



WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION AND PERCEPTION OF GRAMA SABHA: EVIDENCE FROM KERALA

Dr Suba Kuriakose* Dr Madhu Lal M**

**Assistant Professor, P.G. Department of Commerce, S.K.V. College, Thrissur, Kerala.*

***Assistant Professor, School of Management and Business Studies, Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, Kerala.*

Abstract

Decentralisation and participatory governance are foundational elements of inclusive development in India. The Grama Sabha, introduced through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, serves as a central institution for facilitating citizen engagement in local governance. This study examines women's attitudes, participation, and empowerment within the frame work for village level governance in Kerala. Using data collected from women beneficiaries across various Grama Panchayats, the study explores how gender, representation, and self-efficacy influence participation levels. Findings reveal that women in Kerala actively involve themselves in grama Sabha sessions and demonstrate a high level of confidence and freedom of expression. However, reduced decision making power and persistent gender biases limit their full empowerment. The paper concludes with policy recommendations for empowering women in local governance through capacity building, gender-sensitive planning, and institutional reforms.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Grama Sabha, Decentralisation, Local Governance, Kerala, Gender Participation.

Introduction

Democratic decentralisation in India was institutionalised through the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, which aimed to empower local self-governments and bring governance closer to the people. The Grama Sabha, functioning as the foundation of participatory democracy at the village level, provides citizens—especially women—a platform for direct engagement in decision-making and community development. Kerala, renowned for its robust local governance framework, has played a pivotal role in promoting people-centric planning through vibrant Grama Sabhas.

Despite institutional provisions for inclusivity, gender disparities persist in political participation and decision-making processes. While Kerala has made remarkable progress in women's literacy, health, and social participation indices, the extent to which these translate into active involvement in local governance remains a key question.

Research Problem and Objectives

Although Grama Sabhas have enhanced participatory democracy in Kerala, women's involvement often remains consultative rather than influential. This study seeks to analyse the extent and quality of women's participation in Grama Sabha meetings and evaluate whether such participation translates into empowerment and decision-making influence.

The key objectives are to

1. Assess the frequency and nature of women's participation in Grama Sabha meetings.
2. Examine women's perceptions of inclusivity, representation, and empowerment in local governance.
3. Identify institutional and social barriers limiting women's effective participation.



Hypotheses

H₁: Women's regular participation in Grama Sabha meetings positively influences their perceived empowerment.

H₂: There is a significant association between women's representation and their perceived decision-making influence.

Literature Review

The concept of participatory governance through Grama Sabha is rooted in the broader framework of decentralisation and grassroots democracy. Scholars such as Mathew (1995) and Isaac and Franke (2000) emphasised Kerala's pioneering role in institutionalising people's planning through strong local self-government institutions. Research from Patnaik (2001), Reddy (2020), and Ruge and Ritgen (2021) highlights the importance of financial and institutional support for effective local governance. From a gender perspective, Agarwal (2010) and Panda (2020) argue that patriarchal structures continue to limit women's agency, while Bhatnagar and Ghosh (2019) demonstrate that representation alone does not guarantee participation. Recent studies (Devi & Joseph, 2022; Menon & Ramesh, 2023) confirm that Kerala's participatory model provides a relatively enabling environment, but it requires stronger institutional support for women leaders.

Methodology: The study employed a descriptive and analytical research design using both primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected from 99 women beneficiaries of Grama Panchayats across Kerala (33 each from southern, central, and northern regions) using a structured questionnaire. A five-point Likert scale measured 12 key variables related to participation and empowerment. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS with frequency, mean, and percentage analysis. Secondary data sources included government reports and academic publications.

Results and Discussion: Table 1 presents the variables used in the study. Findings reveal that women demonstrate strong tendencies towards participation and civic engagement, although barriers such as household responsibilities and social norms persist.

Table 1: Identified Variables for the Study

Variables	Description
Regularity in Grama Sabha	Frequency of Attendance
Gender Discrimination	There is no Gender discrimination in programme selection in GS.
Female Representation	Women representation in GS is sufficient.
Decision Making	Women are represented in decision-making.
Governance	Women have a commendable role in the good governance of GS.
Political Freedom	Women are enjoying political freedom.
Freedom of Speech and Expression	Women are enjoying freedom of speech and expression.
Self Confidence	Women having self-confidence in dealing with GS.
Self-Initiative	Women are self-initiated to deal with GS.
Women Empowerment	Women are socially and economically empowered because of GS.
Reservation	Women not only occupy reserved positions.

Source: Primary data.



Participation and Inclusivity

The study revealed that 60% of respondents attend Grama Sabha meetings regularly, while about 10% reported never attending. Limited awareness, household responsibilities, and cultural norms emerged as significant barriers to consistent participation. Despite these constraints, the overall attendance figures demonstrate that women in Kerala exhibit strong civic engagement. Moreover, gender discrimination (mean = 2.94) was reported as minimal, indicating progress toward inclusivity. However, female representation (mean = 3.09) remains largely symbolic rather than substantive, reflecting Bhatnagar and Ghosh's (2019) observation that numerical representation alone does not ensure active participation or decision-making power.

Empowerment and Agency

Indicators such as self-confidence (mean = 3.60) and freedom of speech (mean = 3.54) show that women feel empowered to express opinions and engage constructively in deliberations. The Grama Sabha platform thus fosters an environment of self-efficacy and democratic expression. Political freedom (mean = 3.34) further indicates a growing comfort with political engagement. However, self-initiative (mean = 3.09) remains moderate, suggesting that while women express themselves freely, few take the lead in proposing or implementing initiatives. The findings resonate with Devi and Joseph (2022), who argue that empowerment is a process requiring sustained institutional and social support rather than an outcome achieved through participation alone.

Decision-Making and Governance

The analysis shows that decision-making (mean = 2.71) and governance participation (mean = 2.80) are relatively low. Although women attend and contribute to discussions, their involvement in planning, budgeting, and policy implementation remains limited. This aligns with Narayanan (2021), who noted that hierarchical barriers and entrenched power structures constrain women's decision-making authority in decentralized governance. Reservation (mean = 3.29) policies have facilitated entry into governance spaces, but qualitative empowerment remains constrained by institutional inertia. Strengthening women's role in governance thus requires moving beyond quotas toward capacity building and policy inclusivity.

Institutional Support and Policy Implications

The overall empowerment score (mean = 3.37) underscores steady progress but reveals persistent structural gaps. Institutional mechanisms such as leadership training, awareness programs, and gender budgeting remain critical to deepening women's agency in governance. The findings imply that Kerala's decentralized system provides a robust foundation for gender inclusion, yet continued efforts are needed to translate participation into influence. Integrating social capital frameworks (Menon & Ramesh, 2023) and enhancing cross-sectoral collaboration can further reinforce women's leadership in local governance.

Table 2 illustrates the attitudes of women beneficiaries toward the Grama Sabha system and local self-government. The highest mean score (3.60) for self-confidence indicates a growing agency among women, while the lowest score (2.71) for decision-making underscores persistent constraints.



Table 2: Attitudes of Women Beneficiaries toward the Grama Sabha System

Variables	Mean	Rank
Gender Discrimination	2.94	VII
Female Representation	3.09	VI
Decision Making	2.71	X
Women Empowerment	2.77	IX
Governance	2.80	VIII
Political Freedom	3.34	IV
Freedom of Speech and Expression	3.54	II
Self Confidence	3.60	I
Self-Initiative	3.09	VI
Empowerment	3.37	III
Reservation	3.29	V

Source: Primary data.

Overall, the findings reveal that women in Kerala are active participants in local governance but continue to face structural barriers that limit their decision-making influence. The results support H_1 , confirming that active participation correlates with higher self-confidence and empowerment, but only partially support H_2 , as formal representation does not always translate to absolute authority.

Table 3: Results of Hypothesis Testing

Hypotheses	Spearman's rho	Significance (p-value)	Decision
H_1 : Women's regular participation in Grama Sabha meetings positively influences their perceived empowerment.	0.482	0.001	Supported
H_2 : There is a significant association between women's representation and their perceived decision-making influence.	0.263	0.027	Partially Supported

Source: Primary data; $n = 99$; significance level set at $p < 0.05$.

The results in Table 3 indicate that women's frequency of attendance in Grama Sabha meetings significantly influences their empowerment levels ($\rho = 0.482$, $p < 0.01$), confirming Hypothesis 1. This suggests that regular engagement enhances self-confidence, awareness, and a sense of agency. Hypothesis 2 is partially supported ($\rho = 0.263$, $p < 0.05$), revealing that while female representation contributes positively to decision-making perception, its effect remains modest. This finding aligns with earlier studies (Bhatnagar & Ghosh, 2019; Narayanan, 2021), emphasising that numerical representation alone does not guarantee meaningful participation.

Policy Implications

1. Establish continuous leadership and management training for women elected representatives to strengthen policy engagement.
2. Create dedicated women's empowerment cells within Grama Panchayats to monitor inclusivity and ensure equitable representation.



3. Institutionalize gender budgeting and participatory planning processes at the Panchayat level to bridge gender gaps in resource allocation.
4. Expand awareness programs to encourage sustained participation and family support for women's engagement in governance.
5. Promote digital participation through online Grama Sabha sessions, enabling broader access and transparency.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study is limited to a sample of 99 respondents across Kerala and focuses primarily on women beneficiaries. Future studies can employ larger, stratified samples and incorporate inferential statistics to analyse determinants of empowerment more precisely. Qualitative approaches, such as focus group discussions, can also offer more profound insights into gendered experiences within local governance.

Conclusion

The Grama Sabha system in Kerala remains a strong pillar of participatory democracy. Women's involvement has expanded both numerically and substantively, yet true empowerment requires greater influence in decision-making. Strengthening institutional mechanisms, leadership capacity, and policy inclusivity will ensure that women transition from participants to key decision-makers shaping local development.

References

1. Agarwal, B. (2010). Gender and green governance: The political economy of women's presence within and beyond community forestry. Oxford University Press.
2. Bhatnagar, D., & Ghosh, A. (2019). Women in local governance: A comparative study of South Indian states. *Indian Journal of Public Administration*, 65(3), 511–528. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0019556119868559>
3. Devi, R., & Joseph, P. (2022). Women's leadership in local governance: Lessons from Kerala's participatory model. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 31(4), 512–527. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2021.1957754>
4. Isaac, T. M. T., & Franke, R. W. (2000). Local democracy and development: People's campaign for decentralised planning in Kerala. LeftWord Books.
5. Mathew, G. (1995). Panchayati Raj: From legislation to movement. Concept Publishing.
6. Menon, S., & Ramesh, K. (2023). Social capital and women's engagement in local self-governance: Evidence from South India. *Community Development Journal*, 58(1), 88–105. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cdj/bsac004>
7. Narayanan, V. (2021). Gender and governance: Structural constraints in decentralised planning. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 56(27), 45–53.
8. Patnaik, P. (2001). Alternative paradigms of economic decentralisation. *Social Scientist*, 29(9–10), 48–59. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3518026>
9. Panda, S. (2020). Gender equality and participatory governance: Lessons from Kerala. *Journal of Social and Economic Development*, 22(2), 182–197. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40847-020-00109-x>
10. Raj, A., & Pillai, M. T. (2023). Empowering grassroots governance: Evaluating women's participation in Kerala's Grama Sabhas. *South Asian Journal of Policy and Governance*, 47(1), 59–77. <https://doi.org/10.5958/2249-7315.2023.00015.5>



11. Reddy, K. S. (2020). Impact of Grama Panchayat finance in rural development: A case study of Yelandur Taluk, Karnataka. *Asian Journal of Research in Social Sciences and Humanities*, 10(9), 13–21. <https://doi.org/10.5958/2249-7315.2020.00015.5>
12. Ruge, K., & Ritgen, K. (2021). Local self-government and administration. In *Public Administration in Germany* (pp. 123–141). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-53697-8_9
13. Singh, N., & Chathukulam, J. (2021). Gender and decentralisation: Evidence from Kerala's participatory planning. *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, 27(4), 441–460. <https://doi.org/10.1080/12259276.2021.1997549>
14. Thomas, J., & Devi, L. (2022). Women's empowerment through Grama Sabhas: An empirical study in Kerala. *Kerala Economic Review*, 4(2), 105–122.