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Article

Women's Participation, Human Resource Management, and Local Natural Resource Governance: A Conceptual Analysis of Panchayati Raj Institutions in Una District, Himachal Pradesh, India

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Abstract: Panchayati Raj institutions (PRIs) have become increasingly significant for decentralised local governance and may be relevant for the management of natural resources, including forest, grazing and water. With the adoption of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992, the women's quota in PRIs has increased their representation in local governance formally. Nevertheless, numerical representation does not always mean effective participation and influence on natural resource governance. The objective of this study is to analyse theoretically the relationship between women's participation, human resource management (HRM), and local natural resource governance, especially in the case of Una district, Himachal Pradesh. Based on literature on decentralised governance, gender, common pool resources, reservation policy, and public sector HRM, a theoretical framework is developed. This study underlines the significance of taking into account the institutional conditions along with representation, keeping in mind that the impacts vary based on the context. The conceptual analysis highlights that formal representation is not sufficient to achieve effective participation, and that capacity development, role clarification, and institutional support may possibly explain this relationship. Its main contribution lies in bringing into consideration public sector HRM issues in the analysis of gender-inclusive local natural resource governance. The study does not provide empirical data related to a specific district nor does it develop any causal relations; rather it poses research questions and indicator examples for further empirical study in Una district.

Keywords: Panchayati Raj Institutions; Women's Participation; Human Resource Management; Public Sector HRM; Human Resource Development; Capacity Building; Role Clarity; Institutional Support; Natural Resource Governance; Himachal Pradesh

1. Introduction

Local self-governing bodies can connect social institutions with ecological systems. Depending on the resource concerned and the applicable laws, Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) may have responsibilities relating to aspects of local development and natural-resource management. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992, provided constitutional status to PRIs and also transferred to them various functions enumerated in the Eleventh Schedule such as, land improvement, soil conservation, social forestry, minor irrigation, drinking water management (Government of India, 1992). The same amendment mandates that at least one-third of all PRI seats, including the seats of chairpersons, must be reserved for women and some states, such as Himachal Pradesh, have since increased the reservation to fifty percent.

The gender division of labour in rural areas of Himachal Pradesh has

led to women being more involved in domestic collection and utilization of natural resources like fuelwood, fodder and water. This gives them direct ecological knowledge and reliance, but historically, a limited voice in access and management of these resources in the institutions which govern them. Statutory reservation was meant to remedy this imbalance, but the extent to which numerical representation translates into substantive participation remains an important question for understanding local natural-resource governance, including forest management, water-source maintenance, and the use of common lands.

Una District of Himachal Pradesh state falls in the lower Shivaliks zone and is suitable to understand the participation of women in PRIs and natural resource management at local level. The issues concerning water, common lands, forest and rural livelihoods will be important themes of discussion from conceptual point of view. But the current paper does not determine whether there are particular ecological concerns in Una district because the paper does not have any field work in the district. Rather, the paper uses Una district to formulate questions for further research.

This enquiry is situated within a wider policy landscape and gender-inclusive natural-resource governance has become an important policy concern. Gender equality (SDG 5) and clean water and sanitation (SDG 6) are recognized as interlinked targets under the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, providing an international policy context for considering gender equality alongside sustainable resource management (United Nations, 2015). This convergence is visible in India's own policy architecture: the National Water Policy (2012) advocates women's participation in water-user associations and local bodies and the National Policy for Women (2016) also commits to strengthening women's role in natural resource management as a pillar of rural empowerment (Government of India, Ministry of Water Resources, 2012; Government of India, Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2016). However, this study is set in the context of a federal, three-tier system of decentralised governance in India, where these national and international commitments are ultimately operationalised, or not, at the level of the Gram Panchayat, where reservation policy under the 73rd Amendment meets local ecological and social conditions. In practice, policy commitments in national and international contexts do not always reflect grassroots participation. Experiences from participatory water management systems in Eastern India clearly indicate that it is important to analyze the implementation of gender commitments in practice (Khandker et al., 2020). Against this background, the present paper conceptually examines these dynamics in the context of Una district.

In the state of Himachal Pradesh, the long experience with Joint Forest Management (JFM), introduced in the early 1990s to devolve forest protection and management responsibilities to local user communities, offers a parallel and instructive institutional context to PRIs. Case-study evidence from JFM committees in the state's mountain communities of Solang and Khakhnal has revealed that women's participation in forest-related decision-making is still hampered by their underrepresentation on executive committees, despite the fact that they are disproportionately dependent on forest produce for household subsistence (Birch, 2016). In a similar vein, the study by Lal et al. (2016) that assessed participation in joint forest management in the district of Kinnaur revealed that among the various barriers are limited knowledge about participatory forest management, lack of coordination with forestry officers, insufficient funding and training, conflict with agriculture activities, and benefit-sharing problems. These studies provide a comparative basis for examining women's participation in natural-resource governance in Himachal Pradesh. However, findings from Joint Forest Management committees cannot automatically be

generalised to Gram Panchayats, which have a broader local-governance mandate. The present paper uses Una district as a context for developing a conceptual framework and identifying questions for future research, rather than claiming that the district has been inadequately studied in the existing literature.

A further dimension of this discussion involves HRM considerations under which elected female representatives could carry out their duties effectively. Training, role definition, and institutional support would be factors determining whether elected female representatives have access to information, awareness of their duties, and participation in decision making. The existence of formal representation alone does not guarantee that such conditions are met. An analysis of PRIs from the perspective of HRM therefore allows relating the entrance of women in elective positions to institutional mechanisms that would facilitate their participation in natural resource governance. It is for these reasons that the current paper constructs a theoretical framework on the interrelationships between women's representation, HRM conditions, participation, and socio-ecological impacts, especially in the context of Una district.

2. Objectives of the Study

The paper explores the relationship between the presence of women in the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), institutional mechanisms and natural resource governance, taking Una district in Himachal Pradesh as an example. The paper adopts a conceptual, literature-based approach and does not seek to establish women's participation or the ecological effects of PRIs in the district through field research. Thus, the objectives of the paper are:

1. To study the difference between the descriptive representation and substantive participation of women in PRIs, especially in decision-making regarding the use of natural resources (forests, water, common land).

2. To consider the possibility of women's substantive participation in local natural resources governance and socio-ecological issues in general, in the context of Una district.

3. To explore how HRM-related institutional conditions, including capacity development, role clarity, and institutional support, may shape the relationship between women's representation and their participation in local natural-resource governance.

These research questions draw together studies on women's political representation and decentralized natural resource governance as well as HRM in the public sector. This study seeks to theorize about the institutional processes which could make the connection between representation and participation and effective governance without testing the causality and effectiveness of the reserved seat policy with fresh empirical evidence (**Figure 1**).

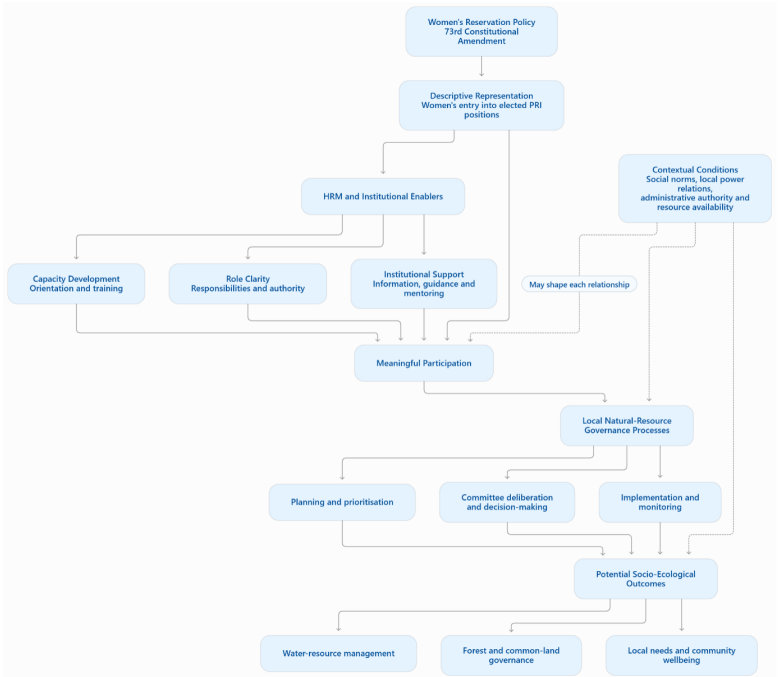


Figure 1. Proposed conceptual framework linking women's reservation, HRM conditions, meaningful participation and socio-ecological governance outcomes in Panchayati Raj Institutions.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Decentralised Governance and Natural Resource Management

There is a significant literature on decentralisation in natural resource governance, which suggests that decentralising power over forests, water, and common land to local institutions can lead to better natural resource outcomes if local users are genuinely involved and have a voice in decision making (Larson & Ribot, 2004; Larson & Soto, 2008). In India, PRIs were envisioned to be one such channel of decentralized environmental governance, as they have the statutory authority to perform responsibilities under the Eleventh Schedule of the Indian Constitution. Comparative research on decentralised forest and water governance suggests that outcomes may depend not only on the formal transfer of responsibilities but also on the distribution and exercise of decision-making power within local institutions.

Empirical studies have considered the relationship between political representation and forest conservation success. Evidence from India's Scheduled Areas has been provided by Gulzar et al. (2024) regarding the association between political representation that is mandated and forest conservation. While this study provides useful insight into how political representation might be associated with environmental results, it should not be considered as direct evidence about the impact of women's representation. In any case, the separation of descriptive representation and substantive participation continues to be relevant since the existence of representatives in elected bodies is not enough to claim the representatives' influence on the agenda, decision-making, and its implementation.

3.2 Gender and Common-Pool Resource Governance

The relationship between gender and governance of common pool resources stresses the need for recognizing how differently women and men contribute to the usage and governance of resources. Daily tasks such as gathering fuelwood, fodder, and water allow women to gain first-hand information about the nature of the resources and their changing states. However, this information might not be properly taken into consideration in the decision-making processes of resource governance institutions at the local level. Participation of women in

resource governance, as studied by participatory resource management research, is questionable when it comes to the issue of the decision-making power of women (Agrawal, 2003; Tisserand et al., 2022).

This pattern is not unique to forests, but exists for other common-pool resources too. Evidence from participatory water institutions in Eastern India shows that although women are primarily responsible for water collection and are best placed to identify supply and quality issues, their formal presence in water-user associations and panchayat water committees is minimal and gender mainstreaming commitments within the national water policy are unevenly implemented at the local level (Khandker et al., 2020). The same argument has been applied to non-timber forest produce (NTFP) and subsistence forest labour. Women's everyday hands-on interaction with forest resources generates practical ecological knowledge that participatory forest management programmes have historically failed to translate into decision-making authority or economic benefit-sharing. Women's labour burden has remained largely invisible even as forest policy has formally embraced participatory approaches (Jattan, 2003). Together, this literature suggests that the gap between women's knowledge on resource use and their institutional voice is a recurring concern of forest, water and grazing-land governance in India and not one that is peculiar to any one resource type.

3.3 Reservation Policy and Substantive Participation in PRIs

The literature on women's representation in PRIs has drawn a distinction between descriptive and substantive representation, where descriptive representation is described as the proportion of women in elected seats, and substantive representation is the voice of women representatives in agenda setting, budget allocation and implementation (Patnaik, 2013; Sukumar et al., 2019). The literature on women's participation in PRIs has studied situations where the presence of reservation may not always result in real participation. One issue raised in such studies is that of proxy participation, whereby a male relative may exert influence over the decision-making process reserved for the elected female representative. There have also been studies conducted to investigate whether women's representatives are able to influence decision-making related to drinking water, sanitation facilities, and fuel wood, among others.

Caste dynamics can further widen the gap between descriptive and substantive representation. Studies on decision-making in Gram Sabha meetings in Rajasthan show that caste position interacts with gender to determine whose voice is actually heard in open forums. Women from historically marginalised castes face a compounded exclusion, often hidden when studies treat 'women' as a homogenous category (Koli, 2017). Earlier survey-based evidence on women's participation in PRIs also found that attendance at meetings does not imply influence over agenda-setting. Women's contributions were concentrated in a narrow set of socially sanctioned topics such as sanitation and drinking water, rather than extending to higher-stakes decisions over forest and grazing-land allocation (Kaul & Sahni, 2009). An important research question that needs to be addressed in future research on Una district is whether women representatives have meaningful involvement in Panchayat discussions and committees and can affect decision-making on natural resource management. The current theoretical paper poses this as a question for empirical study and not a finding on women's participation in Una.

3.4 The Himalayan and Himachal Pradesh Context

In some parts of Himachal Pradesh, natural resource governance could be connected to issues pertaining to soil quality, availability of water during certain times of the year, and the usage of forest and grazing land for fodder and

firewood. Himachal Pradesh offers a useful case study to consider theoretically the relationship between women's representation and institutional factors within natural resource governance. The effects of higher representation on the Gram Panchayats need to be studied empirically.

The experience of Himachal Pradesh in common-pool forest management adds another dimension to this picture. The study on heterogeneity in collective management of common forests in the state found that participation outcomes also vary widely by household level factors such as landholding size and dependence on forest income which makes it difficult to sustain any simple assumption that formal reservation alone will produce uniform ecological benefits across panchayats (Naidu, 2009). Case studies of JFM committees in the mountain communities of the state also provide evidence that women are under represented on executive forest committees even where their dependence on forest produce for subsistence is the highest, even after decades of the implementation of JFM (Birch, 2016). It is interesting to note that these are findings at the HP and committee level and not at the panchayat level. These findings add to the utility of exploring if the broader constitutional PRI model differs from the narrower JFM committee model in terms of outcomes.

3.5 Gender and Forest Governance Outcomes: National Comparative Evidence

Comparative evidence from outside Himachal Pradesh gives useful benchmarks for interpreting the findings from Una. A study of 641 village-level forest protection committees in Madhya Pradesh found that women's participation was associated with improved regulation of illicit grazing and illicit felling. Importantly, the study distinguished the effects of women's active participation in monitoring and protection activities from the effects of their formal representation through committee membership (Agrawal et al., 2006). This finding is important for the present study because it suggests that ecological outcomes may be less a function of the numerical representation of reserved seats, than of active participation of women representatives in monitoring, enforcement and fieldwork. Meanwhile, comparative research across states cautions against homogenising 'women': research comparing Karnataka and Madhya Pradesh has found that exclusions from forest governance are constructed along intersecting lines of gender, caste and tribal identity, and that the particular pattern of exclusion is contingent upon local political-economic history, rather than conforming to a uniform national template (Elias et al., 2020). This is complemented by a study of community-based forest governance institutions in Odisha which found that participatory forestry programmes were generally successful in getting communities involved but exclusionary of women particularly when their participation was structurally under-represented in decision-making bodies rather than in attendance figures (Rout, 2018). Taken together, these studies suggest that the association between women's representation and natural resource outcomes is neither uniform nor automatic, and is contingent upon the specific institutional design, local social structure and extent to which representation is translated into active participation.

3.6 Research Gap

The existing literature on gender and natural-resource governance highlights several significant findings regarding women's participation, inclusion in the resource management institutions, and the situation when local governance can result in a more responsive outcome. Still, there are certain topics, which are still relevant for the further analysis of the role of women in PRIs.

The contribution of this paper is theoretical in nature. It synthesises findings from the field of women's political representation, decentralised natural resources management, and public sector HRM to develop a framework that links

representation with capacity building, role clarity, institutional support, and actual participation. It also suggests some indicative variables by which such linkages can be studied in future. The setting for developing such questions is the Una district, although the paper makes no attempt to develop district-level participation patterns or ecology.

First, gender and natural-resource governance studies typically focus on particular institutions like joint forest management committees or water user associations. Further conceptual analysis is needed to examine how women participate in Gram Panchayats, which address a range of local-development and resource-related responsibilities.

Second, the ecological and institutional context of Una district in the lower Shivalik region of Himachal Pradesh is suitable for analyzing the problems associated with water, forests, grazing grounds and common lands. The current study does not demonstrate through a literature review that such an ecological and institutional context has been inadequately explored. Instead, it employs Una as the context in order to formulate certain research questions.

Third, the relationship between the extent of women's representation in formal bodies and their actual involvement needs an assessment of the context which may either facilitate or limit such participation. More specifically, the potential influence of capacity development, role clarity, access to information, and organisational support may be considered together with the difference between descriptive and substantive representation.

These problems are approached in the paper with a review of the literature dealing with decentralised governance, gender and common pool resource management, reservation policies and HRM in public organisations. The contribution of this paper is an attempt to build a framework connecting women's reservations and representation to institutional support, participation, natural resource governance processes and possible socio-ecological outcomes. The framework does not prove the existence of any such connections in Una but proposes relationships and indicators for future empirical studies.

3.7 Human Resource Management Perspectives in Local Governance Institutions

In addition to political and ecological perspectives mentioned above, PRIs could be considered using the human resource management (HRM) perspective. Elected representatives are not employees recruited according to typical organizational practices, yet they have to fulfill their roles in effective local government. This perspective allows one to focus on the way organizations prepare and equip people to perform their roles in an efficient manner rather than on formal appointments. Research on public-sector people management highlights the relevance of management practices, organisational structures, and workplace relationships to public-sector performance (Ali et al., 2021).

Statutory reservation as mentioned in the 73rd Constitutional Amendment becomes an essential means for women to participate in elected office. Yet, the fact of women's presence in elected office does not guarantee their active participation in discussions, decision-making processes and the implementation of those decisions. The difference between the two types of representation is important since elected officials are able to demonstrate their capabilities depending not only on personal qualities but also on institutional support provided to them after entering office.

From the HRM point of view, four specific interdependent dimensions become highly important: capacity development, clarity of roles, institutional support and possibilities for active participation. Firstly, orientation and capacity development can be used in order for representatives to better understand the

process of functioning of the Panchayat system as well as budgeting and development planning processes. In India, capacity development programs for the elected Panchayat representatives have been developed, covering orientation, refresher courses and thematically focused learning sessions (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India, 2026). This provides a relevant institutional basis for examining how training is designed and delivered and how it relates to representatives' responsibilities. Nevertheless, the mere existence of training cannot be regarded as its effectiveness.

Second, the aspect of role clarity is concerned with whether representatives are aware of their duties and how they should contribute. Public administration research indicates that role clarification leads to role clarity and work satisfaction among government workgroups (Hassan, 2013). In the PRI scenario, lack of clarity regarding responsibilities and lack of information on the administrative process could prevent the representative from participating effectively. Role definition and procedural guidance will assist women representatives to participate in the discussions, planning, and monitoring processes more confidently.

Third, institutional support refers to access to the right kind of information, cooperation from Panchayat officials, the possibility of seeking advice, and the actual capacity to engage in debate and decision-making. This aspect of support is essential because merely providing training will not be enough to eliminate organizational and social impediments to participation. While the representative might have the requisite knowledge, she may not have much influence if she does not have access to documents, if she is not part of any discussion, or if she does not have much scope for performing her duties.

This makes these dimensions of HRM an important connection between women's representation and natural resource management. If the representatives have received adequate capacity development, have clear understanding of their duties, and also have institutional support, then there is a possibility that they might be able to contribute towards the decision-making process about water, common land, forests and other issues. These conditions may, in turn, influence how local needs are identified, resources are prioritised, and decisions are monitored. However, the ecological outcomes will not necessarily come out of good HRM practice alone. Other factors such as resource availability, administrative jurisdiction, community participation and so forth need to be taken into consideration.

Overall, the framework links women's descriptive representation with substantive participation through capacity development, role clarity, and institutional support. These proposed relationships provide a basis for future empirical research in Una district; they are not established findings about the district.

4. Study Area

Una district is located in the southern parts of Himachal Pradesh in the Lower Shivalik zone, near the Punjab border. The district includes varied terrain, seasonal rivulets that are locally called 'khads', and a subtropical climate characterized by a dry season. Livelihood activities of the people in the district include farming and cattle rearing. Common village lands could also provide fodder and firewood for rural populations. Gram Panchayats represent an important institution within which the question of local development and natural resource governance needs to be understood, including the aspects of water management and common land and forests (**Figure 2**).

In the current paper, Una district serves as a geographical and institutional setting for conceptual discussion about participation of women in PRIs. The present study does not provide primary data collected in Gram Panchayats of this

district. It therefore serves as a contextual setting for questions to be examined through future research (**Figure 3**).

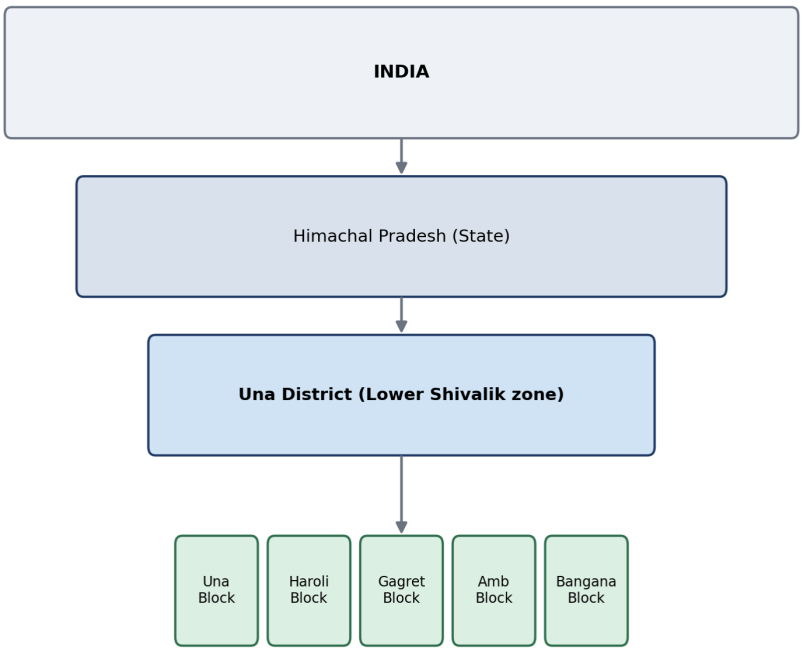


Figure 2. Administrative nesting of the study area

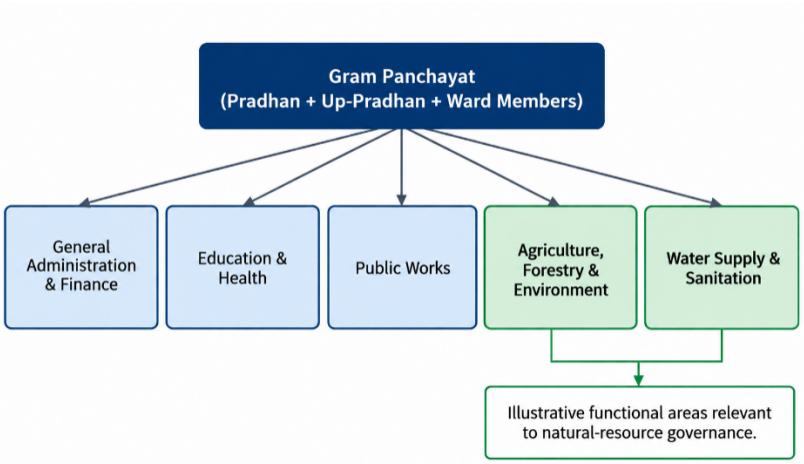


Figure 3. Conceptual illustration of Gram Panchayat functions and resource-related areas relevant to local natural-resource governance. The diagram is illustrative and does not represent a verified statutory committee structure.

5. Research Methodology

In this study, a conceptual and literature-based approach is used to analyse the connection between women's representation in PRIs, HRM practices and natural resource governance in Una district of Himachal Pradesh. This study does not include any primary data collection, but rather draws upon the themes generated in the literature review to build a conceptual model connecting reservation policies, institutional support, actual participation and possible socio-ecological consequences.

The methodology is guided by the paper's central proposition that women's formal representation does not necessarily translate into substantive participation. In this respect, the conceptual analysis considers how capacity development, role clarity, and institutional support may influence women representatives' participation in decision-making regarding local water resources, forests and

common lands.

5.1. Conceptual Scope and Institutional Context

The study concentrates on the PRIs in Una district of the lower Shivalik areas of Himachal Pradesh. Such an area provides a context in which the institutions of local governance can be examined in terms of their role in development activities and natural resources management at the village level. The paper focuses on women's reservation and representation in Panchayat elections.

The institutional framework takes into account the constitutional arrangement provided by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, implementation of Panchayati Raj in Himachal Pradesh, and the policy context of women's reservation in local government. The discussion takes into consideration the difference between access to political office and the institutional arrangements needed for participation.

5.2. Literature-Based Conceptual Analysis

The research is based on the literature reviewed in Sections 3.1–3.7, which include the literature on decentralisation and governance, women and CPR governance, women's reservation in PRIs, Himachal Pradesh background, comparative studies of forest governance and HRM in local institutions. These strands of literature are synthesised to develop a conceptual framework outlining possible relationships between representation, participation, and natural-resource governance.

The analysis is organized along four interrelated dimensions:

Representation: Women's participation in the formal process of being elected into the position of PRI member by way of reservation.

HRM and institutional conditions: Capacity building, role definition, information provision and mentoring.

Meaningful participation: Participation in discussion, committee work, planning, decision making and monitoring.

Potential governance outcomes: Identification of local priorities of resources and plans, implementation and monitoring of decisions regarding water, forests and common lands.

The framework also acknowledges contextual factors, such as social context, power dynamics, administrative control, and resource endowment. The latter might impact the interplay among representation, institutional support, participation, and governance effectiveness.

The aim of the conceptual analysis is not the quantification of effects nor does it make any claims about the confirmation of the relationships outlined for Una district. Rather, it aims at outlining theoretically relevant linkages and developing the groundwork for future research. The paper does not make any claims about conducting a systematic review since no formal literature search, screening process, and inclusion/exclusion criteria have been established within this manuscript.

5.3. Conceptual Dimensions and Proposed Indicators

In order to make the framework applicable for research within the field of HRM and empirical research in the future, this paper proposes illustrative indicators for examining the dimensions of the conceptual framework in future research. These indicators are proposed for future investigation and do not represent observations from the present paper.

The proposed indicators can differentiate between HRM inputs, participation and the possible governance outputs. For instance, participation in the training program indicates exposure to capacity development, but not necessarily improved performance. In addition, attending a Panchayat meeting does not necessarily

indicate an influence on the decision-making process.

5.4. Analytical Approach

Conceptual analysis involves assessing the connections between the dimensions mentioned above. To begin with, it assesses the ways in which the reservation policy creates opportunities for female representation. Secondly, it assesses how capacity building, role clarity, and institutional support may affect the representatives' participation process. Thirdly, it assesses the mechanisms through which participation may affect the identification of priorities, discussion, implementation and evaluation of initiatives. Finally, it identifies contextual conditions that may influence the aforementioned mechanisms.

This approach brings political, institutional, and ecological perspectives together to examine women's reservation and natural-resource governance while clarifying the contribution of the HRM perspective. It also avoids treating women's representation as a sufficient explanation for ecological outcomes without considering other relevant institutional and contextual factors.

5.5. Methodological Scope and Limitations

This paper is conceptual and does not discuss the findings of a completed primary survey, interviews, focus groups or statistical analyses. The indicators presented in **Table 1** are a conceptual framework rather than empirical findings.

Table 1. Conceptual dimensions and illustrative indicators for future empirical investigation

Conceptual dimension	Illustrative indicators	Potential sources for future research
Women's representation	Proportion of women elected; representation in leadership positions; membership of relevant standing committees	State Election Commission records; Panchayat records
Capacity development	Access to orientation and training; relevance of training to assigned responsibilities; opportunities for refresher learning	Training records; interviews with elected representatives
Role clarity	Understanding of responsibilities, decision-making authority, committee functions and administrative procedures	Questionnaires; interviews; Panchayat rules and documents
Institutional support	Access to records and information; guidance from Panchayat functionaries; mentoring and peer-learning opportunities	Interviews; institutional records; questionnaires
Meaningful participation	Attendance and contributions in meetings; involvement in committee deliberations; participation in planning and oversight	Meeting minutes; committee records; interviews
Natural-resource governance processes	Inclusion of water, forest and common-land priorities in plans; allocation of resources; implementation and monitoring arrangements	Panchayat plans, budgets and records; relevant departmental documents
Potential socio-ecological outcomes	Condition and accessibility of local resources; reported time and effort involved in collecting water, fuelwood and fodder; community perceptions of resource management	Relevant departmental records; household surveys; community interviews

Source: Author's conceptual synthesis. Indicators and sources are proposed for future empirical research and do not represent data collected in this paper.

The scope of the study is restricted due to its reliance on literature and conceptual analysis. The paper does not provide information regarding the prevalence of particular constraints to HRM among elected women representatives in Una district, their effectiveness in particular training programs, or the influence of women's involvement in improving the local ecology. All these issues require further empirical study with proper sampling methodology, data collection tools, and methods of analysis.

However, despite these restrictions, the conceptual approach allows the paper to develop a framework for examining how HRM-related conditions may connect women's representation with meaningful participation in local governance. Moreover, it suggests several dimensions for future empirical research in Una district and other similar cases of local government.

6. Conceptual Analysis and Discussion

This section discusses the conceptual implications of the literature reviewed in Section 3 and considers how the framework in **Figure 1** could guide future research on Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in Una district, Himachal Pradesh. Since no field study was conducted, the discussion does not provide any observations on the district as empirical evidence but explores the applicability of the literature to the issues of women's representation, institutional support and substantive participation in natural resource governance. Particular emphasis is placed on HRM as a potential explanation for why formal representation may not always translate into substantive participation by women in PRIs.

6.1. Women's Representation and Meaningful Participation

Reservation of women within PRIs provides an opportunity for the entry of women into institutions of local governance. It should be acknowledged though that formal or descriptive representation, that is the presence of women in elected positions, must be separated from substantive participation in deliberations, agenda-setting, decision-making and oversight processes. The literature reviewed in Sections 3.2 and 3.3 suggests that numerical representation does not necessarily translate into substantive participation.

The research on local governance in India has posed some queries about whether the formal presence of women is followed up by their influential role in decision-making (Kaul & Sahni, 2009). The research on forest governance has similarly differentiated between the presence of women within a committee and their role in resource monitoring and management (Agrawal et al., 2006). This is an indication that the quality of participation should be taken into consideration together with the quantity of positions held by women.

Regarding PRIs in Una, this difference becomes highly significant for decisions related to water resources, forests, grazing areas, and common lands. However, the level of participation of women in these standing committees and their influence on resource-related priorities and decision-making processes cannot be determined from the current conceptual analysis.

The HRM approach introduces yet another dimension to the discussion. The representatives can vary in their experience and knowledge of the administration process and information access. Learning opportunities, clear responsibilities, and access to deliberative processes may create an institutional environment that supports meaningful participation by women representatives. Representation needs to be analyzed, therefore, not only as an outcome of the reservation process but also in terms of institutional support post-election.

6.2. Potential Socio-Ecological Implications of Participation

Women's participation could be relevant to natural resource governance because resource management decisions can affect access to water, access to fuelwood and fodder, common land use and other rural livelihoods. Women's actual experiences of resource collection and management can contribute to the knowledge of priorities in resource use and management. Nevertheless, the mere presence of women in positions of decision-making does not mean that this knowledge will be utilized in planning and ecology will improve.

There is evidence related to the role of participation in monitoring and forest protection in the case of forest governance in Madhya Pradesh (Agrawal et al., 2006), as well as evidence concerning women's participation in joint forest management and women's representation in forest management institutions in Himachal Pradesh (Birch, 2016). Although they constitute important perspectives for comparison, they cannot be considered as evidence about results in Una's Gram Panchayats due to different contexts.

This relationship is possible through various governance processes in

which representatives capable of participating in the process of planning can aid in raising community concerns regarding the provision of water supplies, common land and resource-management priorities. Implementation and monitoring processes can help identify governance problems and assess whether planned activities have been carried out. Whether these processes will lead to some positive outcomes will depend on several factors, including funding, administrative capacity, ecological pressures and coordination of relevant departments.

Thus, this conceptual framework suggests socio-ecological outcomes as possible outcomes of governance processes and not as the effect of women's participation. In the case of Una, future research can explore the changes in access to the resources, the state of common lands, the time needed for collecting essential resources and the perceptions of the community about the local resource management. Without any evidence, it will be inappropriate to assume that women's participation has alleviated resource collection burdens or improved the ecological situation in the district.

6.3. Reservation Policy and Institutional Effectiveness

Reservation policies can increase women's representation in elected local-government institutions. But its further institutional relevance would depend on whether women have meaningful opportunities to participate in governance alongside their formal representation. The papers discussed in this review demonstrate that the connection between reservation policies and the opportunity to take part in the governance activities should be considered through the lens of the institutional practices and power dynamics.

There are three factors that are crucial in the context of the current theoretical framework. Firstly, the representatives should have opportunities to perform their functions without their formal powers being undermined by somebody else. Secondly, they should be educated on the processes of administration, budgeting, planning development, and managing natural resources. Finally, the institutional support may influence their ability to make use of the chances of participation.

These factors provide a link between reservation and HRM. Capacity development facilitates knowledge acquisition; role clarification enables understanding of roles and powers; institutional support provides access to information and cooperation to carry out the role. While these factors cannot be seen as necessary for good governance, they provide a structure to assess why different formal structures function in diverse ways in different environments.

For Una district, the above considerations pertain to the implementation of reservation in the broader context of PRI organisations. Future research can focus on whether women representatives are provided with training related to the task; whether they are clear regarding their responsibilities in the committees; whether they have access to administration-related information; and whether they can influence decisions and resource allocations. These are suggested areas of research but not conclusions on the current effectiveness of reservation in Una. The latter can be drawn only based on evidence from Una.

6.4. Lessons from Himachal Pradesh and Other Indian Contexts

Comparative analysis not only allows for a better understanding of the issues that may be of relevance in the case of Una, but also shows why lessons cannot simply be transferred blindly between contexts. In this regard, studies on joint forest management in Himachal Pradesh have pointed to the problem of women's representation in executive forest management committees (Birch, 2016). Also, studies conducted in other parts of India have discussed how social position and institutional design influence participation in community forest governance (Elias et al., 2020; Rout, 2018).

This research is relevant as it points to the fact that participation depends not only on women's representation in forest management committees. The context of social relations and resource access as well as the institutional design can influence the process of participation, which knowledge is taken into account and who possesses the power to act and make decisions. At the same time, forest management committees and Gram Panchayat are not the same institutions.

The study has relevance to future research by virtue of the fact that the paper concentrates on the lower Shivalik region and local governance pertaining to water sources, forest lands, grazing grounds, and common lands. The significance of this study does not lie in claiming that the situation in Una is a repeat of what occurs elsewhere; rather it lies in posing questions that can be explored through research in the context of Una. These include whether women members actually take part in decision-making on the issue of resources, whether institutional mechanisms influence such participation, and whether there is any link between resource requirements and local governance.

6.5. HRM Gaps and Implications for PRI Functioning

The key HRM issue that emerges from this study is that of the importance of institutional environment in enabling representative women to participate effectively. Reservation enables women to become members of elected bodies, but these members may need continued assistance to understand the processes and participate in decision making. Thus, capacity development, role clarity, and institutional support are important dimensions of research on local governance.

Capacity building needs to go beyond a one-time orientation as responsibilities call for continued learning. Relevant training could include Panchayat procedures, budgeting, planning, committees and resource management. The value of training should be assessed not only by attendance but also by its relevance and usefulness for governance tasks.

Role clarity is about whether representatives are clear about their official duties, the range of their powers and their contribution to the decisions of committees and Panchayats. Adequate guidance on procedures and access to appropriate documents might help representatives participate more efficiently. However, role clarity cannot compensate for limited authority, power inequalities, or administrative non-cooperation.

Institutional assistance involves access to information, help by Panchayat staff members, mentoring and peer learning possibilities, and the ability to participate in decision-making processes. Institutional support may be particularly important when representatives have limited experience of working within formal governance systems. Institutional assistance should be regarded as an organisational, not individual, duty to help women representatives develop necessary competences.

This suggests the conceptual order: reservation allows women to get access to elected positions; HRM and institutional assistance can assist representatives in performing their role; participation may affect governance process; governance process may influence socio-ecological outcomes. Each of such linkages depends on local context. Training may not generate influence, participation does not guarantee effective resource management, and ecological outcomes may depend on factors beyond the reach of representatives.

In terms of policy and practice, however, the framework suggests several aspects where the institutional effort is needed, including accessibility and continuity of training, information on responsibilities, timely access to administrative documentation, structured support in committee activities, and involvement of the representatives in the planning and monitoring processes. The relevant Panchayat and state bodies may also consider evaluating training

relevance, role clarity, institutional support, and decision-making participation of the representatives. The indicators proposed in Section 5 may serve as a starting point in this process.

On the whole, the conceptual framework expands the discussion of the topic by incorporating HRM mechanisms in the explanation of local governance. It provides a framework to analyze the potential ways of supporting the elected women representatives in their efforts to move from formal representation to participation in natural resource decision-making. The extent to which these relationships exist in reality in the case of Una district deserves further empirical investigation.

7. Conclusion and Policy Implications

This paper develops a conceptual framework for examining the relationships among women's representation in PRIs, HRM-related institutional conditions, and natural-resource governance, using Una district, Himachal Pradesh, as the context for future research. The combination of theoretical perspectives on decentralized governance, gender and CPR management, reservation policy, and HRM in the public sector contributes to the formulation of a conceptual framework for explaining why women's formal entry into elected office does not necessarily mean substantive participation in governance processes.

It should be stated that reservation creates an essential institutional basis for women's representation; however, reservation alone does not ensure substantive participation or particular socio-ecological outcomes. Capacity development, role clarity, and institutional support may influence how elected representatives understand their responsibilities, access relevant information, and contribute to decision-making concerning water resources, forests, and common lands. The HRM aspects create an interesting additional approach to studying the relationship between descriptive and substantive representation.

The paper additionally emphasizes the need to differentiate between participation and its possible consequences. Participation in the processes of planning, deliberations, implementation and monitoring may generate possibilities for taking into account the resource needs of the locality in the process of decision making. However, increased participation does not necessarily lead to a better state of the environment. Consequences may also depend on factors such as administrative competence, funding availability, power structures in the locality, social norms and ecological pressures in particular localities.

7.1. Policy Implications

The framework suggests three practical priorities for public-sector HRM in Panchayati Raj Institutions: relevant and continuing capacity development, clear guidance on representatives' responsibilities and decision-making powers, and institutional support through timely access to information, Panchayat records, and administrative cooperation. Implementation may include task-relevant orientation and refresher training, structured support for committee activities, and opportunities for women representatives to contribute to planning and monitoring. These measures could be evaluated through role-knowledge assessments, representative feedback, access to records, documented participation in committee discussions and oversight, and the inclusion of resource-related priorities in local plans and budgets. Such indicators would help assess institutional processes but would not, by themselves, establish improved governance or ecological outcomes. These recommendations require evaluation in context and should be treated as proposals for future practice, not as findings from Una district.

7.2. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The paper is purely conceptual and thus has not conducted any empirical fieldwork or done any statistical analysis. Therefore, it cannot confirm the degree

of the HRM-related constraints that exist for the elected women representatives in Una, evaluate the success of particular training programs, nor prove that women's participation has led to changes in resource condition in the area. Its contribution consists of organizing available literature and identifying relationships which need further investigation.

Further research might conduct an empirical study of relationships described above using the example of Gram Panchayats in the Una district. The following dimensions can be used: access to training, role clarity, institutional support, participation in standing committees, participation in resource decision-making and measures of resource accessibility and management. Further research designs will have to make clear how they sampled data and conducted data analysis and will have to differentiate between representatives' perceptions and administrative information as well as independently assessed resource conditions.

Further research could use comparative analysis of Panchayats in order to find out how the identified relationships are affected by the tenure of the representatives, social situation in the area, its resource dependency and administrative support.

7.3. Concluding Remarks

The main contribution of this paper is to link the issue of women's representation in local government to the HRM-related institutional conditions that may facilitate their effective participation. Through the introduction of the issues of capacity building, role clarity, and institutional support into the analysis of PRIs, the discussion goes beyond the mere number of women holding elected posts and looks at the organizational issues related to their participation in natural resource management.

In relation to Una district, this conceptual framework offers a starting point for further empirical research rather than a claim of achieved results on the local level. However, generally speaking, it shows that the issue of gender-balanced local governance should be addressed both in terms of who holds the elected posts and what makes it possible for them to do their job.

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