

Women's role in India's village councils

key points

- India was one of the first countries to introduce a mandatory quota system for women.
- Of 3.2 million elected political office bearers in India, a million are women.

India was one of the first countries to introduce a mandatory quota system to enhance women's representation in government. What is unique about the Indian system is that the quota is also applicable to top positions in government, and a third of all mayors in India today are women. South Africa can learn from India's experience in order to create a more equitable environment for women.

More than ten years ago, on 23 December 1992, the Indian Parliament amended the Constitution (the 73rd amendment) and the Panchayats (village councils) became constitutional bodies. The Constitution defines them as "institutions of self-government". The Constitution reserved not less than a third of all seats for women. This was hailed as historic and as the beginning of a silent revolution in government in India. Out of 3.2 million members who are elected every five years at the village, block and district levels of the local government system of panchayats and municipalities, more than a million are women. Further, women

head a third of all local bodies (table 1).

The big question is: has the silent revolution adversely affected the women elected as Panchayat members?

The biggest challenge facing India today is turning the present phase in which women are victims of oppressive structures into one of gender equity in public life, with dignity for all.

The first ten-year period since the Constitution was amended has not been altogether disappointing. Given the severe social and political constraints within which the new system had to function – social inequality, the caste system, patriarchy, India's feudal setting, illiteracy and

Table 1: Women's membership and leadership of local government bodies in India since 1993

Local bodies	Total number of bodies	Number of women members	Number of bodies headed by women
Village Panchayats	231 630	990 482	77 210
Block (middle level)	5 912	48 471	1 971
District Panchayats	595	5 272	198
City Corporations	107	2 388	36
Town municipalities	1 443	11 361	481
Nagar Panchayats	2 091	9 486	697

The numbers are averages of figures from different sources

uneven development – there are several aspects of which India can be proud.

Today, elections to the local government institutions every five years have become the norm, although in the initial years, almost all the states in the country defied the constitutional provision, irrespective of the party in power. As civil society organisations took the initiative to fight the anti-constitutional approach of the states by filing public interest litigations (PILs), the judiciary intervened at different levels.

The last ten years have also seen steady progress in the inclusion of previously marginalised sections of the Indian population, in this case women, in the decision-making process from the village to the district level. About 30 million women, an average of three per seat, contest the elections. This is no mean achievement in a hierarchical and male-dominated society like India's. The common refrain that men control elected women members may be partly true, but studies show that the situation is rapidly changing. The number of women who are elected from general constituencies and defeat men in the process is also increasing. In the state of Karnataka 43% of those elected to the local governments are women and in Kerala and West Bengal the figures are 37% and 36%, respectively.

Many states, taking advantage of the prevailing situation, have come up with innovative and creative experiments in local governance involving women. Gender budgeting in Kerala is a case in point.

With this new and bold initiative, India has exploded numerous myths about women in public life, such as that:

- women are passive and uninterested in political institutions;
- only rich and powerful women will succeed, even after the allocation of reserved seats;
- women's political connections matter and only relatives of leaders or those connected to them will enter the local bodies; and
- women will be proxy members for male members of their the families or caste groups.

Field studies have shown that women all over the country are coming forward to participate in public life, to contest elections and to hold office, breaking social, cultural and economic barriers in the process.

However, women face structural and systemic problems. For instance, if women Panchayat presidents do not yield to pressure from powerful land owners or contractor lobbies, motions of no confidence are passed to remove them from office.

About eight states have passed legislation whereby women who have more than two children cannot hold office and if they bear a child while they hold office, their membership of the Panchayats or municipalities ceases. This is not applicable to higher levels of government and does not affect members of state assemblies or Parliament. Village women are the worst affected and find different ways to hide newborn babies. In certain areas male officials do not hold elected women members/presidents in high esteem because of their low social status. Women are doubly disadvantaged, carrying the burden of both household chores and demands from the community, as well the demands of the office they hold.

Ten years is a short time. The Panchayats and women representatives have not worked wonders but a small beginning has been made. Alert citizens and civil society organisations are not simply leaving things up to negative forces. A people's movement can change the anti-women bias. It is encouraging that the CBOs, NGOs and the media are taking the initiative with a measure of success.

Hundreds of women have given up their lives for the cause of women's empowerment. People in India cannot and must not allow their sacrifices and dreams to fade away. In a not-too-distant future, India, through its new Panchayati raj system, will have women occupying 50% of public positions.

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