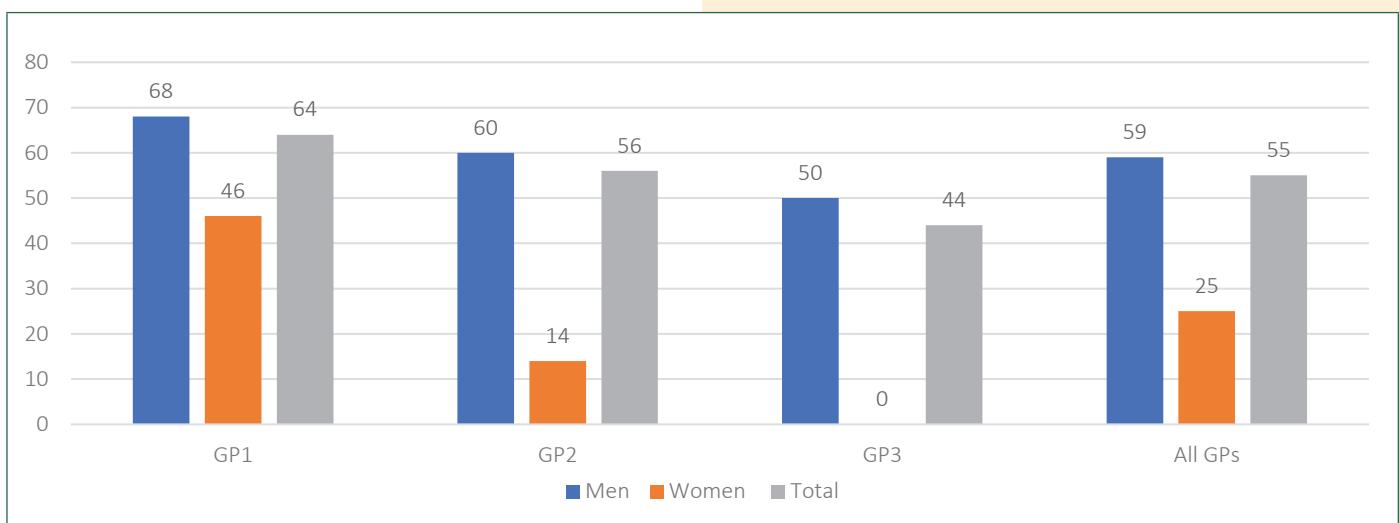
<sup>3</sup> Madhya Pradesh was chosen, based on, its mid-scores on devolution index indicating a functioning Panchayati Raj system in the state, its agrarian economy, and the prevailing issues in the state related to land, water, and forests.

**Table 1: Attendance of elected women representatives in Gram Sabha meetings**

| Particulars  | Respondents (%) |
|--|-----------------|
| Respondents (%) stating that they attended the meeting of Gram Sabha                   | 55              |
| Respondents (%) stating that they did not attend the meeting of Gram Sabha             | 45              |
| <b>Total number of respondents</b>   | <b>210</b>      |
| <b>Of those attending Gram Sabha meeting:</b>  |                 |
| Proportion stating that women representatives attended the meeting of Gram Sabha       | 66              |
| Proportion stating that women representatives did not attend the meeting of Gram Sabha | 30              |
| Proportion stating that someone else attend on the behalf of women representatives     | 4               |
| Total (number)   | 115             |

Source: Primary data

**Chart 1: Responses of sample households on their attendance in Gram Sabha meetings**



Source: Primary data

therefore discuss and legitimize their choices in the Gram Sabha to actualize their plans on NRM interventions. A little over two-thirds of the respondents confirmed in household survey that women representatives attend Gram Sabha (Table 1).

However, women representatives belonging to the more affluent or the upper-caste families attend the meeting of Gram Sabha to a lesser extent due to more strict cultural norms.

Further, as we asked how women representatives contribute in the decision-making process in Gram Sabha, the households shared that women representatives do not have much influence and they attend the Gram Sabha to fulfil procedural formalities. Responses like “women members come for sign-seal only”; “women members come for quorum only” were most common across all the sample GPs.

Along with providing space to GP representatives to contest and convince about their choices, Gram Sabha offers a platform to the local people, men and women, to share their resource-related concerns and priorities and get them integrated in local planning for resource-management. However, data on attendance in Gram Sabha suggests that attendance of women is less than half of the men.

The variations in women attendance across the sample GPs are noticeable, offering some insights as to when and how women's participation gets worse or better.

Zero participation in GP3<sup>4</sup> can be attributed to stricter cultural norms faced by upper caste women, and hence women participation in this GP is restricted. In GP1, the proportion of women attending Gram Sabha is higher as many women are

<sup>4</sup> As the analysis on women's attendance (Chart 1) shows that women do not attend in GP3 at all, the analysis refers to individual responses of women respondents. This was revealed in the overall discussions (considering all the respondents including the male respondents), that women with designations such as Anganwadi workers or ASHA attend the Gram Sabha.



Common NRM interventions in sample GPs

associated to a self-help group (SHG) in the GP. In addition to the SHG members, the women who attend are either household heads or hold an official designation. The membership in SHG has particularly helped women to attend Grama Sabha as they were trained in being vocal and participatory. These SHGs have engaged women in various group activities, and provided hand-holding support, changing their perception of self and of participation in public places.

### 3.2 No changes in NRM interventions of the local government

The NRM interventions of the sample GPs largely relate to the management of water and target beneficiary-oriented works. Meeting registers of the Gram Sabha for the period 2011-2015 show that major NRM works are dug wells, farm bunds, deepening of existing wells, stop dam, Peedhi Jal Samvad, and plantation. Discussions with the households indicate that the Gram Panchayats have also undertaken sandbag bunding, farm ponds, and common ponds, and have distributed plant saplings to farmers.

Do NRM intervention choices of the local government change when a woman becomes the Sarpanch? If yes, how? The evidence shows that NRM interventions of the local government remain the same, irrespective of gender of the president. This is largely on account of proxy leadership. Discussions with the households show that proxy leadership comes into existence when a woman becomes the Sarpanch. To a question whether a woman Sarpanch brings in any changes, a SC male respondent from GP3 stated, “it does not make any difference if a man or a woman is Sarpanch, because the work is done only by men.” Further, an OBC male respondent in GP2 points to the inability of women to work on their own, “it does not make any difference... no woman is capable enough to bring any difference on her own by playing her role as a Sarpanch, it's only a man who has to work.” Due to *de facto* leadership not being vested in elected women representatives,

preferences of women as a group, are not reflected in the NRM interventions of the local government.

### 3.3 Constraints

Discussions with the households and GP representatives indicate that the personal attributes and social position of women restrict their substantial participation in decentralised governance. Emphasizing women's lack of educational attributes, for instance, a male GP representative in an FGD stated, “women are at a lower position in society since the beginning. They are not educated and aware. Just because of institutional provisions (reservation of seats) they are designated as representatives, but that does not make them capable.” However, discussions with the households also point to the vested interests of the patrons or family members in choosing an illiterate or uneducated woman candidate.

Further, the socio-political culture is noted to be constraining. The social norms prescribe that women stay at home, be quiet or soft-spoken in public places, and prioritize their domestic chores over leisure or participating in public forums like Gram Sabha; the prevailing political culture in sample GPs only reinforces these social norms. A male representative justified during the FGD, “women are to take care of the home, the rule only is like that... just as males look after the farms in the night, women can't do that, similarly women have to do the domestic work.” GP officials also fulfil the procedural formalities only. Feeling that the *purdah* culture in rural regions is a big issue, they express their helplessness, “what (else) can we do, can just tell them but what to do if they (women representatives) are not coming.” Such an attitude of male representatives and GP officials is exhibited as a woman representative explained her low participation in Gram Sabha meetings, “when *Sachiv* and *Sarpanch* do not listen to us, what will the people listen to?” To make matters worse, the socio-political culture is not only restrictive in itself, but also adversely affects women representatives' agency to make an effort to alter the situation.

Along with elected women representatives, the socio-political culture also restricts involvement of women Gram Sabha members. Women not going to the Gram Sabha is an explicit and emphatic norm in sample villages that any good woman needs to abide by. How such a norm drives the actions of the women in the village is reflected in the explanations of a woman respondent from GP3 as she doesn't attend the Gram Sabha, "I want to go, but no one goes here, if I take the initiative and go, the people of the village will say that I am shameless." Similarly, another woman respondent in GP2 shares why she doesn't attend the Gram Sabha, "No one (woman) goes here, how can I go alone. It does not look good...if other women are going, I will also join them."

Although the women (except few elected women representatives and designated women such as ASHA and Anganwadi workers) do not usually attend the Gram Sabha, it was indicated that women take part in issue-based special Gram Sabha, focusing on maternal or child health, immunization, nutrition, girls' education, sanitation or SHG formation for alternative livelihoods. The households, the GP representatives and officials, all shared a common view that women attend these meetings. Interestingly, the Panchayat provides additional facilities such as transport for women staying in far off villages, and snacks and food, to ensure women participation when such meetings are held.

It indicates that the political institutions also perceive development in a gendered manner. Issues such as childcare, maternal health, sanitation and supportive livelihoods are taken as women-specific and there, it's necessary to seek their participation. Agriculture, politics, resource management are associated with men, where, the presence of women is not indispensable.

## Policy suggestions

- Appoint a female Panchayat secretary in women-headed GPs**

There is need to provide hand-holding support to women representatives, especially during the initial years of their term. Appointment of a female secretary in women-headed Panchayats could be a small facilitating measure given the revelations that designated women workers such as ASHA and Anganwadi workers are instrumental in bringing women from neighbouring households to the Gram Sabha

and that the women feel more comfortable to participate in the presence of other women.

- Involve the SHGs**

As women shared their views about normative pressures, cultural restrictions and their domestic responsibilities, to explain their lower participation in Gram Sabha, findings indicate that SHGs are instrumental in ameliorating the effects of the above factors by providing hand-holding support and by developing leadership capacities of women. A strategic partnership should be cultivated with the SHGs aiming to increase women participation in Gram Sabha.

- Create a conducive institutional environment**

Along with the affirmative institutions that carve out some space for women in men-crowded places, it is imperative that the local government representatives and officials strive to create an enabling environment where the required information on local issues and resources is easily accessible to the women, and women can freely share their experiences, knowledge, concerns, and priorities.

- Sensitize, not only the women but also the men**

Specific targeting of women as a left-out group is needed, given their linkages with NRM and their low participation. Notably, not only women need to be sensitized and made aware, men should also be part of such sensitization on women participation. Further, considering the institutional nestedness, legal institutional arrangements for decentralized resource management need to be complemented with sensitization measures and programmes at each level targeting the officials, the political representatives and the people.

## References

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