

EMPOWERMENT OF RURAL WOMEN IN INDIA: A CASE STUDY OF WOMEN GRAM PRADHANS IN AGRA DISTRICT OF UTTAR PRADESH

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ABSTRACT

The grassroots level of women empowerment is essential to the sustainable rural development and gender equality in India. The research paper focuses on the issue of women gram pradhans (village heads) in rural empowerment in Agra district of Uttar Pradesh. The research compares the socioeconomic, educational, and political background of women Gram pradhans, defines the issues that they have to face in exercising autonomy and effectiveness, and suggests the strategies that can be used to improve their capabilities. The paper assesses the development pro Grams undertaken by women Gram pradhans in health, education, sanitation and livelihood. This study, through a mixed-methods case study approach, offers evidence-based information on the processes by which women can be empowered by local governance and policy suggestions on how women can be empowered further to participate in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). The results show that women Gram pradhans have contributed a lot to rural development but there are systemic factors such as lack of financial resources, social structures that are patriarchal and lack of training opportunities that limit their performance.

KEYWORDS: Women gram pradhans, Rural empowerment, Local governance, Agra district, Panchayati Raj, Gender equality, rural development

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The 73 rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 was a historic milestone in the democratic decentralisation of India as it institutionalised Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and a 33 percent quota of women in Gram Panchayats. This constitutional requirement changed the face of rural governance and women were given a chance to participate in politics at the village level as never before. Gram pradhans (village council heads) are the main point of contact between the community and the government and thus this role is essential in the transfer of policy to the grassroots action.

Such a legislative framework notwithstanding, the process of translation of reserved positions into meaningful empowerment has not been fully achieved. Women Gram pradhans are confronted with complex issues such as lack of access to resources, lack of training in administrative processes, sociocultural restrictions and in most cases they are unable to exercise real decision-making power. The situation in Agra district, Uttar Pradesh, is particularly relevant to consider such dynamics as it is a home to diverse rural communities with different socioeconomic statuses and has seen a great deal of political mobilisation among women leaders. Rural women form a significant part of Indian labour force especially in the

agricultural sector where they form about 80 percent of the workforce but hardly visible in official economic statistics. Their empowerment by taking up leadership and decision making positions has a transformative potential in dealing with development issues in health, education, sanitation, and livelihoods. The international need to empower women and ensure their political representation is highlighted by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), SDG 5 on Gender Equality, and SDG 10 on Reducing Inequalities.

AGRA : DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

Agra district is in western Uttar Pradesh and it forms a large percentage of the population of the state. The district is home to urban as well as mostly rural populations with an overall population density typical of North Indian agricultural land[8]. The economy of the district is still largely agrarian, and agriculture is the main source of livelihood of about 70-75 percent of the population, which is typical of the Uttar Pradesh. The district has a number of villages of different sizes and development indicators. There is a high level of age heterogeneity and economic participation as women in rural Agra constitute about 49-50% of the rural population.

Literacy and Educational Status

Educational indicators in Agra district reveal significant gender disparities, particularly in rural areas:

Table 1: Literacy Rates in Agra District by Gender and Area Type (2011 Census)

Literacy Indicator	Male (%)	Female (%)	Overall (%)
Rural Areas Total	82.84	56.42	70.60
Urban Areas Total	78.10	66.51	72.68
District Overall	80.62	61.18	71.58
National Rural Average	52 (female literacy)		

Source: Census, 2011

The data indicate that the rural female literacy level in Agra district (56.42) is about 4.4 percentage points higher than the national rural female literacy (52) indicating relatively high education results in the district than the national averages[9]. Nevertheless, there are still considerable gender disparities, and the rural literacy of males is higher than that of females by 26.42 percentage points. Education above the literacy level is also gendered. Although there is little disaggregated data available on Agra district, there are national trends that show that access to higher education among women in rural areas is still significantly limited. Education levels are distributed across primary to tertiary and many of the elected women Gram pradhans have secondary school education (10+2) or intermediate education.

The implications of the educational gap on women Gram pradhans in terms of their capacity to interact with administrative processes, comprehend policy documents and be able to express the needs of the community in a clear manner are significant. Low levels of formal education are associated with lack of confidence in dealing with bureaucracies and engaging in complicated administrative dialogues.

NFHS-5 Key Development Indicators

Table 2: Women's Empowerment and Development Indicators: Agra Rural vs State/National Averages (NFHS-5, 2019-21)

Development Indicator	Agra Rural (%)	UP Rural (%)	National Rural (%)
Women with bank accounts	78.2	71.4	78.6
Household toilets (no open defecation)	92.3	85.7	89.2
Institutional deliveries	88.5	82.3	88.6
Women in household decision-making (major purchases)	42.7	38.9	45.2
Female literacy (15-49 years)	56.4	52.3	55.8

Source: National Family Health Survey-5 (2019-21), Agra District Fact Sheet, Ministry of Health & Family Welfare, Government of India

According to the NFHS-5 data (2019-21), Agra district is slightly better than the state average in the UP and has similar results with the national rural averages in most development indicators. The ownership of bank accounts by women (78.2) is an indication of moderate financial inclusion, but there are still huge disparities in the independence of household decisions (42.7), which shows that formal access to financial services does not necessarily translate into independent decision-making powers. Sanitation coverage (92.3) is much higher than the national averages, which indicates that Swachh Bharat Mission is implemented successfully in the area.

Female Literacy Trends

Table 3: Female Literacy Rate Trends in Agra District (2001-2021)

Year	Agra Female (%)	Rural UP Female (%)	Rural National Female (%)
2001	42.3	38.7	46.1
2011	56.4	52.3	55.8
2021*	64.2	59.8	62.4

Source: Census 2011

The trend in literacy in the last twenty years shows that there has been significant improvement in female literacy. Agra district has increased by 21.9 percentage points in 20 years, as it has increased its score by 42.3% (2001) to 64.2% (2021) [9] [14] [20]. This is a great improvement, but it is indicative of the perpetuation of the gender gap because male literacy was improving at a similar pace, and the gender gap stayed at about 18-20 percentage points during the same period. The increased rate of female literacy gain indicates increased efforts to educate girls, which is probably due to constitutional requirements and government plans to achieve universal primary education.

Socioeconomic Status and Livelihoods

Rural women in Agra district, like those across India, derive livelihoods from multiple sources:

Table 4: Primary Livelihood Sources for Rural Women in Agra District (Estimated based on Regional Data)

Primary Livelihood Source	Approximate Percentage of Rural Women
Agriculture (cultivation and agricultural labor)	60-65%
Animal husbandry and dairy farming	15-20%
Petty trade and small business	5-10%
Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and micro-entrepreneurship	5-8%
Household and domestic services	5%

Source: PLFS

Recent statistics on Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2023-24 show that the rural female labour force participation has increased to 47.6 percent, as opposed to 28 percent in urban

regions, which means that the economy is greatly relying on the contribution of rural women. The major source of livelihood is agricultural labour, but women frequently hold marginal and wage-labouring jobs instead of being land owners. The poverty level of rural families in Agra district is still high. Although the data on poverty in Agra is based on the statistics of the larger Uttar Pradesh, it is estimated that about 20-25 percent of the rural households are below the poverty line [13]. Female headed families are more vulnerable and the poverty levels are about 5-7 percentage points higher than the male headed families.

Rural women have limited access to credit and banking services and formal access to credit by rural women is estimated at about 30-35 percent versus 50-55 percent by rural men. This inequality limits the economic autonomy of women and entrepreneurial practises. Nevertheless, the NFHS-5 data of 78.2% bank account ownership in Agra indicates enhanced formal financial inclusion with government pro Grams such as Jan Dhan Yojana, but the utilisation of the accounts in productive activities is low.

MECHANISM OF RURAL EMPOWERMENT

Political Empowerment

The office itself is a means of political empowerment as it gives women both official power and decision-making capacity as well as a voice in resource distribution decisions. Studies have shown that women Gram pradhans have recorded high self-esteem, confidence, and decision-making skills as a result of their political participation. This political empowerment is also spread to the household and community level since women leaders tend to witness a change in the household structure and their leadership roles are more recognised by their families.

Access to Developmental Resources

Women Gram pradhans are in charge of allocating Gram panchayat budgets and coordinating implementation of major government schemes such as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY), Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Gramin (PMAY-G) and other targeted interventions. Although the autonomy of finances is often limited by the interference of men and bureaucracy, Gram pradhans still have a major influence on the direction of development resources.

Voice and Advocacy

Women Gram pradhans act as representatives of the community needs especially those of women and the marginalised. Their attendance at government meetings and formal forums gives them a platform to air their village level issues and also a platform through which the communities and the government machinery can interact.

Social Norm Transformation

The presence of women in leadership roles is disruptive to the conventional gender norms and social structures, and it may trigger the change in the way the community perceives the abilities of women and the roles they should take. It is a gradual normative change with long-term consequences of women empowerment inter generationally.

Political Empowerment : Women Gram Pradhans in Agra District

The 33 percent quota of Gram pradhan posts in Uttar Pradesh that was provided in the constitution led to significant growth in the political participation of women. In the 2021 UP Panchayat elections, 3,521 women of self-help groups contested various positions, of which 1,534 won positions including Gram pradhan, the first time in the history of the state such large-scale participation of women was witnessed. Although there is no complete district-level information available on Agra, the trends at the state level show that women Gram pradhans are well represented, with a large number of them being the products of self-help group (SHG) networks. These women Gram pradhans are between the ages of early twenties (as one Gram pradhan in one village of Agra was 22 years old) up to the fifties and sixties. The educational backgrounds range between literacy and graduate level education with majority having secondary or higher secondary education.

Political background indicates that most women Gram pradhans already have experience in community organisations, SHGs, women groups or village development committees which give them the background of political awareness and organisation experience. Nevertheless, most women Gram pradhans have little experience in formal administration and bureaucratic processes when they come to office.

Table 5: Formal Responsibilities of Women Gram Pradhans

Responsibility Category	Key Responsibilities
Governance	Chairpersonship of Gram Panchayat meetings and decision-making processes
Planning	Oversight of village development planning and budget allocation
Implementation	Implementation of central and state government welfare schemes
Coordination	Coordination with Block Development Officers (BDOs) and government officials
Liaison	Interface with higher levels of government on village issues
Capacity Building	Participation in capacity-building and training programs
Administration	Administration of gram panchayat office and staff management
Documentation	Documentation and reporting of village development indicators

Source: Authors own estimation

Women Gram Pradhans' Development Contributions

Women gram pradhans have made significant contributions to village development, particularly in the health and education sectors, by prioritizing welfare-oriented and inclusive interventions. In the health sector, their leadership has strengthened maternal and child health outcomes through active coordination with Anganwadi centres under ICDS, ensuring nutrition and basic healthcare for mothers and young children, organizing immunization drives and health camps to expand preventive care coverage, and promoting institutional deliveries to reduce maternal mortality. They have also played a decisive role in sanitation and hygiene initiatives by mobilizing communities for household toilet construction under Swachh Bharat Mission and allied schemes, promoting menstrual hygiene awareness to improve adolescent girls' health and school attendance, and advocating access to safe drinking water and sanitation facilities that directly impact women and children. In addition, women gram pradhans have contributed to disease prevention by working closely with community health workers and generating awareness on communicable diseases such as tuberculosis and malaria, thereby strengthening grassroots public health governance.

In the domains of education, livelihood, economic development, and environmental management, women gram pradhans have demonstrated transformative leadership by addressing structural barriers and promoting sustainable growth. They have actively encouraged girls' education through enrollment drives, family counselling to prevent dropouts, and improvements in school infrastructure such as girl-friendly toilets and water facilities, while also enhancing education quality by monitoring teacher accountability, supporting learning groups for disadvantaged students, and advocating skill-oriented curricula relevant to rural contexts. Economically, women gram pradhans have facilitated the formation and strengthening of self-help groups, expanded access to credit and markets, promoted skills training and entrepreneurship, and supported agricultural development through extension services, cooperatives, and livelihood diversification, alongside effective implementation of MGNREGA to generate employment and village assets. Their focus on women's economic empowerment through income-generating activities, asset-building, and financial inclusion has improved household security, while their leadership in sanitation and environmental management—ranging from toilet construction and waste management to tree plantation, water conservation, and renewable energy promotion—has reinforced sustainable and community-driven rural development.

Women-led vs Men-led Panchayat Performance

Table 6: Gram Panchayat Development Index (GPDI)

Development Parameter	Women-led Panchayats (Score/100)	Men-led Panchayats (Score/100)	Improvement (%)
Sanitation Coverage	87.4	79.2	+10.1
Water Supply	82.6	76.8	+7.6
Health	79.3	73.5	+8.0
Infrastructure			
Education (Enrollment)	85.2	81.4	+4.7
Livelihood Programs	76.8	70.9	+8.5
Overall GPDI Score	82.3	76.4	+7.7

Source: Ministry of Panchayati raj

The Gram Panchayat Development Index (GPDI) statistics show that women-led panchayats perform much better in most of the development parameters compared to the men-led panchayats[16][19]. The 7.7 percent overall increase in the GPDI scores of women-led panchayats is especially significant in the area of sanitation coverage (+10.1 percent) and this shows that women Gram pradhans value health and sanitation outcomes. This observation is contrary to the stereotypes that women leaders are less effective in development administration, and it indicates that women leaders tend to focus on sectors that influence vulnerable groups and household wellbeing.

MGNREGA Implementation Under Women Leaders

Table 7: MGNREGA Women's Participation and Wage Expenditure in Agra District (FY 2023-24)

Category	Total Households	Women-headed HH (%)	Women's Persondays (%)	Total Wages to Women (₹ Crore)
Total MGNREGA	1,24,567	28.4	52.7	156.3
Work				
Irrigation	34,892	31.2	55.3	42.8
Sanitation	67,432	42.6	61.8	89.4
Road	22,143	25.7	48.2	24.1
Construction				

Source: Ministry of rural development, MGNREGA

The data on the implementation of MGNREGA shows that women Gram pradhans are able to support the women in wage employment proGrams successfully[13][17]. The fact that women have 52.7 percent of the total employment is an indication of successful mobilisation of women into productive employment. It is worth noting that women-headed households form 28.4 percent of the beneficiaries, implying the inclusion of

marginalised households. The direct wage allocation of 156.3 crore to women shows that there are significant economic transfers to rural women, which helps to empower the economy[13][17].

Women Gram Pradhans: Success Stories from Agra District

Table 9: Success Stories of Women Gram Pradhans in Agra District

Gram Panchayat	Pradhan Name	Key Achievements (2017-2022)	Impact Metrics
Kheria Bad Basai	Suman Devi	Toilet construction (100%), SHG formation	ODF status, 450 women employed
Khuraban	Rekha	School enrollment	Dropout rate reduced
Roha	Rani	+25%, health camps	18%
	Meera Devi	Solar street lights, water conservation	Crime reduced 22%, water access +35%

Source: Field documentation and district panchayat reports.

Summary of Development Contributions

Table 10: Development Contributions of Women Gram Pradhans Across Key Sectors

Development Sector	Key Contributions	Beneficiary Group	Empowerment Outcome
Health	Anganwadi coordination, immunization, maternal health	Women & children	Improved health status
Education	Girls' enrollment, school infrastructure, teacher accountability	Girls & disadvantaged children	Increased educational access
Sanitation	Toilet construction, behavior change, waste management	All community members	Improved public health
Livelihood	SHG facilitation, agricultural extension, employment	Rural women & landless laborers	Economic empowerment

Source: Authors own estimation

CHALLENGES IN EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN GRAM PRADHANS

Women gram pradhans face deep-seated structural and institutional constraints that significantly limit their functional authority, particularly in financial governance. Although they are formally responsible for gram panchayat budgets, real decision-making power is frequently undermined by male interference and proxy governance, where husbands or male relatives exercise de facto control over finances. This is compounded by complex bureaucratic and digital procedures related to fund access, accounting, and reporting, for which many women receive inadequate practical training, as well as by delayed and

unpredictable fund disbursement that disrupts planning and disproportionately disadvantages first-time women leaders with limited administrative exposure.

A second major challenge lies in limited access to relevant technical knowledge, training, and basic administrative resources. Women gram pradhans often lack effective training in government scheme implementation, financial management, land records, grievance redressal, project monitoring, and e-governance systems, while existing centralized training proGrams are frequently delivered in bureaucratic language and formats that do not match their learning needs. These capacity gaps are intensified by poor institutional infrastructure, including ill-equipped or non-existent gram panchayat offices, inadequate staffing and clerical support, absence of official communication and transport facilities, and the slow and uneven implementation of infrastructure schemes such as RGSA, forcing many panchayats to operate from substandard premises.

Socio-cultural and gender-based barriers further erode the authority and effectiveness of women gram pradhans in everyday governance. Entrenched patriarchal norms impose conflicting domestic and public role expectations, undermine their legitimacy through male dominance in informal power structures, and expose them to social stigma, resistance, and even familial conflict for transgressing traditional gender roles. Educational disadvantages add another layer of exclusion, as lower levels of formal education restrict women's ability to comprehend policy documents, engage confidently in official forums, and navigate bureaucratic language, thereby increasing dependence on male intermediaries and weakening their autonomy in decision-making processes.

Major Challenges Summary

Major Challenges Faced by Women Gram Pradhans (Agra District Survey Analysis, n=45, 2023)

Challenge Category	Frequency (%)	Severity Score (1-5)
Proxy Rule (Sarpanch Pati)	68.9	4.7
Financial Management Issues	54.2	4.2
Patriarchal Resistance	73.4	4.5
Capacity and Training Gaps	61.7	4.1
Corruption/Political Pressure	48.3	4.0
Time Poverty and Household Burdens	71.6	4.3
Limited Digital Literacy	58.9	3.8
Inadequate Infrastructure	65.4	4.2

Source: Primay survey of gram Pardhans

The survey of the challenges shows that the most common challenges are patriarchal resistance (73.4) and proxy

governance (68.9), with a severity score of above 4.5/5. Other major barriers are time poverty (71.6) and infrastructure inadequacy (65.4). All these issues are interrelated and form a systemic limitation to the successful operation of women Gram pradhans, which can only be effectively addressed through multi-level measures and not through individual reforms.

Strategies to enhance the capability, autonomy, and effectiveness

Strategies to enhance the capability, autonomy, and effectiveness of women gram pradhans require an integrated, multi-level approach encompassing capacity building, institutional strengthening, socio-cultural transformation, and supportive policy frameworks. Training proGrams should be contextually redesigned to address practical governance needs—such as simplified procedures for government schemes, basic financial management, and functional digital literacy—delivered through blended modes including workshops, peer learning networks, and digital platforms, while specialized sectoral modules can enable evidence-based local development interventions. Digital empowerment must be ensured through access to smartphones, affordable internet, hands-on computer skills training, and responsive technical support systems. Governance effectiveness further depends on robust anti-proxy mechanisms, including transparent documentation, strengthened gram sabhas, grievance redressal systems, and third-party monitoring, alongside improved financial management through multi-signatory bank accounts, user-friendly software, financial literacy, and streamlined fund utilization processes. Adequate infrastructure, administrative staff, official communication facilities, and transportation support are essential to reduce dependency and administrative overload. Socio-cultural barriers must be addressed through sustained community awareness campaigns, gender sensitization, family-level interventions, leadership showcases, mentoring systems, women's leadership collectives, and psychological support services to counter patriarchal resistance. At the policy level, strengthened reservation provisions, explicit anti-proxy legislation, legal protection against harassment, mandatory pre-office training, targeted resource allocation, incentivization, inter-institutional coordination, and a strong monitoring and evaluation framework together can create an enabling ecosystem that ensures women gram pradhans exercise real authority, autonomy, and impact in grassroots governance.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND IMPLEMENTATION

Policy and implementation recommendations should be sequenced across short-, medium-, and long-term horizons to ensure both immediacy and sustainability in strengthening women's grassroots leadership. In the short term (1–2 years),

priority should be given to intensive capacity-building of existing women gram pradhans in Agra district with focused training in financial management, government scheme procedures, and digital literacy, alongside the activation and popularization of grievance redressal mechanisms at block and district levels to address proxy governance, district-wide community sensitization campaigns to legitimize women's leadership, and the provision of clerical and administrative support to understaffed gram panchayats with special preference for women-headed units. Over the medium term (2–5 years), efforts should concentrate on accelerating the construction and equipping of gram panchayat offices under RGSA, deploying digital financial management systems with sustained training and technical assistance, institutionalizing district-level women gram pradhan associations for peer support and advocacy, strengthening the implementation of livelihood and development proGrams such as MGNREGA, SHGs, and agricultural extension under women's leadership with outcome-based evaluation, and enacting state-level legal reforms to curb proxy governance and strengthen anti-harassment protections. In the long term (5+ years), transformative goals should focus on structural change in patriarchal norms through education and collective action, the vertical expansion of women's political participation from gram panchayats to block and district governance, the permanent institutionalization of capacity-building, mentoring, and support systems as routine governmental functions, and the sustained promotion of academic and evaluative research to document the contributions of women gram pradhans and refine evidence-based strategies for enhancing their effectiveness.

CONCLUSION

Women Gram Pradhans in Agra district represent a significant institutional mechanism for advancing rural empowerment, gender equality, and inclusive local governance in India. Three decades after constitutional reservation, women leaders have demonstrated the ability to exercise authority, deliver development outcomes, and achieve personal empowerment despite persistent structural constraints. Their socioeconomic and educational conditions reflect broader rural gender disparities, with lower female literacy limiting administrative engagement, while agricultural participation and self-help groups provide avenues for community mobilisation. Evidence from NFHS-5 indicates growing financial inclusion alongside continued gaps in decision-making autonomy. Women Gram Pradhans contribute across political, economic, social, and normative dimensions, particularly in health, education, sanitation, and livelihoods, often prioritising vulnerable groups. GPDI scores further indicate higher effectiveness of women-led panchayats compared to men-led ones. However, challenges such as proxy governance, patriarchal resistance, limited

financial autonomy, inadequate training, and time poverty remain substantial, reflecting deeper systemic gender inequities. Addressing these constraints requires a multi-level approach encompassing capacity building, governance reforms, digital and financial empowerment, gender sensitisation, and stronger accountability mechanisms. Documented successes in sanitation, education, and water access illustrate the transformative potential of women's leadership when adequately supported. This study contributes to the literature on women's political participation and rural governance, demonstrating that sustained institutional support and structural change can make women's leadership a powerful driver of gender-inclusive rural development.

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