

# Outcome of Women's Reservation in Panchayati Raj Institutions in Bihar

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## Abstract:

Many studies have highlighted the advantages of female leadership in bolstering investment in public infrastructure aimed at enhancing the well-being of women and children, along with fostering the empowerment of women. Building upon this premise, this study aims to examine how political decentralization and female leadership impact social and demographic indicators related to women's empowerment, thereby contributing to the growing body of research on this topic. The focus of this study is on State of Bihar, which is India's third most populous state with approximately 40 percent of the population lives below the poverty line. By analysing data from various rounds of the National Family Health Survey (NFHS), the study finds that empowering local governance and promoting female leadership have led to enhancements in women and child health outcomes, as well as bolstering women's empowerment at the grassroots level in Bihar.

**Keywords:** Panchayati Raj System, Panchayati Raj Institution, Political Decentralisation, Women Empowerment,

## Introduction:

Though the modernisation of a society requires strong leadership and planning at the central level, it will not succeed unless it engages the grass-roots units of self-government which ensures active involvement, contribution and participation of its citizens both male and female. Acknowledging the significance of democratic decentralization, Article 40 was introduced in Constitution of India. The Article states that the state shall take measures to establish village panchayats and empower them with the necessary powers and authority to function as units of 'self-government'. In order to study the implementation of Article 40, the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee was appointed in 1957. Based on the recommendations the aforesaid committee, a three-tier Panchayati Raj system was introduced. The Panchayati Raj system envisaged establishment of gram panchayat at the village level, panchayat samiti at block or intermediate level, and zilla parishad at the district level. Accordingly, all states of Government of India were covered with the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) in succeeding decade.

Thereafter, the Ashok Mehta Committee (1977) was set up for further investigation on functioning of Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) and recommended greater decision-making power to the local councils. It's one of the important recommendations were the participation of political parties in Panchayat elections and constitutional protection to further extend decentralization of power. The Committee also recommended representation of Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) in the election of PRIs on the basis of their population.

In the light of the recommendation of aforesaid committee as well as the short-comings that were observed during 1980s, the 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment of the Constitution was enacted in 1992, to protect certain basic and essential features of PRIs. Its major provisions included: establishment of three tier PRI system with elected bodies at the village, block and district levels; reservations for the SCs and STs proportional to their populations; and, most importantly, a one-third (33%) reservation of all the seats for women. Subsequently, 74<sup>th</sup> amendment of Constitution was also enacted in 1992 to provides for the local self-governing institutions in the urban areas. The 74th amendment provided with the authority to State Governments to establish the Urban Local Bodies (ULBs). ULB is also structured into three tiers, namely Nagar Nigams, Nagar Parishads and Nagar Panchayats. Thus, the local governance is administered through two main categories of institutions in India. In urban areas, there are municipal bodies and town councils, while rural areas are served by PRIs.

The majority of India's population resides in rural areas, with approximately 65 percent of the total population living in rural areas across the country. Specifically, in the state of Bihar, approximately 88 percent of the population resides in rural areas. This significant rural population emphasizes the importance of examining the impact of local governance through PRIs in addressing issues concerning women's development and empowerment. Accordingly, the present study is focused on Bihar which reserved 50% of seats for women in PRIs in 2006. In order to analyse the impact of increased women representation in PRIs, the present study has compared the development in various indicators of women development and empowerment with Uttar Pradesh which lower level of reservation (33%) for women in PRIs. The present study has used three rounds of data of National Family Health Survey (NFHS) conducted by Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India for the aforesaid analysis. NFHS is household survey that provide estimates of indicators of population, health and nutrition in India. It also provides important data on indicators crucial for measuring women's empowerment in India. The contents of NFHS 3 (2005-06), NFHS 4 (2015-16) and NFHS-5 (2019-21) are almost similar, however, NFHS 3 has used slightly lesser number of indicators to measure certain characteristics of women empowerment.

### **Panchayati Raj Institutions and their function in Bihar**

PRI in Bihar are organised into a three-tier structure aimed at decentralizing governance and empowering local communities. Gram Panchayat for every village or cluster of villages is the lowest level of the PRI system which is followed by Panchayat Samitis at block level, and the highest tier is Zilla Parishads at the district level.

Each Gram Panchayat is headed by an elected Mukhiya, similar to a chief executive officer of the village administration. Within the jurisdiction of each Gram Panchayat, a Gram Katchahry, or village court, is established to handle judicial matters related to the village. The Gram Katchahry consists of elected officials known as Panchs, with a Sarpanch serving as the head of the Gram Katchahry. The main objective of the Gram Kachahari is to try for an amicable settlement between the litigants. The Gram Panchayat also administer and govern villages focusing on social welfare, infrastructure development, and natural resource management. Moreover, Gram Panchayats manage local finances, foster social justice and empowerment and resolving local disputes.

The Panchayat Samiti serves as an intermediary tier of the Panchayati Raj system. It formulates strategies for economic progress and social equity at an intermediate level. Panchayat Samitis oversee

and regulate the activities of Panchayats in their jurisdiction. The function of Panchayat Samitis is also to facilitate and transmit the requests of Gram Panchayats to the Zila Parishad.

Zila Parishad plays a pivotal role as the apex body of the Panchayati Raj system at the district level. Its functions encompass district planning and resource management, overseeing the implementation of government schemes, and spearheading infrastructure development initiatives such as roads, water supply systems, and sanitation facilities. Additionally, the Zila Parishad plays a pivotal role in promoting agriculture, rural industries, and environmental conservation, while also coordinating with various government departments to ensure cohesive development efforts. As per the website of Panchayati Raj Department, Government of Bihar<sup>1</sup>, there are 8053 Gram Panchayats, 533 Panchayat Samitis and 38 Zila Parishads are functional in Bihar. Gram Panchayats are further divided into around 1.15 lacs wards.

### **Women Representation in PRIs**

The provisions of the above mentioned 73<sup>rd</sup> constitutional amendments were implemented differently in different states. For example, PRI has been operational in West Bengal since the 1970s, with regular elections held since 1978. Whereas, Government of Bihar implemented 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment to the Constitution without incorporating women reservation in PRIs and conducted the first local bodies elections in 200, after a long gap of 23 years. The election results revealed disparities in representation, particularly concerning women. While other reserved castes obtained representation relatively proportional to their population, women fell significantly short of their prescribed theoretical share of 33%. Specifically, less than 1% of women were selected as mukhiyas. However, the percentages were higher for the two higher tiers, with 11% of women were chosen as pramukhs, and 24% as adhyakshs (Kumar and Prakash, 2012).

In order to eliminate the above-mentioned gender imbalance in Bihar's local governance, the Bihar Panchayat Raj Act, 2006<sup>2</sup> was enacted to introduce 50 % reservation for women in PRIs, exceeding the 33% reservation introduced through the 73<sup>rd</sup> constitutional amendment. Thus, Bihar holds the distinction of being the first state to reserve 50% of the seats in Panchayats for women. As per the Bihar Panchayat Raj Act, women's reservation was embedded within the caste reservations (i.e., SC, ST & OBC categories) as well as the general categories, ensuring that the total number of reserved seats for women did not exceed 50 % limit. Following the Bihar Panchayat Raj Act, 2006, elections were conducted and women candidates got elected in the excess of 54% in 2006. Currently, according to the Bihar Gender Report Card 2019<sup>3</sup>, proportion of elected women in PRIs is approx. 52 %. Now, as per the information available in public domain, 20 States namely 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 have made provisions of 50% reservation for women in their respective PRIs.

### **Impact of Women's Reservation in PRIs on Social Development and Health**

Since the early 1990s, there has been a strong emphasis on market-driven economic reforms, which encompassed labour market liberalisation applying the provisioning of public services in India. These policies have led to a situation where households, particularly women within those households, are

<sup>1</sup> <https://state.bihar.gov.in/biharprd/CitizenAboutUs.html>

<sup>2</sup> The Bihar Panchayat Raj Act may be accessed at <http://www.bareactslive.com/BIH/BH291.HTM>

<sup>3</sup> Gender Report Card available at [https://www.c3india.org/uploads/news/C3\\_Bihar\\_Gender\\_Reportcard-min.pdf](https://www.c3india.org/uploads/news/C3_Bihar_Gender_Reportcard-min.pdf)

bearing a disproportionate burden of unpaid care and household work such as caring for children, elderly family members, or maintaining the household. This has implications for gender equality, as it perpetuates traditional gender roles and restricts opportunities for women in education, employment, and involvement in public affairs. Moreover, factors such as the lack of safety in public areas, inadequate care infrastructure, and challenges in accessing productive resources like land, finance, and digital technology further aggravate the economic disadvantages faced by women (Jhabvala, 2023).

Alongside the onset of economic reforms in the 1990s, India witnessed a new wave of decentralization of local governance, spurred by the enactment of the 73rd and 74th Constitution Amendments. These amendments mandated a 33.33% representation for women in local governments, aiming to promote political empowerment and gender equity. Thereafter, Panchayat being a state subject, various State Governments also implemented policies that provided opportunities for a significant number of women to participate in local governance and become members of decision-making bodies.

The literature suggests that female politicians tend to prioritize investments in antenatal care and early child health, recognizing the fact that women bear the costs of reproduction and replacement fertility (Bhalotra, 2014). Additionally, women politicians are more inclined to allocate resources towards initiatives benefiting women and children and are also supportive of redistribution policies (Besley and Case, 2003). The finding of the study by Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) supports the above statement as they found that women reservation in village council leadership positions in West Bengal and Rajasthan resulted in a rise in investment in public infrastructure essential for women. This study also found that female leaders exhibited a clear inclination towards directing investments into public goods primarily utilized by women, such as drinking water facilities.

Women in leadership position also contribute towards shifting societal attitudes and beliefs towards educational attainments of girls. Women leaders can influence aspirations of girls through two important channels: first, by undertaking policies that make it easier for women to succeed, thus changing beliefs on what is possible for girls, and second by providing a role model of a successful woman (Beaman et al., 2012). However, some other studies found the lack of evidence showing positive outcomes from women's reservation policies which happens due to existence of elite capture and clientelism (Bardhan et al. 2012).

A survey conducted in Bihar in 2021 revealed that elected women representatives play a crucial role in providing support to address issues such as domestic violence and child marriage. The survey found that 61% of elected women representatives intervened to stop instances of abuse reported by women in their constituencies, and 46% intervened to prevent child marriages. However, many women leaders were hesitant to openly discuss these interventions due to prevailing social norms (Sakshama, 2021). At the same time media reports from Bihar indicate that a significant number of women representatives in local governance have remained inactive and have served merely as symbolic figureheads. Such a situation can significantly limit the positive impact on their own development and the development of the community as a whole.

The aforementioned empirical findings can be elucidated through theory of Caroline Moser's (2012), which offers a meaningful differentiation between the practical needs and strategic interests of women. Moser (2012) suggests that practical needs pertain to immediate and tangible requirements essential for women to fulfil their existing roles, such as access to clean fuel, water supply, credit, and financial services, etc. On the other hand, strategic gender needs emerge from an analysis of women's subordination to men, focusing on rectifying gender-based disparities in wages, education, employment,

and participation in decision-making processes. Moser observes that while men tend to support women when they strive for practical needs, opposition arises when women advocate for equality, an end to gender discrimination, and the cessation of subordination.

In light of the above discussions, the following paragraphs tries to illustrate the extent of women's development in the State of Bihar after women's reservation in PRI through the data collected by NFHS. The NFHS provides data on various health and demographic indicators which can be used in assessing the status of women's health, empowerment, and overall well-being. The table below provides data comparing various indicators related to women's well-being and gender equality in Bihar in last three NFHS held in years 2004-05, 2015-16 and 2019-20:

**Table 1: Social and Health indicators in Bihar**

	2004-05	2015-16	2019-21
Sex Ratio at Birth for Children Born in the Last Five years (Females Per 1,000 Males)	893	934	908
Women who are Literate (%)	37	49.6	57.8
Women With 10 or More Years of Schooling (%)	13.2	22.8	28.8
Women Age 20-24 Years Married Before Age 18 Years (%)	69	39.1	40.8
Total Fertility Rate (Children Per Woman)	4	3.4	3
Infant Mortality Rate (IMR)	62	48	46.8
Institutional Births (%)	19.9	63.8	76.2
All Women Age 15-49 Years who are Anaemic (%)	67.4	60.3	63.5

Source: NFHS 3, 4 & 5

The above table and figures show the direction of change or trend observed during the three time periods (2005-6, 2015-16 and 2019-21) for various important indicator of women development covered under NFHS. If we consider the women development based on above mentioned indicators during 2005-06 to 2019-21, there is significant development for women in Bihar. However, if we consider the data captured in last two rounds of NFHS (2015-16 and 2019-21), the data provide mixed result as some of the indicators are improving and others deteriorating. This data also suggests that Government of Bihar and its PRIs performed better during the period 2005 to 2015 than that of the latter period from 2015 to 2021.

The above table shows that there is decline in sex ratio in Bihar during 2015 to 2021. The NFHS report indicates that this ratio is also decline at all India level. However, if consider the data from 2005, there is slight improvement in sex ratio at birth of child in Bihar as well as all India level. Women literacy is also increasing in Bihar as well as at all India level.

Child marriage has declined over one and a half decade, however, its incidence remains high in Bihar with 40.8 % of the women in the age group of 20-24. Girls who marry young are often socially isolated and they may face an increased risk of limited opportunities for education and decent work.

Further, the NFHS reports indicate that despite increasing educational attainment over time in Bihar, only 28% of women aged 15-49 had completed 10 or more years of schooling as of 2021. The NFHS 4 report also mentions that infant mortality rate is higher for children whose mothers have no schooling (i.e, 51 per 1,000 live births), compared to children born to mothers who have completed 10 or more

years of schooling (i.e., 37 per 1,000 live births). This substantial difference underscores the critical role of education, especially for women, in enhancing maternal and child health outcomes.

The NFHS data indicates that anaemia remains highly prevalent among women of all age groups, despite government-mandated iron supplementation primarily targeting pregnant women. The situation of anaemia is worsening in Bihar and across India over time, despite increasing levels of education among women across different segments of society.

### **Impact of Women's Reservation in PRIs on Women's Empowerment**

The most important aspect of the term 'empowerment' is 'power'. It implies control over material assets (physical and financial), intellectual resources (knowledge, information and ideas) and ideology (beliefs, values, and attitudes). This control, in turn, confers the power of decision-making. Thus, the process of challenging existing power relations, and of gaining greater control over the sources of power may be termed empowerment. (Batliwala, 1993).

Feminist writings from the 1990s present three key insights regarding empowerment. Firstly, they highlight that empowerment involves transforming power dynamics, recognizing that the inequalities prevalent in everyday life are neither natural nor acceptable. Secondly, empowerment is viewed as relational which acknowledges that individuals may experience disempowerment within certain power structures but can gain the "ability to make strategic life choices" within others. Thirdly, empowerment is conceptualized as a process rather than a fixed state or measurable outcome (Cornwall, 2016).

There are multiple dimensions to women's empowerment, with political participation being a significant one. For instance, it enables them to attain fair representation in decision-making bodies, whether formal or informal. This representation allows women to shape policies that impact their communities and societies. Thus, absence of women from leadership position means that decisions regarding the allocation of resources and other important matters may not adequately consider the needs, experiences, and priorities of women (Khan, 2011).

The study by Beaman et al. (2011) conducted in West Bengal illustrates how the absence of women in local leadership positions can influence parental aspirations for their daughters. In areas where no woman had previously held a local leadership role, a significant majority of parents, accounting for 86%, expressed a preference for their daughters to pursue traditional roles, such as being a housewife or adhering to decisions made by their future in-laws. This finding underscores the impact of representation and visibility of women in leadership positions on shaping societal perceptions and aspirations for girls.

A substantial body of literature underscores the significance of a woman's financial contribution to the household budget as a pivotal determinant of her decision-making authority within the family. However, woman's contribution to household income is not the sole factor influencing their decision-making power. The issue of property rights is also critically important in this regard (Roy, 2008). Several other studies have explored the correlation between women's ownership of land titles and their involvement in household decision-making. For instance, Santos et al. (2014) a positive link between women's inclusion on land titles and their engagement in decisions concerning agricultural land use and procurement of productive assets in West Bengal. Roy (2008) also found that women's inheritance rights contribute towards enhancing their autonomy within their in-law families. Similarly, Mishra and Sam (2016) presented evidence from Nepal, suggesting that women's participation in decisions regarding their healthcare, significant household expenditures, and familial visits escalates based on their land ownership status.

Given the above discussions, the subsequent paragraphs aim to depict the progress of women's development in Bihar following the implementation of women's reservation in PRI, drawing upon data acquired from the various rounds of NFHS.

**Table 2: Indicators of Women Empowerment (%)**

	2004-05	2015-16	2019-21
Participation in Household Decisions Making by currently married women	69.2	75.2	86.5
Women who Worked in the Last 12 Months and Were Paid in Cash	17.2	12.5	12.6
Women Owning a House and/or Land (Alone or Jointly With Others)	Na	58.8	55.3
Women Having a Bank or Savings Account that they Themselves Use (%)	8.2	26.4	76.7
Women Having a Mobile Phone that they Themselves Use	Na	40.9	51.4
Women Age 15-24 Years who Use Hygienic Methods of Protection During Menstrual Period	Na	31	58.8
Women of Age 18-49 Years who have Ever Experienced Spousal Violence (%)	59	43.2	40

Source: NFHS

The NFHS reports about women empowerment through various indicators like participation in household decisions, involvement in paid work, ownership over property, possessing bank account, using hygienic method during menstrual period and experiencing spousal violence, etc.

The aforesaid reports indicate improvement in women’s participation in household decisions from 69 percent to 86.5 percent during 2005-06 to 2019-20. The recent report finds that highest participation of women in decision making was seen in Nagaland at 99.1 percent followed by Mizoram at 98.8 percent. It is relevant to mention here that Bihar has reported the maximum increase from 75.2% in NFHS-4 (2015-2016) to 86.5% in NFHS-5 (2019-2021).

The data on women who worked in the last 12 months and were paid in cash shows the situation of paid work. The situation of paid work has worsened in last one and half decade as 17.2 percent women were engaged in paid work in 2005-06 which declined to 12.6 percent in 2019-21. If we see the development in last five years, this figure is abysmally low with almost negligible improvement from the last survey (2015-16).

Further, the situation of Women’s ownership of House and/or Land in Bihar has worsened in last five years. This data was not collected for the year 2004-05. The recent NFHS report mentions that 11 of the 22 states reported a decline in the fraction of women owning houses or land.

It is worth noting that while women's participation in paid work has declined from 2005-06 to 2019-21, their involvement in household decision-making has increased. This contradictory trend suggests that some other factors like education also plays important role in household decisions making and empowerment of women.

Government have been making efforts to enhance awareness of hygienic menstruation practices among girls and women. However, its percentage is still quite low in many states. Only 58.8% of

women in Bihar use hygienic methods of protection during their menstrual period. Whereas, 98.9 % women in Andaman and Nicobar Islands uses hygienic menstruation practices and secure top position amongst all states and union territories on this count.

Financial inclusion through saving account or other financial services is considered as an important indicator of development and is recognized as an enabler for various Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). As mentioned in above table, proportion of women having Savings Account in banks has increased significantly in Bihar as well as in India.

The occurrence of spousal violence in any form is seen as a sign of women's disempowerment within a relationship, reflecting a deficiency in autonomy and the capacity to assert their rights and choices. Therefore, spousal violence is considered as an important indicator of women empowerment. The above-mentioned data indicates that situation of women of Bihar has improved significantly in last few years.

### Women’s development in Bihar in comparison to Uttar Pradesh and All India

The preceding discussion highlights a prominent trend in women's development and empowerment, with a specific emphasis on the significant impact of increased reservation for women in local government in Bihar. This indicates substantial progress in Bihar since 2005. However, to thoroughly evaluate the ramifications of this reservation policy in local governance, it is imperative to undertake a comparative analysis with other states that have different levels of reservation for women in PRIs. Consequently, the subsequent section of the article endeavours to compare the developments in Bihar with those in Uttar Pradesh, as well as with the national average during the last two rounds of NFHS.

**Table 3: Social and Health Indicators of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and at All India level.**

Social Indicators	2015-16			2019-21			Change in status		
	Bihar	Uttar Pradesh	All India	Bihar	Uttar Pradesh	All India	Bihar	Uttar Pradesh	All India
Sex Ratio at Birth for Children Born in the Last Five years	934	903	919	908	941	929	26	38	10
Women who are Literate (%)	49.6	NA	68.4	57.8	61.1	71.5	8.2	NA	3.1
Women With 10 or More Years of Schooling (%)	22.8	32.9	35.7	28.8	39.3	41	6	6.4	5.3
Women Age 20-24 Years Married Before Age 18 Years (%)	39.1	21.1	26.8	40.8	15.8	23.3	1.7	-5.3	-3.5
Total Fertility Rate (Children Per Woman)	3.4	2.7	2.2	3	2.4	2	-0.4	-0.3	-0.2
Infant Mortality Rate (IMR)	48	63.5	41	46.8	50.4	35.2	-1.2	-13.1	-5.8
Institutional Births (%)	63.8	67.8	78.9	76.2	83.4	88.6	12.4	15.6	9.7



All Women Age 15-49 Years who are Anaemic (%)	60.3	52.4	53	63.5	50.4	57	3.2	-2	4
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Source: NFHS 3 and NFHS 4.

Note: The red blocks indicate worsening of situation.

India’s sex ratio at birth for children born in the last 5 years has demonstrated a marginal improvement, increasing from 919 female births per 1000 male births to 929 in 2021. Similarly, Uttar Pradesh experienced a notable improvement of 38 points during the same period. However, Bihar has undergone a significant decline of 26 points in sex ratio at birth, which is indeed concerning. This significant decline also raises concerns about either the quality of data collected through NFHS or the implementation of the Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (PCPNDT) Act of 1994 in Bihar. Both aspects need to be examined to understand the reasons behind this significant decline in the sex ratio at birth in Bihar.

Similarly, situation of child marriage and anaemia amongst women has worsened in Bihar, however, the same indicators have shown improvement in the state of Uttar Pradesh as well as at all India level. As regards the situation of anaemia amongst women, many other states have also experienced worsening condition.

The situation of year of schooling, Total Fertility Rate, Infant Mortality Rate and institutional birth have increased significantly over the last five-year period. However, if we compare this improvement with Uttar Pradesh or All India average, this is comparatively at lower points in most of the indicators.

The indicators such as years of schooling, total fertility rate, infant mortality rate, and institutional births have shown significant improvement in Bihar over the last five years. However, when compared to the Uttar Pradesh or All India, these improvements are still relatively lower in most of the indicators.

**Table 4: Indicators of Social Empowerment in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and at All India**

Women Empowerment Indicators (%)	2015-16			2019-21			Change in status		
	Bihar	Uttar Pradesh	All India	Bihar	Uttar Pradesh	All India	Bihar	Uttar Pradesh	All India
Currently Married Women who Usually Participate in Household Decisions	75.2	81.7	84	86.5	87.6	88.7	11.3	5.9	4.7
Women who Worked in the Last 12 Months and Were Paid in Cash	12.5	16.6	24.6	12.6	15.5	25.4	0.1	-1.1	0.8
Women Owning a House and/or Land (Alone or Jointly With Others)	58.8	34.2	38.4	55.3	51.9	43.3	-3.5	17.7	4.9

Women Having a Bank or Savings Account that they Themselves Use	26.4	54.6	53	76.7	75.4	78.6	50.3	20.8	25.6
Women Having a Mobile Phone that they Themselves Use	40.9	37.1	45.9	51.4	46.5	54	10.5	9.4	8.1
Women Age 15-24 Years who Use Hygienic Methods of Protection during Menstrual Period	31	47.1	57.6	58.8	72.6	77.3	27.8	25.5	19.7
Ever-Married Women Age 18-49 Years who have Ever Experienced Spousal Violence (%)	43.2	36.7	28.8	40	34.8	29.3	-3.2	-1.9	<b>0.5</b>

Source: NFHS 3 and NFHS 4

Now turning to the analysis of changes in indicators of women's empowerment over the last five years, Bihar has demonstrated greater improvement in most of the indicators mentioned in the table above, with the exception of ownership of house/land. These improvements are notably higher compared to Uttar Pradesh and the All-India average. For instance, in Bihar, there was an 11.3 percent rise in women's participation in household decision-making from 2015 to 2021, compared to a 5.9 percent increase. Likewise, spousal violence in Bihar declined by 3.2 percent, whereas in Uttar Pradesh, the decline was 1.9 percent over the same period. However, Bihar has shown slight decline in the percentage of women owning houses/land compared to 17.7 increase in Uttar Pradesh. Nonetheless, the current status of women's ownership of land is slightly higher in Bihar than in Uttar Pradesh.

When considering overall progress across all indicators mentioned in Table 3 & 4, situation of Bihar has notably improved at a higher rate compared to Uttar Pradesh and the All-India average. This suggests positive trends in women's empowerment within Bihar over the specified period.

### Conclusion

The existing literature available in this filed suggests the vital link between participation of women in local governance and women's development, thereby promoting women's empowerment. As discussed above, researches indicate that women political representatives play a significant role in improving the distribution of essential public goods and facilities which are closely associated with women's concerns. Furthermore, by prioritizing policies that support families and advocating for gender equality, women contribute to the development of more equitable and responsive local communities. These efforts ultimately contribute to women's empowerment. Given this background, this paper empirically examined the impact of higher representation of women in PRIs in Bihar on women's development and empowerment by utilising data from different rounds of the NFHS.

The figures presented in above tables illustrate the trends observed across three time periods (2005-06, 2015-16, and 2019-21) for various key indicators of women's development covered in NFHS. Over the period from 2005-06 to 2019-21, there has been significant development for women in Bihar based on

these indicators of social and health indicators such as sex ratio, women's education, child marriage, Total Fertility rate, Infant Mortality rate, institutional births and situation of anaemia amongst women. However, if we consider the data captured in last two rounds of NFHS (2015-16 and 2019-21), the data provide mixed result as some of the indicators are improving and others deteriorating. It is a serious concern that indicators such as sex ratio at birth, prevalence of child marriage, and the prevalence of anaemia have shown deterioration over the period 2015-16 and 2019-21, despite government efforts to raise awareness through various schemes.

It is relevant to mention here that India's sex ratio at birth for children born during last two NFHS has demonstrated a marginal improvement, increasing from 919 female births per 1000 male births 2016 to 929 in 2021. Similarly, Uttar Pradesh experienced a notable improvement of 38 points during the same period. However, Bihar has undergone a significant decline of 26 points in sex ratio at birth, which is indeed concerning. Similarly, situation of child marriage and anaemia amongst women has worsened in Bihar, however the same indicators have shown improvement in the state of Uttar Pradesh.

It's important to acknowledge that while empowering local bodies can certainly enhance the effectiveness of public facilities and promote health awareness, it cannot fully replace interventions addressing both the supply and demand sides of the health sector. Bihar currently faces challenges related to healthcare workforce shortages, including the low ratio of doctors and Auxiliary Nurse Midwives (ANMs) per capita. More than forty percent of sanctioned seats of doctors and ANM are vacant in Bihar (Bihar Economic Survey, 2022-23). Thus, health infrastructure conditions in Bihar may have hindered the improvement of health and social indicators.

On women's empowerment, the indicators mentioned in Table 2 and 4 highlight obstacles for women in earning income (paid work) and acquiring assets like property or financial resources. Overcoming these challenges necessitates holistic approaches, including efforts to expand economic opportunities, boost financial education, and ensure fair access to resources for women. Moreover, it is commendable that women have achieved significant progress in other dimensions of empowerment such as household decision making and improved financial inclusion through access to bank account. This progress likely reflects the significant role played by women in leadership positions, contributing to advancements in various aspects of women's empowerment. Moreover, the aforesaid improvements in indicators related to women empowerment are notably higher compared to Uttar Pradesh and the All-India average.

The analysis of this study highlights that women's representation in leadership positions positively impacts women's empowerment and ultimately influences women's well-being. However, it is important to recognize that the quantity and quality of health infrastructure and public facilities also play a significant role in women's development. Addressing both aspects i.e., women's representation in leadership and improving health infrastructure and public facilities, are essential for advancing women's empowerment and overall development of women.

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