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Family Support Structures and Social Capital: A Study of the Household Background of Elected Women in Chamba

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Abstract

This study examines the role of family support structures and social capital in shaping the political participation and leadership experiences of elected women representatives in Chamba's Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). It focuses on how household background, family relationships, socio-economic conditions, and community networks influence women's ability to enter, participate in, and exercise authority within grassroots governance. The study adopts a qualitative and empirical approach, drawing upon semi-structured interviews, field observations, focus group discussions, and localized case studies of elected women representatives. Particular attention is given to the nature of emotional, financial, logistical, and institutional support received from husbands, parents, children, and other household members. The study also examines how kinship relations, community networks, local leadership, and access to administrative actors constitute forms of social capital that can either facilitate or constrain women's political agency. The findings indicate that supportive households can enable women to attend Panchayat meetings, engage with officials, manage public responsibilities, and develop confidence in decision-making. Conversely, domestic responsibilities, patriarchal expectations, and excessive family control can restrict their autonomy. The study argues that family support and social capital are crucial mediating factors between women's formal political representation and substantive grassroots leadership, highlighting the need for stronger institutional and community-based support mechanisms.

Introduction

Women's participation in grassroots governance has emerged as an important dimension of democratic decentralisation and political empowerment in India. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 institutionalised Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and provided constitutional reservation for women in local self-government. Himachal Pradesh subsequently



strengthened women's representation by providing 50 percent reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions, thereby creating greater opportunities for women to enter formal political institutions and participate in local decision-making (Government of India, 1992; Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2024). The Himachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act, 1994, as amended, provides for one-half of the seats to be filled by direct election in every Gram Panchayat to be reserved for women (Government of Himachal Pradesh, 1994).

The increasing presence of women in Panchayati Raj leadership raises an important question: to what extent is women's formal political representation supported by their household and social environment? Political leadership does not occur independently of family relationships. In rural societies, household members can influence women's political participation by providing emotional support, financial resources, mobility, childcare, domestic assistance, political contacts, and encouragement. Conversely, patriarchal expectations, unequal distribution of domestic responsibilities, and dependence on male family members may constrain women's ability to participate independently in public affairs. Thus, family support can operate simultaneously as a facilitating resource and a potential mechanism of control (Chhibber, 2002).

Chamba district provides an important context for examining this relationship because its mountainous geography, dispersed settlements, close-knit communities, and strong kinship networks make household and community relationships particularly significant in everyday governance. The reported distribution of Pradhan positions demonstrates a substantial presence of women across the district. In Chamba, there are 47 Pradhan positions, of which 21 are held by men and 26 by women. In Tissa, 23 positions are held by men and 30 by women, while in Bhatiyat, 33 are held by men and 38 by women. In Mehla, women hold 30 positions compared with 22 held by men, whereas Salooni records an equal distribution of 23 male and 23 female Pradhans. These figures demonstrate that women constitute a substantial proportion of grassroots political leadership in all five areas and, in four of them, exceed the number of male Pradhans.

The numerical strength of women in these institutions, however, should not be interpreted automatically as evidence of substantive empowerment. Political participation is embedded within household and community structures that influence access to information, resources, mobility, and social legitimacy. Studies of women's political participation have shown that household conditions and relationships can affect women's ability to enter public life and exercise political agency (Chhibber, 2002). Similarly, the concept of social capital highlights the importance of networks, trust, reciprocity, and relationships in facilitating access to social and institutional resources (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). For elected women representatives, family and kinship networks may provide valuable political support, while wider community networks can facilitate interaction with voters, local leaders, officials, and development institutions.

Family support is therefore particularly relevant to understanding the household background of elected women in Chamba. A supportive household may allow an elected woman to attend Panchayat meetings, travel for official work, interact with government officials, participate in Gram Sabha activities, and devote time to resolving community problems. The Ministry of Panchayati Raj has also recognised the importance of strengthening the capacity and independent functioning of elected women representatives and has addressed concerns surrounding women's leadership and proxy participation (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2008, 2024). At the same time, social capital may have a gendered character. Networks dominated by men can provide women with access to political resources but may also make their participation dependent upon husbands, male relatives, or influential community members. The distinction between support and control is therefore central to the present study. Family involvement may strengthen women's political participation when it enables them to perform their responsibilities; however, it may weaken leadership autonomy when family members make decisions on their behalf.

Against this background, the present study examines family support structures and social

capital among elected women in Chamba. It focuses on household composition, family support, domestic responsibilities, kinship relations, community networks, political connections, and access to institutional resources. The study seeks to determine whether household and social networks function primarily as resources that strengthen women's political agency or as structures that reproduce dependence and patriarchal control. By connecting household background, family support, social capital, and political participation, the study seeks to move beyond numerical representation and examine the social foundations of effective and autonomous women's leadership in Chamba's Panchayati Raj Institutions.

Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative research approach to examine the household background, family support, social relationships, and political experiences of elected women representatives in Chamba district. The study focuses on all female Pradhans of the selected Panchayats, thereby providing direct insights into the experiences of women holding leadership positions at the grassroots level. The respondents were selected purposively because they had direct experience of Panchayati Raj administration and could provide relevant information about family support, household responsibilities, community relations, political participation, and decision-making. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the female Pradhans. An interview schedule was prepared around major themes such as family structure, educational and socio-economic background, support received from husbands and other family members, household responsibilities, political networks, interaction with Panchayat members and officials, and freedom in taking administrative decisions. The semi-structured format allowed the researcher to ask common questions to all respondents while also permitting additional questions whenever detailed information or clarification was required.

The interviews were conducted personally in a comfortable setting and the responses were recorded through detailed notes. The collected information was organized thematically and interpreted through qualitative analysis. Confidentiality and informed consent were maintained throughout the research process. This methodology helped capture the lived experiences and perceptions of elected women Pradhans regarding family support and their role in local governance.

Socio-Economic Profiles and Household Dynamics

The socio-economic profile of elected women Pradhans provides an important foundation for understanding the nature and extent of their participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). Political representation at the grassroots level does not operate independently of women's social and economic circumstances. Their educational background, occupation, household income, family structure, marital status, domestic responsibilities, mobility, and access to family and community networks collectively shape their capacity to enter local politics and exercise authority after election. The semi-structured interviews conducted with the selected women Pradhans in Chamba indicate that political participation is embedded within the everyday realities of household life. Their experiences demonstrate that electoral representation alone cannot fully capture the extent of women's political empowerment. Rather, the ability to perform the role of Pradhan effectively depends considerably upon the availability of household resources, family cooperation, and social support. (Agnihotri & Singh, 2014; Devi & Kumar, 2023)

The interviews reveal that most elected women representatives continue to perform substantial domestic responsibilities alongside their public and political duties. Their role as Pradhan is therefore generally added to, rather than substituted for, their existing responsibilities as wives, mothers, daughters-in-law, caregivers, agricultural workers, and household managers. Cooking, cleaning, childcare, care of elderly family members, agricultural activities, livestock



management, and other routine household tasks remain important components of their everyday lives. Consequently, the political participation of these women involves the negotiation of two interconnected spheres—the private sphere of household responsibilities and the public sphere of Panchayat governance. The amount of time available for attending meetings, visiting development sites, interacting with government officials, addressing local grievances, and participating in community programmes is influenced by how household responsibilities are distributed.

Family structure consequently emerges as a significant factor in determining the practical possibilities of women's political participation. Women living in households where husbands, parents, children, or other relatives share domestic responsibilities appear to have greater flexibility in undertaking Panchayat-related activities. Assistance with childcare, household work, agricultural responsibilities, or transportation can create additional time and mobility for elected representatives. Such support is particularly important in rural areas of Chamba, where settlements are geographically dispersed and travel to Panchayat offices, government departments, development sites, and other villages may require considerable time and effort. Family members can therefore indirectly facilitate political participation by reducing the domestic and logistical burden placed upon women. (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2008).

The nature of family support, however, is not uniform. The interviews suggest that family involvement can operate simultaneously as an enabling and constraining mechanism. On the one hand, husbands and other relatives may encourage women to contest elections, assist them in understanding administrative procedures, accompany them to official meetings, help manage household responsibilities, or provide financial and logistical assistance. Such support can increase women's confidence and enable them to participate more actively in Panchayat affairs. On the other hand, excessive family involvement may reduce women's independent political agency. In some circumstances, family members may influence decisions, interact with officials on behalf of the elected woman, or determine which political and developmental issues should receive priority. Thus, the distinction between family support and family control becomes crucial for understanding substantive political empowerment.

Education also represents an important component of the socio-economic profile of elected women Pradhans. Educational attainment can influence women's ability to understand government schemes, read official documents, communicate with administrative officials, maintain records, and participate confidently in Panchayat discussions. However, the interviews suggest that formal education alone does not determine political effectiveness. Women with limited formal education may compensate through practical experience, community knowledge, family networks, and interaction with Panchayat officials and other local actors. Political competence can therefore develop through both formal educational qualifications and experiential learning. This finding reinforces the need to understand women's leadership through a broader conception of capability rather than treating educational qualification as the sole indicator of political capacity.

Occupational and economic conditions also shape women's participation. Women belonging to relatively economically stable households may have greater access to mobile phones, transportation, communication facilities, and other resources necessary for political engagement. Economic security can also reduce the immediate pressure to prioritise household income-generating activities over Panchayat responsibilities. Conversely, women who are heavily involved in agriculture, wage labour, livestock-related activities, or other forms of household economic production may experience greater difficulty in allocating time to public responsibilities. In such cases, participation in Panchayat governance may involve significant opportunity costs because attending meetings or visiting development sites can require them to temporarily withdraw from productive or domestic activities.

Household economic conditions are particularly important in understanding mobility and access to political networks. Effective grassroots leadership requires regular interaction with Block Development Offices, district-level officials, elected representatives, community organi-

sations, and local residents. Women with access to family vehicles, communication facilities, or supportive relatives may find it comparatively easier to maintain these networks. Women with fewer household resources may experience greater dependence on others for transportation and administrative assistance. Thus, socio-economic status indirectly influences not only women's mobility but also their access to information, institutional networks, and opportunities for political learning.

The concept of social capital is particularly useful in interpreting these household dynamics. Family and kinship networks can provide information, contacts, legitimacy, emotional encouragement, and practical assistance. A woman whose family has established relationships within the community or with local political and administrative actors may enter public life with an existing network of support. Such networks can facilitate access to officials, information about government programmes, and community cooperation. However, social capital can also reproduce existing power structures. If political networks remain dominated by male relatives, women may possess access to political resources without necessarily exercising independent authority over them.

The interviews therefore indicate that household dynamics constitute an important intermediary between formal political representation and substantive political participation. The election of a woman as Pradhan provides her with a formal institutional position, but the extent to which she can exercise that position depends on the resources and relationships available within her household and community. Family members may function as supporters, facilitators, political intermediaries, or gatekeepers, depending upon the circumstances.

Overall, the socio-economic profiles of the women Pradhans demonstrate that grassroots political empowerment is a multidimensional process. Electoral representation provides women with institutional legitimacy, but meaningful leadership requires time, mobility, confidence, information, economic resources, and supportive social networks. The household remains a critical arena in which these resources are either made available or restricted. The evidence from Chamba therefore suggests that women's political empowerment cannot be assessed merely by counting the number of women occupying Panchayat positions. It must also consider who supports them, how domestic responsibilities are distributed, who controls political decisions, and whether women are able to convert formal representation into independent political agency. Family support and social capital consequently emerge as crucial mediating factors in transforming women's presence in Panchayati Raj Institutions into substantive grassroots leadership.

Kinship Networks, Political Lineage, and Social Capital

Kinship networks constitute an important dimension of political participation and leadership in rural society. In the context of Chamba's Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), the political participation of elected women Pradhans cannot be understood exclusively as an individual decision to enter electoral politics. The semi-structured interviews conducted with elected women indicate that their political trajectories are frequently embedded within existing family, kinship, neighbourhood, and community relationships. These networks influence the decision to contest elections, mobilisation of electoral support, access to political information, interaction with community members, and engagement with local administrative institutions. Kinship therefore functions not merely as a private social relationship but also as an important resource within the political environment of rural governance.

The primary interviews indicate that family and kinship relationships can provide women with a degree of social recognition and political legitimacy before and after their election. In rural communities, where interpersonal relationships and familiarity often play an important role in political mobilisation, an individual's family reputation can influence how community members perceive her candidature. Women belonging to families with established relationships within the village may find it comparatively easier to approach voters, participate in community



discussions, and mobilise support. Such relationships can also provide access to information about local issues, government programmes, Panchayat procedures, and community expectations. Consequently, kinship networks may reduce some of the social barriers associated with women's entry into grassroots political institutions.

The interviews further indicate that political participation is sometimes influenced by the political or community background of the family. Women belonging to families with previous involvement in Panchayat politics, local organisations, cooperative activities, or community leadership may possess greater familiarity with electoral processes and local political practices. Such women may have prior exposure to election campaigns, public meetings, negotiations with community members, government officials, and discussions concerning local development. Family members with political experience can provide practical guidance regarding nomination procedures, campaigning strategies, Panchayat meetings, government schemes, and administrative processes. In this respect, political lineage may provide an informal form of political education that is not necessarily available to first-time entrants into local politics.

Political lineage, however, needs to be understood critically. A politically influential family can facilitate a woman's political entry without necessarily ensuring her independent political agency. The primary evidence suggests that family members may sometimes continue to influence political decisions even after a woman is formally elected. Guidance and assistance can gradually become political intervention when relatives determine priorities, communicate with officials on her behalf, influence decisions concerning development projects, or represent her in public forums. Consequently, the presence of political lineage may produce two contrasting outcomes: it can enable political entry and capacity-building, while simultaneously creating conditions for continued dependence on established family authority.

The concept of social capital provides a useful theoretical framework for interpreting these relationships. Bourdieu (1986) conceptualised social capital in terms of resources accessible through durable networks and relationships, while Coleman (1988) emphasised the role of social relations in facilitating action. Putnam (2000), meanwhile, highlighted networks, trust, and norms of reciprocity as important components of social capital. Applied to the present study, social capital refers to the resources that elected women can access through relationships with family members, relatives, neighbours, community elders, Self-Help Groups (SHGs), local leaders, Panchayat members, and administrative actors.

The primary interviews suggest that these networks can provide several practical resources. First, they can provide information about government schemes, Panchayat programmes, meetings, development projects, and administrative procedures. Second, networks can provide social support, particularly when women face difficulties in dealing with unfamiliar institutional processes. Third, they can provide political mobilisation, enabling women to communicate with community members and identify local concerns. Fourth, networks may provide institutional access, particularly where established relationships exist between family members and local officials. Finally, social networks can contribute to women's confidence and political learning by increasing their opportunities to participate in public discussions.

However, social capital is not automatically empowering. The nature and composition of a woman's network are important. A network dominated by male relatives may provide access to political resources while simultaneously limiting women's autonomy. Conversely, broader and more diverse networks involving women's groups, SHGs, community organisations, neighbours, elected representatives, and administrative officials may provide women with greater opportunities to develop independent political capabilities. The distinction between bonding and bridging social capital is particularly relevant here. Strong family and kinship ties may provide emotional and material support, while connections extending beyond the immediate family can provide access to new information, institutions, and political opportunities.

The interviews indicate that social capital is not a static resource but develops through con-

tinuous interaction with the community. Women who regularly attend Gram Sabha meetings, participate in village-level programmes, interact with residents, visit development sites, and communicate with government officials have greater opportunities to expand their social networks. Repeated interaction can gradually strengthen their familiarity with public institutions and increase their confidence in expressing opinions. Political leadership, therefore, can itself become a mechanism through which women accumulate social capital. Election to the position of Pradhan may initially provide formal authority, but sustained engagement with the community can transform this institutional position into wider social recognition.

Community participation is particularly important in the context of rural Chamba. Geographical dispersion, difficult terrain, and dependence on interpersonal relationships make local networks significant for the functioning of grassroots governance. A Pradhan requires cooperation from residents, Panchayat members, officials, community organisations, and other local actors to identify problems and implement development initiatives. Women who possess broader community connections may therefore be better positioned to identify local priorities and communicate them to the appropriate institutions. At the same time, kinship networks can create social obligations and expectations. Women may be expected to remain loyal to particular families, groups, or community interests. Such expectations can affect their political choices and may sometimes generate tension between personal judgement and collective expectations. A woman Pradhan may have to negotiate between the interests of her household, kinship group, electoral supporters, and the broader Panchayat community. Political leadership therefore involves not merely the utilisation of social networks but also the ability to manage competing expectations.

An important finding emerging from the primary interviews is that kinship support and political autonomy should not be treated as mutually exclusive. Women can utilise family connections while gradually developing independent networks. The crucial question is whether the network becomes a resource controlled by the woman herself or remains controlled by other family members. Where women are able to independently communicate with officials, participate in meetings, mobilise community support, and make decisions, kinship networks appear to function as enabling social capital. Where family members make decisions or act on behalf of the elected representative, the same network may become a mechanism of political dependency.

Thus, the evidence from Chamba suggests that political lineage facilitates political entry, while independent social capital strengthens political agency. Women who inherit established political connections may initially possess an advantage, but substantive leadership requires them to extend their networks beyond the family and develop direct relationships with community members and institutions. This distinction is important because formal political representation does not automatically translate into autonomous decision-making. Overall, the primary evidence demonstrates that kinship networks, political lineage, and social capital play a complex and multidimensional role in the political experiences of elected women Pradhans. Family and kinship connections can provide recognition, information, legitimacy, financial and logistical support, and access to political resources. However, the same networks can also produce dependency, political control, and expectations of conformity. The effectiveness of these networks therefore depends upon women's ability to convert inherited or family-based relationships into independent political resources. The findings suggest that meaningful grassroots leadership emerges when elected women are able to retain the supportive dimensions of kinship while expanding their own networks and exercising autonomy in political decision-making. In this sense, social capital becomes most empowering when it moves beyond family dependence towards broader, diverse, and independently controlled networks of political and community engagement.

Finding of the Study

The findings of the study, based on semi-structured interviews with all female Pradhans of



the selected Panchayats, reveal that family background, household support, kinship networks, and social capital play an important role in shaping women's political participation and leadership. The respondents generally viewed family support as an important enabling factor, particularly in managing domestic responsibilities while attending Panchayat meetings, interacting with officials, and participating in community activities. The findings also indicate that husbands and other family members can provide practical assistance, political guidance, and encouragement, although excessive family involvement may sometimes affect women's independent decision-making. This dual role of family support is important because national evidence has similarly found that husbands and family members often motivate women to enter Panchayat politics, while participation can subsequently increase women's confidence, decision-making ability, and respect within the household and community. The study further finds that kinship and community networks provide valuable social capital. Relationships with relatives, neighbours, community elders, Panchayat members, local leaders, and government officials help women access information, mobilise community support, and address local development concerns. Women with stronger social connections appear better placed to communicate their concerns and participate actively in Panchayat affairs. Political lineage also provides familiarity with local politics and administrative processes; however, it does not necessarily ensure autonomous leadership. The findings therefore suggest that networks become empowering when women themselves are able to use them for political and developmental purposes.

Overall, the study demonstrates that formal political representation alone does not guarantee substantive empowerment. The effectiveness of female Pradhans depends on their ability to balance household responsibilities, utilise family and community support, develop independent social networks, and exercise authority in decision-making. The results support the broader objective of Panchayati Raj reforms: transforming women's numerical representation into meaningful participation in grassroots governance.

Conclusion

The study concludes that the political participation of women Pradhans in Chamba is shaped not only by constitutional reservation but also by the social and household environment in which they exercise leadership. The findings demonstrate that family support, kinship networks, political lineage, and social capital are important resources for women entering and performing political roles. Support from husbands, family members, and relatives can help women manage domestic responsibilities, access political information, and develop confidence in Panchayat affairs. At the same time, excessive family involvement may reduce their autonomy and create possibilities of proxy decision-making. This reflects the continuing tension between formal political representation and substantive political empowerment.

The study further concludes that women's social networks can strengthen their capacity to communicate with communities, mobilise support, and participate in local development. Social capital becomes particularly valuable when women are able to build networks beyond their immediate families and independently use these relationships for governance. Thus, the empowerment of female Pradhans should be understood as a gradual process in which representation, family support, independent decision-making, and community engagement work together. Strengthening leadership training, administrative knowledge, independent mobility, and women-centred support networks can further transform numerical representation into meaningful and autonomous grassroots leadership.

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