



Structural Hurdles in Grassroots Administration: A Study of Conflict Resolution and Male Dominance Faced by Elected Women in Chamba's PRIs

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Article Info: (Received- 22/04/2026, Accept- 26/06/2026, Published- 05/07/2026)

DOI- [10.64127/rnimj.2026v2i30011](https://doi.org/10.64127/rnimj.2026v2i30011)

Abstract

This study examines the structural, administrative, and socio-cultural impediments encountered by Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) within the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) of Chamba district, Himachal Pradesh. Utilizing an empirical primary data-driven framework, the research investigates how institutionalized male dominance and entrenched patriarchal norms circumscribe the administrative and dispute-mediation autonomy of women at the grassroots level. Fieldwork was executed across two distinct administrative blocks in Chamba: Pangi (a remote, high-altitude tribal block) focusing on Dharwas and Luj Gram Panchayats; and Bharmaur block, focusing on Ulansa and Nayagram Gram Panchayats. Primary data was gathered on-site using structured interview schedules, focus group discussions (FGDs), and localized case studies of active female representatives and community stakeholders.

The paper specifically evaluates the dual pressures of administrative gatekeeping and the pervasive phenomenon of proxy politics (the *Sarpanch Pati* culture) within these specific mountainous topographies. Special analytical focus is directed toward the efficacy of EWRs in local conflict resolution, encompassing disputes over natural resource allocation, community land boundaries, and domestic grievances. The empirical findings reveal a stark divergence between formal constitutional empowerment and substantive administrative authority. While state PRI mandates have successfully guaranteed numerical representation, qualitative entry barriers persist. Female leaders across both blocks routinely confront non-cooperation from male bureaucrats, domestic gatekeeping, and a systemic deficit in community acceptance during dispute mediation, where traditional male authority figures continue to be favored. Consequently, conflicts are frequently hijacked or mediated through male proxies, undermining the statutory power vested in elected women. Conversely, comparative field insights highlight emerging narratives of leadership resilience—particularly within Pangi's geographically isolated terrain—where targeted capacity-building mitigates initial vulnerabilities. The paper concludes by presenting data-driven policy recommendations, emphasizing gender-sensitised administrative training and

institutional safeguarding mechanisms designed to dismantle proxy intervention.

Introduction

The implementation of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act in 1992 marked a watershed moment in India's democratic decentralization, statutorily mandating a minimum of 33% reservation for women across all tiers of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). In a progressive move to further deepen grassroots democracy, several Indian states, including Himachal Pradesh, elevated this quota to 50% reservation in 2008. This legislative intervention aimed to democratize rural local bodies by shifting governance power from traditional, upper-caste male elites to historically marginalized groups, particularly rural women. By structurally altering the demographic composition of local governance, the state sought to foster inclusive development and gender-responsive administration. However, the transition from descriptive representation (numerical presence) to substantive representation (actual exercise of authority) remains a complex, contested process. In deeply patriarchal agrarian and tribal societies, formal constitutional rights frequently collide with informal institutional arrangements, entrenched gender roles, and systemic male resistance.

This study contextualizes these institutional friction points within Chamba district, an administratively and topographically challenging region in Himachal Pradesh. Characterized by its rugged, mountainous terrain, remote valleys, and distinct socio-cultural fabrics, Chamba offers a critical vantage point for evaluating gendered governance. The study focuses specifically on two blocks: Pangi a high-altitude, snow-bound tribal area, examining the Dharwas and Luj Gram Panchayats—and Bharmaur, focusing on the Ulansa and Nayagram Gram Panchayats. In these remote areas, the state's formal administrative machinery overlaps with traditional community frameworks. While legislative mandates have successfully ushered a new cohort of Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) into office, their everyday administrative reality is heavily bounded by structural hurdles. The core of this administrative friction manifests in two primary domains: the ubiquitous nature of male dominance in institutional spaces and the gendered challenges encountered during local conflict resolution.

To understand the scale of this structural intervention, it is essential to examine the institutional layout and gender demographics of the local government universe in these two blocks. According to official data from the State Election Commission of Himachal Pradesh for the 2026–2031 PRI tenure, the Pangi development block comprises 19 Gram Panchayats, while the Bharmour development block spans 31 Gram Panchayats. Due to the strict enforcement of the 50% gender quota, the distribution of *Pradhan* (Panchayat President) seats is split dynamically across both blocks. In Pangi, women hold the executive majority with 10 females Pradhans to 9 males Pradhans. Similarly, in Bharmour, the gender balance tilts toward female leadership with 16 female Pradhans and 15 males Pradhans. This macro-demographic backdrop means that across both blocks combined, women numerically command the executive leadership of the majority of local bodies (26 out of 50 panchayats), including all four specific field sites selected for this study: Dharwas, Luj, Ulansa, and Nayagram.

However, this mathematical majority introduces a deep administrative paradox that forms the analytical core of this research. A primary manifestation of structural male dominance in rural governance remains the pervasive phenomenon of “proxy politics,” colloquially known as the *Sarpanch Pati* or *Pradhan Pati* culture. In many rural locales, women are positioned as candidates due to mandatory seat reservations, but actual executive power is hijacked by their husbands, fathers, or male relatives (Mohanty, 2019). This informal institutional arrangement positions the EWR as a titular head

while the male proxy interacts with bureaucrats, manages finances, and chairs panchayat meetings. This practice is not merely a product of individual male ambition, but a structural defense mechanism deployed by patriarchal societies to maintain control over public spaces and community resources (Jayal, 2013). This proxy ecosystem effectively silences women's voices, turning local bodies into spaces of tokenistic female participation where structural power dynamics remain unaltered despite women holding the numeric majority of seats. Beyond domestic proxy interventions, EWRs face significant structural barriers from the formal state machinery. Rural administration requires interaction with a traditionally male-dominated local bureaucracy, including Panchayat Secretaries, Junior Engineers, and Block Development Officers. Bureaucrats often display an institutionalized gender bias, exhibiting non-cooperation, patronizing attitudes, or outright dismissal toward female representatives (Rai & Carroll, 2021). This bureaucratic gatekeeping is frequently compounded by a deliberate lack of capacity-building and administrative training for EWRs. Deprived of adequate technical knowledge regarding budgetary allocations, regulatory frameworks, and e-governance portals, newly elected women are structurally engineered into dependency on male peers or relatives, reinforcing the very patriarchal cycles the reservation policy aimed to break.

These structural hurdles become particularly acute during local conflict resolution, a core administrative function of PRIs. Gram Panchayats are legally mandated to mediate localized disputes, ranging from natural resource distribution (such as community forest and water rights) and village land boundaries to domestic grievances and inter-family rivalries. In mountain economies like Chamba, where livelihood survival is directly linked to scarce natural resources, these conflicts carry high community stakes. However, dispute mediation has historically been the exclusive domain of male community elders through informal, traditional bodies. When EWRs attempt to arbitrate these disputes, they face a deep-seated deficit in social acceptance and authority (Bano, 2018). Community members, habituated to patriarchal arbitration, frequently bypass elected women leaders, preferring to seek counsel from male proxies or traditional male networks.

Furthermore, when EWRs assert their statutory authority to resolve disputes, they are often met with institutional pushback or open hostility. Resolving conflicts over common pool resources requires challenging existing local power hierarchies, a task that exposes women to social isolation or political sabotage if they lack strong domestic and institutional backing (Agarwal, 2010). Consequently, the capacity of EWRs to deliver fair, gender-sensitive dispute resolution is constantly undermined by both community skepticism and institutional non-cooperation. This creates an administrative paradox: women are structurally tasked with maintaining rural harmony but are systematically denied the social legitimacy and institutional authority required to enforce their decisions.

Given this background, this study utilizes an empirical, primary data-driven approach to investigate the lived realities of EWRs in the Dharwas, Luj, Ulansa, and Nayagram Gram Panchayats. By shifting the focus away from macroeconomic statistical trends, this research captures the micro-level nuances of grassroots governance through direct field insights, structured interviews, and focus group discussions across these specific 50 local bodies. It analyzes how the distinct geographical isolation of Pangi and Bharmour shapes, restricts, or occasionally facilitates female political agency. Ultimately, this study aims to dismantle the monolithic narrative of rural women's helplessness, documenting not only the rigid structures of male dominance but also the quiet strategies of leadership resilience and negotiation that EWRs deploy to reclaim their constitutional mandate.

Research Methodology

This study utilizes an empirical, primary data-driven research design to investigate the structural hurdles faced by Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) in Chamba district, Himachal Pradesh. Fieldwork was executed across two distinct development blocks: Pangi (focusing on Dharwas and Luj Gram Panchayats) and Bharmaur (focusing on Ulansa and Nayagram Gram Panchayats). All four selected local bodies are headed by female *Pradhans* under the state's 50% gender reservation mandate.

The study adopts a purposive sampling framework to capture a holistic overview of grassroots power dynamics. The primary research tool is a semi-structured questionnaire designed to gather both quantifiable data and open-ended qualitative narratives regarding administrative autonomy, proxy politics, and local conflict resolution.

To maintain rigorous analytical objectivity, the sample size consists of 10 respondents from each of the 4 panchayats, establishing a targeted baseline of N=40 total respondents. To explore patriarchal gatekeeping, this field sample is strictly balanced by gender, split evenly into 20 male and 20 female participants. The female cohort comprises elected women leaders and local ward members, while the male cohort targets administrative peers, village elders, and family proxies. This balanced framework ensures a comparative examination of institutional resistance and community acceptance across the selected field sites.

Empirical Analysis of Male Dominance and Institutional Gatekeeping

The empirical investigation of male dominance and institutional gatekeeping in Chamba's Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) reveals a significant gap between women's formal political representation and their substantive participation in grassroots administration. The study covers four Gram Panchayats—Dharwas and Luj in Pangi block and Ulansa and Nayagram in Bharmaur block. These areas represent geographically difficult and socially distinctive mountain environments in which formal institutions operate alongside established community networks and traditional authority structures. The study draws upon primary fieldwork using semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and localized case studies. The sample consists of 40 respondents, equally divided between 20 women and 20 men, including elected women representatives, ward members, administrative peers, village elders, and male family proxies. A central empirical finding emerging from the field framework is that the numerical presence of women in Panchayati Raj leadership has not automatically translated into independent decision-making authority. The 2026–2031 institutional context is particularly significant because women occupy 10 of 19 Pradhan positions in Pangi and 16 of 31 in Bharmaur. Across the two blocks, women therefore hold 26 of 50 Pradhan positions, including all four selected field sites. This numerical strength creates an important democratic transformation; however, it simultaneously exposes the persistence of informal mechanisms through which male actors attempt to retain control over decision-making.

The most visible manifestation of this informal control is proxy politics, commonly associated with the *Sarpanch Pati* or *Pradhan Pati* phenomenon. In this arrangement, an elected woman may formally occupy the constitutional position, while her husband or another male relative performs many of the practical functions associated with the office. Such intervention can include communication with government officials, participation in administrative discussions, handling financial matters, and exercising influence over Panchayat meetings. The resulting situation creates a distinction between the woman's legal authority and the authority exercised in everyday institutional

practice. The woman is therefore present within the political institution, but her capacity to independently exercise the powers attached to her office may remain restricted.

The field framework also indicates that male dominance is not confined to the household. Elected women representatives must interact with Panchayat Secretaries, Junior Engineers, Block Development Officers, and other officials whose institutional knowledge and administrative authority are essential for the functioning of local government. The study identifies non-cooperation, patronizing behaviour, and dismissal of women's views as important dimensions of bureaucratic gatekeeping. Such practices can be especially consequential for first-time representatives who may have limited familiarity with government procedures, budgets, development schemes, technical documentation, and digital governance systems. In such circumstances, dependence upon male relatives, officials, or experienced male representatives can become an institutional necessity rather than an individual choice.

An important dimension of this gatekeeping concerns access to administrative knowledge. Lack of adequate capacity-building can unintentionally reproduce gendered dependency. When elected women are unfamiliar with budgetary procedures, regulatory provisions, documentation, or e-governance platforms, other actors acquire greater influence over the practical implementation of Panchayat decisions. The empirical framework therefore suggests that political reservation alone cannot guarantee substantive empowerment. Administrative literacy, procedural knowledge, confidence, and direct access to officials are equally important components of effective political agency.

Male dominance becomes particularly visible when women attempt to exercise authority in conflict-resolution processes. Panchayats deal with disputes involving community resources, water, forests, land boundaries, domestic grievances, and inter-family disagreements. In the mountain context of Chamba, these issues can have direct consequences for livelihoods and community relationships. Yet dispute mediation has historically been associated with male elders and informal male networks. Consequently, an elected woman attempting to mediate a dispute may encounter resistance from individuals who continue to regard male authority as more legitimate.

This produces what may be termed an authority-legitimacy gap. Women possess statutory authority because they have been democratically elected, but sections of the community may not automatically recognize that authority in practice. When disputing parties bypass the elected woman and approach male relatives, elders, or traditional intermediaries, the formal Panchayati Raj institution is weakened. Such practices also reinforce the perception that women's political roles are secondary or dependent. The problem is therefore not simply that men participate in governance; rather, it is that informal male authority can supersede the legally established authority of elected representatives.

The empirical framework further indicates that women who assert independent authority may face social and political costs. Resistance can take the form of criticism, social isolation, non-cooperation, or attempts to undermine their decisions. This is particularly significant in close-knit rural communities where political authority is deeply embedded in social and familial relationships. Women therefore have to negotiate not only institutional procedures but also expectations concerning appropriate gender behaviour. The challenge is consequently both administrative and socio-cultural.

At the same time, the evidence should not be interpreted as demonstrating complete female powerlessness. The study deliberately seeks to identify forms of leadership resilience and negotiation among EWRs. The comparison between Pangri and Bharmaur

is especially useful in this regard. Pangi's geographical isolation and difficult terrain create additional administrative constraints, yet the study framework also identifies instances in which capacity-building can reduce women's initial vulnerabilities. This suggests that women's political agency can strengthen when they acquire institutional knowledge, develop confidence, establish direct relationships with administrative authorities, and receive support from the community. Overall, the empirical analysis demonstrates that the principal challenge facing elected women in Chamba is not access to political office but the conversion of constitutional representation into substantive administrative power. Reservation has significantly altered the gender composition of Panchayati Raj leadership, but informal proxy politics, bureaucratic gatekeeping, limited administrative capacity, and patriarchal notions of authority continue to constrain women's independent decision-making. The evidence therefore points toward the need for gender-sensitive administrative training, stronger institutional safeguards against proxy intervention, direct communication between EWRs and government officials, and mechanisms that strengthen women's authority in conflict-resolution processes. Such interventions are essential for transforming numerical representation into meaningful and autonomous grassroots leadership.

Field Insights into Conflict Resolution and Leadership Autonomy: Influence of Men in Key Panchayat Decisions

The field investigation across Dharwas and Luj in Pangi block and Ulansa and Nayagram in Bharmaur block demonstrates that the presence of women in elected positions has not completely displaced men's influence over important Panchayat decisions. Analysis of the 40-respondent field framework—comprising 20 women and 20 men—together with field observation indicates that male influence operates through several interconnected channels: husbands and male relatives, senior male Panchayat members, village elders, politically influential persons, and actors possessing greater administrative experience. The important empirical finding is therefore not that men formally occupy women's elected positions, but that men continue to exercise considerable informal influence over decisions that are legally within the domain of elected women representatives.

Across all four selected Panchayats, the influence of men was particularly visible in decisions involving development priorities, allocation of local resources, selection and implementation of development works, financial matters, interaction with government officials, and settlement of community disputes. Field observation suggests that women representatives were more likely to be directly involved in routine public-facing activities, while discussions surrounding technically complex, financially significant, or politically sensitive decisions frequently attracted greater male intervention. This distinction is important because it reveals a hierarchy within grassroots decision-making: women may participate visibly in Panchayat administration, while men retain greater influence over decisions perceived as consequential.

Dharwas Gram Panchayat

In Dharwas, male influence was particularly apparent through family-based intervention and informal consultation. Field observations indicate that the husband or another male family member could become an important intermediary between the elected woman representative and other community or administrative actors. In important matters, discussions did not always remain confined to the elected representative and Panchayat members; male relatives could become involved before a decision was finalized.

This was especially relevant to decisions concerning development works, administrative communication, and conflict settlement. The practical consequence is

that the elected woman could remain the constitutional decision-maker while the process leading to the decision was influenced by male actors. Such a pattern represents a form of informal gatekeeping, because access to information, officials, and community networks can determine whose views ultimately shape the decision.

The field evidence also suggests that women were not necessarily passive in this process. Rather, some negotiated with male relatives and community members to secure support for their preferred decisions. Consequently, male influence in Dharwas should be understood as a constraint on complete autonomy rather than evidence of complete absence of women's agency.

Luj Gram Panchayat

In Luj, male influence was also evident in development-related and administrative decisions. The difficult geographical conditions of Pangi increase dependence on established interpersonal networks. Men with previous administrative experience or stronger connections with officials could consequently exercise considerable influence over the practical functioning of the Panchayat.

Field observation indicates that when decisions required knowledge of government procedures, technical matters, documentation, or communication with block-level authorities, women representatives could experience greater dependence upon experienced male actors. This creates what may be termed an administrative knowledge advantage for men. The significance of this finding is that institutional dependence can reproduce male dominance even without overt opposition to women's leadership. If a woman requires another person to interpret official procedures or communicate with authorities, that person can indirectly influence the decision-making process. Thus, control over administrative knowledge becomes a form of political influence.

Ulansa Gram Panchayat

The situation in Ulansa demonstrates the interaction between formal women's leadership and informal male authority. Although the Panchayat is headed by an elected woman, field observations indicate that male actors continue to possess influence in discussions concerning important community matters.

This influence was particularly significant in conflict-resolution processes. Community disputes involving land, water, pathways, family disagreements, or other local matters can bring traditional networks of male elders into the decision-making process. In such situations, the elected woman may possess formal institutional authority, while male elders or influential persons possess social legitimacy. This creates an authority-legitimacy gap: the woman is legally empowered to act, but community members may still look towards men when determining how a sensitive dispute should be resolved. The result is a hybrid decision-making structure in which formal Panchayati Raj institutions coexist with informal male authority.

Nayagram Gram Panchayat

In Nayagram, male influence similarly appeared through informal consultation, community networks, and involvement in significant Panchayat decisions. Field observation suggests that men could influence the discussion of development priorities and community-level problems even when the final decision formally rested with the elected woman representative. An important feature here is the distinction between participation and control. Women were visible participants in Panchayat governance, but visibility did not always correspond to equal influence over the most important decisions. Male actors could shape the agenda before formal discussion, influence the preferences of other members, or provide the information upon which decisions were based.

This suggests that measuring women's empowerment simply by their presence in Panchayat meetings would provide an incomplete picture. A more meaningful indicator is whether women can set the agenda, articulate independent preferences, resist unwanted pressure, and ensure implementation of decisions.

Comparative Pattern across the Four Panchayats

The evidence from the four Panchayats reveals a broadly similar pattern:

Area of Decision-Making	Observed Male Influence	Implication for Women's Autonomy
Development works	Consultation/influence of husbands, male members and elders	Women's priorities may be negotiated through male networks
Financial matters	Greater involvement of experienced male actors	Technical knowledge can create dependence
Government interaction	Male relatives/experienced men may act as intermediaries	Direct institutional access of women may be weakened
Conflict resolution	Male elders and influential men retain social authority	Formal authority may compete with traditional authority
Selection of local priorities	Male community networks influence agenda-setting	Women's independent agenda-setting may be constrained
Administrative procedures	Men with greater procedural knowledge can dominate discussions	Knowledge asymmetry reproduces dependency
Implementation of decisions	Male networks can influence practical execution	Formal decisions may be altered during implementation

The comparative evidence therefore points to a common mechanism of male influence across all four Panchayats, although its intensity and form may vary according to local social relations, family structures, administrative experience, and geographical conditions. Importantly, male dominance is not necessarily exercised through direct confrontation. More frequently, it operates through consultation, advice, mediation, information control, social pressure, and informal networks.

Overall Empirical Interpretation

The combined questionnaire framework and field observations indicate that the major challenge to women's leadership in Chamba is not numerical under-representation. Indeed, women occupy all four Pradhan positions in the selected field sites. The deeper problem is the persistence of informal male influence within formally female-led institutions. Men continue to exercise influence particularly when decisions involve money, development priorities, government officials, technical procedures, and community disputes.

The findings consequently support a distinction between descriptive representation and substantive representation. Descriptive representation exists because women have entered Panchayat institutions in substantial numbers. Substantive representation, however, requires that women possess sufficient autonomy to determine priorities and make and implement decisions without undue male intervention. At the same time, the field observations do not support portraying all women representatives as powerless. Some women appear to use consultation strategically, acquire administrative knowledge, build relationships with officials, and gradually establish independent authority. Hence, male influence should be understood as a negotiated and contested form of power, rather than an absolute structure that eliminates women's agency. The central empirical conclusion is that reservation has changed who occupies the Panchayat office, but it has not completely transformed who influences key decisions. Across Dharwas, Luj, Ulansa, and Nayagram, the continued involvement of husbands, male relatives, elders, experienced male representatives, and influential community

actors demonstrates that the transfer of formal political office to women has proceeded faster than the transfer of informal decision-making power. Strengthening women's administrative knowledge, ensuring direct communication with officials, discouraging proxy representation, and giving EWRs greater institutional support in conflict-resolution processes are therefore essential for converting

Findings

The study finds that women's political representation in Chamba's Panchayati Raj Institutions has increased significantly, but their substantive participation and independent decision-making authority remain constrained. The field study conducted in Dharwas and Luj of Pangi block and Ulansa and Nayagram of Bharmaur block, covering 40 respondents equally divided between 20 women and 20 men, shows that the presence of women in elected positions has not completely transformed established patterns of male influence. Although women occupy constitutionally recognized positions, important decisions are often shaped through informal consultations with husbands, male relatives, village elders, experienced male representatives, and other influential members of the community.

A major finding of the study is the persistence of proxy politics, particularly the *Pradhan Pati* phenomenon. Field observations indicate that male family members may influence or participate in matters formally falling within the authority of elected women representatives. Their influence is particularly visible in communication with government officials, discussions concerning development activities, administrative procedures, financial matters, and important community decisions. This creates a distinction between formal office-holding and practical decision-making power, whereby women legally occupy the position but may not always exercise complete authority independently.

The study further finds that male influence is present across all four selected Panchayats, although its form and intensity may vary according to local circumstances. In Dharwas and Luj, family and community networks play an important role in shaping decisions, while in Ulansa and Nayagram the influence of male elders, experienced representatives, and informal community actors is particularly relevant to sensitive decisions and dispute settlement. Across the four Panchayats, male influence is more evident in decisions involving development priorities, allocation of resources, financial issues, technical matters, interaction with officials, and implementation of Panchayat works. Thus, male dominance does not necessarily occur through direct occupation of women's positions; rather, it frequently operates through informal influence, consultation, mediation, and control over institutional information. Another important finding concerns bureaucratic and administrative gatekeeping. Women representatives, particularly those with limited previous experience in local administration, may face difficulties in understanding government procedures, budgets, technical documentation, development schemes, and digital governance systems. This lack of administrative knowledge can increase dependence on Panchayat Secretaries, technical officials, male relatives, or experienced male representatives. Consequently, unequal access to institutional knowledge becomes an important mechanism through which women's autonomy can be restricted. The findings suggest that political reservation without adequate administrative capacity-building cannot by itself guarantee effective empowerment.

The study also identifies conflict resolution as a major arena in which women's leadership autonomy is tested. Panchayats deal with disputes related to land, water, forest resources, pathways, domestic disagreements, and inter-family or community relations. In such matters, traditional male elders and influential men may continue

to possess considerable social legitimacy. Women representatives therefore sometimes have to negotiate between their formal constitutional authority and established informal systems of male authority. When community members approach male elders or male relatives instead of the elected woman, a significant authority-legitimacy gap emerges between the legal status of women representatives and their recognition as effective community leaders. At the same time, the findings reveal that women representatives are not passive or completely powerless. Field observations indicate forms of negotiation, adaptation, confidence-building, and gradual acquisition of administrative competence. Women can strengthen their position through repeated participation in Panchayat meetings, direct interaction with officials, knowledge of rules and schemes, community engagement, and successful handling of local problems. Thus, women's political agency appears to be an evolving process in which experience and institutional knowledge can progressively reduce dependence upon male intermediaries.

The study also finds that geographical and social conditions influence women's leadership experiences. The difficult terrain and relative isolation of Pangi can increase administrative and communication challenges, while close-knit community relationships in both Pangi and Bharmaur can reinforce the importance of informal networks. These conditions can make women's access to officials, information, mobility, and independent decision-making more difficult. However, geographical constraints do not eliminate women's agency; rather, they interact with patriarchal social structures to shape the conditions under which women exercise political authority.

Overall, the principal finding is that Chamba has experienced a transition from numerical representation towards emerging substantive participation, but this transition remains incomplete. Women have entered grassroots political institutions in substantial numbers, yet informal male authority continues to influence key decisions. The gap between representation and autonomy is maintained through proxy politics, patriarchal expectations, administrative knowledge gaps, informal male networks, and traditional authority structures. Nevertheless, increasing political experience, capacity-building, direct institutional access, and women's willingness to negotiate and assert their authority provide important possibilities for change. The study therefore concludes that the real measure of women's empowerment in Panchayati Raj should not be the number of women elected alone, but the extent to which elected women can independently deliberate, decide, resolve conflicts, communicate with state institutions, and implement decisions without undue male interference.

Conclusion

The study concludes that women's representation in Chamba's Panchayati Raj Institutions has brought a significant transformation in the formal structure of grassroots political leadership, but substantive leadership autonomy remains constrained by persistent male influence. Evidence from the four selected Gram Panchayats—Dharwas, Luj, Ulansa, and Nayagram—based on 40 respondents and field observations shows that husbands, male relatives, elders, experienced representatives, and influential community members continue to affect key decisions relating to development works, financial matters, administrative communication, and conflict resolution. The persistence of proxy politics, particularly the *Pradhan Pati* phenomenon, demonstrates the gap between women's constitutional authority and their practical control over decision-making.

The study further reveals that limited administrative knowledge, bureaucratic gatekeeping, traditional gender expectations, and dependence on male networks can restrict women's independent exercise of power. Conflict resolution remains a particularly important area where traditional male authority often competes with

women's formal institutional authority. Nevertheless, the findings also demonstrate emerging forms of women's agency through negotiation, increasing confidence, administrative learning, and direct engagement with Panchayat institutions. Therefore, the study concludes that political reservation is necessary but insufficient for genuine empowerment. Effective training, administrative literacy, direct institutional access, protection from proxy intervention, and recognition of women's authority are essential to transform numerical representation into substantive and autonomous grassroots leadership.

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Cite this Article

"Kewal Krishan", "Structural Hurdles in Grassroots Administration: A Study of Conflict Resolution and Male Dominance Faced by Elected Women in Chamba's PRIs", ResearchNext International Multidisciplinary Journal (RPIMJ), ISSN: 3107-9725 (Online), Volume:2, Issue:3, July-September 2026.

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