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Resource and Support Centre
for Development (RSCD)

FROM MARGINS TO LEADERSHIP

Women, Power and the Future of Democratic
Representation in India



Event Report

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About ALIGN

ALIGN – Advancing Learning and Innovation on Gender Norms – is a digital platform and programme of work led by ODI Global, London, UK. It supports a global community of researchers, practitioners, and activists committed to gender justice and equality, generating research, practice-based insights, and grant-supported initiatives that seek to deepen understanding of, and challenge, patriarchal gender norms.

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About PDAG

The Policy and Development Advisory Group (PDAG) is a New Delhi-based social impact advisory working at the intersection of public policy, social research, and strategic communications to advance evidence-based, data-driven, and people-centred policymaking. PDAG partners with governments, multilateral institutions, academia, the private sector, and civil society to translate rigorous analysis into policy action at scale.

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About RSCD

The Resource and Support Centre for Development (RSCD) is a Maharashtra-based non-profit organisation established in 1994. It works to strengthen grassroots democracy, women's political participation, and inclusive local governance through community mobilisation, training, policy engagement, and institutional collaboration.

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RSCD

Towards a Vision of People-Centered Governance

Executive Summary

From Margins to Leadership: Women, Power and the Future of Democratic Representation in India was a one-day public dialogue organised by the Policy and Development Advisory Group (PDAG) on 30 March 2026 at IIC Annexe, Lecture Hall 1, Delhi. The event served as the formal launch and dissemination of our study, **From Margins to Leadership: Caste and Gender Dynamics in India's Local Governance**, commissioned under the ALIGN programme led by ODI Global, with research support from the Resource and Support Centre for Development (RSCD).

The event brought together elected women representatives from Jharkhand and Maharashtra, researchers, civil society actors, development practitioners, and policy stakeholders to reflect on the study's findings and their implications for women's political leadership, local governance, and democratic deepening in India. The programme comprised an inaugural address, a formal presentation of a report, a ceremonial report launch, two special addresses, three thematic roundtable sessions, and closing reflections by two speakers.

Discussions across the day reinforced the study's central proposition: that women's political leadership must be understood as a continuous process of learning, negotiation, assertion, and institutional engagement, not as a fixed outcome of electoral success. Across all sessions, a consistent argument emerged – that reservation and formal entry into political office are necessary but insufficient conditions for authority. Authority is built through practice, contested within institutions, and sustained through collective structures, political recognition, and equitable access to resources and networks.

Report Presentation | Dr Ekata Bakshi and Rahul Kumar, PDAG

The study's core findings, drawn from qualitative research in Maharashtra and Jharkhand, were presented through six interconnected arguments: that authority is built through everyday governance practice; that it is institutionally negotiated through interactions with bureaucracy, parties, and local governance systems; that political mobility remains constrained by structural barriers; that caste shapes the nature and unevenness of authority across social locations; that proxy leadership is better understood as a relational and contextual phenomenon rather than a marker of absent agency; and that a "one-term trap" limits women's ability to consolidate political experience into durable leadership.

Special Address | Dr Ranjana Kumari, Director, Centre for Social Research

Dr Kumari situated the discussion within the longer trajectory of the women's movement in India. She argued that while women's numerical presence in Panchayati Raj Institutions has grown substantially, the capacity to execute governance decisions has not yet been matched by the capacity to shape governance structures. She emphasised the need for women to assert political agency rather than wait for it to be conferred, and identified bureaucratic practices that continue to bypass elected women's authority as a structural impediment requiring direct intervention.





Session I: Women's Leadership from the Ground: Authority, Experience, and Everyday Governance

Session I grounded the discussion in the lived experiences of elected women representatives from Jharkhand and Maharashtra. Speakers traced trajectories from entry into office to the gradual consolidation of authority, demonstrating that leadership is forged through sustained engagement with institutions, communities, and political networks. Key themes included: resistance to pressure to withdraw from public roles; the mobilisation of governance mechanisms such as PESA to respond to community concerns; the role of training and collective platforms in strengthening women's capacity to navigate governance systems; and the ways in which proxy relations can both enable and constrain authority depending on context.

Session II: Institutions and the Exercise of Authority: Expanding Women's Substantive Access to Local Governance

Session II examined the institutional, fiscal, and social conditions that determine whether women's formal political presence translates into substantive authority. The discussion addressed gender-responsive budgeting as a measure of institutional commitment rather than a compliance exercise; the care economy and the structural exhaustion that shapes women's political participation; the democratic significance of Panchayats as political institutions rather than administrative delivery mechanisms; the intersecting operations of caste, class, and institutional violence in shaping women's experience of office; and the role of party structures in managing rather than genuinely empowering women. The session concluded with a clear shift in emphasis: from capacity-building to authority-building.



Special Address | Dr Sanjay Kumar, Professor and Former Director, CSDS

Dr Kumar presented empirical evidence on the shift in women's electoral behaviour across India. Women now vote in large numbers, the gender gap in turnout has narrowed significantly, and their participation increasingly extends beyond voting to active campaign engagement.

He located the constraint on legislative representation not in a lack of participation but in party nomination processes and political gatekeeping. His remarks highlighted the gradual normalisation of women's leadership at the local level, including gains in non-reserved seats, while underscoring that this shift has yet to translate proportionately into legislative representation.



Session III: Beyond Representation: Knowledge, Civil Society, and the Wider Ecosystem of Leadership

Session III extended the discussion to the wider ecosystem shaping women's leadership: knowledge systems, funding structures, civil society, and political pathways. Speakers examined why women's experiential knowledge is not recognised within dominant institutional frameworks; why politics is not positioned as a viable career pathway for women; how institutional fragmentation weakens the sustained impact of interventions; and how the absence of clear progression pathways within party structures interrupts women's political trajectories. The session located the problem of authority not in individual capacity but in the systems: political, institutional, and epistemic, that determine whether women's participation is sustained and translated into power.

Key Themes

The distinction between formal representation and substantive authority is the central democratic challenge — not only at the local level but across all levels of governance.

- Authority is produced through everyday practice, not conferred through election.
- Institutional conditions — budgets, planning systems, party structures, bureaucratic responsiveness — determine whether women's presence translates into power.
- Care burdens, financial barriers, and the absence of peer and collective support continue to limit women's sustained political engagement.
- Intersecting inequalities of caste, class, and gender must be recognised within all frameworks of analysis and intervention.
- Progress requires shifting the burden of change from individual women to the institutions within which they operate.

Closing Reflections | Bhim Raskar, Director, RSCD, and Ján Michalko, Research Fellow, Gender, Equality and Social Inclusion, ODI Global

The closing reflections drew the day's discussions together. Raskar emphasised the need to treat elected women representatives as knowledge resources and experts in their own right, identified the structural conditions of women's "invisible confinement," and called for a continuum of support from training through collective organisation to sustained political backing. Michalko highlighted the importance of an intersectional lens in understanding political exclusion and situated the discussion within widening global disparities that bear directly on democratic institutions.



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Introduction

This event report documents the proceedings and key discussions of **From Margins to Leadership: Women, Power and the Future of Democratic Representation in India**, a one-day public dialogue organised by the Policy and Development Advisory Group (PDAG) to formally launch and disseminate the study **From Margins to Leadership: Caste and Gender Dynamics in India's Local Governance**, commissioned under the ALIGN programme led by ODI Global, with research support from the Resource and Support Centre for Development (RSCD). The event brought together grassroots women leaders, researchers, civil society actors, development practitioners, and policy stakeholders to reflect on the study's findings and their wider implications for women's political leadership, local governance, and democratic deepening in India.

The expansion of women's political representation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) through constitutional reservation marks one of the most significant developments in India's democratic transformation. With women now constituting nearly 46 per cent of elected representatives in local government, their presence in public office is no longer exceptional, but firmly embedded within the institutional architecture of Indian democracy. Yet the central question is no longer only one of numerical inclusion. It is whether women's entry into political office is translating into recognised, durable, and substantive authority in practice.

Anchored in qualitative research conducted in Maharashtra and Jharkhand, the study examines how women's political representation in local governance translates, or fails to translate, into substantive authority within the everyday workings of democratic institutions. It shows that women's leadership is not conferred automatically through electoral entry. Rather, it is built gradually through everyday political and administrative practice: attending meetings, negotiating with officials, addressing community demands, navigating bureaucratic procedures, and asserting legitimacy within social and political environments that remain deeply unequal. Women's trajectories in office are shaped not only by gender but by caste hierarchies, class inequalities, kinship structures, patriarchal norms, bureaucratic control, partisan gatekeeping, and the uneven availability of support systems. Authority, in this sense, emerges not as a fixed outcome of representation, but as a negotiated and contingent process. It is also in this context that the familiar language of "proxy representation" becomes inadequate to capture the complexity of women's political lives and the ways in which authority is exercised, mediated, and built through everyday political labour.

The event was conceived against a wider democratic and policy backdrop. At a moment when questions of women's representation have gained renewed national significance, including through the **Constitution (One Hundred and Sixth Amendment) Act, 2023**, and growing policy attention to women's substantive leadership in Panchayats, the convening sought to move beyond celebratory narratives of inclusion and foreground the harder question of power: under what conditions does representation become authority, and what continues to prevent that transition? More broadly, it positioned women's local leadership not merely as a narrow issue of participation, but as central to democratic entrenchment, institutional reform, and the future of representative politics in India.

The convening was intentionally designed not only as **a formal launch of the report, but as a broader public dialogue across sectors**. The structure of the day reflected this purpose: it moved from the report's key arguments and findings, to grounded accounts of women's lived experiences in local governance, to institutional questions around authority and access, and finally to the wider ecosystem of knowledge, civil society, and political leadership within which women's representation is shaped and sustained. The programme on 30 March 2026 proceeded in the following order: an inaugural address by Manuj Pandey, Co-founder and Partner, PDAG; the formal presentation of the study's core findings by the principal researchers; a special address by Dr Ranjana Kumari; Session I; Session II; a special address by Dr Sanjay Kumar; Session III; and closing reflections by two speakers. This sequence reinforced the convening's design as a deliberate effort to connect research, lived experience, and policy debate within a single forum. The event therefore served not only as the formal launch of a research study, but also as a platform for dialogue between research, lived experience, and policy practice. By bringing the report's findings into conversation with grounded perspectives and wider institutional concerns, the convening deepened reflection on how women's political participation in PRIs can move from formal presence to sustained and effective leadership.

Objectives of the Event

The event was organised with the following objectives:

- To formally launch and disseminate *From Margins to Leadership: Caste and Gender Dynamics in India's Local Governance*, a commissioned PDAG study under the ALIGN programme led by ODI Global.
- To examine how and under what conditions women's political representation in Panchayati Raj Institutions translates into substantive authority, with a focus on everyday governance practices, institutional engagement, and lived experience.
- To identify the structural, social, and institutional factors that shape women's leadership trajectories, including caste relations, class inequalities, patriarchy, kinship structures, bureaucratic processes, and political gatekeeping.
- To create a dialogue between elected representatives and stakeholders across governance, research, civil society, and the development sector in order to surface grounded insights on the challenges, strategies, and enabling conditions that shape women's leadership in practice.
- To generate forward-looking policy and institutional reflections on the reforms, support systems, and pathways needed to strengthen women's authority in local governance and enable more durable forms of political participation and mobility.





Inaugural Address:

Manuj Pandey, Co-founder and Partner, Policy and Development Advisory Group

The inaugural session began with an address by **Manuj Pandey**, Co-founder and Partner at the Policy and Development Advisory Group, who set the context for the day's discussions by situating the event within a broader question about women's political participation and authority.

He opened by welcoming participants from across states, including elected women representatives from Jharkhand and Maharashtra, as well as partners and participants joining both in person and online. Reflecting on the theme of the convening, he framed the discussion around the central idea of "From Margins to Leadership," emphasising the need to understand how women move from marginality to roles of authority within political systems.

He noted that while women's representation in Panchayati Raj Institutions has expanded significantly, with nearly **46 per cent of seats now held by women**, **this numerical increase raises a deeper question: whether greater representation has translated into actual participation in decision-making and shifts in power structures.** Despite occupying formal positions, women often continue to face limitations in exercising authority, with questions remaining around the extent to which their voices are heard and their decisions carry weight within governance processes.

Drawing on insights from the study conducted in Jharkhand and Maharashtra, he highlighted the gap between holding office and being recognised as a legitimate political actor. He shared an example of a woman Mukhiya who remarked that while the position was hers, her identity within that role had yet to be fully established. This captures a broader tension between formal designation and substantive authority, where the journey from identity to capability remains uneven and ongoing.

He further illustrated how leadership evolves over time through practice. Referring to experiences from Maharashtra, he noted that women leaders often encounter resistance in the initial stages of their tenure, particularly when implementing decisions. As they engage with governance processes and demonstrate their ability through work, however, perceptions begin to shift — from being evaluated on the basis of identity to being recognised for their performance. This transition reflects a gradual movement toward leadership, rather than an immediate outcome of electoral success.





At the same time, he emphasised that such transitions are neither linear nor automatic.

Authority is continuously negotiated across multiple spaces — within households, communities, bureaucratic systems, and political networks. Leadership is therefore shaped not only by formal position but by the ability to navigate and negotiate these intersecting structures.

He also drew attention to the broader institutional and systemic context within which women's leadership operates. Factors such as **family dynamics, caste relations, bureaucratic processes, and political networks** all influence how authority is exercised. He positioned Panchayati Raj Institutions as critical sites of democratic practice — testing grounds where changes in leadership and governance can emerge from the grassroots and potentially shape higher levels of political representation.

He concluded by reiterating PDAG's commitment to grounding policy discussions in evidence, particularly evidence that emerges from lived realities and grassroots practice. He closed by thanking partner organisations, research collaborators, and participants, and expressed the hope that the discussions would contribute to advancing a more grounded and sustained engagement with questions of women's leadership and local governance.



"When the number of women in politics increases, does that translate into participation or power, or do we only talk about numbers?"



Presentation of Core Findings

The formal presentation of the study's core findings was led by Rahul Kumar, Senior Associate Consultant, Policy and Development Advisory Group (PDAG), and Dr Ekata Bakshi, Associate Director – Research, PDAG, the principal authors of the study. This segment of the event constituted the research presentation proper, not as a conclusive statement but as an opening to a set of questions concerning the relationship between representation and authority in local governance.

Dr Ekata Bakshi began by situating the report within a broader political context marked by increasing centralisation and polarisation at higher levels of governance. Against this backdrop, she argued that local self-government institutions, both rural and urban, continue to function as important sites of democratic contestation and participation. More than two decades after the institutionalisation of reservations, these spaces have enabled historically marginalised groups, particularly women, to enter political life as legitimate actors. However, she emphasised that entry into political office does not resolve the question of power. Rather, it introduces a more complex process through which authority must be negotiated, recognised, and sustained within existing institutional and social structures.



She further clarified that the report does not seek to provide definitive answers, but to provoke a re-examination of widely held assumptions about women's political participation. The central question guiding the study is whether representation has translated into recognition across households, communities, political parties, and bureaucratic systems, and whether this has led to any substantive redistribution of power. The findings suggest a more ambivalent outcome: while women have entered political spaces in large numbers and are actively engaging with governance processes, their authority remains uneven and contested. Women draw upon available resources and strategies to assert their roles, yet their efforts are often constrained by institutional arrangements, social expectations, and unequal access to support systems.

A key conceptual contribution of the presentation lay in its reframing of authority as a negotiated and processual outcome rather than a status conferred by electoral victory. Women representatives do not assume office with ready-made authority; instead, they acquire it gradually through engagement with administrative systems, interaction with officials, and participation in decision-making processes. This process is shaped by differentiated social locations, particularly caste, class, and gender, which structure access to legitimacy, mobility, and institutional space. The presentation, therefore, emphasised that political participation must be understood within an intersectional framework that accounts for these layered inequalities.

The discussion also revisited the concept of proxy leadership, moving away from its conventional treatment as a marker of women's lack of agency. Instead, a proxy was conceptualised as a relational phenomenon operating across multiple sites. The question, as framed in the presentation, is not simply who stands alongside women, but whether such relationships enable or constrain their authority. Male family members, caste networks, and institutional actors may both support and limit women's political roles, making proxy a more complex and context-dependent process than is often assumed. This reframing allows for a more nuanced understanding of how authority is exercised within embedded social and political relations.



Rahul Kumar then presented the core empirical findings of the study, structured around six key arguments. The findings are as follows:

- **Authority is built through practice:** Electoral victory does not automatically translate into power; rather, authority develops through everyday engagement with governance processes, attending meetings, interacting with officials, addressing local issues, and learning how institutions function. Authority, in this sense, is not given but produced through repeated practice.
- **Authority is institutionally negotiated:** Women's ability to function as leaders depends not only on their individual efforts but on the responses of institutional structures, including bureaucracy, political parties, and local governance systems. The critical question, therefore, is not only whether women are elected, but whether these structures allow them to act as decision-makers.
- **Limits of political mobility:** While entry into politics has expanded significantly, it does not necessarily lead to sustained or upward political trajectories. Many women are able to enter office but face constraints in continuing, consolidating, or advancing their roles. The system, as presented, opens the door to participation but does not provide a clear pathway for progression.
- **Role of caste in shaping authority:** Women do not experience political office uniformly; caste position influences the nature of barriers encountered, the forms of support available, and the extent of authority exercised. Leadership, therefore, is not only gendered but also deeply structured by caste relations.
- **Complexity of proxy:** Proxy cannot be reduced to a binary absence of agency. In some cases, male actors may facilitate women's entry and navigation of political systems, while simultaneously constraining their autonomy. Proxy is thus better understood as a relational dynamic shaped by broader social and institutional conditions.
- **One-term trap:** Women often develop confidence and effective leadership skills only after gaining experience in the office. However, institutional arrangements do not always allow this authority to be sustained across electoral cycles. As a result, political experience does not easily translate into long-term leadership, limiting the consolidation of authority.

In concluding the presentation, Rahul Kumar emphasised that the issue is not a lack of capability among women, but the constraints imposed by institutional and structural conditions that prevent authority from developing and enduring. The findings collectively underscore that representation, while necessary, is insufficient on its own. The central challenge lies in transforming the conditions under which authority is recognised, exercised, and sustained.

Dr Ekata Bakshi closed the presentation with a brief summary in Hindi, reiterating the core argument of the study. She emphasised that women utilise all available resources to assert their rights and claim authority, yet face persistent barriers at multiple levels – within households, in interactions with bureaucracy, and within political parties. She noted that women often carry out governance responsibilities alongside domestic labour, sometimes signing official documents while engaged in household work. Despite constant scrutiny and limited institutional support, they continue to assert themselves and demonstrate their capability.

She further clarified that the presence of others alongside women – often described as proxy – must be interpreted carefully. Such presence can either suppress or strengthen women's voices, and its implications depend on context. She emphasised the need to recognise and build upon the resources and strategies that women already possess, rather than undermining them. The emphasis, therefore, is not on replacing these strategies but on enabling conditions that allow women's authority to be exercised more effectively.

Special Address: Dr Ranjana Kumari

In her special address, **Dr Ranjana Kumari, Director, Centre for Social Research**, located the discussion within the longer trajectory of the women's movement in India, while engaging closely with the central arguments emerging from the report. She began by acknowledging the study's analytical strength, particularly its use of an intersectional lens to examine caste, class, and gender together. Reflecting on her own involvement in the movement for women's political representation, she recalled the early struggles that preceded the **73rd Constitutional Amendment**, noting that the decision to institutionalise women's representation first at the Panchayati Raj level has, in retrospect, enabled a bottom-up process of leadership formation. In her view, local governance has served as a critical site where women develop political confidence, understand power relations, and learn to exercise authority.



She also **addressed the ongoing debate over proxy leadership**, noting that while it has often been used to dismiss women's participation, there is now growing recognition — including within government discourse — that such framing is inadequate. Instead, she emphasised the need to examine how women actually navigate structures of power and how their authority evolves over time.

She described the study as an important attempt to document how women have moved from being positioned as dependents within political structures to becoming actors within them. She recalled how, at the time of the introduction of reservations, women's entry into politics was widely dismissed through terms such as "**pati pradhan**," reflecting the assumption that women would not be able to act independently. She pointed out that similar doubts continue to surface in contemporary debates around women's representation at higher levels of governance. As she noted, "this preparedness will never appear sufficient," because the social order itself does not begin from the premise that women are capable of leadership.

Engaging directly with the study's findings, she argued that the expansion of women's representation in Panchayati Raj Institutions — now close to 46 per cent, with **approximately 1.45 million elected women — cannot be understood merely as a numerical figure**. It reflects a substantive shift in which women are increasingly learning to exercise authority and negotiate their relationship with power. Where repeated election cycles have taken place, there is visible evidence that women are not only participating but also delivering governance outcomes, whether through infrastructure, service delivery, or local problem-solving. However, she identified a critical limitation: while women can implement decisions within existing frameworks, they are not adequately positioned to shape governance structures themselves. The capacity to execute has expanded, but the capacity to influence institutional design and policy direction remains constrained. This gap, she argued, is precisely where the question of whether representation translates into political power becomes most relevant.

She further highlighted the **importance of the study's intersectional analysis** in challenging prevailing assumptions about leadership. The belief that women from marginalised caste locations lack leadership capacity is contradicted by empirical evidence. Drawing from both the study and her own experience, she observed that women from Dalit and Adivasi communities often demonstrate forms of leadership that emerge directly from lived realities and collective experience. At the same time, she pointed to the growing influence of financial power in elections across levels of governance, arguing that class inequalities increasingly shape political access and outcomes.





Dr Kumari also addressed the role of institutional structures in enabling or constraining women's authority. She drew attention to bureaucratic practices that continue to recognise male intermediaries even when women are the elected representatives, arguing that such practices effectively legitimise the displacement of women's authority. She emphasised that leadership cannot be reduced to the delivery of schemes alone. The role of elected representatives also includes questioning, reshaping, and intervening in governance structures. Without this, representation risks remaining limited in its transformative potential.

A central thread in her address was the question of political agency. She argued that the language of "giving" agency is itself inadequate; the current moment requires women to recognise and assert their own political agency. This involves not only participation in governance but also the ability to define one's role within it, resist attempts at control, and establish legitimacy. Resistance to women's leadership reflects a broader reluctance within political systems to share power, evident across levels of governance.

In conclusion, she situated the discussion within both national and global contexts. She pointed out that the question of women's representation is not limited to India, with global averages still falling short of parity. She identified three significant shifts: the political mobilisation of women across the country, the increasing importance of women as a voting constituency, and the growing recognition of their electoral influence. She concluded by emphasising that the future of democratic representation depends on whether women's participation can translate into changes in power relations, requiring not only increasing numbers but also addressing the institutional, social, and political conditions that shape how authority is exercised.



"The question is not just numerical representation. The real question is whether it has translated into substantive political power."



"The experience is not equal for all women, caste, class, and social support matter enormously."



"Equality is a constitutional right, but beyond that, women must be able to exercise political agency."



SESSION I: WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP FROM THE GROUND: AUTHORITY, EXPERIENCE, AND EVERYDAY GOVERNANCE

Session I examined how women's leadership in Panchayati Raj Institutions takes shape in practice, focusing on the movement from entry into office to the exercise of authority. The discussion engaged directly with a central question raised in the report: whether increased representation translates into control over decision-making, or remains limited to formal participation. By grounding the discussion in lived experiences, the session highlighted that leadership is not secured at the point of election, but is built through sustained negotiation with institutional structures, social norms, and local political dynamics.

The session was chaired by **Rahul Kumar**, Senior Associate Consultant, PDAG. The speakers included **Ms Bari Murmu**, President, Zila Parishad, East Singhbhum, Jharkhand; **Ms Lalita Asaram Bethekar**, Sarpanch, Amravati, Maharashtra; **Ms Saraswati Tudu**, Mukhiya, Dashuni Karadhi, East Singhbhum, Jharkhand; **Ms Rajashree Pagare**, Programme Lead, RSCD; and **Ms Sharda Yashwant Dhanvij**, Mahila Rajsatta Andolan. In opening the session, Rahul Kumar emphasised that much of what constitutes women's political authority is not fully captured in formal documentation. He noted that while research identifies broad patterns, important meanings are often lost in translation, making it necessary to listen directly to women's accounts of governance, negotiation, and decision-making. He framed the session around the trajectories through which women enter politics, how they sustain their position, and how they navigate both institutional processes and everyday pressures.



Lalita Bethekar's account traced this trajectory from entry to consolidation. Coming from a socio-economically marginal background, her initial engagement with politics was marked by hesitation, shaped by prevailing perceptions of politics as corrupt. However, her experience of local deprivation and administrative gaps led her to view the Panchayat as a site through which change could be attempted. Her entry as a ward member, followed by her role as deputy sarpanch and later sarpanch, was accompanied by pressures to withdraw, including monetary inducements and conflict within the household. Her experience demonstrated that access to office is mediated by competing interests, and that sustaining a position often requires resisting these pressures. In office, she focused on disrupting informal brokerage practices in welfare delivery, publicly asserting that schemes should not require payments and initiating action against those involved in such practices. She also addressed issues such as encroachment and irregularities in local establishments, emphasising rule-based decision-making. These actions contributed to building legitimacy, not through positional authority alone, but through visible administrative practice.



Bari Murmu's intervention extended this discussion to the district level, highlighting how authority is further mediated as one moves across institutional tiers. Drawing on her experience as Zila Parishad President, she described how her entry into politics emerged from sustained engagement with Adivasi women through social work, particularly around rights, livelihood, and access to services. However, she also pointed to the limits of this transition, noting that political parties often support candidates who are expected to remain compliant. Her decision to contest independently followed the withdrawal of party support on these grounds. After assuming office, she encountered constraints in exercising authority, particularly in relation to administrative processes such as transfer and posting decisions. These experiences underscored that a formal position does not guarantee control over governance processes, and that bureaucratic and political structures can limit the operational space available to elected representatives. Her account of organising collectively with district-level representatives across Jharkhand to assert institutional rights demonstrated that authority often requires collective assertion beyond individual office.

Saraswati Tudu's reflections focused on how leadership develops through engagement with specific local issues. Entering office at a young age, she described limited initial familiarity with governance processes and restricted participation of women in decision-making forums such as the Gram Sabha. Her intervention in addressing harassment linked to liquor outlets illustrated how local governance mechanisms can be mobilised to respond to community concerns. She emphasised that institutional provisions, including those under PESA, remain underutilised due to gaps in awareness and training. Her experience in increasing women's participation in Gram Sabhas pointed to the importance of transparency, clarity of purpose, and demonstrable outcomes in building trust. She also highlighted that leadership requires not only formal authority but the ability to mobilise collective support within the village.

The discussion on proxy leadership was approached with complexity. Rather than treating proxy as a fixed condition, speakers reflected on how women's authority is mediated through relationships within households, political networks, and administrative structures. Lalita Bethekar's trajectory illustrated how initial support from family members can coexist with independent political action over time. Saraswati Tudu pointed to instances where access to training and information is restricted, limiting women's ability to act autonomously. Bari Murmu extended this further by showing that control over women's leadership is exercised not only within families but also through institutional arrangements. The discussion thus moved beyond a narrow understanding of proxy, situating it within broader structures that shape women's access to power.

Rajashree Pagare situated these experiences within a wider institutional framework, emphasising that reservation alone does not ensure effective leadership. She highlighted the role of sustained capacity-building efforts that recognise women's existing knowledge while strengthening their ability to navigate governance systems. Drawing on her work with RSCD and the Mahila Rajsatta Andolan, she highlighted the importance of collective platforms that provide mentorship, peer support, and ongoing engagement beyond formal training. She also emphasised the gap between formal political recognition and social acceptance, noting that women's authority is often contested even after they assume office.

Sharda Yashwant Dhanvij further elaborated on the role of collective structures in sustaining leadership. She described how movement-based approaches build women's familiarity with institutional processes, including budgeting, schemes, and administrative procedures, enabling them to engage more effectively with governance systems. Her emphasis on training, local networks, and continued support highlighted that leadership is sustained through collective processes rather than individual effort alone.



The session also reflected on the question of continuity in women's political engagement. Discussions highlighted that withdrawal from political roles cannot be understood solely as individual choice, but must be situated within structural pressures, including social backlash and institutional constraints. At the same time, speakers noted that engagement in governance processes can strengthen confidence and enable further participation, even in the face of challenges.

The session concluded by reinforcing that women's leadership in local governance is shaped by ongoing negotiation across institutional, social, and political domains. While representation enables entry, authority is established through practice, collective support, and the ability to navigate constraints. In this sense, the discussion aligned closely with the report's broader argument that leadership is not an outcome of representation alone, but a process shaped by the conditions within which it is exercised.



"Without support systems, women cannot sustain leadership."
– Rajashree Pagare



"Position is given, but power is not given."
– Bari Murmu



"I had heard that politics is dirty... but then I asked myself, if change has to happen, where will it happen if not in the Panchayat?" – Lalita Asaram Bethekar



"When women come together, change becomes possible."
– Saraswati Tudu



"When women get knowledge, they start speaking."
– Sharda Yashwant Dhanvij





SESSION II: INSTITUTIONS AND THE EXERCISE OF AUTHORITY: EXPANDING WOMEN'S SUBSTANTIVE ACCESS TO LOCAL GOVERNANCE

Session II deepened one of the central questions animating both the conference and the report: why does women's formal political representation so often fail to become substantive authority? Moving beyond the question of entry, the session focused on the institutional, social, and political conditions that shape whether elected women representatives can function as recognised decision-makers in practice. The discussion brought together concerns around planning and budgeting, the design of public institutions, bureaucratic mediation, care burdens, party structures, caste and gender hierarchies, and the broader ecosystem within which women attempt to translate office into authority.



The session was moderated by **Ms Arunima Sen Chaturvedi**, Senior Manager, Gender and Social Inclusion, Ernst and Young (E&Y), and featured **Dr Sanghamitra Dhar**, Programme Lead, Gender Responsive Budgeting Unit, UN Women; **Dr Sona Mitra**, Senior Advisor, IWWAGE; **Dr Vivek Anand**, Rural Development Advisor, GIZ; **Prof (Dr) Santvana Kumar**, Assistant Professor and Assistant Dean, O.P. Jindal Global University; and **Ms Sheilza Bhatia**, Social Worker and Politician. The discussion was not about whether women have entered local governance — that threshold has already been crossed on a historic scale. Rather, the concern was what happens after entry: whether institutions recognise women as legitimate actors, whether systems support their work, whether social and political arrangements amplify or mute their authority, and whether local participation can generate pathways into deeper and more durable forms of political power.

The moderator drew attention to a central paradox in India's democratic landscape: women's presence in Panchayati Raj Institutions has expanded significantly, yet this expansion has not translated into proportionate legislative mobility or broader political advancement. Her question was pointed: "Why is the Panchayat leadership not translating into legislative leadership in proportions?" That framing shifted the focus away from celebratory accounts of numerical inclusion and toward the institutional and political bottlenecks that interrupt women's trajectories, resonating strongly with the report's broader finding that while reservation has opened the door, authority must still be built, negotiated, and sustained through everyday practice.

The session refused overly simplistic framings of women's political experience. The discussion did not treat women's entry into politics as a clean break from family, caste, bureaucracy, or local power networks. Rather, it recognised that women govern within a field of already-existing social relations and institutional constraints, and moved toward a more layered understanding of how authority is mediated, negotiated, and often exercised through relational structures that can both enable and constrain women simultaneously.

Dr Sanghamitra Dhar's intervention brought the question of authority into the terrain of public finance, devolution, and institutional commitment. Her remarks clarified that the gap between representation and authority is not only social or cultural; it is also deeply administrative and budgetary. If institutions are serious about women's leadership, then that seriousness must be visible in the architecture of planning, budgeting, and resource allocation. She argued that gender-responsive budgeting should not be treated as a technical compliance exercise. Rather, it must be understood as a way of asking whose needs are rendered visible in public finance, whose priorities are treated as central, and whether the state is willing to fund women's leadership in substantive rather than symbolic ways. Without institutionalised budget pathways, women's voices cannot become a durable authority.

Dr Dhar's intervention shifted the conversation from a general endorsement of women's inclusion to the harder question of what institutions actually do differently when they claim to support gender equality. She suggested that decentralisation was always meant to carry local priorities upward into planning and expenditure systems, yet this promise remains only partially realised. Without meaningful access to planning systems, budgets, and decision-making channels, women may occupy office while remaining structurally distant from the institutional processes through which priorities become policy and policy becomes action. Her remarks established that the problem of authority cannot be separated from the state's fiscal and administrative life.

Dr Sona Mitra's contribution shifted attention to the care economy and the hidden labour beneath leadership. Her intervention made visible a dimension of political life that is often treated as external to governance but, in reality, profoundly shapes it: unpaid care work, time poverty, and women's continuing domestic responsibilities. She argued that political leadership does not free women from the burden of care. On the contrary, for many women, entry into public office adds another layer of work onto already demanding domestic obligations. The result is that political aspiration and public engagement are pursued amid structural exhaustion.

This argument insisted that the question of authority is not exhausted by whether women are allowed to speak in meetings or formally recognised by officials. It also depends on whether women have the material conditions, time, support structures, and social backing required to participate in public life meaningfully and consistently. One of the strongest lines from this part of the discussion captured the point clearly: "The support system women need to move ahead, somewhere we have continued to ignore it." This observation shifted the frame from individual resilience to institutional neglect, suggesting that women's leadership is often celebrated precisely where institutions have failed to provide the conditions necessary to sustain it. Care emerged not as a private issue, but a democratic one.





Dr Vivek Anand urged participants to think of Panchayats not merely as implementing arms of government schemes, but as democratic institutions whose deeper significance lies in representation, participation, and justice. The formulation resisted the administrative narrowing of local governance. If Panchayats are seen only as delivery mechanisms, then elected representatives, especially women, are confined to a managerial role within a bureaucratic chain. However, if Panchayats are understood as political institutions in their own right, then the question of women's authority becomes inseparable from broader questions of democratic voice and public accountability.

Dr Anand's remarks also drew attention to variation across states and the need for caution in generalising. He stressed that local institutions are always embedded in wider social and political fields, and that the experience of authority depends also on whether institutions can respond to everyday material needs. Responding to questions about what kind of organisational support actually strengthens women's agency, he distinguished between organisations that merely operate within state programmes and those that build independent collective capacity, public thinking, and the ability to question power. His reference to Mahila Samakhya as a stronger model of collective empowerment pointed to a wider argument: durable authority requires more than procedural inclusion; it requires support structures that cultivate legal confidence, solidarity, and political confidence.



Dr Santvana Kumar's contribution kept the discussion from drifting into generic language about women's empowerment. She situated women's political participation within the interlocking operations of caste, class, gender, and institutional violence, emphasising that "reservation may provide entry, but it does not automatically redistribute power." Although formal inclusion may alter institutional composition, it does not, on its own, reconfigure the unequal social and bureaucratic structures through which legitimacy and authority are constituted. Dr Kumar drew attention to the uneven ways in which women experience political office across caste and social location. Dalit and Adivasi women encounter intersecting forms of marginalisation that cannot be understood through the lens of gender alone. The barriers they encounter are institutional, social, symbolic, and often violent. By foregrounding systemic discrimination and structural violence, Dr Kumar grounded the session in an intersectional understanding of democratic inequality, underscoring that analysis of authority must account for these structural conditions.



Ms Sheilza Bhatia's intervention shifted the discussion to the terrain of political socialisation, confidence-building, and party structures, bringing together two key insights. First, reservation creates openings through which women begin to build confidence, gain experience, and develop political literacy. Second, these openings do not, by themselves, dismantle the structures that continue to keep women at the margins of substantive power. The example she shared of a young elected woman who initially entered office under paternal control but later expressed a desire to contest independently illustrated the gradual and cumulative nature of political learning. This resonated with the report's broader finding that authority is cultivated over time through practice, not simply conferred through electoral victory. She repudiated the segregated approach through which women are managed rather than genuinely empowered within party structures, reflected in her remark: "I really want to get away with the mahila cell within the political parties." Her observation that "Women never put themselves first" pointed to issues of internalised gender norms and the social conditioning that shapes women's political aspirations. Together, these points reinforced the idea that leadership requires not only institutional reform, but shifts in political culture.

The Session II discussion marked a clear shift from a focus on capacity-building to a more politically grounded emphasis on authority-building. The panellists underscored that women's political agency is shaped not merely by their presence in office, but by whether institutions recognise their authority, support systems sustain their participation, budgets reflect their priorities, party structures invest in their leadership, and democratic spaces remain accessible to their claims. The session presented a coherent account of the conditions under which representation can translate into substantive power.



Political leadership does not free women from the burden of care.
~ Dr Sona Mitra



Gender-responsive budgeting should not be seen as a technical exercise, but as a way to assess whether the state and political institutions support women's leadership.
~ Dr Sanghamitra Dhar



Women cannot be expected to carry this transition alone; institutions and systems must enable their authority. ~ Arunima Sen Chaturvedi



Reservation allows us the entry of women into the structure but it doesn't give us power or leadership necessarily.
~ Dr Santvana Kumar



Panchayats are democratic institutions whose deeper significance resides in their roles in enabling representation, fostering participation, and executing justice.
~ Dr Vivek Anand



Representation requires not only institutional reform but also deeper shifts in political culture.
~Ms Sheilza Bhatia

Special Address: Dr Sanjay Kumar

In his special address, **Dr Sanjay Kumar**, Professor and Former Director, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), extended and broadened the concerns raised in Session II. While the panel focused on the institutional conditions shaping women's authority in local governance, his intervention situated these questions within the wider landscape of Indian electoral democracy. Moving beyond a narrow focus on Panchayat elections, he framed his remarks around a critical paradox: women's political participation has expanded significantly, yet their representation in legislative bodies remains limited. His address bridged the gap between grassroots authority and the larger question of representation at scale, deliberately widening the analytical frame to include broader patterns in Assembly and parliamentary politics.





The core of his argument lay in demonstrating that India has already experienced a significant democratic shift in women's electoral behaviour. Women are no longer peripheral to electoral politics. His presentation highlighted that women now vote in large numbers, that the gender gap in turnout has narrowed considerably and in some cases even reversed, and that their participation increasingly extends beyond voting to include attending meetings, joining processions, and engaging in door-to-door campaigning. This is a crucial empirical insight as it challenges the conventional view of women as politically passive or electorally marginal. Instead, it indicates that Indian democracy has already been reshaped from below, even as formal structures of representation have yet to fully reflect this transformation.

A key implication of this shift is that women's underrepresentation in legislatures cannot be explained by a lack of political participation. The constraint lies elsewhere. Dr Kumar located it primarily in party nomination processes and systems of political gatekeeping. He argued that parties remain hesitant to field women candidates due to an unexamined assumption that women are less electorally viable. However, the evidence he presented challenges this belief, showing that women candidates have often had higher success rates than men. This shifts the focus away from questions of women's "winnability" to the conservatism of party structures.

His reflections also connected back to local governance in a significant way. He observed that in many states, women are increasingly winning from non-reserved seats, while the figure of the "Sarpanch Pati" is gradually receding. These insights are important as they speak to questions of legitimacy, recognition, and a move beyond proxy-based interpretations of women's political participation. They suggest that local democracy is beginning to normalise women's leadership beyond the formal limits of reservation. The central question that remains is whether this shift at the grassroots can translate into greater political mobility at higher levels of representation.

Dr Kumar's address both reinforced and extended the central argument of Session II. The question is no longer whether women participate in politics – their engagement is visible and growing. The real issue is whether political institutions, particularly parties and higher-level representative structures, are willing to convert this participation into candidature, invest in women as sustained political actors, and create viable pathways from voter to representative, and from local leadership to legislative office. His intervention expanded the institutional critique of Session II beyond Panchayats to the wider framework of representative democracy in India, highlighting that the current democratic gap lies not in women's participation, but in the institutions that continue to shape, constrain, and limit its political translation.

Key Point



Local governance has begun to normalise women's leadership beyond the framework of reservation. Women are increasingly contesting and winning from non-reserved seats, and the influence of "Sarpanch Pati" is gradually declining.



SESSION III: BEYOND REPRESENTATION: KNOWLEDGE, CIVIL SOCIETY, AND THE WIDER ECOSYSTEM OF LEADERSHIP

Session III extended the discussion beyond the question of women's entry into political institutions to examine the wider ecosystem that shapes whether leadership can be sustained, recognised, and translated into authority. Building on earlier sessions that foregrounded lived experiences and institutional constraints, this session examined how knowledge systems, civil society interventions, funding structures, and political pathways interact to enable or constrain women's leadership. The discussion brought together concerns about aspiration, access to resources, the legitimacy of knowledge, institutional fragmentation, and structural inequalities, reinforcing the report's central argument that representation is only the starting point and that authority is contingent on how these interconnected systems respond to women's participation.



The session was moderated by **Ms Akshi Chawla**, Independent Researcher, Writer, and Editorial Consultant, and brought together a panel comprising **Dr Sowjanya Tamalapakula** (Assistant Professor, Woxsen University), **Ms Gauravi Lobo** (Director, University of Toronto Foundation), **Ms Ruby Sinha** (President, BRICS CCI WE and Founder, SheAtWork), **Ms Arshia Gupta** (Rural Development Specialist, The World Bank), and **Ms Aparajita Bharti** (Co-founder, YLAC and Founding Partner, The Quantum Hub). The composition of the panel reflected a deliberate effort to bring together perspectives from academia, civil society, development practice, and leadership ecosystems.

Opening the session, Akshi Chawla situated the discussion within the broader trajectory of work on women's political participation. She noted that while much of the focus has been on enabling entry, through training, capacity-building, or reservation, far less attention has been paid to what happens after women enter political spaces. As she observed, "politics is essentially a gendered space; it continues to remain male-dominated in who occupies positions of power." This framing shifted the focus from access to authority, raising the question of whether existing systems are equipped to recognise and sustain women's leadership in practice.



Building on this, Dr Sowjanya Tamalapakula grounded the discussion in a structural analysis of inequality, emphasising that women's leadership must be understood through the intersecting dynamics of caste, class, and patriarchy. As she pointed out, "caste operates through graded inequalities, which means power shifts in complex and often unpredictable ways." Her remarks made clear that representation does not flatten hierarchy; rather, it reorganises how power is exercised within governance structures. Even where women enter political office, their ability to function as leaders remains shaped by these layered inequalities. As she underscored, "the key question is not only whether women are present, but whether they are able to exercise real power," reinforcing the report's emphasis on the gap between participation and authority.

Extending this structural framing, Gauravi Lobo shifted attention to the question of knowledge and recognition. She drew a distinction between formal, propositional knowledge — privileged within institutional and funding systems — and relational, experiential knowledge that emerges from everyday governance practice. While women leaders generate rich, context-specific insights through practice, these are often not recognised as legitimate knowledge within dominant systems. As she noted, "inclusion is not just about who is in the room, but whose knowledge is taken seriously." Her remarks deepened the report's argument by showing that authority must be not only exercised but also recognised within prevailing knowledge systems to translate into influence.

Taking this further, **Ruby Sinha focused on aspiration and structural access**, questioning why politics is not positioned as a viable career pathway for women. As she noted, "we do not position politics as a viable career option for women in the same way as other professions," pointing to how early socialisation shapes political participation. She also emphasised the centrality of economic resources, noting that "without access to financial resources, women cannot sustain political participation." Her intervention underscored that entry into politics is not only about opportunity but about the ability to remain and progress within it. Her remarks speak directly to the report's identification of entry without mobility, in which structural constraints — particularly in finance and access to networks — limit women's political trajectories.

Arshia Gupta further complicated this discussion by **examining the relationship between participation and authority in rural governance contexts**. She noted that while development interventions and collectives create enabling conditions for women's participation, this does not automatically translate into decision-making power. Authority, she emphasised, depends on how institutions respond to women's roles. At the same time, she pointed to a structural limitation that cuts across governance systems: fragmentation. When institutions operate in silos, gains made in one domain are not reinforced in others, making it difficult for women to sustain and expand their leadership. This reinforces the report's argument that authority is institutionally mediated and contingent on the organisation and interconnection of systems.

Aparajita Bharti brought these strands together through **a structural analysis of political entry pathways**. She highlighted that "a large proportion of women in Parliament continue to come from political families," while others face significantly longer and more uncertain trajectories into politics. She pointed to the absence of institutional pathways within party structures, highlighting the lack of clear progression from participation to candidature. She also underscored the scale of exclusion, noting that in a significant number of constituencies, no women contested elections. Her remarks highlighted the structural bottlenecks that interrupt women's political trajectories, reinforcing the report's concern that access to leadership is shaped by unequal distributions of resources, networks, and legitimacy.



The session moved decisively away from viewing leadership as an individual attribute and instead located it within a wider ecosystem of constraints and enablers. Across speakers, a consistent insight emerged: women's authority depends not simply on entry or capacity, but on whether the systems they operate within — political, institutional, and epistemic — are willing to recognise and sustain it. The session deepened the report's central proposition that authority is relational and negotiated, produced through ongoing interaction with structures that can both enable and constrain it. Without shifts in how institutions function, participation risks remaining partial — visible in numbers, but limited in its ability to reshape power.

In her closing remarks, Akshi Chawla returned to this central tension, noting that current approaches continue to place the burden of change on women themselves through training, capacity-building, and individual preparation, while leaving institutional arrangements largely intact. She emphasised that the challenge is not simply to prepare women to enter politics, but to reconfigure the systems within which they operate. The session concluded with a clear shift in focus: from women as subjects of intervention to institutions as sites of change, underscoring that progress will depend on whether these systems are able to recognise, respond to, and sustain women's authority so that participation can translate into durable and substantive shifts in power.



"Politics is essentially a gendered space; it continues to remain male-dominated in who occupies positions of power." — **Akshi Chawla**



"Reservation alone cannot solve the problem if structural barriers to entry and mobility remain." — **Ruby Sinha**



"The key question is not only whether women are present, but whether they are able to exercise real power." — **Dr Sowjanya Tamalapakula**



"A major challenge is that institutions work in silos, which weakens the impact of interventions." — **Arshia Gupta**



"Without funding, mentoring, and structured pathways, many women remain stuck between aspiration and entry." — **Aparajita Bharti**



"Women leaders generate rich, context-specific knowledge through practice, but this is not always recognised as legitimate." — **Gauravi Lobo**





Closing Reflections: Bhim Raskar

Following a series of discussions that moved across lived experiences of elected representatives, institutional constraints, and the wider ecosystem shaping women's leadership, the closing reflection by Bhim Raskar, Director, Resource and Support Centre for Development (RSCD), brought the conversation back to its central tension. Beginning on a note of reflection, he remarked on the depth and range of the discussions, noting that after listening to the speakers across sessions, the challenge was not a lack of insight, but how to meaningfully carry these insights forward. Drawing on over two decades of engagement with women in local governance, he situated the day's deliberations within a longer trajectory of practice, marking nearly twenty-six years of work with the **Mahila Rajsatta Andolan**.

A key argument in his reflection was that **the knowledge emerging from women's lived experiences in governance must be treated as central to how this field is understood and advanced**. He emphasised that elected women representatives should not be positioned only as beneficiaries or participants, but as experts and resource persons in their own right. Drawing from experience in Maharashtra, he suggested that systematically identifying such leaders across states could generate a substantial pool of grounded expertise capable of shaping both policy and institutional practice. This reframing shifts authority over knowledge production towards those directly engaged in governance.

At the same time, he described the conditions within which women operate as a form of "invisible confinement," structured by overlapping systems of power. He pointed to the combined influence of patriarchy, party structures, caste hierarchies, class inequalities, and religious authority, noting that women are navigating all of these simultaneously. In this context, he highlighted the increasing centrality of financial resources in elections, noting that the lack of economic capital has become a significant barrier to women's continued political participation. Despite these constraints, he underscored that women are not withdrawing; they continue to engage and contest these structures.



He further argued that institutional responses remain fragmented and insufficient. Reservation, in his view, must be accompanied by a sequence of support — training, sustained handholding, collective organisation, protection, and eventual social and political backing. Without this continuum, representation remains incomplete.

He reiterated a concern raised during the sessions: that while women may receive formal recognition through electoral processes, their social recognition of authority remains limited. This is evident in practices such as the continued acceptance of "sarpanch pati" arrangements at the village level, where community norms reinforce the displacement of women's authority.

Mr Raskar also identified shifts in women's engagement with politics. He noted that women are increasingly participating in broader political discussions beyond the household, engaging with public issues and negotiating with opponents. This expansion of political engagement marks a significant transformation, even as it coexists with persistent challenges, including character-based attacks, financial barriers, and discontinuities in political careers. He emphasised that leadership must be understood beyond formal office. Panchayats are only one among multiple "power centres," and there is a need to map and engage with these wider sites of influence to enable more substantive forms of leadership.



A critical area of emphasis in his reflection was the role of peer-based learning. He argued that women's leadership is often strengthened through horizontal exchanges of experience, where knowledge is shared and built collectively. In contrast, he described existing training systems as limited in scope, focusing more on duties than on enabling women to understand and exercise power. Strengthening systems of peer learning, therefore, becomes essential to deepening women's engagement with governance.

He also raised concerns about emerging institutional and policy directions. Referring to models such as "samrasta panchayat," where elections are replaced by consensus-based selection, he cautioned that such approaches risk undermining democratic processes. Similarly, he pointed to the absence of institutional mechanisms such as protections against harassment within Panchayats, identifying this as a significant barrier to women's participation. These concerns underscored the need to remain attentive not only to enabling conditions but also to developments that may restrict democratic accountability.

In conclusion, he returned to the broader purpose of women's participation in governance. He argued that women's presence is essential to sustaining value-based, constitutionally grounded, and issue-focused politics, in which the needs of the most marginalised are prioritised. He emphasised that the task ahead is not only to document these experiences but to act on them — through strengthening collective structures, building institutional support, and sustaining engagement over time.



"All women are confined within an invisible prison... shaped by the dominance of parties, patriarchy, caste, and religion."



"Analysis, action, and advocacy must move together."

Closing Reflections: Mr Ján Michalko, Research Fellow, Gender, Equality and Social Inclusion, ODI Global

The closing remarks by Ján Michalko, Research Fellow, Gender, Equality and Social Inclusion, ODI Global — who has been closely engaged with the ALIGN programme and provided sustained analytical guidance throughout the development of the study — drew attention to two central insights from the day's discussion. First, women continually find ways to exercise power within political and institutional settings, and these pathways must be recognised, even though they are often overlooked in dominant frameworks of political theory and knowledge production. Second, the idea of "proxy" needs to be understood within the social norms and institutional contexts that shape it. The report offers a nuanced account of women's political experiences that resists reductive framings in both directions.





A key analytical point he raised was the need to ask not only who gains entry into positions of power, but also who remains excluded and marginalised. This perspective foregrounds an intersectional lens that does not treat women as a homogeneous category, but instead recognises how class, caste, religion, and other axes of inequality shape access to political power. It also draws attention to the relative neglect of economic inequality within debates on political representation.

He further emphasised that this concern becomes more critical in the context of widening global disparities, where the concentration of wealth among a small elite has profound implications for democratic institutions, as economic power increasingly translates into political influence. Existing patterns of privilege continue to structure access to leadership, reinforcing exclusion, while rising living costs, austerity measures, and shrinking welfare provisions deepen precarity and create conditions for polarising politics that target vulnerable communities.

In this context, he underscored that addressing intersectional inequalities is not only a matter of social justice but a democratic imperative. Expanding inequalities weaken democratic institutions, intensify exclusion, and heighten the risk of democratic erosion. The discussion highlighted that any meaningful effort to strengthen democracy must prioritise the redistribution of power and resources, while remaining attentive to the intersecting structures that shape access, participation, and authority.



Addressing intersectional inequalities is not just a matter of social justice, but a democratic imperative, since growing economic and social disparities directly shape access to political power and pose a serious threat to democratic institutions.



Way Forward

The following directions emerge from discussions across all segments of the day's programme. They reflect collective insights from elected women representatives, researchers, civil society practitioners, and policy actors who participated in the event, and are offered as a starting point for the reforms, support systems, and institutional changes needed to strengthen women's authority in local governance and beyond.

- Shift the focus from representation to authority by addressing how decisions are made and controlled within institutions, ensuring that women's elected positions translate into actual decision-making power.
- Strengthen institutional pathways for political continuity by enabling women's progression from local governance to higher levels, including reforms within party structures and support systems that reduce financial and network-based barriers.
- Invest in sustained capacity-building and handholding that equips women with the knowledge to navigate budgets, schemes, and administrative processes, while building on their existing experiential knowledge.
- Support collective platforms and networks that provide women with institutional backing, peer learning, and the ability to negotiate and defend their authority within political and bureaucratic systems.
- Align policy and programme design with ground realities by incorporating insights from elected women representatives, ensuring that interventions respond to the structural constraints they face in exercising leadership.



FROM MARGINS TO LEADERSHIP

Women, Power, and the Future of Democratic Representation in India

 30 March 2026  09:30 AM – 5:00 PM  IIC Annexe, Lecture Hall 1, Delhi

AGENDA

TIME	SESSION	DETAILS
09.30 AM 10.00 AM	REGISTRATION & TEA	Arrival, registration, and informal networking
10.00 AM 10.05 AM	WELCOME REMARKS	Welcome Remarks
10.05 AM 10.15 AM	INAUGURAL ADDRESS	Mr Manuj Pandey , Co-founder & Partner, Policy & Development Advisory Group
10.15 AM 10.30 AM	REPORT PRESENTATION	Dr Ekata Bakshi & Mr Rahul Kumar , Policy & Development Advisory Group
10.30 AM 10.35 AM	OFFICIAL LAUNCH OF THE REPORT	Formal ceremonial launch of the report.
10.35 AM 10.50 AM	SPECIAL ADDRESS	Dr Ranjana Kumari , Director, Centre for Social Research

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TIME	SESSION	DETAILS
10.50 AM 11.05 AM		TEA BREAK
11.05 AM 12.35 PM	SESSION I: Women's Leadership from the Ground: Authority, Experience, and Everyday Governance	Panellists • Ms Bari Murmu, President, Zilla Parishad, East Singhbhum • Ms Lalita Asaram Bethekar, Sarpanch, Amravati • Ms Saraswati Tudu, Mukhiya, Dashuni Karadhi, East Singhbhum • Ms Rajashree Pagare, Programme Lead, RSCD • Ms Sharda Yashwant Danvij, Mahila Rajyasatta Andolan Moderator • Mr Rahul Kumar, Senior Associate Consultant, PDAG
12.35 PM 01.20 PM		NETWORKING LUNCH
01.20 PM 02.45 PM	SESSION II: Institutions and the Exercise of Authority: Expanding Women's Substantive Access to Local Governance	Panellists • Dr Sanghamitra Dhar, Programme Lead - Gender Responsive Budgeting Unit, UN Women • Prof (Dr) Santvana Kumar, Asst. Prof & Asst. Dean, O.P.Jindal Global University • Ms Sheilza Bhatia, Social Worker and Politician • Dr Sona Mitra, Senior Advisor, IWWAGE • Dr Vivek Anand, Rural Development Advisor, GIZ Chair & Moderator • Ms Arunima Sen Chaturvedi, Senior Manager, Gender & Social Inclusion , E&Y



TIME	SESSION	DETAILS
02.45 PM 03.00 PM	SPECIAL ADDRESS	Dr Sanjay Kumar, Professor & Former Director, CSDS
03.00 PM 03.15 PM	TEA BREAK	
03.15 PM 04.40 PM	SESSION III: Beyond Representation: Knowledge, Civil Society, and the Wider Ecosystem of Leadership	Panellists • Ms Aparajita Bharti, Co-founder, YLAC & Founding Partner, The Quantum Hub • Ms Arshia Gupta, Rural Development Specialist, The World Bank • Ms Gauravi Lobo, Director, University of Toronto Foundation • Ms Ruby Sinha, President, BRICS CCI WE & Founder sheatwork • Dr Sowjanya Tamalapakula, Assistant Professor, Woxsen University Chair & Moderator • Ms Akshi Chawla, Independent Researcher, Writer & Editorial Consultant
04.40 PM 04.55 PM	CLOSING REFLECTIONS	• Mr Bhim Raskar, Director, Resource & Support Centre for Development (RSCD) • Mr Ján Michalko, Research Fellow, Gender, Equality and Social Inclusion, ODI Global
04.55 PM 05:00 PM	VOTE OF THANKS	

05:00 PM
ONWARDS

TEA & INFORMAL NETWORKING

