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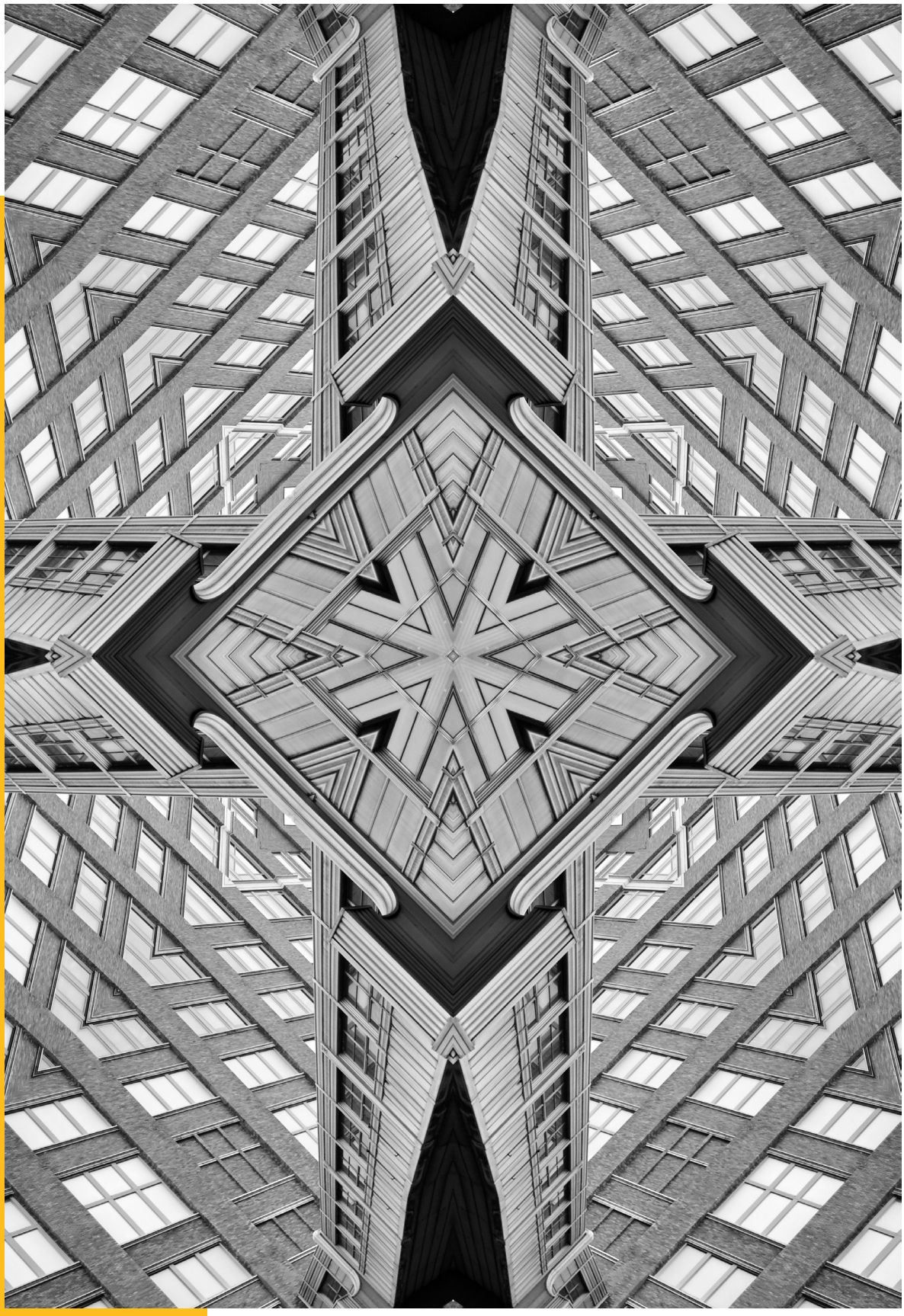

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The State of Women's Representation in Urban Local Self-Government in India: A Review

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Abstract

Women's representation in local governance is a crucial indicator of gender inclusivity. Since 1993, the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act has reserved one-third of seats in Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) to women. Multiple states have since granted 50 percent reservation of seats for women in urban and rural local self-government bodies. Today, women have become a crucial political constituency, both as voters and as electoral candidates. This paper examines the milestones that India has achieved in women's participation in urban local governance in the past three decades. The paper also highlights the persisting challenges and offers recommendations for strengthening institutional structures to improve the scale and impact of women's participation and leadership in ULBs in India.

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Introduction

The marginalisation of women in all levels of politics and decision-making structures is an enduring challenge globally.[1] Gender quotas, which were consolidated in the 1970s and have been adopted by over 130 countries since, have proved to be an effective method for increasing women's participation in politics, which is a key to strengthening democracy, achieving gender equality, and delivering on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).[2] Quotas have increased the political representation, voice, and agenda-setting power of women; countries with quotas for women in governance institutions report increased spending in public health, food security, subsidised education, and increased provision of services to female constituents.[3]

India was among the early adopters of gender quotas at the level of local government. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts, which came into effect in 1993, reserved one-third of electoral seats for women in rural areas, or Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), and in Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) or municipalities. Thirty years later, there are today over 1.45 million elected women representatives in rural and urban local bodies in India; and the country has among the highest levels of participation of women in local governments, at 44.4 percent of elected seats.[4] Globally, women constitute an average of 35.5 percent or more than three million elected members in local deliberative bodies.[5]

However, the progress of local governments in India at the rural and urban levels continues to be impeded by inadequate devolution of power and funding to local bodies, which has impacted their performance and accountability.[6] For decades, research has focused more on PRIs and rural development, leaving ULBs understudied. Municipalities across the country, despite their potential to usher in decentralised governance and provide quality welfare services, are weighed down by inefficiency and lack of transparency.[7] Political decentralisation has not matched financial decentralisation, which leads to funding shortages that leave functionaries unable to keep pace with the demands of rapid urbanisation.

Recent government data shows that there are over 4,500 ULBs in the country: 255 municipal corporations, 1,897 municipalities, and 2,433 town

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panchayats.[8] However, research on women's representation in ULBs has been limited. There is little qualitative and quantitative data on aspects of women's participation in urban local self-governments, such as decision-making and leadership, which has led to an undervaluation of their work as local representatives and impacted policy reforms.

India's rapid economic growth has accelerated the rate of urbanisation, with over one-third of the total population residing in urban areas.[9] With the shift away from agriculture and rural economies, the urban population is expected to grow exponentially and touch 675 million, or 43.2 percent of the Indian population, by 2035.[a],[10] Moreover, cities are experiencing greater demands and pressures in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, including increasing climate shocks. In these contexts, managing emerging governance challenges in Indian cities is becoming a massive challenge for local self-government.

The 2011 Census of India indicated a trend of growth in the female population in urban areas compared to males.[11] With increasing urbanisation and worsening climate change, more women are expected to migrate to urban areas. Women and men use urban spaces differently and have different priorities when accessing urban services and infrastructure such as housing, transport, water and sanitation, health and environmental resources, livelihoods, and economic opportunities. Research demonstrates that most cities fall short of meeting the basic needs of women, thus hindering their social and economic prospects and making them feel unsafe, and in turn widening gender gaps.[12]

For urban governance to be sustainable, resilient, and equitable, it needs to be gender-responsive and inclusive. The gender-responsive approach in urban governance underlines two key objectives: designing urban areas that are responsive to the needs of all women, and increasing the participation of women in urban governance.

This paper focuses on women's role in ULBs in India and analyses the socio-economic and region-specific trends to understand barriers to participation and their impact on sustainable development. It analyses

a That will then make India's population the second highest in the world, after only China.

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secondary literature, research articles, news reports, and survey reports, and builds on ongoing research by both authors of this present study.[b,13] The paper outlines specific recommendations for enhancing women's participation in ULBs in India.

With the adoption in September 2023 of the landmark Women's Reservation Bill, under which one-third of seats in national and state legislative assemblies are reserved for women, it would be relevant to assess the impact that gender quotas have had on India's local self-governance institutions over the past three decades.

b The authors focused on women's representation in PRIs in an earlier paper and have taken up the issue of ULBs in this study.

History and Legal Framework

Municipal governance in India can be traced to the establishment of the Madras Municipal Corporation in 1688. Initially, these governance bodies were akin to royal establishments in the presidency towns of Madras and Bombay rather than administrative entities; for instance, the Greater Chennai Corporation was established under a Royal Charter issued by King James II of England.[14] Eventually, municipal administration extended to district towns with the formation of Town Committees in Bengal in 1842. Decentralisation efforts began in 1870, with the involvement of Indians in administration, highlighted in the Montague-Chelmsford Report of 1918, which emphasised creating local bodies "with the largest possible independence for them from outside control."[15] Subsequently, the Government of India Act in 1919 expanded the role of local governments and granted them more autonomy.

The introduction of dyarchy[c] divided governance into central and provincial categories, with transferred subjects of governance, including local self-government, under provincial control. However, uniformity was lacking, as the organisation and size of municipal bodies varied across states. The 1935 Government of India Act abolished dyarchy and further expanded the role of provincial governments but failed to ensure uniformity in municipal organisation.[d]

In the post-Independence era, in 1989, the Rajiv Gandhi government introduced the 65th Constitutional Amendment Bill (Nagarpalika Bill) in the Lok Sabha, aimed at strengthening and revamping municipal bodies by conferring them with constitutional status. Although the Bill was passed in the Lok Sabha, it was defeated in the Rajya Sabha in October 1989 and consequently lapsed. The National Front Government under VP Singh

c The system of double government introduced by the Government of India Act (1919) for the provinces of British India. It divided each provincial government into two branches, authoritarian branch—composed of executive councillors and appointed by the crown—and popularly responsible sections—composed of Indian ministers chosen by the governor from the elected members of the provincial legislature.

d Municipal bodies in India were typically composed of elected councillors, associate councillors, and co-opted members, with provisions for representation from marginalised groups, though often only symbolically.

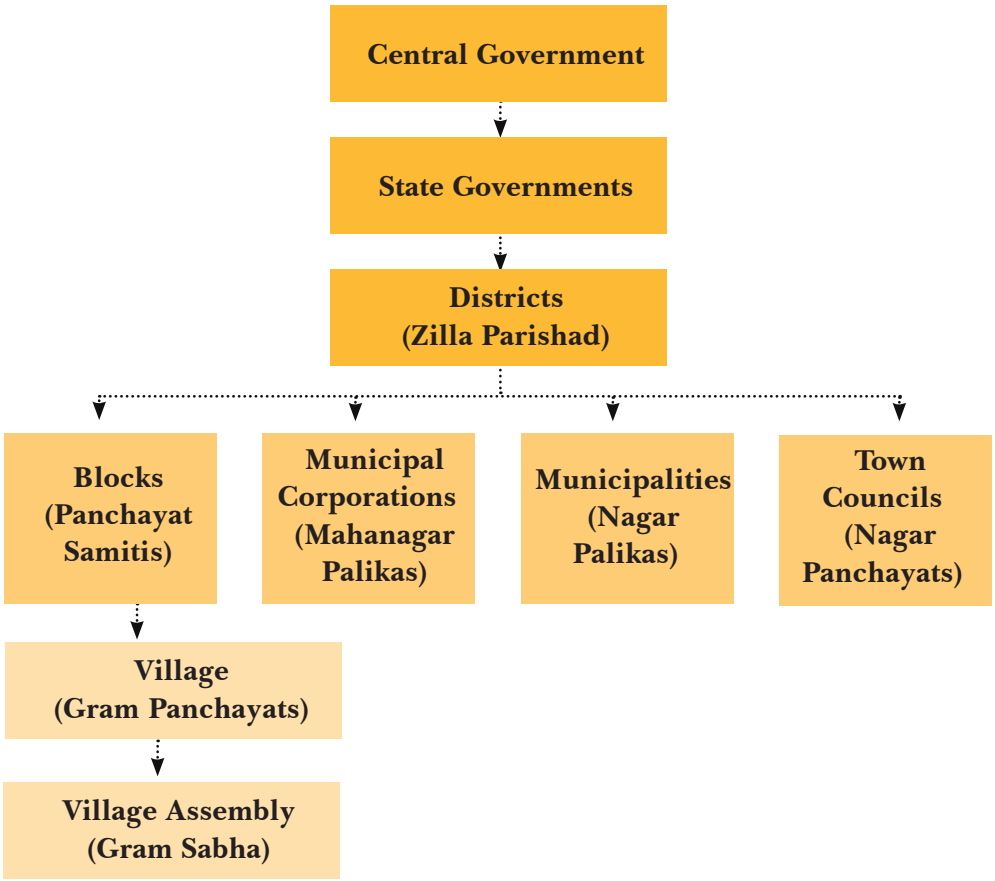
introduced the revised Nagarpalika Bill in the Lok Sabha in September 1990. The Bill was not passed and lapsed with the dissolution of the Lok Sabha for that term. The PV Narasimha Rao government also introduced the modified Municipalities Bill in Lok Sabha in September 1991. It finally took the form of the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 and came into force on 1 June 1993.

The 74th Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 provides for the reservation of not less than one-third of the total seats for women, including those reserved for women belonging to the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs). The Act also has provisions that allow the state legislature to provide for the manner of reservation for women and SCs and STs in the offices of chairpersons in municipalities.[16] At that time, there was no such reservation for women at the central and state levels. Since then, 20 states[e] have progressively raised women's representation to 50 percent in both rural and urban local bodies.[17]

In urban regions, there are three categories of local governing bodies: municipal corporations, also known as *mahanagar palikas*, designated for areas with populations exceeding one million; municipal councils or municipalities, referred to as *nagar palikas*, for areas with populations below one million; and town councils or *nagar panchayats* for areas in the process of transitioning from rural to urban. To streamline administration, extensive municipal regions are divided into smaller units known as wards.

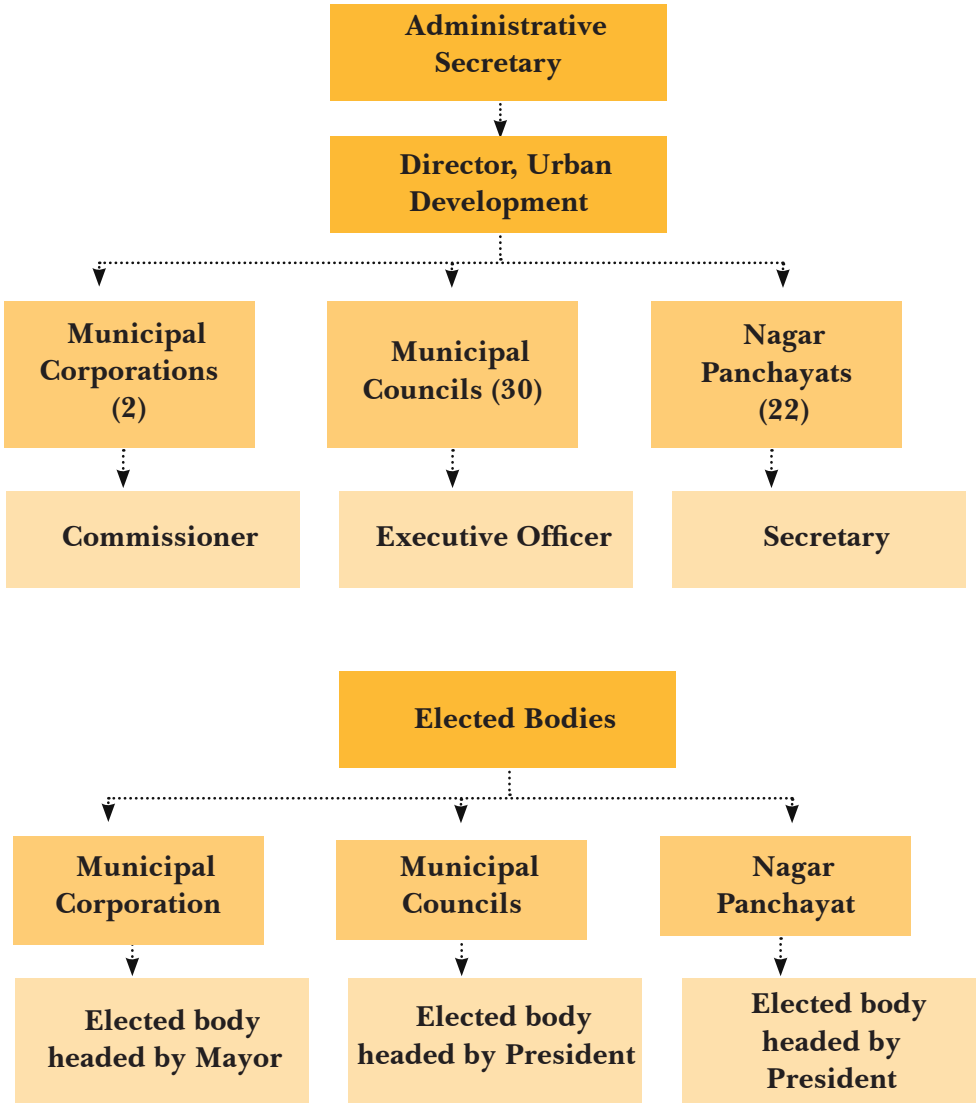
e These are: Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Punjab, Rajasthan, Sikkim, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Tripura, Uttarakhand, and West Bengal.

Figure 1: Structure of Urban Local Self-Governments in India



Source: India Development Review[18]

Figure 2: Administrative Setup of ULBs in India



Source: Comptroller and Auditor General of India[19]

The office of the Mayor is the highest office in ULBs in India; therefore, women's representation in the office of the Mayor is an indicator of women's leadership at the core of urban self-government institutions in India.

Table 1: Select Women City Mayors and Their Impact on Governance in India

Name	Region	Impact
Tara Cherion	Madras	First female mayor of Madras in 1957; credited for slum management initiatives and introducing mid-day meals in corporation schools.[20]
Eunice Britto	Mangalore	First Mayor of Mangalore in 1994; played a pivotal role in elevating the Mangalore Municipal Council to a corporation.[21]
Aneesa Begum Mirza	Ahmedabad	India's first Muslim woman mayor to get elected in 2003; during her tenure, Ahmedabad achieved mega-city status and credited for the Sabarmati riverfront.[22]
Mercy Williams	Kochi	Assumed office in 2004. Established regulations around solid waste management, thus facilitating decentralised waste management; brought funding for infrastructural initiatives; Kochi declared cleanest city during her tenure.[23]
Asha Lakra	Ranchi	Mayor of Ranchi in 2014 who initiated projects like building modular toilets, improving sanitation, and installing LED lights.[24]

Women Leaders in ULBs

Name	Region	Impact
Malini Gaud	Indore	Took charge in 2015, is known to hold effective citizen engagement programmes to spread impactful cleanliness awareness programmes.[25]
Madhu Bai Kinnar	Raigarh	First transgender woman Mayor of the Raigarh ULB in Chhattisgarh; elected in 2015 and has made concerted efforts to improve the sanitation system of the city.[26]
Sanyukta Bhatia	Lucknow	First Mayor of Lucknow Corporation in 2017; the first woman to occupy the role in the municipal body's 100-year history.[27]
Sira Sahu	Patna	Elected first woman Mayor of Patna Municipal Corporation in 2017 and took initiatives such as afforestation and improving the sewage system.[28]
Ajitha Vijayan	Thrissur	Became Mayor in 2018. A former *Anganwadi* worker, improved the water distribution network in Kanimanagalam, a region that was severely impacted by water scarcity and drought.[29]
Arya Rajendran	Thiruvananthapuram	Elected Mayor of the Thiruvananthapuram Corporation, the largest urban local body in India at the age of 21 in the year 2020.[30]
K. Vasanthakumari	Chennai Metropolitan Area	Elected first Mayor of newly formed Municipal Corporation of Tambaram at the age of 25 in 2022.[31]
Kalpana Anandakumar	Coimbatore	First woman Mayor of Coimbatore in 2022. A first-time elected councillor who became the first female Mayor of the Coimbatore Corporation.[32]

While Table 1 is not an exhaustive list of all female mayors who have ever been elected in India, it captures the impact that these women have had in multiple aspects of urban governance, such as sanitation, water, and cleanliness, healthcare, and safety and mobility.[33] It is notable that some of these women belonged to politically influential families at the time they were elected, reinforcing the importance of social networks in gaining access to local political institutions.[34]

Many states have witnessed the success of women in electoral contests for local municipal seats. For instance, in Tamil Nadu, 11 out of 20 mayors in various municipalities elected in 2022 were women.[35] The state government has enacted provisions under the Tamil Nadu Town Panchayats, Municipalities, Corporations (Delimitation of Wards or Divisions and Reservations) Rules, 1996, to reserve the mayor's position in Chennai, Avadi, and Tambaram Corporation for women from the SC community.[36] Three former women Mayors of Delhi—namely, Neema Bhagat, Satya Sharma, and Kamaljeet Sehrawat—were re-elected as councillors in the December 2022 polls despite their party not being able to bag the majority of seats.[37]

Key Findings from Select Studies in States

A study on women representatives in Rajasthan revealed that for women members of local bodies to shoulder administrative responsibilities effectively, having supportive families is important.[38] It was not uncommon, however, for women candidates to be lacking in support from their political party despite being elected on their ticket. For example, only 61 percent of women representatives said they received support, overall, from their political party; a far lower 35 percent reported to have received material assistance. At the same time, more than 66 percent of the women representatives covered in the study were found to lack interest in administrative work.[39] This is largely due to most women being new entrants in administrative affairs who thus find it difficult to discharge their duties properly; they are also juggling their family responsibilities simultaneously. Women are more likely to share their problems with women members of urban bodies.[40] Women representatives have also reported having cordial relations with officials of civic bodies. Additionally,

a sizeable section (around 80 percent) of women representatives stated that male members of the administration are cooperative.[41]

Most women leaders (96 percent) in this study reported that they attend civic meetings regularly, but their participation in the deliberations remains limited.[42] Voters maintain positive views regarding the performance of women councillors, who are perceived to be more responsive to people's needs and less likely to be corrupt.[43] However, as parties continue to be dominated by men, there is limited interaction between political parties and their women representatives and leaders at the local level. Increasing women's local participation and leadership also changes the spending priorities of local governments; female mayors are known to allocate a larger percentage of expenditures on issues like education, healthcare, and social assistance, relative to male mayors.[44]

Lack of experience and confidence is a persisting challenge faced by women leaders in ULBs in India.[45] Progress has been made, however, in terms of local societies and city bureaucracies having greater sensitivity towards women's issues.[46] A study on the impact of reservation on women's representation in ULBs in Assam revealed that the amendment has created opportunities for women to participate in the decision-making processes of urban local governance. As a result of the reservation provision in local bodies, female representatives elected to the Guwahati Municipal Corporation experienced a tangible shift in their mindset, becoming more positive and self-reliant, actively running for and winning seats in urban local government. Their election has empowered them to oversee and manage resources and officials as well as to challenge their male counterparts.[47]

A study of the Jaipur Municipal Corporation revealed that more women are pursuing a political career, demonstrating abilities at par with their male counterparts. They have further contributed to reducing societal and municipal bureaucratic gender prejudices.[48]

Similarly, a study of the Kolkata Municipal Corporation showed that women councillors excelled in programme implementation and advancing community services and interests. Their performance often led to their re-election, even when their wards became open seats. Additionally, women councillors were proficient in fund utilisation, with rates ranging from 60 to 90 percent; utilisation below 50 percent was rare.[49]

The book *Democratisation in Progress: Women and Local Politics in Urban India* provides an account of women councillors in Kolkata, Mumbai, Delhi, and Chennai. The study showed regional variation in the profiles of the women local representatives.[50] Kolkata had the highest number of women councillors who were more educated, with full-time employment and greater political experience. In Delhi, most women councillors were new entrants in politics. Prior family connections in politics were evident among women leaders in Delhi and Mumbai. In Chennai, most women councillors had neither prior political or social experience nor politically active relatives. Kolkata also had a bigger presence of women in election campaigns than Delhi. The study noted that, in these mega-cities, party support, family connections, association with women organisations and NGOs, and financial strength play an important role for women leaders to participate in municipal elections and succeed in politics.

In the same 'Democratisation in Progress' book, there is little evidence that women's presence has significantly affected the workings of the municipal corporations in these cities. Women local representatives are viewed as being more aware of immediate civic problems in urban areas.[51] The reservation of seats in local bodies has proved to be most successful in states that have a proper rotation of reserved seats. In contrast, reservations for women were less effective in the two states that had women chief ministers at the time of the study (i.e., Delhi and Tamil Nadu). This indicates that the presence of a woman in the highest political position does not always guarantee that women will be better represented at the lower levels.

Challenges to Women in ULBs

The obstacles that women face in achieving equitable political representation must be analysed within the context of their roles in families, communities, and the work force. A comparative analysis of women in urban local governments in 13 countries indicated greater acceptance of women in city governments compared to central legislatures.[52] This has been attributed to how it appears to be easier for women to fit city governance work alongside employment and families; the work is also viewed more as community engagement, and there is relatively less competition.[53]

In India, empirical evidence shows that elected women representatives in ULBs face different barriers from those that confront their male counterparts. These include lack of orientation and training in urban development issues and municipal administration; insufficient knowledge and understanding of municipal acts, rules, and regulations; absence of prior experience in handling the complexities of multidimensional urban development and civic issues; and limited knowledge of technical aspects related to urban service delivery systems.[54] There is also inadequate support from senior colleagues in the party or municipal body and limited cooperation from municipal officials in understanding the various facets of governance like the budget and fund allocation dynamics at the central and ward levels.[55]

The political survival of women representatives is further challenged by a lack of party support, male-dominated party mechanisms, poor organisational structures, and insufficient funds and resources to sustain electoral campaigns, despite the code of conduct drawn up by the Election Commission.[56] They also experience discrimination in decision-making within the party and lack confidence in public speaking.[57] The criminalisation of politics as well as the increasing influence of money and power in elections create hurdles for women to contest complex electoral space while simultaneously handling family responsibilities.[58]

- **Lack of training:** A majority of women who are elected to ULBs are novices with no prior experience and who enter politics largely on the back of the reservation provisions.[59] Studies show that most women councillors have no experience of working in the public domain and

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struggle to understand issues of urban development, urban service delivery systems, and municipal administration.[60] In a 2022 survey in Karnataka, women councillors self-reported a lower understanding of the process of availing funds for their ward; four women councillors self-reported inadequate understanding, whereas only one male councillor self-reported the same.[61]

- **Lack of support from political parties:** As most party structures, especially at the local level, remain male-dominated, women's voice in the decision-making structures remains limited.[62] Surveys have suggested that women councillors do not receive adequate support from political parties for trainings and funds.[63] Limited interactions between political parties and local women leaders remains a structural challenge.[64]

- **Time poverty and care work:** The persistently uneven distribution of domestic work between men and women due to prevailing gender norms impacts the work of women councillors and mayors who are also bound to household activities. In a survey in West Bengal, women councillors reported having feelings of guilt for not being home for long hours to perform their work and said that they had less time for ward visits.[65]

- **Gender norms and patriarchal systems:** The capacity of women to exert influence is impacted by restrictive gender norms. Women councillors report facing stigma and restrictions when they occupy positions of power.[66] They are not considered to be assertive, knowledgeable, and able to lead well.[67] A study of women councillors from Jaipur revealed that men, blocked from holding office because of the gender quota, were still able to control and influence women office-holders.[68]

- **Family obligations and conditions**: The family environment and the level of support that women leaders receive have a significant impact on the level of engagement of women representatives in the administrative work of municipal bodies.[69] Supportive family members who share domestic duties help women representatives work more effectively.

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- **Rotation of seats:** Reserved seat rotation every five years, aimed at inclusivity, limits women's ability to build on their experience. Elected men often pursue multiple terms, while women are dissuaded from contesting unreserved seats by parties or male household members. Perceptions of women's electability also lead to fewer party nominations. Even women with political legacies and networks are confined to "safe" seats that were previously held by male relatives. Recent data suggests that women can win as much as men, but ingrained biases hinder their continuity in leadership roles.[70]

- **Dominance of money and muscle power:** While political background affects both male and female representatives, for women, the impact of political sociology and the political economy of local governments is more intense. The increasing influence of money and muscle power that are required to contest any election in India, combined with the aggression and misogyny faced by women candidates is perceivably higher.[71]

The Impact of Women's Participation in ULBs

SDG 5 underlines the importance of women's participation in decision-making at all levels, including in the development and implementation of policies and programmes. While it can be argued that women's participation in urban local governance has remained constrained in many aspects, the 74th Amendment has enabled the emergence of women's urban leadership, which is necessary for the sustainable and inclusive development of cities and for ensuring that cities accommodate the needs of all. Surveys show that, as chairpersons, mayors, and councillors, women in ULBs prioritise the needs of women and children, and their communities.[72] Women constituents find it easier to approach women councillors and demand resources for issues like water and sanitation, pre-school education, preventive health care, and environmental resources.[73] Women representatives have also demonstrated bold leadership to take prudent administrative and policy implementation decisions to strengthen the local governance architecture in many cities.

A study of women representatives in the Guwahati Municipal Corporation found that, even though the majority of women representatives were first-time entrants, they felt optimistic after entering public life and regarded themselves as empowered as they maintained and controlled administrative resources, interacted with other officials, and challenged their male counterparts.[74] Similarly, a 2022 study of wards led by women in the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai (MCGM) found that, with most women having entered politics because of the provision of reservation and with support from the men in their families, they are perceived as "proxy women"; however, women's proxy status is dynamic.[75] With greater political exposure, many women have been able to obtain political knowledge and move beyond the proxy status; around 18 percent of women in the study demonstrated the confidence to contest open seats and went on to win them.

Some women leaders and representatives of ULBs in many cities are well-educated and have taken a keen interest in addressing crucial challenges of local governance and developmental dynamics.[76] Simultaneously, many women leaders have belonged to political families and merely "inherited" the position of their male family members in local municipal bodies. Self-Help Groups (SHGs) across states have served as a useful training platform for many of their women members, providing them with the necessary exposure to participate in local politics and eventually be elected as representatives in local municipal bodies.

Recommendations and Conclusion

As in the case of *panchayats*, women's reservation in urban local self-government has increased women's representation and participation in politics in the cities and towns of India. The reservation of seats for women has facilitated the presence of women in electoral politics, thus making grassroots democracy more inclusive. Also, with increasing urbanisation in India and the concomitant challenges of governance, it is essential to enhance the roles of women representatives in ULBs. As women's representation in urban and rural local governance institutions face many of the same challenges, the recommendations for institutional reforms aimed at enhancing women's participation in local politics are also similar.

Building on their ongoing research on women's participation in rural and urban governments, the authors of this present analysis outline the following policy recommendations:

- Scale up and reinforce capacity-building and training programmes for women representatives in ULBs in urban governance, gender budgeting, climate change resilience, and environmental studies through government training institutes in partnership with civil society organisations. There is also a need to monitor the quality of these programmes and include access to digital technology and skilling.

- Establish institutional mechanisms to ensure that women can discharge their functions without interference from male representatives. Awareness and sensitisation campaigns need to be conducted to help change conservative perceptions about women's participation in urban politics.

- Promote greater convergence of women representatives in ULBs with women's collectives and SHGs to improve the reach and quality of public services, to tap into larger networks and improve the capacity for collective action.

- Implement institutional reforms that would compel political parties to encourage more women to participate in local politics in varied capacities in cities.

Recommendations and Conclusion

- Implement policy innovations to provide female candidates with access to skills and networks for innovative fundraising. Funding is essential for participation in all political systems and women candidates are known to have less resources than men.[77]

- Establish policy support for networking events and forums that bring together NGOs, the private sector, and government line agencies so that women representatives can build and sustain networks that can help them exercise their roles more effectively. The forums can be a platform for exchanging experiences and information with other women representatives as well as connecting with their constituents and understanding their concerns.

- Within ULBs, adopt gender-responsive planning and gender-responsive project financing, and ensure that funds are equitably distributed among male and female representatives.

The implementation of these recommendations would take time but their impact could be far-reaching. They will help strengthen local institutions of urban governance by implementing gender-responsive approaches.

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