# Navigating Patriarchal Norms: A Study on the Political Participation and Representation of Married Women in Chennai's Local Governance

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## ABSTRACT

The participation of women in political spheres, particularly at local governance levels, is a critical factor in advancing gender equality and promoting inclusive decision-making. However, patriarchal norms continue to pose significant barriers to women's political involvement, particularly for married women, who often face additional societal expectations and constraints. This study explores the political participation and representation of married women in Chennai's local governance, aiming to uncover the socio-cultural dynamics that shape their involvement and to understand the extent to which patriarchal structures influence their political agency.

The research studies both formal and informal factors that affect the political engagement of married women. It takes into account legislative frameworks, including the reservation of seats for women in local governance as mandated by India's Constitution (73rd and 74th Amendments), and the socio-cultural norms that often hinder their active participation. The study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data collection through surveys with married women in local governance roles with qualitative interviews to gain deeper insights into their lived experiences. Furthermore, the study explores the inter-sectionalist of caste, class, and religion, examining how these factors compound the barriers that married women face in political engagement. Preliminary findings indicate that despite the constitutional mandate for women's representation in local governance, patriarchal norms deeply rooted in family and community structures continue to constrain the political participation of married women. Many face opposition from family members, particularly spouses, and are often expected to prioritize domestic responsibilities over political careers. Additionally, there is evidence of systemic bias within political institutions, where male counterparts often undermine or marginalize the voices of married women leaders. Cultural expectations surrounding gender roles also discourage women from pursuing active political participation, as they are often perceived as less capable of handling governance responsibilities compared to men.
**Key Words:** Local Governance, Married Women, Political Participation, Patriarchal Norms.

## INTRODUCTION

The political participation and representation of women in governance are crucial elements of a functioning democracy, and local governance, in particular, serves as a vital platform for fostering inclusivity and gender equality. However, women's participation, especially that of married women, remains significantly constrained by entrenched patriarchal norms. In India, despite the constitutional provisions aimed at enhancing women's representation in local governance, societal expectations tied to marriage, family roles, and gender stereotypes continue to inhibit their political agency. This study seeks to examine the impact of patriarchal norms on the political participation and representation of married women in Chennai's local governance system.

Chennai, like many urban centers in India, presents a complex socio-political landscape where traditional values intersect with modern governance structures. The Indian Constitution's 73rd and 74th Amendments, which mandate the reservation of seats for women in local governance, have increased the formal participation of women in politics. Yet, the implementation of these progressive policies often clashes with the conservative social fabric of patriarchal society.

Married women, in particular, face unique challenges as they are often expected to conform to traditional gender roles within the household, placing limits on their ability to engage in public and political spheres.

This study builds on existing literature that examines the barriers to women's political participation, focusing on the additional burdens faced by married women due to their dual responsibilities in the private and public realms. While significant strides have been made toward gender parity in local governance, the experience of married women reveals how deeply ingrained cultural expectations continue to influence their access to power and decision-making roles. Social norms dictate that married women prioritize family obligations, often discouraging their active involvement in political affairs or delegitimizing their contributions when they do engage.

The study also considers the inter-Sectionality of caste, class, and religion, as these socio-cultural identities compound the challenges married women face in navigating local governance. By using a mixed-methods approach, this research seeks to capture both the quantitative dimensions of married women's representation and the qualitative narratives of their lived experiences within the patriarchal structures of their communities and political institutions.

In investigating the political participation of married women in Chennai, this study aims to provide critical insights into the socio-political dynamics that perpetuate gender inequality in governance. Furthermore, it seeks to inform policy recommendations that can help create an environment where married women can participate fully and equitably in the political processes that shape their communities.

**Local Governance**

Democratic decentralization is a political framework aimed at broadening participation, authority, and autonomy for local communities. Blair defines this as the devolution of meaningful authority to local governance units that are accountable and accessible to local citizens, who enjoy full political rights and liberty. This approach differs from earlier decentralization efforts, which focused on public administration without incorporating democratic elements. Iqbal Narain highlights that democratic decentralization seeks to expand democracy by granting power and autonomy to lower levels of governance. Bryce metaphorically refers to such local democracies as "tiny fountainheads of democracy.

In an effort to ensure economic development and social justice in rural areas, initiatives like the Community Development Programme and the National Extension Service were launched. However, these programs failed to evoke widespread public participation in rural development. To address this, the Ministry of Agriculture constituted a team led by Balwant Rai Mehta, which, in its 1957 report, recommended the establishment of a three-tier Panchayati Raj system. The report emphasized the need for local governance to oversee development programs and called for adequate resources, genuine power devolution, and representative democratic institutions at the local level. It also proposed the election of Panchayat members, with provisions for co-opting women and members from marginalized communities such as SCs and STs.

By 1959, the Panchayati Raj system had been adopted nationwide. However, challenges like irregular funding and inconsistent elections hindered its effectiveness. The Ashok Mehta Committee (1978) attributed the decline of Panchayats to the proliferation of specialized agencies, such as the Small Farmers Development Agency (SFDA), and a lack of political support. It also noted that higher-level politicians viewed Panchayat leaders as potential rivals, further weakening the system. The G.V.K. Rao Committee (1985) later recommended that the District Panchayat be made the primary agency for rural development. Continued obstacles, such as irregular elections, underrepresentation of weaker sections, insufficient power devolution, and lack of financial resources, persisted. To address these issues, the L.M. Shinghvi Committee (1986) advocated for the constitutional recognition of Panchayati Raj institutions as a third tier of government. The Sarkaria Commission echoed the need for greater local participation in governance. Eventually, the Seventy-Third Constitutional Amendment Act (1992) was passed, granting Panchayats constitutional status and enshrining regular elections, especially with reserved seats for women and marginalized communities, at all three levels of the Panchayati Raj system.

Despite India's move toward urbanization, urban governance faces similar challenges. Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) remain weak, financially unsustainable, and unable to efficiently manage service delivery due to fragmented responsibilities across multiple agencies. Urban issues like migration, slum growth, and poor living standards exacerbate these governance challenges. Women, in particular, suffer from the negative impacts of both rural neglect and urban hardship. However, decentralized governance offers a solution by empowering local bodies and encouraging citizen participation in decision-making, particularly for women. This framework can foster women's empowerment, equal participation, and greater involvement in the development process, ensuring their voices are heard in shaping the future of their communities.

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Despite significant strides toward gender equality in governance, the political participation and representation of women, particularly married women, remain constrained by deeply entrenched patriarchal norms. In India, the constitutional mandate for women's representation in local governance through the 73rd and 74th Amendments has facilitated their entry into political spaces. However, these legal provisions do not necessarily translate into equal participation or effective representation, especially for married women who face additional societal pressures and limitations.

In the context of Chennai's local governance, married women encounter a unique set of challenges. Patriarchal expectations within the household often dictate that women prioritize their roles as wives, mothers, and caregivers, leaving little room for political engagement. These societal norms not only discourage political participation but also restrict married women's ability to perform effectively in governance roles once elected. Furthermore, within political institutions, married women frequently confront biases from male colleagues who undermine their authority or exclude them from key decision-making processes.

The inter-Sectionalist of caste, class, and religion further compounds these barriers, as many married women from marginalized communities face even greater obstacles due to their socio-economic and cultural status. Traditional gender roles, deeply ingrained in both public and private spheres, limit the capacity of married women to actively participate in governance, which ultimately hampers their ability to represent their constituencies effectively.

This study addresses these critical issues by exploring the socio-cultural and institutional barriers that restrict the political agency of married women in Chennai's local governance. It seeks to examine how patriarchal norms manifest in both personal and professional domains, shaping the experiences of these women in politics. By understanding the unique challenges faced by married women and identifying strategies they use to navigate these obstacles, the study aims to contribute to policy discussions and offer solutions that promote equitable political participation and representation. Ultimately, it seeks to foster a more inclusive governance structure that supports the active involvement of married women in political leadership.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To investigate the impact of patriarchal norms on the political participation of married women in Chennai's local governance.
2. To explore the challenges faced by married women in navigating political institutions.
3. To identify the coping strategies and support systems that enable married women to overcome barriers.

## Research Questions

1. How do patriarchal attitudes affect the political participation of married women in Chennai?
2. What is the unique barriers married women face compared to other groups?
3. How do caste, class, and religion intersect with gender norms to impact political engagement?

## Data Processing

The data collected from fieldwork was processed, coded, and organized electronically using computer software. Both primary and secondary sources were analysed thoroughly to capture all relevant aspects of the study.

## Analysis of Data

In 1993, the Indian Constitution was amended with the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts, which introduced a mandatory provision of 33% reservation for women in Panchayats and Urban Local Bodies, significantly advancing gender representation at the grassroots level. However, the Women's Reservation Bill, which proposes reserving seats for women in Parliament and state legislative assemblies, remains pending in Parliament. The current representation of women in Parliament, both in the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha, presents a stark contrast. The male-dominated nature of these bodies is evident, with women occupying only a small fraction of seats. In the 16th Lok Sabha, for instance, women make up just 11.4% of Members of Parliament (MPs), painting a concerning picture of gender disparity in national decision-making. This lack of female representation highlights the ongoing challenges in achieving gender equality in higher legislative bodies, as illustrated by the data in the table provided.

**Table 1 Women's representation in Lok Sabha**

| Lok Sabha election | Year | Lok Sabha | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | Number of Women MPs | % of women winning candidates |
| First | 1951 | NA | NA |
| Second | 1957 | 27 | 5.4 |
| Third | 1962 | 35 | 7.0 |
| Fourth | 1967 | 30 | 5.7 |
| Fifth | 1971 | 21 | 4.0 |
| Sixth | 1977 | 19 | 3.5 |
| Seventh | 1980 | 28 | 5.1 |
| Eight | 1984 | 42 | 7.7 |
| Ninth | 1989 | 27 | 5.1 |
| Tenth | 1991 | 37 | 7.1 |
| Eleventh | 1996 | 40 | 7.3 |
| Twelfth | 1998 | 43 | 7.9 |
| Thirteen | 1999 | 52 | 9.5 |
| Fourteen | 2004 | 45 | 8.2 |
| Fifteen | 2009 | 59 | 10.8 |
| Sixteen | 2014 | 62 | 11.4 |

Source: Ministry of Statistic and Programme Implementation (mospi.nic.in),

In 1980, women's representation in the Rajya Sabha reached its highest, with 29 women MPs that year (as shown in Table 2). Interestingly, as illustrated by Tables 1 and 2, elections in the early years after independence brought more women leaders into Parliament compared to the present. Over time, the percentage of women winning elections has decreased, despite an increasing number of women contesting. This decline is particularly noteworthy when considering the steady rise in the number of female candidates. Historically, women's participation in electoral politics and representation in various democratic institutions have been extremely low. Election Commission reports from 1962 to the 2014 general elections show a persistent male dominance in the electorate. However, the gender gap in the electorate has narrowed from 5.4% in 1962 to 4.9% in 2014, with the lowest gap recorded in the 1984 elections. Traditionally, women have been less likely to vote compared to men due to socio-cultural factors rooted in gender inequality. In the 1957 elections, for instance, only 39% of women voted, compared to a much higher percentage of men. However, in subsequent elections, such as those in 1999, 2004, and 2009, women's voting percentages increased alongside men's. According to the National Election Study (Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, 2009), women's voting turnout has been higher in assembly elections than in general elections.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, addressing the South Borough Committee on Franchise in 1919, emphasized that an increase in voting percentages reflects 'representation of opinion,' but true political participation means transforming this into 'representation of persons.' This argument remains relevant today when analyzing women's participation and representation in politics. Table 1 on women candidates in the Lok Sabha indicates that women have remained marginal in parliamentary representation over the past 60 years. Up until 1990, the Seventh Lok Sabha had the highest percentage of women representatives, a number that continued to increase in subsequent general elections. For example, in the 1957 general elections, there were 27 women MPs out of 494 total members in the Lok Sabha. By 1996, with the total number of seats increased to 543, the number of women MPs rose to 40. In the current 16th Lok Sabha, the number of women representatives has increased further, from 59 to 62, representing 11.4% of the total strength of the House.

Although the Constitution and various government bodies advocate for equal opportunities and treatment, the data in Tables 1 and 2 reveal a significant gender disparity in parliamentary representation. In the Rajya Sabha, women's representation has yet to reach 15%. Despite the Upper House's election process being different from the Lok Sabha—where members are selected by educated and informed representatives from various fields—the inequality persists. Despite

an increase in the number of women candidates over the years, there has been no corresponding substantial rise in the number of women representatives in Parliament.

**Table 2 Women members in Rajya Sabha**

| Year | Women Members | Percentage |
|------|---------------|------------|
| 1952 | 15 | 6.9 |
| 1954 | 16 | 7.3 |
| 1956 | 20 | 8.6 |
| 1958 | 22 | 9.5 |
| 1960 | 24 | 10.2 |
| 1962 | 17 | 7.6 |
| 1964 | 21 | 8.8 |
| 1968 | 22 | 9.2 |
| 1970 | 14 | 5.8 |
| 1972 | 18 | 7.4 |
| 1974 | 17 | 7.0 |
| 1976 | 24 | 9.8 |
| 1978 | 25 | 10.2 |
| 1980 | 29 | 11.9 |
| 1984 | 24 | 9.8 |
| 1986 | 28 | 11.5 |
| 1988 | 25 | 10.2 |
| 1990 | 24 | 9.8 |
| 1992 | 17 | 6.9 |
| 1994 | 20 | 8.2 |
| 1996 | 19 | 7.8 |
| 1999 | 20 | 8.2 |
| 2000 | 22 | 9.0 |
| 2002 | 25 | 10.2 |
| 2004 | 28 | 11.4 |
| 2006 | 25 | 10.2 |
| 2008 | 24 | 9.8 |
| 2010 | 27 | 11.0 |
| 2012 | 24 | 9.8 |

Source: Election commission of India

The data presented in highlights the already limited participation of women in Parliament compared to men, raising important questions about the impact of decentralization on women's effective participation in local governance, both in urban and rural areas of India. To understand the current status of women, it is essential to examine recent trends in their participation across various sectors considered to be at the top of the public hierarchy. In the 2014 general elections, only 11.4% of women candidates secured seats in the Lok Sabha. Among the states, Uttar Pradesh contributed the largest number of women MPs, with 13 representatives in the Lower House, a fact partly explained by the state's large population and corresponding high number of seats.

However, a concerning reality is that 17 states had no women representatives in the Lok Sabha, while in 6 states and Union Territories, no women contested the elections. North Eastern states and Union Territories like Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Mizoram, Daman and Diu, Lakshadweep, and Sikkim had no women candidates for the Lok Sabha. Additionally, a significant gap remains between the number of women nominated, those contesting elections, and those ultimately winning. As Table 3 shows, the number of women who successfully won elections is disproportionately low compared to those who contested. This disparity supports the argument that women have lower chances of winning elections, leading political parties to hesitate in offering those tickets.

According to the Global Gender Gap report of 2009, India ranked 106th in terms of women's representation in Parliament. Women remain far from achieving the 33% threshold considered necessary to form a critical mass capable of

influencing political decision-making in a substantial way. This lack of representation underscores the on-going challenges women face in accessing equal opportunities in the political arena.

**Table 3 State and UT Wise Performance of Women Candidates in 2014 Election (16th Lok Sabha)**

| States/UTs | No. of Seats | No. of Women Nomination Filed | No. of Women Contestants | No. of Women Elected | % of Women Elected |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Andhra Pradesh | 42 | 76 | 43 | 3 | 6.7 |
| Arunachal Pradesh | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Assam | 14 | 18 | 16 | 2 | 12.5 |
| Bihar | 40 | 54 | 47 | 3 | 6.3 |
| Goa | 2 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| Gujarat | 26 | 25 | 16 | 4 | 25 |
| Haryana | 10 | 32 | 11 | 0 | 0 |
| Himachal Pradesh | 4 | 6 | 5 | 0 | 0 |
| J&K | 6 | 6 | 3 | 1 | 33.3 |
| Karnataka | 28 | 27 | 20 | 1 | 5.0 |
| Kerala | 20 | 36 | 27 | 1 | 3.7 |
| Madhya Pradesh | 29 | 40 | 37 | 5 | 13.5 |
| Maharashtra | 48 | 112 | 69 | 5 | 7.2 |
| Manipur | 2 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| Meghalaya | 2 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Mizoram | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Nagaland | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Orissa | 21 | 19 | 17 | 2 | 11.7 |
| Punjab | 13 | 41 | 20 | 1 | 5.0 |
| Rajasthan | 25 | 39 | 27 | 1 | 3.7 |
| Sikkim | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Tamil Nadu | 39 | 123 | 55 | 4 | 7.2 |
| Tripura | 2 | 3 | 3 | 0 | 0 |
| Uttar Pradesh | 80 | 183 | 126 | 13 | 10.3 |
| West Bengal | 42 | 52 | 51 | 12 | 23.5 |
| Chhattisgarh | 11 | 27 | 21 | 1 | 4.7 |
| Jharkhand | 14 | 19 | 18 | 0 | 0 |
| Uttarakhand | 5 | 9 | 7 | 1 | 14.2 |
| Andaman & Nicobar Island | 1 | 3 | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| Chandigarh | 1 | 6 | 5 | 1 | 20 |
| Dadra & Nagar Haveli | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Daman & Diu | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| NCT of Delhi | 7 | 25 | 13 | 1 | 7.6 |
| Lakshadweep | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Puducherry | 1 | 3 | 3 | 0 | 0 |
| **TOTAL** | **543** | **990** | **668** | **62** | **9.28** |

Source: Election commission of India

In the 15th Lok Sabha, among the larger states (those with more than 20 seats in the Lok Sabha), Madhya Pradesh had the highest percentage of women MPs at 21%, followed by West Bengal at 17% and Uttar Pradesh at 15%. Until recently, women comprised only 9% of the Lok Sabha, 10% of the Rajya Sabha, and 7% of state legislative assemblies.

In the current Lok Sabha, states with larger populations have a notable number of women MPs in double digits. West Bengal tops the list with 23.5% women MPs, followed by Madhya Pradesh with 13.5%, Uttar Pradesh with 10.3%, Tamil Nadu with 7.2%, and Bihar with 6.3%. In terms of numbers, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal stand out, having sent

13 and 12 women MPs, respectively, to represent their constituencies in the house.

This Lok Sabha has the highest percentage of women MPs to date, reflecting a positive, albeit gradual, shift. Political parties, which serve as key agencies for political mobilization and recruitment, play a crucial role in this. National parties, regional parties, and registered parties often select candidates based on their alignment with party ideologies, making it easier for voters to choose representatives. Some leaders, however, contest elections independently without the backing of any political party. In the 16th Lok Sabha, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which secured a majority, sent 30 women MPs to the house.

However, women's representation in political parties and as winning candidates remains disproportionately low, similar to other spheres of public life. Only 7.61% of women candidates won the Lok Sabha elections. Political parties must play a more proactive role in increasing women's presence as candidates and elected representatives to achieve gender equality in politics. Several factors contribute to the limited candidacy of women, including societal, cultural, and domestic constraints. A 2012 study by the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies and the International Development Research Centre on the participation of Dalit women in Indian politics found that these barriers significantly hinder women's entry into politics. Additionally, many political parties are reluctant to encourage female participation, citing concerns that women are 'less winnable' candidates, an argument that further restricts their political involvement. Table 3 provides statistical evidence to support these observations.

**Table 4 State wise proportion of Elected Women Representatives in Panchayat**

| States | Total | Women | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|
| Andhra Pradesh | 2,54,487 | 85,154 | 33.5 |
| Arunachal Pradesh | 9,356 | 3,889 | 41.6 |
| Assam | 26,844 | 9,903 | 36.9 |
| Bihar | 1,36,130 | 68,065 | 50.0 |
| Goa | 1,559 | 504 | 32.3 |
| Gujarat | 1,18,751 | 39,206 | 33.0 |
| Haryana | 68,152 | 24,876 | 36.5 |
| Himachal Pradesh | 27,832 | 13,947 | 50.1 |
| J&K | NA | NA | NA |
| Karnataka | 95,307 | 41,577 | 43.6 |
| Kerala | 19,107 | 9,907 | 51.9 |
| Madhya Pradesh | 3,93,209 | 1,98,459 | 50.5 |
| Maharashtra | 2,03,203 | 1,01,466 | 49.9 |
| Manipur | 1,723 | 836 | 48.5 |
| Orissa | 1,00,863 | NA | NA |
| Punjab | 84,138 | 29,389 | 34.9 |
| Rajasthan | 1,09,345 | 54,673 | 50.0 |
| Sikkim | 1,099 | NA | NA |
| Tamil Nadu | 1,19,399 | 41,790 | 35.0 |
| Tripura | 5,676 | 2,044 | 36.0 |
| Uttar Pradesh | 7,73,980 | 3,09,511 | 40.0 |
| West Bengal | 51,423 | 19,762 | 38.4 |
| Chhattisgarh | 1,58,776 | 86,538 | 54.5 |
| Jharkhand | 53,207 | 31,157 | 58.6 |
| Uttarakhand | 61,452 | 34,494 | 65.1 |
| **All- India** | **29,21,381** | **13,64,154** | **46.7** |

SC- schedule caste, ST- schedule Tribe, NA- not available, All India includes figure for UTs

In both the executive and judiciary branches of government, women's representation remains limited. While a few notable women have held prominent administrative positions, such as Secretaries of Departments and roles in the Indian Administrative Services (IAS) at both the National and State Government levels, their numbers are still relatively small. In the judiciary, the situation is similarly imbalanced, with only 8.75% of judges in High Courts being women and only one woman judge currently serving in the Hon'ble Supreme Court.

The representation of women in administrative services has seen a gradual increase, rising from 10% in 1997 to 17% in

2014. However, even within India's premier civil services, the proportion of women remains discouragingly low. One major factor contributing to this disparity is the need for higher levels of professional education and training, which many women are unable to access due to barriers such as low female literacy rates and other socio-cultural constraints.

Although technical qualifications are often a barrier for women entering fields like the judiciary or administrative services, politics offers a unique opportunity. Unlike other professional roles, political participation does not require formal educational qualifications, making it a potential avenue for women to engage directly in the decision-making process. Despite these opportunities, the historical and social backdrop of women's status in India has contributed to their underrepresentation across these key sectors.

## CONCLUSION

To address the unintended consequences of decentralization and promote meaningful participation of women in municipal and panchayat processes, it has been proposed that the government should implement targeted measures. These measures could include creating specific provisions to encourage women's active involvement in public meetings and council committees, facilitating discussions on issues significant to women, and earmarking funds that women can allocate for community projects. Additionally, building the capacity of women councillors through training and support, and ensuring that local accountability mechanisms are responsive to women's needs, are essential steps to enhance their participation.

True social transformation, however, depends not only on the policies and actions of political parties and government institutions but also on the active pressure exerted by organized civil society. This combined effort is necessary to ensure that women have a strong voice and influence in local governance, leading to more inclusive decision-making and greater gender equality in public life.

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