



Leaving no one behind through women's leadership: How elected women representatives become agents of inclusivity in local governance

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Abstract

The principle of “leaving no one behind (LNOB)” lies at the heart of contemporary global development commitments. It requires that those who are most excluded from decision making become visible and heard. Elected women representatives (EWRs) in local governance are uniquely positioned to translate this principle into action. This paper examines how such representatives can act as agents of inclusivity, moving beyond mere presence in elected office to substantive influence over policies and resources that affect the most marginalized women and girls. The paper adopts a qualitative, conceptual methodology based on a critical synthesis of existing literature and documented cases from multiple contexts. It does not present new primary data but instead analyzes patterns of success and failure to derive a practical framework. The argument proceeds in three stages. First, the paper reviews evidence that when women hold leadership positions, women in the community come forward with their needs, and governance becomes more responsive to issues such as water, sanitation, health, nutrition, and safety. Second, the paper identifies persistent barriers that prevent many elected women representatives from acting effectively. These barriers include proxy rule by male relatives, lack of political and administrative skills, unpaid care work, limited safe mobility, and everyday patriarchal hostility. Ultimately, these constraints create a gap between formal inclusion and real influence, a gap where the promise of leaving no one behind is routinely broken. In this context, the paper argues that elected women representatives can become genuine agents of inclusivity only when three conditions are met. First, they require sustained, collective capacity building that builds confidence, legal literacy, and solidarity, not merely one-off technical training. Second, they need strong linkages with women's organizations and self-help groups that provide accountability, protection, and a direct channel from marginalized communities to decision makers. Third, monitoring systems must shift from counting how many women are elected to tracking whether they actually influence decisions, whether marginalized women report being heard, and whether public resources reflect women's stated priorities. The paper contributes a practical framework for moving beyond symbolic representation to substantive inclusion. It reframes elected women representatives not as passive beneficiaries of quotas but as active agents who can, when properly supported, ensure that the furthest behind are no longer forgotten. The conclusion offers actionable recommendations for policy makers, civil society organizations, and international partners committed to leaving no one behind.

Keywords: leaving no one behind (LNOB), elected women representatives (EWRs), local governance, agents of inclusivity, women's political participation

Introduction

India's 73rd Constitutional Amendment (1992) mandated that at least one-third of seats in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) be reserved for women. Several states later raised this to 50 per cent (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2021) ^[12]. These legal provisions have significantly increased the numerical presence of women in local governance. However, research shows that numerical representation does not automatically translate into substantive decision-making power or improved service delivery for disadvantaged groups (Jayal, 2006; Dahlerup & Freidenvall, 2005) ^[4, 9]. The principle of “leaving no one behind” (LNOB) is central to the 2030 ^[8] Agenda for Sustainable Development. India's Voluntary National Review 2020 ^[14] states that:

The pledge to leave no one behind is a commitment to end extreme poverty in all its forms and to act explicitly to ensure that those who have been left behind in the development story are raised to a level-playing field. (NITI Aayog, 2020 ^[14], p. 34)

This means that the LNOB principle requires governments to actively identify and prioritise those who have been excluded from development progress.

Elected women representatives (EWRs) are uniquely positioned to advance the LNOB principle because they often have direct knowledge of the needs of women, children and other excluded populations in their villages. Yet, EWRs face severe constraints such as proxy rule by male relatives, lack of political awareness, heavy domestic workloads and patriarchal resistance that prevent them from acting on behalf of the most vulnerable. As NITI Aayog (2019) ^[13] noted, “reservation alone cannot suffice to ensure real empowerment of rural women” (p. 3). Thus, it becomes clear that quotas are a necessary but insufficient condition for women's political empowerment.

Cochrane and Rao (2018) ^[2] provide a powerful warning about the limitations of focusing on a single dimension of inequality. They argue that:

Devoting resources to one component, usually sex disaggregation, in data collection and analyses, results in fewer studies exploring the interactions of gender with other forms of social difference, or the multiple layers of social inequalities people experience in their lived realities. (p. 2)

This is a point to note, as simply counting how many women are elected is insufficient. It is also necessary to

understand how caste, class, and location interact with gender to shape whether an elected woman can actually exercise power. They further contend that “Uncovering these patterns of interdependence, the fluidity of connections within and across categories, is central to understanding the continuities and changes in social inequalities” (Cochrane & Rao, 2018 ^[2], p. 2). For EWRs, this implies that interventions must address the intersection of patriarchy, caste, and economic marginalisation simultaneously.

Winkler and Satterthwaite (2017) ^[20] critically examine whether the SDGs can truly deliver on the LNOB promise. They argue that:

The litmus test for whether the SDGs will truly leave no one behind is not whether the SDG goals and targets include such (aspirational) language, but whether this language will translate into implementation of the goals on the basis of equality and non-discrimination. (p. 2)

Clearly, quotas for women in PRIs, while important, are not sufficient. What matters is whether these quotas translate into actual decision-making power. Winkler and Satterthwaite further observe: “Despite a mandate to produce disaggregated data, there has been little attention to disaggregation based on some of the most important axes of discrimination - especially race or ethnicity” (p. 2). This data gap is directly relevant to EWRs in India: without disaggregated data on caste, tribe, and gender together, the specific barriers faced by Dalit or Adivasi women representatives remain invisible to policy makers.

Stuart and Woodroffe (2016) ^[18] connect the LNOB principle directly to gender equality. They write: “The Leave No-one Behind agenda could potentially help ensure that the particular interventions needed for women and girls to meet each target are recognised across the board” (p. 70). Thus, it is clear that LNOB is not a separate agenda from gender equality but a framework that requires gender to be considered in every goal. They also warn that “Leaving No-one Behind implies reaching women and girls even in areas where new national targets are to be introduced” (p. 76). For EWRs, this means that their role is not limited to “women’s issues” but extends to all areas of local governance such as infrastructure, agriculture, education, health, because women and girls are affected by all of these policies.

Gabay and Ilcan (2017) argue that the SDGs themselves are a political construct. They write that the SDGs:

Define the limits of what can be said and what can be done; shape development logics through notions of division and forms of exclusion; construct political problems as technical problems; create certain spaces of imagination as a field of activity; and endorse particular ideas and forms of knowledge in models for sustainable development. (p. 3)

This observation is directly relevant to PRIs: the technical framing of women’s representation as a simple numerical target, for instance the 50 per cent reservation, constructs a political problem through patriarchal exclusion from decision-making that extends as a technical problem of seat allocation. By doing so, it endorses a narrow, measurable knowledge of “empowerment” while ignoring the lived, embodied, and relational dimensions of power.

Klasen and Fleurbaey (2018) ^[10] offer a conceptual clarification that is essential for understanding LNOB in the context of PRIs. They distinguish between “left behind countries, groups, or people” (p. 3). They argue that “When considering LNOB within countries, it is still important to

distinguish between a concern for LNOB among individuals or among groups, commonly referred to as vertical and horizontal inequality, respectively” (p. 3). Here, the argument points out that EWRs must focus not only on poor individuals but also on groups such as Dalit women, Adivasi women, and disabled women who face multiple, intersecting forms of discrimination. They further note that “horizontal inequality is a source of conflict and social strife in many societies” (Klasen & Fleurbaey, 2018 ^[10], p. 3). Certainly, ignoring horizontal inequalities between caste groups as well as tribal and non-tribal populations risks perpetuating the very conflicts that undermine sustainable development.

Pogge and Sengupta (2016) ^[17] offer a critical perspective on the tension between human rights and development goals. They argue that “The development goals discourse invites an incremental approach to overcoming deprivations, while the human rights discourse suggests that deprivations must be ended right away” (p. 22). Clearly, the incremental approach of reservation policies like gradually increasing women’s representation stands in tension with the human rights demand that women’s political participation be ensured immediately. They further argue that the SDGs’ language of “progressive realization” indicates that “the full eradication of various deprivations recognized by the SDGs may take as much time as the governments deem reasonable to complete the task” (Pogge & Sengupta, 2016 ^[17], p. 22). Therefore, it can be interpreted that without a human rights framework, the LNOB principle can be indefinitely delayed. Fukuda-Parr and Smaavik Hegstad (2018) ^[7] analyse the origins and trajectory of the LNOB concept. They state that “The term ‘leave no one behind’ first appeared in a report of the UK based charity Save the Children, Ending Poverty within Our Generation: Save the Children’s vision for a post-2015 ^[15] framework, Save the Children 2012, that was published in 2012” (p. 2). Interestingly, the LNOB principle originated in civil society advocacy, not in government circles. The authors further note that “Leave no one behind was then put forward in the report of the HLPEP as one of the five ‘transformative shifts’ and priority policy aims pursued by the new agenda” (Fukuda-Parr & Smaavik Hegstad, 2018 ^[7], p. 2). This observation points out the fact that the principle gained political traction through the High Level Panel process. The authors also observe that “Through 2 years of negotiations following the submission of the HLPEP report, the term continued to be promoted. Ultimately, it became the centerpiece of the consensus in the 2030 ^[8] Agenda” (Fukuda-Parr & Smaavik Hegstad, 2018 ^[7], p. 2). Thus, the LNOB principle was not a pre-existing consensus but was actively promoted and eventually adopted through negotiation.

Having established the conceptual foundations of the LNOB principle and its relevance to women’s political participation, the paper now turns to examine the existing literature on women in Panchayati Raj Institutions. This review reveals a persistent gap between formal representation and substantive decision-making power. Drawing on critical mass theory and intersectional analysis, the paper then identifies the structural constraints that prevent EWRs from serving the most marginalised populations. That said, documents from NITI Aayog are examined to present how current monitoring frameworks fail to capture political voice. The analysis then situates these findings within broader Global South debates on inequality and governance before linking them to specific

SDG targets. Finally, the paper proposes actionable recommendations for policy makers, civil society organisations, and international partners committed to ensuring that no one is left behind.

Literature Review

Research on women in Panchayati Raj Institutions has consistently found a gap between formal representation and substantive influence. Professor Jayal (2006) ^[9] argues that quotas have enabled women to address “practical gender needs” such as water and health care, but their capacity to address “strategic interests” like gender equality and challenging patriarchal norms remains constrained by institutional and social barriers. Dahlerup and Freidenvall (2005) ^[4] caution that “fast-track” quotas without political socialisation can produce “empty” representation.

Studies from various Indian states report that many EWRs are illiterate, unaware of their roles, and controlled by male relatives (Kumar & Ghosh, 2024). Deb (2024) ^[11] found that “more than 80 per cent of women are active in politics only after being elected ... and they contest election only after the seat is reserved” (Deb, 2024 ^[6], p. 108). This finding clarifies that many women do not enter politics through their own agency but are drafted by their families or political parties. Ansari (2014) ^[1] reported that many women are “surrogates” for male relatives, “often elected through familial ties rather than individual agency” (Ansari, 2014, p. 120). Das (2014) ^[1, 5] found that “women’s voices often go unheard in meetings, and their ability to influence local governance remains limited” (Das, 2014 ^[5], p. 56).

The principle of leaving no one behind requires that EWRs actively identify and serve the most marginalised. However, existing literature has not systematically examined how the constraints on EWRs affect their ability to reach vulnerable populations.

Cochrane and Rao (2018) ^[2] provide a critical perspective that is directly relevant to the study of EWRs. They argue that the push for gender-sensitive research, while important, can inadvertently limit our understanding of inequality. They state that “We call for a broader approach to understanding inequalities and how the simultaneous experience of multiple, intersecting inequalities, is greater than their sum” (p. 1). Thus, focusing only on gender in isolation, for example counting how many women are elected, is insufficient. What matters is how gender interacts with caste, class, and location. They further note that “This shift is essential to support the ‘leave no one behind’ agenda of the Sustainable Development Goals” (Cochrane & Rao, 2018 ^[7], p. 1). Therefore, interventions must address the multiple, intersecting inequalities that shape their ability to exercise power.

Winkler and Satterthwaite (2017) ^[20] reinforce this diagnosis in their analysis of SDG indicator frameworks. They find that “Among the 230 indicators used to measure progress towards the SDGs, 46 indicators call for disaggregation by sex or require sex-specific data, 35 for disaggregation by age or age-specific data, and 11 for disaggregation by disability status” (p. 8). However, they note that “not a single indicator among the final list specifically requires disaggregation by ethnicity or race – not one” (Winkler & Satterthwaite, 2017 ^[20], p. 8). This is a critical finding for EWRs in India. Without race/ethnicity disaggregation, the specific barriers faced by Dalit and Adivasi women representatives remain invisible. They further observe that

“The closest the indicators get to capturing inequalities related to such marginalisation is a small number of indicators that relate to ‘indigenous status’” (Winkler & Satterthwaite, 2017 ^[20], p. 8). Clearly, even where indigenous status is tracked, the intersection with gender is not adequately captured.

Fukuda-Parr and Smaavik Hegstad (2018) ^[7] analyse Voluntary National Reports (VNRs) to understand how countries are implementing LNOB. They find that “Most VNRs do not provide much detailed information on how the pledge is being implemented, and whether this reflects mere rhetorical use of the term of a deeper engagement with implementing a transformative strategy” (p. 7). This finding clarifies that the LNOB principle is often used rhetorically without concrete implementation plans. For EWRs, this means that national plans may mention women’s participation but lack the specific indicators and budgets to make it meaningful. They also note that “Only ten countries have explicit reference to putting the last first or reaching those furthest behind” (Fukuda-Parr & Smaavik Hegstad, 2018 ^[7], p. 8), connecting the fact that even the commitment to prioritise the most marginalised is not widely operationalised.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative methodology based on a critical synthesis of existing literature and documented cases from multiple contexts. Instead of presenting new primary data, this study analyzes patterns of success and failure to derive a practical framework for understanding how EWRs can uphold the LNOB principle. The analysis is guided by two interrelated theoretical approaches: critical mass theory and intersectionality.

Critical mass theory, developed by Kanter (1977) and refined by Dahlerup (2006) ^[3], holds that a minority group needs to reach a certain size, typically 30–40 per cent, to influence decision-making and overcome tokenism. In the context of PRIs, women now hold 50 per cent of seats in several states, satisfying the numerical condition. However, as Dahlerup (2006) ^[3] notes, “it is not only about numbers but about the likelihood of substantive policy advocacy” (Dahlerup, 2006 ^[3], p. 515). This means that numerical presence alone does not guarantee influence; what matters is whether women representatives have the skills, confidence, and support to act collectively.

In many PRIs, women are numerically a critical mass but remain politically a token because they lack the skills, confidence and social support to act collectively. Critical mass theory therefore requires not only numerical thresholds but also capacity-building, solidarity and institutional mechanisms that enable women to translate numbers into power.

Klasen and Fleurbaey (2018) ^[10] provide a framework for understanding who is “left behind.” They argue that “One approach to examining the left behind is to focus on those at the bottom of the distribution of a key well-being indicator such as income, education, or health, which is sometimes referred to as vertical inequality” (p. 4). However, they caution that “such an approach may be limiting in several ways: it ignores the multidimensional nature of inequality and deprivation; it says little about the causes of such inequalities” (Klasen & Fleurbaey, 2018 ^[10], p. 4). This argument ties in an important step to consider. That is, EWRs must look beyond income to understand the multiple dimensions of deprivation in their communities.

Cochrane and Rao (2018) ^[2] introduce a typology of inequality that is directly relevant. They examine “five dimensions of potential social differentiation: gender, location, wealth, education and regional-states/geopolitics” (p. 3). It means that EWRs face inequalities not only based on gender but also based on where they live, their economic status, their education, and the region they belong to. They further demonstrate that these dimensions interact “the collective impacts are not always compounding negatives” (Cochrane & Rao, 2018 ^[2], p. 16). This implies that being a woman in a rural area with low education creates a different experience of marginalisation than being a woman in an urban area with higher education.

Stuart and Woodroffe (2016) ^[18] distinguish between the “long route” and “short route” to accountability. They note that:

Citizens delegate authority to political representatives, usually via political parties, who then govern bureaucracies that deliver services. Long route accountability comes from citizens trying to make sure those politicians are doing their job. But there is also a ‘short route’ to accountability: rather than asking your MP or local councillor to improve your child’s school, why not lobby the headmaster directly? (p. 129)

For EWRs, this means they can be held accountable through multiple routes – by their constituents, by women’s organisations, and by state-level monitoring bodies.

Winkler and Satterthwaite (2017) ^[20] introduce the concept of “missing millions” in data collection. They connect a study by noting that “A recent study by Carr-Hill estimates that as many as 300-350 million people might be missing from standard household surveys” (p. 12). They further explain that “A number of groups are often excluded from household surveys by their very design. These include homeless populations, populations in institutions such as prisons or refugee camps, and mobile, nomadic or pastoralist populations” (Winkler & Satterthwaite, 2017 ^[20], p. 13). Thus, the most marginalised women in India such as those in informal settlements, nomadic communities, and remote tribal areas may be systematically excluded from the data that is used to design policies.

Gabay and Ilcan (2017) offer a theoretical lens on the SDGs as a political construct. They argue that the SDGs “constitute the kinds of epistemological, hegemonic, or politico-economic assumptions built into them” (p. 3). The SDG framework is not neutral but reflects particular power relations and worldviews. They further argue that the SDGs “take issue with many of the assumptions upon which SDGs rests, while also broadening the conversation to pay attention to knowledge production, modernity, colonialism, exclusion, citizenship, and other conceptual insights” (Gabay & Ilcan, 2017 ^[20], p. 3). For EWRs, this means that the very framework that promises to leave no one behind may itself reproduce colonial and exclusionary logics.

Constraints on Elected Women Representatives

Based on the literature and official documents, the following constraints are most salient for EWRs in rural India. Each constraint directly undermines the ability of EWRs to serve the most marginalised.

1. Proxy Representation

When an EWR is a proxy for her husband or another male relative, she does not attend meetings independently, does not speak, and does not propose policies. Vulnerable groups have no channel to reach her. As the VNR 2020 states, “people who are left behind are likely to include more than

just the income-poor” (NITI Aayog, 2020 ^[14], p. 34). This means that proxy representation excludes not only the income-poor but also women, Dalits, Adivasis, and other marginalised groups from political voice.

Fukuda-Parr and Smaavik Hegstad (2018) ^[7] reinforce this point in their analysis of who is left behind. They find that: “While most reports identify groups that are globally recognized as important, some reports fail to mention groups that are highly important in their domestic context” (p. 8). This means that even when VNRs mention women, they may fail to mention Dalit women or Adivasi women. The implication is that proxy representation is a symptom of a broader failure to recognise multiple, intersecting forms of marginalisation.

2. Low Political Awareness

Many EWRs are not trained in PRI functions, budgeting, or legal rights. The Localising SDGs report notes that “training on SDGs should go beyond the 17 goals and targets and should be viewed from the perspective of fundamental skills and competencies” (NITI Aayog, 2019 ^[13], p. 30). Without such training, EWRs cannot identify or prioritise the needs of the poorest. Cochrane and Rao (2018) ^[2] show that education is a critical factor in health outcomes, stating that “Educational attainment of mothers is one of the most significant indicators in terms of both access to health services and the health status of children” (p. 17). It is clear that low political awareness among EWRs has cascading effects on the health and well-being of their communities.

3. Dual Burden (Unpaid Care Work)

Rural women spend long hours on domestic work. The National MPI report includes indicators on assets and bank accounts but does not capture time-use data (NITI Aayog, 2021, p. 15). Unpaid care work remains invisible in policy, yet it is a major barrier to political participation. Stuart and Woodroffe (2016) ^[18] note that “women’s paid employment is concentrated in poorly paid part-time jobs, and women are still paid less than men for comparable work, across all sectors” (p. 71). Therefore, even when EWRs are elected, their economic marginalisation limits their ability to participate effectively.

4. Lack of Security and Mobility

Many EWRs cannot travel alone to block or district offices. The SDG India Index has no indicator on women’s mobility to Panchayat offices (NITI Aayog, 2024 ^[11], p. 90). This data gap hides a real constraint. Cochrane and Rao (2018) ^[2] show that location matters. They state that “The rural-urban question is essentially one about the impact of geospatial location, and the availability of infrastructure, services and goods in relation to that” (p. 13). Thus, EWRs in remote rural areas face additional barriers compared to those in urban or peri-urban areas.

5. Patriarchal Attitudes of Male Members

Male sarpanches and village elders treat EWRs as figureheads. The VNR 2020 calls for “a robust system for identifying the marginalised and ensuring that they are able to exercise their rights” (NITI Aayog, 2020 ^[14], p. 34). Such a system must include protection for EWRs who assert their authority. Cochrane and Rao (2018) ^[2] observe that “understanding the diverse drivers and manifestations of social inequality and difference is crucial” (p. 2). Certainly, patriarchal attitudes are not isolated incidents but part of a broader pattern of social inequality that must be systematically addressed.

These constraints are not merely technical failures of policy design; they are produced and reproduced by the very development discourse that claims to empower women. Fukuda-Parr and Smaavik Hegstad (2018)^[7] argue that “the term itself has been subject to critique” because “its rhetorical power helps frame a narrative” but “recent commentators propose that the idea is based on the premise that ‘there is a direction to development,’ with a single destination with a given pathway” (p. 10). The LNOB discourse may inadvertently reinforce a paternalistic approach to development, where “experts” decide who is left behind and what they need, rather than listening to the voices of the left-behind themselves.

Policy Frameworks and Data Deficits: Evidence from NITI Aayog

Official documents provide tools for measuring poverty, health and education, but they lack granular indicators on political voice within local governance.

The SDG India Index 2023-24 reports that India’s score on SDG 5 (Gender Equality) is 49 out of 100; the lowest among 15 SDGs monitored (NITI Aayog, 2024^[6], p. 103). The Index dashboard, described as “the country’s principal official monitoring tool” (NITI Aayog, 2022^[16], p. 24), does not disaggregate data at the Gram Panchayat level for women’s decision-making power. As the report admits, “availability of disaggregated data across spatial and social dimensions becomes much scarcer at the sub-national level” (NITI Aayog, 2022^[16], p. 24). Clearly, even where state-level data is available, it is not broken down to the Panchayat level where EWRs operate.

The National Multidimensional Poverty Index (NITI Aayog, 2021)^[12] captures deprivations in health, education and standard of living. It notes that “the MPI has been estimated ... for all the districts in the country (more than 600)” (p. 4). However, it does not include any indicator on political participation or voice. Women who escape multidimensional poverty may still be politically marginalised. Cochrane and Rao (2018)^[2] warn about the limitations of single-dimension indicators. They state that “Thinking about disparities, vulnerability and poverty as occurring in multidimensional and multiplying ways, however, has not yet transformed the expectations and demands of research donors” (p. 16). Thus, even the MPI, despite being multidimensional, does not capture political voice.

The Localising SDGs report notes that “training on SDGs should go beyond the 17 goals and targets and should be viewed from the perspective of fundamental skills and competencies” (NITI Aayog, 2019^[13], p. 30). This means that capacity-building for EWRs must focus on practical governance skills, not just knowledge of the SDGs. The report also emphasises that “reservation alone cannot suffice to ensure real empowerment of rural women” (NITI Aayog, 2019^[13], p. 3). This means that quotas must be complemented by training, resources, and institutional support.

The Indian Model of SDG Localisation report states that “CSOs working directly with vulnerable social groups participated in various consultations” (NITI Aayog, 2022^[16], p. 42) and that “partnerships can bridge critical capacity gaps” (p. 45). Certainly, civil society organisations have an important role to play in supporting EWRs. The report also notes that “effective monitoring of the SDGs necessitates

ensuring that reliable and valid data for all indicators ... are made available to policymakers at a regular frequency” (NITI Aayog, 2022^[16], p. 30). Without regular data collection on women’s political participation, monitoring will remain incomplete.

Winkler and Satterthwaite (2017)^[20] argue that “the failure to produce such knowledge can only be ascribed to politics and power. Data are political because data are powerful” (p. 20). The absence of gender-power indicators is not an oversight but a political choice. They further argue that “The hesitancy and even resistance to monitor progress specifically for groups based on ethnicity, race, religion and caste demonstrates precisely what a powerful instrument data can – or could – be” (Winkler & Satterthwaite, 2017^[20], p. 20). Contextually, the absence of indicators on proxy representation and women’s decision-making power reflects resistance to making these issues visible and accountable.

Stuart and Woodroffe (2016)^[18] warn that “there is still a danger that the measures within SDG 5 will be seen as sufficient for the achievement of gender equality with little understanding of the barriers that women and girls face across all the targets” (p. 79). For this reason, focusing on economic indicators alone, like entrepreneurship, misses the political dimension of empowerment. They further argue that:

The concept of Leave No-one Behind also has pertinent implications for the implementation of SDG 5, in ensuring that women living in poverty and/or facing other aspects of social discrimination meet the targets under Goal 5 with their particular needs and priorities addressed. (Stuart & Woodroffe, 2016^[18], p. 79)

Clearly, LNOB requires a differentiated approach that recognises the specific barriers faced by different groups of women.

Global South Perspectives on Leaving No One Behind

Recent scholarship on global governance has shown that the Global South is not a monolithic category but a site of diverse struggles, aspirations, and barriers. Fukuda-Parr and Smaavik Hegstad (2018)^[7] note that “the term is broad and vague and each of the stakeholders saw it as an opportunity to impose their own interpretation” (p. 7). The LNOB principle is interpreted differently by different actors, and these interpretations reflect power relations.

Cochrane and Rao (2018)^[2] demonstrate the importance of understanding multiple dimensions of inequality through their health indicators analysis. They find that “the five domains analyzed in this paper (male-female, rural-urban, economic status, education attainment, geopolitics) raise key questions about the reproduction and intensification of inequality” (p. 17). The finding clarifies that EWRs face a web of inequalities that cannot be addressed through single-dimension interventions. They also note that “this is the severe marginalization identified by Husmann (2016), it is not necessarily marginalization across every domain, but deep and disproportionate disparities for certain key domains, with multiplier effects on the overall quality of life and well-being” (Cochrane & Rao, 2018^[2], p. 17). Thus, EWRs who face multiple disadvantages such as being a woman, being Dalit, being poor, being in a remote area experience marginalisation that is more than the sum of its parts.

Stuart and Woodroffe (2016)^[18] connect the LNOB principle directly to intersectionality. They observe that:

Part of the importance of the Leave No-one Behind agenda is that it recognises that people face forms of inequality other than that related to their income, which shape their experience of poverty. These are often called ‘group-based’ inequalities. Implicit in the SDGs is recognition that these inequalities intersect: that frequently a person will be a member of two or more marginalised groups. (p. 73)

It connects the point that EWRs who are Dalit women, or Adivasi women, or disabled women face multiple, intersecting forms of discrimination that require targeted interventions.

Winkler and Satterthwaite (2017) ^[20] argue that the SDGs’ focus on economic inequality is insufficient. They state that “Focusing on economic disparities only cannot fully address the root causes of exclusion from social development, and material solutions cannot fully address discrimination” (p. 6). Economic interventions must be complemented by interventions that address discrimination and political exclusion. They further argue that “Where discrimination is at play, being left behind does not happen arbitrarily. It is inherently political. Without acknowledging this, the necessary normative, attitudinal, political and social change will be impossible to achieve” (Winkler & Satterthwaite, 2017 ^[20], p. 6). Thus, addressing political exclusion, such as proxy representation, requires acknowledging that it is a form of discrimination, not just a governance failure.

Gabay and Ilcan (2017) argue that the SDGs are “constitutively embedded in a neo-liberal politics of development” (p. 67). The SDG framework reflects particular power relations and may reproduce rather than challenge inequality. They also argue that “the commitment to ‘leave no one behind’ is a discourse that is strategically deployed to justify the implementation of a highly problematic political project as the framework of global development” (p. 64). For EWRs, this means that the language of LNOB may be used to legitimise a particular model of development, like one that prioritises market-based solutions, individual responsibility, and quantifiable targets, while deflecting attention from the structural inequalities such as patriarchy, caste, class that actually determine who gets heard and who remains silent.

The Sustainable Development Goals: Linkages and Shortfalls

The 2030 ^[8] Agenda includes specific SDG targets that are directly relevant to EWRs. SDG 5 (Gender Equality), Target 5.5 requires “women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making.” The SDG India Index 2023-24 reports that India’s score on SDG 5 is 49 out of 100 (NITI Aayog, 2024 ^[11], p. 103). Without addressing proxy representation and low political awareness, “full and effective participation” cannot be achieved.

SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) is rarely measured with gender-disaggregated political voice indicators. Winkler and Satterthwaite (2017) ^[20] note that:

Perhaps most striking is the indicator associated with target 10.2. The target language is robust, reading: ‘By 2030 ^[8], empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status.’ The associated indicator 10.2.1, however, calls for monitoring of the ‘proportion of people living below 50 per cent of median income, by age, sex and persons with disabilities’. (p. 9)

The political inclusion of women is mentioned in the target but not measured in the indicator. The authors conclude: “Disturbingly, in the step of translating the target into the indicator, the dimensions of ‘race, ethnicity, origin, religion or other status’ were dropped entirely” (Winkler & Satterthwaite, 2017 ^[20], p. 9). Therefore, without indicators on political voice, the SDG framework cannot measure whether EWRs are truly included in decision-making.

SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions), Target 16.7 requires “responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels.” The Indian Model of SDG Localisation report emphasises that “effective monitoring of the SDGs necessitates ensuring that reliable and valid data for all indicators ... are made available to policymakers at a regular frequency” (NITI Aayog, 2022 ^[16], p. 30). In many PRIs, no data is collected on whether EWRs speak in meetings or whether their proposals are accepted.

Stuart and Woodroffe (2016) ^[18] argue that:

The main focus on gender equality within the SDGs has been on Goal 5. However, the ‘leave no-one behind’ lens provides a new opportunity, with its implication that no target can be met if it is not met for any specific marginalised group, including women and girls. (p. 74)

Clearly, the LNOB principle requires gender to be mainstreamed across all goals, not just SDG 5. They further argue that:

To ascertain whether a particular group has been left behind’ clearly requires disaggregation of all data. But more fundamentally, from a gender equality perspective, Leaving No-one Behind requires consideration of the specific and different barriers faced by women and girls in meeting every target across the 17 goals. (Stuart & Woodroffe, 2016 ^[18], p. 74)

This implies that EWRs must be supported not only on “women’s issues” but on all development issues, because women are affected by all of them.

Cochrane and Rao (2018) ^[2] provide a framework for understanding the “layers of vulnerability” that EWRs face. They state that “One of the challenges of a narrow focus on sex disaggregation for gender analysis is that while important, we may miss or undervalue the importance of other factors, and furthermore, we may miss or undervalue the impact of multiple layers of intersecting inequalities” (p. 16). Therefore, interventions must address the intersection of gender, caste, class, and location. They further argue that “Taking a systems approach enables us to see how disparities might interact” (Cochrane & Rao, 2018 ^[2], p. 16). Contextually, proxy representation cannot be addressed in isolation from other barriers like lack of mobility and lack of education.

Recommendations

Based on the analysis above, this paper proposes six recommendations to enable EWRs to uphold the principle of leaving no one behind.

1. Mandatory capacity-building before assuming office

Every EWR should undergo training on PRI functions, financial management, legal rights, and leadership before taking office, with annual refresher courses. As the Localising SDGs report notes, “the training on SDGs should go beyond the 17 goals and targets and should be viewed from the perspective of fundamental skills and competencies” (NITI Aayog, 2019 ^[13], p. 30). Training

should include how to identify vulnerable households, how to use government schemes for their benefit, and how to conduct outreach. Cochrane and Rao (2018) ^[2] show that “educational attainment of mothers is one of the most significant indicators in terms of both access to health services and the health status of children” (p. 17). By extension, education and training of EWRs is critical for their effectiveness. This means that investment in training is not a cost but an investment in better governance.

2. Proxy representation audits

District Panchayat Officers should conduct surprise inspections of Gram Panchayat meetings to verify that the elected woman is actually speaking and deciding. The VNR 2020 calls for “a robust system for identifying the marginalised and ensuring that they are able to exercise their rights” (NITI Aayog, 2020 ^[14], p. 34). Audits would operationalise this for EWRs. Winkler and Satterthwaite (2017) ^[20] argue that “without targeting the most marginalised people among people living in poverty with adequate measures, people will continue to be excluded even when efforts target those living in poverty” (p. 7). Therefore, audits must target not just attendance but substantive participation.

3. Infrastructure for care and mobility

Childcare facilities should be provided at Panchayat office premises. Travel allowances should be given to women representatives to attend block and district level meetings. The MPI report highlights that lack of assets and bank accounts restricts women’s economic autonomy (NITI Aayog, 2021, p. 15). Similarly, lack of transport and childcare restricts political participation. Cochrane and Rao (2018) ^[2] show that rural-urban disparities are persistent. They state that “the rural-urban analysis showed how entrenched rural disparities are, with limited progress occurring over time” (p. 10). Without targeted investment in rural infrastructure, EWRs in remote areas will continue to face mobility barriers.

4. Strengthen civil society and self-help groups (SHGs)

SHGs can act as training hubs and safe spaces for EWRs to form alliances, building critical mass. The Indian Model of SDG Localisation report states that “CSOs working directly with vulnerable social groups participated in various consultations” (NITI Aayog, 2022 ^[16], p. 42) and that “partnerships can bridge critical capacity gaps” (p. 45). This model should be extended to support EWRs. Stuart and Woodroffe (2016) ^[18] argue that “women’s collective action in particular has been seen as highly effective in achieving this kind of transformative change” (p. 76). EWRs need to be connected to women’s organisations to sustain their political engagement.

5. Integrate gender-power indicators into SDG monitoring

The SDG India Index should add indicators on women’s attendance in Gram Sabha meetings, number of speeches made by EWRs, number of proposals moved by EWRs, and number of vulnerable households visited by EWRs. As the Annual Report 2024-25 notes, “what gets measured gets done” (NITI Aayog, 2024, p. 90). Without measurement, proxy representation will remain invisible. Winkler and Satterthwaite (2017) ^[20] argue that “the politics of data

cannot be overestimated. Data are political because data are powerful” (p. 20). Therefore, adding gender-power indicators is a political act that will face resistance but is essential for accountability.

6. Adopt an intersectional approach to LNOB

Following Cochrane and Rao (2018) ^[2], monitoring must disaggregate data by caste, tribe, location, and gender together. They observe that “Understanding disparities and marginalization based on sex and gender is important and must translate into more informed policy, programs and practice. However, to be meaningful in addressing the rising threat of deepening inequalities, we also need data and analyses that examine the interaction between different forms of difference” (p. 17). Clearly, intersectional data is not optional but essential. Stuart and Woodroffe (2016) ^[18] reinforce this idea. They state that “the intersection of disadvantage is more complex than this. The experiences of those with multiple disadvantages is not simply the sum of the experience faced by being in each group – there is a particular experience as the different discriminations intersect” (p. 74). Thus, interventions must be tailored to the specific needs of Dalit women, Adivasi women, and other intersectional groups.

Conclusion

Reservation policies have successfully brought a large number of women into India’s Panchayati Raj Institutions. However, as this paper has argued, numerical representation alone does not enable elected women representatives to uphold the principle of leaving no one behind. Proxy representation, low political awareness, unpaid care work, lack of mobility and patriarchal attitudes are structural constraints that reservation cannot dismantle on its own.

The official documents from NITI Aayog such as the SDG India Index, the National MPI, the VNR 2020 ^[14], and the Localising SDGs report provide robust tools for measuring poverty, health and education. However, they lack granular, gender-disaggregated indicators on political voice within local governance. Without such indicators, the principle of leaving no one behind remains incomplete. As the VNR 2020 acknowledges, “people who are left behind are likely to include more than just the income-poor” (NITI Aayog, 2020 ^[14], p. 34). Political exclusion is a form of being left behind.

Winkler and Satterthwaite (2017) ^[20] conclude their analysis with a sobering observation. They observe that “The SDGs represent a real break from the past by emphasising the need to reduce inequalities, but so far the difference is largely one of rhetoric and aspiration. The leave no one behind’ mantra does not translate into indicators that capture progress for marginalised groups such as those defined by race and ethnicity” (p. 20). Without specific indicators on political voice, the LNOB principle will remain a slogan rather than a reality for EWRs.

Cochrane and Rao (2018) ^[2] offer a pathway forward. They state that “The SDGs and the ‘Leave No One Behind’ agenda demand it”, that is, a broader approach to understanding inequalities and how multiple, intersecting inequalities interact (p. 17). For EWRs, this means that reservation alone was never going to be enough. What is required is a coherent package of training, audits, mobility support, civil society engagement, and disaggregated monitoring, all working together.

Fukuda-Parr and Smaavik Hegstad (2018) ^[7] warn that “the policy response in the VNRs is mostly a continuation of existing national programs and policies” (p. 9). Without a fundamental shift in how development is planned and monitored, EWRs will continue to be marginalised. They further argue that “The 2030 ^[8] Agenda relates human rights principles to the commitment to LNOB. Along with principles of participation and non-discrimination, the agenda engages states to give priority to those furthest behind. This has huge implications for policies” (Fukuda-Parr & Smaavik Hegstad, 2018 ^[7], p. 9). For India, the government must move beyond existing programmes and adopt a transformative approach to women’s political participation.

Stuart and Woodroffe (2016) ^[18] conclude that “the next test will be the way in which countries take the SDG goals and targets, and translate them into national-level work plans. This is where the increased emphasis on gender should be important” (p. 79). For India, this means that the Ministry of Panchayati Raj, the Ministry of Women and Child Development, and NITI Aayog must work together to translate the LNOB principle into actionable plans for EWRs.

Gabay and Ilcan (2017) conclude their analysis by noting that the SDGs are “an affective agenda” that “seeks to animate the capacities of active subject” (p. 147). For EWRs in India, the promise of reservation has been exactly that: a promise that attaches them to a seat but not to power. Moving from a crisis of representation to genuine resilience requires that EWRs are not merely present but are empowered to speak, decide and act on behalf of the most marginalised. Only then can governance in South Asia truly learn from crisis, build capacity, and strengthen resilience.

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