



## How social media empowered women leadership in Panchayat Raj: A case study of Uttar Pradesh

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### Abstract

Male leadership has always dominated India's Panchayati Raj system. However, by giving women's views a platform and enabling their leadership in local administration, social media and the reservation for women in PRIs have started to undermine this norm. This study looks at how social media empowers female leaders in Uttar Pradesh, India's Panchayati Raj organizations. Through the use of a qualitative research technique and the analysis of multiple case studies, this study shows how social media has sparked women's leadership and political engagement. The results highlight how digital platforms have the power to revolutionize gender equity in rural governance. Despite significant advancements, issues including socioeconomic hurdles, patriarchal norms, and low levels of digital literacy still exist, underscoring the necessity for all-encompassing approaches to fully realize social media's liberating potential. In order to promote women's leadership in Panchayati Raj institutions, this study suggests improving digital literacy, eliminating online harassment, guaranteeing fair access to technology, and creating support networks.

**Keywords:** Social media, women leadership, Panchayati raj, Uttar Pradesh, digital empowerment

### Introduction

Decentralization and inclusive development are crucial components of democratic governance, aiming to ensure that all societal segments, including marginalized groups, have a voice in decision-making processes.

Pursuing gender equality is a key component of this objective in India, primarily through the Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs). A major turning point was reached in 1992 when the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act required a 33% reservation for women in panchayat seats, which was eventually raised to 50% in some states. The goal of this historic law was to increase women's grassroots political empowerment and involvement. But in spite of these developments, social hurdles and gender inequity still prevent women from reaching their full potential in local government.

Village assemblies were used for local governance in ancient India, which is where the Panchayati Raj system got its start. However, the 73rd Constitutional Amendment's ratification codified the contemporary foundation for PRIs. By creating a three-tiered structure of PRIs—Greek Panchayats (village councils), Panchayat Samitis (block councils), and Zilla Parishads (district councils)—this reform sought to improve local self-governance. By allocating one-third of the seats to women, the amendment was a significant step toward decentralizing governance and strengthening their position in local government.

Women's involvement in local government has grown as a result of the reservation policy. The concept seeks to empower women, mostly from underprivileged groups like Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), by giving them the chance to participate in community development and decision-making. A significant turning point was reached in 1992 when the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act required a third of the seats in panchayat councils throughout India to be reserved for women. The dedication to gender parity in local governance was further

cemented when this quota was eventually raised to 50% in a number of states.

The goal of this program was to address historical gender disparities and increase the representation of women in municipal government. This reservation policy's effects have been profound. By guaranteeing a significant number of women in PRIs, the policy has made it easier for them to enter the political sphere, which has historically been dominated by men. This has given women the chance to participate in community development and decision-making processes, especially those from marginalized groups like Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Scheduled Castes (SCs). Women's participation in these organizations has broadened the range of viewpoints in local government, leading to more inclusive and representative decision-making.

Government initiatives designed to support women's economic, social, and political empowerment have also contributed to this increase in participation. Various training programs and capacity-building initiatives have been introduced to equip women with the necessary skills and knowledge to perform their roles effectively. These programs have helped to enhance women's confidence and capabilities, enabling them to navigate the complexities of local governance more effectively. Additionally, the presence of women in PRIs has helped to raise awareness about gender issues and the importance of women's participation in governance, both among women themselves and within the broader community.

Many studies have also shown that while the reservation system has increased awareness and engagement among women representatives, it has yet to entirely overcome the deep-seated societal attitudes and practices that limit their influence and effectiveness.

Panda (1996) discovered that required reservation provisions or pressure from family members or their rural community were the main reasons why women representatives in Orissa's village panchayats entered

politics. Based on their research in Karnataka's Chitradurga district, Nagraj and Pallavi (2013) found that reservations in PRIs helped tribal women grow by increasing their awareness of their voting power, the responsibilities of panchayat members, and the support they receive from their families.

According to Crook and Alan (2001), decentralization in India led to a rise in political representation and involvement. Notwithstanding the constitutional mandate and the growing number of women in PRIs, there are still issues that must be resolved in order to convert their presence into genuine empowerment and participation. Cultural conventions, societal resistance, and educational limitations that still prevent women legislators from fully participating often limit their effectiveness.

### **Challenges and barriers**

Despite the constitutional mandate for gender representation, the effective implementation of this reservation policy has faced numerous challenges. This practice of proxy politics involves male relatives strategically positioning women as candidates for PRIs under reservation quotas while retaining control over decision-making processes. Consequently, many women elected to PRIs through reservations struggle to fully engage in their roles due to a lack of necessary skills, experience, or confidence to navigate the complexities of local governance. These challenges highlight the gap between the legislative intent of the reservation system and the actual outcomes in terms of women's empowerment, as traditional patriarchal structures continue to exclude women from exercising absolute power and influence.

In his research on Dalit and tribal leadership in Gujarat, Das (2013) discovered that just one-third of Dalit women were able to win panchayat elections on their own. Education, experience with social issues, a desire to promote community development, previous panchayat performance, family support, a personal relationship with villagers, economic stability, and political connections within the family are some of the crucial elements he identified that women need in order to be able to hold panchayat positions. These results imply that those without such privileged backgrounds have an especially difficult road to political success.

In a similar vein, Thorat (2002) noted that caste-based human rights violations continue in modified forms despite a number of constitutional prohibitions, resulting in the ongoing exploitation of Dalits in rural India. He underlined that these systemic disparities are still being maintained since the underclass has not yet been completely politically mobilized against the dominant class.

Pai's (1998) study, "Pradhanis in New Panchayats," provides a critical perspective on this disparity. It highlights that while the reservation system has increased women's participation in electoral processes, many of these women need to be actively involved in governance. The study reveals that numerous women who have been elected to leadership positions are either illiterate or come from affluent backgrounds, with little to no work experience outside the home. Their involvement in PRIs is often driven more by familial or community pressure than personal agency or ambition. Consequently, their decision-making authority is frequently influenced by family members or local elites rather than being a product of their independent

judgment. This dynamic illustrates a significant disconnect between the policy's aims and the real-world implications for women's empowerment in local governance.

Nambiar's (2001) study, "Making the Gramsabha Work," further elucidates the barriers women face when participating in Gram Sabha meetings. Many women encounter obstacles such as the dominant presence of village elders, potential loss of daily wages, and the overwhelming demands of household responsibilities, discouraging their attendance and active involvement. This lack of participation limits their ability to engage in governance processes and highlights systemic issues related to the inclusion of women in decision-making forums. The study underscores that the mere presence of women in PRIs does not necessarily equate to meaningful participation, as these barriers effectively restrict their ability to contribute to governance and decision-making.

Women's participation in PRIs is greatly influenced by socioeconomic circumstances, especially for those from marginalized groups like Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Scheduled Castes (SCs). These women frequently have severe socioeconomic disadvantages that make it difficult for them to participate successfully in local governance, such as poverty, low literacy, and restricted access to resources.

The compounded effect of socio-economic deprivation and entrenched societal norms further restricts their capacity to perform their roles as elected representatives. Discrimination and cultural biases also exacerbate these challenges, limiting their ability to make meaningful contributions to community development and governance. Addressing these socio-economic barriers through targeted policies and interventions is essential for fostering greater participation and empowerment of women in PRIs.

Moreover, systemic issues often limit the effectiveness of capacity-building programs designed to support women leaders in PRIs. Training programs to enhance women's understanding of governance processes, improve decision-making skills, and boost confidence are crucial for their effective participation. However, the success of these initiatives is frequently hampered by inadequate resources, lack of support from local institutions, and persistent societal resistance to women in leadership roles. The failure to provide comprehensive and accessible training and support for women, especially those from marginalized backgrounds, undermines their ability to fulfil their roles effectively and realize their leadership potential.

### **Digital platforms as tools for empowerment**

The emergence of digital platforms has profoundly reshaped the landscape of women's empowerment, particularly within the context of local governance in India. Social media channels such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp have become crucial tools in enhancing women's leadership roles within Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). These platforms offer unprecedented opportunities for women to voice their concerns, mobilize support, and engage with their communities in previously unattainable ways. This digital transformation has facilitated women's entry into local governance and significantly enhanced their leadership capabilities, fostering more inclusive and representative governance structures.

Social media has democratized access to information and broadened the scope of political engagement. Platforms

such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp have revolutionized the dissemination of information, allowing individuals and groups to bypass traditional media gatekeepers and engage in direct communication with their audiences. This shift has empowered marginalized groups, including women, to leverage these tools for political mobilization, awareness-raising, and advocacy. Scholars argue that social media's role in democratizing information and providing a platform for previously voiceless groups is crucial in the modern political landscape. This democratization of information enables women to challenge entrenched power structures and participate more fully in local governance.

One of the most transformative impacts of social media on women's leadership is the creation of online communities that foster a sense of belonging and support. These platforms enable women leaders to connect with peers, share experiences, and build networks of support that transcend geographical limitations. Online communities provide spaces where women can engage in discussions, seek advice, and celebrate each other's achievements, fostering a collective sense of belonging. This sense of community is vital for reducing isolation and enhancing the confidence of women leaders, empowering them to navigate their roles with greater assurance.

Social media also serves as a powerful motivational tool by showcasing success stories and sharing inspirational content. Highlighting the achievements of women leaders through posts, videos, and articles offers tangible examples of success and encourages others to pursue leadership roles. Success stories and regular updates on initiatives help illustrate the potential for achievement, motivating aspiring leaders to overcome obstacles and persist in their efforts. Additionally, empowerment campaigns and skill development resources shared on social media offer practical advice and tools that boost confidence and drive motivation among women leaders.

Raising awareness about the significance of female leadership and the impact of women in governance is another critical function of social media. These platforms enable disseminating educational content that highlights the benefits of women's contributions to local governance. Infographics, articles, and videos can shift public perceptions, build support for gender equality, and advocate for necessary reforms. Social media campaigns can address barriers faced by women, advocate for supportive policies, and amplify issues related to gender equality, mobilizing public and institutional support for change.

### Challenges

However, integrating social media into women's leadership in PRIs is challenging. A primary issue is that the limited digital literacy and access to technology in rural areas needs to improve many women's ability to engage effectively with social media platforms. In many regions, women face barriers such as lack of smartphone access, limited internet connectivity, and insufficient digital skills. With adequate resources and training, women can fully utilize these tools, limiting their impact and participation in local governance. Online harassment and cyberbullying represent additional significant challenges. The anonymity of the internet can lead to a hostile environment where women are subjected to harassment and abuse. This can undermine their confidence and deter them from active participation. The lack of robust

mechanisms for reporting and addressing online abuse further exacerbates this issue, leaving many women vulnerable to digital violence. Addressing these challenges requires the development of effective strategies for combating online harassment and creating safer digital spaces for women.

Moreover, traditional societal norms and biases can complicate leveraging social media for political leadership. Gender-based discrimination and cultural expectations may influence how women are perceived and treated online. Women leaders may face scrutiny and backlash that male counterparts do not, impacting their ability to gain support and recognition. To overcome these barriers, policymakers, civil society organizations, and technology companies must collaborate on initiatives that enhance digital literacy, create safer online environments, and address entrenched gender biases. Such collaborative efforts are crucial in ensuring that social media can fully realize its potential as a tool for empowering women in PRIs.

In short, digital platforms have revolutionized women's leadership in Panchayati Raj Institutions, offering new avenues for engagement, support, and advocacy. While significant progress has been made, ongoing challenges related to digital literacy, online harassment, and societal biases must be addressed to ensure that social media continues to serve as a powerful tool for women's empowerment and inclusive governance.

### Future directions and recommendations

Empowering women in local governance through social media includes several key strategies.

First, enhancing digital literacy is essential to empower women to use social media effectively in local governance. State governments and NGOs should collaborate to provide comprehensive training programs that cover digital skills, cybersecurity, and social media management. These programs should be accessible through community workshops, online courses, and school curricula. By equipping women with these skills, they will be better positioned to engage in political discourse, advocate for their communities, and exercise leadership within Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs).

Second, addressing online harassment is crucial for creating a safe digital environment. Policymakers must develop and enforce regulations targeting online abuse, including harassment and cyberbullying. Technology companies must enhance content moderation and provide robust tools for reporting abuse. NGOs should offer legal support and counselling for women affected by online harassment. A safer online space will encourage more women to participate in social media, strengthening their leadership roles and influence.

Third, promoting equitable access to technology is vital for bridging the digital divide. Governments should invest in improving internet connectivity in rural areas and make digital devices more affordable. Public-private partnerships can help expand broadband access and provide resources for low-income women. NGOs can establish community tech hubs to offer technology access and support. Ensuring widespread access to technology will enable more women to effectively engage in social media and local governance.

Fourth, developing support systems such as mentorship programs and peer networks will nurture women's leadership. States and NGOs should create mentorship

opportunities that connect emerging women leaders with experienced mentors and facilitate peer networks for collaboration and support. These programs should be inclusive and accessible, offering virtual and in-person interactions. Robust support systems will help women overcome challenges and enhance their community leadership capabilities.

### Conclusion

Integrating social media into local governance has significantly impacted women's leadership within Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in Uttar Pradesh. By providing a platform for women to express their voices, engage with their communities, and advocate for their rights, social media has served as a powerful tool for digital empowerment and gender equity. The case studies and research presented in this paper highlight the transformative potential of digital platforms in enhancing women's political participation and leadership at the grassroots level. Despite the substantial progress made, numerous challenges persist. Patriarchal norms, entrenched gender biases, socio-economic barriers, limited digital literacy, and online harassment continue to impede the effective participation and empowerment of women in PRIs. These challenges underscore the need for comprehensive and multifaceted approaches to fully realize the potential of social media as a tool for women's empowerment. Several key actions are recommended to address these challenges and promote more inclusive and effective governance. Enhancing digital literacy, addressing online harassment, ensuring equitable access to technology, and developing robust support systems are crucial steps in this direction. Collaboration among state governments, NGOs, civil society organizations, and technology companies is essential to implement these measures effectively.

Finally, the goal is to create an environment where women can participate meaningfully and confidently in local governance, leveraging digital platforms to amplify their voices and influence. By overcoming the barriers and challenges identified, we can move closer to achieving true gender equity in rural governance, fostering a more inclusive, representative, and effective democratic process. The ongoing efforts to empower women through social media in PRIs not only advance gender equality but also contribute to the broader goals of decentralized and inclusive development in India.

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