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Women in the Digital Age in India

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Abstract : This analysis explores how women engage in India's governance, especially in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), and the impact of digitalization on their involvement. It highlights how digital technologies are breaking traditional barriers, and empowering women to actively engage in local governance. Through online platforms, women access resources, participate in decision-making, and voice concerns. Digitalization streamlines administrative procedures, enabling virtual participation and reducing logistical hurdles. This convergence of women's involvement in PRIs and digitalization represents a transformative force for inclusive governance, fostering social justice and gender equality. However, challenges persist, including societal norms and access barriers. The analysis underscores the importance of integrating a gender perspective into ICT initiatives and fostering collaboration to eliminate gender barriers in technology. It emphasizes the need for continued efforts to empower women, enabling their full contribution to India's development journey.
Keywords: Women's participation, Digital India, Panchayati Raj Institutions, Digitalization, Women's empowerment.

Introduction

The time has come to explore the colourful story of women's participation, which is intertwined with themes of fortitude, tenacity, and empowerment. From way back in the past till today, women have played many roles and been involved in lots of different activities. Women have become the change agents of the world, influencing history with their steadfast courage and unshakable spirit across all nations and continents .From the corridors of power to the grassroots level, women's voices resonate, advocating for equality, justice, and progress. The participation of women in this dynamic terrain is not just a question of numbers; rather, it is a reflection of the significant contributions that women have made to society. We are honoured by the diversity, power, and promise that women offer to all areas of life as we set out on a quest to investigate the many facets of women's participation.

The phrase "Women in Digital India" captures the expanding importance of women in the digital landscape of the nation by highlighting their increased involvement in initiatives driven by technology. The relationship between women's involvement in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and digitalization signifies a profound shift in India's system of decentralized governance, with important ramifications for inclusion, social justice, and democratic participation. Traditionally, women in India have faced numerous barriers to political participation at the grassroots level, including cultural norms, lack of education and awareness, limited mobility, and entrenched patriarchal attitudes. As a result, their representation and influence within PRIs have often been marginal.

However, the emergence and widespread adoption of digital technologies have begun to challenge these

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barriers, opening up new avenues for women's engagement in local governance processes. One of the key ways digitalization has facilitated women's participation is through the use of online platforms for communication, information dissemination, and decision-making. Digital platforms such as websites, mobile apps, social media, and online forums provide women with access to vital resources, knowledge, and networks, thereby empowering them to overcome geographical constraints and connect with fellow community members and policymakers.

Moreover, digitalization has streamlined administrative processes within PRIs, making it easier for women to navigate bureaucratic procedures and participate in meetings, consultations, and decision-making forums. Through the use of electronic voting procedures, virtual meetings, and online registration platforms, women can participate in PRI events without having to physically be present, which reduces logistical challenges like childcare duties and travel restrictions.

Furthermore, digital platforms offer women a voice to articulate their priorities, concerns, and aspirations, amplifying their influence in shaping local development agendas and policies. Through online surveys, feedback mechanisms, and social media campaigns, women can express their views on issues ranging from healthcare and education to infrastructure and livelihoods, ensuring that their perspectives are heard and considered in the decision-making process.

All things considered, women's involvement in PRIs and the convergence of digitalization and these two factors constitute a revolutionary force for inclusive and responsive governance in India . Policymakers, civil society groups, and community leaders may enable women to become proactive change agents in their communities by utilizing digital technologies. This will promote social justice, sustainable development, and gender equality from the ground up.

Meaning of women participation in pris

Women's participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) signifies a pivotal aspect of grassroots democracy in India. PRIs are decentralized governance bodies established under the 73rd Amendment Act of the Indian Constitution, tasked with governing rural areas and addressing local development needs. The significance of women's participation in PRIs stems from historical inequalities and disparities in rural communities, where women often face discrimination and limited access to decision-making.

The 73rd Amendment Act, passed in 1992, was a landmark legislation that aimed to address gender disparities in local governance by reserving one-third of the seats in PRIs for women. This constitutional mandate marked a significant step towards gender equality and women's empowerment, recognizing the importance of women's perspectives and contributions in local decision-making processes. Women have traditionally been underrepresented in politics, but the reservation of seats made it possible for them to actively influence policies and initiatives that directly affect their communities and way of life.

The introduction of reservation quotas for women in PRIs led to a visible increase in women's representation in these institutions. Women from diverse backgrounds and socio-economic strata began contesting elections and assuming leadership roles at the grassroots level . In addition to giving women a forum to express concerns, this increased representation gave them the ability to fight for causes like women's rights, healthcare, education, and sanitation in their local communities.

Moreover, women's participation in PRIs goes beyond mere representation; it fosters inclusive governance and decision-making processes. Women bring unique perspectives, experiences, and priorities to the table, enriching discussions and policy formulation with a gender-sensitive approach.

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Their presence in PRIs ensures that local development initiatives are more responsive to the needs of women and marginalized groups, thereby promoting social equity and inclusive growth.
However, despite the constitutional mandate and efforts to promote women's participation in PRIs, challenges persist. Deep-rooted patriarchal norms, socio-cultural barriers, and gender stereotypes continue to hinder women's full and effective participation in local governance. Women often face resistance, discrimination, and violence when asserting their rights and challenging traditional power structures. Additionally, socio-economic factors such as lack of education, financial dependence, and limited mobility further constrain women's ability to engage actively in PRI activities.

To address these challenges and maximize women's participation in PRIs, concerted efforts are needed at multiple levels. Capacity-building programs, leadership training, and awareness campaigns can empower women with the skills, knowledge, and confidence to navigate political processes and engage effectively in PRI governance. In addition, specific interventions like resource allocation, infrastructure development, and gender-sensitive budgeting can guarantee that the needs and interests of women are sufficiently taken into account in local development plans and policies.

In conclusion, women's participation in Panchayati Raj institutions is essential to India's inclusive and participatory democracy. The reservation of seats for women in PRIs represents a significant legislative milestone towards gender equality and women's empowerment. By actively engaging in local governance, women not only contribute to community development but also challenge entrenched inequalities and advocate for a more equitable and just society. In rural India, sustained efforts to overcome barriers and encourage women's participation in PRIs are crucial to achieving the goals of grassroots democracy and sustainable development.

3 History of women’s participation in pris in India

Pre-independence era

In the pre-independence era, women's participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in India was virtually non-existent due to the prevailing socio-cultural norms and the absence of formalized local governance structures as we understand them today. India during this period was primarily under colonial rule, and the governance system was largely centralized, with limited avenues for grassroots-level representation or participation, regardless of gender.
Traditionally, Indian society was patriarchal, with women's roles predominantly confined to the domestic sphere. While women did play essential roles within their families and communities, their participation in formal decision-making processes, especially at the political level, was extremely limited. Cultural norms and societal expectations dictated that women's voices were seldom heard in matters of governance or public affairs.

Moreover, the colonial administration did little to promote gender equality or women's participation in governance. The governance structures established by the British Raj were designed to serve colonial interests rather than empower local communities, and women were largely excluded from these structures.

However, it's worth noting that even in the absence of formal political representation, women in pre-independence India often played significant roles in community organizing, social reform movements, and resistance against colonial rule. Women leaders such as Rani Lakshmi Bai, Sarojini Naidu, and Annie Besant, among others, emerged as influential figures in various spheres of public life, advocating for women's rights, education, and social justice.
Despite these notable individual contributions, systemic barriers to women's participation in governance

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persisted, and it wasn't until after independence that concerted efforts were made to address gender disparities in political representation and empower women at the grassroots level through initiatives like the Panchayati Raj system and subsequent constitutional amendments.

Post-independence era

In the post-independence era, the historical development of women's participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in India underwent a significant transformation, marked by legislative reforms, policy interventions, and grassroots mobilization efforts aimed at promoting gender equality and empowering women in local governance. The period following India's independence in 1947 saw a growing recognition of the importance of grassroots democracy and decentralization as essential pillars of democratic governance. Against this backdrop, efforts were made to institutionalize and strengthen local self-government institutions, including PRIs, as vehicles for participatory democracy and inclusive development.

One of the pivotal moments in the post-independence era was the enactment of the Panchayati Raj system through constitutional amendments in the 1950s and 1960s . While these early reforms laid the groundwork for decentralized governance, they did not explicitly address gender disparities in political representation or women's participation in PRIs. Legislative reforms aimed at increasing the participation of women in local governance did not yield substantial progress until the 1990s.

The 73rd Amendment Act of 1992 stands out as a landmark legislation that transformed the landscape of women's participation in PRIs. This constitutional amendment mandated the reservation of one-third of the seats for women in all tiers of PRIs – village, intermediate, and district levels . This Amendment Act, is a revolutionary step so far as it ensures women's empowerment on an expanded scale . This expansion includes not only scheduled castes and scheduled tribes but 33 percent reservation for women of all categories in all the three tiers of Panchayat Raj, and also at Sarpanch and Panch levels in Gram Panchayat. Thus, it was women's entry on the threshold of political power structure though at the grassroots level. The philosophy behind it is to bring women community into the mainstream of developmental efforts. Special constitutional provisions and volunteer efforts as well as the communication revolution have awakened the Indian women. She has realized her real potential though in a very limited manner. Property rights, economic half- reliance and a sense of complete individuality have created a new intelligent, self-respecting, determined and progressive class of women. These women represent the future women of our country but Indian women are yet to learn the art of political living. The introduction of reservations for women in PRIs was a watershed moment in India's democratic history, aimed at addressing historical gender disparities in political representation and empowering women as equal partners in local decision-making processes.

Following the enactment of the 73rd Amendment Act, concerted efforts were made to implement the provisions related to women's reservation in PRIs across the country. State governments introduced various measures to ensure compliance with the reservation quotas, including capacity-building programs, awareness campaigns, and support mechanisms to address barriers faced by women in electoral politics. These efforts aimed to create an enabling environment for women to contest elections, participate in PRI activities, and contribute to local development agendas. One such example is of the State of Madhya Pradesh which enacted the MP Panchayat Raj avam Gram Swaraj Adhiniyam, 1993 which went a step further and provided for 50 percent reservation of women in all three tiers of Panchayat i.e., Zila Panchayat, Block Panchayat and Gram Panchayat . This was a historic step, in the view of low levels of women representation in the sphere of governance in the country and especially in the state of Madhya Pradesh. There is no doubt that reservation for women in Panchayats opened the

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door for their empowerment at the grassroots level. As the Centre for Women's Development Studies in 1999 revealed, 95 percent of women surveyed felt that they would not have been elected had it not been for the reservation. So the reservation for women in PRIs became crucial for facilitating first time entry into politics for over 80 percent of the elected women. Also, reservation was crucial for the disadvantaged groups, Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes.

Over the years, the implementation of reservations for women in PRIs has led to significant improvements in women's representation and participation in local governance. Women elected to PRI positions have played instrumental roles in advocating for gender-sensitive policies, addressing issues such as healthcare, education, sanitation, and livelihood opportunities, and championing the rights and welfare of women and marginalized communities. Moreover, the presence of women in PRIs has contributed to broader empowerment outcomes, including increased political awareness, leadership development, and social mobilization among women in rural areas. By assuming leadership roles in local governance, women have challenged traditional gender norms and stereotypes, inspiring other women and girls to aspire for leadership positions and actively engage in civic and political activities.

The foundation for women's entry into governance structures, particularly in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), has been established through reservations mandated by the Constitution. However, despite these progressive measures, various studies (Buch, Panchayats and Women, 2000; From Reservation to Participation; From Symbolism to Empowerment; Rai M., 2001) have indicated that the ideals of democracy and gender equality enshrined in the Constitution are often not fully realized in practice . Rather than actively participating in decision-making processes, women elected as sarpanches or village heads sometimes find themselves relegated to the sidelines, giving rise to a concerning phenomenon known as 'Sarpanch Pati' or 'Sarpanch Putr'. In these instances, women sarpanches serve as mere proxies for dominant male family members who exercise their powers behind the scenes. This pseudo-presence not only distorts the intent of reservations but also perpetuates gender inequalities, highlighting the challenge of women's effective representation in political spheres.

Through extensive interviews and research, it becomes evident that while reservations have facilitated women's entry into the Panchayati Raj System, their meaningful representation remains elusive due to various societal, structural, and knowledge-related barriers. Societal issues such as entrenched patriarchal mind-sets, the presence of male dominance in decision-making processes, gender biases, and cultural norms pose significant challenges to women's participation and leadership in PRIs. Additionally, family responsibilities and a lack of support in household chores further restrict women's ability to engage actively in political activities, perpetuating their role as proxies rather than empowered leaders . Structural issues within the administration, including a lack of support and cooperation, coupled with unrealistic expectations of immediate results following elections, further hinder women's participation and effectiveness in PRIs. Moreover, political parties' reluctance to uplift women and provide them with meaningful opportunities for leadership exacerbates the problem. Furthermore, a lack of knowledge and resources, including illiteracy, limited technical and IT-related skills, insufficient training, and a dearth of exposure in the public sphere, contribute to women's low self-esteem and undermine their confidence to engage effectively in PRI activities. Taking on these complex issues calls for all-encompassing approaches that not only remove social and institutional barriers but also provide women the tools, resources, and support networks they need to take on leadership roles and exercise their agency within local governing structures.

"since the seats are reserved, women get elected. And from the very next day they are supposed to perform their duties and implement schemes and give sanctions for projects. However, since they are illiterate and do not have any training of handling technical issues and financial deals, they have no

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option but to take assistance from male family members. Also, family members are the only people she can trust for financial decisions. This is just a transitional phase. Once these representative are trained, they will feel confident and empowered . "

Shashi Shekhar Sharma, PS, Panchayati Raj Department, Bihar

In conclusion, women's participation in Panchayati Raj institutions witnessed a historic shift in the post-independence era, mostly as a result of legislative changes, policy interventions, and grassroots mobilization campaigns that supported gender equality and women's empowerment in local governance. While significant progress has been made, challenges persist, and continued efforts are needed to ensure meaningful and effective participation of women in PRI processes, thereby realizing the vision of inclusive and responsive grassroots democracy in India.

Women participation in the 21st century

The rapid innovations of the digital era and the historical development of women's participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) have brought about a transformational shift in the landscape of grassroots governance and women's empowerment in the 21st century . The convergence of women's participation in PRIs with the digital revolution has brought up new opportunities and challenges, building upon the foundations laid by legislative reforms and constitutional amendments in the preceding decades.

Efforts to increase women's representation and participation in PRIs through legal changes and policy initiatives continued in the twenty-first century . Constitutional mandates such as the reservation of one-third of PRI seats for women laid the groundwork for their increased involvement in local governance. But in spite of these progressive steps, women frequently encountered societal prejudices and structural obstacles that prevented them from participating meaningfully in decision-making processes.

The advent of the digital era brought about a profound change in the way women engaged with PRI systems and procedures. Digital technologies, including mobile apps, online portals, and social media platforms, emerged as powerful tools for women to access information, communicate, and participate in PRI activities . Women were able to overcome geographical boundaries and establish real-time connections with policymakers and other community members thanks to these digital platforms, which democratized access to governance.

Furthermore, the adoption of digital tools in PRI procedures transformed accountability, inclusion, and transparency. Women were better equipped to keep an eye on PRI activities and expenses thanks to online platforms that made information about government programmes and services easier to access . Digital grievance redressal platforms gave women a way to quickly address issues impacting their communities and voice their concerns.

Digital literacy and capacity-building initiatives played a crucial role in empowering women to navigate the digital landscape confidently. Training programs on IT skills, e-governance, and digital communication equipped women with the knowledge and skills needed to leverage technology for their empowerment . As a result, women in PRI institutions challenged conventional gender norms and stereotypes by progressively claiming their agency and leadership.

In addition, women's advocacy and collective action were made easier by the digital age, which broke down geographical barriers and promoted female solidarity throughout the world. Virtual networks,

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online petitions, and social media campaigns all played a significant role in gaining support, elevating the voices of women, and promoting change on everything from gender equality to local development priorities.

In conclusion, the historical development of women's participation in PRI in the 21st century is intricately linked with the present digital age, which has reshaped the dynamics of grassroots governance and women's empowerment. Women have used digital technologies to break down barriers, make their voices heard, and change the face of responsive and inclusive democracy in India's decentralized government system.

Women participation and sustainable development goals

The participation of women in panchayats, which are local self-governing bodies in India, plays a crucial role in achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) . When women actively participate in panchayats, they bring diverse perspectives, priorities, and experiences to the decision-making process. This leads to policies and programs that are more inclusive and responsive to the needs of women and marginalized groups within the community.

Additionally, women's participation in panchayats helps advance SDG 1: No Poverty, by addressing issues related to economic empowerment, such as access to resources, livelihood opportunities, and social protection measures. Through their involvement in decision-making processes, women can advocate for initiatives that promote sustainable development, poverty reduction, and social justice .
Moreover, women's participation in panchayats contributes to SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being, by advocating for healthcare services that are accessible, affordable, and gender-responsive . Women leaders can prioritize healthcare initiatives that address maternal and child health, reproductive rights, and nutrition, thereby improving the overall health outcomes of their communities.

Additionally, women's participation in panchayats is linked to SDG 4: Quality Education, as they can advocate for policies and programs that promote gender-inclusive and equitable education systems . By prioritizing education for girls and marginalized groups, women leaders can help ensure that all members of the community have access to quality education, leading to improved literacy rates and lifelong learning opportunities.

In conclusion, women's participation in panchayats is instrumental in achieving multiple Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 5: Gender Equality, by ensuring that women have a voice in decision-making processes and that their needs and priorities are addressed . By empowering women as leaders and decision-makers at the local level, societies can move closer to achieving sustainable and inclusive development for all.

Empowering women in panchayati raj: challenges and solutions

Women's participation in Panchayati Raj institutions, which form the backbone of local governance in India, is crucial for achieving gender equality and inclusive development. Despite constituting nearly half of the population, rural women often face barriers to political participation due to cultural norms and institutional biases. However, the 73rd Constitutional Amendment introduced reservations for women, scheduled castes, and scheduled tribes, leading to a steady increase in women's representation in Panchayats. The study showed that a sizable proportion of women surveyed perceived enhancement in their confidence, decision making ability and respect within the family after winning an election. What is significant, the women and girls related issues get attention if the Panchayat Pradhan is a

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woman. There are a number of examples where women sarpanch Or Pradhan have organized campaigns against liquor consumption, child marriages and other evils in the society. They have not only worked for ensuring development of villages but have also organized self-help groups for their economic empowerment.

While the reservation system has increased women's participation, challenges remain in ensuring their effective functioning within Panchayati Raj institutions. Merely reserving seats is not enough; women members must be given commensurate powers and support to fulfill their roles effectively. Recommendations include providing training and empowerment programs for women members, developing interpersonal communication skills, and linking women's development programs with Panchayat functions. Additionally, efforts are needed to address socio-economic pressures that may constrain women's political participation, such as through mobilization initiatives and involving Panchayats in addressing specific issues. Ultimately, empowering women in Panchayati Raj is essential for realizing the full potential of grassroots democracy and promoting gender-inclusive governance.

Women elected representatives in Panchayati Raj face numerous challenges that hinder their effective participation in local governance . Important among these challenges are:

- Patriarchy: Except a few tribal societies, Indian society in general continues to suffer from patriarchy . Many elected women representatives continue to work as a rubber stamp for their family members and also at times as proxies of rural elites. Their male co- workers show insensitivity and refuse to cooperate. Burden of household responsibilities, purdah system and domestic violence negatively affect their functioning.
- Caste System: Hierarchical caste system in rural India makes it difficult for women from SC and ST communities to function independently and effectively. Community or Khap panchayats function parallel to panchayats and pressurize women representatives to act in a particular way.
- Lack of Cooperation from Line/Sectoral Departments: Elected women representatives, particularly the first timers find it very difficult to deal with officials of block/ district administration and of line/ sectoral departments. Bureaucratic apathy and corruption is rampant which makes these women representatives demotivated and disenchanted from the Panchayati Raj . People's expectation to deliver coupled with non-cooperation of administration frustrate these women representatives so much so that many a times they are unwilling to contest for the next term .
- Inadequate Capacities: Majority of elected women representatives enter into public life for the first time and do not have enough knowledge and skills to handle affairs of panchayats. Training programs conducted by government training agencies are unable to cover all elected representatives in time. A large number of ward members do not get an opportunity to attend any training in their entire term. At times they are also not allowed by their family members to travel and stay alone during the residential training. Lack of education also puts constraints on elected women representatives.
- Encroachment and Non-Payment of Taxes/ Fees: Elected representatives in general and specially elected women representatives face resistance from the community if they want to remove encroachment from panchayat land/ properties . Many times they are subjected to violence from powerful elements of the society. Many rural households do not want to pay taxes and fees on time while expecting panchayats to deliver public services and goods on time. Insistence by elected women representatives is resisted at times by violent protests.
- Two Child Norm: A few states are still continuing with the two child norm for contesting panchayat elections. In rural areas women hardly have any say in the number of children in the family and such laws restrict their entry into panchayats.

Despite these challenges, initiatives by the government of India and state governments aim to empower

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women in rural areas and enhance their participation in Panchayati Raj. Recognizing the importance of women's empowerment for socio-economic development, various programs and policies have been implemented to address gender disparities and promote inclusive governance. However, concerted efforts are needed to overcome the deep-rooted obstacles that hinder the effective participation of women in Panchayati Raj and ensure their meaningful contribution to grassroots democracy and inclusive development.

Governmental Initiatives

“It is not possible for a bird to fly on only one wing"- said Swami Vivekananda emphasizing that the world would progress only when the condition of women improved. Confirming this, experience over the year’s shows that women, despite facing many socio- economic barriers, have been making invaluable contributions to society. This also holds true for Indian rural women. They are no longer restricted to behind the curtains doing domestic duties . Today, rural women contribute to almost 70-80 percent of the farming activities, but in general perception they are still not recognized as farmers and their role in decision making such as marketing or selection of their livestock or crop is limited.

To address this and to equip rural women for new age challenges, education has to be the foremost priority. With this in mind, the Government has launched a number of initiatives for their education and wellbeing, most notably of these being- Beti Bachao- Beti Padhao campaign . This campaign has positively impacted the mindset of society towards girl child and the government has decided to expand it in all districts of the country.

In addition to formal education, rural women need to be trained in new skills and latest digital tools so as to enable them to migrate from agriculture to more diversified occupations. It is heartening to note that more than 50 percent certificates under Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana have been awarded to the women. Similarly, Pradhan Mantri Gramin Digital Saksharta Abhiyaan will go a long way in spreading digital literacy in far flung and remote areas of the country. And digital literacy will empower rural women by raising social and political awareness, improving educational and employment opportunities.

Full potential of the women- whether economic or social, cannot be realized unless the environment is safe and secure for them. To ensure women safety, the government has taken several innovative steps such as Universalization of Women Helpline and appointing one Mahila Police Volunteer in every Gram Panchayat. These Mahila Police Volunteers would act as a link between rural women and the police, setting a good example of community volunteerism.

For the women in difficult circumstances facing physical, emotional and economic abuse, the government has created One Stop Centers and Swadhar Greh across the country which would provide integrated support and assistance to the distressed women. The main objective of the One Stop Centers is to urgently provide support to the women suffering from violence in private and public places, within the family, in the community and at the workplace. It also intends to facilitate immediate emergency and non- emergency access to services like those of medical, legal, psychological and counselling to fight against various types of atrocities against women. On the other hand, Swadhar Greh scheme had been launched for the purpose of providing the opportunities to women, victims of the various adverse circumstances, to lead a life of dignity and self-esteem. Under this scheme, basic needs like those of food, clothing, medical facilities and shelter for women are taken care of for those who are deprived of socio- familial and economical support. Swadhar Greh is set up in each district of the country for 30 women and the main objective of which is nourishing the emotional balance due to coming across untoward incidents in their lives. The scheme also provides the victims with legal aid and much required support to enable them to start a fresh life in both family and society.

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Though all these efforts are laudable, real empowerment will happen only when women themselves participate effectively in governance and political processes. A nationwide training program has been launched in this regard to prepare Elected Women Representatives (EWR) for leadership roles in their villages. The Ministry of Panchayati Raj commissioned a Study on elected women representatives in Gram Panchayats. The Study was based on a nationwide survey and this study helped analyse various issues related to EWRs and it also investigated their socio-economic profile, tracked their political careers and examined the quality of their post-election participation in terms of performance of their roles and responsibilities.

For capacity building of elected representatives of PRIs, the Ministry of Panchayati Raj has been making continuous efforts by launching and implementing various schemes like Panchayat Mahila Evam Yuva Shakti Abhiyaan, Rajiv Gandhi Panchayat Sashaktikaran Abhiyaan and recently launched Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan . These schemes also have a strong component of capacity building of elected women representatives. For example, objectives of Panchayat Mahila Evam Yuva Shakti Abhiyaan where to enable women Panchayat leaders to come together to -

(a) Articulate their problems as women Panchayat leaders.

(b) Discuss issues regarding the institutional mechanisms for their empowerment.

(c) Come up with a charter of issues to be mainstreamed into policy and advocacy support so that their concerns are addressed by the process of development adopted by the State and the three - tier PRI system.

(d) Form an association of the Elected Women Representatives with elected office bearers and with cascading representation of EWRs from the district level and divisional level EWRs organizations.

For the capacity building of EWRs in PRIs, the National Capacity Building Framework of the Ministry of Panchayati Raj has recommended customized training programs based on training needs assessment. The Ministry of Women and Child Development in collaboration with the MoPR has undertaken a countrywide program of training the EWRs in various areas like finance, social development, education, health, and environment among others. States have also been taking steps to build capacities of EWRs in PRIs. For example, Government of Madhya Pradesh under its Umaria pilot made a short and intensive field based intervention of four months duration aimed to enhance leadership skills of women Gram Panchayat Sarpanches in the tribal majority district of Umaria. Also, the women sarpanches are also being encouraged to form a WhatsApp group and share their good practices as well as assist one another in finding solutions to common problems.

The Ministry of Panchayati Raj has also issued various advisories to States with regard to EWRs. All the States government and UT administrations were advised to impress upon PRIs to ensure the safety of EWRs and female Sarpanchs, particularly those belonging to the weaker sections. They should not be physically harmed, assaulted or humiliated in any manner. Discrimination of any kind against them should not be allowed to remain unheeded and be resolved expeditiously. To put a curb on the cases of proxy attendance by relatives of women EWRs, States have been advised to issue orders that the officers, in whose presence such meetings are held, should be proceeded against departmentally. MoPR has also issued advisories to States to instruct gram panchayats to celebrate international women's day on 8th of March and to involve self-help group women and Women Swachhata doots actively in these celebrations.

In conclusion, the government has implemented a range of initiatives aimed at empowering rural women in Panchayati Raj institutions, addressing their educational, economic, and safety needs. From campaigns like Beti Bachao-Beti Padhao to skill development programs and digital literacy initiatives, efforts have been made to enhance the capabilities and opportunities of rural women. Additionally,

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measures such as One Stop Centers and Mahila Police Volunteers aim to ensure their safety and well-being. Furthermore, capacity-building programs for elected women representatives in PRIs are crucial for enabling their effective participation in governance. Despite these efforts, ongoing commitment and collaborative action are necessary to overcome the challenges and realize the full potential of rural women in local governance and societal development.

Gender focus of e-governance projects in india

In recent years, e-governance initiatives have gained momentum in India, with the aim of leveraging technology to improve the delivery of social services to marginalized communities, including women. The integration of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) into service delivery holds the promise of enhancing accessibility, efficiency, and transparency in governance processes . However, a critical question arises: do these initiatives prioritize the needs and preferences of women as a distinct category of service recipients? While the potential of e-governance to empower women and address gender disparities is evident, the extent to which these projects are designed and implemented with a gender-sensitive approach remains a subject of scrutiny. In addition to highlighting the significance of making sure that women are not only beneficiaries but also engaged players in the field of digital governance, this introduction provides context for analysing the gender focus of e-governance initiatives in India.

The examples of Gyandoot and FRIENDS highlight the varying approaches and outcomes of e-governance projects concerning women's participation and empowerment in India. While Gyandoot did not have specific strategies targeting women, it inadvertently benefited rural women by providing them with opportunities to engage with local bureaucracy and access market information like, For example, widows in villages could send emails at negligible cost to the local bureaucracy to put pressure regarding payment of pensions that had not been paid for several months. Small town women traders could check the latest market prices for their products through the computer so that they were no longer at the mercy of the middleman.

In contrast, FRIENDS in Kerala exemplifies a more deliberate effort to cater to women's needs, offering one-stop service centers for various government payments. Evaluations of FRIENDS revealed a significant increase in women's utilization of services compared to traditional departmental counters, indicating a potential positive impact on women's access to government services. An evaluation of the project in 2002 showed that the number of women making such payments at the FRIENDS service centers was more (11.3 percent) than the number of women making similar payments at 74 departmental counters (3.1 percent). 80 percent of the women respondents indicated a preference for using the FRIENDS center. However, despite these promising examples, the overall evaluation of e-governance applications in India lacks comprehensive assessments of their gender focus and effectiveness in promoting women's use of services. As such, while initiatives like FRIENDS show promise, there is a need for further research to ensure that e-governance projects prioritize gender inclusivity and effectively address the specific needs and preferences of women in accessing government services.

Reforms aimed at social empowerment, under the banner of "Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas," prioritize the participation and advancement of rural women in India's workforce. This endeavor encompasses various facets such as ensuring safety, security, good health, education, skill development, and equal rights for women. Tackling the problem of skewed sex ratios and preventing female infanticide is an important first step towards empowering women. The Beti Bachao Beti Padhao scheme has played a pivotal role in mobilizing masses towards eliminating gender discrimination and improving the sex ratio at birth.

Furthermore, initiatives like the Sukanya Samridhi Yojana have focused on promoting girls' rights and

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providing opportunities for higher education. The Ministry of Women and Child Development spearheads several schemes and programs across the country for the holistic empowerment of women and the development of children. Additionally, initiatives such as the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana and Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, including the Swachh Vidyalaya Abhiyaan, are instilling confidence among rural women by addressing their basic needs and ensuring access to essential amenities. Furthermore, the implementation of 33 percent reservations for women's participation in politics has been a pivotal reform for political empowerment, allowing women to emerge as influential leaders. Today, local women occupy a significant 43 percent of the seats at village and district levels, signifying progress towards gender parity and inclusive governance.

In the pursuit of women's empowerment, the integration of digital technologies has emerged as a transformative force, reshaping societal norms and empowering women across various spheres of life. Empowerment is the process which confers power on individuals over their own lives, in their society, and in their communities. It signifies promotion in the social, economic, spiritual or political status of an individual. In the context of women, it is an exercise in enhancing their educational, economic, social, and political and health status. For empowering Indian women, our constitution endorses equality to women and requires the state to assimilate steps to protect rights of women. Empowerment is a multi-faceted, multidimensional and multi-layered concept. Women's empowerment is a process in which women gain greater share of control over resources- material, human and intellectual, like knowledge information, ideas and financial resources like money- and access to money and control over decision making in the home, community, society and nation and to gain power. The grim scenario of women having no voice in their own houses has undergone major transformation in recent times. The modern woman is no longer confined to the four walls of the house. Women are now realizing their worth in every way and demanding gender equality and justice both at home and in the workplace. They have broken the glass barrier in almost every field, be it technology, space science, sports or the armed forces. Almost every fifth women is an entrepreneur- both in urban and rural India.

Over recent years, there has been a notable shift away from the traditional confines of gender roles, with women asserting their worth and demanding equality and justice across various domains. With advancements in information and communication technologies (ICTs), opportunities for women have expanded significantly, with the ICT sector offering plentiful job opportunities that are non-discriminatory and inclusive of diverse demographics . Digitalization has the potential to further advance gender equality and women's empowerment by facilitating access to information, healthcare, education, economic opportunities, and avenues for collaboration, thereby amplifying women's voices and contributions in the journey towards a more equitable society.

Educational empowerment for women and girls is undergoing a significant transformation globally, fueled by the integration of new technologies into learning processes. Countries are increasingly leveraging technologies such as computers, the internet, and broadcast media like radio and television to enhance training opportunities for women and girls in education. Use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) offers a viable remedy despite ongoing gender disparities in education between men and women due to traditional home responsibilities, restricted mobility, and socio-cultural attitudes that devalue women's education. ICTs have the power to increase women's participation in education globally by removing obstacles to access and participation. Whether through online learning platforms, digital resources, or distance education initiatives, ICTs offer avenues for women and girls to pursue education and skill development, regardless of geographical constraints or societal norms. ICTs will be essential to the empowerment of women and girls as nations adopt digital

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innovations in education because they will increase the knowledge available to them, improve their learning experiences, and eventually promote greater gender equality in education.

Political empowerment of women is experiencing a paradigm shift globally, driven by the innovative utilization of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) for networking and political activism. ICTs are being used effectively to link people and inspire communities to get involved in politics all over the world. Women and their organizations, in particular, are strategically harnessing ICTs to advance their rights and amplify the voices of marginalized women. Through online platforms and social media, women's networks are utilizing technology to elevate issues that are often overlooked by traditional media channels. The development of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and alternative organisations committed to tackling gender-related issues has also been accelerated by the introduction of ICTs. Moreover, the internet has given women a forum to express their opinions and actively engage in public conversation, including venues dedicated to women's issues. ICTs have enormous potential in this context to support women officials in their duties, build women's networks for social and political action, increase women's engagement in the political process, and improve women's access to government services. As ICTs continue to evolve, they stand poised to play a pivotal role in advancing the political empowerment of women on a global scale.

The economic empowerment of rural women has emerged as a pivotal priority in India's quest for comprehensive societal development. Since the Indian government has realized how important financially independent rural women are to the well-being of families, communities, and countries, it has stepped up its efforts to support them. Notably, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have emerged as a catalyst for women's economic empowerment, offering opportunities for women to initiate and manage ICT projects. Moreover, digitalization has facilitated remote work for women, enabling them to contribute to the economy while balancing family responsibilities. Beyond employment, ICTs have made it easier for women to achieve their financial goals and stand up for their rights. In particular, by bridging the gender gap in account ownership and streamlining formal financial transactions, digital financial services have significantly improved women's financial inclusion. With continued advancements in digitalization, there is great potential for financial goods and services to become more accessible, inexpensive, transparent, and customized to the requirements of women. This might lead to the empowering of women economically and improve societal development in general.

A true measure of evolution of a society is depicted by the status women of the society have. In this regard, the approach of successive governments in our country has changed from welfare to development to the empowerment of women to ensure gender equality in society. While gone are the days of protective patronage and subjective equality, the present society cannot prosper unless a holistic development based approach is successful to ensure economic independence and empowerment of women. The umbrella scheme of National Mission for Empowerment of Women talks about use of digital and information technology in no uncertain terms. Various initiatives of the government such as Rashtriya Mahila Kosh, Support to Training and Employment Program for women, Dhanalakshmi scheme, Swadhar, Ujjawala can greatly benefit from the use of digital technologies at the disposal of the government today. The tools like Public Financial Management System for funds disbursal and monitoring under these schemes, linking of Aadhaar to projects like Ujjawala and Swadhar can promise a zenith in the area of women empowerment in our country. New initiatives like One Stop Centers and Women Helpline have digital technology at the core of their functioning.

For holistic empowerment of rural women to happen, an effective convergence of all aspects impacting a women's life is needed- be it social, economic or political. The process of empowering rural women is

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a continuous process. The need of the hour is to make women realize their potential, make them aware of the bright future that awaits them, guide them and nurture them.

Leveraging Digitalization To Achieve Gender Equality

Leveraging digitalization offers a promising way to advance gender equality globally in today's rapidly evolving digital ecosystem. By harnessing the power of technology, we have the opportunity to dismantle barriers, empower women economically, socially, and politically, and bridge longstanding gender divides. Digitalization has the potential to significantly boost gender equality globally in a number of ways, from advancing women's rights in AI governance to guaranteeing equitable access to education and employment opportunities.

Despite the implementation of various initiatives, there remains a pressing need for comprehensive policies aimed at enhancing women's participation in the digital revolution . Even though digital technologies present fresh avenues for women's empowerment, the structural problems at the root of the gender gap in the digital sphere cannot be solved by them alone. It is imperative to address ingrained beliefs, actions, and customs that support violence and discrimination against women. The complete involvement and inclusion of women and girls in the digital world must be given top priority in legislative initiatives, with an emphasis on removing obstacles and fostering equal opportunities. It's essential to recognize that narrowing the digital divide between men and women requires multifaceted approaches, with no singular solution, but rather a concerted effort across various sectors and stakeholders.

Addressing gender inequality requires a multifaceted approach that tackles economic, social, political, and cultural barriers. Effective interventions should be evidence-based and tailored to the specific challenges faced in different contexts. Governments play a pivotal role in ensuring that new technologies prioritize, protect, and advance women's human rights while also establishing ethical frameworks for AI auditing and governance that prioritize gender equality . Bridging the gender data gap is essential, with a focus on both quantity and quality of data while upholding privacy and data safety. Educational institutions must prepare women and girls for the digital revolution, equipping them with the necessary skills to thrive in the technology-driven world. Furthermore, education on women's rights compliant technology should be provided to those involved in designing, developing, and using AI in decision-making processes. Companies, particularly in the technology sector, must adopt gender mainstreaming policies to promote equal access to well-paying jobs and professions for women and men alike. Additionally, the development of labor market rules, including provisions for paid maternity/parental leave and affordable childcare, is crucial for fostering gender equality in the workforce and ensuring women's full participation in economic activities. By implementing these measures, societies can take significant strides towards achieving gender equality and creating inclusive environments for all individuals to thrive.

Conclusion

In conclusion, women's empowerment is vital for economic growth and stability, and information and communication technologies (ICTs) play a crucial role in achieving this goal. To harness the potential of ICTs for women's empowerment, it's essential to integrate a gender equality perspective into all endeavors and ensure equal opportunities in high-tech education and training. Collaboration is key to eliminating gender barriers in the technology sector and promoting equal opportunities in ICT-related enterprises. In India, women empowerment programs are making significant strides, fostering social and economic empowerment through community-based initiatives. These programs focus on building skills,

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confidence, access to resources, and community engagement, enabling women to become confident decision-makers and leaders in their homes and communities. While Indian women have made remarkable progress, challenges persist due to social and religious customs that inhibit their freedom, education, and participation in various spheres of life. Continued efforts are necessary to address these challenges and create a more inclusive society where women can thrive and contribute fully to the nation's development.

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