



A Mixed-Methods Survey to Investigate the Effect of Reservation of Seats for Women in Local Governance in Jammu and Kashmir

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Abstract

The reservation of seats for women in local governance has emerged as a pivotal initiative in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), aimed at fostering gender equality and enhancing women's participation in decision-making processes. This study employs a mixed-methods research approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques, to gain a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics and challenges faced by women in governance in J&K. A total of 300 surveys were completed, providing a substantial dataset for statistical analysis. Qualitative data were collected through in-depth interviews with a select group of elected women representatives, male members of local bodies, and community leaders. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring themes and patterns within the interview responses. The findings of this study provide a robust framework for analyzing the effects of women reservation in governance, offering insights that can inform policy and practice moving forward. The research findings highlight key arguments surrounding the empowerment of women through reservation policies, the challenges they face in asserting their authority, and the implications of these dynamics on effective governance.

Keywords: Women reservation, PRI, male proxy, patriarchal society, J&K, socio-political landscape

Introduction

The reservation of seats for women in local governance has emerged as a pivotal initiative in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), aimed at fostering gender equality and enhancing women's participation in decision-making processes. This approach is crucial in a region where traditional gender roles and socio-cultural norms have historically limited women's involvement in public life. By reserving a percentage of seats for women in local bodies, the government seeks not only to empower women but also to ensure that their voices are heard in the formulation of policies that affect their lives directly.

The significance of women reservation in J&K extends beyond mere representation; it is a transformative strategy that aims to dismantle patriarchal structures and encourage a more inclusive political environment. Women, when given the opportunity to participate in local governance, have proven to bring unique perspectives and priorities to the table, addressing issues such as health, education, and social welfare, which are often overlooked in male-dominated discussions. Furthermore, this initiative aligns with global movements advocating for gender equality, acknowledging that sustainable development cannot be achieved without the full and equal participation of women.

However, the implementation of such reservations is not without its challenges. There are concerns regarding the misuse of power by male members who may attempt to undermine or manipulate the roles of elected women representatives. In many instances, women may act as proxies for their male relatives, leading to a situation where the intended benefits of the reservation system are diluted.

Additionally, prevailing societal attitudes can hinder women's ability to assert their authority and influence within local governance structures.

The local governance system in J&K, characterized by its unique socio-political landscape, necessitates targeted measures to ensure that women are not just participants but active and empowered contributors to governance. By understanding the context and the challenges involved, stakeholders can work towards creating an environment that genuinely supports women's leadership and participation in local governance.

Research Background

The historical context of women's political representation in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) is intertwined with broader trends in India's governance and societal evolution. The constitutional provision for women's reservation in local governance through the 73rd and 74th Amendments in 1992 marked a significant turning point, mandating the reservation of one-third of the seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). However, the socio-cultural fabric of J&K has both supported and constrained women's political participation. Traditional gender roles, coupled with the ongoing socio-political conflict in the region, have posed unique challenges to women's engagement in governance. Legal frameworks in J&K, specifically the J&K Panchayati Raj Act of 1989 and its subsequent amendments, have established a foundation for women's representation. These laws underscore the importance of women's voices in governance, yet the implementation has often been fraught with complications, including the influence of patriarchal norms that tend to overshadow women's contributions. Prior studies indicate that while women's representation has increased, their actual agency within these roles is frequently compromised by male-dominated political structures.

Globally, the literature on women's participation in local governance highlights both successes and challenges. Research suggests that when women are involved in decision-making, there tends to be a greater focus on social issues, which directly benefit communities. For instance, studies from various countries indicate that women leaders are more likely to prioritize health, education, and social welfare initiatives. In J&K, similar findings have emerged, showcasing that elected women representatives often advocate for policies that address the specific needs of women and children.

Nevertheless, the participation of women in local governance in J&K remains a complex issue, with reports of women serving primarily as proxies for their male relatives. This phenomenon raises concerns about the authenticity of women's representation and the genuine empowerment intended by the reservation policy. Understanding the interplay of these factors is crucial for advancing women's role in governance and ensuring that the benefits of reservation translate into real empowerment.

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods research approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques to gain a comprehensive understanding of women's reservation in local governance in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). The primary aim is to explore the dynamics of women's participation in governance, the challenges they face, and the extent to which their roles are influenced by

male counterparts.

Data Collection Methods

Quantitative data were gathered through structured surveys distributed to women elected representatives in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) across various districts of J&K. The survey included questions related to their experiences in governance, perceived challenges, and the impact of their role on local decision-making processes. A total of 300 surveys were completed, providing a substantial dataset for statistical analysis.

Qualitative data were collected through in-depth interviews with a select group of elected women representatives, male members of local bodies, and community leaders. These interviews aimed to delve deeper into the personal experiences of women in governance, exploring themes such as empowerment, authority, and the dynamics of gender relations within local political structures. A total of 20 interviews were conducted, allowing for rich, detailed narratives that complement the quantitative findings.

Sample Population

The sample population was strategically chosen to reflect diverse socio-economic backgrounds and geographical locations within J&K. This approach ensured that the study captures a wide range of experiences and perspectives. Women representatives from both rural and urban areas were included, along with a balanced representation of male members to provide insights into their roles and perceptions about women's participation.

Analytical Techniques

Data from the surveys were analyzed using statistical software to identify trends and correlations. Descriptive statistics were utilized to summarize the findings, while inferential statistics helped in understanding the relationships between different variables, such as the level of empowerment and the challenges faced by women.

For the qualitative data, thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring themes and patterns within the interview responses. This technique facilitated a nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics at play in local governance, highlighting both the barriers and opportunities for women's active participation.

Overall, this combination of qualitative and quantitative methods provides a robust framework for analyzing the effects of women's reservation in local governance in J&K, offering insights that can inform policy and practice moving forward.

Findings

The study reveals significant insights into the effectiveness of the reservation policy aimed at empowering women council members in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). The data collected from the structured surveys and interviews highlight several key findings regarding women's participation rates, decision-making power, and the instances of misuse of authority by their male counterparts.

Women's Participation Rates

The survey indicated that women's participation in local governance has increased since the implementation of the reservation policy. Approximately 45% of the elected representatives were women, surpassing the mandated one-

third reservation. However, despite this positive trend, many women reported feeling marginalized in decision-making processes, with only **30%** indicating that their opinions were frequently considered during meetings and discussions.

Decision-Making Power

In terms of decision-making, the findings illustrate a stark contrast between formal power and actual influence. While women hold positions as elected representatives, many reported being sidelined by their male counterparts. For instance, only 25% of women felt that they had genuine authority to influence policy decisions, with many stating that critical decisions were often made by male members without their input. This suggests that despite the increase in representation, the real power dynamics within local governance remain heavily skewed.

Misuse of Power

Instances of misuse of power by male members were prevalent, with **40% of surveyed women** expressing concerns about being treated as proxies for their male relatives. This phenomenon not only undermines the intended purpose of the reservation but also diminishes the potential impact that women could have on local governance. Interviews revealed that many women were pressured to align with the views of male family members, limiting their ability to advocate for issues pertinent to their constituencies.

Tale 1: Summary of Key Findings

Key Metrics	Findings
Women's Participation Rate	45% of elected representatives
Decision-Making Influence	30% felt frequently considered
Genuine Authority	25% reported actual influence
Instances of Proxy Representation	40% expressed concerns

These findings underscore the complexity of women's empowerment in J&K's local governance framework. While the reservation policy has led to increased female representation, significant barriers still hinder women's ability to exercise their authority and contribute meaningfully to decision-making processes.

Discussion

The findings of this study illuminate the intricate dynamics of women's participation in local governance in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), particularly in relation to existing literature. Despite the positive strides made through the reservation policy, the prevailing perception of women by their male counterparts remains a significant barrier to genuine empowerment. This aligns with previous research that highlights how patriarchal norms can overshadow women's contributions in political spaces.

In J&K, many male members perceive women in governance primarily through a lens of traditional gender roles, often relegating them to secondary positions. The study revealed that a notable percentage of female representatives felt marginalized in decision-making processes, with only 30% reporting that their opinions were valued. This reflects a broader pattern documented in literature, where women leaders frequently face challenges in asserting their authority and influence, particularly in male-dominated environments. The concept of women serving as proxies for male relatives, as highlighted in this study, mirrors findings from various countries where women are often utilized as placeholders

rather than active decision-makers.

The implications of these findings are profound. The effectiveness of women's reservations in fostering genuine empowerment is compromised by the socio-cultural dynamics at play. While the increase in women's representation is commendable, the true test lies in their ability to influence policy and advocate for community needs. The reported misuse of power by male counterparts, with 40% of women expressing concerns about being treated as proxies, raises critical questions about the integrity of the reservation system and the authenticity of women's voices in governance.

Moreover, the literature emphasizes the importance of not just representation but also the need for substantial agency among women in political roles. The disconnection between formal positions and actual power must be addressed to ensure that the intended benefits of the reservation policy materialize. As the research indicates, empowering women means providing them the tools, support, and societal recognition necessary to transform their roles from mere representatives to influential leaders in their communities.

Case Studies

Examining specific case studies from Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) provides valuable insights into the dual narratives of women's leadership success and the misuse of power by male members in local governance. One notable example of successful female leadership is the case of **Sahiba**, an elected woman representative in a rural Panchayat. Upon assuming office, Sahiba prioritized community health initiatives, successfully advocating for the establishment of a local health clinic. Her proactive engagement with women in her constituency enabled her to understand their unique health challenges, leading to tailored solutions that significantly improved healthcare access. This case illustrates how women's leadership can drive positive change when they are empowered to act independently and effectively.

In contrast, the case of **Amina** highlights the challenges posed by male dominance in local governance. Amina was elected to the same Panchayat but faced substantial resistance from male members who sought to undermine her authority. Despite her attempts to introduce educational programs for girls in the community, crucial decisions were consistently made without her input. Male colleagues often dismissed her proposals, viewing her as a mere proxy for her husband, who had previously held the position. This situation reflects a broader pattern where male members leverage their influence to sideline elected women, thereby diluting the intended impact of the reservation policy.

These contrasting experiences underscore the importance of context in determining the success or failure of women's participation in governance. Factors contributing to Sahiba's success included her strong community ties, the support of local women's groups, and an environment that encouraged female agency. Conversely, Amina's experience illustrates the pervasive influence of patriarchal norms and the need for systemic change to ensure that elected women can genuinely represent their constituents. Here is one another case study where there are four elected women representatives, one of them is Sarpanch, another one Naib Sarpanch and two Panches. All the affairs of these elected representatives are performed by their male members. The elected representatives were never seen to attend their offices, meeting. Our case study finds out that lack of knowledge is

one of the reason behind the case of Sarpanch and Naib Sarpanch where as other two Panches were highly qualified, in spite of that they are the male proxy members to run the affairs of their respective wards. One of the case study is very astonishing where the husband of elected Sarpanch uses her signed seal in his pocket and thereby sign every official document.

In analyzing these case studies, it becomes clear that for the reservation policy to achieve its objectives, it is crucial to address the socio-cultural barriers that inhibit women's authority. Empowering women involves not only increasing their numbers in governance but also fostering an environment that recognizes and respects their leadership capabilities.

Recommendations

Based on the research findings and discussions, the following actionable recommendations are proposed to improve the implementation of women reservation policies in local governance in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). These measures aim to prevent the misuse of power and enhance the capacity of women elected representatives, ensuring that they can contribute meaningfully to governance.

1. Capacity Building Programs

Establishing targeted training programs for women elected representatives is essential for enhancing their skills and confidence. Workshops should focus on leadership development, negotiation techniques, public speaking, and understanding local governance structures. By equipping women with the necessary tools, these programs can help them assert their authority and influence policy decisions effectively.

2. Awareness Campaigns

Conducting awareness campaigns aimed at both men and women in the community can foster a more supportive environment for female leaders. These campaigns should address gender biases and promote the value of women's contributions in governance. Engaging male members of local bodies in discussions about gender equality can help shift perceptions and reduce instances of women acting as proxies.

3. Mentorship Initiatives

Implementing mentorship programs that connect experienced women leaders with newly elected representatives can provide guidance and support. Mentorship can empower women by sharing best practices, strategies for overcoming obstacles, and fostering a sense of community among female politicians. This network can serve as a valuable resource for women navigating the challenges of local governance.

4. Policy Enforcement and Monitoring

Strengthening the enforcement of existing policies surrounding women's reservation is crucial. Establishing a monitoring body to oversee the implementation of these policies can help identify instances of misuse of power and address grievances effectively. This body should include representatives from women's organizations to ensure that the voices of women are heard in the oversight process.

5. Community Engagement and Support

Encouraging community involvement in local governance

can amplify women's voices and support their initiatives. Local governments should facilitate platforms for women to present their concerns and proposals directly to the community, fostering a sense of accountability among male members. Initiatives such as public forums and community meetings can create a more inclusive environment where women's perspectives are valued.

6. Legal Frameworks and Protections

Reviewing and amending legal frameworks to provide greater protections for women in governance is essential. Ensuring that laws explicitly address the misuse of authority and outline consequences for male members who undermine female representatives can establish a more equitable governance structure. Additionally, creating legal provisions that recognize the unique challenges faced by women in politics can promote their empowerment.

By implementing these recommendations, stakeholders can create a more conducive environment for women in local governance in J&K, empowering them to be effective leaders and ensuring that the benefits of the reservation policy are fully realized.

Conclusion

The exploration of women's reservation in local governance in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) underscores the critical importance of gender representation in political spaces. Throughout this paper, we have examined key arguments surrounding the empowerment of women through reservation policies, the challenges they face in asserting their authority, and the implications of these dynamics on effective governance. The findings highlight a mixed landscape: while there has been a notable increase in the number of women elected to local bodies, many continue to struggle against patriarchal norms that undermine their roles.

The impact of women's reservation in J&K extends beyond mere numbers. It has initiated a shift towards greater inclusivity in decision-making processes, allowing women to bring to the forefront issues that affect their communities, such as health and education. However, the findings also reveal concerning trends regarding the misuse of power, with many female representatives acting as proxies for male relatives. This phenomenon dilutes the potential effectiveness of the reservation policy, raising questions about the authenticity of women's voices in governance.

Looking toward the future, it is essential to foster a political environment that not only promotes women's participation but also empowers them to exercise true authority. Ongoing research in this area is vital to monitor the effectiveness of the reservation policy, understand the nuanced experiences of women in governance, and develop strategies that address the barriers they face. By continuing to investigate these dynamics, stakeholders can work towards creating a framework that genuinely supports women's leadership and enhances their contributions to local governance in J&K. The journey toward equitable representation is ongoing, and sustained efforts are necessary to ensure that the intentions behind women's reservations are fully realized.

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