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Panchayati Raj

Report of the Advisory Committee on Transforming Women's Representation and Role in Panchayati Raj Institutions: Efforts to Eliminate Proxy Participation

VOLUME - I   **2025**

Ministry of Panchayati Raj Government of India

Report of the Advisory Committee on Transforming Women's Representation and Role in Panchayati Raj Institutions: Efforts to Eliminate Proxy Participation

VOLUME - I

Message

To the women who inspire and show the way and despite the resistance, their resolve remains undiminished. This work is dedicated to their relentless pursuit to achieve equality, justice and freedom.

Maya Angelou said it beautifully "*Each time a woman stands up for herself, she stands up for all women*" and as Malala Yousafzai has also said, " *We cannot all succeed when half of us are held back*".

Shri Sushil Kumar

Chairman of the Advisory Committee

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Foreword

The core values of democracy, local self-governance, and inclusive governance can be realised only with women's participation. This implies that women have the right to participate meaningfully in governance and influence decisions. It also means that government institutions and policies need to be accessible, accountable, and responsive towards women, protecting their interests and providing diverse groups of women with opportunities to take part in public service at the grassroots.

21 States and 2 UTs have made provisions for upto 50% reservation of seats for women in PRIs. Some States have one-third reservation of seats for women by rotation. Continuous efforts are being made towards the capacity-building of women elected representatives (WERs) of PRIs through Revamped Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan in collaboration with different IITs/IIMs, NGOs and INGOs. These capacity-building initiatives are to enable discussion regarding the institutional mechanisms for their empowerment and bring about a charter of issues to be mainstreamed into policy and advocacy support so that their concerns are addressed by the process of development adopted by the State and the three-tier PRI system.

While there is an increasing trend towards women's participation in PRI bodies, the irony is that even though WERs account for approximately 46% of total elected representatives, still in many Panchayats of the country, the practice of proxy women's participation prevails. Some States have legal provisions to address and abolish any kind of proxy practices. However, other States lack such provisions, encouraging this proxy practice to thrive in the open with societal patronage.

I would like to compliment this Advisory Committee for their efforts in bringing out the root causes behind the prevailing proxy practices in Panchayats and providing feasible and appropriate solutions to abolish such practices. The time is ripe to address the various socio-economic cultural barriers that prohibit women from performing as autonomous Panchayat leaders.

I look forward to achieving the objective of the emergence of more empowered & atma nirbhar Women Leaders in local self-government Institutions through the recommendations of this Report.

Vivek Bharadwaj
(Vivek Bharadwaj)

ममता वर्मा
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Joint Secretary

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Acknowledgement

We have arrived at the culmination of over one year of intensive deliberation, study and field workshops for the Advisory Committee *'To Examine the issue of Women Pradhans being Represented by the Male Members of their Families and also examine other issues related thereto'.* It is important to acknowledge the commitment and considerable effort put in by the members.

We were led with direction and sagacity by Shri Sushil Kumar, IAS, (Rtd.), former Secretary, Ministry of Mines, Government of India for which I express my gratitude to him. I extend my greatest appreciation to the Chairman for his expertise, knowledge and efforts in preparing the report.

A special gratitude to Shri. V. K. Bhasin, Former Secretary of Law, Government of India (Rtd.) who as a member of this Committee has been continuously initiating stimulating discussions and suggestions regarding legal measures.

I extend my deepest appreciation to other members - Dr. Mallinath Kalshetti, DDG, YASHADA, Pune, Government of Maharashtra and Dr. Anita Brandon, Sr. Consultant UNFPA-India in addressing proxy practices emerging from their respective ground experiences in the field of women empowerment. I also thank them for their time in undertaking the State's visits for wider consultation with elected women representatives and for their efforts in documenting the inputs from the field with regard to proxy practices.

I extend my gratefulness to Smt. Meenakshi Negi, Member-Secretary, National Commission for Women, Government of India and Smt. Smriti Sharan, Joint Secretary, NRLM, Ministry of Rural Development, for their valuable contribution during the Committee's discussions and in preparing the report. I thank Ms. Nisha Ooran, Director, Department of Panchayati Raj, Department of Jharkhand, for her immense contribution in preparing a dedicated chapter for the report of the Committee as a member.

My deepest appreciation are for Dr. N. V. Madhuri, Associate Professor, Department of Anthropology, University of Hyderabad and Shri Sajith Sukumaran, Director, State Programmes, Janaagraha Centre for Citizenship and Democracy for their contribution as members of the Committee and in report preparation by undertaking the study across States in India on 'Issues of Women Pradhans in PRIs". I thank Shri Satish Kumar Senior Advisor, Centre for Health and Social Justice (CHSJ), New Delhi for his immense contribution in the Committee.

Contd/-

Furthermore, I thank the State Governments of Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Tripura and Uttar Pradesh for organising the two-day seminars for the Committee Members for wider consultation with elected women representatives on addressing and abolishing the Proxy Women's Participation from PRIs.

I would extend my appreciation to Ms. Hyun Hee Ban, Chief, Social Policy and Social Protection, UNICEF-India, Mr. Gibson Michael Riungu, Chief, CT ad Digital Innovation, UNICEF-India and Shri. Mayank Kharbanda, Consultant, MoPR for their technical know-how and knowledge sharing for addressing the proxy participation of women in PRIs. I thank Shri Amjad Khan, Sr. Project Manager, TRIF for his contribution towards writing the chapter on Strategies to combat proxy participation in PRIs.

Finally, I would also like to acknowledge with much appreciation the crucial role played by my staff in the Policy Division of this Ministry – Shri Ramit Maurya, Director, Shri Ajay Kumar, Under Secretary, Smt. Neelina Goel, Section Officer and Ms. Anuradha, Assistant Section Officer for their support provided to the Advisory Committee. I would extend my deepest appreciation to Ms. Priyanka Dutta, Consultant in the Policy Division for her continuous professional assistance, knowledge expertise and support provided at every step to this Advisory Committee from organising the meetings, preparing the minutes, and organising States' visits, coordinating with the members for States' visits to preparing and finalising this report.

(Mamta Varma)
Joint Secretary cum Member Convenor, Advisory Committee

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Abbreviations

AWC:	Anganwadi Centres
ASHA:	Accredited Social Health Activist
CBOs:	Community-based Organisations
CLFs:	Cluster-level Federations
CSOs:	Civil Society Organisations
FLWs:	Frontline Workers
GoI:	Government of India
GP:	Gram Panchayat
GPDP:	Gram Panchayat Development Plan
GRC:	Gender Resource Centres
GRG:	Gender Responsive Governance
HDI:	Human Development Index
IEC:	Information, Education and Communication
LSDGs:	Localisation of Sustainable Development Goals
MGNREGA:	Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act
MGNF:	Mahatma Gandhi National Fellowship
M&E:	Monitoring and Evaluation
MLA:	Member of the Legislative Assemble
MP:	Member of Parliament
MoPR:	Ministry of Panchayati Raj
MoRD:	Ministry of Rural Development
NE States:	North-Eastern States
NGOs:	Non-Governmental Organisations
NHGs:	Neighbourhood Groups
NIRD&PR:	National Institute of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj
NRLM:	National Rural Livelihood Mission
OBC:	Other Backward Classes
PESA:	The Provisions of the Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996
PS:	Panchayat Samiti
PR:	Panchayati Raj
PAI:	Panchayat Advancement Index
PRIs:	Panchayati Raj Institutions
RD:	Rural Development
RLB:	Rural Local Bodies
SDG:	Sustainable Development Goals
SC:	Scheduled Castes
SCW:	State Commission for Women
SHGs:	Self-Help Groups
SIRD:	State Institute of Rural Development
ST:	Scheduled Tribes
ULBs:	Urban Local Bodies
UTs:	Union Territories
VECs:	Village Employment Councils
VO:	Village Organisation
VPRP:	Village Poverty Reduction Plan
WERs:	Women Elected Representatives
ZP:	Zilla Parishad

Summary of the Report

The issue of Pradhan Pati, or Sarpanch Pati, or Mukhiya Pati, symbolises a mode of proxy politics that is prevalent across the country but is more pronounced in some particular pockets and regions. Pradhan Pati does not only mean husbands, but includes male relatives exercising real political power leaving the officially elected women leaders to function as mere figureheads. It is socio-culturally acceptable for men to act as proxies for their wives, sisters, or daughters-in-law. This prevalent practice continues to undermine the laudable Constitutional enactment (73rd Amendment), made over three decades ago (1992), which provided for one-third reservation of seats for women, amongst a total of three million elected representatives (ERs) at the level of the Panchayats. This policy prescription was intended to promote female leadership and empowerment of women, enabling them to act as agents of social change at the village level in particular and rural areas in general.

Currently, India boasts over 15 lakh Women Elected Representatives (WERs), constituting approximately 46.6% of the total elected representatives in PRIs. Additionally, 21 States and 2 Union Territories (UTs) have expanded this Constitutional provision and extended reservation for women to the extent of 50%. However, the prevalence of patriarchal norms, limited enforcement of legal safeguards, and socio-cultural barriers have hindered women's effective participation and leadership in Rural Local Bodies (RLBs). The Ministry of Panchayati Raj (MoPR), acknowledging the seriousness of these challenges, and in compliance of the Supreme Court's advice, constituted an Advisory Committee, in October 2023, to examine and address issues related to proxy participation and empowerment of women as genuine grassroots leaders. This report not only delves in details of the issue of Pradhan Pati but also of enablement of WERs and then consolidates the findings and delineates actionable strategies.

The Terms of Reference were:

(i)   To suggest measures for eliminating proxy practices and ensuring good governance including effective implementation of the clauses under Article 243 of the Constitution of India which were inserted through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 to increase women's representation in the grassroots democratic set-up.

(ii)   To examine the legal framework to overcome the practices being followed in the Panchayats where women have been elected as Pradhan/ mukhiya/ chairperson for the namesake and their male family members are handling the day-to-day work of the panchayat.

(iii)   To provide suggestions/recommendations for empowering women elected

representatives (WERs) of Panchayats and ensuring their participation in the political process and decision-making at the grassroots level for effective implementation of reservation for WERs in Panchayats.

This report aims to address these challenges by:

1. **Identifying Barriers:** Analysing the socio-cultural, economic, and legal factors contributing to proxy participation.

2. **Providing Policy Recommendations:** Proposing actionable strategies to eliminate proxy leadership and empowerment of WERs in general to qualitatively improve the functioning of PRIs.

3. **Enhancing Quality of Representation and Participation:** Suggesting measures to strengthen women's leadership and their active participation in PRIs.

4. **Leveraging Technology:** Exploring innovative tools to monitor governance and enhance transparency and improve the functioning of local self-government institutions and concomitantly foster institutionalisation of such efforts.

5. **Promoting Awareness:** Recommending Information, Education, and Communication (IEC) campaigns to challenge patriarchal norms and increase women's visibility in leadership roles besides supporting their agency role functions through sharing examples of their work.

Socio-Cultural Dimensions:

The participation of women in political activities has grown significantly with the implementation of the policy of reservation of seats in the PRIs. However, there are various socio-cultural factors influencing gender roles faced by the women in Panchayati Raj Institutions such as lack of awareness, experience, knowledge, skills, leadership quality, low level of education, lack of exposure etc. Some of the socio-cultural barriers are prevailing gender roles; educational disparities & inadequate capacities; caste and class dynamics; social resistance; lack of cooperation from line/sectoral departments; dominance of political parties; minimum education qualification; rotation of seats; re-election; and gender digital divide.

Legal Framework Relating to Panchayats:

To examine the legal and statutory framework prevailing in the States/UTs on the issue of Pradhan Pati and the efforts enunciated for eliminating political proxy participation by male relatives of WERs, particularly at the GP level, a consultative paper was prepared by the legal team of the Advisory Committee. The consultative paper identified certain legal and non-legal parameters. Further to that, inputs were sought from the stakeholders especially the State Panchayati Raj Departments and the State Commission for Women (SCW) for their respective inputs. The consultative paper sought to examine the following:

(i)   Legal measures initiated to eliminate proxy political participation and indulging and interfering in the roles and responsibilities of the women elected representatives.

(ii)   Video recording of Panchayat meetings.

(iii)   Punitive measures to deter proxy political participation in place of/ for women elected representatives.

(iv)   Information, Education and Communication Campaign undertaken to address for gender-based discrimination and proxy political practices.

(v)   Building a nationwide/ Statewide/ District Network and a network of networks of all Panchayats.

Field Findings:

Four Regional Workshops were conducted to study women's empowerment and related issue of the Pradhan Pati. These workshops were as under: -

➢   Madhya Pradesh–1st Regional Workshop (Oct.24)

➢   Tripura and North East Region – 2nd Regional Workshop (Nov.24)–6 States: Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Sikkim and Tripura

➢   Uttar Pradesh – 3rd Regional Workshop (Dec.24)-4 States: including–Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh

➢   Karnataka – 4th Regional Workshop (Dec. 24)–3 States: including, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Kerala

Our detailed interactions with the State Governments and field visits involving interaction with WERs/Women Pradhans, actually, validated the findings of various studies quoted in this report; but additionally, this opportunity also offered us to receive and incorporate specific suggestions for consideration of the planners and policy formulators in the government. The feedback included inputs received under the following heads:

(i)   Lack or Inadequate Experience of Political Leadership

(ii)   Gender-Based Discrimination

(iii)   Prevailing Patriarchal norms and practices

(iv)   Political Pressure

(v)   Socio-economic and cultural disadvantages

(vi)   Pressure of balancing their public life with domestic responsibilities

(vii)   The WERs in most Panchayats face lack of or limited opportunities and access to rapid and customized capacity-building training

(viii) The principle of rotational reservation of seats, whereby, WERs are allowed only a tenure of 5 years.

(ix) Due to socio-cultural reasons combined with lack of education and experience and subsidiary/subject partner roles assigned in families, the WERs are hesitant in taking financial decisions independently.

Strategies to Combat the Sarpanch Pati Phenomenon

Capacity Building and Training: These trainings aim to build women leaders' perspectives on gender (social structures perpetuating gender as a construct, how gender manifests in different domains), political knowledge (understanding of the Constitution, rules and technical items for budgeting, approval process etc.), and skills (ability to facilitate resource mapping efforts and use it for planning).

i. **Fostering Gender-Inclusive Governance through:**

> **Integrating Gender Perspective:** Gender mainstreaming should be done into the planning and budgeting exercises while approving the scheduled caste component plan, tribal sub-plan, and women component plan of the Panchayats.

> **Encouraging Female Participation:** the capacity building and enhancement efforts, both through the government and through new public-private partnerships built for undertaking these measures, there is no doubt that WERs would be able to enhance their voice and agency functions both at individual levels and at collective levels in the panchayat bodies, be it GP or PS or ZP.

ii. **Network for women elected representatives:** The WER network would not only improve horizontal learning among the WERs, but would also help in to institutionalise learning of digital tools; it helps in the dissemination of key messages and lessons learnt from successful interventions and implementation of development programmes and improvement of governance issues including improving accountability and transparency.

iii. **Promoting Awareness and Support:** Reporting and Redressal Systems, A system of reporting for proxy leadership should be initiated in the Panchayati Raj department at the block, district, and state levels.

iv. **Role of Civil Society Organisations:** Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) can play a critical role in addressing the Sarpanch Pati phenomenon through local and context-based initiatives, advocacy, capacity building, monitoring, community engagement, and research.

Recommendations from Workshops and Field Visits:

Based on the consultation with WERs in the four regional workshops, several suggestions/recommendations have come up for consideration. These suggestions are summarised under related headings and these are:

i.   **Training and Capacity Building:** WERs need to be equipped with speedy and focused training for requisite leadership, knowledge & skills involved in the management of the Panchayats.

ii. **Gender Sensitisation and Behavioural Change** are desired at the community and family level to overcome restrictive cultural practices through the IEC efforts.

iii. **Empowerment of WERs:** Networking mechanisms be it through technology or personal interactions with support groups like SHGs, CBOs, NGOs could be mobilised to motivate WERs for facilitating active leadership role in Panchayats

iv. **Institutional Support and Policy Measures:** Administration at all levels of PRIs should engage with WERs and not with their proxies (male relatives).

v.   **Educational Reforms:** Minimum school-level education should be made mandatory for contesting elections for Panchayat President, irrespective of gender.

vi. **Legal and Regulatory Framework:** On violation of the orders banning male interference in place of WERs, fines and serious penalties should be imposed on offenders.

vii. **Leadership Promotion and Role Models:** Celebrate success stories of women leaders who have challenged societal norms and helped progress the agenda of SDG-5 (Gender Equality) with public recognition.

viii. **Support Systems:**

> ➢ Dedicated help desk and helpline numbers should be instituted and publicised at the State, District, and Block levels to provide mentoring and problem-solving support to WERs.

> ➢ Increased honorarium to avail services of house-help and caregiving help, and provision of mobility allowances, should be considered for WERs.

Policy Intervention and Road Ahead:

A.   Strategies for Promoting Independent Women Leadership:

The following strategies have been found to contribute significantly to strengthening and promoting women's leadership in PRIs, when they forge partnerships with the SHGs and CBOs, particularly in the following issues:

(i)   Mentorship - this was validated during the field visits in Jharkhand where mentorship by the previous GP Mukhiya greatly helped the woman Pradhan and this was also noticed in other States.

(ii) Capacity Building and Training- this has been discussed in detail in relevant paragraphs.

(iii) Creating inclusive spaces taking into account specific requirements of WERs.

(iv) Leveraging Technology: Example: use of drones for project management like the national SVAMITVA Programme; and use of digital platforms for payments for better accountability in financial management at the GP levels particularly.

(v) Building Networks with other stakeholders through networks created through social media and portals like the IDRN etc.

(vi) Participation in Mahila/Gram Sabhas including video recording and putting minutes and decisions in public domain like in West Bengal

(vi) Inclusive Development Plan: GPDP is better prepared when the CBOs/NGOs

(vii) and agencies in the government promoted programmes where women work viz. ASHA, SHGs, and Anganwadis, are integrated in the GP plan preparation.

B. **Strategies of IEC Campaign against Proxy Practices**

The following strategies may be implemented to address the issue of proxy participation and promote gender-responsive governance at the PRIs:

i. Media Campaigns: Foremost, the audio/ video for the campaigns should be short crisp and direct for ensuring maximum impact.

ii. Television and Radio: Short videos, talk shows and interviews with WERs on women's leadership.

iii. Social media: Leveraging social media platforms such as X, Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube to share videos, infographics, and testimonials to promote gender-sensitive governance.

iv. Sharing inspirational stories of women making path-breaking contributions to local governance.

v. Services of well-known creative media agencies/NGOs/CBOs to be sought for better design creative and new/catchy advertisements.

vi. Short videos or interviews featuring male role models who support gender equality/equity.

vii. Educational Materials: Development of pamphlets, brochures, hoardings and posters in local languages outlining the negative impacts of proxy practices and the principles of gender-sensitive governance.

viii. Mentorship Programs: Engage experienced women leaders to mentor and share their experiences with aspiring and current female leaders, especially for the first-time WERs and Women Pradhans.

ix.   Wall Paintings: Visual communication through wall painting on issues such as violence, education, health, women's leadership, etc. with appropriate captions to reach out to wider rural groups.

x.   School and College Programmes: Integrate gender equity/equality and women's leadership issues into the curriculum.

xi.   Slogans: During interaction with Women ERs and other stakeholders at Lucknow, it was suggested that the women empowerment should be promoted through inspirational slogans.

xii.   Outdoor media: Outdoor media such as wall-hoardings, banners, kiosks, etc should be adequately placed at the schools, bus stops, hospitals, government office buildings, market places, panchayat buildings and any other relevant public spaces.

xiii.   Community Engagement through Street Plays and Theatre: Local folklore and language on street plays, puppet shows, and local theatre groups to be used to spread awareness on proxy participation.

xiv.   Innovative ideas like "Your Voice Must Be Heard" should be raised and converged through SHG groups to amplify women's participation and representation.

xv.   Gender Resource Centres should be established to support and empower women by providing resources and guidance.

xvi.   Recommendations for scaling up the GRCs in Panchayats.

xvii.   Public Address System: It could be an effective tool in spreading awareness among the community level on various women-related government schemes.

xviii. Women's Leadership Forums: Create platforms/associations/groups for women to discuss issues faced by them in local governance, share their experiences, and advocate for their rights.

Monitoring and Evaluation Mechanisms

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) mechanisms are crucial for ensuring the effectiveness and sustainability of policies, and interventions aimed at promoting gender-sensitive governance and combating proxy practices like the phenomenon of Sarpanch Pati. The following para outlines the key components of the proposed M&E mechanisms:

i.   Establishment of a Dedicated Monitoring Cell within the MoPR

ii.   Development of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to ensure consistent and measurable outcomes, a set of KPIs may be developed.

iii. Regular Monitoring and Reporting including quarterly and annual reviews, to evaluate the progress of interventions

iv. Use of Technology for Real-Time Monitoring

v. Third-party evaluations to provide an unbiased assessment of the impact and effectiveness of the interventions.

vi. Feedback Mechanisms and Iterative Learning to allow WERs, community members, and other stakeholders to share their experiences and suggestions.

vii. Capacity Building for Monitoring Staff to effectively implement the M&E mechanisms.

Road Ahead: Suggestions:

Based on the research of available literature and extensive consultations with the State Governments and knowledge gained from the interactions of four Regional Workshops involving 14 States, this Committee identified steps to address the issue of eradicating the practice of proxy participation of spouses and other male relatives of WERs. These include:

i. Policy Interventions and Structural Reform including initiatives such as gender-exclusive quotas in some Panchayat subject committees, ward-level committees (like Kerala); Annual Award for Anti Pradhan Pati Champions; appointing Women's Ombuds- persons; public swearing-in of Women Pradhans in Gram Sabha; Federation of Women Panchayat leaders could be created; and Gender Resource Centres which serve as hubs for leadership training, legal advice, and support networks.

ii. Technological Solutions including Modern technological interventions like Virtual Reality (VR) simulation training; integrating AI-powered query-driven replies to provide real-time legal and governance guidance to WERs in vernacular languages; WhatsApp Groups of WERs could be created and linked with officials of Panchayats and Block Officials to help solve the day-to-day problems; and MoPR's Panchayat Nirnay Portal serves as a platform for citizens allowing them to track elected Pradhans' participation in meetings and decisions, fostering public accountability and discouraging proxy leadership, etc.

iii. Capacity Building and Training Initiatives focusing on continuous and mandatory training in vernacular languages; collaboration with IIMS, IITs/NITs; involvement of international development agencies and women MLAs/MPs to leadership training to Women Pradhans; etc.

iv. Mentorship and Peer Support Programmes including Direct mentorship of elected Women Pradhans by the MLAs and MPs; Dedicated Women-Only Monitoring Councils at District and Block levels, comprising experienced women ERs and retired officials; Launching mentorship programmes; Forming regional and district-level networks of

elected women leaders; Formation/Association of Women's Federations; etc.

v.   Community Engagement and Inclusivity including mandating regular Mahila Sabha meetings; Using Folk Traditions through street plays, radio dramas, and village festivals to challenge cultural norms and promote women's leadership in governance; etc.

vi.   Institutionalising gender-responsive budgets in Panchayat meetings to empower WERs in resource allocation and programme management.

vii. Accountability and Oversight Mechanisms: Mechanisms of Helplines and Women Watchdog Committee for confidential complaints about proxy leadership, with whistleblower rewards in verified cases.

viii. Exemplary penalties should be enforced for proven cases of proxy leadership, deterring male relatives' interference.

ix.   Recognition, Awards and Motivation: National Awards for exceptional women leaders on Republic Day could inspire grassroots leadership and create role models.

Introduction

1.1   Context

The issue of Gram Pradhan Pati, or simply Pradhan Pati, primarily pertaining to the proxy leadership exercised by a husband, as also including the exercise of similar influence/s by other male relative/s of an elected woman Pradhan, at the Gram Panchayat (GP) level, persists in posing plurality of perspectives: first, in perceiving of the prevalent practice, and then positing of possible paths to address this protracted practice in some pockets of the country.

The issue of Pradhan Pati, or Sarpanch Pati, or Mukhiya Pati, symbolizes a mode of proxy politics that is prevalent across the country but is more pronounced in some particular pockets and regions. Pradhan Pati does not only mean husbands, but includes male relatives exercising real political power leaving the officially elected women leaders to function as mere figureheads. It is socio-culturally acceptable for men to act as proxies for their wives, sisters, or daughters-in-law. Pradhan Pati practices are creating structures of irresponsible governance at the Panchayats, as it pushes and often creates parallel paths and informal structures, promotes proxy participation, fostering misuse of funds, sustaining corruption, and inducing ineffective governance, and defeating the goal of accountable and transparent governance by the local self- government institutions like the Panchayats.

This prevalent practice continues to undermine the laudable Constitutional enactment (73rd Amendment)[1], made over three decades ago (1992), which provided for one-third reservation of seats for women, amongst a total of three million elected representatives (ERs) at the level of the Panchayats. This policy prescription was intended to promote female leadership and empowerment of women, enabling them to act as agents of social change at the village level in particular and rural areas in general.

Currently, India boasts over 15 lakh women elected representatives (WERs), constituting approximately 46.6% of the total elected representatives in PRIs. Additionally, 21 States and 2 Union Territories (UTs) have even expanded this Constitutional provision and even extended reservation for women to the extent of 50%. However, the prevalence of patriarchal norms, limited enforcement of legal safeguards, and socio-cultural barriers have hindered women's effective participation and leadership in Rural Local Bodies

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1   Ministry of Law and Justice, GoI. 1992. "The Constitution (Seventy-Third Amendment Act, 1992).

(RLBs). The Ministry of Panchayati Raj (MoPR), acknowledging the seriousness of these challenges, and in compliance of the Supreme Court's advice, constituted an Advisory Committee, in October 2023, to examine and address issues related to proxy participation and empowerment of women as genuine grassroots leaders. This report not only delves in details of the issue of Pradhan Pati but also of enablement of WERs and then consolidates the findings and delineates actionable strategies.

Women Leaders asserting their role as District Panchayat President in Tripura

1.2   Challenges

As stated, the reservation of one-third (1/3) seats for women in the Panchayats through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment (1992) promulgated over three decades ago, was hailed as a revolutionary step in enhancing women's empowerment, enablement, electoral representation to improve decentralized governance, and is hailed as a turning point in making Indian democracy as truly representational. This measure sought to deepen democracy and decentralize/ strengthen grassroots governance through gender mainstreaming of political space in rural India; it made women equal partners and stakeholders in India's development journey in the formal sense to begin with.

As we all know, the plurality of perspectives pertaining to the issue of Pradhan Pati stem from immense intersectionality involving convergence of innumerable issues, such as the primacy of traditional homemaker role for women, more so for rural women, differential educational attainments from men, multiplicity of expectations emanating from family and community networks, sudden thrusting of public representative role without any experience or preparation, differential property rights, remnants of purdah , socially segregated roles, caste-based male Panchayats operating in parallel in some States, parallel role expectations as farm workers and generally assignment of subsidiary roles allowing to function only as subject partners in rural landscape. Some of these issues are summarized below:

➢ **Patriarchal Norms:** The offshoot of a traditional society, especially the rural one, where patriarchal mores and practices prevail, is that while women represent elected seats due to constitutional mandates, the centuries-old continuum of

socio-cultural matrix openly sanctions the concomitant continuum of decision-making power being exercised primarily by men. The continuum of centuries-old culturally conditioned/codified roles, exercises both overt and covert pressures to instinctively impel women to conform to the traditional subservient gender roles defined for them.

As stated, the Women Pradhans have been vested with formal power for over three decades, but they do not exercise or assert their authority due to societal pressure, deficient educational attainments, inadequate political apprenticeship or education in general and political socialisation in particular. Moreover, there are few social sanctions and penalties for men who assume control of women's elected positions.

Deeply entrenched gender norms define politics as a male-dominated space, leading to systematic demonstration of tokenism of women in decision-making roles even when reservation of seats is provided. This phenomenon is evident in countries such as South Asia, Africa, and parts of Latin America, where women end up acting as symbolic figureheads while real authority remains within male power structures. Additionally, gender-based discrimination leads to inadequate resources, limited political mentoring, and reduced access to influential networks, further marginalising women's voices in governance. The impact of patriarchal structures is also visible in policy priorities. Women's leadership tends to emphasise social welfare, health, and education, but their proposals often receive less funding and bureaucratic backing compared to male-driven infrastructure and economic projects. Women leaders are also subjected to higher scrutiny and violence, both online and offline, deterring many from seeking re-election.

Yes, patriarchal norms affect women's participation in political leadership even in Western developed countries, though often in subtler ways compared to many parts of the Global South. Despite having legal equality and higher gender awareness, systemic biases, cultural expectations, and institutional barriers continue to limit women's political representation and influence.

In countries like the United States, Canada, and across Europe, women remain underrepresented in local governments, mayoral positions, and legislative bodies. Unconscious biases still frame leadership traits—assertiveness, decisiveness, and strategic thinking—as inherently "masculine". Studies show that women candidates face greater scrutiny over their personal lives, appearance, and leadership styles, which male politicians typically do not experience to the same extent. In many Western democracies, politics remains an "old boys' club," where

informal networks and party structures favour men. Even when elected, women frequently receive fewer speaking opportunities, lower committee assignments, and less media coverage than their male counterparts. Another persistent issue is gendered political violence—both online and offline. Female politicians in the West face higher levels of harassment, doxxing, and threats of violence, which discourage many from entering or continuing in political office. Countries like Sweden, the UK, and France have seen rising instances of misogynistic abuse targeting women leaders, often intensified by social media.

Despite these barriers, progress is being made. Initiatives like gender quotas, mentorship programs, and equal campaign funding laws in countries like Norway, Germany, and France have helped improve women's representation. However, while Western democracies may not exhibit overt patriarchal restrictions like proxy leadership, structural inequalities and deeply ingrained gender norms still shape women's political experiences, making full and equal participation a continuing struggle.

Seen in this perspective, the practice of Pradhan Pati is just another form of women struggle to find independent voices in political space and be their own person/s. This is not to deny that India should not do anything to address this practice and as we shall see the efforts are constantly being made but the results come over longer period over a generation. An example is to see that women had to struggle much longer to achieve universal suffrage rights.

➢ **Proxy Leadership:** For the newly elected Women Pradhans in particular and WERs in general, the new role is not only challenging but can be overwhelming, as it comes with totally contrasting social roles, responsibilities and expectations. Consider this - from being confined to chullahs, cooking, cleaning, children caring, cultivating, cloistered confines in mind and spaces at if it were, and then emerging in full public view and spaces, with the whole village society turning as spectators and surrounded by a continuous scrutiny by old societal watchdogs can be pretty unnerving; the role is a psychological shock at first, and after five years when they just begin to comprehend and come to grips with the new roles, they are asked to get back to the very same confined roles/ responsibilities and claustrophobic cloistered places. The prospect of return to the same situation haunts their five-year tenures. At least, women representing Parliamentary and State Assembly seats, have the advantage of gaining experience and confidence by representing the seats over successive terms. The Elected Women Pradhans do not have this opportunity to cement their learnings and roles over a reasonable period of time. This is a limiting factor for Women Pradhans when one considers

that male members can fight panchayat elections repeatedly.

➢ **Weak Enforcement Mechanisms:** The Pradhan Pati issue actually shows us the mirror image of our rural society and the time lag that invariably occurs between a new legal change/empowering enactment (de jure) and corresponding actual field-level socio-political-cultural change (de facto). In other words, one sees a yawning gap between the legislative intent of our lawmakers and actual ground and field-level social reality. In fact, we can say that formal legal rights bestowed can only succeed if backed up by corresponding policies/programmes adopted through a multi-faceted socio-cultural-legal approach. There should be strict enforcement of legal empowering provisions, complemented through an entire range of capacity-building interventions. The governments should undertake multiple programmes to foster socio-cultural shifts towards acceptance of increased women's representation, participation and sharing of space and responsibilities, in rural social political and economic structures. In other words, women have to be coopted as equal partners and not as subject partners in this national development and nation-building exercise.

➢ **Capacity Constraints:** Many WERs lack formal educational attainments beyond middle schools, lack political training or political socialisation comparable to men, and very limited exposure to the functioning of local self-government institutions, government systems and the entire spectrum of highly bureaucratic and complex governance processes. Field-level interactions by this Committee, also highlight a significant gap in the knowledge and confidence quotient among first-time WERs.

➢ **Cultural Codification Conditioning Roles:** Cultural stigmas discourage women from actively engaging in public roles, public life and open public participation. Reports from such States as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar indicate that women often face societal pressures to willingly defer to the decision-making capabilities of their male relatives.

➢ **Economic Dependency:** Limited financial independence restricts women's ability to fully participate in newer roles for governance. Many WERs also lack control over household finances, further constraining their autonomy. Despite these, one still sees that women frontline workers such as the Anganwadi, Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) workers and the Self-Help Groups (SHGs) women members are beginning to become active contributors to family incomes and this has enabled them to assert their independence, individualities and inclination to exercise their autonomy.

The above issues would come again for detailed examination in related Chapters.

1.3   Objective

Studies show if the WERs, especially Women Pradhans function independently, they bring positive changes in health (using intersectional convergences of Anganwadi Workers/ ICDS teachers help in preschool learning), and public health issues through ASHA outreach and extension activities, education (through School Teachers), resulting in exponential results and visible improvement in health care, education, sanitation and drinking water, microfinance expansion and numerous mother and child care and healthcare programmatic interventions. In this perspective, if the Women Pradhans function independently, they bring substantial qualitative changes in improving governance of local self-government institutions and help in improved transparency and accountability and better delivery of citizen-centric services especially at the doorstep. Very few studies highlight the fact that women's leadership fosters finding local and innovative solutions at the local levels. This was validated during the Advisory Committee interactions with ERs of fourteen States and through cases seen by them during their field-level visits.

It is not that the Union and State governments are adopting an ostrich-like approach in ignoring the issue or they have not made attempts to address the problem of Pradhan Pati. For instance, Punjab has banned male relatives from attending the official meetings on behalf of WERs. However, typical of other governance-improving interventions, field-level enforcement remains weak. Moreover, the relatives develop new ways to beat the system like preparing and handing over briefs for mouthing the dictated responses, responses facilitated by message exchanges or giving a pre-prepared reply etc. This report aims to address these challenges by:

1.   **Identifying Barriers:** Analysing the socio-cultural, economic, and legal factors contributing to proxy participation.

2.   **Providing Policy Recommendations:** Proposing actionable strategies to eliminate proxy leadership and empowerment of WERs in general to qualitatively improve the functioning of PRIs.

3.   **Enhancing Quality of Representation and Participation:** Suggesting measures to strengthen women's leadership and their active participation in PRIs.

4.   **Leveraging Technology:** Exploring innovative tools to monitor governance and enhance transparency and improve the functioning of local self-government institutions and concomitantly foster institutionalisation of such efforts.

5.   **Promoting Awareness:** Recommending Information, Education, and Communication (IEC) campaigns to challenge patriarchal norms and increase women's visibility in leadership roles besides supporting their agency role functions through sharing examples of their work.

As stated above, the issue of Pradhan Pati or proxy leadership is quite complex as it involves multi-perspective perceptivity and multi-dimensional understanding. And then, as a natural corollary to these, it also calls for multi-dimensional approaches and solutions. In other words, the issue has infinite interconnected lines and the resultant intersectionality of issues is such that not all can be listed, let alone taken up for study and suggesting of solutions. Both the intersectionality and the complexity of the issue render it difficult for any analysis to find the entire range of final solutions.

The intersectionality of the Pradhan Pati issue is demonstrated singularly by the fact that the problem persists even after almost three decades of legal empowerment and the initial typical tolerance level has since evaporated and people are demanding solutions. The complexity of the issue makes examining the issue of Pradhan Pati quite challenging, for the Committee and its report would not be able to do full justice due to its inability to examine all the related issues in research mode though some semblance of research has been attempted by resorting to a detailed examination. Nevertheless, it is hoped that its adoption of a multi-perspectival approach to studying the issue would point to possible paths for the future.

Chapter - 2

Historical and Socio-Cultural Context

2.1 Evolution of Panchayati Raj Institutions

All the literate societies, especially where democratic polity is practised, in both policy and practice, show strong evidence that political representation of women is a strong pre-requisite not only for the deepening of democracy at the grassroots levels but also in institutionalising and mainstreaming of the entire gamut of advancing gender equity/equality interventions or shall we say gender mainstreaming of all development paths in general. The functioning of Indian democracy in the first four decades after India's independence clearly showed that the lack of effective participation of women at grassroots levels is adversely affecting the successes of development programmes, relating to both public and individual health, especially of children, education, water, sanitation, besides accountability and transparency gaps in governance especially of local self-government institutions.

The experience of the functioning of Panchayats in some of the States like Kerala, Karnataka, Gujarat, Maharashtra, and West Bengal has strongly shown that political participation of women has been yielding remarkable results, especially in improving child/women health, educational enrolments, prevention of child labour, reduction of communicable diseases etc. So, by the nineties of the previous century, it was progressively being realised that India's embarking on the path of liberalisation and economic growth could not proceed and possibly yield planned results, unless the women were co-opted as active political partners in development and democratic governance at the local levels, especially at the Panchayats. This would also ensure that women contribute to public policy formulation at the grassroots level, besides improving transparency, accountability and governance of local self-government institutions and bodies. So, going by the spirit of checks and balances enshrined in the Constitution, the Government of India sought to build similar systems at the Panchayat levels by inducting women at every level of planning and policy implementation, by broad-basing the Panchayati Raj System. This thinking led to the introduction of provisions for the reservation of seats for women in the Panchayats. But before we go further it would not be out of place to study the issue of political participation of women in a historical context.

2.1.1 Ancient and Medieval Time

Though the exact details of the functioning during the Vedic times are not known, the ancient texts like the Rigveda and the Brahmans mention the words like the 'Sabha' and the 'Samiti'. Generally, the Sabhas seem to be advisory bodies which advised the king or the ruler; and the Samitis, a body larger than the Sabha is understood to help the ruler to better govern or rule.

The historical texts usually mention the word kings being aided by such bodies, but the concept of kings and kingdoms came to the fore with the setting of independent republics around the sixth century BCE. It is inevitable that these rulers needed advisory bodies like the Sabha and the Samiti. It is also generally agreed that women were part of these bodies. These bodies were primarily advisory bodies though Samitis are reportedly said to be involved in the implementation of decisions taken by the rulers. We can infer that the important members of the community were taken as partners in governance.

During the Maurya and post-Maurya periods, village administration was formalised with the establishment of a system of local self-governance. The Arthshastra, an elaborate treatise written by Kautilya on matters of law, justice, governance, economics, warfare etc. describes an elaborate system of local administration and self-governance, involving the village-level institutions in managing local affairs. The rule of Ashoka gives a detailed picture of a king as a benevolent ruler driven by the sole purpose of welfare of its citizens and this marks the beginning of defining the role and responsibilities of the State. In its various edicts and inscriptions found, all across the Ashoka's empire, the core principles of governance and public administration were articulated and passed on as public proclamations to/amongst the general public. And the independent republics (also called the age of Janpadas and Mahajanapadas) during the sixth century BC were a continuum of the principles of democratic governance with public welfare, combined with freedom in pursuit of occupational/commercial activities. The golden age of the Guptas also reflected how the public welfare should remain the focus of all rulers. The rule of Harshvardhan also exemplified how a benevolent ruler should keep the welfare of the subjects as the driving force through decentralised governance facilitated through the functioning of local assemblies- generally understood to comprise village elders and community leaders. There is little direct evidence about the exact functioning of the villages during that time in terms of village bodies, called by various names but one gets the impression that during all these years the so-called villages were becoming self-contained entities virtually leading an independent existence as long as they paid the taxes and accepted the suzerainty of the local ruler, chieftain, king or the emperor. As far as village-level bodies are concerned, the Sabhas may have slowly transformed themselves to become bodies comprising adult male members, mostly of influential

community leaders which settled petty disputes and dispensed justice for petty crimes or settled local disputes as per customary laws and this system with variations continued during this period. The remnants of this type of independent village bodies, functioning as per customary laws, still survive in Nagaland and have been allowed to function by the Constitution.

The medieval period saw a further evolution in local governance structures. Under the Cholas, the Rajput, and Delhi Sultanate and the Mughals, local governance systems largely allowed the rural areas to govern themselves as per local customary laws and practices. The Uttaramerur inscriptions of the Chola Empire (9th -13th century Common Era (CE) describe the village assemblies as Ur (village assemblies for general governance), Sabhas comprising of community leaders handling temple administration/ land matters and Nadu as a coordination body between villages. Members were chosen through elections or a draw of lots (Kodaivolai System) and were substantially autonomous and had responsibility for local administration, maintenance of public works and management of local resources.

Under the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughals the village councils continued to function with responsibility for settling local disputes, especially in matters of land, and due to increasing centralisation, their autonomy was relatively reduced during the Mughals, though in management of petty disputes, maintenance of social order, their roles remained as in previous eras. However, though participatory principles were followed the lower castes, women and the landless were not reportedly represented in such bodies. So, in that sense, the phenomenon is similar to what is observed in pre-modern feudal Europe, where political power and representation were confined to propertied classes.

During the medieval era (8th–18th century CE), caste Panchayats slowly came to assume the form of informal institutions and came to function as autonomous, localized self-governing bodies handling issues such as marriage disputes, inheritance conflicts, economic transactions, and breaches of caste codes.

All the rulers let these independent functional institutional entities operate as before and they became a link with royal administration for maintaining social harmony and reducing costs of administration for the kingdoms.

2.1.2 Colonial Period

Early British colonial rule of the East India Company, during the 17th century, marked the beginning of significantly altering the existing governance structures, and as an outcome of adopting a strong centralised system, the autonomy of local bodies came to

be rather restricted to maintenance of public order and responsibility for maintaining local social order was left to the local bodies much to their delight, as neither these bodies nor the British wanted to interfere in the local social order- after burning their hands before the 1857 mutiny. When the British Government assumed direct responsibility of administering India, the 1861 Act allowed for the establishment of local self-government in some areas. The British introduced a system of local self-government in urban areas, but they continued to exercise direct administrative control in most areas through the mechanism of district administration. The pre-existing village bodies like the Panchayats- an assembly of adult male members of the village- were allowed to function and handle village matters as per customary laws as long as they did not act contrary to other statutory laws and law and order administration.

When the British Government sought to allow some measure of relative autonomy to self-rule while considering the issue of women's franchise, the Joint Select Committee of the British Parliament for the Government of India Act 1919 stated that "*The question whether women should or should not be admitted to the franchise on the same terms as men should be left to the newly elected legislative council of each province to settle by resolution[2]*". The Montagu- Chelmsford Reforms and the Government of India Act, 1919 while allowing decentralization through the principle of "dyarchy," transferred certain functions to elected local bodies but powers granted to local bodies were restricted.

In the first set of Panchayat Acts enacted in the 1920s in the then provinces and Princely States, the women were not considered ineligible for either acting as representatives or as voters[3]. The Holkar State Panchayat Act 1920 (of Indore Princely State) included property qualifications for voting and there was no reference to male/female[4]. The Indore Village Panchayat Act 1928 specified that the subha (collector) may, with the sanction of the minister, establish a Panchayat on his motion or on the report of the Amin, or on receipt of an application by not less than 20 adult male residents of a village or group of villages, and bonafide adult male residents of a village were entitled to elect Panchs[5]. At the dawn of India's independence, in keeping with the impending independence, the Indore Gram Panchayat Act 1947 finally made a small beginning and provided for vote by every bona-fide adult male resident, and resident adult woman who was able to read and write or had immovable property[6].

The Uttar Pradesh Village Panchayat Raj Act 1920 provided for the Panchs as well

2   Buch, Nirmala,. 2000. "WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE IN NEW PANCHAYATS: THE EMERGING LEADERSHIP OF RURAL WOMEN". CWDS, Occasional Paper, No.35
3   *ibid*
4   Buch, Nirmala. 2000." Women's Experience In New Panchayats: The Emerging Leadership Of Rural Women", CWDS. Occasional Paper, No.35
5   *ibii*
6   *ibid*

as the Sarpanch to be appointed by the collector without mentioning male/female eligibility to vote or to contest elections[7]. The Bombay Village Panchayats Act 1920, categorically stipulated that no person may become an elected member who was a female and election was to be held in each village by the adult male residents therein at a meeting presided over by the assistant or deputy collector. Thus, the elections in rural local bodies did not empower women legally[8].

In the then undivided Bengal, the law of 1919 stipulated that the electorate was to consist of all adult males having a residence and paying taxes[9]. During the debate on the CP and Berar Panchayats Bill 1946 in the then CP legislature, an MLA Mr. Abdul Razzak Khan moved an amendment that the Panchs appointed shall include a Muslim, a Harijan and a woman. In case the Panchs so elected do not include a Muslim, a Harijan and a woman, the total number of Panchs of a GP shall be increased by nomination by the provincial government of a Muslim, a Harijan and a woman, as far as may be from among those persons whose names are on the electoral roll of the GP area[10]. This marked the serious beginning of bestowing of legal rights for women representatives in the rural local bodies in the sense of ensuring that the progress of empowering women, by ensuring their political representation in the Rural Local Bodies, moved beyond merely paying lip service observed hitherto by the powers that be[11].

2.1.3 Post-Independence Developments

The issue of reservation of seats for women in the Parliament and the State Assemblies was elaborately discussed in Constituent Assembly Debates[12]. These reflected efforts to reconcile the ideals of gender equality and the need for affirmative action. Some members like Rajkumari Amrit Kaur argued that women were under-represented in public life due to centuries of socio-economic and cultural disadvantages, and reservations could help ensure their effective participation in governance. On the other hand, members like Hansa Mehta and Durgabai Deshmukh stated that reservations could segregate them into separate categories and undermine the broader struggle for gender equality. The Constituent Assembly ultimately decided against reserving seats for women in legislatures. The Assembly believed that over time women would enter politics in greater numbers through general competition, rather than through reserved seats. However, it allowed reservations for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled

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7   Buch, Nirmala. 2000." Women's Experience In New Panchayats: The Emerging Leadership Of Rural Women", CWDS. Occasional Paper, No.35
8   *ibid*
9   *ibid*
10   *ibid*
11   *ibid*
12   Constituent Assembly Debates Official Report, Lok Sabha Secretariat, New Delhi,2014, https://eparlib.nic.in/bitstream/123456789/763285/1/cad_25-11-1949.pdf

Tribes. The Directive Principles of State Policies broadly promote gender equality and decentralised governance[13]. As far as the Panchayats are concerned since the Constitution only provided general policy prescriptions as suggestive prescriptions in the Directive Principles of State Policy, the further question of representation of women was left to State legislatures[14].

As stated, the Constituent Assembly believed that over time, women would enter politics in greater numbers through general competition rather than through reserved seats. But this anticipation did not fructify even after four decades of independence, and the process of women's political representation remained more symbolic than substantial. Their continuing marginal political representation and limited political participation finally led to formally embodying the legal mandate and corresponding provision of reservation of seats for women in Rural and Urban Local Bodies through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment.

It is not that the issue of representation of women in the Panchayats was not in public debate till the nineties but that there was still a continuum of pre-colonial mindset, as seen in merely mouthing homilies rather than initiating legal enactments towards such empowerment. This can be seen in such developments as the Central Council of Local Self Government, in its third meeting in 1957, recommended that the elected representatives, (about 20 in number in each block panchayat), will coopt two women who were interested in working among women and children (GOI; 1957a emphasis added)[15]. The proceedings of the Fourth Meeting of the Council recorded that "the Panchayats to be a real representative body of the people should have women as about half the number of members. But till we reach that stage, we must ensure adequate representation of women, on the Panchayats. Some States have reserved one seat for women but, in practice, it is found that a solitary woman is unable to express herself freely on the aspects touching women's lives in the villages. It is, therefore felt that at least two seats must be reserved for women" (GoI; 1958 emphasis added)[16].

The proceedings referred to women as a neglected section, along with most marginalised sections such as Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes (SCs/STs), yet the representation recommended for women, did not exceed being only tokenism in recommending representation for at least two seats. So, from the first decade itself, after the independence, it was increasingly being realised that representation of women was

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13   Government of India, The Directive Principles of State Policy, The Constitution of India. See further: https://cdnbbsr.s3waas.gov.in/s380537a945c7aaa788ccfcdf1b99b5d8f/uploads/2024/07/20240716890312078.pdf

14   *ibid*

15   Government of India.1957a." Proceedings of the third meeting of the Central Council of Local Self Government Srinagar 1957".

16   Government of India. 1958. "Proceedings of the 4th meeting of the Central Council of Local Self Government New Delhi 1958".

wanting, and their virtual non-representation was adversely affecting development and other socio-economic outreach programmes and works in the rural areas. In order to understand the progressive movement towards realisation of women's representation in the Rural Local Bodies (RLBs), let us take into account the important developments, prior to the 73rd Constitutional Amendment. These include:

1. **Balwant Rai Mehta Committee (1957):** Recommended a three-tier Panchayati Raj system, but in keeping with the thoughts and times at that times, it included only token provisions for women by suggesting that the 20-member Panchayat Samiti should co- opt or nominate two women, "interested in work among women and children" (Government of India, 1957:45-52)[17]. The Maharashtra Zilla Parishad and Panchayat Samiti Act of 1961 followed this recommendation by providing for the nomination of one or two women to each of the three-tiered bodies if no woman candidate was otherwise elected[18]. So, here again, we see the delineation of a cherished ideal and a long-term goal of giving and realising reservation of fifty per cent, yet it recommended that a beginning should be made by merely giving reservation of two seats for women in the Panchayats. And we must also acknowledge that the final aim to give fifty per cent reservation for women in the Panchayats was formally recognised right in the beginning and when some of the States started giving reservations to women, even before the Constitutional amendment, they had taken their cue from such pronouncements made several decades earlier. This goal has indeed been realised in many States legally providing for fifty per cent reservation for women in both Urban Local Bodies (ULB) as well as Rural Local Bodies. The details are mentioned in subsequent paragraphs.

2. **Committee for the Status of Women in India (1974):** Between Balwant Rai Mehta and Ashok Mehta Committee Report of 1978, the Committee for the Status of Women in India, in its report Towards Equality (1974), argued that rural women's needs and perspectives have never been given sufficient weightage in the plans and development policies of the Government of India[19]. The Report recognised that the induction of women through co-opting and nominating mechanisms was underwritten by the assumption that women were incapable of contesting elections, and would not permit the questioning, much less transformation, of power equations in rural society[20]. It, therefore, recommended for setting up of statutory women's Panchayats at the local level,

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17   Ministry of Panchayati Raj, GoI. 2008. "Study on EWRs in Panchayati Raj Institutions".

18   Ministry of Panchayati Raj, GoI. 2008. "Study on EWRs in Panchayati Raj Institutions".

19   Samata, (Roy), Ujjaini. 2018."Women in Political Decision Making the Indian Experience (1917-1993)". Journal of People's History and Culture. Vol.4.December 2018.

20   *ibid*

which would have strong links with Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), as well as will begin to access some resources to manage and administer welfare and development programmes specially for the women and children[21].

3. **Ashok Mehta Committee (1978):** Emphasised women's participation and proposed co-opting the women into the PRIs while noting that in 1978, out of 320 women representatives on the Panchayat Samitis and Zilla Parishads in Maharashtra, only six were actually elected; demonstrating – if any evidence was required – that the provision of co-option or nomination was turning out to be an opportunity for the male-dominated political system for extending this as a patronage mechanism, instead of accepting the right based entitlement and empowerment; at best, it was an expression of tokenism[22]. The patronage was not intended to help in institutionalizing the process of effective participation in decision-making and facilitating women leadership roles, in the rural development machinery or the works. Haryana, Punjab and Rajasthan also resorted to using such provisions with broadly similar results. It was only with the enactment of the Andhra Pradesh Gram Panchayats Act, 1964 that effective participation was ensured through the reservation of 22-25% for women[23]. This again is symptomatic of the fact that it were the States, which initiated and enacted the enabling and empowering provisions, of reservation of seats for women in the Panchayats. The Central Government was continuing the earlier trend of tokenism in the form of including nominated members without any actual corresponding legal empowerment. The said Committee in its report also emphasised the urgent need and important roles the Panchayati Raj Institutions could discharge in undertaking local development planning, on account of both the democratic imperative of decentralising power, as well as per the efficiency imperative of strengthening the micro-level planning and project management processes[24]. It recommended a two-tier panchayat system, in which the two women who polled the highest number of votes in the panchayat elections would, even if they failed to actually get elected, stand co-opted into the panchayat. Where no women contested elections, any two women known to be active community workers, could be co-opted So, the tokenism of two women members involvement somehow continued to engage the minds of the policy makers and planners for quite a bit of time, say for more than half a century.

4. Other Committees (**G. V. K. Rao Committee**, 1985; the **L. M. Singhvi Committee**, 1986): The importance of a, formal/legal enabling enactment, and bestowing

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21 Ministry of Panchayati Raj, GoI. 2008. "Study on EWRs in Panchayati Raj Institutions".
22 *ibid*
23 *ibid*
24 Ministry of Panchayati Raj, GoI. 2008. "Study on EWRs in Panchayati Raj Institutions".

highest recognition to the PRIs through Constitutional provisions, strongly came up in the recommendations of several official committees, constituted to review rural development and other poverty alleviation programmes e.g., the G.V.K. Rao Committee, 1985; the L.M. Singhvi Committee, 1986)[25]. **S.R. Sankaran Committee** (1986) was tasked with reviewing the functioning of the Panchayati Raj Institutions and recommending measures to improve their effectiveness. The committee recommended

(i) Ensuring that Panchayats have adequate resources and autonomy to function effectively;

(ii) Strengthening the linkages between different levels of Panchayats for better coordination and implementation of programmes; and (iii) Focusing on capacity building and training for Panchayat members and staff to enhance their performance[26].

As mentioned above, it was the State Governments who, through actual field level direct experience of administering rural development programmes, initiated the process of legally empowering the women through statutory enactments in their respective State Acts. It would be relevant to take into account some of these Acts/ Provisions which provided for women's representation and reservation of seats in the Panchayats, before the 73rd Amendment Act, and these are briefly mentioned below:

➢ The Karnataka Zilla Parishad, Taluka Panchayat Samiti Act 1983 provided for reservation of 25 per cent of seats for women at the ZP and the Taluka Panchayat levels. One seat each in the Taluka Panchayat and Zilla Panchayat was also reserved for SC/ST women[27].

➢ Andhra Pradesh Mandal Praja Parishad, Zilla Praja Parishad and Zilla Abhivrudhi Sameeksha Mandal Act, 1986 provided for reservation of maximum of four seats for women in GP, and some percentage of seats in Mandal Praja Parishad and Zilla Praja Parishad. Some percentage of the posts of Chairperson of the ZP were also reserved for women and this marked the beginning of reserving seats for chairpersons and this was replicated in the 73rd Constitutional amendment[28].

➢ Himachal Pradesh Panchayat Act embodied a provision giving 25 per

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25 Ministry of Panchayati Raj, GoI. 2008. "Study on EWRs in Panchayati Raj Institutions"

26 *ibid*

27 Srivalli, Dr.K. 2018."Empowerment to women Through Political Participation: A Study of Panchayati Raj Institutions in India". International Journal of Research in Social Sciences. Vol 8.May 2018.

28 Srivalli, Dr.K. 2018."Empowerment to women Through Political Participation: A Study of Panchayati Raj Institutions in India". International Journal of Research in Social Sciences. Vol 8. May 2018.

cent reservation for women[29].

➢ Madhya Pradesh Panchayati Raj Adhiniyam 1990 provided 30 per cent reservation for women at village level, 10% each in Janpad Panchayat and ZP levels. Among them, at least one seat was reserved for SC/ST women[30].

➢ The Maharashtra Panchayat Act,1990 made a provision of 30 per cent reservation for women[31].

➢ Orissa Panchayat Samiti Act 1991 reserved not less than one-third of seats for women including SC/ST women. Besides, either chairperson or vice chairperson will be women[32].

➢ The West Bengal Panchayat Act also had a provision of not less than one-third of seats for women at different tiers of the Panchayat. The Panchayat Acts of the rest of the States had provided berths for women either through co-option or nomination[33].

Thus, one sees that just about prior to the 73rd Constitutional Amendment in 1992, the winds of change had started blowing towards providing one third reservation of seats in the Panchayats for women, and in this Odisha (the then Orissa) and West Bengal- besides Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra began providing for 30% reservation of seats for women.

5. **73rd Constitutional Amendment (1992):** This amendment is widely regarded as a turning point in Indian democracy in promoting the gender equity, empowerment and enablement by promoting grassroots leadership Since the subject of Panchayats falls squarely in the State List of the Seventh Schedule of the Constitution, the States were mandated to take formal legal action in inducting women as active stakeholders and partners in development processes in the rural areas. So, in a way, it was the leadership of some of the States that compelled and propelled the Union Government to empower women through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment. So, as a natural and inevitable progression of the legal empowerment ensured through the State Acts, in 1993, the reservation of seats for women was incorporated in the Panchayati Raj through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment (for Panchayats at the village, block, and district levels) and the 74th Constitutional Amendment (for municipalities) Acts, with

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29 Srivalli, Dr.K. 2018."Empowerment to women Through Political Participation: A Study of Panchayati Raj Institutions in India". International Journal of Research in Social Sciences. Vol 8. May 2018.
30 *ibid*
31 *ibid*
32 *ibid*
33 *ibid*

both providing for the reservation of one-third of elected seats for women[34].

6. The reservation of women in RLBs as well as ULBs - 74th Constitutional Amendment has not stayed stuck at the mandated one-third reservation but has touched a high ceiling fifty per cent in nearly half of the States. And as far as the formal empowerment of women in political participation/representation is concerned, the reservation of seats for women exceeds the percentages in some of the most developed countries of the world.

7. Presently, 21 States and 2 Union Territories—Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Daman & Diu and Dadra & Nagar Haveli, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Kerala, Lakshadweep, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Punjab, Rajasthan, Sikkim, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Tripura, Uttarakhand, and West Bengal have progressively expanded the reservation for women in their PRIs to 50% - a ceiling for reservation laws mandated through a Supreme Court ruling[35]. In some states, like Karnataka, women have even surpassed this threshold through some women winning more than 5 representations in PRIs beyond the reserved seats, indicating that women are now succeeding in electoral wards that were not specifically reserved for them, and this finally realises the dream discussed in the debates of the Constituent Assembly that women may not need reservation when they join politics in large numbers.

8. India's position, like most achievements vis-a-vis legally mandated policies and programmes, since the independence are concerned, indicates a bag of mixed success. Though the legal and formal power has been vested in creating women leadership in rural areas, the substantive power is still largely vests and rests with the menfolk, and the practice of Pradhan Pati is an example of that persisting phenomenon at least in some pockets. The proclivity of practising proxy leadership or the Pradhan Pati singularly dilutes the impact of this policy. But one must not lose sight of the big picture- the total cases of proxy participation by male relatives coming to light are a minuscule percentage amongst a huge number of over 15 lakh WERs out of over 32 lakh ERs approximately, and the cases of Pradhan Pati are even smaller percentage, but that is not to run away from the problem of Pradhan Pati and not find solutions. The Government of India and the State governments are aware of this practice and have even initiated action in this regard as we shall note later on.

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34 Ministry of Law and Justice, GoI. 1992. "The Constitution (Seventy-Third Amendment Act, 1992). See further:https://www.india.gov.in/my-government/constitution-india/amendments/constitution-india-seventy-third-amendment-act-1992, 1996

35 Press Information Bureau, GoI. 2024."Participation of Women in Panchayats". February,2024. Weblink:Press Release: Press Information Bureau

9.   The incidence of male members of families of female Sarpanches usurping their roles, powers and responsibilities is rather well known and continues to make headlines in the social and mass media. The Committee not only undertook research but also sought to undertake and validate the truth, or otherwise, of this issue; and found that the socio- eco-cum-cultural reasons, and commonly found that the capacity building and enhancement efforts of the WERs have not been successful due to their intermittent nature and other reasons. Moreover, efforts are still required to effect sufficient socio-cultural behavioural change including moulding the mindset of the majority population so as to limit this practice sufficiently. It was inferred that for men, much more than for women, Panchayat elections are a stepping stone to bigger political careers. Also, the general population was simply more willing to look up to men than to women in leadership positions, and this is best reflected in the actual lack of adequate political representation of women in the Parliament and State Assemblies since the independence. After three decades, since the 73rd Constitutional amendment, the Government of India has finally decided to extend one-third reservation of seats to women in the Parliament and the State Assemblies. Of course, this process will take another half decade, if not more, but at least the public commitments have been made in the Parliament.

10.   Let's us now consider some of the research on the issue of women's empowerment through political participation. Patil (2009) studied the power structure and participation of SCs/STs/other backward castes (OBCs) and women representatives in rural local government in the Kolhapur district of Maharashtra[36]. His study found that although women who were housewives had entered politics due to reservations, their role in administration was nominal and they were found to be dependent on their husbands for such activities. Lack of education, knowledge about panchayat administration, and poor economic status of members and president enabled the dominant caste people to control GP administration as the latter were largely dependent on dominant castes. The concept of dominant caste has been studied since the times of M.N. Srinivas, Andre Beteille, Y. Singh, Dube etc. and the existence of dominant castes' roles in local land holdings, agrarian and social relations etc. is universally acknowledged. Due to the recent permeation of political and social consciousness, the absolute domination of local dominant castes is beginning to get reduced though (as seen in Haryana, Bihar etc.).

11.   Vijaya Lakshmi and Chandrashekar (2002) pointed out that a majority of male presidents wanted to pursue a political career and they thought panchayat

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36   Patil, RB. 2009."Changing Power Relations through Panchayats in Maharashtra". Chapter 12 in Inclusion and Exclusion in Local Governance: Field Studies from Rural India edited by BS Baviskar and George Mather, Institute of Social Science. Sage Publication. Pp.317 - 352.New Delhi 2009.

presidentship and resultant political socialisation including expansion of influences beyond the Panchayats was the first step in this direction[37]. In contrast, the majority of female presidents did not aspire to pursue any protracted political career; and were doubtful about their repeated participation, due to the rotational reservation system for women seats as well as other socio-cultural and economic reasons. So, there are significant differences between the expectations of male Pradhans and female Pradhans, and also in their attitudes regarding political involvement at the panchayat level.

12. Duflo and Topalova, (2004) pointed out that people were less satisfied with the public goods provided by the women leaders, and it was the main reason for women rarely winning elections even though they were effective leaders in the GP[38]. Duflo and Topalova, (2004) utilised survey data from 'Millennial Survey' which covered 36542 households, 2304 villages in 24 States in the country including the random selection of reserved presidencies for women; they found that in comparison to unreserved Gram Panchayats (GPs), women leaders from reserved Panchayats had provided more public goods (drinking water, roads, etc.), and quality infrastructure. They observed that people were less likely to be corrupt in these reserved Panchayats[39].

13. Studies have also brought out the positive impact of women Panchayat leadership, by showing that where women are able to overcome the disadvantages that they have at the start, they bring positive impact, socially as well as with regard to corruption.

14. Baviskar and Mathew 2009, found that women are less corrupt as against its relatively high prevalence or failure to prevent it during times of male elected members[40]. Chakraborthy and Bhattacharya 1993; Vyasalu and Vysalu,1999 said women ERs try to provide basic services in the villages and attend to the needs of women[41]. This has been validated by cases discussed in this report.

15. Based on their study in the Chitradurga district of Karnataka, Nagraj and Pallavi (2013) observed that reservation in PRIs had increased the number of women members, and had helped the developing leadership of tribal women, who had become aware of their power, duties and responsibilities as panchayat members

37 Vijayalakshmi, V and Chandrashekar, B.K. 2002."Authority, Powerlessness and Dependence: Women and Political Participation". Working Paper 106. Institute for Social and Economic. Bangalore 2002.

38 Duflo, Esther and Topalova, Petia. 2004. "Unappreciated Service: Performance, Perception, and Women Leaders in India". October, 2004.

39 *ibid*

40 Baviskar, BS and Mathew, George. 2009. "Inclusion and Exclusion in Local Governance: Field Studies from Rural India". Institute of Social Science. Sage Publication. New Delhi 2009.

41 Vyasulu, P., and V. Vyasulu. 1999. Women in Panchayati Raj: Grassroots democracy in Malgudi. Economic and Political Weekly 34 (52): 3677–3686.

and were being supported by their family members[42].

2.2   Socio-Cultural Dimension

Participation and the effective role of the women representatives are hindered by several factors even after extensive constitutional provisions have been enacted to empower them. Indian society is typified as an illustrative case of a country with a composite culture (six major religions with 83 religious groupings (Census 2011)[43] and 3000 castes and 25000 subcastes), a continuum of centuries-old socio-cultural traditions, plurality of languages (over 200 languages and 19500 dialects); despite these differences, the society shares a common characteristic of being dominated by a patriarchal mindset permeating other features of social and public life[44]. The participation of women in political activities has grown significantly with the implementation of the policy of reservation of seats in the PRIs. However, there are various socio-cultural factors influencing gender roles faced by the women in Panchayati Raj Institutions such as lack of awareness, experience, knowledge, skills, leadership quality, low level of education, lack of exposure etc. Some of the socio-cultural barriers are elaborated below.

2.2.1   Gender Roles

Deeply entrenched patriarchal mindset and its concomitant norms[45] end up limiting women's decision-making power and autonomy not only in the Panchayats but also within the family and local social and kinship networks. One such expectation that women prioritise household duties over public roles, reinforces their subservience and role as a subject partner, and this restricts their leadership opportunities. Social customs like the child marriage, dowry, and discrimination against widows in the rural pockets, though considerably contained, also affect the functioning of WERs.

Historically, while the Gram Sabhas were considered expressions of management of public affairs at the village level, these basically comprised of male members only, and women's role and influence was informal and behind the scenes. So, even after the formal enactment that provided political representation to women at the Gram Panchayat (GP) levels, many WERs hesitate to speak in front of the male members of the family and village elders and seem to quietly go through the motions despite having original and insightful ideas.

42   S. Nagaraja. 2013."Participatory Democracy and Tribal Women: A Case Study". Indian Journal of Research. Vol 2 (10). October 2013

43   GoI. 2011." Census of India". Weblink: https://censusindia.gov.in/census.website/data/population-finder

44   Turnbull, Brian. 2018. "Women Who Only Serve Chai: Gender Reservations and Autonomy in India". Ph.D Dissertation. University of Kansan. USA 2018.

45   PRIA Org. "Women's Leadership: Towards Gender Mainstreaming in Local Self-Governance". Weblink:https://pria.org/knowledge_resource/1693826164_women_leadership.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com

2.2.2 Educational Disparities & Inadequate Capacities

According to NFHS-5 data, rural women's literacy remains significantly lower than men's, contributing to their marginalisation in PRIs and contributes to their having limited or lack of knowledge and awareness on such issues as health, nutrition reproductive rights and this ends up impacting their functioning[46]. As of the 2023-24 period, the literacy

Women Pradhan openly expressing her opinions to the Committee Members

rate among rural women in India has risen to 70.4%, up from 57.93% in 2011[47]. Low literacy rates among rural women hinder their ability to comprehend the complexities involved in the elaborately laid out governance processes and this prevents them from first gaining familiarity/confidence to assert their individuality in decision-making. This was validated by a detailed study by K.K. Sumesh[48].

The newly elected women members are unable to understand the basics of working at PRIs. Moreover, a majority of the WERs enter into public life for the first time and do not have enough knowledge and skills to handle the affairs of Panchayats[49] i.e. Women representatives are not aware of their functions, duties and responsibilities. The lower digital literacy amongst WERs also affects their performances[50].

2.2.3 Caste and Class Dynamics

Caste-based prejudices and mindset also perpetuate discrimination which further

46 Ministry of Health & Family Welfare, GoI. 2021."National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) 2019-21). Weblink:https://mohfw.gov.in/sites/default/files/NFHS-5_Phase-II_0.pdf

47 The Economic Times. 2024."Rural Literacy Rate up over 10 pc points in Past decade: Govt. tells Lok Sabha". The Economic Times website:https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/rural-literacy-rate-up-over-10-pc-points-in-past-decade-govt-tells-lok- sabha/articleshow/116146950.cms?utm_source=chatgpt.com&from=mdr

48 K.K. Sumesh. 2016."Status of Women Political Representatives in Rural India: Analysing Opportunities and Challenges". EPRA International Journal of Economic and Business Review. Vol.4 (1). Weblink: https://eprajournals.com/IJES/article/8784/abstract; and Observation Research Foundation. 2022. "The link between education and participation of women in politics". Weblink: https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/link-between-education-and-participation-of-women-in-politics?utm_source=chatgpt.com

49 Sinha, Rajesh, Kumar.. 2018."Women in Panchayat". Kurukshetra. Weblink:https://www.pria.org/uploaded_files/panchaya-texternal/1548842032_Women%20In%20Panchayat.pdf

50 Kumar, Sunaina and Ghosh, Ambar, Kumar . 2024. "Governments in India: Assessing the Impact and Challenges". Occasional Paper. Observer Research Foundation.Weblink: https://www.orfonline.org/research/elected-women-representatives-in-local-rural-governments-in-india-assessing-the-impact-and-challenges?utm_source=chatgpt.com

exacerbates the challenges faced by marginalised women. WERs from SC/ST backgrounds often encounter hostility from dominant caste groups, limiting their effectiveness. Field studies in Madhya Pradesh highlight that women from marginalised communities are frequently excluded from key decision-making processes. This intersectionality of caste, gender and socio-economic status affects their performances as studies have shown - of *B.B. Malik and Jaya Shrivastava in their 'Understanding Participation of Dalit Women Elected Representatives in Panchayats in Ghazipur and Mau Districts and other studies have shown*[51].

2.2.4 Social Resistance

Centuries old culturally conditioned prejudices, stigmas and resistance to women's leadership persist, particularly in regions with deeply entrenched gender biases. Practices such as dowry and child marriage continue to undermine women's empowerment. Case studies from Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh[52] reveal that women leaders often face backlash from their communities when attempting to assert their authority.

2.2.5 Lack of Cooperation from Line/Sectoral Departments

WERs, particularly the first-timers in leadership roles as Pradhans find it very difficult to deal with officials of block/district administration and of line/ sectoral departments[53]. Furthermore, Administrative roles, like that of panchayat secretary and other posts, are dominated by men. Most first-time WERs find it difficult to deal with block and district administration and police officials, due to limited exposure to public life[54].

2.2.6 Encroachment and Non-Payment of Taxes/ Fees

Elected representatives in general and particularly the WERs face resistance from

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51 Kumar, Sunaina and Ghosh, Ambar, Kumar . 2024. "Governments in India: Assessing the Impact and Challenges". Occasional Paper. Observer Research Foundation.Weblink: https://www.orfonline.org/research/elected-women-representatives-in-local-rural-governments-in-india-assessing-the-impact-and-challenges?utm_source=chatgpt.com; Kothenmaril, Nithya. 2023."Political Participation of Dalit Women in Panchayati Raj Institution in Kerala, India". ECPR General Conference, Charles University. 4th - 8th September, 2023.Weblink:https://ecpr.eu/Events/Event/PaperDetails/69627?utm_source=chatgpt.com; Lakshmi, Puvi, A. 2023."Performance of Elected Dalit and Non-Dalit Women Representatives in Panchayats with special reference to Kancheepuram district, Tamil Nadu". Society and Culture Development in India. Vol.3 (1): 1-10.Weblink: https://www.arfjournals.com/image/catalog/Journals%20Papers/SCDI/2023/No%201%20%282023%29/1_Puvi.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com; and Pal, Mahi. 2004. "Caste and Patriarchy in Panchayats". Economic and Political Weekly. Vol.39 (32):3581-3583. Weblink:https://www.jstor.org/stable/4415374?utm_source=chatgpt.com

52 Mayaram, Shail.2002."New Modes of Violence: The Backlash Against Women in the Panchayat System" in The Violence of Development the Politics of Gender, Identity and Social Inequalities in India edited Karin Kapadia. Kali for Women Publication, New Delhi, 2002.Weblink:https://zubaanbooks.com/wp-content/uploads/19_New-Modes-of-Violence-Shail-Mayaram.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com

53 Sinha, Rajesh,, Kumar. 2018."Women in Panchayat". Kurukshetra. Weblink:https://www.pria.org/uploaded_files/panchaya-texternal/1548842032_Women%20In%20Panchayat.pdf

54 Kumar, Sunaina and Ghosh, Ambar Kumar.2024. "Elected women representatives in local rural governments in India : assessing the impact and challenges." Digitales Archiv , Leibniz Information centre for economics, New Delhi, India : ORF, Observer Research Foundation

the community if they want to remove illegal encroachment from Panchayat land/ properties. Many times, they are subjected to violence from powerful elements of the society. Many rural households do not want to pay taxes, fees or other user charges on time while expecting Panchayats to deliver public services and goods on time. The insistence on payment of user charges by the WERs is resisted at times even by violent protests[55]. No further proof is needed than this that WERs are more inclined to effect changes in the old mindsets and practices if life changes for the better for the local populace.

2.2.7 The dominance of Political Parties and party politics

The women representatives who lacked political party support do not stand a chance to win elections against a candidate backed by a strong political party[56]. This indicates that in the long run when democracy gets deep-rooted and decentralised truly, the political parties' practices would permeate regular elections.

2.2.8 Two-Child Norms

A few States such as Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, and Telangana are still continuing with the two-child norms qualification for contesting Panchayat Elections. In rural areas, women hardly have any say in the number of children in the family and such laws restrict their entry into Panchayats[57], thereby barring women's candidacy in Panchayat elections. The Supreme Court has also validated this legal provision.

2.2.9 Minimum Educational Qualification

States like Haryana and Rajasthan have also set minimum education qualifications for candidates. These policies inadvertently restrict women's entry into politics as they are likely to lack access to education and independent choices in family planning[58].

2.2.10 Rotation of seats

Many women have drawn attention to the policy of rotating reserved seats every five

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55   Kumar, Sunaina and Ghosh, Ambar Kumar.2024. "Elected women representatives in local rural governments in India: assessing the impact and challenges." Digitales Archiv, Leibniz Information centre for economics, New Delhi, India: ORF, Observer Research Foundation

56   Boro, Rajeeb. 2022. "Women Empowerment through Panchayati Raj: A Study of the working of Panchayats in Assam". Res Militaris. Vol.12 (2). And NIRD&PR and CORD."A Case Study on Women leadership in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) at the Gram Panchayat level". Weblink:https://nirdpr.org.in/nird_docs/casestudies/cord/cord1.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com

57   Sinha, Rajesh,, Kumar. 2018."Women in Panchayat". Kurukshetra. Weblink:https://www.pria.org/uploaded_files/panchaya-texternal/1548842032_Women%20In%20Panchayat.pdf

58   Gupta, Tanushree, Jana, Anindita, Maiti, Susobhan and Y, Meenakshi. 2023."Gender-Gap in Internet Literacy in India: A State-Level Analysis". Scholars Journal of Economics, Business and Management. Vol.10 (9):209-213.Weblink:https://www.researchgate.net/publication/374951642_Gender-Gap_in_Internet_Literacy_in_India_A_State-Level_Analysis

years as a barrier[59]. Rotation aims to bring in as many excluded groups and individuals as possible into the system. But this also means that women candidates cannot gain from their experience from one term to the next, and many return to their caregiving roles at home after a single term. Elected male representatives were found to be more likely to contest elections more than once than elected women[60]. Women are usually not given the chance to contest from general unreserved seats, as this decision mostly lies with the concerned political party or with senior male members of the household. Male-dominated political circles often view women candidates as less likely to win elections than men, resulting in political parties giving them fewer tickets[61]. Even women from political dynasties are more likely to be given 'safe' seats— those previously occupied by a male family member—where their win is mostly assured [62] [63] [64].

2.2.11 Re-election

The policy of rotating reserved seats for women in PRIs means that a seat reserved for women in one election cycle may become unreserved in the next. This rotation often leads to WERs losing the opportunity to contest from the same seat, as it becomes open to general candidates, typically resulting in male incumbents manning those seats[65]. *Reservation motivated 43% of women representatives to contest their first election and its withdrawal dissuaded 39% from seeking re-election. This points to the need to rethink the system of rotating seats reserved for women so that they are given 10 to 15 years of continued opportunity.*

A majority of women representatives do not contest another election, while many of those who do contest, are unable to get re-elected, possibly due to societal prejudices and structural disadvantages. Further women who are elected to reserved seats tend to have a lower economic status compared to their male counterparts, along with less experience, lower educational qualifications, and a lower likelihood of being literate. Voters may factor in these attributes when evaluating the quality of their leaders. Additionally, it is

59   Tiwari, Nupur. 2009. "Rethinking the Rotation Term of Reservation in Panchayats". Economic and Political Weekly. Vol. 44 (5). January, 2009.https://www.epw.in/journal/2009/05/commentary/ rethinking-rotation-term-reservation-panchayats.html

60   Tiwari, Nupur. 2009. "Rethinking the Rotation Term of Reservation in Panchayats". Economic and Political Weekly. Vol. 44 (5). January, 2009.https://www.epw.in/journal/2009/05/commentary/ rethinking-rotation-term-reservation-panchayats.html

61   Deshpande, Rajeshwari. 2004. "How Gendered was Women's Participation Women in Election 2004?". Economic and Political Weekly. Vol.39(51): 5431–5436.

62   Spary,Carole. 2014. "Women Candidates and Party Nomination Trends in India–Evidence From the 2009 General Election". Commonwealth & Comparative Politics. 52(1):109– 138; and Singer, Wendy Singer. 2007. "A Constituency Suitable For Ladies': And Other Social Histories of Indian Elections". Oxford University Press. 2007

63   Jayal, Gopal, Niraja. 2006. "Engendering local democracy: The impact of quotas for women in India's panchayats". Taylor & Francis. Vol.13(1):15-35.

64   Kumar, Sunaina and Ghosh, Ambar, Kumar. 2023. "Lessons from 30 years of women's reservation in panchayats". Observer Research Foundation. Weblink:https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/lessons-from-30-years-of-women-s-reservation-in-panchayats?utm_source=chatgpt.com

65   Tiwari, Nupur. 2009. "Rethinking the Rotation Term of Reservation in Panchayats". Economic and Political Weekly. Vol. 44 (5). January, 2009.https://www.epw.in/journal/2009/05/commentary/ rethinking-rotation-term-reservation-panchayats.html

possible that villagers may believe that women may be less effective as leaders and are hesitant to change this belief even when confronted with factual evidence[66]. Former WERs said they felt that administrative work in Panchayats was unsuitable for women and that they had felt incompetent in executing their responsibilities, often discouraging them from seeking re-election. Many also expressed that they were unable to maintain a balance between work and household chores due to resistance from their spouses or families. These factors are borne out by a study done by PRIA in six States[67].

2.2.12 The gender digital divide

It predominantly affects women in rural India, and hampers the work of women representatives[68]. This is relevant as local governments are adopting more digitisation in keeping with nationwide drives undertaken the national mission mode programme of Digital India which emphasis for public service delivery and redressal through online or other digital technology. Low digital literacy among women remains a major hurdle for women leaders in discharging their administrative functions more efficiently in the Panchayats[69] and this further contributes to lower digital literacy as well.

66 Hardikar, Neeta.2023."What women need to succeed in panchayat elections". India Development Review (IDR). December 2023. Weblink:https://idronline.org/article/gender/what-women-need-to-succeed-in-panchayat-elections/

67 PRIA,Org. 1999. "Women's Leadership in Panchayati Raj Institutions: An analysis of six states (Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Kerala, Maharashtra, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh)".November, 1999. Weblink:https://pria.org/knowledge_resource/1533206139_Women%E2%80%99s%20Leadership%20in%20Panchayati%20Raj%20Institutions.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com

68 Tarfe, Akshay Atmaram. 2022. "Women, Unemployed, Rural Poor Lagging Due to Digital Divide: Oxfam India Report". Oxfam India. 2022. Weblink: https://www.oxfamindia.org/press- release/women-unemployed-rural-poor-lagging-due-digi-tal-divide-oxfam-india-report.

69 Hardikar, Neeta.2023."What women need to succeed in panchayat elections". India Development Review (IDR). December 2023. Weblink:https://idronline.org/article/gender/what-women-need-to-succeed-in-panchayat-elections/

Chapter - 3

Legal Framework relating to Panchayats in India

A Public Interest Litigation (PIL) was filed before the Hon'ble Supreme Court of India, vide W.P.(Civil) No. 615/2023 wherein the issue of proxy leadership by male relatives of the elected women Gaon Sabha Pradhans also loosely referred as the problem of the Pradhan Pati, was raised. The Hon'ble Court vide its Order dated 06/07/2023, (**Annexure-I**). directed the petitioner to seek appropriate remedy from the Ministry of Panchayati Raj, in the first instance. Pursuant to this, the petitioner filed a representation before the MoPR for consideration of the following:

(i)   To constitute a committee of experts to examine the issue of Women Pradhans being represented by the male members of their families and also to examine other issues related thereto for making the reservation for women meaningful that was promised by Part IX of the Constitution of India and Panchayati Raj Acts passed by the various State Government of India.

(ii)   Taking into account the report submitted by this Committee, the Government of India may take further steps as may be considered necessary to implement the suggestions made by the Committee.

In accordance with the developments emanating from the filing of the above-mentioned PIL, the MoPR vide its order dated 19.09.2023 constituted an "*Advisory Committee to examine the issue of Women Pradhans being represented by the male members of their families and also examine other issues related thereto*" under the Chairmanship of Shri. Sushil Kumar, Former Secretary of Mines/OBC and SC National Commissions, Government of India (Rtd.) (**Annexure-II, II A, II B and II C**). Within the broad parameters emerging from the said PIL and the SC order, some additional aspects incidental to addressing the issue of proxy participation by male relatives of the WERs in the functioning of the PRIs were elaborated and these include:

(i)   To suggest measures for eliminating proxy practices and ensuring good governance including effective implementation of the clauses under Article 243 of the Constitution of India which were inserted through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 to increase women's representation in the grassroots democratic set-up.

(ii)   To examine the legal framework to overcome the practices being followed in the Panchayats where women have been elected as Pradhan/ mukhiya/ chairperson for

the namesake and their male family members are handling the day-to-day work of the panchayat.

(iii) To provide suggestions/recommendations for empowering women elected representatives (WERs) of Panchayats and ensuring their participation in the political process and decision-making at the grassroots level for effective implementation of reservation for WERs in Panchayats.

Thus, we see that the report had to per se expand its scope beyond the limited issue of Pradhan Pati and when one sees the inclusion of item (iii) above, one sees that this involved examination of virtually the entire edifice of the Panchayati Raj system, dealing with the overarching issue of women empowerments and enablement. This inevitably led to not only direct consultations with virtually all States and related stakeholders but also involved obtaining direct feedback from the field through visits and discussions with WERs directly. This process of consultations involved protracted exchange of views and ideas with stakeholders such as the State Governments, various Ministries/Departments of the Union Govt., international development agencies, women commissions, WERs etc.

3.1   Overview of Legal Provisions

3.1.1 Constitutional Mandates

Despite early Constituent Assembly debates diving deep and dwelling on/in the details of empowering and enabling the marginalised, excluded and disadvantaged groups and including consideration of certain connected and concomitant issues – such as gender equity, equality, entitlement, enablement, and general empowerment to help attain a voice and achieve equality, at least legally, in immediate terms. After this intense intellectual exercise, after the independence, the actual concrete measures to enhance women's representation in politics, especially at the grassroots/panchayat levels moved in super slow mode, starting with tokenism, typical of all fundamental structural changes witnessed in history. It followed the international trend of progressive gains, accumulated through small steps taken slowly over a period of time.

If we see the worldwide trend of empowerment of women, the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 mandating one-third reservation for women in PRIs (Buch, 2000)[70], indeed was a path-breaking step in the legal empowerment of women's participation in politics- much like the universal suffrage, sans any conditionalities, introduced by the Indian Constitution right at the dawn of the independence.

Numerous research studies have shown that reservation, of one-third of seats in all three-tiered Panchayats, unleashed the untapped potential, in building a partnership

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70   Buch, Nirmala. 2000." Women's Experience In New Panchayats: The Emerging Leadership Of Rural Women", CWDS. Occasional Paper, No.35.

of women as equal stakeholders, in deepening democracy at the grassroots levels and in improving rural governance through increased transparency and accountability measures, across all the democratic structures and government institutions and bodies, that came under review and monitoring mechanisms of the Panchayats. Its success motivated several States not to restrict themselves to mandating not only one-third of seats for women but was impelled them to increase quota further and several States have since extended up to 50%: resulting in a substantial increase in the number of WERs (Sharma, 2018). This aspect was elaborated earlier in the report.

Women's participation in local self-government institutions and local governance have been instrumental in improving transparency, accountability, and service delivery (Rai, 2017). However, women sarpanches and representatives continue to face numerous structural, cultural, institutional, and administrative challenges. Patriarchal mindsets, gender norms, insufficient capacity-building, and financial constraints persist as significant barriers (Kumar, 2019). These challenges and constraints are not typical and particular to the Indian context, but these continue to pose challenges even in countries like China and even other developed countries.

India is no exception in all societies encountering the usual trend of facing a time lag, in effecting socio-cultural change after legal enactments. Despite these challenges, there has been remarkable progress in political, social and cultural empowerment of women including in the rural areas. Several success stories have emerged and continue to emerge, and nothing indicates this more emphatically than the tale of Sunita Devi from Jharkhand demonstrating the transformative potential of empowered women leaders (Chaudhary, 2021). This part would take note of the historical milestones that marked the path of increased women's political participation, and highlight case studies to inspire, while also noting, the persistent challenges WRs continue to face. These cases also validate how sustainable and inclusive development can be institutionalised and sustained only through women-led grassroots governance enhancing interventions especially in social sectors directly touching peoples' lives viz. education, health, water, sanitation, environment etc.
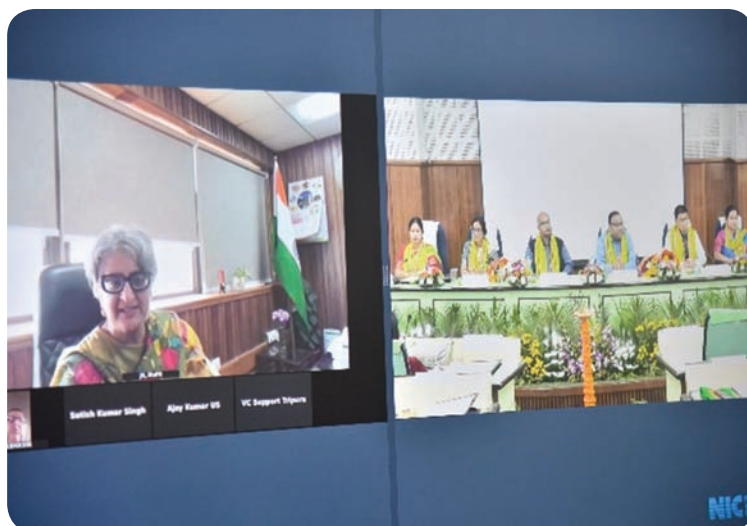
3.1.2 Inputs Received from States

To examine the legal and statutory framework prevailing in the States/UTs on the issue of Pradhan Pati and the efforts enunciated for eliminating political proxy participation by male relatives of WERs, particularly at the GP level, a consultative paper (**Annexure III**) was prepared by the legal team of the Advisory Committee. The consultative paper identified certain legal and non-legal parameters. Further to that, inputs were sought from the stakeholders especially the State Panchayati Raj Departments (**Annexure**

IV) and the State Commission for Women (SCW) for their respective inputs (**Annexure V**).

The consultative paper sought to examine the following:

(i) Legal measures initiated to eliminate proxy political participation and indulging and interfering in the roles and responsibilities of the women elected representatives

Committee Members discussing legal measures to abolish Proxy Participation

(ii) Video recording of Panchayat meetings

(iii) Punitive measures to deter proxy political participation in place of/ for women elected representatives

(iv) Information, Education and Communication Campaign undertaken to address gender-based discrimination and proxy political practices

(v) Building a nationwide/ Statewide/ District Network and a network of networks of all Panchayats

The inputs received are discussed below:

(i)   Legal measures

The responses showed that except for Karnataka, the majority of the States have not resorted to enacting legal sanctions in their respective Panchayat Raj Acts, or other statutory framework/s, that outrightly prohibit proxy participation of male relatives of WERs, in the functioning of the Panchayats. However, the inputs indicated that the States/UTs are not averse to embracing the idea of laying down the sanctions through legal enactments or through legally supported standard provisions seeking to eliminate such practices. In fact, the States/UTs and SCW went to the extent of even providing suggestions that could be legally incorporated in the State Acts/Rules to address the issues and these include:

➢   Introducing a legal provision vesting full powers and the authority to the Chief Executive Officer of the Zilla Parishad (ZP), the Executive Officer of the Panchayat Samitis (PS), and the Panchayat govt. official (to Panchayat Development Officer or equivalent in the States having such officials and

Panchayat Secretaries if no full-time functionary is deputed) to receive, attend and address the complaints by initiating or conducting an enquiry (particularly by the officials at ZP and PS levels), and if found to be guilty,(following the principles of preponderance of probability maxim, applicable to public servants in disciplinary proceedings as such) initiate appropriate legal process to even to remove the concerned WERs from their elected posts.

➢ Development of a mechanism to identify defaulting Panchayats where women-elected leaders are actively collaborating with their male members to act as their proxies.

➢ Formulate Rules to initiate disciplinary as well as other legal action including barring the defaulter/s from contesting the elections, if the WERs are found, after due process of enquiry) to act as a front for the male relatives/spouses.

➢ Willingness to amend existing/extant rules, regulations and statutory provisions embodying the disqualification/removal sections/clauses in the respective State-specific Panchayat Acts/Rules. In this, an appreciable step was noted in the State like Karnataka which has already introduced laws to disqualify WERs found engaging in proxy practices.

➢ The States were willing to engage in discussion and consultations with stakeholders to devise a legal framework, to make proxy participation by male members a criminal and a punishable offence. Developing a model legal framework by the MoPR, in consultation with the Law Ministry and the State Governments, can also be considered.

➢ Suggestion was made to induct a responsible official at the GP level, similar to what prevails in other two tiers, viz. PS & ZP, where officials like the "Executive Officer" take executive actions on the day-to-day routine administrative work. In other words, recruitment and posting of a full time official may be done in GP through the amendment of the State Panchayat Act specially in the GP having a relatively larger population to cater to – like in Kerala, West Bengal, Karnataka and post a full-time official giving responsibility of a cluster of Panchayats if the GP population size is smaller as in UP. The present system where the Panchayat Secretary in the GP is functioning more as a field staff, or implementing officer of government programmes, is seen as not being able to discharge the office functions fully. Moreover, posting responsible officials at the GP level would make the GP function fully as a government office during the office hours, and

such official would act as a resource person with continuing institutional memory, guiding the highly changing rates of the women GPs, especially the Women Pradhans. This method has shown remarkable results in Kerala and Karnataka where the GP office actually functions like a full-time government office during office hours and administration is finally reaching the doorstep of rural populations, breaking the grip of a Block office.

➤ Setting up a strong, transparent and accountable complaint redressal mechanism on issues concerning proxy leadership on the patterns of Centralized Public Grievance Redress and Monitoring System (CPGRAMS) and 'For the People' in Kerala and similar ones set up in Maharashtra and Assam.

➤ There may be a need to set up Helpline and Support Centres for the WERs seeking guidance on the issues affecting them. Karnatak[71] has set up an integrated call centre with the helpline number 8277 506 000 and a help desk at 080-22032238 to address grievances related to local governance. Maharashtra has also facilitated citizens who can contact the helpline at 1800 120 8040.

➤ Initiatives like the Nari Adalats have been introduced for address women-centric grievances[72]. These forums often work in conjunction with local Panchayats and legal aid societies to provide timely justice to women and girls[73].

➤ Extension of legal support and counselling services to WERs especially through building synergies with District Legal Aid Societies. In Delhi, the Mahila Panchayat Programme, supported by the Delhi Commission for Women, collaborates with DLSAs to empower women by raising awareness about their legal rights and providing necessary information and support. These Mahila Panchayats serve as platforms where women can openly discuss their problems, particularly those related to domestic violence, and receive legal aid services at their doorstep[74].

➤ To consider the imposition of penalties on political parties that fail to meet the required quota of women candidates (where the elections are fought on open political lines).

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71 See further:https://bsk.karnataka.gov.in/BSK/grievance/loadComplaintDetails?utm_source=chatgpt.com
72 See further: https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2098463&utm_source=chatgpt.com
73 Dr.Anita.2022."Advancing the Rights of Women and Girls: Panchayats Leading the Way-A Compendium of Success Stories". UNFPA-India. Weblink:https://india.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/unfpa_compendium_panchayat_mopr.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com
74 See further:https://dslsa.org/central/2023/07/11/central-district-legal-services-authority-under-the-aegis-of-nalsa-and-dslsa-organised-awareness- sessions-in-the-office-of-mahila-panchayat-mahila-panchayats-are-platforms-designed-to-empower-women/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

➢ Review strong disqualifications applicable to Panchayat members, in States, facing disqualification for having more than a specified number of children. Gujarat, Odisha, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Uttarakhand and Assam bar people having more than two children from contesting elections. This seems unfair specially when such a bar does not exist for the Parliament and State Assemblies elections. Such provisions should be withdrawn as women are unfairly affected and are creating avoidable unintended consequences such as encouraging sex- selective abortions. Considering this, the Govt. of Andhra Pradesh abolished this norm from August 2024 which was imposed in 1994 in unified Andhra Pradesh.

(ii) Video Recording of Panchayats Meetings

Documenting the participation of WERs through photographic records, and resorting to video recording the proceedings of the GP meetings, is an effective step in addressing issues of Pradhan Pati; and has the potential to motivate the WERs for increased and effective participation and in improve the discharging of project formulation/management and implementation responsibilities. The State Government of Goa amended the Goa Panchayat Raj Act in 2016, mandating that proceedings of all Gram Sabhas be video recorded. These recordings are to form part of the official records of the Gram Sabha[75].

This is owing to the fact that GPs in Goa were the first ones to fully implement core elements of the ePanchayat (now eGramSwaraj)[76] and by now the e-governance mind has permeated the thinking of the GP. So, it is expected that in the coming period, video recordings would be integrated and institutionalised, especially in the GPs implementing the ePanchayat programmes.

The current predilection of people making reels can be thought of for integration in the Panchayats by training the ERs, and these small clips can be uploaded on panchayat websites etc. (example where Bihar government is seeking to develop websites for all its 8,387 Gram Panchayats). Such sharing on the public platform/domain would increase transparency and accountability in the governance of the Panchayats and would enable women to assert their roles publicly. This practice would help to track, address and legally act in the case of proxy participation.

75   The Times of India. 2016."Gram Sabha Proceedings must be recorded: Government to be video recorded". December, 2016. Weblink: https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/goa/gram-sabha-proceedings-must-be-recorded-govt-to-be-video-recorded/articleshow/55883710.cms?utm_source=chatgpt.com
76   See further: https://egramswaraj.gov.in

In keeping with this objective, some of the States/UTs such as Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Karnataka and Andaman & Nicobar Islands have started video recording and documenting the proceedings of the GP meeting; and these are being regularly uploaded on the public domain through MoPR's portals such as Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP) Portal, *e*Gramswaraj Portal, Vibrant Gram Sabha Portal, and Nirnay Application. The Panchayat NIRNAY portal serves as a real-time monitoring system for Gram Sabha meetings and its system can be expanded to video record the Gram Sabha meetings. Making them accessible to the public has improved transparency and helped rebut allegations of proxy participation of male relatives. Moreover, the level of transparency helps in keeping the community informed and continuously engaged and even builds collective ownership of programs and ideas. Even Sansad TV transmits live proceedings during the zero hour and other proceedings are not shared with the public. Time is not far when some States would start sharing proceedings of the GP live or recorded proceedings. This step would help women ERs to be conscious of their roles.

Further, in West Bengal, the Panchayat Management System, a computer-based governance tool, is also being used to upload data regarding all types of GP meetings including uploading copies of the resolution of the meetings. The use of IT in helping the Panchayats in improving governance has made remarkable progress in some of the States where the GPs are delivering citizen centric services online. In such States uploading of GP meetings should not be a problem. However, whether the capacities exist in terms of cloud space for uploading the GP meeting videos need to be taken on a case-to-case basis at the State level. The NIC does have software for the conduct of VC meetings including having the provision of recording. It is to examine whether partnership with NIC or C-DAC or other similar bodies can be considered to record the GP meetings including the option of showing them live if needed.

As of April 2024, out of the total 2.22 lakh Gram Panchayats planned under BharatNet, 2.13 lakh have been made service-ready and this plus digital literacy endeavours can be planned by the States and the MoPR for not only transmitting live recording of meetings but for capacity building and capacity enhancement of WERs.

(iii) Punitive Measures

Inputs from the States/UTs have indicated a positive response in support

of devising appropriate sanctions in the form of punitive measures viz. imposition of fines against male members of the family acting as proxy for women elected representatives. However, they state that such measures need to be handled sensitively so that affected women WERs do not face punitive action. States and SWC have proposed that a system needs to be developed to detect, investigate and verify proxy practices in any GPs. For this, the lead can be taken by the MoPR by initiating a multistakeholder consultations.

As stated, States such as Karnataka has already enacted a provision embodied in Section 43 (a) of respective legislation namely, the Karnataka Gram Swaraj and Panchayat Raj Act, 1993 which provides to disqualify membership of WERs on receiving complaints on proxy participation. Though

Group Discussion on Legal Measures to Abolish Proxy Participation

not through an Act, and more so to control the proxy participation, the Andhra Pradesh Government vide Circular Memo No.27712/Mdis. III/1996-1 Dt:24.07.1996 formally allows relatives and spouses of WERs to attend Panchayat meetings, as visitors sitting in the visitor's gallery. Similarly, in the State of Uttarakhand, in case, the husband or other family member or relative is found to be performing or interfering in the official duties of the elected women Panchayat representatives in the three-tier Panchayats, the Uttarakhand Government vide its Panchayati Raj Act, 2016 has enacted a provision for disqualification of Gram Panchayat member from the membership under Section 08 (1) (p); Disqualification for membership of Kshetra Panchayat under Section 53 (1) (p) and disqualifications for membership of Zila Panchayat under Section 90 (1) (p). Similarly, in both its order no. 359 dated 26th February 2010 and 3618 dated 02nd June 2020, the State Panchayati Raj Department has categorically highlighted that under Section 28 of the Panchayat Raj Act, 1994 action should be taken against the concerned women Chairperson/officer bearer if her male relative is

representing her. Simultaneously, under CCA Rules, appropriate action will also be brought against the officer/employee who indulges in this type of behaviour.

(i) Information, Education and Communication Campaign for addressing Gender-based Discrimination and Proxy Political Participatory Practices

Information, Education and Communication (IEC) campaigns like awareness rallies, signature campaigns, making of short films, documentaries, wall painting, miking, pamphlets, posters etc. are crucial to promote changes in prevailing social mindsets, particularly in eliminating proxy practices. Inputs from the States/UTs highlight that they have used the IEC campaign strategies in collaboration with other line departments, State Training Institutions including the State RD and PR Training Institutes and Community-based Organisations/ Non-governmental Organisations (CBOs/NGOs) are being taken on board as partners to raise awareness of WERs on gender-based discrimination and proxy political participatory practices. Under the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM) scheme, pamphlets and posters are distributed by the SHG members at the Panchayat level to disseminate information about eliminating gender-based discrimination and proxy political participation practices. Further, the short Localisation of Sustainable Development Goals (LSDGs) thematic videos and success stories depicting stories relating to various themes including Theme 9 – Women Friendly Panchayats by MoPR are also being disseminated for spreading awareness and promoting women's political empowerment at the grassroots. Other suggestions regarding IEC strategies to raise awareness against proxy participation include:

➢ Using social media platforms, news channels, community radio stations, AIR, FM channels, local cable networks etc. to disseminate the messages. The content of such events needs to be sensitively handled and monitored to ensure clear, non-biased messaging for more impact and causing less conflict or discomfort for women ERs and other women at the grassroots.

➢ Innovative initiatives need to be considered, such as 'Engaging Sathins As 'Panchayat Level Trainers for Vibrant Bal Sabha and Mahila Sabha' adopted by the State of Rajasthan in collaboration with UNICEF-India; it is leading efforts in strengthening the capacity and role of women and children in Panchayats.

(ii) Creating Network Amongst Networks of All Panchayats

Inputs received from the States/UTs support the idea of creating a network of networks. One such example to learn from is the India Disaster Knowledge Network[77] and another is the UNDP Solution Exchange initiative[78]. Such a network could enable all the Panchayat ERs and functionaries (three million ERs) across the country to share best practices, discuss challenges, offer suggestions/solutions, share resources/ build partnerships, and further institutionalise and improve panchayat governance through the enablement of WERs. Systematic planning and conducting of regular meetings, workshops, and online platforms could also be established to strengthen these connections and promote active participation among WERs including in the local vernacular languages, using the NIC software for automatic translation in national languages (the Google Translate has translation issues).

Such collaboration through real-time and continuing contact could enhance the effectiveness of governance, and empower local leaders to drive sustainable development initiatives. The government could also collaborate with Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)/NGOs for the formation of alliances and to facilitate their meetings/design functions. However, the Director or Deputy Director of the State Panchayati Raj Department should be deputed and made the point of focus to supervise and monitor this network of WERs as that would ensure its effective outcomes. The arrival of ChatGPT, Deep Seek, Gemini and other such AI tools offers a great potential to empower, educate, enable and encourage the WERs. Since the Government of India has already embarked on a mission to develop its own AI tool, the inputs for the WERs under the overarching needs of the MoPR can be shared with the Ministry of Electronics and IT.

(iii) Other Suggestions from States/UTs and SCWs

Besides the legal suggestions, inputs have been received for enhancing the capacity and capabilities of WERs, helping to improve discharging their roles as independent leaders and becoming agents of not only development but also social change, and some of these include:

➢ Mandatory compulsory orientation training programmes for WERs starting from the Induction Stage itself, till the continuation of their respective tenures; and even beyond to enable them to become rural

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77 See further: https://nidm.gov.in/idkn.asp
78 See further: https://info.undp.org/docs/pdc/Documents/ BRC/SE%204-pager.pdf

leaders much beyond occupying seats of the elected Panchayats.

➢ Continuous training, both online and offline, on development and governance issues of the Panchayat, delivery of citizen-centric online and offline services, emanating through the enactment of respective State Citizen Service Delivery Acts, types/ elements of leadership/ leadership styles at local levels including best examples and practices, training on programme/project and financial management etc. The manuals and modules of such training should be prepared in vernacular and in easy-to-comprehend languages and should be contextualised to local needs, culture and State machinery and systems.

➢ Training on the use of digital technology needs to be provided to WERs as in this age of digital governance, the digital divide should not hamper the effective functioning of the WERs; and if not done, there surely would be digital disconnect in the long run especially with the younger population getting increasingly digitally empowered.

➢ Time to conduct trainings running in parallel times, in not actual joint training, of both male ERs and WERs; and during such training parallel training for ICDS, ASHA, SHGs personnel etc. can be done to facilitate mutual understanding of respective roles and how to synergise and build cooperation. And for that such training should be done at the Block levels first. These parallel trainings with some sessions thrown in for common lectures could build better understanding amongst male ERs about what women can achieve and do for better outputs and outcomes.

➢ Similar to above, training of WERs should be done with actual field level implementers including field visits- joint ones too - involving line department officials of Block specially of Water and Sanitation, Health, Education etc. Departments.

➢ 'Administration at Door Step'[79] should be promoted in each village to empower the unprivileged section of the society through the active involvement of WERs. In other words, like the administrative camps being organised at the Block and District levels, mini-administrative camps should be done at the panchayat clusters (if panchayat population is less unlike Kerala, West Bengal, Karnataka where the population is

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79 The Times of India. 2023. "Goa CM Pramod Sawant announces 'administration at your doorstep' on March 17". March, 2023. Weblink:https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/goa/goa-cm-pramod-sawant-announces-administration-at-your-door-step-on-march-17/articleshow/98647181.cms

relatively more), where the public complaints are heard and solutions decided and followed up by conduct of another such camps. This will build grassroots women leadership and field-level contact/feedback and would prevent the problem of Pradhan Pati quite effectively.

➢ Continuous handholding support and guidance needs to be provided to the WERs, enabling them to learn ways and means to balance their role as local leaders and home-makers, home-care and child-care services in the rural areas need to be strengthened to enable WERs to reconcile their multiple social and family roles.

➢ Mandating conduct of Mahila Sabhas specially before each GP meeting as that would enable role strengthening of the WERs. The guidelines already issued by the MoPR need to be strictly enforced through reward and sanction schemes like the release of funds or grants etc.

➢ An appropriate and standardised rate of monthly honorarium for all WERs needs to be considered with the provision of yearly increase of DA/TA. The Ministry of Panchayati Raj has advised states to ensure that Ward Members of Gram Panchayats are included in various sub-committees.

➢ To encourage their participation, it has been suggested that an honorarium or sitting fee of up to ₹1,000 per month be provided, sourced either from the Gram Panchayat's own revenues or through state government assistance. For services rendered by the Gram Pradhan (Sarpanch) to these committees, an honorarium of up to ₹5,000 per month has been recommended. Some States like the UP, Sikkim, Odisha and Himachal Pradesh provide for payment of sitting fees, honorarium etc.

➢ Minimum eligibility criteria viz. education qualification, age or experience in community development programme etc. may be considered for electing WERs.

➢ Training of GP functionaries such as Panchayat Secretaries, Gram Rozgar Sevak, etc., needs to be customised to build sensitivity in enabling/helping WERs to discharge their roles effectively on becoming the first-time WERs. Maybe the performance report of the GP officials needs to be counter-signed by the senior most WER and Women Pradhans when in position and if this is administratively impermissible, the inputs may be provided in writing by the Panchayats if the inputs are collectively signed by all the ERs.

➢ Ways have to be considered to provide adequate resources to women representatives like earmarked office space (by using nearby school building after school hours), personnel (retired govt staff working on voluntary basis but only after approval by the GP/Gram Sabha), and facilitating transport needs (use of govt. vehicles on holidays though govt of Odisha provides for travel expense) while carrying out inspections and project monitoring) In this way, both governance rather logistical problems can be simultaneously addressed.

➢ Once or twice a year a State level Women's Convention may be organised by the State Governments to deliberate on the issues of Panchayat Governance etc. and their report and recommendations should be placed on the floor of the State Legislative Assembly through the State PR Department.

Chapter - 4

Comparative Analysis and Field Findings

(A) **The 'Sarpanch Pati' Practice across different regions of India and Suggestions for its elimination to empower Women Leaders of Panchayats**

4.1 **Context:**

4.1.1 The Supreme Court of India was approached by the Mundona Rural Development Foundation, an NGO, through a Public Interest Writ Petition in 2023, to address the issue of 'Sarpanch Pati/Pradhan Pati' continuing in the Panchayat system, even 30 years after the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, granting minimum one-third reservation of seats to women in PRIs; spearheading political reservation for women in rural local governments. So far, 21 States and 2 UTs have proactively gone forward to give 50% reservation to women in Panchayats, resulting in 46.6% women representation amongst elected members in the PRIs – i.e. over 15 lakh women serving as elected members of PRIs.

4.1.2 This makes India to emerge as one of the top countries in the world for women's political empowerment in local government institutions; yet the challenge of making the political reservation for women meaningful, by empowering them to emerge as independent leaders in their own right and not be shadowed by proxy participation of their husbands (Sarpanch Pati / Pradhan Pati) and other male relatives, continues to persist.

The Supreme Court after hearing the aforesaid PIL No. 615/2023, directed the Petitioner to seek remedy from the Ministry of Panchayati Raj, MoPR, Government of India, (GoI) (**Annexure I**), to look into the issue and come up with effective interventions to make reservation for women meaningful, as envisaged in Part IX of the Constitution of India and the State Panchayati Raj Acts passed by various State Governments; latter as the Panchayati Raj is a subject on the State List of the Constitution of India.

Women in Gram Panchayats: Achievements and Challenges

4.2 **Women's Political Participation -**

A. **Case Story 1:** *"The Significance of Participation" Sunita Devi's case*

After the famed click of the midnight hour and ever since the dawn of Indian independence, the Indian democracy has been taking deep roots by progressively empowering, and enabling its citizens to directly elect their National, State at first and then local representatives; latter effort getting pronounced since the nineties. Like many disadvantaged, marginalised and excluded groups, the Scheduled Tribes (STs) in Jharkhand, have been living under their own customary laws fostering democratic and rather egalitarian social systems since centuries. Their local autonomy relatively remained untouched by the colonial rulers specially after the Birsa Munda uprising of 1899-90 shook off their onslaught.

In keeping with this spirit of allowing greater autonomy to the tribal population living in the forest areas, the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA) was also enacted for the areas excluded from the 73rd Constitutional amendment. Additionally, the Jharkhand Panchayati Raj Act, 2001 created a three-tier panchayat system, to further strengthen local democracy in non-PESA areas of Jharkhand.

The Bari Panchayat, falling in the Sonua Block forest area of the West Singhbhum district, is inhabited by the tribal population of Ho (exceeding 60%). The inaccessibility and connectivity challenges have contributed to their continuing isolation, which in turn has facilitated the easy operation of corrupt practices in these interior villages. The extent of corruption has reached alarming proportions; so much so that one must pay bribes to different layers of middlemen to get any task completed when involving the government institutions. Unhappy with the continuance of such unethical patterns and practices affecting their day-to-day lives, the villagers pinned their hopes on a women leader and elected Sunita Gagrai as their Mukhiya.

Sunita Gagrai, aged 32, lives in the village of Bari Panchayat, Sonua Block, mostly a forest area and is far from urban pockets and commercial establishments including the markets. She is from the same hamlet; thus, most residents are fully familiar with her personality traits since her childhood. She used to take the train regularly to commute to Chakradharpur for attending school. Sunita, a Porahat Mahila Maha Sangh member, was a GP Facilitator for over two years, helping the community to access benefits under various social welfare programmes. She has worked tirelessly for Porahat Mahila Mahasangh, a Block-level women's Federation, working to empower women and address local development issues. This experience of working in the field helped to develop people's contact and she learnt

of people's problems. SHGs and women of the community developed a positive image and began to trust her leadership due to her dedication. Sunita contested the GP President/ Mukhiya election despite facing difficult conditions and fought on the plank of addressing corruption in the panchayat and this touched a raw nerve affecting the people. She campaigned with integrity and refused to use

Sarpanch Smt. Sunita Gagrai

money to persuade people to vote for her. Her tenacity paid off, and she was elected and over a period of time her dedicated work, commitment and easy accessibility, contributed to making her a community icon, committed to ensuring ethical conduct, and through that in releasing the untapped potential to realise the goal of attaining a responsible and accountable local self-government that works for the benefit of the local people.

"The villagers were in dire need of transformation," Sunita's Self-Help Group fellow partner Indumati recalls. "We saw Sunita as a symbol of hope, someone who could bring integrity and diligence to the role." Some of the villages initially mocked her for championing the cause of providing a transparent, responsible and corruption-free local governance. Due to this appeal, Sunita won the Panchayat election because the desire for change for cleaner local self-government was much stronger. New Mukhiya Sunita was appointed after the election. "I experienced a blend of elation and obligation," Sunita said. "As Mukhiya, I recognised the need for diligent effort to achieve the expected change." So, it was clear to her that she was a social change agent for transforming the rural local body.

Sunita was quite new to her newly mandated roles and responsibilities in project management and implementation requiring familiarity and knowledge of the basics of good governance and working knowledge, if not mastery, of elaborate rules and procedures governing the functioning of such a local body. To enable her to discharge her role effectively, CBOs like the PRADAN[80] helped her in understanding her roles and responsibilities in providing good, transparent and accountable local self-government.

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80   See futher: https://www.pradan.net

Additionally, through the UNICEF-supported PRI-CBO collaboration arrangement, local staff managed to arrange a master trainer in helping her to understand her new roles and responsibilities. Accordingly, a former Hazaribagh Mukhiya was taken on board to act as an instructor and he helped Sunita to understand newer concepts and issues, such as the Panchayati Raj framework, stakeholder roles, project management, procedures and documentation. Sunita and other panchayat members observed and learnt from Pindarkon's efficient operations. The administration also provided her with basic training on the Panchayati Raj system. Sunita joined the Indian School of Democracy and PRADAN's SHE Represents Programme to strengthen her leadership abilities and governance responsibilities.

After getting familiar with the knowledge about her new roles and responsibilities, the panchayat held multiple meetings of the Gram Sabhas and other Committees to understand and find solutions to the pending issues. "The infrastructure was deplorable," Sunita said. "We renovated and enhanced the panchayat office and set a regular opening schedule." Panchayat involvement in GPDP planning was sought to be increased to achieve mandated targets. Monthly GP Coordination and Executive Committee meetings began to be held at regular intervals to improve their oversight roles and with each meeting, Sunita became increasingly confident and sure of her roles and responsibilities. In keeping with her election promise to reduce corruption, she resorted to promoting openness through sharing details with the people about decision-making, and all operations and this led to reducing intermediaries who were part of corrupt practices, and it helped people directly. The people of Panchayats breathed a sigh of relief that not only corruption could be handled but that a woman could help achieve this difficult goal. Nothing could demonstrate the successes achieved in the functioning of the rural panchayat than the views expressed by the Panchayat member Bimla Gope when she said, "This transparency facilitated the restoration of trust." This clearly showed how trust deficit commonly affects the functioning of the RLBs and this stems from a predilection to postpone Gram Sabha meetings to shun open public opprobrium when works are either not being done or when corruption corrodes the confidence of the people. "We began regular meetings with diverse stakeholders, providing mutual support." The Panchayat prioritised its functioning by deciding to exercise oversight roles to ensure the effective functioning of the Anganwadis, better supply of potable water, improving educational outcomes, and cleanliness drives engineered by women. We

have also argued in this report how women-led Panchayats lead to quantum jump in achieving better outputs and outcomes in all these parameters, which improve quality of life and lead to better Human Development Indicators (HDIs). Imagine, what transformational energies for development can be unleashed through women-led project management at the Panchayat levels specially in women and child welfare programmes. This has been done in several Panchayats as studies after studies have shown that.

The MoPR has formulated a LSDG goals for the Panchayats and it would be worthwhile if a study is undertaken to assess a comparative achievement of these goals in the women-led Pradhans vis-a-vis men-led GPs. One has a hunch that the performance of women led Panchayats would be a notch higher. However, this is only a matter of an impressionistic assessment at this stage and a field-level enquiry is needed to validate this hypothesis.

Sunita Devi organizing Pension Camp

In order to build familiarisation with IT-driven management tools for better governance, the Panchayats had undertaken training for all the PRI members in West Singhbhum, Jharkhand

Conducting Gram Sabha Meeting for GPDP Preparation

specially in handling the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) management information system. This was in keeping with her promise of ensuring corruption-free governance in government programmes especially the ones involving extremely poor sections such as the wage labour class, solely dependent on surviving on daily wages given by the government. This helped in saving them from the

threat of starvation especially in the lean season when the local produce at home runs out and some tribals resort to surviving on traditional coping mechanisms.

Meena, another SHG member, says, "She has demonstrated a glimpse of the potential she can contribute to the panchayat." Her goal is to serve the most underprivileged by making the panchayat the leading developmental entity, in the rural and interior areas of Jharkhand. The role of the panchayat was emphasized to make it as a development hub, where all the issues of development are discussed, and roles and responsibilities assigned with the participation of the public by regular conduct of GP meetings. To achieve this objective, a decision was taken to hold public meetings held every Monday and Thursday. All-important planning and detailed deliberations were done in such village meetings, to build a transparent and accountable local governance. For example, around 120 pensions and 64 housing units were approved in such public meetings, disposing of long pending cases. The implementation of Nal Jal Yojna was monitored for effective implementation as it extends water supply to all Jhaliyamara village homes (a total of 50 such households were helped in just one year). Three schools were provided with sanitary pad machines after she as the mukhiya imparted training to the girls on how to use them. Then in Burusai and Kharimati villages, wells and hand pumps were repaired to ensure that villages have regular sources of water.

Let us note the prophetic words of Sunita when she says "We are navigating a complex journey of transformation. I have a deep belief in our collective efficacy. Together, we can change our community'. Need one to say more or write more about what a Women Pradhans-led Panchayat can do for the local community and imagine when the time comes when the male relatives of women ERs let go of their undesirable tendencies to cling on to the influence exercised remotely.

B.   **Case Story 2: Education, Equity, Inclusion and Community Participation:**

Roshni Merawi, the Sarpanch of the Garhi Gram Panchayat in Balaghat, has earned all round community support by working tirelessly in ensuring that everyone has access to education, particularly girls, and also that young girls are persuaded and motivated to pursue further education.

The role and responsibilities of women elected Pradhans show intersectionality of role convergence- of a homemaker, income contributor, subsidiary social and segregated sex-defined roles etc. This can be seen in this Pradhan, who

would go to the local forest at five am, collect minor forest produce such as bamboo and firewood, and on return go to school. She had to drop out of school after the 12th grade due to the demands of multiple roles, assigned and expected from girls and women. But her spirit was not deterred and

Sarpanch Smt. Roshni Merawi

through the self-motivation maxim "I will work and pay for my education and also support in household income," she persuaded her parents to allow her to pursue education beyond school. After that, "members of my family gave me permission to study. I started working for MGNREGA, went to school for a master's degree, and even finished my master's degree in social work. One thing that everyone is aware of, is my determination. It was recommended to me that I fight for the election, and I did so, ultimately winning the election" One can see the trace and possible motivational patterns made famous by the likes of Ms. Rajawat from Rajasthan[81].

She was first confronted with the challenge of how to improve education, and in order to get a better understanding, she conducted an assessment of the situation by talking directly to the students and the teachers. A move was initiated where Members of the Panchayat began to visit families' homes to motivate them to enrol their children in schools, emphasising how education was free and even books were given free for most children. In order to address the issues of school dropouts, the panchayat began to arrange free coaching facilities for children of classes between VI-XII. Regular monitoring by the Panchayat was initiated to foster better discipline not only amongst children but also among teachers; this led to improved attendance of teachers and students. In order to improve school functioning, efforts were made to ensure better water supply in schools and also to undertake steps to improve cleanliness in the schools. The members of the Panchayat began reviewing the matter of the School Management Committee meeting on a regular basis. The Panchayats began to regularly meet the parents and instructors in order to address the bottlenecks and find solutions. This is one illustrative case which shows how local schools can discharge their mandated responsibilities if only the GP exercises

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81   See further: https://www.boundindia.com/chhavi-rajawat-a-sarpanch-with-a-difference/

Roshni Devi discussing strategies to improve education in the GP meeting

the oversight functions effectively. The joint responsibility of school administration and the Panchayat invariably improve the issues of teacher absenteeism, opening and closing of schools at regular school timings, better administration of Mid-Day Meal Scheme, improving school dropout rates etc. This case clearly shows how the effective leadership of a woman Pradhan ensured that the education of the local community is an equal responsibility of the GP besides the Education Department, and keeping an eye and oversight on the functioning of local schools helps achieve what no other government machinery can do. It is like the GP assumes the role of the parent interested in better outcomes and completion of education with quality. In other words, the GP is actually meant as aiding arm of the government and that alone achieves accountability like no other body.

This case clearly showed what a woman Pradhan, and a panchayat can do, to ensure better educational outcomes, and effectively address educational issues afflicting the school education system since the independence. Yet, after addressing the issue of educational performance at the schools, the Panchayats were lost, searching for answers, due to a lack of clarity on their roles and responsibilities once quality education was ensured up to class XII. On their own, after due deliberations, they sought to establish a career counselling centre for students who needed guidance after completing their education up to the 12th standard. So, here is an example of how a woman-led Panchayat sought to improve educational outcomes even beyond the school and setting up a counselling centre was a local solution to a local problem.

4.3 Challenges

Though some of these challenges have been discussed earlier in this report, these challenges were observed during interaction with 14 State Governments and their WERs including the field visits to several Panchayats. These are discussed below.

4.3.1 Gender-Based Role Impediments

Women Sarpanches face substantial obstacles in discharging their leadership roles falling under three important categories: structural, practical/capacity, and administrative. These hurdles can be differentiated by their commonalities and distinctions. Deeply entrenched social norms, gender biases, and cultural stereotypes are the principal causes of structural impediments that diminish their authority (Buch, 2000; Jayal, 2006). Insufficient training, limited education, and a deficiency of exposure to governance processes exemplify practical and capability impediments. These obstacles affect the confidence and competence of the individuals concerned (Nambiar, 2020; Panda, 1996). The inefficiency of bureaucracy, insufficient institutional support, and limited access to essential resources are the fundamental causes of administrative hurdles (UN Women, 2018). These are:

➢ **Gender stereotypes:** Gender stereotypes are quite similar to what one sees in other societies of the world and emanate from the millennia-old role definition and expectation in pre-literate, and some of these role expectations still persist in people's consciousness even in literate societies. For example, women are generally considered as the weaker sex (or second sex as Simone De Beauvoir called it) due to their reproductive roles making them emotionally weak, and physically weak often in need of protection. In contrast, men are considered rational, career-oriented, and strong. These preconceptions impede WERs' ability to exhibit and develop agency function roles and exercise appropriate assertiveness in discharging of their governance roles. According to Kumar (2019), these perceptions create substantial impediments for women leaders, affecting their performance and effectiveness as leaders in Panchayats.

➢ **Burden of Triple Role:** According to Moser's[82] planning paradigm, women are bestowed with multiple and demanding roles such as the "triple role" which includes reproductive, productive, and community-management duties. WERs in workshops have consistently stated that they must fulfil these roles, particularly reproductive duties, regardless of their political

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82   Moser, Carolin. 1993." Gender Planning and Development: Theory, Practice and Training".Routlegdge.

aspirations. Many are also the breadwinners in their families. The stipend they earn from Panchayats is insufficient to support their family and political careers. In Uttar Pradesh, participants reported spending a large amount of money serving tea to villages when officially interacting with them or when approaching them for votes during elections. These social roles expand their obligations (Jha, 2015; Singh & Shah, 2020). According to Singh (2018), this is an issue that affects many women in rural India, impeding their ability to fully participate in government and policymaking.

➢ **Two-Child Norm:** Some States continue to impose the two-child limit for fighting Panchayat elections[83], and such rules restrict their admittance into Panchayats. According to Jha (2015), this regulation disproportionately impacts women, particularly those who live in rural regions and have less influence over their reproductive decisions. This decision needs to be reviewed vis-a-vis the States where such restrictions have not been made, and this has been discussed in the chapter on legal rights.

➢ **Rotation of Terms:** The policy of rotating reserved seats and chairperson positions within Panchayats is said to impede the development of leadership skills among WERs. Their tenure expires just when they have begun to gain confidence in independent functioning and relatively acquired the required abilities to manage the Panchayat affairs. Only a few States including Chhattisgarh, Kerala, Himachal Pradesh, Odisha, and Karnataka allow for two-term reservations. This policy frequently hinders the sustainability of women's leadership and development (Singh, 2018). The multiple-term reservations need to be thought of, especially in SC, ST, OBC and Aspirational District pockets.

4.3.2 Limited Capacity Building & Communication competencies

Due to the near absence of government staff besides the Panchayat Secretary (anyway recruited as a field-level functionary), the ERs end up performing unexpected executive roles in the GPs' administrative apparatus, which in PSs and the ZPs, these roles are performed by the so-called Executive Officer or the Chief Executive Officer. There is plenty of evidence that WERs are in jails due to mismanagement of funds and other corruption issues at the GP level as they are bestowed with executive function roles for which they were not primarily elected. It is like the Chairman and Members of State and Union Commissions start exercising the executive functions meant for the Secretaries and other

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83   Dak, T.M. 2009."Application of two child norm for contesting or holding office in Panchayati Raj Institutions in Fifth Scheduled Areas States of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat: A study of its impact on women".Institute of Social Development. Weblink: https://cdnbbsr.s3waas.gov.in/s316026d60ff9b54410b3435b403afd226/uploads/2023/02/2023022225.pdf

career public servants and officials in such Commissions and other regulatory bodies. In addition, being illiterate and less educated affects their performance.

As stated, they are not officials and were not expected to act as officials and for this purpose, the Govt. of Karnataka had started recruiting staff such as the PDO etc, for manning their GPs. These circumstances and their inherent inability to face the new challenges individually impel them to depend on their family members to negotiate through the new challenges. Some WERs, like in Tripura, Bihar, and Uttar Pradesh, struggled to fully understand panchayat functioning fully and began to depend on relatives, Panchayat secretaries and familiar fellow representatives for assistance, at least during their first-time tenures.

They all struggled initially with limited knowledge in matters such as how to conduct and work through the subject standing committees, how to understand the panchayat records including perusing and understanding past proceedings of the Gram Sabhas, statutory requirements of quorum, field inspections, segregation of roles of project approvals and project implementation specially in general or specific terms. Though the 73rd Constitutional mandate does not strictly apply to them and despite having a matrilineal society amongst the Khasis, in Meghalaya, women representatives in Village Employment Councils (VECs) still don't have a full understanding of their conduct, functions, fund regulations, and use of technical or software applications. This highlights the need for recruiting and deploying officials at the GP levels. Some States have their respective cadre of panchayat raj staff, and it would be worth considering whether some reservation for women in appointments as GP staff is made. This would help the newly WERs in finding women working as officials at the GP levels. This felt need was also expressed by the WERs during discussions with the States and field visits undertaken by the Advisory Committee.

➢ **Communication Competencies:** Even when the WERs gain knowledge about schemes/programmes/projects, they face challenges in acquiring and articulating skills to explain the details comprehensively, either in the Gram Sabha meetings or while facing people in general and officials in particular, as seen in the case of Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh. However, many WERs have developed excellent public engagement and communication skills, compensating for knowledge gaps through their active involvement in community service even before fighting the elections. The case of woman Pradhan namely Sunita in Jharkhand effectively illustrates this aspect.

➢ **Technical and Financial Literacy Gaps:** Learning how to handle and manage government funds, signing cheques/online forms, and using

panchayat portals is a challenge for most WERs and often lack of training and education makes them dependent on others as seen in the case of Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Rajasthan. In Meghalaya, a dependency on male representatives for record-keeping tasks was reported.

4.3.3 Administrative issues & facilities for WERs

➢ **Infrastructure Constraints:** Despite seeing the participation of WERs for over three decades, one still sees the creation of gender-unfriendly infrastructure, like in the GP buildings that do not have functional toilets with water connections for women representatives. In most of the GPs covered in the study, there was no dedicated office space or room for the Sarpanch/President, regardless of their gender leading to avoidance of their availability at the office premises.

➢ **Financial Limitations:** The honorarium provided to the elected representatives, including women, has been noticed to be too low and inadequate. Such honorarium ranges from Rs.2,500/- in Jharkhand to Rs. 13,200/- in Kerala. Additionally, across the States, delays in receiving travel and daily allowances posed continuous financial difficulties to the WERs. In Meghalaya, VECs are voluntary institutions without any provisions for remunerations for office bearers. This limited the interest and ability of women representatives to stay engaged, especially when they had to travel long distances for training without the option of reimbursement.

➢ **Mobility:** For commuting WERs are highly dependent on their family members and this is one of the major constraints for WERs in discharging their public office roles. Most of the WERs do not own any vehicle, and even when they can afford it, they don't have the skill to ride it independently. This limitation often impacts their participation and attendance in official functions, in Panchayat offices or while discharging their field-related official activities. In other words, it poses a significant barrier to their participation in public forums, political activities and project management responsibilities related to project formulation and implementation. One possibly cannot

give strong objections to the quality of project implementation to field staff, if a free ride was provided by the Panchayat secretary or the contractor. Further, there are caste-based mobility restrictions that impact the effective discharging of their roles and responsibilities across their full jurisdiction. Additionally, security concerns often restrict WERs from travelling alone.

The mobility constraints not only hinder their ability to carry out official duties effectively in the constituencies but also restrict their access to capacity-building opportunities like training and exposure visits outside their villages. The mobility challenges, exacerbated by lack of security, transport and restrictive cultural practices, significantly undermine the participation, growth and leadership potential of women representatives in discharging their expected roles in local governance.

(B) **Findings/Learnings from State Workshops, Field Visits and Interactions with WERs:**

Four Regional Workshops were conducted to study women's empowerment and related issue of the Pradhan Pati. These workshops were as under:

> ➤ Madhya Pradesh–1ˢᵗ Regional Workshop (Oct.24)
>
> ➤ Tripura and North East Region–2ⁿᵈ Regional Workshop (Nov.24) – 6 States: Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Sikkim and Tripura
>
> ➤ Uttar Pradesh–3ʳᵈ Regional Workshop (Dec.24)-4 States: including–Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh
>
> ➤ Karnataka–4ᵗʰ Regional Workshop–3 States: including, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Kerala

Our detailed interactions with the State Governments and field visits involving interaction with WERs/Women Pradhans, actually, validated the findings of various studies quoted in this report; but additionally, this opportunity also offered us to receive and incorporate specific suggestions for consideration of the planners and policy formulators in the government. The feedback included inputs received under the following heads:

(i) **Lack or Inadequate Experience of Political Leadership:**

Newly WERs lack exposure and experience in learning the ropes to effectively discharge their new roles and responsibilities as local self-government leaders across all three-tiered Panchayati Raj System, especially at the GP levels. Their new roles require that they must have some familiar grounding about leadership, communication and negotiating skills, and clearly need to know their specific roles and responsibilities as Panchayat leaders and as change agents in improving the quality of life in rural areas.

(ii) **Gender-Based Discrimination:**

All WERs continue to face discrimination in the sense of being ignored and bypassed in official, semi-official and even informal meetings by their male ERs/peer-elected representatives, and as if taking their cue, even the male officials manning the GP machinery also do the same, in generally preferring to interact with male ERs. This fosters the perpetuation of the system of Sarpanch/Pradhan Patis, depriving WERs of their newly found representative voice and leadership in public affairs, thereby, violating their constitutional rights.

(iii) **Prevailing Patriarchal norms and practices:**

The traditional rural society continues to display centuries-old entrenched patriarchal mindsets and rigid socio-cultural norms such as observing variants of the '*purdah*' *practices*–women covering their heads and even putting a sort of a veil before male peers more so if they are elders and in public places; and as an extension of such mindsets and socio-cultural manners, they are required not to speak out in male gatherings in general and this orientation ends up being extended to the panchayat and gram sabha meetings.

(iv) **Political Pressure**

The instances abound where the WERs are subjected to disguised and open threats, coercion and even violence sometimes from the political opponents and dominant groups, and they even resort to using 'No Confidence Motion' as a pressure tactic and a weapon to oust them from their seats, cutting their electoral terms.

(v) **Socio-economic and cultural disadvantages:**

The WERs already face the disadvantage of belonging to the group of marginalised sections in the rural areas; additionally, other elements such as belonging to the SC/ ST/ Minority/ Disability categories further aggravate their vulnerabilities as village leaders. This intersectionality of disadvantages does not end there, other elements such as illiteracy/lack of formal education or limited to schools in villages and digital illiteracy aggravate their positions further. The difficulties in easy mobility and general socio-cultural restrict them from travelling alone. Most of them don't have their own means of transport and do not have the driving skills to undertake independent visits.

(vi) **Pressure of balancing their public life with domestic responsibilities** such as being homemakers and caregivers causes huge expectations, and multiple burdens to discharge these multiple and often conflicting roles. This is one of many reasons, that the WERs mostly come from the families of males who have already been operating in panchayat electoral politics for some time.

(vii) **The WERs in most Panchayats face lack of or limited opportunities and access to rapid and customised capacity-building training which can make them** effective political leaders; additionally, they have very limited access to mentors who can advise and guide them on their new roles. There are also limited networks and helplines/help desks enabling their learning on the job and or in seeking advice on issues faced by them in discharging their newer roles and responsibilities.

(viii) **The principle of rotational reservation of seats, whereby, WERs are allowed only a tenure of 5 years** against a reserved seat is too short a gestation period, to enable them to learn their challenging roles as change agents and simultaneously seek to consolidate their knowledge and experience in providing effective local governance. In other words, by the time they start gaining confidence and competence as panchayat leaders, their term is already coming to a close, causing operational slowdown of processes and procedures impacting their images of being effective leaders.

(ix) Due to socio-cultural reasons combined with lack of education and experience and subsidiary/subject partner roles assigned in both families of creation and procreation, the WERs are hesitant in taking financial decisions independently; this leads to their being dependent on their husbands/male relatives and restricts their developing an independent mindset and some measure of autonomy in independent action.

(x) **Absence of Strong Deterrent Laws with punitive measures**- Though some beginnings have been made to formulate rules and enact law to punish male relatives who de facto run the Panchayats, there is tendency amongst male relatives to compromise the de jure roles assigned to WERs.

4.4 **Regional Differences in the Prevalence of 'Sarpanch Pati': Kudumbashree and NIRDPR Study: and State Visits**

4.4.1 Suggestions from Kudumbashree and NIRD&PR Study

4.4.1.1 In order to comprehensively comprehend the full dimensions of the issue of Pradhan Patis a study was commissioned by the MoPR, GoI-through Kudumbashree (Kerala Govt.'s Poverty Eradication and Women Empowerment Programme through Women Self Help Groups) and National Institute of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj (NIRD&PR) in 2023-24 and the report is enclosed (**Annexure -VI**).

4.4.1.2 The Study covered 16 States and the findings show that the Sarpanch Pati practice plagues the Northern, North-Western and Central Indian States more, typically the Hindi speaking States of India; while the practice was less manifest in the North Eastern and Southern States, due to a strong Self Help Group network consolidating social capital that has been emerging due to SHGs acting as a training ground for women; this has helped them in developing their leadership skills and continuous peer partnership within the SHGs help in grooming them to emerge confidently to embrace their new roles and responsibilities in public life. The hold of patriarchal socio-cultural norms is

seen to be more deeply entrenched in north, north-western and central Indian States–the Hindi heartland; whereas, in the North Eastern and Southern States there have been matrilineal communities as well, diluting the rigid patriarchal norms of confining women to the private space, of primarily being homemakers. Different shades of 'Sarpanch-Patism' can be seen in different States of India, whereas, in Kerala, this practice is almost non-existent.

4.4.1.3 This Study highlighted certain already known characteristics such as the lack of knowledge emanating largely due to limited formal education and familiarity about the functioning of PRIs among WERs, subsidiarity of their roles in contributing to economic incomes generally and its lack or limited financial independence, make them inhibited in taking financial decisions. This was seen as the major capacity gaps and handicaps faced by women leaders, making them dependent on their husbands/ male relatives leading to proxy participation of WERs.

4.4.1.4 This Study's main recommendations include taking priority action on functional training for non-literate WERs, facilitating focused training courses to develop WERs as effective leaders with requisite skill sets of political leadership, financial management and soft skills; creating help desks for WERs at the State and District Levels; promoting associations/federations of WERs; strengthening PRI-CBO-SHG convergence; making panchayat offices women friendly in infrastructure, as well as women-friendly work-culture; by promoting training in gender-responsive governance for Panchayat elected leaders and officials. These suggestions were considered for inclusion in the suggestions.

4.4.1.5 The Study also validates that women who have been active in Self Help Groups, get elected as panchayat leaders and perform well with their prior experience of participating in meetings, decision-making/taking and handling of finances as micro-entrepreneurs. This was borne out by the experience of Southern States.

4.4.2 Experience of Second/ Multiple Term WERs:

4.4.2.1 It is also borne out from the experience of WERs winning against general seats in their second/multiple terms, across different States of India, that after hands-on leadership experience and practical training in their first innings against a reserved seat, WERs emerge confident to contest and win elections from general (unreserved) seats, even defeating male contestants due to having established their credentials as effective leaders in their first term against a reserved seat. Examples of multiple-term WERs are on the rise in many States.

4.4.2.2 Presently, Tamil Nadu is the only State that allows women to serve two

consecutive terms in the constituencies reserved for them. It is turning out to be an enabling provision for empowering WERs and is worthy of emulation and replication by other States through inserting similar enabling provisions in their State Panchayati Raj Acts.

4.4.3 **Suggestions emerging from Interaction with WERs of Madhya Pradesh (MP):**
Madhya Pradesh State Rural Livelihood Mission (MPSRLM) is seeking to create organic leadership among Women SHGs and its members are now quite empowered to seek elections to become Panchayat leaders. However, this is not enough and there is a pressing need for undertaking social and behavioural change amongst PRI-ERs and officials with active involvement of the community at large.

The Workshop led to in identification of challenges and suggested interventions, and these can be read in the Base Report prepared by the Advisory Committee members and subject matter specialists. The Base Report is annexed. These suggested interventions are:

Interactive Session with WERs in Bhopal

4.4.3.1 IEC Campaigns:

➢ Launching of periodic multi-media campaigns through folk media, mass media, TV and Community Radio, and informative documentaries transmitted through mass media including YouTube, to promote learning from across the country good practices, particularly on curbing gender discrimination and proxy practices in Panchayats, need to be designed and promoted.

➢ Dedicated radio & TV programmes and newspaper columns to widely disseminate success stories of effective WERs for inspiring others need to be multiplied.

4.4.3.2 Legal Measures:

➢ Legal literacy training for WERs and SHGs needs to be promoted, synergising efforts like holding monthly Mahila Sabhas for wider outreach and expanding awareness of the rights and in this effort partnerships with District Legal Aid Societies and Lawyers Collectives need to be built.

➢ Conducting regular Mahila Sabha meetings needs to be institutionalized as part of each State's Panchayati Raj Act, on lines of Maharashtra State P. Raj Act. SHGs and Women Frontline Functionaries together with WERs, to collectively come together to be commonly motivated to make Mahila Sabhas active and vibrant, leading to mainstreaming women's participation in Gram Sabha meetings and integrating women's development needs in GPDPs.

➢ Stringent punitive action needs to be taken to remove proxy participation and interference of male spouses/relatives. Provisions of Uttarakhand Panchayati Raj Act to address this issue can be examined for replication.

➢ It is time that the provision providing for the reservation of seats for WERs for a minimum of two consecutive terms should be considered and beginnings in this regard has been made already through the incorporation of a provision in the Tamil Nadu State Panchayati Raj Act.

4.4.3.3 Learnings from the field visit in MP:

The Workshop entailed a field visit to GP-Fanda Kalan in Bhopal-a Sansad Aadarsh Gram Yojana (SAGY) selected model Panchayat, having a woman Sarpanch - Ms. Varsha Kunwar. The Panchayat members advocated the issue of warning on the first instance of Sarpanch Pati interfering in the Panchayat Meetings and affairs. And on repetition of the report of proxy participation, the penalty of imposition of fines was recommended. They also advocated having a woman GP Secretary in a woman-headed Panchayat, to help build an environment of free communication and mutual trust.

As regards the extent of women's participation in Mahila Sabha and especially Gram Sabha, it was revealed that these forums are still struggling to meet the prescribed quorum of a minimum 10% voter count to attend the meetings. To make Mahila Sabhas and Gram Sabhas more vibrant and well-attended, there was a suggestion to fully tap

Interaction with WERs in Fanda GP

the potential of ensuring that all women SHG- members and women frontline

workers, along with all women ward members should commit and resolve to attend these meetings and this would help fulfil the requisite quorum mandate on a continuing basis. Since this Panchayat had over a dozen active SHGs, the collective action by women would send the right message amongst the officials and other male ERs. Additionally, the Panchayats should organise a free health check-up camp for the villagers, calling a team of specialist doctors and the expenses could be met from NHM funds, GP's own income & CSR funds. This would generate increased interest in Gram Sabha and Mahila Sabha meetings and increase the participation of members in these grassroots democratic forums.

4.4.4 Suggestions after interaction with WERs of North Eastern States:

Six States of the North Eastern Region namely Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Sikkim and Tripura attended this Workshop. Assam could not be represented, as elections for PRIs in the State were going on. The participants reported hardly any prevalence of Sarpanch Pati practice in

Group Discussion Session with WERs in Agartala

these States due to relatively higher levels of literacy amongst women and the existence of inherent egalitarianism witnessed in tribal societies in general and in tribal societies in the NER in particular; some States have matriarchal / matrilineal family structures as well which promote gender empowerment and equality. The existence of several Autonomous District Councils has also helped in the deepening of democratic structures. And as seen in other parts of the country, active women SHG members have enabled women to further pursuing active participation in public life. However, other challenges faced by WERs were reported. The details of these challenges faced by the WERs and suggested interventions can be read in the Base Report of the Advisory Committee.

4.4.4.1 Learnings from the field visit in Tripura:

Field Visits were undertaken for two Panchayats- namely Holakhet GP in Matabari Block and Paschim Majlishpur GP in Jirania Block of Agartala. Discussions with ERs in these Panchayats validated the existence of a robust and real and effective participation of WERs in GP meetings. This may have been due to the strengthening of the Panchayat System initiated in the State

since the seventies, almost two decades before the 73rd Constitutional amendment. Interaction with local SHGs highlighted their contributory role in promoting economic empowerment and financial independence amongst women. The State showed the existence of active

Interaction with WERs in Holakhet GP

Mahila Sabhas and the State had undertaken several mobile-based campaigns to disseminate information on health, education and financial literacy. Well-maintained community infrastructure with gender-friendly spaces such as parks, open gyms, health centres, schools and Anganwadi Centres (AWCs) were existing. The visited Panchayats advocated the need to undertake targeted IEC Campaigns to promote awareness building in the community on women's rights including their change agent roles in local governance. The need for customised training for WERs to build their leadership, administrative and digital governance skills was strongly recommended. The need for creating a dedicated platform for continuous skill development and problem-solving for women PRI Leaders was also advocated. Organising inter-State exposure visits for WERs to learn from best practices of Women-friendly Panchayats was also suggested for practical learning. Legal Awareness Building efforts need to be included in the Mahila Sabha meetings. The Panchayats should also formulate Standard Operating Procedures for most aspects of Panchayat functioning and efforts should be made to educate rural women on their rights and legal entitlements and how to obtain them. Awareness campaigns should focus on social legislation enacted to eliminate harmful social practices like Gender Based Sex Selection, Prevention of Child Marriages and Dowry, Sexual Violence and Harassment etc.

Interaction with WERs in Atari GP

4.4.5 Interaction with WERs of Uttar Pradesh (UP) & other States

The Regional Workshop at Lucknow saw the participation of WERs from four States viz. Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Rajasthan and UP. Two Women Pradhans in GPs of UP were given the National Awards by the Hon'ble President of India on 11th December 2024 concerning

Interactive Session with WERs in Lucknow

Localizing the SDGs, as per the 9 Themes for Action formulated by the MoPR.

A small documentary film shared stories of good governance and development initiatives of Women Pradhans such as ensuring safety for girls/ women by installing street lights and CCTVs, creating smart classrooms and libraries for school children, mobilising Bal Sabhas and Mahila Sabhas, promoting menstrual hygiene for adolescent girls, ensuring proper solid/liquid waste management in villages, focussing on improved nutrition for children through Anganwadi & Mid-Day Meals in schools, creating WhatsApp groups for speedy grievance redressal. These local development initiatives showed results in improving outcomes in education, health and sanitation parameters and were contributing to giving a decent quality of life in the villages.

4.4.5.1 Learnings from Field Visit:

A field visit was organised to the GP Atari of Maal Block in Lucknow District and the district was rather remarkable in showing that out of 67 Gram Panchayats, 30 had women as GP Presidents. But this is as far as the formal political leadership was concerned, but it was soon learnt that in the Block level meetings, only 2-3 women GP Presidents actually participated and the majority of 27 women-headed Panchayats were represented by their male relatives or spouses. It was also noted that even the woman- Block President did not chair the Block level meetings and were chaired by her spouse. This revealed a dismal and actual picture of proxy participation of WERs.

However, the Atari GP Women's President, Ms. Sanyogita Singh Chauhan stands as an example of inspirational leadership at the local level as she has ensured that all women Ward Members themselves participate actively in the GP, meetings,

and the role of husbands is limited to supporting roles of advising them in their homes or in escorting them for meetings. They are not allowed to represent the elected women members in the GP Meetings. The GP President represented a confident and independent leader who has been mobilising women frontline workers to work as team with active participation of women SHG members and women ward members. This has ensured that Mahila Sabhas are fully active in addressing issues of water, sanitation, school education, health and safety of women and girls, skill training and self-employment and SHG members have discharged important roles as 21 active women SHGs have worked as a team in the Panchayat.

The GP has shown a wonderful example of women SHG members having learnt to drive auto rickshaws and ferrying groups of 4-5 women ERs for attending Block and District meetings. Due to this active mobilisation and synergyisation of women's power from the SHGs, WERs and women workers in the GP, the incidence of child marriage and domestic violence has stopped in this GP Atari. The impact has also been positive in ensuring zero dropout of girls from schools.

Additional suggestions from the WERs include:

(a)   Nurture women-led empowerment by promoting active networking of WERs, SHGs & women frontline workers.

(b)   Ensure functional education and literacy for WERs.

(c)   Timely training for panchayat management and gender-responsive development planning.

(d)   Drawing up group mobility strategies when WERs have to participate in Block/District Level Meetings.

(e)   Building and institutionalising collective vigilance mechanisms involving women power (WERs, SHGs & women workers) for monitoring the quality of service delivery and project monitoring/ implementation including inspections, especially of physical and social infrastructure works undertaken in the GP.

(f)   Promoting punitive measures for checking the transgressions of male relatives in official duties, functions and functionalities of WERs.

(g)   Make biometric attendance mandatory while attending the Panchayat Meetings

(h)   Creation of Help Desks at Block Levels and WhatsApp Groups of Women GP- Presidents with Block Officials can be created for real-time resolution of issues and finding solutions.

(i) Formation of Association of GP Presidents and WERs at the Block Level for facilitating peer learning and extending mutual support would help in confidence building

(j) Provision of Scooty for Women Presidents of GPs, with training in driving skills to be supported by the government also came up during the discussions.

4.4.6 Interaction with WERs of Karnataka:

There are over 40,000 WERs in PRIs of Karnataka, with 7000 of them elected as Chairpersons demonstrating how Indian democracy is increasingly becoming decentralised at the grassroots levels with women becoming equal partners in not only planning but also actual grassroots governance.

Karnataka was the first State in the Country to give political reservation for women in Panchayats to the extent of 25% in the 1980s -much before the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 and this process has seen the reservation of women rising up to 50% in 21 States and 2 UTs of India. In

Group Discussion Session with WERs in Mysore

Karnataka and many other States of India, proxy- participation of WERs is showing a reduction due to the rise in education, and training facilitated under RGPA– the flagship Scheme for Capacity Building of PRIs under MoPR, GoI and parallel initiation to public participation and experiences in leadership amongst women by their association and active involvement of the SHGs movement in India

Interactive Session with WERs in Mysore

As of June 2023, under the Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana-National Rural Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NRLM), India has mobilised over 10.04 crore (100.4 million) women into more than

90.76 lakh (9.076 million)

Self-Help Groups (SHGs). This extensive network averages approximately 14 SHGs per village, indicating that about one in every eight Indian women is an SHG member. These groups play a crucial role in promoting financial inclusion, digital literacy, sustainable livelihoods, and social development among rural women in India and all these are development goals for the rural areas.

The time has come to devise strategies to synergise women's leadership facilitation through active participation as a collective. This can also create the SHG women members as a resource pool for joining electoral politics at the Panchayat levels.

After noting the above penetration of the SHGs right up to the villages, it is evident that women's empowerment through the SHGs is equally strong as much as through the WERs. In a way, these two bodies share a similar mindset of empowering women, building their collective strength and helping women assume leadership in determining their destinies albeit limited to economic activities. However, they do share similar issues of improving their internal governance, accountability, responsibility, collective bargaining strengths, building partnerships and WERs also share similar issues. Hence, these two women's bodies need to build partnerships at the Panchayat levels and help Panchayat WERs.

Similarly, there are ASHA workers who can help WERs in understanding their development roles in health, sanitation, education, public contact, creation of public awareness etc. As of 2020–2021, India had approximately 914,101 ASHAs working under the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM), achieving nearly 96% of the target of 956,672 ASHAs[84]. The government should consider building synergy between WERs and the ASHA mechanisms. The ASHA system has built women leaders and this is seen in ASHA workers being honoured with the Global Health Leaders Award at the 75th World Health Assembly

Similarly, there is an immense potential in building synergies with the Anganwadi System largely dominated by women members. As of June 30, 2023, India has approximately 13.96 lakh (1.396 million) AWCs registered under the Poshan Tracker application. These centres are staffed by around 13.51 lakh (1.351 million) Anganwadi Workers (AWWs) and 9.22 lakh (0.922 million) Anganwadi Helpers (AWHs).

The focus of all Panchayati Raj Departments in the States should now be to improve women's leadership capability to help them effectively perform their mandated roles in Panchayats.

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84   See further: About Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) :National Health Mission

4.4.6.1 Learnings from Field Visit:

A field visit was undertaken to Gram Panchayat–Hemmanahalli, in Maddur Block of Mandya District of Mysore Division. This GP has 13 elected ward members of which 7 Ward Members are women. The name of the lady Sarpanch of the GP is Veena who is doing second term as the Panchayat President, she worked in the 1st term on a seat reserved for a woman, and she was elected for the 2nd term against a general seat. There is no proxy participation problem in this GP, as the majority of the Ward Members are women–7 out of 13. Due to two consecutive terms, she has consolidated her learnings and has gained experience. This process has been aided by the GP Secretary-cum- Panchayat Development Officer who is also a woman–Ms. Leelavathi – and has occupied that post for over 8 years. This Panchayat has won a national award as a Child-Friendly GP–recognised by MoPR, GoI. It has also won the Gandhi Award for three years in a row. The Panchayat gives priority to the development needs of children and women in the Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP). The elected Sarpanch, Ward Members and Panchayat officials work in tandem and led to the formation of a strong team committed to development works in the GP. The Hemmanahalli GP accords high priority to the health and nutritional development of children and women and has ensured the full and entitled distribution of milk, eggs and fruits at Anganwadi Centres. This again shows how women workers in parallel women instructions can help in forging development partnerships and greater numbers of women coming in partnerships at the Panchayat levels automatically reduces participation through proxy.

There has been a focus on ensuring 100% coverage of all children in school education with no dropouts. Skill training is promoted for women in producing solar lamps, tailoring, beautician trade, agriculture extension, mushroom cultivation, auto-rickshaw driving etc. The woman Sarpanch Veena is Pre-University passed candidate and recommends a minimum school pass as an essential educational qualification for eligibility to contest Panchayat elections as this strongly curbs the dependence on male relatives among WERs. She and other WERs of the GP took great pride in sharing that their GP has 56 active women SHGs, with the Panchayat promoting bank linkages and credit support for them. Resultantly, they have active Mahila Sabhas, wherein 80% women voters participate. This Panchayat also practices child and gender budgeting and advocates this practice for all Panchayats while preparing their GPDP. The Panchayat WERs and Secretary, led by the Sarpanch Veena also took pride in sharing that because of the active women empowerment in this GP, child marriages

have been stopped and there is no Gender Based Violence. This is facilitated by the creation of WhatsApp Groups where women share their problems and these are speedily addressed. The GP Hemmanahalli is a living example of a women-led development model achieved through building effective teams across SHGs, Anganwadi, ASHA. The election for the 2nd term for the woman Sarpanch has begun to institutionalise learning and leadership amongst women. This process has been made easy by a long-serving woman PDO, woman GP Secretary, active women ward members, 56 active SHGs, and active women frontline workers as vibrant Mahila Sabha and child and women-centred GPDPs.

Major Recommendations made by the EWRs of GP Hemmanahalli

➢ Promote basic education as eligibility for contesting Panchayat elections.

➢ Ensure timely orientation and refresher training for WERs–with a focus on Leadership skills, soft skills and digital literacy.

➢ Facilitate exposure visits for WERs under RGSA, to best practices in Panchayats specially in the women-led GPs.

➢ Strengthen Mahila Sabhas with the active participation of all WERs, SHG members, women frontline workers and village women and then this collective partnership can identify women's development needs for further integrating them in GPDP.

➢ Focus on making Panchayats given to achieving development goals for the child and women to accelerate their development and adopt the practice of child and gender budgeting as part of GPDP exercise, and this can make Panchayats pioneering agents of women-led development.

➢ Promote induction of women officials in the Panchayat teams as that can create a supportive work environment for WERs in the Panchayats.

This Panchayat demonstrated that it should focus on health and nutrition for all, education and skill training for all, and this will promote inclusive socio-economic empowerment of girls and will equip them for participation and leadership roles in political and public life, without dependence on men.

4.5   Policy Recommendations from Workshops and Field Visits:

4.5.1 Empowering Women Leaders of Panchayats:

1.   Panchayati Raj Act of Tamil Nadu needs to be studied and replicated for giving political reservation to women for two successive terms helping build and consolidate the knowledge gained, and capacity built in their first term.

2. Minimum Education Qualifications for contesting Panchayat Elections introduced in State Panchayati Raj Acts of Rajasthan and Haryana need to be studied and in light of the Central Act namely the Right to Education Act, 2009-(RTE)-mandating education for all children up to VIII standard in India; can be considered for the introduction of minimum educational eligibility for election to Sarpanch/Pradhan-President of GP Position, across all States, from 2030 onwards, as it would be enforceable after 21 years of RTE, as minimum age to contest Panchayat elections is 21 years. Also, in light of the fact that a Panchayat President has to discharge administrative and financial management functions, which necessitate a minimum level of formal education; also necessary for acquiring digital skills and bridging the digital gender divide. This minimum education will also help reduce the dependence of WERs on their spouses/male relatives to effectively discharge their role as Panchayat leaders.

3. Customised Capacity Building and Training of WERs to build their leadership, management and digital skills is a non-negotiable and is the need of the hour. Problem-solving and mentoring help desks need to be created for WERs in each Block and District besides the creation of online portals for continued learning and problem-solving sessions. The online and offline Learning Management Systems need to be thought of.

4. Multi-Media IEC Campaigns for removing gender discrimination and Gender- Based Violence-through building awareness of gender laws and efforts should be mounted for changing patriarchal gender norms, gender equal opportunities can be created for empowering women and girls.

5. Punitive Measures need to be introduced by integrating them in the State Panchayati Raj Acts. This will go a long way in deterring if not completely eliminating proxy participation by male relatives of the WERs. The State Panchayati Raj Acts of Uttarakhand and other States introducing such measures can be studied for this purpose.

6. Mandatory conduct of Mahila Sabhas needs to be legally mandated, as has been done in the State Panchayati Raj Act of Maharashtra and suitably amending other State Panchayati Raj Acts.

7. To make Gram Sabhas and Mahila Sabhas vibrant and fully attended public incentives like free health check-up camps for the village

community/village women and children need to be introduced, by pooling resources from National Health Mission, CSR and Women and Child Development Programmes; Legal Literacy Sessions on Gender Laws can also be dovetailed with Mahila Sabhas and Gram Sabhas. IEC Melas can also be organised on the spot, on days of Gram Sabhas- to educate people on schemes of various Ministries and Citizens' Charters rolled out by them. All these enabling measures shall help to mobilize optimum people's and women's participation in Gram Sabhas and also Mahila Sabhas.

8. Gender Responsive Budgeting to be made an integral part of Gram Panchayat Development Plans (GPDP)for which Training is to be imparted to all ERs and Officials of Panchayats.

9. Special Incentives may be considered for WERs to alleviate their burden of household and care-giving roles; by allowing extra allowances, setting up of creches and day care centres for children and the elderly, near the Panchayat Bhavans.

10. Driving skills, provision of a Scooty & vehicle allowance and self-defence training skills, also need to be ensured for WERs to make them independent in mobility and fearless in public participation

11. Formation of Associations of WERs at Block, District, State and National Levels to be promoted for peer learning and confidence building besides experience sharing.

12. Dedicated streaming of success stories of WERs needs to be showcased through TV, radio, social media and newspapers for spreading their good work, practices to inspire others.

13. Consolidation of women power unleashed by the government at the local level needs to be nurtured by promoting the networking of WERs, SHGs and Frontline Women Functionaries in all Panchayats.

14. Exposure to skill sets for becoming better political leaders at grassroots levels with focus on ensuring giving effective governance to the rural population has to be promoted and this exposure could start from the children from upper primary and senior secondary school education and this may make them aspire for becoming effective leaders in local governments. To achieve this goal, the school curricula need to be revised and forums like the Bal/Balika Sabhas and Mock Panchayat Sessions

need to be promoted; interaction with Panchayats, ERs and WERs can be thought of.

15.   Legal Literacy needs to be promoted in Mahila Sabhas and Gram Sabhas including putting increased focus on promoting values of gender equality as a human right as well building a commitment to enforce all gender laws in Panchayats.

Chapter - 5

Strategies: Women's Empowerment and Elimination of Proxy Participation

5.1 Introduction

As a result of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 that reserved one-third of electoral seats in the Panchayats for women and with 21 States & 2 UTs increasing this to 50% India surely is unleashing the untapped potential of women's participation in improving governance, transparency and accountability of the local self-governments. This effort has resulted in India having over 15 lakh WERs manning the political establishment like no other countries in the world in terms of scale and size. Today, nearly 46.6% of all Elected Representatives in PRIs are women and these WERs are shaping the future contours of local government functioning and governance. It is steering the development agenda of Panchayats towards human development, gender development and localising the Sustainable Development Goals. In other words, the responsibilities of development at the bottom of the pyramid level began to be passed in 1992 and the process is proceeding unabated. In fact, addressing the issue of Pradhan Pati is a step in that direction. It is now becoming universally acknowledged that WERs can ensure good local governance, and localise sustainable development and they alone can deliver gender equity and equality in the long run. This has spurred the Union Government to finally accept Reservation for Women in the Parliament and State Assemblies also, through the Nari Shakti Vandan *Adhiniyam*, 2023 – that will bring forth one-third reservation of seats for Women in the Parliament and the State Legislatures.

Many Countries, including India, have adopted the strategy of gender quotas as a means to overcome historical imbalances and socio-cultural, and economic barriers related to women's political exclusion. Legislated gender quotas are proving to be effective at increasing women's political representation. As of January 2023, 88 Countries have introduced legislated gender quotas for local elections. India climbed 8 places in the 2023 Global Gender Gap Report- ranking 127 - when the inclusion of women in local governance was added as a new indicator[85]. Only 18 out of the 146 countries, reported in

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85   World Economic Forum. 2023."Global Gender Gap Report". June, 2023. Weblink"https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2023/

the 2023 Global Gender Gap Report, had achieved over 40% representation of women in local governance, whereas, India has attained over 45% and this ranks among the highest participation of women in local governance, ahead of Global Northern countries like Germany (30.3%), and the UK (35.3%) and Global South Countries like Brazil (15.7%), Indonesia (15.7%) and China (28.1%). The inclusion of Sub-goal 5.5 in the SDGs emphasizes the importance of women's leadership in the governance structures for preserving democracy and helping achieve the SDGs, by creating more equitable and responsive local communities and bridging the gender gaps in development[86].

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment sought to end the entrenched male dominated political structures (PRIs) in rural areas. Gender Indicators of development show a marked improvement in the 30 years as an aftermath of 73rd Amendment in the Constitution of India. The literacy rate of rural women in 1992-93 was 34% compared to 65.9% in 2019-21 (NFHS Data), the Total Fertility Rate of rural women was 3.7 children per woman in 1992-93, reducing to 2.1 in 2019-21[87]. The median age of marriage for women has improved from 16.2 years in 1992-93 to 19.2 years in 2019-21[88]. The impact is also evidenced in improved delivery of public services of health, education, livelihoods in rural areas and weakening of gender stereotypes about women's abilities to lead in Women-headed Panchayats - with numerous success stories compiled by NIRD&PR, UNFPA, PRIA, The Hunger Project, Institute of Social Sciences, CHETNA, Mahila Chetna Manch, UNDP and UN Women and most of all-by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India. These compendiums of Success Stories of Women Leaders of Panchayats can be perused from the websites/repositories of documented reports of the organisations cited. These success stories showcase the progressive enhancement in women's political agency and their engagement with working of Panchayats becoming more gender-responsive, women and girl-friendly; with the added stimulus of MoPR, GoI's push for Localizing the SDGs in a Mission Mode through Thematic GPDPs from 2022-23 onwards, subsuming the SDGs into 9 Critical Themes for Action; wherein, Theme-9 is about creating Women-Friendly Villages and Panchayats. Women Panchayat Leaders are emerging as instrumental drivers of good local governance and gender transformative social change by helping improve the sex ratio, school enrolment and retention of girls, reducing open defecation, improving sanitation, and access to safe water for rural households, enhancing economic empowerment of women through SHGs and skill training, removing patriarchal gender discriminatory harmful practices like - 'purdah', son-preference, child marriage, alcoholism and related gender-based violence and other social practices like-stigmatizing widows and single women etc.

86 World Economic Forum. 2023."Global Gender Gap Report". June, 2023. Weblink"https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2023/

87 Ministry of Health & Family Welfare, GoI. 2021."National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) 2019-21). Weblink:https://mohfw.gov.in/sites/default/files/NFHS-5_Phase-II_0.pdf

88 ibid

Despite the positive impacts of women's leadership in Panchayats, challenges remain, which impede women's empowerment as Panchayat leaders. In the main, they include rotational reservation and limited tenure of 5 years, gender biases of bureaucracy in PRIs who tend to engage more comfortably with spouses of women elected leaders, thus, encouraging proxy participation. WERs show relatively lower economic status compared to their male counterparts, besides lower educational exposure and experience in political leadership and digital illiteracy. The latter proves to be a greater handicap for WERs where increasingly the work of Panchayats is to be reported online on the portals of MoPR, MoRD and other Ministries and monitoring systems of Panchayats are all data-driven and digitised.

We have analysed the available literature and research materials on the subject and these are indicated at the appropriate place. We have also taken into account the interactions of the Advisory Committee with fourteen State Governments including intensive interactions with WERs during field visits. The detailed report of these Workshops and Field Visits are embodied in the Base Report (attached with this report) prepared by a group of officials and subject matter specialists.

Based on our detailed study, this chapter examines various strategies that are hitherto adopted and possible newer strategies which can be thought of, to address and mitigate the Sarpanch Pati phenomenon, besides ensuring that women ERs in leadership roles can fully exercise their authority and contribute meaningfully to nation and community building.

5.2 Strategies to Combat the Sarpanch Pati Phenomenon

➢ **Capacity Building and Training:** These trainings aim to build women leaders' perspectives on gender (social structures perpetuating gender as a construct, how gender manifests in different domains), political knowledge (understanding of the Constitution, rules and technical items for budgeting, approval process etc.), and skills (ability to facilitate resource mapping efforts and use it for planning).

Objectives:

❖ Capacity building of WERs with a special component on women leadership at local bodies levels would help better understand the core features of decentralisation, planning and budgeting, Village Poverty Reduction Plan (VPRP) and GPDP interventions, especially from gender perspective including that of girl child.

❖ Develop Master Trainers to train WERs and institutionalise, adopting models based on cascading effect of training, on overarching theme of gender and decentralisation/ RLBs/accountable and transparent local self govt. institutions

and issues. These Master Trainers, if not available locally on a continued basis, can be developed from a pool retired public representatives/government officials living in/around the Panchayats. The partnerships with local businesses implementing community projects under the CSR funds can also be built and these plus local chapters of business organisations like the ASSOCHAM, FICCI, CII can be considered.

❖ Ministry of Panchayati Raj has already prepared a matrix localising the SDG goals[89]. The training should enable the WERs to develop their own rudimentary local performance parameters including developing local strategy on how to realise these parameters, individually or collectively. Each Panchayat especially those led by Women Pradhans have immense

Capacity Building Training of WERs

potential to achieve the SDG goals localised for the Panchayats. Only effort required is how to be an effective coordinator of all the interventions being undertaken by the line departments of the Govt. of India and the State Governments. The recent success nationwide property survey programme and distribution of records under the SVAMITVA Scheme of the MoPR[90] is a case in point.

❖ Training on how to optimally use the flow of government funds in the Panchayats can be developed. In fact, a system of rewarding the GPs utilising maximum funds can be developed.

Implementation: The strategy can be implemented through the following steps:

❖ Capacity building of master trainers on gender and decentralisation: The training of master trainers can be conducted on gender and decentralisation which comprises concepts of gender, salient features of decentralisation, gender planning and budgeting. The training would enable them to train women elected representatives. This would lead to the enhancement of information, knowledge and skills of women elected representatives. Modules and materials are to be developed including updation and customisation as per local social requirements for segmented sections like the SCs STs OBCs etc. and these customised training

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89 Ministry of Panchayati Raj, GoI. 2021. "Report on Localization of SDGs through PRIs Vol. II". Weblink: https://panchayat.gov.in/en/document/report-on-localization-of-sdgs-through-pris-vol-ii/
90 See further: https://panchayat.gov.in/en/svamitva/

can be imparted to the elected representatives including women. Kerala's Kerala Institute of Local Administration (KILA) and Karnataka's Abdul Nazeer Sab State Institute of Rural Development and Panchayat Raj (ANSSIRDPR) in Mysuru have good experience in building a system of Master Trainers.

❖ Capacity building of WERs to understand the salient features of decentralisation, planning and budgeting, VPRP and GPDP preparation while adopting the gender mainstreaming perspectives and approaches: The master trainers can be engaged for training women elected representatives through SIRDs and ETCs of different regions. Through this training, information, knowledge and skills of women elected representatives can be further enhanced. Actually, a State and a National level database should be created that can act as Resource Portal to all the Panchayats in the country. In fact, due to the present models of AI like the ChatGPT, Gemini, and Deep Seek coming out pro bono in the public domain, it is time that a low-cost AI tool is developed to collate, compile and process all information available on Panchayat websites, SIRDs, NIPR and RD and other similar institutions including academic institutions. With these interventions, their self-confidence, articulation and negotiation skills with public institutions and officials would be enhanced. The sessions should include gender concepts, integration of gender and decentralisation with focus on planning and budgeting.

❖ Develop parameters for gender-sensitive Panchayats to achieve the SDG goals and support selected Panchayats in different geographies in the state to implement them: Parameters for gender-sensitive Panchayats would be developed along with Panchayats. This would be aligned with the achievement of the SDG goal of gender equality. Protocol can be developed for declaration as gender-sensitive panchayat and technical support can be extended to Panchayats to take up these activities.

Fostering Gender-Inclusive Governance

i. **Integrating Gender Perspective:** Gender perspective needs to be reviewed for integrating the next generation gender issues in the curriculum and modules of NIRD and SIRDs. The officials and staff, the national resource persons, and master trainers should be trained and even the elected representatives should be trained using this curriculum. The SDG goals already converted by the MoPR into achievable goals through GPDP should be taught. The infrastructure of the panchayat should incorporate gender-sensitive features considering the needs of the marginalised communities, women, and children. Gender mainstreaming should be done into the planning and budgeting exercises while approving the scheduled caste component plan, tribal sub-plan, and women component plan of the Panchayats. There should be a mandatory separate earmarking of the budget

for the capacity building of elected representatives for building sensitivity and commitment to gender issues in general, and for the agency enhancement role of the women elected representatives in particular.

ii. **Encouraging Female Participation:** the capacity building and enhancement efforts, both through the government and through new public-private partnerships built for undertaking these measures, there is no doubt that WERs would be able to enhance their voice and agency functions both at individual levels and at collective levels in the panchayat bodies, be it GP or PS or ZP. For this reason, the capacity building should include the development of agency enhancement skills to enhance their newly found political identity, higher sense of self-esteem, increased self-confidence, developing negotiation capacities, especially during oral interactions and all these would enhance their ability and confidence to address the officials, increase participation in meetings, better engage with women citizens, regularly convene Gram Sabha meetings, better address Gram Sabha, gain better knowledge and information on Panchayati Raj, improve skills to participate in Gram Sabha, GP and Subject Committee meetings, regularly participate in the planning exercises for Gram Panchayat development planning and better understand the budgetary processes and resource envelope. The network between the Self-Help group, village organisation, cluster-level federation, and the WERs needs to be set up for fostering feelings of collective solidarity.

Examples of Gender-Responsive Governance can be seen in the following:

➢ **Kudumbashree (Kerala):** A model programme that integrates SHGs into local governance, empowering women to participate actively in Panchayat activities.

➢ **Mission Shakti (Odisha):** Focuses on empowering women's collectives and linking them with governance systems.

➢ **Rajasthan's Gender Forums:** Provides platforms for WERs to collaborate and address gender issues.

The suggestive sessions and modules for the capacity building of the WERs to effectively take their leadership role have been in the related chapters draft report prepared by the subject specialists and is annexed with this report.

Network for women elected representatives

❖ **Strategic Intent:** The WER network would not only improve horizontal learning among the WERs, but would help in institutionalise learning of digital tools; it helps in the dissemination of key messages and lessons learnt from successful interventions and implementation of development programmes

and improvement of governance issues including improving accountability and transparency. Learning lessons through the network helps in improving negotiation skills with related stakeholders. This will strengthen the collective voice of WERs to not only effectively raise concerns at the Block and District levels but would ensure that neglected or ignored voices reach beyond these levels for redressal as and when time and opportunity arises as digital records don't just disappear. The network will help nurture and support the development of local leadership and would impart structured knowledge, enable cross-learning and build feelings of solidarity amongst the WERs.

Promoting Awareness and Support: Some of the strategies for running a successful awareness campaign are:

❖ **Engaging Community and Local Stakeholders** - Engaging community stakeholders, including influential local figures and civil society organisations, can foster an environment of extending support for female Sarpanches.

❖ **Community Dialogues:** Organise community dialogues and meetings where village leaders, local influencers, and elected female Sarpanches can discuss the issue and advocate for building respect and support for women in leadership roles

❖ **Education Workshops at the community and local level** - Organise workshops in villages to educate community members about the legal rights of women Sarpanches and the importance of respecting their authority. Discussions should include issues on gender equality and strategies to address gender-based discrimination and prejudices and their impact of the Sarpanch Pati phenomenon.

❖ **Use of Media as a tool for running the campaign** – Social Media Campaigns: Use social media platforms to share stories, infographics, and videos that educate the public about the challenges faced by female Sarpanches and the importance of respecting their leadership. Create hashtags and encourage discussions to increase visibility. There can be the beginning of creation of a nation, State, District and Block-wise WER groups to share information, experiences and strategies.

❖ **Articles and Reports:** Publish articles, reports, and case studies in newspapers, magazines, and online platforms highlighting the issue and showcasing successful women leaders who have overcome the Sarpanch Pati phenomenon. An online virtual magazine at the District, Block and Panchayat levels can be created to start with.

❖ **Organise Talk Shows and Interviews:** Feature female Sarpanchs and experts in talk shows and interviews can be done to discuss their experiences and the importance of women's leadership in local governance

❖ **Cultural Events**: Use of local theatre and drama performances to depict the challenges faced by female Sarpanches and promoting messages of gender equality and respect for women's leadership.

5.3 Case Studies, learnings, and references from the field that can be shared and replicated

i. Karnataka Learnings - SUGRAMA – Grama Panchayat Chunayitha Mahila Prathinidhigala Sagha is a Federation, developed by the Hunger Project in Karnataka, which mobilises Grama Panchayat WERs towards becoming self-reliant and collective action, empowering women as key change agents, and engages with local government in bringing positive change through collective action and advocacy. Formed in 2010, SUGRAMA completed its first full five-year tenure between 2010 and 2015. Apropos of the elections conducted for Grama Panchayats in 2015, the new body of taluk level and state level federation was constituted with the smooth transfer of powers from the earlier members to the new incumbents in 2016.

➢ **Kerala**- Cap deck- Kila project, endeavours at enhancing the agency role of women have been undertaken. Kerala remains one of the first States to pursue the path of strong local self-government institutions when one sees that in 1953 the first local body elections were held under the provisions of the then Travancore - Cochin Panchayat Act, 1950. The Women's Commission (KSWC) which came into being in 1996 March, found the number of petitions filed regarding crimes against women was definitely on the increase. Therefore, it took the initiative to establish District level Jaagratha Samithies (DJS). To initiate action on issues faced by women there were no effective practical solutions at the local level. For ordinary rural women accessibility to the Women's Commission (WC) and even to the DJS is difficult. Therefore, the need for having a representative body of the KSWC at the local level was felt. Such a representative body was expected to help KSWC to see the problems of women at grassroots.

ii. **Learnings from Madhya Pradesh** - TRIF in collaboration with Stanford University has recently initiated a new intervention that provides monthly training to all local, WERs. This training aims to build women leaders' perspectives on gender (social structures perpetuating gender as a construct, how gender manifests in

different domains), political knowledge (understanding of the Constitution, rules and technical items for budgeting, approval process, etc.), and skills (ability to facilitate resource mapping efforts and use it for planning). The second strategy is to have regular Mahila Sabhas. Mahila Sabha or women-only citizen-representative political forums at the local with aim to strengthen local governance.

5.4   Reporting and Redressal Systems

A system of reporting for proxy leadership should be initiated in the Panchayati Raj department at the block, district, and state levels. It can comprise block panchayat, zilla panchayat presidents, departmental heads, gender specialists, and complaints can be taken up for redressal. Stringent disciplinary action should be initiated and information should be given to respective political parties also for action. Advisories and orders should be issued by respective state governments. Similarly, Internal Committee under the POSH Act could be constituted.

5.5   Role of Civil Society Organisations

Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) can play a critical role in addressing the Sarpanch Pati phenomenon through local and context-based initiatives, advocacy, capacity building, monitoring, community engagement, and research. By leveraging their expertise and grassroots connections, CSOs can and are important stakeholders in empowering female Sarpanches, challenging patriarchal norms, and promoting gender equality in local governance.

CSOs can also support in facilitating the monitoring of the functioning of Panchayats and can also be assigned the role of doing third-party social audits of the Panchayats. The examples include works done by SEWA, The Hunger Project, PRIA (Participatory Research in Asia), C3 (Centre for Catalyzing Change), ANANDI (Area Networking and Development Initiatives), MKSS (Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan), Jagori Rural Charitable Trust. By doing so, they help hold local leaders accountable and encourage the implementation of policies that protect the integrity of democratic processes at the grassroots level. Another important role where CSOs are instrumental is identifying local champions, highlighting the best practices, documenting and publishing the impactful initiatives in local languages so it reaches the mass, promoting peer learning etc.

Some of the Global Women Leadership Forums relevant to India include the following:

5.5.1   **Women Deliver Leadership Programme seeking to** provide training and fostering of platforms for women advocates working in the domain of gender equality and health. Learning from such programmes, there is a felt need to avoid the repetition of old programmes and review study State specific totality of

leadership programmes undertaken so far and after review, the new programmes need to be devised taking into account the AI-based learning management system that are updated on a real-time basis.

5.5.2 International Women's Forum (IWF)[91]: It is a Global forum connecting women leaders, including Indian representatives, to share best practices in leadership. There are regional bodies like the SAARC, ASEAN, BIMSTEC etc. and in partnership with them, India can take create such regional and international forums.

5.5.3 UN Women's Leadership Programmes undertaken under UN Women, UNICEF and other sister UN Organisations can be studied for drawing lessons learnt for developing and strengthening leadership amongst rural women including WERs and based on that some local models applicable to the Panchayats can be developed through partnerships with SIRDs and NIRD and PR. For example, studies of exemplary leadership roles chosen by qualified women, as in Rajasthan and other States can be compiled and shared with the world through the web etc.

State-Level Women Leadership Initiatives

5.5.4 Odisha's Mission Shakti[92] Mahasanghas: Odisha was one of the first States to tap the potential of women's power by launching Mission Shakti and over two decades has been successful in developing their leadership in rural governance.

5.5.5 Rajasthan's Women Sarpanch Collectives are regional platforms where Women Sarpanchs discuss governance challenges, share resources, and collectively advocate for policy changes.

Grassroots Platforms Run by NGOs

5.5.6 The Aga Khan Foundation's Women Leadership Initiative[93]

➢ Works in rural communities to promote women's participation in local governance.

5.5.7 CARE India's Women in Governance Program[94]

➢ Builds leadership capacity among women leaders in Panchayats to promote gender-responsive governance.

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91 See further: https://iwforum.org/contact/
92 See further: https://missionshakti.odisha.gov.in/
93 See further: https://akuwomenleadershipacademy.com
94 See further:https://careindiawelfaretrust.org

Chapter - 6

Recommendations from Workshops and Field Visits

India's empowering Constitutional provision, enacted, over thirty years ago, mandating thirty-three per cent reservation of seats for women in the Rural Local Bodies, or the Panchayats, is universally acknowledged as a momentous event in history. This singular legal step sought to unleash hitherto untapped potential to partner and tap the energy of fifty per cent of India's population and thereby empower, and enable one of the most disadvantaged segments of centuries-old traditional society. This move has made Indian democracy turn truly representational, and it has been deepening democracy at the grassroots level, leading to decentralised governance at the grassroots level like no other interventions introduced before that. The immediate initial induction of thirty-three per cent of women, (i.e.one million) out of nearly three million elected panchayat representatives, somewhat shook the system from its slumber, but the institutional system has slowly stabilised over three decades. The institutional integration of women in the three-tier Panchayats has led to a spillover effect of increasing women's participation in local self-government institutions thereby improving local governance, and initiating, directly and indirectly, the irreversible process of gender mainstreaming in virtually every government-sponsored or stimulated initiative.

The women leadership in the Panchayats has stimulated, and improved local governance not only at the Panchayat levels itself but has improved governance of women-related interventions viz. ICDS, School Education, Health, Micro-Finance (SHGs) etc. However, despite these spectacular achievements, some irritants, in some places more than others, have continued to persist despite ceaseless efforts to address them. One of these is the issue of Pradhan Pati, particularly prevalent at the Gaon Panchayat level. At the PS and ZP levels, this issue is far less prevalent.

As stated, the Advisory Committee interacted with ERs of 14 States and participated in four Regional Workshops and also undertook field visits. The details of these interactions and field visits are available in the Base Report prepared by the members of the Advisory Committee and subject experts and this Report is annexed. In this part, the recommendations from such workshops have been studied to obtain their suggestions; and these are elaborated below.

6.1 Recommendations from Four Regional Workshops in Bhopal, Agartala, Lucknow and Mysuru

Based on the consultation with WERs in the four regional workshops, several suggestions/ recommendations have come up for consideration and most of these basically validate the analysis and conclusions already mentioned in the related chapters. These are elaborated below to strengthen the analysis embodied in other chapters of this report. These suggestions are summarised under related headings and these are:

6.1.1 Training and Capacity Building:

➢ WERs need to be equipped with speedy and focused training for requisite leadership, knowledge & skills involved in the management of the Panchayats.

➢ Active/retired WERs at the State, District, Block, and GP Levels should be empanelled as peer trainers and mentors to create a pool, to inspire/motivate and train all WERs for greater effectiveness in Panchayat Governance.

➢ Gender Sensitisation Training are needed for all Panchayat ERs and officials to make them aware of related gender laws and motivate them to make public places and workplaces safe for women and girls

➢ Crash Training Course for WERs on skilling them to use and upload data of their GP on MoPR, GoI/Government Portals

➢ Training on self-defence should also be part of the training of WERs.

➢ Customised focused training campaigns should be organised for WERs in the beginning of their term, with 6-monthly thematic refreshers and monthly online problem-solving sessions steered/coordinated by District & Block Panchayati Raj Officials.

6.1.2 Gender Sensitisation and Behavioural Change:

➢ Social and behavioural change interventions are desired at the community and family level to overcome restrictive cultural practices through the IEC efforts.

➢ Social and attitudinal change has to be accelerated through multimedia campaigns for gender equality-orientation of the rural community needs to be changed/adapted to women's new roles in society.

➢ Gender stereotyping of roles needs to be changed through gender-transformative education, starting from schools.

➢ Ensure gender equality in roles, responsibilities, and opportunities by educating daughters and sons about gender equality as a human right, from early childhood.

6.1.3 Empowerment of WERs:

➢ Networking mechanisms be it through technology or personal interactions with support groups like SHGs, CBOs, NGOs could be mobilised to motivate WERs for facilitating active leadership role in Panchayats.

➢ Strengthen PRI-CBO-SHG convergence to build support for WERs.

➢ Women Frontline Workers like ASHA, ANM, Anganwadi workers, and women teachers have to align and work as a collective body/team to encourage WERs for increasing active participation in Panchayats.

➢ Collectivisation of WERs, SHGs with rural women voters in the Mahila Sabhas has to be promoted to ensure vigilance against proxy interference of male relatives/spouses of WERs in Panchayat affairs.

➢ Mobility support for WERs needs to be strengthened by training them in driving skills and provision of fuel/vehicle allowances.

➢ Ensuring mobile and internet connectivity for WERs at all times for real-time supervision and training in digital skills should be a priority.

6.1.4 Institutional Support and Policy Measures:

➢ Administration at all levels of PRIs should engage with WERs and not with their proxies (male relatives).

➢ Ban of male interference in acting on behalf of WERs should be imposed and given wide publicity.

➢ Panchayat officials engaging with male relatives of WERs should be subjected to disciplinary proceedings especially when this interaction results in decision making through the WERs.

➢ The Panchayat Members/WERs not attending GP meetings themselves may be disqualified – if they are continuously absent for four GP meetings, their membership could be cancelled.

➢ CEO/CDO in the Zilla Parishad to give a monthly report to the State Commission for Women regarding the number of Women Pradhans affected by proxy participation and steps taken to empower WERs.

6.1.5 Infrastructure and Resources:

➢ Women Sarpanches should be provided transport facilities like a Scooty, with monthly vehicle allowances for their independent functioning and mobility.

> ➤ All Panchayat Bhavans/ Buildings should also have gender-supportive infrastructure like crèches and elderly care centres to reduce the caregiving burden of women leaders in Panchayats.

6.1.6 Educational Reforms:

> ➤ Minimum school-level education should be made mandatory for contesting elections for Panchayat President.

> ➤ Functional literacy and digital literacy should be promoted for WERs not having formal education, within the first quarter of their getting elected.

> ➤ The vacuum of political leadership training needs to be creatively filled, right from Class VI onwards, by introducing local governance and required skill sets subjects in the Civics and Political Science curriculum in upper-primary and senior secondary classes.

> ➤ Students' aspirations have to be built to choose political leadership as a career, especially in local governments.

6.1.7 Legal and Regulatory Framework:

> ➤ On violation of the orders banning male interference in place of WERs, fines and serious penalties should be imposed on offenders.

> ➤ Punitive action should be instituted by making provisions to this effect in State Panchayati Raj Acts to eliminate proxy participation.

6.1.8 Leadership Promotion and Role Models:

> ➤ Celebrate success stories of women leaders who have challenged societal norms and helped progress the agenda of SDG-5 (Gender Equality) with public recognition.

> ➤ Students have to be inspired to become WERs by promoting interactions with successful role models and exposure visits to beacon Panchayats.

6.1.9 Support Systems:

> ➤ Dedicated help desk and helpline numbers should be instituted and publicised at the State, District, and Block levels to provide mentoring and problem-solving support to WERs.

> ➤ Increased honorarium to avail services of house-help and caregiving help, and provision of mobility allowances, should be considered for WERs.

> ➤ The GP Secretary should be mandated to share all official circulars and guidelines with all ERs and WRs to keep them updated.

Chapter - 7

Policy and Programmatic Interventions - Road Ahead

7.1 As we seen so far in our study, the Indian Panchayati Raj System seeks to strengthen and deepen democracy at the grassroots level, by making it more broad-based and representative, by ensuring social, economic and political empowerment of population in general, and of the weaker sections of the society in particular. This is in keeping with the basic philosophy propounded in the Preamble of the Constitution, providing for social, economic and political justice to the people. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 is basically a continuum of that commitment and, as if in compliance of that commitment made at the dawn of the independence, it made two path-breaking provisions embodied in the Constitution:

firstly, ensuring participation of women in PRIs by mandating not less than one-third reservation for women out of total number of seats to be filled by direct election and number of offices of chairpersons of Panchayats (Article 243D)[95]; and

secondly, ensuring involvement of women in decision-making and preparation of plan for development (Article 243G)[96].

Salient issues relating to the empowerment of women have been elaborated in the related chapters, but for the purpose of proper connect with the proposed paths for future progress of the Panchayati Raj System in general, and of EWRs in particular, it would not be out of place to recall the important developments, and these are as under-

> ➢ This one-third reservation in PRIs is provided for women against (i) a total number of seats of Panchayats to be filled by direct election; and (ii) a total number of offices of chairpersons of Panchayats.

> ➢ States/UTs have increased the limit of one-third reservation for women in PRIs -21 States and 2 UTs, have gone even further and have made provisions even to the extent of providing 50% reservation for women in PR system in their respective Panchayati Raj Acts.

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95 Ministry of Law and Justice, GoI. 1992. "The Constitution (Seventy-Third Amendment Act, 1992).
96 *ibid*

➢ Presently, 21 States namely Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Punjab, Rajasthan, Sikkim, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Tripura, Uttarakhand, West Bengal have made provisions in their respective State Panchayati Raj Acts for 50% reservation for women. This extent of reservation in political representation/space is not generally seen even in the most developed countries of the world and this achievement is often missed by most.

➢ Further, not only these 21 States but 2 Union Territories namely 'Lakshadweep' and 'Dadra & Nagar Haveli and Daman & Diu', where the Panchayati Raj system is not that strongly entrenched, even though they have also made provisions in their respective State Panchayati Raj Acts and Regulations for 50% reservation for women in PRIs.

➢ In respect of remaining States and Union Territories, Constitutional provisions, as prescribed in Article 243D, apply as a legal mandate.

➢ State of Bihar was the first (in 2006), and UT of Lakshadweep is the most recent one (in 2022) to make provisions for 50% reservation for women in the PRIs.

➢ Government has been encouraging increased involvement of women in the functioning of Panchayats through active participation in the Gram Sabha meetings for preparation of GPDPs and implementation of various schemes done by the Panchayats.

➢ The Ministry of Panchayati Raj has also issued advisories to the States to facilitate holding of separate Ward Sabha and Mahila Sabha meetings prior to the mandated Gram Sabha meetings, enhancing the presence and participation of women in Gram/Ward Sabha and Panchayat meetings, in allocation of Panchayat funds for women centric activities, and in steps for combating the negative practices of women trafficking, female foeticide, child marriage etc. These advisories are available in public domain.

➢ Bihar is the only Indian State that has enacted legislation to provide two consecutive terms for women in Panchayat leadership positions. This initiative aims to strengthen women's leadership at the grassroots level by allowing them to serve as Pradhans (village heads) for two consecutive terms, thereby enhancing their experience and effectiveness in local governance. The related recommendation has, hence, emanated from this enabling empowerment.

7.1.1 Enhanced women reservation, a mandatory political representation right still not available at the Parliament and State Assemblies levels, is provided by most

of proactive States; and, the Constitutional provisions ensuring involvement of women in decision-making and preparation of plan for development (Article 243G) has created and continues to foster a conducive environment for assigning the leadership role for women in the functioning of PRIs. It is not that the issue of Pradhan Pati plagues the entire country, but that it persists in parallel with other protracted issues pertaining to societal, economic and cultural roles and gender-based role segregation often seen in traditional societies. As the States have taken proactive steps in providing enhanced reservations for women, similarly the States have to again take several steps to ensure effective leadership roles for women in PRIs for their capacity building/enhancement, and the creation of opportunities for fostering leadership role by women ERs. And this is a continuous effort and a lot is being done as our study and interactions with ERs of 14 States and field visits have also shown.

Despite the increased number of women participating in the PRIs due to reservations including protracted provisions and practices for imparting capacity-building training, the leadership quality of women, to function as people's elected representatives at the grassroots remains below expectation in some of the rural pockets. This lack of capacity empowerment, in addition to other causes, is leading towards the persisting practice of proxy participation in the PRIs. As we have seen in other parts of the report, the main reason behind this phenomenon is the lack of confidence among women representatives to perform their roles as public leaders at the grassroots.

7.1.2 Strengthening Role of SHGs and CBOs in Building Women's Leadership

Though originally micro finance initiative such as the SHGs were not primarily driven by the motivation to create women leaders at the local community levels; their basic aim was to foster financial inclusion, much before the Jandhan initiative kicked the ground running, and to promote local businesses, SHG programme has also led to some welcome socio-cultural developments as by-products. It has enabled women to change their mindset from domestic responsibilities to step outside their private spaces to take steps to supplement their family incomes, raising their standards of living. As a result, it is increasingly being observed that women involved in/ with Self-Help Groups (SHGs) are not only financially and socially empowered but increasingly show a trend of accepting heightened leadership roles in raising their voices and addressing women's development concerns. Their coming together as a small collective, especially in the interior/ rural areas, has contributed immensely to unparalleled confidence building and realisation of the power of women collective/s.

The main objective of community-based organisations (CBOs) is community development, through inclusive community involvement involving women to help in accessing, mobilising and controlling resources and addressing social issues. Going by the commonality in their mindset, the SHGs and CBOs could play a pivotal role in providing a platform for women to develop leadership and public interaction skills, learn to manage finances and become socio-economically and politically empowered.

Maybe this is the time for imparting training, through new Learning Management Systems, to motivate SHG women to go for electoral politics at the Panchayat levels especially when their work is acknowledged and admired by the local rural society. Research involving women from SHGs across four Indian States revealed that many have contested and won positions in Gram Panchayats, leveraging the solidarity and support from their groups[97].

In the Sons Panchayat, numerous SHG representatives have successfully contested Gram Panchayat elections and are now playing pivotal roles as elected officials. This convergence has led to improved communication within the village and increased women's participation in Gram Sabha meetings[98].

SHGs and CBOs have been instrumental in empowering women socio-economically and politically, at the grassroots level.

7.1.2.1 Economic Empowerment: The microfinancing initiatives of SHGs have helped rural women to undertake different economic activities including starting their own small businesses and maintaining the finances of their organisations quite effectively. Through the management of funds and businesses, these SHG women naturally learn to develop leadership skills such as taking responsibilities of independent decision-making, financial management, communication and negotiation paths to motivate the community. Their economic independence has further helped them in their contribution to the household income, thereby reducing reliance on male counterparts at least in the mindset and manners, if not in adding majorly to financial incomes.

7.1.2.2 Social Empowerment: CBOs often engage in activities and outreach interventions that address social issues, such as education, healthcare, and violence against women. Through participation in these organisations, women

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97 Gupta, Ishita, Chakrabarti, Srijita and Parmar, Sugandha Singh. 2022. "Friendships, Networks and Solidarity: Women's Political Participation through Self-Help Group Memberships (Pilot Study)".Centre for Gender and Politics.October,2022. Weblink: https://www.cgapsouthasia.org/_files/ugd/0dea55_ecd090825f9c4f688520f85e17803233.pdf?index=true

98 Majid, Elyas, Nath Seemna and Unnayan, Shramajivi."Convergence of Women Self-Help Groups and Gram Panchayat". Weblink" https://nirdpr.org.in/nird_docs/casestudies/shramjivi/shramjivi4.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com

gain a platform to voice their concerns, advocate for their rights, and mobilise their communities towards social change. Leadership within these groups gets enhanced by organising events, managing projects, and representing the group in wider forums; these add tremendously to self-confidence and self-belief amongst the new women entrants.

7.1.2.3 Political Empowerment: SHGs and CBOs both serve as a platform for women to transition to the next level of political empowerment by participating in the governance mechanism of the PRIs. By engaging in community interaction, governance and advocacy initiatives, women build their confidence and networks necessary for becoming ERs. The training provided by SHGs and CBOs grooms rural women in understanding political processes, improve public speaking, and teaching leadership processes and dynamics, thus preparing women for larger leadership roles.

7.1.3   Strategies for Promoting Independent Women Leadership:

In light of detailed examination in various chapters, the following strategies have been found to contribute significantly to strengthening and promoting women's leadership in PRIs, when they forge partnerships with the SHGs and CBOs, particularly in the following issues:

(i)   **Mentorship** - this was validated during the field visits in Jharkhand where mentorship by the previous GP Mukhiya greatly helped the woman Pradhan and this was also noticed in other States

(ii)   **Capacity Building and Training**- this has been discussed in detail in relevant paragraphs

(iii)   **Creating Inclusive Spaces taking into account specific requirements of WERs.**

(iv)   **Leveraging Technology:** Example: use of drones for project management like the national SVAMITVA Programme; and use of digital platforms for payments for better accountability in financial management at the GP levels particularly.

(v)   Building Networks with other stakeholders through networks created through social media and portals like the IDRN etc.

(vi)   Participation in Mahila/Gram Sabhas including video recording and putting minutes and decisions in public domain like in West Bengal.

(vii)   Inclusive Development Plan: GPDP is better prepared when the CBOs/

NGOs and agencies in the government promoted programmes where women work viz. ASHA, SHGs and Anganwadis are integrated in the GP plan preparation.

7.2 Outline for Information, Education and Communication (IEC) Campaigns

The enactment of the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act in 1992 acted as a stimulus for pushing increased participation of women in local self-governance. However, despite the reservation, there still persist systematic gender inequalities in accessing the full potential of available political decision-making power by women at the panchayat levels. This is because the existing socio-cultural norms of patriarchy, lack of awareness, and inadequate support systems for women, at home and workplaces, often hinder their effective participation in political decision-making and on-field implementation. Proxy participation in local self-governance weakens the credibility of democratic institutions, undermines the accountability of elected representatives, and perpetuates gender inequality. This is leading to local governance failure in addressing the gender-based issues related to education, health, violence and economic empowerment of girl children and women at the grassroots. Therefore, understanding and addressing proxy practices is essential for creating a more inclusive and gender-sensitive governance system at the grassroots. The issue of proxy participation by male relatives of WERs can be addressed by mainstreaming Gender Responsive Governance in all interventions undertaken under the auspices of the PRIs.

Gender Responsive Governance (GRG) focuses on the dynamism of governance with emphasis on the State–women interface, through addressing specific gender concerns that respond to the women and their communities at different levels of governance and across various governance functions[99]. This approach goes beyond simply increasing the number of women in political positions and requires efforts to create an enabling environment for women to actively participate and influence the decision-making process that affects their lives and communities. Moreover, GRG breaks down the systemic barriers perpetuating gender inequality, paving the way for a more just and equitable society. Therefore, to break the shackles of proxy participation by their male family members and empower independent leadership at the grassroots, GRG become quintessential in the PRIs. However, GRG does not come to action automatically. It requires a systematic and methodical approach to awareness rising among different stakeholders of PRIs on GRG. The examples of GRG include issues as under:

➢ **Mentorship Programmes through** Pairing newly elected women leaders with experienced mentors (including senior women leaders or civil society members

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99   ICRW and UN Women. "Concept Paper: Gender Responsive Governance". Weblink:https://www.feministpolicyindia.org/documents/resources/Concept-Paper-Gender-Responsive-Governance%20pdf.pdf

or NGOs or retired women officials) to guide them in governance systems operating through the PRIs;

➢ **Gender-Responsive Budgeting (GRB)** involves the allocation of specific funds in Panchayat budgets for programmes benefiting women viz. education, healthcare, nutrition, skill development, and sanitation; and to maintain gender-disaggregated data on local issues like literacy rates, health indicators to help improve access to resources to plan targeted interventions;

➢ **Community Consultations by** Conducting focused group discussions with women to understand their needs and include their inputs in Gram Panchayat Development Plans (GPDPs); Promote women's representation in key decision-making committees, such as those related to health, education, ICDS and resource management.

➢ **Focus on Health and Education by** prioritising issues like maternal health, menstrual hygiene, and nutrition in local development plans and advocate for better implementation of schemes such as ICDS, Janani Suraksha Yojana, and Beti Bachao Beti Padhao etc.

➢ **Combating Gender-Based Violence:** Establish community-level grievance redressal mechanisms for women to report cases of domestic violence or harassment. Involve Panchayat leaders in creating awareness about laws such as the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act and how to access numerous funds provided by the Govt like the Nirbhaya Fund.

➢ **Improving Livelihood Opportunities:** Promote women-centric livelihood programmes, such as skill training and micro-enterprise development, through SHGs and local cooperatives.

➢ **Social Audits:** Conduct social audits to ensure gender-sensitive implementation of development projects and schemes.

➢ **Monitoring Committees:** Form gender monitoring committees to oversee the effectiveness of gender-focused initiatives.

➢ **Incentives for Gender-Responsive Panchayats:** Introduce awards or recognition programmes for Panchayats that excel in implementing gender-responsive governance.

➢ **Digital Inclusion:** Provide digital training to women leaders and ensure they have access to smartphones or computers and if not they may be provided loans on concessional terms to equip them. Use technology to track and monitor the

progress of gender-sensitive schemes.

➢ **E-Governance;** Promote e-governance tools to streamline processes like fund allocation, grievance redressal, and data collection and these ensure inclusivity.

➢ **Legal Awareness:** Educate Panchayat members about gender-related legal frameworks like the Nari Adalats and the MGNREGA provisions for equal wages and maternity entitlements. Conduct gender-sensitization workshops for male Panchayat members to build support for women's leadership.

Local administration in the States/UTs needs to establish an institutionalised mechanism to have an oversight on the work of women representatives to ensure they are able to discharge their functions without any interference from their family/male members of the community. In addition to this, the safety of women representatives must be ensured so that fear of violence does not deter women from contesting local panchayat polls. Government-initiated awareness drives and campaigns at the village level could help change conservative perceptions about women's participation in politics[100].

During interaction with Women ERs and other stakeholders, it was observed that education has a key role in gender sensitivity and GRG. Education not only of the girls but also of the boys in building gender sensitivity is equally important.

7.2.1 Successful IEC campaigns

Information, Education, and Communication (IEC) campaigns play a crucial role in generating awareness and addressing intractable issues such as women's empowerment. IEC through its strategies of information dissemination helps to dismantle the barriers to gender equity in governance, proxy practices, and brings about a behaviour change and mindset that promotes gender-responsive governance.

IEC awareness programs are essential to spread information about women's rights and encourage active participation to overcome proxy practices in the long run. Governments should undertake suitable IEC campaigns through various means. A few successful examples are as under:

➢ Scheme for Adolescent Girls (SAG) envisions a multi-sectoral IEC campaign to fuel behaviours towards better education and nutrition for adolescent girls. Community mobilisation is envisaged through activities like mid-media activities, kala jatthas and street plays. The scheme guidelines mandate key roles to be played by the frontline workers to

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100 Kumar, Sunaina and Ghosh, Ambar Kumar. 2024."Elected Women Representatives in Local Rural Governance in India: Assessing the Impact and Challenges". Observer Research Foundation. Issue No. 425. January, 2024.

spread awareness and encourage positive behaviour change at the community level[101].

➢ Department of Consumer Affairs has been conducting country-wide multimedia awareness campaigns titled "Jago Grahak Jago" and subject-specific disaster management messaging say of earthquakes, cyclones etc. In "Jago Grahak Jago" through simple messages, consumers are made aware of fraudulent practices or problems and the mechanisms to seek redressal. The campaigns have been carried out through print media, TV, radio, cinema theatres, websites, hoardings / unipoles / display boards (at airports, railway stations, bus stands), access cards of religious places/fairs, and boarding passes. Mobile vans, as a pilot programme, have also been used to generate awareness by direct interaction with people in rural areas[102].

➢ Bureau of Energy Efficiency's (BEE) has also successfully launched an effective campaign in raising awareness about energy conservation. People are also made aware of the quality and standard issues of energy-intensive appliances. The media campaign comprising electronic, outdoor and print medium was released through DAVP & NFDC as per policy of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. Jingles like ("Buttton Dabao Bijli Bachao", Ek Leher etc) video/audio spot was telecasted on Doordarshan, TV channels, FM stations and LED/LCD screens at various railway stations, metro stations, trains, buses and other public utility places across the country. The advertisements on energy conservation in Hindi and vernacular languages were also released[103]. Beti Bachao campaigns, Swach Bharat Abhiyan, Mission Shakti of Odisha, Poshan Abhiyaan, Sakhi One Stop Centres (Multi-channel campaigns, including posters, leaflets, and advertisements, to inform women about the availability of OSCs and helplines (181 no.) collaboration with Panchayats and SHGs for community outreach and thousands of women accessed the OSCs for counselling, legal aid, and rehabilitation, Janani Suraksha Yojana (how the issue of dowry deaths was handled through strong laws mandating arrests etc.), Mahila E Haat, Ujjawal Yojana, Stand up India, Make up India campaigns. The IEC campaign to control bursting of crackers led to children shunning bursting of crackers and this led to the parents also abstaining and this led to much reduction of purchase of fire crackers during Diwali.

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101 NITI Aayog, GoI. 2022."Gender Mainstreaming in Governance". Weblink: https://dmeo.gov.in/sites/default/files/2022-06/Thematic_Paper_Gender_Mainstreaming_220622.pdf
102 See further: https://consumeraffairs.nic.in/organisation-and-units/division/publicity
103 See further: https://saathee.beeindia.gov.in/Common/BEEContent?MID=2&SMID=27

Common Features of Successful IEC Campaigns:

1. **Localised Messaging:** Tailoring messages to the cultural and linguistic contexts of communities.

2. **Community Involvement:** Using grassroots networks like SHGs, ASHAs, and Anganwadi Workers to spread awareness. Lessons learnt from the Pulse Polio Campaign can be drawn for involving communities across the entire geography of India.

3. **Multi-Channel Approach:** Combining mass media, social media, and mid-media activities reinforced through Ward Sabha, Gram Sabha, ASHA, Anganwadi and School Management Committee meetings as they facilitate interpersonal communication for maximum reach.

4. **Showcasing Success Stories:** Highlighting role models to inspire and motivate women. These examples are available in the Base Report written by members/subject experts of the Advisory Committee.

5. **Behaviour Change Focus**: Encouraging shifts in attitudes and practices through sustained engagement.

These campaigns demonstrate the power of well-designed IEC initiatives in transforming societal attitudes, enabling women, and driving inclusive development processes and interventions.

7.2.2 Challenges and main issues for the IEC campaigns

During interactions with the WERs, it was observed that the possible constraints are patriarchy, variants of the 'purdah' custom in rural areas, girl child education, gender equality etc. Few WERs stated that during the meetings headed by the Women Sarpanch, on many occasions male members do not give them proper respect. During field interactions, the need for IEC (Information, Education, and Communication) campaigns was stressed to eliminate proxy representation in PRI bodies and ensure genuine women's participation in decision-making at all levels.

Impact and Policy Research Institute (IMPRI) in the report mentioned several challenges in women's participation at the local level: Patriarchy Casting Shadow on Different Sectors, Stereotypical, Lack of Political Education, Corruption and Good Governance[104].

Thus, the IEC campaigns should be focussed on such basic issues in addition to the direct campaigns on proxy practices.

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104 See futher:https://www.impriindia.com/insights/women-politics-patriarchy/

7.2.3 Strategies of IEC Campaign against Proxy Practices

The following strategies may be implemented to address the issue of proxy participation and promote gender-responsive governance at the PRIs:

I.   **Media Campaigns:** Foremost, the audio/ video for the campaigns should be short crisp and direct for ensuring maximum impact. The communication should be in local/vernacular languages including the local dialects.

II.   **Television and Radio:** Short videos, talk shows and interviews with WERs on women's leadership have made direct impact at the grassroots, how to better implement government schemes, and legal provisions which back women's empowerment etc.

III.   **Social media:** Leveraging social media platforms such as X, Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube to share videos, infographics, and testimonials to promote gender-sensitive governance. The influencers with wider reach can be made as partners to spread messages about women's leadership.

IV.   **Sharing inspirational stories of women** making path-breaking contributions to local governance (like some cases seen in field visits while preparing this report).

V.   **Services of well-known creative media agency/ NGO/CBOs** to be sought to better design creative and new/catchy advertisements.

VI.   **Short videos or interviews featuring male role models** who support gender equality/equity.

VII.   **Educational Materials:** Development of pamphlets, brochures, hoardings and posters in local languages outlining the negative impacts of proxy practices and the principles of gender-sensitive governance. Distribution of material in public places such as the Panchayat Office and in public meetings of Mahila/Ward and Gram Sabhas for greater dissemination of information and awareness raising.

VIII.   **Mentorship Programs:** Engage experienced women leaders to mentor and share their experiences with aspiring and current female leaders, especially for first-time WERs and Women Pradhans.

IX.   **Wall Paintings:** Visual communication through wall painting on issues such as violence, education, health, women's leadership, etc. with appropriate captions to reach out to wider rural groups. The walls of the line Ministries can be used for respective messaging- like school walls for girl education, Health for women's role in nutrition, public health and banks for SHGs.

X. **School and College Programmes:** Integrate gender equity/equality and women's leadership issues into the curriculum.

XI. **Slogans:** During interaction with Women ERs and other stakeholders at Lucknow, it was suggested that the women empowerment should be promoted through inspirational slogans, such as:

''अर्थव्यवस्था में भागीदारी बढ़ाओ, महिलाओं को आगे लाओ।''

''जब नारी में है शक्ति सारी, तो क्यों रहे नारी बेचारी।''

''सम्मान, प्रतिष्ठा और प्यार, महिला सशक्तिकरण के आधार।''

Similar slogans in local languages can be promoted by the State Governments.

XII. **Outdoor media:** Outdoor media such as wall-hoardings, banners, kiosks, etc should be adequately placed at the schools, bus stops, hospitals, government office buildings, market places, panchayat buildings and any other relevant public spaces.

XIII. **Community Engagement through Street Plays and Theatre:** Local folklore and language on street plays, puppet shows, and local theatre groups to be used to spread awareness on proxy participation and promote independent women's leadership and its impact on governance and socio-economic development of the area and this would disseminate the information to a larger audience and target group in rural areas.

Innovative ideas like "Your Voice Must Be Heard" should be raised and converged through SHG groups to amplify women's participation and representation. Similar programmes like the one Meri Panchayat Meri Awaz, Your Voice Your Story of UN Women, Gaon Ki Baat by the Pradhan and the Hunger Project, Strengthening Voices of Women in Politics (SWEEP campaign by the ECI), Voice and Accountability Programme of Oxfam India, Hunger Project, Jan Sunwai, Gram Vaani, Mission Saksham, may be considered for local customisation.

XIV. **Gender Resource Centres** should be established to support and empower women by providing resources and guidance. The lessons could be drawn from Gender Resource Centres (GRC) under NRLM, GRC in Gujarat, GRCs under the Hunger Project, Gender and Resource Centres in Odisha, Mahila Shakti Kendras under Ministry of Women and Child Development, NIRDPR's Gender Resource Centres, GRC under Kutumbshree and Rajasthan Justice Resource Centres.

Recommendations for scaling up the GRCs in Panchayats through

➢ **Increased Funding:** Allocate specific resources to create GRCs in all districts.

> **Integration with Panchayati Raj Institutions:** Ensure GRCs work closely with Gram/Ward Sabhas and Gram Panchayats.

> **Digital Platforms:** Establish e-GRCs to provide remote access to training and information for women leaders.

GRCs have proven to be effective tools in empowering women and fostering gender-responsive governance, ensuring their voices are heard at the grassroots level.

XV. **Miking:** Miking could be an effective tool in spreading awareness among the community level on various women-related government schemes.

XVI. **Women's Leadership Forums:** Create platforms/associations/groups for women to discuss issues faced by them in local governance, share their experiences, and advocate for their rights.

XVII. **Establish Monitoring Teams**

> Create Vigilant monitoring teams comprising women organisations, community leaders, government officials, and gender experts to oversee women's participation in local bodies and to ensure gender-sensitive policies are implemented. A nodal officer may be appointed by the executive order of the government and action should be ensured through them.

> Mandatory follow-up procedures should be established to track the progress and resolution of cases involving women's issues. The details of the cases and disposal/pendency positions should be posted in public domain for strengthening oversight role and functions.

> States and districts may also develop their own creative content for maximum impact, customising the contents to the local conditions and cultural context and put these on their websites.

> Efforts may also be made to collaborate with social media influencers, leaders and prominent personalities who are committed to gender related issues.

7.3 Monitoring and Evaluation Mechanisms

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) mechanisms are crucial for ensuring the effectiveness and sustainability of policies, and interventions aimed at promoting gender-sensitive governance and combating proxy practices like the phenomenon of Sarpanch Pati. The following para outlines the key components of the proposed M&E mechanisms:

I.   **Establishment of a Dedicated Monitoring Cell:** A dedicated monitoring cell within the MoPR may be established to oversee the implementation of interventions aimed at promoting independent leadership among WERs. This cell will be responsible for collecting data, tracking progress, and providing timely feedback to relevant stakeholders. Similar cells may be established at the States/ UTs for effective monitoring and evaluation. Going further, effort should be made to locate inspiring leaders at the district level, preferably women, to set up a similar cell and when successful, the experience can be shared with the other districts and other States.

II. **Development of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs):** To ensure consistent and measurable outcomes, a set of KPIs may be developed. These indicators will focus on:

➢   The proportion of WERs actively participating in Panchayat meetings and decision-making processes.

➢   The reduction in reported cases of proxy practices, particularly in the Sarpanch Pati phenomenon as that would help in assessing the extent of the issue.

➢   The effectiveness of capacity-building programs in enhancing the leadership skills of WERs.

➢   The impact of community awareness campaigns on changing societal attitudes towards women in governance.

Panchayat Advancement Index (PAI): The Ministry of Panchayati Raj has introduced the PAI[105] as a multi-domain and multi-sectoral index to evaluate the holistic development and progress of Panchayats. The PAI encompasses 144 local targets and 577 local indicators across nine themes of LSDGs. This framework serves as a baseline for Panchayats to set local targets and action points with measurable indicators in their development plans. The Aspirational Panchayat Development Programme (APDP) in Jammu & Kashmir[106] has identified 100 measurable indicators across nine sectors, including Agriculture & Allied Activities, Health & Nutrition, Education, and others. These KPIs are utilised to assess and promote the development of Panchayats within the region. The Gaon Panchayat Development Plan in Assam[107] includes district-wise trend analysis of

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105 See further: pdi.gov.in

106 Planning Development & Monitoring Department, Government of Jammu & Kashmir. "Aspirational Panchayat Development Programme". Weblink: https://jkplanning.gov.in/pdf/APDP%20Booklet.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com

107 State Institute of Rural Development, Panchayat & Rural Development, Govt. of Assam and UNICEF. 2015."Aamar Gaon Aamar Achoni". Weblink: https://rural.assam.gov.in/sites/default/files/Guideline.14th%20FC%20Government%20of%20Assam.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com

key indicators related to poverty, health, nutrition, education, water, and sanitation. This data aids facilitators and stakeholders in conducting group discussions and preparing comprehensive development plans tailored to the specific needs of each district.

III. **Regular Monitoring and Reporting:** The monitoring cell will help conduct regular assessments, including quarterly and annual reviews, to evaluate the progress of interventions. These assessments will be based on field visits, surveys, and reports from State and District- level PRIs. Findings will be compiled into regular reports, which will be shared with the MoPR, state governments, and other relevant stakeholders.

IV. **Use of Technology for Real-Time Monitoring:** Leveraging technology, a real-time monitoring system will be developed to track the activities and participation of WERs. This system will include mobile applications and online platforms where data can be reported and accessed by the monitoring cell and state-level authorities. This approach will facilitate timely interventions and support where needed.

V. **Third-Party Evaluations:** Independent third-party evaluations could be commissioned periodically to provide an unbiased assessment of the impact and effectiveness of the interventions. These evaluations will focus on both qualitative and quantitative aspects, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the outcomes.

VI. **Feedback Mechanisms and Iterative Learning:** To promote continuous improvement, a feedback mechanism will be established to allow WERs, community members, and other stakeholders to share their experiences and suggestions. This feedback will be used to make necessary adjustments to the interventions and M&E processes, fostering an iterative learning approach.

VII. **Capacity Building for Monitoring Staff:** To effectively implement the M&E mechanisms, targeted capacity-building programmes may be conducted for the staff of the monitoring cell and other relevant stakeholders. These programmes will focus on data collection, analysis, reporting, and the use of technology in monitoring processes.

By implementing these robust M&E mechanisms, it can be ensured that the interventions not only achieve their intended outcomes but also contribute to the long-term empowerment of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions.

Road Ahead: Suggestions

7.4   Based on the research of available literature and extensive consultations with the State Governments and knowledge gained from the interactions of four Regional Workshops involving 14 States, this Committee identified steps to address the issue of eradicating the practice of proxy participation of spouses and other male relatives of WERs and these include:

7.4.1   Policy Interventions and Structural Reform:

➢ The Government could also consider the introduction of gender-exclusive quotas in some Panchayat subject committees, ward-level committees (like Kerala) and important committees/sub-committees of nationwide programmes such as immunisation and ICDS implementation.

➢ One novel initiative could be the institution of an Annual Award for Anti Pradhan Pati Champions. These awards can be given on public functions like Independence Day, Republic Day, State/District Formation Day etc. when the entire State's focus is concentrated on the conduct of such functions.

➢ The State Government can consider declaring one day as a Gender Decision-Making Day wherein women in a particular block, district, or all GPs take all governance decisions.

➢ Nepal's introduction of gender quotas in local elections, ensuring at least two women among five elected members in each ward council (including one Dalit woman), is a model for enhancing women's representation. Their training programmes include modules on governance, budgeting, meeting management, and gender and social inclusion. A similar quota system could be adopted by the States/UTs.

➢ The Government could examine the feasibility of appointing Women's Ombuds-persons (referred to Ombudsman generally) to address grievances and investigate proxy leadership issues, with powers to mediate, issue warnings, and impose minor penalties.

➢ Political parties could motivate WERs by offering tickets for elections in State Legislative Assemblies, or nominations to State Legislative Councils. This will surely accelerate on its own anyway.

➢ Inspired by Maharashtra, public swearing-in of Women Pradhans in Gram Sabha meetings, with formal oath-taking and ceremonial signing of documents,

to emphasise their independence and accountability could be initiated in Gram Panchayats of other States.

➢ Tamil Nadu's Federation of Women Panchayat leaders bring together WERs to share best practices, strategies, and build/consolidate mutual mentorship to tackle male dominance in governance. Similarly, a Federation of Women Panchayat leaders could be created in other States/UTs.

➢ Tamil Nadu's Gender Resource Centres which serve as hubs for leadership training, legal advice, and support networks for women in local governance. They address challenges in gender-based governance. Similar, such a hub could be established at the GP level in other States/UTs.

➢ States/UTs to introduce mandatory workshops for husbands of WERs to educate them on the legal and ethical dimensions of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, highlighting its impact and their supportive role.

➢ States/UTs to establish a mechanism where Women Sarpanches lead with male deputies under a shared responsibility matrix, ensuring decisions are endorsed by the woman leader.

➢ In Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, 30% reservation of women in Panchayat Secretary at GP level have been made. Similar reservations in the Panchayat Secretary post for women in other States/UTs could be adopted and implemented.

7.4.2 Technological Solutions:

➢ Modern technological interventions like Virtual Reality (VR) simulation training could be customised to simulate proxy participation by male relatives. This could help build empathy among male relatives for women leaders.

➢ In areas witnessing severe cases of proxy leadership, an anonymous grievance portal can be set up. Citizens, officials, NGOs, and CBOs could lodge complaints, report instances, and upload evidence through phones or websites, operating like crowdsourcing complaints seen on social media platforms.

➢ Platforms integrating AI-powered query-driven replies to provide real-time legal and governance guidance to WERs in vernacular languages, addressing their queries privately could reinforce women's knowledge of their rights and responsibilities.

➢ A mobile application or platform that tracks and digitally stores GP decisions, incorporates community inputs and increases transparency. Rajasthan's example of Pradhans' digitally signing attendance could be expanded.

- ➢ WhatsApp Groups of WERs could be created and linked with officials of Panchayats and Block Officials to help solve the day-to-day problems faced on the job as Women Panchayat Leaders.

- ➢ MoPR's Panchayat NIRNAY Portal serves as a platform for citizens allowing them to track elected Pradhans' participation in meetings and decisions, fostering public accountability and discouraging proxy leadership.

- ➢ Introducing mandatory gender audits for GPs with partnerships from Women's Commissions, CBOs, NGOs, and women's rights groups.

- ➢ Andhra Pradesh's collaboration with the Centre for Good Governance (CGG) to design leadership programmes using digital governance tools and training modules is a fine intervention. A similar collaboration between State Panchayati Raj Departments and such centres could be undertaken for digital training modules and tools.

- ➢ Expanding eGram Swaraj with features to track decisions, upload project updates, and crowdsource community inputs, enhancing public accountability.

- ➢ Broadcasting sessions through community radio, radio channels, TV programmes, YouTube channels with experienced female Pradhans, allowing WERs to seek guidance through live questions.

7.4.3 Capacity Building and Training Initiatives:

- ➢ Leadership training for newly elected WERs should be made mandatory. Examples include Hunger Project Leadership Training Workshops that combine public administration, public speaking, law, governance, and financial management training with field visits.

  - ❖ Continuous and mandatory training should be offered in vernacular languages and employ a continuum approach rather than one-off sessions. In other words, customised Learning Management Systems should be developed.

  - ❖ Offline learning options should be included to allow Women Sarpanches to learn in private environments without neglecting traditional roles.

  - ❖ Partnerships between Institutions such IIMs and IITs/NITs and State Institutes of Rural Development (SIRD) and Panchayati Raj Training are already taking place to design and implement such programmes.

- ➢ Relevant international training programmes for WERs in countries like Rwanda, Mexico, and Uganda should be studied and adapted to the Indian context.

Incentivising participation, as done in some states for civil servants, can increase uptake.

➢ India's academic institutions, such as IIMs and IITs, are collaborating with State Institutes and the University Grants Commission to utilise infrastructure and expertise for training during long breaks. These partnerships could enhance the accessibility and quality of training.

➢ Kenya Women's Parliamentary Association offers training with certification, while Mexico, Rwanda, and Uganda mandate certification for courses on public policy, governance, and budgeting. Similar programmes in India could boost women's confidence. There are numerous notable institutions operating in proximity of most Panchayats and building learning partnerships wouldn't be that difficult.

➢ International development agencies and women Members of the Legislative Assembly/Members of Parliament (MLAs/MPs) could partner to provide leadership training to elected Women Pradhans.

➢ States to further strengthen the conducting of Training Needs Assessments (TNA) to tailor programmes to regional variations. Training topics should include legal education, governance practices, financial management, and public speaking skills.

➢ Joint training camps for WERs and their husbands could be conducted to educate them on legal frameworks, governance, and the liabilities of proxy participation.

➢ Telangana's Stree Shakti Programme empowers women through skill training, self-employment, and leadership opportunities, with a focus on political participation. Other States/UTs could adopt similar training initiatives in respect to their specific State context in encouraging and promoting women's economic and political empowerment.

7.4.4 Mentorship and Peer Support Programmes:

➢ Direct mentorship of elected Women Pradhans by the MLAs and MPs of their respective regions could be explored, as this has been successfully implemented in Rwanda.

➢ Dedicated Women-Only Monitoring Councils at District and Block levels, comprising experienced women ERs and retired officials, could oversee women sarpanches' functioning, provide training, and address proxy leadership issues.

➢ Over three decades of women reservations in Panchayats have created a pool of experienced women sarpanches whose potential remains largely untapped. Such resource pool of experienced WERs could be used to provide handholding support to the serving WERs of all three-tiers of PRIs. Examples of such initiatives include Uttarakhand's "Prerna Pradhan" and Haryana's Mahatma Gandhi National Fellowship (MGNF) programme leveraging experienced women leaders to mentor and guide new entrants.

➢ Madhya Pradesh has introduced a mentorship programme where experienced women leaders support newer entrants, focusing on public policy, budget management, and leadership.

➢ Building on initiatives like Uttarakhand's "Prerna Pradhan" and Haryana's MGNF, mentorship programmes could involve experienced women leaders to guide new entrants in governance and leadership.

➢ Launching mentorship programmes where experienced leaders guide new Women Pradhans on governance, digital tools, and independent decision-making, initiated by SEWA in Gujarat can be considered.

➢ Forming regional and district-level networks of elected women leaders to share experiences and engage with stakeholders like NGOs, CBOs, and Women's Commissions on a continuum basis.

➢ Peer Review Committees headed by women can be set up to assess the performance of WERs, providing reports for corrective actions like training or administrative measures.

➢ Formation/Association of Women's Federations such as in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu would empower women Panchayat leaders, offering collective platforms for addressing issues and resisting male interference.

➢ Similar to Kerala's formal Women Development Committees, other States could constitute women's committees for tackling health, education, and welfare issues with NGO and CBO support.

➢ District Governance Clinics can be formed to serve as a platform for women officials and ERs to address governance challenges collaboratively, modelled on election help desks.

7.4.5 Community Engagement and Inclusivity:

➢ Mandating conducting Mahila Sabha meetings regularly can overcome hesitations in mixed gatherings and enhance active participation in decision-

making. Synergising women's collective power of frontline women workers working in ICDS SHGs teachers/principals/doctors working or retired, retired MPs MLAs MLCs is a must and is already taking place in few pockets. What is required is to build formal structures in addition to the informal ones operating already.

➢ MoPR directives for Mahila Sabha meetings before each Gram Sabha require stricter enforcement, potentially tying to the release of central funding for healthcare, education, ICDS, and sanitation. MoPR rule mandating holding of Mahila Sabha before each gram sabha and discussing issues of education, health, drinking water, ICDS etc. needs to be taken to the next levels of enforcement.

➢ Institutionalising Mahila Gram Sabhas, as done in Maharashtra, Tripura and Karnataka, as an integral part of Gram Sabha functioning to consolidate gains for women representatives.

➢ Using Folk Traditions through street plays, radio dramas, and village festivals to challenge cultural norms and promote women's leadership in governance.

➢ Inspired by Kudumbashree, Neighbourhood Groups (NHGs) like those in Mission Shakti and Society for Elimination of Rural Poverty (SERP) act as watchdogs, empowering women and discouraging proxy politics.

➢ Organising public swearing-in ceremonies for Women Pradhans to highlight their roles and responsibilities, inspired by Maharashtra.

➢ Andhra Pradesh's Women's Political Empowerment Day publicly celebrates women leaders' contributions, reducing male interference through visibility. Similar initiative could be undertaken by the State Governments to promote women's leadership at the grassroots level.

7.4.6 Gender-Responsive Budgeting:

➢ Panchayats should institutionalise gender-responsive budgets at all three levels, focusing on healthcare, education, and sanitation. Including this as an agenda item in meetings can empower WERs and reinforce their leadership.

➢ Institutionalising gender-responsive budgets in Panchayat meetings to empower WRs in resource allocation and programme management.

7.4.7 Accountability and Oversight Mechanisms:

➢ Mechanisms of Helplines for confidential complaints about proxy leadership, with whistleblower rewards in verified cases.

➢ Women Watchdog Committees at Village level like those under Mahila Samakhya, to monitor and report cases of proxy leadership.

➢ Community-driven platforms to be developed for uploading photos, videos, and updates on GP activities to monitor and deter proxy involvement.

7.4.8 Legal and Enforcement Mechanisms:

➢ Legally binding agreements like a performance bond to be given by the male relatives, preventing interference in governance, with penalties for violations.

➢ States like Haryana and Rajasthan have filed legal cases against Pradhan Patis, reducing male interference through penalties and investigations. Other States/ UTs could also file cases against Pradhan Patis and criminalise such practices.

➢ As implemented in Uttar Pradesh, measures such as fines, penalties, warnings, and disqualification for male relatives' interference in Panchayat affairs could be adopted by the other State/UT governments.

➢ Exemplary penalties should be enforced for proven cases of proxy leadership, deterring male relatives' interference.

➢ Shri. V.K. Bhasin, Former Law Secretary, Govt. of India (Rtd.) in consultation with the Ministry is examining the possibility of drafting a model Act on Prevention and Eradication of Proxy Women's Participation in PRIs.

7.4.9 Recognition, Awards and Motivation:

➢ Media campaigns through radio, TV, and social media, as done by Kudumbashree, to highlight success stories of women overcoming proxy politics.

➢ A National and State-level award recognition system could be instituted to honour Women Panchayat leaders for independent leadership, transparency, and impactful governance. MoPR already has an elaborate system of awarding the Panchayats and leaders. If it already has an award, some additional subject-specific awards like best gender mainstreamed GP/Best Gender Budget/Best Gender Resource Centre etc. can be considered.

➢ National Awards for exceptional women leaders on Republic Day could inspire grassroots leadership and create role models.

➢ States could institute district-level recognitions during functions like Independence and Republic Days.

7.4.10 Examples of Successful Interventions: There are several successful interventions all across the country and some of these are as under:

➢ **Kudumbashree Movement (Kerala):** A pioneering program in women's empowerment and governance, creating a robust network of women leaders.

➢ **Mahalir Thittam (Tamil Nadu):** Mobilising women into SHGs, providing financial and social independence, enabling them to assume leadership roles.

➢ **Swa-Shakti Project:** A World Bank-funded initiative in Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka, empowering women through leadership training and SHG support.

➢ **Public Shaming Campaigns:** Andhra Pradesh and Rajasthan's NGO-led campaigns exposed Pradhan Patis, empowering women to reclaim their role.

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