

# Evaluate the Participation Level of Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) in Panchayati Raj Institutions and Challenges Faced by them: A Study of Kadwa Block in Katihar of Bihar

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## ABSTRACT

*Even after 68 years of independence and 23 years of implementation of 73rd amendment devolving 29 subjects to the panchayats and reserving 33% of the seats for women at panchayat level; Elected Women Representatives (EWR) are on the margin, dependent on their husbands, other male family members as the case may be in Kadwa block of Katihar District of Bihar. The EWR are mere proxies to their husband, male family members, who cannot fight election and hold offices due to the reservation of seats for the disadvantages section including women. There are numerous challenges facing EWRs like low level of education, patriarchal society, cultural norms, household liabilities, economic concerns etc, preventing their effective participation in governance process. Mere reserving the seats for the disadvantages including women and implementing them half-heartedly and in piecemeal steps will not put the women and disadvantaged to the fore front and undo the historical injustices meted out to them, but the state has to adopt integrated, whole hearted approach to ensure full participation of the women representatives in the process of the governance.*

**Keywords:** Panchayats, Participation, Elected Women Representatives (EWR)

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## INTRODUCTION

Article 40 of Directive Principles of the State Policy under Indian Constitution envisaged that village panchayats will be promoted and given necessary resources so that they can function as unit. India has been historically patriarchal country. Rural women comprise almost half of the population of the country; they have not yet complete and meaningful participation in politics (Ghosh, 2002). The Government of India extended level playing field to ensure participation of women's in local self-government through historical 73rd Constitution Amendment making sweeping reforms at third tier panchayat level. Apart from reserving 33% of the seats for women and SC/ST in proportionate to their population in Panchayati Raj Institution (PRIs), it has made enabling provisions like defined boundary, devolution of 29 subjects, formation of state election commission, holding regular panchayats election etc. The architects of Panchayat Raj Institution envisaged equal participation for women in the village panchayats along with their male counterparts (Ansari, 2014).

After a long hiatus panchayat election was held in Bihar in 2001 in consonance with the 73<sup>rd</sup> constitutional amendment Act. Provisions for devolving power related to 29 subjects were brought in Bihar Panchayats Raj Act 2006. Fifty percent reservation for women was made at all the three levels, which became a pioneering example in the country compelling many states to follow the suit.

There are about 54% of the EWR at panchayat level in Bihar. But, just having women in large numbers is not enough. Women are far lagging behind to male in terms of their participation in the governance process. The issue that remains to be understood is that with the given conservative patriarchal, caste hierarchical background ground of India society, there is a need to study the gender disadvantages with respect to EWR at panchayats level. Singla (2007) through his study "Women's Participation in Panchayati Raj: Nature and Effectiveness" opines that mere the number of the women representatives in PRIs is not enough. The issue that remains to be understood is that with the given conservative background, will the elected members actually be able to participate in the Panchayati Raj Institutions. There is suspicion in female participation in a male dominated society where the social status has long been neglected (Gochhayat, 2013).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

There are numerous empirical studies available on the women participation in Panchayati Raj. Findings from some researches on the role of women participation in PRIrun as thus:

Dattaand Sen (2003), in their study, identified that the issue of empowerment of the lady members should be tackled both at political and administrative levels. It should be coupledwith other issues, like, economic independence etc.

Sarkar *et al.*, (2014) in their study in Sagar Block South 24 Parganas District of West Bengal found that in rural India communities have a strong division between men and women defining and regulating their roles, responsibilities, benefits, privileges, opportunities, access, and control over resources and decision making process. The study found that pressure is given by husband, male members on elected women representatives (EWR) for approval of their plans and policies. The former ignore their suggestions, and do not give due respect to the latter.

Ansari (2014), in his study of Barak Valley found that participation of women in PRIs is low and for their activities they are dependent on others. Most of the time they are not able to take decision on their own. Economic, household duties, low level of education are some factorshampering their effective participation. The progress of women in PRI is slow and it will take more time to attain women's goal.

Ghatakand Ghatak (2002) also found low participationof disadvantage group in PRI bodies in his study. ISED(1998), Mishra (1998) and Panda (1999), in their studies in Orissa discovered that participation of EWR in decision making is very low despite their significant numbers in PRI bodies.EWR are usually influenced by male members, husbands while taking decisions. Several studies on role of women in Panchayti Raj discovered factors like illiteracy, poverty, unawareness, communication skills, and family liabilities hampering their participation in decision making.

## STUDY AREA

Katihar district is one of the most backward districts in India where literacy is much lower than national and state level, which is pegged at 53.56%. The district also stood with dubious distinction of lowest male literacy at 61.09% in the state and female literacy is also woefully low at 45.39%. Other human development indicators like IMR, MMR, poverty are much

lower than national and state average in the district. Muslim population is nearly 50% of the population in Katihar district and its block Kadwa. The district is prone to natural disasters like flood, quakes etc. The district is characterized by high migration due to poor employment opportunities, better education, healthcare facilities etc. Awareness about the rights and entitlement is not only low among the disadvantaged and female, it is also very low among male even from the well-off category.

## OBJECTIVE

The broad objective of the study is to assess the extent of the participation and challenges faced by the elected women (ward members) representatives in Panchayati Raj Institution.

- To identify the level of their participation and highlight the challenges faced by them in PRIs
- To identify and highlight factors affecting their participation

## METHODOLOGY

The present study is mostly based on empirical methods. For this study, structured interview schedules were canvassed to collect data from the elected women ward members of 10 panchayats (Belon, Bijhara, Dhangama, Dharparsia, Gopinagar, Kumhri, Sheikhpura, Shikarpur, Tyebpur, and Rizwanpur), of Kadwablock Katihar district. These 10 panchayats were randomly selected and further five incumbent elected women ward members in panchayat election of 2011 were randomly selected from each of these panchayats. Unstructured interviews with them and their close male relatives and two FGDs with gramsabha members were conducted in Shikarpur and Dharparsia panchayat. Secondary data like panchayat records are also used in the study. The data were collected in the month of February, 2015.

## FINDINGS

Table 1 shows the age group wise EWR who were interviewed. There are highest 32 members in 30-39 age group and 19 general, 7 OBC, 4 SC and 2 ST in the same age category. There were only 3 EWRs less than 30 years of age. In age group 40-49 there were 13 members while there was only 2 members above 50 years. In marriage category there were 47 members

and 2 unmarried and 1 widow. Almost half of the EWRs are illiterate, 21 were primary/upper primary educated. Only 3 were secondary pass and 1 senior secondary pass and no member was found to be graduate.

**Table 1: Profile of elected women wards members**

All value in absolute number (N = 50)

| <i>Age (In Yrs)</i> | <i>Frequency</i> | <i>Category</i>    |                |            |           | <i>Marital Status</i> |                |                  | <i>Education</i> |                   |                              |                  |                     |
|---------------------|------------------|--------------------|----------------|------------|-----------|-----------------------|----------------|------------------|------------------|-------------------|------------------------------|------------------|---------------------|
|                     |                  | <i>Age (group)</i> | <i>General</i> | <i>OBC</i> | <i>SC</i> | <i>ST</i>             | <i>Married</i> | <i>Unmarried</i> | <i>Widow</i>     | <i>Illiterate</i> | <i>Primary/Upper Primary</i> | <i>Secondary</i> | <i>Sr Secondary</i> |
| <30                 | 3                | 2                  | 1              | -          | -         | 2                     | 1              | -                | 1                | 2                 | -                            | -                | -                   |
| 30-39               | 32               | 19                 | 7              | 4          | 2         | 31                    | 1              | -                | 15               | 13                | 3                            | 1                | -                   |
| 40-49               | 13               | 7                  | 4              | 2          | -         | 12                    | -              | 1                | 8                | 5                 | -                            | -                | -                   |
| 50 & Above          | 2                | 1                  | 1              | -          | -         | 2                     | -              | -                | 1                | 1                 | -                            | -                | -                   |

Source: Primary survey

**Table 2: Level of Interest**

All value in absolute number (N = 50)

|                                      | <i>No Interest</i> | <i>Low interest</i> | <i>High Interest</i> |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------|---------------------|----------------------|
| Interest in politics                 | 45                 | 4                   | 1                    |
| Political Career                     | 44                 | 6                   | -                    |
| Willingness to contest next election | 43                 | 4                   | 3                    |
| Development initiative               | 48                 | 2                   | -                    |

Source: Primary survey

Out of the 50 representatives interviewed only one showed high interest, 4 showed low interest, while rest (45) had no interest in politics. Similarly in political career only 6 showed low interest; in willingness to contest 7 showed interest (4 low interest, 3 high interest), and majority (43) showed no interest. When asked about development initiative, out of 50 only 2 showed low interest.

**Table 3: Reason for Participation in Election**

All value in Absolute Number (N = 50)

| <i>Reason for participation in election</i> | <i>Hold Power</i> | <i>Pressure family member</i> |
|---|-------------------|-------------------------------|
| Frequency                                   | 7                 | 43                            |

Source: Primary survey

When it was asked to the EWR about the reason for fighting election, it was discovered that only 7 fought election to hold power and rest fought because they were persuaded to do so by their husband, family members etc. who de facto held power.

**Table 4: Gain Self-Confidence after Election**

All value in Absolute Number (N = 50)

| <i>Gain self-confidence after election</i> | <i>No confidence</i> | <i>Partial confidence</i> | <i>Full confidence</i> |
|--|----------------------|---------------------------|------------------------|
| Frequency                                  | 41                   | 9                         | -                      |

Source: Primary survey

The study revealed that even after 4 years of last panchayat election (held in April-May 2011) only 9 of the EWRs gained some confidence and 41 did not gain any confidence. Partial confidence were found among the members who were relatively more educated and their family members have some political background and usually from upper caste Hindu.

**Table 5: Attendance of EWR in Panchayats Meeting**

All value in Absolute Number (N = 50)

| <i>Attendance of EWR in panchayat meeting</i> | <i>Regular</i> | <i>Irregular</i> |
|---|----------------|------------------|
| Frequency                                     | 8              | 42               |

Source: Primary survey

The majority (42) of them did not attend the meetings regularly; rest of the 8 stated that they attended meeting regularly. The low attendance was mainly among Muslim EWR. They went to meeting and training only when it was necessary to show their attendance.

**Table 6: Manner of Participation in Discussion**

All value in absolute number (N = 50)

| <i>Manner of participation in discussion</i> | <i>Sit and Listen</i> | <i>Passive<sup>1</sup></i> | <i>Active<sup>2</sup></i> |
|--|-----------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|
| Frequency                                    | 42                    | 8                          | -                         |

Source: Primary survey

1: Participate in discussion initiate by others, 2: Initiate the discussion herself.

It was found in the study that the EWR rarely participated actively in the discussion during panchayat and gram sabha meeting. This is particularly true of women members from Muslim and to some extent from SC and ST community. It was found that 42 respondents only sat and listened while 8 others participated in the discussion initiated by others, but none initiated the discussion in the meeting themselves; some of them were prodded by the male escorts or the latter some time spoke on their behalf.

**Table 7: Manner of Going into Meetings, Training in Panchayats, Blocks**

All value in Absolute Number (N = 50)

| <i>Visit Meeting, training to Panchayat, block</i> | <i>Self</i> | <i>With Relative</i> | <i>Instead Relative go</i> |
|--|-------------|----------------------|----------------------------|
| Frequency  | 2           | 45                   | 3                          |

Source: Primary survey

When it was asked how they go to meetings and for other officials work to panchayats and sometime to block for official works, training, it was found that only 2 of the representatives went all alone and sometime accompanied by male members while 45 said male relatives or husband accompanied them whereas 3 said that instead their husband or relative went in such meetings and workshops.

## Participation

Several areas of participation in panchayats decision-making activities were identified and the EWRs were asked to indicate how they participated in them. The research discovered participation in activities like planning, budgeting, selection of beneficiaries, selection of project location, inspect & supervise schemes, create awareness about the schemes, and raising the issues pertaining to their constituencies.

**Table 8: Participation in Decision Making**

All value in Absolute Number (N = 50)

| <i>Level of participation</i>      | <i>Never</i> | <i>Sometimes</i> | <i>Always</i> |
|------------------------------------|--------------|------------------|---------------|
| Planning                           | 46           | 4                | -             |
| Budgeting                          | 48           | 2                | -             |
| Selection of beneficiaries         | 44           | 6                | -             |
| Select project location            | 44           | 6                | -             |
| Inspect and supervise schemes      | 45           | 5                | -             |
| Create awareness about the schemes | 44           | 5                | 1             |
| Raise issues in Gram Sabha         | 45           | 5                | -             |

*Source:* Primary survey

Table 8 shows the abysmally low participation of EWRs in all the above activities. It was found that they hardly participated, be it planning (46), budgeting (48), selection of beneficiaries (44), selection of project location (44), inspect and supervise of schemes (45), creating awareness about the schemes (44), raising issues in Gram Sabha (45). Only one member said that she always created awareness about the scheme. Six said that they themselves selected beneficiaries and project location. Analysis shows that the actual power is wielded by their husbands, other male relatives, or the local elite on whose behalf they have contested election as their proxies.

### Challenges faced by EWRs

There are numerous challenges faced by the EWRs. We have tried to explore the reasons which hamper their full participation to play their role in the panchayat and governance process, which include unawareness/illiteracy, conveyance, household work, and purdah system/cultural norm.

**Table 9: Challenges Faced by EWR**

All value in Absolute Number (N = 50)

| <i>Challenges faced by EWR</i>                           | <i>Yes</i> | <i>No</i> |
|--|------------|-----------|
| Unawareness/illiteracy                                   | 45         | 5         |
| Travelling to panchayat, block etc for meeting, training | 28         | 12        |
| Household work   | 35         | 15        |
| Cultural norm (purdah system)                            | 37         | 13        |

*Source:* Primary survey

Many reasons were identified in the study which contributed to the low attendance in panchayat and gramsabha meetings and decision making. Among the major reasons, social restrictions, illiteracy/unawareness (45), transport to block, panchayat for meeting (28), household work (35), purdah system (37) contributed to their lower participation in panchayat and governance process despite being elected to the office. Purdah system was found more prevalent among Muslim EWRs. Inbanathan (2001) also found in his study that social restriction prevents the effective participation of EWR in panchayat affairs.

There are different restriction factors for SCs and STs and Muslim women representatives. Muslim women representatives stated that their restrictions on mobility and interaction with male representatives are prevented by their own family members, which hinder their involvement in the panchayats.

## DISCUSSION

A striking fact about the panchayats in Kadwa, Katihar is that the gram panchayats meetings are largely a male-dominated event, in spite of policies targeted towards empowering women by reserving half of the seats. Attendance of the EWR was found very low. It was found that many times the panchayat and gramsabha meetings were mere formalities and marked only in the records, even though they were not organised. It was found that many of the meetings were convened without prior notice to the gram sabha. Proxy meetings were held and the proceedings were recorded and attendance register bore the signature and thumb impression even of the members, who did not actually attend them particularly the EWR. Patnaik (2005) also found in his study in Orissa of the male dominance, low attendance of female representatives, proxy gramsabha meeting etc.

Husbands, close male relatives were initially reluctant to give permission to interview their wives or female relatives, and also intervened during interviews with the researcher. Women representatives acknowledged the role of the husbands and other male relatives who accompany them to panchayat office and other meeting, training venue, which is usually away from their home and which they cannot cover alone. Majority of them said that their attendance depends on the availability and presence of these male members. It has been found that many times, the male escorts of these EWRs prompted them on what to say in the meeting and some time they themselves spoke on their behalf. Patnaik (2005)

also found in his study the dependence of the EWRs on their husband, male family members as the case may be, in Orissa and the interference of the husband and male. Inbanathan (2005) also found in his study social restriction inhibits women representatives' participation in politics.

It was found that none of the EWRs baring few fought election on their own. It was the husband or male relative's interest, which brought them into the politics. In some of the cases local elites who were not able to fight election due to reservation of seats persuaded their wives, scheduled caste and scheduled tribes to fight the election as their proxies. The husbands or male family members, who wanted to contest election but could not do so due to the reservation of seats for disadvantaged section including women, put their proxies or name lenders in the panchayat election and male members are de facto representatives. It was discovered that only 4 EWRs fought panchayat election out of their own interest, while the influence of the husband, male members or local elites, who roped in women members to fight elections, was found in 46 cases. Tiwari (2012) also found in her study that husbands (30%) and other family members (12%) were reported as playing an important role in motivating women representatives to contest election for the first time.

The research shows that the husbands, male members are against the active participation of their wives, female members in panchayats activities, although they were instrumental in bringing their wives, female family members into governance process. It is paradoxical since the same husbands, male members who roped in their wives, female family members to fight the elections now opposed their wives' or female family members active participation in panchayats affairs. This clearly implies the attitude of the husbands, male family members of EWR who could not get themselves formal positions of power because of the reservation policy, are essaying to exercise power through their wives, proxies or name lenders. Also Kumtakar's (1999) study revealed that majority of women leaders admitted that their husbands discouraged them from attending the meeting or hindered their post related activities. Kaul *et al.*, (2009) also found that actual decisions related to panchayat role of women were taken by the husband and their wives only signed or put their thumb impressions on the officials documents.

EWRs especially Muslim EWRs are not interested or apathetic to politics. It was found that women representatives were less interested in politics before elections. Only one woman, who comes from a higher caste Hindu was found to be interested in politics and other four who showed

low interest in politics belonged to Hindu religion and they were also relatively better educated. One of the Muslim respondents who was 10<sup>th</sup> pass said that she was interested in politics, but did not take part actively in politics, because of the traditional norm and she was discouraged by the male members. It was found that education is positively correlated with the awareness. It was also found that those who were illiterate and not highly educated did not take decision germane to their role or do anything attached to their post without the instructions, guidance of their husbands or male members like if they had to put their thumb or sign on a document.

Although most of the EWRs said that they were not regularly attending panchayats meetings, still the panchayats registers showed substantial attendance of elected representatives. Further it was discovered that participation in the panchayats meeting has become a register signing affair particularly for EWRs. Most of the time registers are taken to the houses of the EWRs for their signature, thumb impression or other male members put fake signatures, thumb impression on their behalf. Further analysis showed that a higher proportion of representatives from the Muslim women did not attend the gram panchayats meetings regularly due to the cultural norm. Patnaik (2005) also discovered in his study in Orissa that panchayat meetings have been reduced to a register signing affair. Despite the low attendance of members particularly of female representatives, attendance registers show good strength present in the meetings. Only when it is absolutely necessary for the members to be present like to be present in the training organised (usually at distance places like block etc.) for them, EWRs went there along with their husbands, male members of their families. Participation of Muslim EWRs is found to be relatively low.

Very low attendance of EWR in panchayats, meetings and their limited capacity to raise issues of their ward usually hindered in discussing the problems of the panchayats, wards and in turn in the process of decision-making. Their poor participation is reflected by the fact that they simply sit in the meeting and nodded their heads in between. The participation of EWR, more so in the case of Muslim EWR, was found to be minimal. On the whole, in all the panchayats, there were no EWRs, who participated frequently in discussions during the meetings baring 3-4 out of the 50 interviewed EWRs.

In the study the researcher examined the participation of EWR by the way they acted and took part in the panchayat activities. These activities are their attendance in gram panchayats meetings; involvement in setting the agenda, which involves identifying issues and problems of their wards, raising and discussing them in panchayats meeting; their involvement in

the decision-making process, like taking decisions regarding selection of project location, planning, budgeting, selection of beneficiaries etc. Gender and religious differences were found in raising problems of the wards in gram panchayats meetings. Rarely EWR raised problems and issues of their locality in the meetings. The data further showed that members from Muslim community rarely raised problems of their areas. It was found that negligible role was played by EWR in these; instead their husband or male relative did all these. Even though some of the females who were more educated, they were more vocal and articulated their views also, but they did not take decision independently, rather they took help from their husband, male relative as the case may be baring two Hindu EWRs. In case of illiterate or poorly educated, Muslim EWRs' complete decision was taken by the husband, male relative as the case may be.

Though some of the EWR stated that they participated sometimes in these areas of decisions, in reality, they were not even aware of these activities. They simply put their signatures or thumb impression as asked by their husband, male family members once the decision was taken by the de facto male members. Though some of the EWRs sounded that they knew terms like 'planning', 'budgeting', 'developmental work' etc., but in reality they did not know the significance of these terms in the functioning of the panchayats.

Women representatives from high caste Hindu and even from scheduled castes, scheduled tribes can move out of their houses easily, but it was mostly restricted for Muslim women particularly from well off families. During the course of a meeting in the panchayats the seating pattern is determined according to the sex and caste of the members. EWRs sit separate from male elected representatives. As much as possible, Muslim EWRs sit with Muslim members and similarly SC, ST EWRs sit along with their own categories. Some of the EWRs, mostly from Hindu community, said that they are interested in politics and try to involve themselves in panchayat activities but they are treated as inferior by the male members and they are called in the meeting just to complete the quorum.

In order to gauge the capacity of the representatives in raising issues, the respondents were asked about the manner in which they raised issues at the panchayats meetings. The capacity to raise issues in the panchayats meetings was found to be low among those EWR, especially from Muslim women representatives. EWR in the majority of the cases, did not raise issues of their areas and problem of their locality themselves; rather they

took the help of other members particularly male members to do so. At times, the male escort spoke on their behalf.

During the course of a panchayats meeting some EWRs were found taking the help of others to put their points. Many times the EWR or their male relative or husband told the president of the meeting or any other member in advance about the problem and issues of their constituencies, so that they would speak on their behalf, instead of speaking at the meetings themselves. However, some of the women representatives especially from Hindu community were found discussing matters with the president before or after the meetings. The reason for not speaking during meeting or training was shyness and nervousness in talking in front of others.

Unawareness and illiteracy were observed to be the topmost challenges faced by the EWR hampering their active participation and playing their role. Purdah system was found to be the second most reason for the inhibiting their full participation. Household work was observed to be the third most cause. Purdah system is equally found to be prevalent in both Hindu and Muslim EWR, it was little bit low among high caste Hindu EWR. It was found to be more prevalent in well off Muslim families. Distance of the gram panchayats office is found to be other reason for low participation of women members. It was discovered in most of the cases, women representative hardly get time for panchayats activities after fulfilling their household responsibilities of cooking and child rearing barring few socially spirited representatives. So it is difficult for them to attend panchayats meetings, trainings, which can take several hours, especially if they take place in distance places like block etc. It was found that those EWRs from the poor families face economic hindrances as many have to eke out their living and do not have time to take part in the governance process. Male relatives of the many EWRs revealed that as the latter do not get any salary, it is not feasible for them to take part in politics.

It was observed that the gramsabha members and many people do not know the name of their elected female representatives. They think it is the husband or male relative *is de facto* their representative and who is wielding the power and performing all the duties related to the panchayat.

## CONCLUSION

There is a disconnect between policies directed toward empowering women by reserving half of the seats and complimentary policies, actions

on the part of government to ensure a level playing field to the women and ensure their participation in the governance process. Women have failed to participate in the development process even after being elected to the office of the panchayats due to host of factors viz patriarchal society, low level of literacy and education, socio cultural norms, traditions, economic compulsions, lack of employment, poor infrastructure hampering mobility, and lack of necessary resources by the states to equip them to handle their day to day liabilities related to their post. It is combined with the apathy of the government in devolving the fund functions and functionaries. Even if they are called in the meeting, it is just to complete the quorum. Thus female members have no participation in governance process and have become mere proxies. Mere reserving the seats for the female will not serve the purpose of mainstreaming the women to the political process and undo the historical injustice meted out to them. If state is really serious about the devolution of power to the panchayats and implementation of the true spirit of the reservation for the disadvantage section including the women half hearted and piecemeal approach will not work. Since, state is planning all the 29 subjects to the panchayats and EWRs who are currently lacking skills need to be equipped with necessary skill, resources, manpower etc. before full power and subjects are devolved to the panchayats. It has to provide panchayats all the needed resources, fund, functions, functionaries, build their capacities through tailor made culturally sensitive training of women representatives in general and for Muslim, SC, ST EWR in particular; providing infrastructure in the rural areas to improve their mobility; reducing poverty; breaking the patriarchal mentality of the society. It has to also explore options for providing remuneration to the ward members especially to the disadvantaged group. Last but not the least, it has to invest in the quality education, so that future women leaders are groomed.

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