

# Deliberative Democracy and Gender Inclusion: Assessing Female-Only Deliberation Platforms as Catalysts to Women's Empowerment Based on The Case Study of Mahila Sabhas

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DOI: [10.26821/IJSRC.13.9.2025.130904](https://doi.org/10.26821/IJSRC.13.9.2025.130904)

## ABSTRACT

*Deliberative democracy is often seen as a necessary complement to electoral democracy yet its ability to ensure the inclusive representation of female voices, especially in rural areas of the Global South, remains limited. This paper casts light on the Indian Mahila Sabhas, understudied female-only deliberation platforms, introduced in the world's largest democratic system. It addresses the gap where empirical solutions to women's involvement are often overlooked in favour of theoretical discussions in scholarship on deliberative democracy. As seen in the case study of Mahila Sabhas, females are often compelled to form female-only forums to ensure that gender-responsive policies are being catered towards. However, it calls for further research into comparative female-only frameworks and into their practical implementation in deliberative democracies highlighting both its benefits as well as limitations.*

**Keywords:** Deliberative Democracy, Female-only Deliberation Platforms, Gender-Responsive Policies, Mahila Sabhas, Local and Rural Governance, Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), Women's Political Representation.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Deliberative democracy, a form of citizen communication within a democratic political system, has received increasing attention in recent years as an academic field and empirical practice. Deliberative forums have been proposed as a remedy to political polarization, providing 'citizens with a meaningful platform to challenge their elected officials, demand transparency, and provide information about very real local developmental needs' while engaging with other citizens with opposing viewpoints (Parthasarathy et. al., 2019: 623). Upon institutional integration, deliberative democracy can provide a constitutional platform for meaningful citizen engagement based on 'equal recognition, respect, reciprocity', and could thus be a way to ameliorate electoral politics to enhance democratic cohesion and reduce polarisation (Bächtiger et al., 2018: 1). However, the methods of deliberative democracy have received scrutiny from feminist scholars (Sanders 1997, Bickford 1996). Despite the normative and theoretical discussions, within the deliberative democracy scholarly field, the empirical remedies to gender-equal participation have received less attention.

With the 72nd and 73rd Constitutional Amendments, India, the world's largest democratic system, institutionalised deliberative practices at the grassroots level through the Panchayati Raj system

and Urban Local Bodies. These reforms were designed to enhance inclusive governance by mandating women's representation. Yet, despite these provisions, women's voices have remained underrepresented or silenced in Gram Sabha deliberations (PRIA, 2019: 2). While about 21% of men, on average, show up at the Gram Sabhas, the attendance rate is only 7% for women (Das, 2015). This paper examines the lesser-known female-only deliberation platforms, the Mahila Sabhas, in India's Gram Sabhas. The Mahila Sabha is a case study of a potential remedy to women's disenfranchisement in electoral politics. This paper first underscores the theoretical discussion of deliberative democracy including its deficiencies, before addressing the gap in the literature on how female-only platforms can mitigate those deficiencies, based on the case study of India's democratic system.

## 2. The Deliberative Democracy Dilemma

Electoral Democracy has many flaws. Electoral competition, with the end of having the voter cast their voice at the poll privately, is not a sufficient prerequisite for an egalitarian democracy. Whereas people might vote for the best-fitting candidate, casting a ballot does not ensure they see and hear the perspectives of the other side. As a remedy, deliberative democracy, a form of more engaging, discussion and participation-oriented form of politics, has been proposed both as a policy tool and a theoretical concept (Parthasarathy et. al., 2019: 1).

Deliberative Democracy entails a dilemma. According to Jürgen Habermas, democracies rely on rational-critical debate, a deliberation, needed to legitimize democratic decisions (Habermas, 1992). When well-informed citizens engage in a debate as equals, Habermas argued, the most rational decision could be reached. Since then, the deliberative democracy tradition has emphasised citizen participation in governmental decision-making (Pateman, 1970: 5). Others have pointed out the inherent flaws and even undemocratic tendencies of deliberative democracy (Sanders, 1997: 348). Lynn Sanders, in 'Against Deliberation,' pointed out that some voices within deliberations may be inherently silenced, not least due to the absence of mutual respect, but also due to a lack of equal ability to reason and articulate the ideas on par with others,

pointing out the need for structural remedies to inequalities. Although it is natural for some arguments to be disregarded in deliberations, when this disregard is systematically associated with 'those who are already underrepresented' in formal political institutions, namely women, this is a signal of democratic practice, paradoxically, working undemocratically (Sanders, 1997: 349); Deliberative processes can perpetuate inegalitarian democratic practices. Other scholars have pointed out that the limitations are embedded not so much in the concept of deliberative democracy but in the organisational type, practical functioning, and content of the deliberative fora (Polletta and Chen, 2013: 292). In formats where females felt more comfortable and knowledgeable, for example, discussions focusing on social work, or discussions where females were not outnumbered, females participated as enthusiastically and confidently as males (Polletta and Chen, 2013: 292). The platform matters as it shapes the procedure.

Nevertheless, deliberative processes have been mostly explored theoretically without situating them in a real-world context, focusing on affluent settings (Parthasarathy et. al, 2019: 623). As Parthasarathy et al. have pointed out, gender imbalances in deliberative settings in the case of India's Gram Sabhas are a necessary complement to studies focusing on the American context like Polletta and Chen, 2013, who have focused on America. Gram Sabhas are a body consisting of voters registered in the electoral rolls in one or a few Village Panchayats. The Mahila Sabha, a female-only meeting of the Gram Sabha, provides women with the constitutionally mandated right to participate in decision-making. The introduction of Mahila Sabhas, women-only deliberative forums, addresses these gaps in particular. In states like Rajasthan, Mahila Sabhas provide a space for women to articulate gender-specific concerns, such as maternal health, sanitation, and education (PRIA, 2019: 2). These platforms aim to empower women by offering a supportive environment for self-expression and collective action. However, their establishment raises critical questions about the nature and efficiency of deliberative democracies. If the general Gram Sabha fails to inclusively represent marginalized groups like women, does this indicate a limitation in deliberative democratic models? The creation of separate spaces such as Mahila Sabhas suggests that specialized forums may be effective for ensuring equitable participation and addressing

systemic inequalities, mitigating limitations posed by single deliberative forums which tend to pose additional obstacles for the more marginalised.

### 3.1. The Panchayati Raj System: The Need for Mahila Sabhas

The Panchayati Raj system in India, institutionalized by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, has provided a framework for grassroots democracy, with the Gram Sabha acting as a key deliberative body. While the system was envisioned to enable inclusive governance and participatory decision-making, the practical functioning of Gram Sabhas often falls short of these ideals, particularly in ensuring gender representation and addressing community-specific issues. (Vyasulu et. al, 1999: 1) A notable situation where Gram Sabhas have not worked effectively demonstrates the need for a specialized female-only forum, such as the Mahila Sabha, to amplify women's voices.

Despite the constitutional mandate which positions the Gram Sabha as a cornerstone of participatory democracy in India, its effectiveness in ensuring women's representation remains limited. In Odisha, for instance, the Gram Sabha is intended to function as a 'Citizen's Council,' facilitating direct democracy at the village level. However, traditional patriarchal structures and societal norms often impede women's active participation in these assemblies. Cultural expectations can confine women to domestic roles, discouraging their involvement in public decision-making processes (Panda, 2015: 608). Evidence suggests that even when women are elected to local governance positions through reservation policies, they often act as proxies for male family members, undermining the essence of democratic representation. Studies, such as those by S.K. Tripathi (2022) and Saumya Jyotsna (2022), highlight this issue, noting that many women representatives lack the authority to perform their roles effectively, with decisions being dominated by their husbands or male relatives. For example, in Bihar's Muzaffarpur Municipal Corporation, husbands openly claim to be in charge, reducing the roles of elected women. This issue persists despite measures like the 50% reservation for women in panchayats introduced by the Bihar government in 2006 (Sweety, 24: 104). Education, awareness programs, and confidence-building are seen as critical to overcoming these barriers, yet many

female representatives lack the education and confidence needed to assert their rights, often standing for elections under family pressure. Consequently, women's attendance at Gram Sabha meetings is frequently low, and even when present, they may hesitate to voice their opinions due to societal pressures.

Moreover, the operational dynamics of Gram Sabhas often marginalize women's contributions. Meetings are typically dominated by male members, with discussions focusing on issues perceived as universally relevant, such as infrastructure development, while sidelining matters that predominantly affect women, like healthcare, education, and sanitation (Das, 2015). This gender-biased prioritization can result in the exclusion of women's perspectives from critical decision-making processes. Additionally, a lack of awareness and understanding of the Gram Sabha's functions among women further diminishes their engagement. Without targeted interventions to address these systemic barriers, the Gram Sabha's potential to serve as an inclusive platform for all community members remains unrealized in areas where Mahila Sabhas are absent.

### 3.2. Mahila Sabhas: Remedy to Women's Disenfranchisement

Initiated by the National Institute of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj, in partnership with UNICEF, Mahila Sabhas are women-only assemblies in India that serve as platforms for women to discuss issues, share experiences, and collectively work towards improving their lives. The Ministry of Panchayati Raj's policy initiative in March 2020 further directed all states to organise Mahila Sabha meetings in all Gram Panchayats (Madhuri et. al., 2023). Since then, Mahila Sabhas have gained prominence.

Its purpose, according to Kamala Devi in an interview with UN Women is 'Through the Sabha, we want to help women gain awareness of the facilities that they can avail of and get acquainted with their rights. The second and most important objective was to give women a platform to communicate their difficulties and demands to the Panchayat Samiti (UNWomen, 2013).' The Mahila Sabhas have achieved positive effects, although these have varied by state and region.

For instance, the state of Rajasthan has seen the inclusion of women's priorities in local development agendas after taking active steps to integrate the Mahila Sabha into the Gram Panchayat Development Plans (Sharma, 2019). The impacts of these initiatives have been several as they directly address the issues women raise in forums for instance improving sanitation infrastructure and developing maternal health services. Furthermore, the Mahila Sabhas have empowered women not just in policy prioritisation but by increasing female participation in Gram Sabhas. For instance, in Gujarat's Kutch district, approximately 60% of villages reported increased female participation in Gram Sabhas, largely attributed to the organization of Mahila Sabhas prior to these meetings (Biswas et al., 2016: 15).

These examples are important to note as the establishment of Mahila Sabhas enhances the foundational principles of deliberative democracy, which emphasize inclusive and equal participation in a single, unified forum. The need for separate women-only forums addresses the systemic barriers women face in participating meaningfully in mixed-gender spaces like Gram Sabhas, where patriarchal norms and power imbalances often marginalize their voices. The fact that Mahila Sabhas give women a platform to express their views, especially those who were not comfortable with attending Gram Sabha Deliberations, is further demonstrated by Babli Bua in her interview with Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) where she mentioned, 'When I understood that a Mahila Sabha is only for women, where we can put forward our concerns, our issues, I wanted to attend. I wanted to put forward my problems. Now I am confident, secure that I can raise my voice and will be heard.' This shows how specialised forums are more effective in addressing the needs of marginalized groups.

#### 4.1. Evaluating Female-Only Deliberation Platforms

While Mahila Sabhas have been instrumental in amplifying women's voices in local governance, there are concerns regarding the seriousness with which their final decisions are regarded and implemented. A significant limitation of Mahila Sabhas is the lack of integration of their resolutions into the Gram Sabha agendas, with many being diluted or disregarded. For instance, in the Kutch

District of Gujrat, some officials, even after being informed about the workings of the Mahila Sabhas, were ignorant towards implementing the suggested policies. A limitation highlighted by a tribal development officer was that they did not know how to tackle problems discussed in the Mahila Sabhas (Biswas et al., 2016: 18). This can alienate women from attending the Mahila Sabha meetings in the first place, undermining their confidence and willingness to participate in public affairs, perpetuating the misconception that women are disinterested in governance. In reality, systemic barriers such as patriarchal power structures and familial control even in the presence of Mahila Sabhas suppress women's active engagement, further impacting their self-esteem.

Importantly, proper mechanisms are needed for implementing policies brought about by these female-only platforms. Addressing these limitations in the Mahila Sabha institutional integration requires further systemic reforms, such as granting Mahila Sabhas legal status and mandating the inclusion of their resolutions in Gram Sabha discussions, with non-inclusion rendering Gram Sabha proceedings unacceptable. NGOs and self-help groups (SHGs) support can further foster collective strength, empowering women to express themselves and actively engage in governance. Without such measures, Mahila Sabhas risk being perceived as symbolic rather than substantive, limiting their potential to drive meaningful change (Biswas et al., 2016: 19). Understanding the limitations to female-only deliberation is thus crucial to their functioning.

#### 4.2. Comparative Effectiveness of Female-Only Forums: Co-Option to Conventional Patriarchal Structures

Keeping the above-mentioned limitations in mind, questions can be raised about the applicability of the female-only discussion model to other contexts outside of India. The Federación Nacional de Mujeres Campesinas de Bolivia "Bartolina Sisa" (FNMCBBS) was an organisation following a similar system. Bolivia's FNMCBBS was formed as a platform for indigenous and peasant women to engage in deliberative processes and advocate for their rights. It was a social and political organization in Bolivia. However, it has faced several challenges that have limited its effectiveness. One significant issue is the organization's internal struggle between

seeking autonomy on the one hand, while remaining a branch of the larger and most influential peasant union, the Confederación Sindical Única de Trabajadores Campesinos de Bolivia (CSUTCB), on the other. Efforts to become independent were met with controversy and led to a loss of members, resulting in a decision in 2004 to remain affiliated with CSUTCB. This choice subjected the FNMCBBS to the CSUTCB's overarching patriarchal structure, which has been a barrier to fully addressing women's issues within the organization (Hammad, 2013: 81). This echoes the wider problem of the integration of the agendas of the female-only forums.

Similarly, Indonesia's 2014 village law (Law No. 6/2014), enhanced women's participation, but female-only councils were co-opted to patriarchal structures later. According to research, although the Village Law made it possible for women to participate, gender inclusion was hampered by the entrenched patriarchal norms in many rural communities. Women's organisations encountered challenges that hindered their capacity to effectively impact village development, including restricted information availability, a lack of confidence, and opposition from male counterparts. While women's participation in decision-making and public works increased, their involvement often served to fulfil program requirements rather than genuinely bringing about change and empowering their agenda (Syukri, 2023). This, therefore, highlights how while there are benefits of the Mahila Sabha in terms of women's empowerment, additional measures to female-only forums should be explored which would reinforce their functioning and effectiveness. Additional research into measures to support female-only forums is necessary first and foremost to protect the final agenda and resolutions of the female-only forums from being sidelined, ensuring they're the top-level execution and effectiveness.

## 5. Conclusion

Although deliberative democracy is necessary complement to electoral democracy, it needs further measures to ensure the inclusion of marginalised voices. In deliberations, especially those in the global South, those speaking from a more underpowered position, have found it beneficial to come together to voice their agendas separately rather than in large settings. As seen in the case

study of Mahila Sabhas, females are often compelled to form female-only forums to ensure that gender-responsive policies are being catered towards. By creating a platform that allows them to confidently voice their opinion and address issues that often get sidelined by larger deliberations women have seen an overall increase in the implementation of policies prioritising their interests, which in turn has led to an increase in women's attendance in Gram Sabha meetings.

However, these female-only formats require further policies to ensure their resolutions get acted upon. As seen in case studies, not just in India, but across the Global South, more often than not policies suggested by these female-only forums are hindered due to a lack of organisational and legal methods to enforce recommendations post-formation. This stresses the importance of having a clear framework for enforcing policies brought up by female-only forums to integrate them into larger deliberations. This paper has cast light on the limitations of equal democratic participation, grasping the potential of female-only forums. Based on direct quotes, it has highlighted how important Mahila Sabhas have been for rural women in India. It is urgent and important for further research to explore female-only forums in the Global South from a comparative perspective, explore their implement ability and suggest more concrete methods of their institutional integration and enhancement.

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