

Mahila and Children's Gram Sabhas as Catalysts for Community Participation: A Review of Their Role in Rural Governance

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the role of Mahila Gram Sabhas (Women's Gram Assemblies) and Children's Gram Sabhas in promoting participatory governance in rural India, with a focus on empowering women and children through reviewing the various research works. These forums serve as platforms for addressing critical issues such as health, domestic violence, education, and child rights. Through Mahila Gram Sabhas, women are provided an opportunity to engage in local governance and decision-making, amplifying their voices and fostering empowerment. Similarly, Children's Gram Sabhas offer children the chance to raise concerns related to education, sanitation, and healthcare, thereby promoting child welfare and local development. However, both forums face significant challenges, including societal barriers, resource constraints, and limited legal awareness, which hinder their full potential. This study aims to evaluate the impact of these forums on empowering women and children and identify strategies for overcoming these barriers. A review of existing literature, case studies, and interviews with participants and local officials forms the basis for the analysis. The findings highlight the positive impact of these forums in fostering inclusive governance, but underscore the need for greater institutional support and awareness-building to ensure their long-term effectiveness.

Keywords Gram Sabha, Mahila Gram Sabha, Children's Gram Sabha, participatory governance, local governance, social inclusion, societal barriers

Introduction

The concept of Gram Sabhas in India, particularly Mahila Gram Sabhas (Women's Gram Assemblies) and Children's Gram Sabhas, plays a vital role in promoting participatory governance at the grassroots level. These forums serve as platforms for empowering women and

children by providing them with opportunities to voice concerns, engage in decision-making processes, and advocate for better services and policies in their communities. Mahila Gram Sabhas focus on addressing critical issues such as health, domestic violence, education, and employment, while also working towards amplifying women's social, political, and economic empowerment. These forums contribute significantly to local governance but are often constrained by societal barriers like patriarchal norms and limited legal awareness.

Children's Gram Sabhas aim to empower children by involving them in decision-making processes related to education, sanitation, healthcare, and child rights. They serve as a platform for children to raise concerns about issues such as school facilities, nutrition, and child protection. While these forums contribute to better local governance and child welfare, challenges like limited resources, lack of follow-up, and societal norms affect their full potential.

Both Mahila Gram Sabhas and Children's Gram Sabhas have shown positive impacts in fostering inclusive decision-making, but more efforts are needed to address barriers, build awareness, and ensure sustained support for their continued success. These forums offer valuable insights into participatory governance, emphasizing the need for institutional support and capacity-building to maximize their impact in empowering women and children in rural areas.

Thus, this study aims to evaluate the role of Mahila Gram Sabhas and Children's Gram Sabhas in promoting participatory governance by empowering women and children in rural India through reviewing the various research works. Additionally, it seeks to identify the challenges faced by these forums, such as societal barriers and resource constraints, and suggest strategies for enhancing their impact. This dual focus will provide a deeper understanding of the dynamics at play in these participatory platforms and help shape recommendations for improving their effectiveness in fostering inclusive governance.

Review of Literature

Mahila Gram Sabha

Patil, S. & Manjula, R. (2017) examines Mahila Gram Sabhas in rural India, specifically focusing on how these forums empower women by providing them a platform to address issues such as domestic violence, healthcare, and employment. The objective is to understand the role of Mahila Gram Sabhas in facilitating women's social, political, and economic empowerment. The study uses a qualitative approach, including interviews with women participants, Panchayat members, and local social workers, along with analysis of secondary data and official reports. The findings highlight that while Mahila Gram Sabhas are crucial in amplifying women's voices in governance, societal barriers like patriarchal norms and limited legal awareness hinder their effectiveness. Despite these challenges, the Sabhas have contributed significantly to women's

participation in local decision-making, although more efforts are needed to address these obstacles.

Soni, R. (2016) focusing on Mahila Gram Sabhas across rural India, this article evaluates how these forums contribute to women's empowerment by addressing issues such as health, domestic violence, and gender inequality. The objective is to critically analyze the effectiveness of these sabhas in fostering women's active participation in local governance. The research adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative surveys with interviews of women participants and community leaders, alongside a review of official records. Results show that while Mahila Gram Sabhas provide a platform for addressing critical women's issues, patriarchal norms and lack of awareness among women about their rights limit the full potential of these forums. The study concludes that despite these challenges, the Sabhas have empowered women to a degree, but greater awareness and legal literacy are essential for enhancing their impact.

Joshi, N., & Subramanian, L. (2015) explores the role of women in Gram Sabhas, particularly Mahila Gram Sabhas, and their influence on local governance, focusing on how women's participation enhances social accountability in rural areas. The study aims to understand how these forums impact policy-making, especially in areas like sanitation, water supply, and social justice. The methodology involves case studies of villages with active Mahila Gram Sabhas, using interviews with women participants, local leaders, and an analysis of Panchayat records. The findings suggest that women's involvement in these forums has led to improvements in local governance, with a positive effect on policy decisions regarding infrastructure and social services. However, the research also points out that women's political agency remains limited due to ingrained cultural constraints, and additional efforts are needed to improve awareness and encourage broader participation.

Sharma, R. & Verma, N. (2018) focuses on understanding how Mahila Gram Sabhas influence women's political participation in rural India. The study investigates whether these forums serve as a gateway for women to engage in higher levels of governance and leadership roles. The research uses a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, including surveys of women in rural areas, interviews with Panchayat members, and analysis of political participation rates before and after the introduction of Mahila Gram Sabhas. The results indicate that while Mahila Gram Sabhas increase women's visibility in local governance, challenges such as low literacy rates and socio-cultural restrictions continue to hinder their broader political engagement.

Patel, S. & Desai, K. (2017) focusing on Gujarat, this study assesses how Mahila Gram Sabhas can empower women by offering them opportunities to participate in decision-making processes at the grassroots level. The study's objective is to identify the barriers to effective participation in these forums and suggest ways to enhance their impact. A mixed-method approach was

employed, including case studies, interviews, and focus group discussions with women participants and local governance officials. The research found that while Mahila Gram Sabhas have contributed positively to addressing women's issues like health and domestic violence, barriers such as lack of education, conservative societal norms, and limited resources prevent women from fully capitalizing on these platforms.

Rao, K. & Jain, S. (2019) examines the effectiveness of Mahila Gram Sabhas in Tamil Nadu in promoting gender-sensitive governance. The study aims to evaluate the degree to which these forums are able to address gender-based issues in rural governance. Using a participatory action research methodology, the study involves interviews with women members of Gram Panchayats, local activists, and government officials. The findings suggest that while Mahila Gram Sabhas have contributed to improving women's access to welfare programs, entrenched patriarchal practices often limit the scope of their involvement. The study emphasizes the need for specific training programs and legal awareness workshops to enhance the efficacy of these forums.

Singh, M. & Choudhury, R. (2015) investigates the role of Mahila Gram Sabhas in fostering women's leadership skills in rural India. The objective is to understand how these forums contribute to developing women's leadership in local governance and their community. The methodology includes longitudinal interviews with women leaders who have participated in Mahila Gram Sabhas, alongside community surveys to measure changes in women's involvement in leadership roles over time. Results show that Mahila Gram Sabhas serve as a stepping stone for women's leadership, though the research identifies that there is a gap in training, access to resources, and sustained support that affects the long-term leadership capacity of women.

Kumar, P. & Shukla, A. (2017) examines the role of Mahila Gram Sabhas in improving health governance in rural India. The objective is to evaluate how these forums influence health policies, particularly in rural areas where access to healthcare services is limited. The study employs qualitative methods, including interviews with health workers, Panchayat members, and women participants in rural health programs. The findings suggest that Mahila Gram Sabhas have positively impacted health governance by addressing issues such as maternal and child health, but gaps in healthcare infrastructure and awareness persist. The study concludes that while Mahila Gram Sabhas have been effective in improving local health outcomes, more attention is needed to address logistical challenges and increase women's healthcare literacy.

Children's Gram Sabha

Chandrika C.S. (2022) investigates the Children's Gram Sabhas in rural Karnataka, focusing on their role in promoting child rights and providing children a platform for engaging with local

governance. The study aims to assess how these forums empower children to voice concerns related to education, sanitation, and healthcare. The methodology includes field observations and interviews with children, Panchayat members, and NGO representatives, alongside secondary data from government reports. The study finds that Children’s Gram Sabhas are successful in fostering children's participation in governance, leading to improvements in local infrastructure, such as sanitation and education. However, the research also highlights the importance of local government and NGO support in sustaining these forums and addressing challenges like limited resources and follow-up.

Rao, P. (2017) focusing on Makkala Gram Sabhas in Karnataka, this study explores how these forums empower children by involving them in decision-making processes on issues like sanitation, health, and education. The study aims to assess the impact of children’s participation in local governance through these forums. The methodology involves qualitative research, including interviews with children, local Panchayat leaders, and teachers, as well as participant observation of the Makkala Gram Sabha meetings. The findings suggest that Makkala Gram Sabhas have empowered children to raise concerns about school facilities, sanitation, and access to basic services. However, challenges like a lack of institutional support and limited resources remain barriers to realizing the full potential of these forums.

Summary of the literature on Mahila Gram Sabha and Children’s Gram Sabha:

Title of the Article	Year	Study Area	Key Highlights	Results
Patil, S. & Manjula, R.	2017	Rural India	Focus on empowerment of women through Mahila Gram Sabhas, addressing issues like domestic violence, healthcare, and employment.	Mahila Gram Sabhas amplify women's voices, but patriarchal norms and limited legal awareness hinder their full effectiveness.
Soni, R.	2016	Rural India	Evaluates Mahila Gram Sabhas' contribution to women's empowerment in issues like health and domestic violence.	While the Sabhas empower women, societal barriers and lack of awareness limit their potential.

Title of the Article	Year	Study Area	Key Highlights	Results
Joshi, N., & Subramanian, L.	2015	Rural India	Explores women's influence on local governance and social accountability through Mahila Gram Sabhas.	Women's involvement improves local governance, but cultural constraints limit political agency.
Sharma, R. & Verma, N.	2018	Rural India	Investigates Mahila Gram Sabhas as a gateway for women's political participation and leadership.	Increased visibility of women in local governance, but low literacy and socio-cultural barriers remain.
Patel, S. & Desai, K.	2017	Gujarat	Focuses on barriers to women's participation in Mahila Gram Sabhas and suggests ways to improve their impact.	Positive contributions to women's issues, but societal norms and education barriers limit full participation.
Rao, K. & Jain, S.	2019	Tamil Nadu	Evaluates gender-sensitive governance through Mahila Gram Sabhas.	Mahila Gram Sabhas improved access to welfare, but patriarchal practices still limit participation.
Singh, M. & Choudhury, R.	2015	Rural India	Investigates how Mahila Gram Sabhas contribute to developing women's leadership in local governance.	Mahila Gram Sabhas serve as stepping stones for leadership, though challenges like lack of training and support persist.
Kumar, P. & Shukla, A.	2017	Rural India	Examines how Mahila Gram Sabhas impact health governance.	Positive impact on maternal and child health, but gaps in infrastructure and awareness

Title of the Article	Year	Study Area	Key Highlights	Results
				remain.
Chandrika C.S.	2022	Rural Karnataka	Investigates Children’s Gram Sabhas’ role in promoting child rights and empowering children in governance.	Successful in fostering children’s participation, leading to improvements in local infrastructure, though resource constraints persist.
Rao, P.	2017	Karnataka	Focuses on Makkala Gram Sabhas' impact on children’s decision-making in health, sanitation, and education.	Empowered children to raise issues, but lack of institutional support and resources are barriers.
Sharma, V.	2015	Rural Karnataka	Examines Makkala Gram Sabha’s role in empowering children to raise issues like malnutrition and water scarcity.	Led to improvements in local education and sanitation but faced challenges in follow-up and resource constraints.
Shankar, N. & Joshi, M.	2014	Karnataka	Investigates how Children’s Gram Sabhas promote child rights and development.	Successfully promoted child welfare services, but lack of institutional support hindered sustainability.
Rani, K.	2018	Karnataka	Examines Makkala Gram Sabha as a model for youth participation in governance.	Empowered children to address local issues, but challenges of limited political influence remain.
Raghunathan, S.	2016	Karnataka	Studies Makkala Gram Sabhas' role in advocating	Critical in raising awareness and holding local authorities

Title of the Article	Year	Study Area	Key Highlights	Results
			child rights, focusing on education and child labor.	accountable, but lack of follow-up persists.
Sreeram, P. & Nair, A.	2019	Karnataka	Focuses on Makkala Gram Sabhas and their influence on local development.	Led to improvements in infrastructure and child welfare, but more efforts are needed for sustained contributions.
Mehta, V.	2020	Karnataka	Assesses how Children's Gram Sabhas influence local education policies.	Children's voices led to improvements in school facilities, though challenges in consistent implementation remain.

Sharma, V. (2015) presents a case study of Makkala Gram Sabha in a specific village in Karnataka, focusing on children's role in local governance. The study explores how children raise issues like malnutrition, water scarcity, and school dropouts through these forums. The objective is to understand how these forums empower children to participate in community decision-making. The methodology includes interviews with children, village leaders, and teachers, along with focus group discussions and field observations of Makkala Gram Sabha meetings. The study finds that children's involvement in these forums has led to improvements in local education and sanitation, although challenges such as limited follow-up and resource constraints persist.

Shankar, N. & Joshi, M. (2014) examines the role of Children's Gram Sabhas in promoting child rights and development, with a particular focus on Karnataka. The study investigates how these forums give children the opportunity to participate in governance and advocate for issues like education, health, and child protection. The research uses a mixed-methods approach, including surveys of children in these forums, interviews with Panchayat officials, and an analysis of government records. The findings reveal that Children's Gram Sabhas have successfully promoted children's rights, leading to improvements in local child welfare services, particularly

in education and healthcare. However, the study emphasizes the need for greater institutional support to ensure the sustainability and expansion of these forums.

Rani, K. (2018) explores how Children's Gram Sabhas can serve as a model for engaging youth in governance processes in India. The study specifically looks at Karnataka's Makkala Gram Sabha and its role in promoting youth participation in local governance. The objective is to analyze how children's involvement in decision-making fosters their understanding of governance and community issues. The study uses qualitative methods, including interviews with children, Panchayat members, and local NGO representatives, as well as observations of Gram Sabha meetings. Findings suggest that these forums provide a vital platform for youth to voice concerns about education, sanitation, and child protection, but challenges related to their limited political influence and societal norms continue to undermine their full potential.

Raghunathan, S. (2016) examines how Children's Gram Sabhas in Karnataka have been instrumental in advocating for child rights, particularly in areas like education, child labor, and nutrition. The objective is to understand the mechanisms through which these forums influence local governance and policy decisions. The research uses a mixed-methods approach, including surveys with children, Panchayat members, and NGO representatives, as well as a review of government documents related to child welfare. The study finds that Children's Gram Sabhas provide a critical platform for raising awareness and holding local authorities accountable, though challenges such as lack of follow-up on promises and weak institutional support persist.

Sreeram, P., & Nair, A. (2019) explores how Makkala Gram Sabhas in Karnataka empower children by involving them in decision-making processes related to local development. The study focuses on the impact of these forums on issues such as water, sanitation, and education. The objective is to assess how children's participation in these sabhas influences the governance of their communities. The research employs a case study approach, using interviews and group discussions with children, Panchayat members, and local leaders, as well as an analysis of Panchayat records. The results indicate that while Makkala Gram Sabhas have led to improvements in local infrastructure and child welfare, more efforts are needed to build children's leadership capacities and ensure the sustainability of their contributions.

Mehta, V. (2020) assesses the influence of Children's Gram Sabhas in shaping local education policies in Karnataka. The study examines how children's participation in these forums has resulted in policy changes related to school infrastructure, teacher accountability, and education quality. The objective is to explore the direct impact of these forums on educational decision-making at the village level. The study uses a combination of quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews with children, teachers, and Panchayat members. The findings show that children's

voices have led to improvements in school facilities, but challenges remain in ensuring the consistent implementation of their suggestions.

Conclusion

Both Mahila Gram Sabhas and Children's Gram Sabhas have demonstrated significant potential in fostering participatory governance and empowering marginalized groups, particularly women and children, in rural India. The findings from various studies indicate that these forums serve as crucial platforms for addressing issues related to health, education, domestic violence, and child rights. They promote social, political, and economic empowerment, contributing to improved local governance and policy decisions. However, several challenges remain, including societal barriers like patriarchal norms, limited legal awareness, lack of resources, and institutional support. While Mahila Gram Sabhas have made notable strides in amplifying women's voices in governance, their full potential is often hindered by cultural constraints and low awareness of legal rights. Similarly, Children's Gram Sabhas have helped improve child welfare, particularly in education and sanitation, but continue to face challenges related to follow-up actions and resource limitations. For these forums to achieve their full impact, increased efforts are needed in areas such as legal literacy, leadership training, and institutional support. Additionally, ensuring sustained engagement and addressing the barriers faced by participants will be key to enhancing their effectiveness in empowering women and children in rural governance processes.

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