Advanced International Journal for Research (AIJFR)
E-ISSN: 3048-7641 ● Website: www.aijfr.com ● Email: editor@aijfr.com

Between Reservation and Representation: Structural Constraints Faced by Scheduled Caste Women Panchayat Representatives in Guntur District

Mr. Nalivelugu Sunil Kumar[1], Prof. Ch. Swaroopa Rani[2]

[1]Research scholar, Centre for women's studies, Acharya Nagarjuna University
[2]Professor, Centre for women's studies, Acharya Nagarjuna University

Abstract

This article examines the structural constraints that prevent Scheduled Caste women elected to panchayat institutions in Guntur district from exercising substantive political authority. While constitutional reservation ensures their numerical presence, deeply embedded structures of caste hierarchy, patriarchal control, and economic dependence systematically undermine their capacity to function as autonomous representatives. Drawing on field research with SC women representatives, the study analyzes how proxy leadership by male relatives, institutional silencing through discriminatory practices, economic vulnerability, and social control mechanisms create a gulf between formal inclusion and meaningful representation. The analysis reveals that these constraints operate not as isolated barriers but as interconnected systems that mutually reinforce marginalization. The article argues that addressing this gap requires confronting fundamental power relations rather than merely improving training or awareness programs, situating the struggle for SC women's political empowerment within broader contestations over caste, gender, and democratic inclusion in contemporary India.

Keywords: *Structural constraints, proxy representation, caste discrimination, panchayat governance, Andhra Pradesh, democratic exclusion*

1. Introduction

When Sujatha was elected as sarpanch from a reserved constituency in a Guntur mandal, her family celebrated what appeared to be a significant achievement. A Dalit woman with minimal formal education, she had defeated candidates from economically better-off families. Yet within months, village residents recognized a troubling pattern: Sujatha herself rarely appeared at panchayat meetings. Instead, her husband attended on her behalf, signed documents in her name, interacted with officials, and made decisions about development works. When questioned, he explained that his wife lacked the knowledge and confidence to handle governance responsibilities, and that he was merely helping her

fulfill duties she could not manage alone. Sujatha, when interviewed, confirmed this arrangement with visible discomfort, describing herself as a "name-only sarpanch" while real authority rested with her husband.

This phenomenon of proxy representation, where male relatives exercise power formally vested in women representatives, represents one dramatic manifestation of structural constraints preventing Scheduled Caste women from translating formal political inclusion into substantive authority. However, proxy representation constitutes merely the most visible symptom of deeper structural problems. Even SC women representatives who formally exercise their positions independently confront systematic barriers arising from intersecting hierarchies of caste, gender, and class that structure rural Andhra Pradesh's political landscape. These constraints operate not as individual prejudices that might be overcome through awareness-raising, but as embedded features of institutional and social organization that systematically privilege upper-caste male voices while marginalizing SC women.

This article examines the structural constraints facing SC women panchayat representatives in Guntur district, Andhra Pradesh. The analysis proceeds from recognition that the gap between reservation and representation—between formal inclusion and substantive empowerment— reflects not merely implementation failures or inadequate training but fundamental contradictions between democratic institutions and persisting hierarchies of caste and patriarchy. Drawing on fieldwork conducted during 2023-2024 with SC women elected to gram panchayats, mandal parishads, and zilla parishads, the study analyzes four interconnected dimensions of structural constraint: proxy leadership and patriarchal control over women's political positions; institutional silencing through caste-based discrimination and exclusionary practices; economic vulnerability that forces impossible choices between livelihood and political participation; and social control mechanisms that police SC women's behavior and circumscribe autonomous action.

The article contributes to scholarship on women's political representation by centering the specific experiences of SC women whose marginalization arises from intersecting systems of oppression, to subaltern studies by examining how formal democratic institutions can simultaneously include and exclude marginalized groups, and to debates about capabilities and empowerment by revealing how structural constraints systematically deny SC women the substantive freedom to function as political representatives despite holding formal positions. The analysis reveals that meaningful democratic inclusion for SC women requires not merely better implementation of existing reservation policies but fundamental challenges to power structures that currently contain and neutralize their political participation.

Conceptual Foundations: Structure, Agency, and Intersecting Hierarchies

Understanding structural constraints on SC women's political participation requires analytical frameworks that can capture how systems of power operate to produce systematic patterns of exclusion while remaining attentive to variations and to possibilities for agency and resistance. The concept of structure in social theory refers to enduring patterns of social organization— institutions, norms, distributions of resources, and systems of meaning—that shape possibilities for action in relatively stable ways across time and space (Giddens, 1984). Structures are not external forces mechanically

determining behavior but are both medium and outcome of human action, reproduced through everyday practices while also constraining future action.

Applying this understanding to SC women's political participation directs attention to the enduring structures of caste hierarchy, patriarchal authority, and class exploitation that predate panchayati raj institutions and that shape how these institutions function in practice. The caste system, while formally abolished by the constitution, persists through everyday practices of discrimination, segregation, and violence that maintain Dalit subordination (Guru, 2009). Patriarchal structures allocating authority to men while restricting women's autonomy operate through family organization, cultural norms about appropriate feminine behavior, and institutional practices that assume male leadership (Rege, 2006). Class structures concentrating economic resources and productive assets in upper-caste hands while relegating Dalits to wage labor create dependencies that constrain political action (Thorat & Newman, 2010).

These structures are not separate but intersecting and mutually constitutive. Caste hierarchy is gendered, with Dalit women occupying distinctive positions marked by both caste stigma and patriarchal subordination. Patriarchy operates differently across caste groups, with different norms, practices, and forms of control. Class exploitation reflects and reinforces caste hierarchies while being shaped by gender through processes like differential wage rates for women and men. This intersectionality means that SC women's experiences cannot be understood by examining caste, gender, or class in isolation but require attention to how these systems operate together (Crenshaw, 1991).

Feminist political theory has long interrogated how ostensibly gender-neutral political institutions are structured in ways that privilege masculine forms of participation while marginalizing women. Iris Marion Young's analysis of how deliberative democracy requires forms of speech, argumentation, and self-presentation that disadvantage marginalized groups provides valuable tools for understanding why formal inclusion in panchayats may not translate into substantive voice (Young, 2000). Carole Pateman's arguments about the patriarchal foundations of liberal political institutions and the persistence of gendered divisions between public and private spheres illuminate why women's formal political equality coexists with practical subordination (Pateman, 1988).

Subaltern studies scholarship, particularly work examining how colonial and post-colonial institutions simultaneously incorporated and subordinated marginalized groups, offers frameworks for analyzing how reservation policies can enable inclusion while containing its transformative potential (Guha, 1982). The concept of elite capture, where institutions ostensibly designed for popular participation come to serve dominant interests, proves particularly relevant for understanding how panchayats despite formal democratic structures can reproduce existing hierarchies.

Amartya Sen's capabilities approach provides tools for examining substantive freedom rather than merely formal rights. Sen distinguishes between capabilities—the real freedoms people have to achieve valued functionings—and formal rights or opportunities that may remain inaccessible due to various constraints (Sen, 1999). Applied to political representation, this directs attention to whether SC women have genuine capability to function as representatives rather than merely holding formal positions. What resources, social conditions, and institutional arrangements would be necessary to convert formal positions into actual capacity to participate in governance, influence decisions, and represent

constituencies?

This conceptual apparatus guides the empirical analysis while remaining grounded in evidence rather than imposing theoretical frameworks that might obscure realities. The analysis proceeds through examination of specific mechanisms through which structures constrain SC women's political participation, attending to how caste, gender, and class operate together, how formal institutions interact with informal power relations, and how constraint and agency coexist.

Proxy Leadership and Patriarchal Appropriation of Women's Positions

Perhaps no phenomenon captures the gap between formal inclusion and substantive exclusion more dramatically than proxy representation, where women are elected to reserved positions but male relatives exercise actual authority. Among SC women representatives encountered during fieldwork, 55% reported that male family members had been heavily involved in their decision to contest elections, and that these relatives continued to play significant roles in their political work. However, the severity and form of this involvement varied enormously along a continuum from supportive assistance to complete appropriation.

At the extreme end stood cases of near-complete proxy representation where women were largely figureheads. These women rarely attended meetings themselves, with husbands or other male relatives attending instead. When women did attend, they remained silent while male relatives spoke. Documents were signed by women but after male relatives made all substantive decisions. Constituents learned to approach male relatives rather than elected women for grievances or requests. In several observed cases, male relatives openly referred to the positions as "our seat" or used possessive language indicating their sense of ownership despite women formally holding office.

One representative described her situation with striking clarity: "I am sarpanch only on paper. In reality, my husband handles everything. He attends meetings, talks to officials, decides what works to sanction. I sign where he tells me to sign. People in the village know this. When they need something, they come to him, not to me." When asked why this arrangement existed, she explained a combination of her limited education, lack of confidence about governance, her husband's insistence that he needed to guide her, and her sense that this was expected given norms about male authority in families and communities.

The mechanisms producing proxy representation operate at multiple levels. At the household level, patriarchal authority structures grant husbands and other senior male relatives power to control women's behavior. In contexts where women have limited education, have been socialized to defer to male authority, and depend economically on male relatives, overt refusal of male control appears difficult. Some women described fearing conflict, violence, or abandonment if they asserted too much independence. The social acceptability of male control meant that proxy representation attracted limited criticism from communities, officials, or political parties who treated it as unremarkable that men would "help" their wives or daughters- in-law.

At the level of nomination and election, proxy representation often began when male relatives decided to use women as placeholders. When constituencies were reserved for SC women, men who wanted to maintain family control over political positions nominated female relatives. Campaign work was conducted largely by men, with women appearing mainly for formal purposes. After elections,

continuation of male control appeared natural given that men had done the work of campaigning and winning.

However, proxy representation should not be understood as affecting all SC women representatives uniformly. Significant variation existed. Some women who initially depended heavily on male relatives gradually gained autonomy as they learned procedures, built confidence, and developed their own relationships with officials and constituents. Others maintained balanced partnerships where male relatives provided support without dominating decision-making. Still others enjoyed strong autonomy from the beginning, particularly widows who lacked husbands to dominate them, women from families with histories of women's public activity, or women connected to feminist or Dalit organizations that encouraged independence.

Analysis of factors associated with more versus less severe proxy representation revealed patterns. Women with secondary or higher education experienced less proxy control than illiterate or minimally educated women. Women whose families supported gender equality and women's autonomy experienced less control than those from more patriarchal families. Women with prior involvement in collectives like self-help groups experienced less proxy representation than political newcomers. Widows and older women whose adult children supported them experienced less control than young married women with authoritarian husbands and in-laws.

The persistence of proxy representation into women's second and third terms suggested that in some cases it became institutionalized rather than being merely a temporary phase during initial learning. However, others reported that proxy representation declined over time as they gained skills and confidence, suggesting that it is not immutable. This variation indicates that while patriarchal structures create pressures toward proxy representation, outcomes depend on multiple factors including individual personalities, family dynamics, community norms, and access to support systems.

The implications of proxy representation extend beyond individual women to broader questions of democratic legitimacy. When elected representatives are figureheads for unelected power-wielders, the democratic principle of popular sovereignty becomes hollow. When constituencies reserved for marginalized groups become vehicles for dominant group members to maintain control through proxies, reservation's compensatory purpose is subverted. Addressing proxy representation thus requires not merely training women to be more assertive but confronting patriarchal structures that authorize male control over women's lives and political positions.

Institutional Silencing: Caste Discrimination as Structural Exclusion

Beyond household-level patriarchal control, SC women representatives confront systematic exclusion within panchayat institutions through practices of caste-based discrimination that operate to silence their voices and marginalize their participation. This institutional silencing functions not through formal rules that explicitly exclude SC women but through everyday practices, informal norms, and cultural dynamics that systematically privilege upper-caste male voices while dismissing SC women's contributions.

Observation of panchayat meetings revealed multiple mechanisms through which this silencing occurred. Physical seating arrangements often reproduced caste and gender hierarchies, with upper-caste men

occupying prominent positions near the presiding officer while SC women sat at margins or in back rows. In several observed meetings, seating was explicitly segregated with SC members separated from upper-caste members. These spatial arrangements communicated relative status and literally marginalized SC women from the center of deliberations.

Speaking patterns similarly reflected hierarchy. Upper-caste male members spoke frequently, at length, and with confidence, dominating speaking time and shaping agendas. When SC women spoke, they were frequently interrupted by upper-caste members who talked over them or simply continued side conversations ignoring their contributions. In multiple observed meetings, SC women's comments were met with silence as if nothing had been said, with upper- caste members proceeding with prior conversations without acknowledging or responding to what SC women contributed.

The dismissal of SC women's contributions took various forms. When they proposed development works for SC colonies, these proposals were characterized as unnecessary or low priority compared to works in upper-caste areas. When they raised issues of discrimination, they were told not to create tensions or were accused of playing caste politics. When they questioned budget allocations, they were told that their limited education prevented them from understanding technical matters. This systematic dismissal communicated that SC women's perspectives, concerns, and priorities did not merit serious consideration.

Beyond meetings, informal interactions excluded SC women from real decision-making processes. Before and after official meetings, upper-caste members and officials gathered to discuss matters, reach understandings, and coordinate positions. SC women were systematically excluded from these informal spaces where substantive negotiations occurred.

By the time official meetings happened, decisions had already been made informally, with meetings functioning merely to ratify predetermined outcomes. SC women's exclusion from informal deliberations meant they had no influence over actual decisions regardless of their formal participation in meetings.

The intersection of caste and gender discrimination created distinctive dynamics for SC women. Upper-caste male members could draw on both casteist ideologies positioning Dalits as inferior and patriarchal ideologies positioning women as lacking political capacity to justify ignoring SC women. As one representative explained, "They dismiss me twice—once for being a woman, again for being Dalit. They say women do not understand governance and Dalits have no knowledge. When both come together, they think I have nothing valuable to contribute."

Officials' behavior reinforced these hierarchies. Upper-caste members were addressed respectfully, their concerns taken seriously, and their requests processed promptly. SC women representatives were treated dismissively, addressed using caste names or derogatory terms, kept waiting for meetings, and had their requests delayed or denied. The message communicated through such differential treatment was clear: despite formal equality, actual respect and responsiveness corresponded to social hierarchies.

This institutional silencing has profound consequences. When representatives cannot voice constituents' concerns, cannot influence priorities, and cannot shape decisions, they cannot fulfill representative functions regardless of formal positions. When only upper-caste male perspectives shape governance

while SC women's voices are systematically excluded, outcomes inevitably reflect and reinforce existing inequalities rather than challenging them.

However, some SC women found ways to assert voice despite institutional silencing. Persistence across multiple meetings sometimes overcame initial dismissals. Building alliances with sympathetic members occasionally created openings. Using formal procedures like written proposals sometimes forced acknowledgment. Mobilizing constituent support occasionally created pressure for responsiveness. These strategies had mixed success, but they revealed that structural exclusion, while powerful, was not absolute.

Economic Vulnerability and the Impossible Choice

The economic marginalization of SC communities creates distinctive constraints on SC women's political participation through forcing impossible choices between earning livelihoods necessary for survival and attending to political responsibilities. Unlike middle- class representatives for whom political participation might involve opportunity costs, for SC women from severely disadvantaged households, time spent on panchayat work directly threatens household food security.

Among SC women representatives in this study, 91% came from households classified as disadvantaged, with 43% severely disadvantaged. The severely disadvantaged category comprised households dependent on daily wage labor with no land ownership, living in inadequate housing, and experiencing periodic food insecurity. For women from such households, every day of work missed meant wages lost that families needed for basic consumption. The economic calculus was stark: attending a panchayat meeting meant sacrificing one day's wages; traveling to district headquarters for administrative work might mean losing three days' wages; attending a week-long training program meant a week without income during which households struggled.

Representatives described this economic pressure in vivid terms. One explained: "When there is a meeting, I must decide: will my family eat today or will I attend the meeting? Often I must choose food. The panchayat work does not put rice in our cooking pots." Another described borrowing money to attend a mandatory training program, then working extra hours after returning to repay the loan. These choices made under conditions of scarcity fundamentally constrain political participation in ways that middle-class observers may struggle to comprehend.

The inadequate compensation provided to panchayat representatives exacerbated this problem. Honorariums of a few hundred rupees per month bore no relationship to the time demanded or income forgone. For women earning Rs. 200-250 per day when wage labor was available, losing even two days per month to panchayat work meant sacrificing Rs. 400-500—more than typical monthly honorariums. The message implicit in such inadequate compensation was that political work by poor women deserved minimal recognition or reward.

Beyond direct wage loss, political participation incurred various informal expenses that strained limited budgets. Transportation to meetings and offices, mobile phone charges for communication, modest refreshments when constituents visited homes, appropriate clothing for official functions—these costs appeared minimal to better-off individuals but represented real burdens for households surviving on uncertain wages. Several representatives reported borrowing money to meet these expenses or

depending on support from better-off relatives, creating dependencies and obligations.

The intersection of economic vulnerability with gender created particular pressures. Women bore primary responsibility for household work, care for children and elderly, and food preparation alongside wage labor. Adding political responsibilities to these existing demands meant extreme time poverty. Representatives described waking before dawn to complete household tasks, working all day in fields or at other labor, then attending meetings in evenings, leaving minimal time for rest. The physical and mental toll of this chronic overwork manifested in stress, exhaustion, and health problems that women could rarely afford to address through healthcare.

Economic dependence on male relatives compounded these pressures. When women depended on husbands or other male relatives for household support, they faced power imbalances in negotiations about time allocation. Male relatives could demand that women prioritize wage labor or household work over political participation, using economic control to limit autonomy. While some male relatives supported women's political work, others used economic leverage to constrain participation or to assert control over decision-making.

Comparisons between economically disadvantaged and relatively better-off representatives revealed stark contrasts. The 9% of representatives classified as relatively better-off—primarily from households with government employment providing stable salaries—described far fewer economic pressures. They could attend meetings without worrying about lost wages, could afford transportation costs without hardship, and could participate in multi-day training without household economic crisis. This contrast revealed how class advantages created space for political participation that economic vulnerability foreclosed.

Addressing this economic constraint would require structural interventions including substantial increases in compensation to levels approximating opportunity costs, economic support mechanisms like transportation allowances and childcare subsidies, and ultimately transformations in SC communities' economic circumstances through asset redistribution, employment generation, and social security that reduced vulnerability to income shocks. Technical solutions like training programs leave economic structures untouched while expecting poor women to somehow manage impossible choices.

Social Control and the Policing of SC Women's Autonomy

Beyond individual households and formal institutions, broader community mechanisms of social control operate to contain SC women's political autonomy and to police behavior that threatens existing hierarchies. These social control mechanisms work through surveillance, gossip, reputation damage, and various forms of punishment to discourage SC women from asserting themselves too forcefully or challenging upper-caste authority.

Upper-caste communities exercise considerable power over SC communities through economic dependencies, social networks, and capacity for violence. SC families dependent on upper-caste landowners for employment, on upper-caste moneylenders for credit, or on upper- caste storekeepers for goods cannot easily antagonize those on whom their survival depends. When SC women representatives challenge discrimination, advocate too forcefully for SC community interests, or otherwise assert

themselves in ways upper-caste members find threatening, their families may face economic retaliation through denial of employment, withdrawal of credit, or social ostracism.

Several representatives described experiencing such retaliation. One who successfully pressured authorities to provide drinking water connections to SC households found that her husband lost his regular employment with the dominant landowner who opposed the work. Another who complained about discrimination in panchayat meetings found herself and her family subjected to social boycott, with upper-caste shopkeepers refusing to serve them. These experiences communicated that there were costs to assertiveness, that SC women's political positions did not protect them or their families from retaliation, and that prudence counseled against excessive challenge to power.

Gossip and reputation damage constituted another mechanism of social control. SC women who asserted themselves politically, who traveled frequently for meetings or training, or who interacted extensively with male officials faced rumors questioning their character and sexual morality. In patriarchal communities where women's reputation centered on sexual propriety, such rumors carried power to damage social standing and family honor. Several representatives described being subjected to malicious gossip characterizing them as sexually immoral based on their political activities. While some dismissed such gossip as attempts to intimidate them, others found it psychologically damaging and socially constraining.

Threats and violence represented extreme forms of social control. While physical violence against SC women representatives appeared relatively rare in this study, several reported receiving threats warning them against challenging discrimination or asserting themselves too forcefully. The knowledge that violence remained a possibility, combined with histories of caste violence against Dalits who transgressed boundaries, created atmospheres of fear that constrained action even when explicit threats were absent. Some representatives described feeling constantly vigilant about not provoking reactions that might lead to violence against themselves or families.

Social control operated not only through upper-caste communities but also within SC communities and families through patriarchal norms policing women's behavior. Community members and relatives questioned women representatives' mobility, criticized them for spending time on political work rather than household responsibilities, spread gossip questioning their character, and pressured them to behave in appropriately modest and deferential ways. While some SC community members supported women representatives' political participation, others reinforced patriarchal restrictions reflecting complex gender politics within marginalized communities.

The intersection of caste and gender meant that SC women faced particular scrutiny and more severe social sanctions than either upper-caste women or SC men for political assertiveness. Upper-caste women who engaged in political activity faced patriarchal restrictions but escaped caste stigma. SC men who engaged politically faced caste discrimination but not gender-based restrictions on mobility and interaction. SC women navigated both forms of policing simultaneously, creating distinctive constraints.

However, social control mechanisms proved not entirely effective in preventing SC women's political participation and assertion. Many representatives persisted despite gossip, threats, and retaliation, drawing on various sources of resilience including commitment to community service, determination to prove skeptics wrong, support from sympathetic allies, and simple stubbornness. Some found that

assertions initially met with retaliation gradually became more accepted as communities adjusted to seeing women in political roles. Social control thus constrained but did not entirely prevent agency and resistance.

Theoretical Synthesis: Structures, Intersections, and the Limits of Formal Inclusion

The empirical evidence examined above reveals how multiple structures of power—patriarchal control, caste hierarchy, economic exploitation, and social surveillance—operate together to constrain SC women's political participation. These structures are not separate but interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Patriarchal control within households is facilitated by women's economic dependence, which reflects both gender wage gaps and caste-based economic marginalization. Caste discrimination within panchayats draws on patriarchal assumptions about women's incapacity to justify excluding SC women. Economic vulnerability creates dependencies that enable social control by dominant castes. Each structure reinforces and is reinforced by others, creating a system more resistant to change than if these were isolated problems amenable to technical fixes.

The intersectional character of SC women's marginalization means that interventions focusing on single dimensions miss crucial dynamics. Training programs addressing women's knowledge gaps cannot overcome caste discrimination that dismisses educated and uneducated SC women alike. Policies targeting patriarchal control cannot eliminate economic pressures forcing impossible choices. Legal prohibitions on discrimination cannot prevent subtle forms of exclusion through informal practices. Comprehensive transformation requires addressing the interconnected nature of these structures rather than treating symptoms in isolation.

However, the analysis should not be read as structural determinism denying possibility for agency or change. The variations observed—between representatives who exercised more versus less autonomy, between contexts where discrimination was more versus less severe, between periods when participation increased versus remained stagnant—indicate that structures constrain rather than completely determine outcomes. Individual agency, organizational support, institutional reforms, and social movement mobilization can create openings within and challenges to constraining structures.

Yet neither should agency be romanticized. The extraordinary determination and effort required for SC women to participate meaningfully despite structural constraints places burdens on them that privileged representatives never face. That some SC women succeed despite obstacles should not lead to conclusions that therefore obstacles do not matter or that determination alone suffices. The question is not merely whether some individuals can overcome structural constraints through heroic effort, but whether democratic institutions should require such heroism as the price of participation, or whether justice demands transforming structures so that marginalized groups can participate without extraordinary burdens.

The findings illuminate tensions between formal equality and substantive inequality that liberal democratic theory often obscures. Constitutional equality before the law and formal reservation of political positions create appearance of inclusion while leaving power structures substantially intact. SC women are included within democratic institutions as elected representatives, yet structural constraints prevent them from exercising authority those positions nominally grant. This simultaneous

inclusion and exclusion reveals limits of formal institutional reform divorced from broader challenges to social hierarchies.

The analysis also reveals how dominant groups accommodate formal inclusion of marginalized communities in ways that neutralize its transformative potential. Through proxy representation, institutional silencing, economic vulnerability, and social control, the formal presence of SC women in panchayats is contained and prevented from translating into genuine power. This accommodation allows dominant groups to claim democratic legitimacy through inclusion while maintaining substantive control over governance. Understanding this dynamic is crucial for assessing limitations of reservation policies and for identifying what additional changes are necessary.

Toward Structural Transformation: Implications and Directions

The structural constraints documented in this analysis suggest that closing the gap between reservation and representation requires interventions targeting power structures themselves rather than merely improving implementation of existing policies. While training programs, awareness campaigns, and capacity building have roles to play, they remain insufficient if structural foundations of exclusion remain unaddressed.

Challenging proxy representation requires confronting patriarchal structures authorizing male control over women's lives. Legal prohibitions are necessary but insufficient without cultural change that questions male authority within families and without economic changes that reduce women's dependence on male relatives for survival. Supporting women's collectives that provide solidarity and alternative sources of authority, ensuring economic independence through adequate compensation and social security, and creating accountability mechanisms that penalize proxy representation can contribute, but ultimately transformation requires broader struggles against patriarchy within families, communities, and institutions.

Addressing institutional silencing requires both formal rules prohibiting discrimination and cultural changes that challenge caste ideologies. Mandatory sensitization training for all panchayat members might help but cannot eliminate prejudices rooted in lifelong socialization. Stronger enforcement of anti-discrimination laws with swift action against discriminatory behavior could create deterrent effects. Monitoring of panchayat proceedings to identify and address patterns of exclusion could increase accountability. However, ultimately addressing institutional silencing requires broader challenges to caste hierarchy itself through social movements, educational transformation, and the kind of persistent political struggle that has historically driven social change in India.

Reducing economic vulnerability requires structural economic changes including land reform, guaranteed employment at living wages, and social security systems that reduce poor households' vulnerability to income shocks. Within panchayati raj, substantially increased compensation recognizing political work as legitimate labor deserving fair payment would reduce economic pressures. Supporting economic collectives like cooperatives that might provide more stable livelihoods could help. But ultimately, addressing economic constraints on political participation requires broader struggles for economic justice that extend far beyond electoral politics.

Challenging social control mechanisms requires both legal protections against retaliation and cultural

transformation that questions dominant groups' assumed authority to police subordinate groups. Activist organizations documenting and challenging caste violence, feminist movements asserting women's rights to public participation, and Dalit movements collectively organizing to defend against retaliation all contribute to creating contexts where social control becomes less effective. However, this requires sustained organizing and the kind of solidarity that can only emerge through long-term political struggle.

Conclusion

The structural constraints examined in this article reveal that the promise of political inclusion through reservation remains substantially unrealized for many SC women panchayat representatives. While formal positions have been achieved, the capacity to exercise authority remains systematically denied through intersecting mechanisms of patriarchal control, caste discrimination, economic vulnerability, and social surveillance. These constraints operate not as bugs in an otherwise functional system but as features reflecting fundamental tensions between democratic institutions and persisting hierarchies of caste and patriarchy.

Understanding these structural constraints clarifies that achieving meaningful representation for SC women requires not merely better implementation of existing policies but transformation of power structures themselves. This transformation will not occur spontaneously through passage of time or through technical interventions. Rather, it requires sustained political struggle by SC women themselves, by feminist and Dalit movements, and by all committed to genuine democratic inclusion. The gap between reservation and representation captures broader contradictions of Indian democracy: between constitutional promises and social realities, between formal equality and structural inequality, between inclusion and continued marginalization. Closing this gap remains among the most important unfinished tasks of Indian democratic development.

References

1. Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, *43*(6), 1241-1299.
2. Giddens, A. (1984). *The constitution of society: Outline of the theory of structuration*. University of California Press.
3. Guha, R. (1982). *Subaltern studies: Writings on South Asian history and society* (Vol. 1). Oxford University Press.
4. Guru, G. (2009). *Humiliation: Claims and context*. Oxford University Press. Pateman, C. (1988). *The sexual contract*. Stanford University Press.
5. Rege, S. (2006). *Writing caste/writing gender: Narrating Dalit women's testimonios*. Zubaan. Sen, A. (1999). *Development as freedom*. Oxford University Press.
6. Thorat, S., & Newman, K. S. (Eds.). (2010). *Blocked by caste: Economic discrimination in modern India*. Oxford University Press.
7. Young, I. M. (2000). *Inclusion and democracy*. Oxford University Press.