
Lessons in Women's Empowerment from India's Female Village Leaders



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The relationships and factors that influence the performance of elected representatives.

"I am the hope of the villagers and my village is the hope for me, I can disappoint neither them nor myself." – An elected female representative

Women presidents of village councils have been making significant contributions to India's socioeconomic development, but little is known about what makes them successful as elected officials.

It is necessary to understand what it takes for elected women representatives (just representatives for the rest of this article) to be successful because they could help India become an economically, socially and politically inclusive superpower over the next 30 years.

Leadership of villages is economically critical because 850 million of total population of India's 1.3 billion live in 638,596 villages across 29 states and three union territories. And these villages generate about half, or US\$1.1

trillion, of India's gross domestic product of US\$2.3 trillion.

In 1993, India took a step towards the inclusion of women in the political governance of villages by enacting a constitutional amendment that reserved 33 percent of village council seats for women. That figure was later raised to 50 percent.

The move came as more women were encouraged to take up leadership roles in villages as male villagers moved to larger towns for work, while women took on more significant roles in farming, particularly in the past 10 years.

My thesis, entitled **“Probing the Minds of Elected Women Representatives on Village Councils in India”**, explores the interrelationships between representatives' thoughts, emotions and behaviours and those of their families, village council members and villagers. Based on interviews with 120 representatives from 100 villages across 19 districts in the state of Maharashtra, my research describes how these relationships influence the representatives' performance.

My research found that 70 percent of these representatives successfully met their aims as part of a progress plan drafted by their village council. The rest underperformed because they were unable to win the support of village council members or villagers in carrying out their agenda.

There were eight key themes about the factors that influence representatives' work:

1. Political background and economic status have a moderate influence on performance.

Representatives with no family history of political service performed as well as those from political families. In comparison, many representatives whose fathers or grandfathers had served in village councils delivered mixed performances. Many of them were less effective than their peers without a political background.

Most successful representatives initially ran for office at the request of a local, senior male leader. Those who stood for election on their own had mixed results. Representatives tend to relate to local male political leaders as authority figures.

In terms of financial background, representatives from poorer families did as well as wealthier peers, which shows their drive to become village council leaders. In comparison, richer representatives exploited their assets to advance village causes, but some became complacent about the money and power they enjoyed after being elected.

2. Natural environments are no barriers to success.

My study shows that representatives in villages that are ecologically or geologically deficient performed as well, if not better, than peers in villages with better conditions. Indeed representatives with the advantages of natural resources did not necessarily fare better than their peers. Rather, a lack of natural resources and increased hardship made some representatives more resilient, and they treated adversity as an opportunity to show leadership. This helped them to do as well as their more privileged peers.

3. Psychological and social factors significantly influence performance.

From interviews with representatives, it was clear that successful representatives had a positive mindset that eclipsed negative emotions. In fact, the top three choices of attributes by performing representatives were self-confidence, love and social engagement. They viewed these attributes as mutually reinforcing in their approach to work and life.

In contrast, the top attributes for underperforming representatives were self-doubt, emotional incapacity and irresponsibility; identity conflicts made them ineffective in their work.

4. Self-confidence and a string of seven emotions.

Successful representatives exhibit self-confidence, the most important psychological attribute that explains their performance. They also embrace emotional attributes such as love, learning, authenticity, fairness, survival instinct, social engagement and leadership.

In my interviews, 83 percent of successful representatives chose these attributes as the most important out of 150, while 41 percent of underperforming representatives did likewise.

5. Mother leaders of villagers.

Most successful representatives view villagers as members of their extended family. Indeed, they see themselves as mother figures to their extended families and work with them for the common good.

These leaders have a strong sense of responsibility, which spurs them to work hard to protect their families and extended families.

Successful representatives show that attributes expected of a woman and a leader need not be conflicting. Mother leaders can show affection while also displaying assertive, decisive and clinical behaviours.

6. Gender bias in the treatment of underperformers.

Although most village council members treat representatives with respect if they seem competent, they are intolerant of those they view as incompetent, disagreeable or impractical. Indeed, underperforming women are treated more harshly than men.

Men in local governments indicated that there was an unwritten understanding that the election of women was a favour to them. The stakes are clearly higher for women since they are trying to do a job that men have done for generations. There is a perception that the men were being gracious in offering leadership opportunities to women.

7. Perceptions about village council offices.

Successful and underperforming representatives differ in how they view village council offices. For the former, the offices are a mirror in which they view their progressive social identity, and are places to help them to engage with villagers. The latter, however, see the offices as places for extra work, adding to their domestic responsibilities.

8. Representatives are the instrument and the change.

The representatives are givers and takers as they seek to renew their villages and themselves. They feel they are both a part of their villages and the shapers of a new order. Perhaps this notion of acting as change agents is fundamental to achieving success as a representative.

Implications for representatives

Lastly, the results of this study are meant to highlight the need to equip representatives with the tools to strengthen their minds. Towards this end, I believe that therapeutic communities should be set up in villages to teach and foster everyone's positive emotional attributes. That would be a step towards spurring socioeconomic and political progress at the grassroots level.

At the conclusion of my interviews, some representatives said they had ideas on how they could do better in their roles at home and in the village councils. They realised that their new possible selves were the right choice, and reflected on how they could leverage their strengths.

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