



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR LEGAL RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

Open Access, Refereed Journal Multi-Disciplinary
Peer Reviewed 6th Edition

IJLRA's Edited Book on Law and
Management ISBN: 978-81-948082-7-5]

VOLUME 3 ISSUE 1

www.ijlra.com

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"VOICES FROM THE GRASSROOTS: WOMEN, POWER & THE INDIAN CONSTITUTION"

AUTHORED BY: PRIYAVARDHINI.M,
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LISTOFABBREVIATIONS

Art	Article
AIR	All India Reporter
CEDAW	Convention on The Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CAA	Constitutional Amendment Act
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
ICESCR	International Covenant on Economic , Social and Cultural Rights
DPSP	Directive Principles of State Policy
CSW	Commission on the status of women
PRI	Panchayat Raj Institution
SC	Supreme Court
SCC	Supreme Court Cases
PESA	Panchayat Extension to the Scheduled Areas
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UN	United Nations

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CHAPTER – 1 INTRODUCTION

"Local self-government is the foundation of democracy, and women must be its builders too." -Mahatma Gandhi

Empowerment holds significant importance in shaping political, social and economic aspects of people from all communities. It is a global phenomenon that has gained prominence in both developed and developing countries over the past few decades. Researchers in the field of Social Science have been actively studying various aspects related to empowerment. Different social groups levels of political engagement are essential for maintaining democracy. Women have historically been denied political rights and kept out of the political process while making up roughly half of the population. However, as democracy has grown around the world, the adult franchise has been made universal, democratic institutions have been established, and power has been decentralised, women have begun to get involved in politics in an effort to at least have a small amount of influence. However, politics is generally regarded as a very competitive industry where women have a difficult time competing with men.¹ The involvement of even a few women in politics brings hope and fulfillment to ordinary women who have faith in female leadership. This trust in women leaders places certain responsibilities on them, including the need to fight for recognition and establish their presence in policy-making and implementation processes.² The situation regarding women worldwide has not remained stagnant and has witnessed transformations in recent years. Since the 1960s, leaders in politics, social reformers, and feminist movements have raised awareness of women's issues on a worldwide scale, especially among academics and decision-makers.

The concept of liberating women from centuries-old hardships and poverty has been taken seriously by development planners and feminist leaders³. In the Indian context, the political participation and empowerment of women have gained significant attention, particularly after the implementation of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Act in 1992. By granting them 33 percent reserves in both rural and urban regions, this revolutionary Act represented a historic start towards the political empowerment of women.

¹ Desai, Neera and Vibhuti Patel, *Indian Women*65(Popular Prakasham, Bombay, 1985).

² Susheela Kaushik, *Women and Panchayati Raj*6(Har-anand Publications, New Delhi, 1996).

³Ranjana Kumari, *Women in Decision Making*.117(Vikas Publishing House, New Delhi, 1992).

It was thought that women's involvement in local politics would open doors for them to participate in higher-level governance. It is anticipated that this grassroots involvement of women in politics will significantly alter their socioeconomic circumstances. In fact, this Amendment Act has influenced almost every aspect of Indian society, permeating the phenomenon of empowerment. The highly established traditional social context still presents obstacles to the political empowerment of women, despite the growing desire for more capable women leaders. Furthermore, the degree of political empowerment for women is usually influenced by the socioeconomic and cultural environment of a nation.

The issue of women's empowerment has gained global attention and is now considered an international priority. The United Nations Charter has highlighted the discrimination faced by women as a matter of universal concern. This illustrates the dedication of the international community to the rights of women, particularly their right to equality with men. The declaration emphasises that men and women should have equal access to all rights and fundamental freedoms without any exclusions. As a result, the protection of women's rights has been greatly aided by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).

The preamble, fundamental rights, fundamental obligations, and directive principles of the Indian constitution all firmly establish the values of gender equality and equal rights. The constitution not only ensures women's equality but also grants the state the authority to support women through affirmative action. Within the democratic framework, policies, plans, and programs have been implemented to promote women's progress in various domains. In recent years, there has been a significant focus on empowering women. The status of women has been acknowledged as the pivotal factor in determining their position, and India has actively participated in multiple international conferences and human rights agreements aimed at ensuring equal rights. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which was approved by the United Nations General Assembly in 1979, is one such important treaty.

The National Commission for Women was established in 1990 to safeguard the rights and legal privileges of women, as required by a parliamentary act. Women's empowerment was emphasised as a key goal of the United Nations International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), which was held in Cairo. To measure women's participation in society, the United Nations

Development Programme (UNDP) created the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM), which considers three important factors: political influence or decision-making, education, and health.

The National Policy for the Empowerment of Women was adopted in 2001, the year the Indian government proclaimed to be the Year of Women's Empowerment. The principal goal of this strategy was to guarantee that women had access to all fundamental freedoms and human rights, both in theory (*de jure*) and in action (*de facto*), on an equal footing with men in all spheres, including those of politics, economics, and society. The goal of the programme was to promote societal structures and civil rights for women by outlawing all types of discrimination against them. It placed a strong emphasis on granting women equal access to healthcare, high-quality education at all levels, career and vocational advice, employment possibilities, equitable pay, occupational health and safety, social security, and public office. Discrimination and all types of violence against women and girls were also emphasised by the policy. The Indian government has launched a number of programmes to assist women in challenging situations and weak, marginalised communities. These programmes include the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), Mahila Shakti Kendras (MSK), Women Helpline Scheme, and One Stop Centre Scheme. They also include the Rashtriya Gramme Swaraj Abhiyan and STEP (assistance to Training and Employment Programme for Women).

The idea of empowerment seems to be a modern idea that was inconceivable two centuries ago, when the idea of democracy and a government created by and for the people was a cause worth fighting and giving one's life for. In the 20th century, significant people like Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and Nelson Mandela led to countless instances of political empowerment in numerous nations around the world. When considered from the perspective of people who are a part of a group that is subject to regulations, empowerment means making an attempt to increase your power and influence.

The idea of giving power where it is weak or insufficient gives rise to the notion of women's empowerment. Empowering women entails providing them with the necessary tools to achieve economic independence, self-reliance, and a positive sense of self-worth, enabling them to tackle challenging situations and actively participate in procedures for deciding decisions.

The National Commission for Women (NCW) and the Ministry of Women and Human Resource Development (MHRD-1985) in India have devoted countless hours to defending the rights and legal privileges of women. The 73rd and 74th amendments to the Indian Constitution were passed in 1993, have granted women certain privileges, such as reservation of seats (33%), providing them with special powers. New panchayat systems are being implemented in India as a part of a larger effort to empower women, particularly in rural areas.

This paper investigates the reservations for women in, 73rd and 74th amendment acts, which aimed to provide representation to previously underrepresented or unrepresented categories in government institutions. It examines how women are involved in city development and local governance as chairpersons and advisors. The study argues that as their formal responsibilities are comparable, there is no difference between men and women serving as mayors, chairpersons, and counsellors. Nevertheless, there are certain areas where women can contribute significantly to the advancement of social development, particularly in relation to women and child development. Furthermore, the paper argues that the prevailing biases against women's governing abilities should be replaced with a positive mindset.

It is not a recent development that women's involvement in local bodies through reservations is being discussed. In reality, even during the nationalist movement, reservations for women and other groups were already being considered as part of the political agenda. Following independence, clauses were added to municipal legislation to allot seats to women, backward classes, Scheduled Castes (SCs), and Scheduled Tribes (STs). Additionally, nomination procedures were put in place to guarantee that these organisations were represented in local bodies. The Balwant Rai Mehta Committee played a significant role by recommending reservations for women in corporations in 1957. Following that, although the exact number varied from state to state, efforts were made to reserve a certain percentage of seats for women in various Panchayat Raj Institutions.

For illustrative, let's consider the case of Andhra Pradesh. Initially, the municipalities Act of 1965 did not include any provision for reservation. However, in 1981, a reservation of 5% was introduced in the municipalities Act, which was subsequently increased to 9% in 1986. The

government of Karnataka made a substantial provision by allocating 25% of local bodies to women. Similar to this, Maharashtra adopted a 30% seat reservation for women in all Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) in 1990. Furthermore, the Kerala government introduced reservations for women in district councils. Afterward, a one-third reservation for women was established by the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments (CAAs). The Government of India suggested a 50% reservation for women in both rural and urban local bodies, building on the knowledge accumulated over two decades.

There hasn't been a considerable increase in the number of female legislators, according to a study of their representation in parliament. The 74th and 73rd constitutional amendments (CAAs) have made it possible for powerful grassroots women leaders to advance to positions of power at the state and federal levels. These CAAs established constitutional provisions for Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) across the country, marking them as revolutionary and transformative legislation. Notably, they added gender-based reservation in addition to reserving one-third of the council's seats for women, extending this principle of reservation to female members of Scheduled tribes (STs) and Scheduled castes (SCs).

The political, social, economic, and health situations of women should be improved together with their independence and self-determination. Additionally, it is essential to achieving sustainable development. All facets of life, including productive and reproductive functions, shared parental duties, and home maintenance, require the active participation and engagement of both men and women. Due to their heavy workloads, lack of authority and influence, and other factors, women all over the world struggle with issues relating to their well-being and health. Women sometimes obtain less formal education than males do in many areas, and their own skills, expertise, and coping techniques are frequently overlooked. Power dynamics that prevent women from leading healthy and fulfilled lives exist at all levels of society, from intimate relationships to the workplace. Policy and programme interventions that increase women's access to stable employment and financial resources, lessen the disproportionate amount of work they do at home, remove legal restrictions on their participation in public life, and increase awareness through successful education and public awareness campaigns are necessary to bring about change. Additionally, elevating women's status improves their ability for decision-making in many areas of life, notably

in relation to sexuality and reproduction. The long-term success of population programmes depends on this in turn. Experience has demonstrated that attempts to advance women's status should be done concurrently with population and development objectives in order to achieve the best outcomes.

CHAPTER –II

HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF WOMEN AND GRASS ROOT LEVEL DEMOCRACY

It briefly outlines the extent and nature of their political participation before independence. This chapter also assesses the position of involvement of women in the political and electoral processes at different levels in the years following independence and their role in the various political institutions. This chapter gives the detailed structure of evolution of grass root level democracy it traces its history from ancient to the contemporary position. It gives a detailed picture that grass root level democracy is not a new idea, it attained its perfection in Constitutional Amendments 73rd and 74th.

CONCEPT OF EMPOWERMENT

The commonly held perception of empowerment aligns closely with the literal definition of the term, which involves granting individuals official or legal authority and the freedom to take action⁴. Given that power and empowerment are inextricably linked, power plays a crucial part in the concept of empowerment. In other words, any understanding of empowerment cannot be dissociated from the concept of power.

In the specific context of women, the term "empowerment" revolves around the concept of power. Although widely used, it is seldom precisely defined. By participating in a variety of political activities, including electoral politics, public life, and non-governmental organisations or movements, women can empower themselves. Gaining control over one's own life and taking part in societal and household decision-making are both aspects of empowerment. According to Karl Marilee, empowerment is a process that entails raising awareness about women's situations, discrimination, and their rights. It involves building capacities and developing skills that lead to increased participation. It encompasses decision-making power, control, and the pursuit of gender

⁴*Cambridge International Dictionary of English*,452(Cambridge University Press, New Delhi, 1995.) .

equality.⁵ Batliwala, on the other hand, believes that the term "empowerment" for women inherently contains the word "power," which refers to control over resources, including economic, human, and intellectual resources. By gaining control over these resources, women are ultimately able to make decisions. Thus, "Gaining control over resources and achieving freedom of choice can be considered as the process of empowerment.

Karl Marilee argues that empowerment is not a final outcome but rather a progressive process that occurs through the development of women.⁶ Within this process, there are five distinct levels of equality that are necessary for achieving empowerment. The first level is focused on welfare, which entails meeting basic needs and providing essential services. The second level involves ensuring equal access to resources, including educational opportunities. The third level emphasizes the importance of raising women's awareness and consciousness, empowering them to take action and bridge gender gaps. The fourth level is characterized by active participation, where women are involved in decision-making alongside men. The fifth degree of equality and empowerment, which gives women the power to decide what happens in their own lives and the lives of their children, is attained through control.

EVOLUTION OF WOMEN IN PRE AND POST INDEPENDENCE

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN VEDIC TIMES

It is clear from ancient Indian history that women and men were treated equally in a variety of spheres of life. Women were educated during the early Vedic period, as documented in texts like the Rig Veda, according to ancient Indian scholars Patanjali and Katyayana. Additionally, the Upanishads mention notable female sages and seers like Gargi and Maitreyi. Research findings confirm that throughout this time, women were recognised, respected, and given rights.

We possess ample historical evidence that elucidates the situation of women during the Vedic era. During that period, women actively and significantly participated in local assemblies (panchayats) and enjoyed considerable economic independence. In every way, they shared the same status as men. According to the writings of early Indian grammarians like Patanjali and Katyayana, women

⁵ Karl, Marilee, *Women and Empowerment-Participation and decision making*, (Zed Books Ltd., London and New Jersey, 1995)

⁶ *ibid*

had access to education throughout the early Vedic era. The Rig Veda's lyrics also imply that women entered marriage at an advanced age and probably had the freedom to decide on the husbands they desired. Scriptures like the Rig Veda and the Upanishads make mention of prominent female sages and seers like Gargi and Maitreyi. We may discover a wealth of evidence to back up these allegations in the literary works of the time.

Prior to the Manusmriti, the prevalence of equality between men and women was more frequent than in any subsequent period. However, the Manusmriti brought about a significant decline in women's power and participation, which continues to have implications in the present day. Women in India generally faced confinement and limitations, despite the fact that some reform movements, like Jainism, permitted them to join the religious order. The custom of child marriages, which is said to have started in the sixth century, added to the difficulties women faced.

MEDIEVAL INDIA AND WOMEN

During the Mughal era, women continued to experience a social status that had been established since the time of the Manusmriti. They were nevertheless regarded as having only second-class citizenship. Unfortunately, during the Middle Ages, Indian women's status in society continued to deteriorate. In Indian social life, customs like Sati (the self-immolation of widows), child marriages, and the ban on widow remarriages became commonplace. Purdah (the isolation of women) became common in Indian society after the Muslim invasion of the Indian subcontinent. The Rajasthani Rajput was known to practice Jauhar, or mass female self-immolation. Devadasis, or temple ladies in India, were victims of sexual exploitation in some areas. Numerous people engaged in polygamy, especially Hindu Kshatriya kings. In addition, many Muslim families kept women confined to designated spaces known as Zenana.

Despite the difficult conditions, a number of women excelled in the realms of politics, writing, education, and religion. Only one woman has ever ruled Delhi, and that was Razia Sultana. The Gond queen Durgavati ruled for fifteen years before she tragically perished in a conflict with Akbar's general Asaf Khan in 1564. In the 1590s, Chand Bibi bravely defended Ahmednagar from the overwhelming Mughal armies commanded by Akbar. Jehangir's wife Nur Jahan was often regarded as the real power behind the Mughal throne because of her tremendous imperial

influence. The Mughal princesses Jahanara and Zebunisa rose to fame as poets and influenced the governing body. Shivaji's mother Jijabai was chosen to serve as the queen regent because of her extraordinary abilities as a warrior and leader. In South India, women assumed leadership responsibilities in governing villages, towns, divisions, as well as crucial leadership positions in managing social and religious institutions.

The Bhakti movements were founded with the intention of elevating women's social position and combating harmful customs. Being a female saint-poet, Mirabai was a significant figure in the Bhakti movement. During this time, other renowned female saint-poets included Akka Mahadevi, Rami Janabai, and Lal Ded. Bhakti sects like Mahanubhav, Varkari, and others were well-known Hindu organisations that promoted gender equality and social justice. The first Sikh Guru, Guru Nanak, taught a message of gender equality in the midst of the Bhakti movement. He promoted the involvement of women in conducting religious gatherings, leading congregational hymn singing (Kirtan or Bhajan), serving on religious administration committees, commanding armies in combat, being granted equal privileges in marriage, and being given equal treatment during Amrit (Baptism). Later Sikh Gurus also advocated against the oppression that women endured.

CHANGING STATUS OF WOMEN

After the end of the Vedic era, the status of women in India started to deteriorate and their subordinate position persisted throughout subsequent eras, further reinforced by men's complete authority over them. In the medieval period, women became entirely reliant on men and were subject to the dominance and control of either their fathers or husbands. Notably, there was a significant shift from freedom to bondage and from honor to disgrace. Customs such as Sati (self-immolation of widows), child marriage, and the prohibition of widow remarriage remained prevalent, even persisting into modern times, as noted by Altaker for a duration of approximately 2000 years, spanning from 200 B.C. to A.D. 1800. Despite being financially supported by their parents, loved by their husbands, and respected by their children, the status of women experienced a continuous decline. As per the observation of 'Neera Desai', women were regarded as entirely inferior to men in terms of ideology, lacking any significance.⁷ In the 19th century, the condition of female education was extremely dismal, with women predominantly being illiterate. It was

⁷ Neera Desai, "Women in Modern India, 74(vora & Co., Publishing Pvt. Ltd., Bombay, 1975)

evident that education was restricted to a limited number of boys, while girls had even fewer opportunities for education.

In India, concerted efforts to improve women's standing started in the 19th century. The British government and numerous social reformers took action to improve the unstable situations that women faced and to advance their welfare. Notably, social reformers like Mahatma Phule, Ranade, Karamdas Mulji, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Rajaram Mohan Roy, and others made considerable attempts to promote women's rights. It is crucial to remember, nevertheless, that the British government did not put any particular policy initiatives into place to directly improve the miserable circumstances or aggressively advance the wellbeing of women.

An important turning point in the history of women in India occurred during the 19th century. This period witnessed various political and social movements that had a positive impact on women's lives. Sir William Bentinck implemented a ban on Sati, while female infanticide was prohibited in 1870. In addition to promoting women's education, Lord Dalhousie established a system of grants for public schools that also made institutions under private ownership eligible for funding. Raja Ram Mohan Roy played a remarkable role in the emancipation of women. He strongly opposed early marriage and the practice of Sati. Roy established the Brahmo Samaj to bring about reform in Hindu society. Keshav Chandra Sen advocated for boys to marry only after reaching the age of 18 and girls to marry after reaching 14. He also spoke out against polygamy and the extravagant expenses associated with weddings. His dedication led to the passage of the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856. Another well-known proponent of women's freedom and empowerment was Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. The Arya Samaj was established by Swami Dayanand Saraswati, who advocated for widow remarriage and opposed child marriage. and polygamy.⁸

The movement for political rights in India was primarily spearheaded by women from aristocratic backgrounds. During the 1857 uprising, these women took a prominent part in the initial campaign for freedom. Notable figures such as Rani Laxmi Bai of Jhansi and Begum Hazrat Mahal of Lucknow demonstrated remarkable leadership and courage during this period. Several institutes run by women were founded throughout the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Sarla Devi

⁸ Goyal Omita, “*Interrogating Women’s leadership and Empowerment*”, 112(Sage Publication, 2014.)

Chowdharani founded the Bharat Stri Mahamandal in 1901, while Mahila Samaj organizations were established in Ahmedabad and Mysore. In 1917, the Women India Association was established. It is important to note that most of these leadership positions were held by women from affluent and upper-class backgrounds.

During the early period, women in various regions played significant roles in the struggle for independence. In Bengal, Sarla Devi and Kumudni Mitter led the way, while Sushila Devi and Har Devi took charge in Punjab. Annie Besant made a profound impact on the ideas of home rule and swaraj. Women revolutionaries also played prominent roles in the fight against foreign rule. Kalpana Dutta and Preetilata Wadke were notable leaders among the revolutionaries. Dr. Poonam Ducose became Travancore's first woman state health minister. In the moderate movement, there were numerous women leaders who made a mark for themselves. Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Sucheta Kriplani, and Vijay Lakshmi Pandit were prominent leaders in the United Province. Anasuya Bai Kale left her mark in the Central Province, whereas Kanak Lata Barua created a name for herself in Assam. In Subhash Chandra Bose's army, Lakshmi Swaminathan held the positions of captain and chief organiser for the Rani Jhansi Regiment.⁹

WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN NATIONAL MOVEMENT

During the 20th century national movement, Gandhiji, a champion of women's rights, tirelessly advocated for women's education, stressing its necessity. He strongly believed that education enhances intellect and empowers individuals to do good. Women, influenced by various factors, began actively participating in the National Movement from the 1920s onward, alongside men. It was widely believed that Gandhi's enormous influence served as the principal inspiration for women from all backgrounds and areas to participate in the independence struggle in a variety of ways. Educated women played an active role in the Congress Party, attending its annual sessions, engaging in deliberations, and holding key positions. In 1917, Sarojini Naidu succeeded Annie Besant as the leader of the Congress Party in 1925.

Under Gandhi's leadership, women's involvement in the National Movement progressively

⁹ Kaul Ranjana and Biswas Brati , “*Women and Empowerment in contemporary India*”86,(Worldview Publicaion, 2016,)

increased as they actively participated in various activities. They left their houses to participate in gatherings, protests, processions, the growth of the Khadi business, the anti-liquor movement, promoting the message of Swadeshi, and more. Prominent women leaders who assumed leadership roles during the nationalist movement included Sarojini Naidu, Durga Bai Deshmukh, Sucheta Kripalani, Swarupa Rani, Parvathi Devi, Hansa Mehta, and others. The Civil Disobedience Movement and Quit India Movement were significant events where women participated on a massive scale. These developments highlighted a crucial aspect—the active involvement of women in pre-independence India's political and social movements.

The independence movement played a significant role in opening up opportunities for Indian women to engage in politics, effectively drawing them out of their traditional familial confines. For women, this movement represented the start of a new age, breaching the long-standing custom of confining their lives to their households and encouraging their active participation in various activities, including politics alongside men. However, there were limited efforts to promote education among women during this period. Following independence, the Indian Constitution demonstrated a strong commitment to women's welfare, along with the welfare of marginalized groups, by incorporating special provisions that mandated the State to take necessary measures for promoting women's education. Educational experts argue that the slow progress in educating girls is the primary reason behind this failure.¹⁰

There have been many women who have made significant contributions to history during the fight for freedom. The contributions of famous leaders like Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant, Aruna Asaf Ali, Tara Rani, Lakshmi Sahgal, and several more are outstanding. The Indian Constitution was largely drafted by women, who also held major positions in the founding assembly. 15 women made significant contributions as members of the Constituent Assembly, among them notable figures like Ammu Swaminathan, Begum Aizaz Rasul, Durgabai Deshmukh, Dakshayani Velayudhan, Kamala Chaudhary, Leela Roy, and more.

WOMEN IN POST INDEPENDENCE ERA

The social reform movement was motivated by significant factors such as the position of women

¹⁰ Gandhi, M.K., *Women and Social Injustice*, 132.

within their families, their level of literacy, and prevalent issues like early marriage and widowhood. The deeply entrenched patriarchal nature of society had long oppressed women. Following the attainment of independence from foreign rule, new values began to emerge, affected by the United Nations and Indian constitutions. From its inception, the Indian constitution acknowledged and affirmed women's right to vote. Many laws were generated for women to attain their rights after Independence.

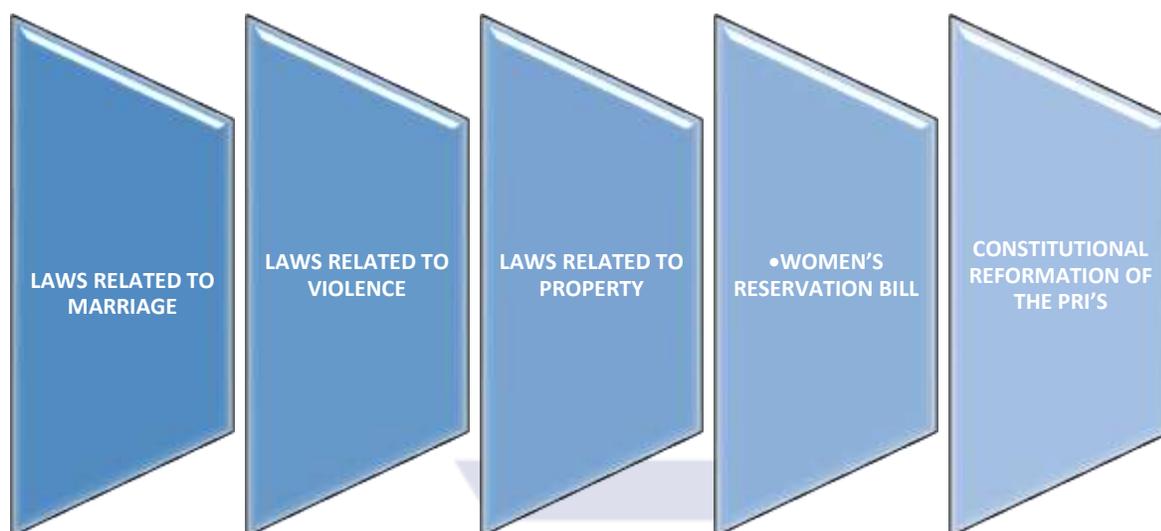
CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS FOR GENDER EQUALITY

The 1950 implementation of the Indian Constitution acted as a trigger for social transformation, aligning with the objectives of the freedom movement. It aimed to address the inequalities endured by Indian women by incorporating various rights under the umbrella of Fundamental Rights. Equality before the law and equal protection under the law are guaranteed by Article 14. Article 15 forbids discrimination on the basis of race, religion, caste, sex, or place of birth and permits the state to make particular measures for women and children. Equal opportunities in public employment are guaranteed by Article 16. Forced labour and human trafficking are prohibited by Article 23. The state is required by Article 39 to implement a policy of equal pay for equal work and to protect both the health and welfare of male and female workers. Article 42 requires the state to offer women maternity leave and just and humane working conditions. The state is urged by Article 44 to work towards a unified civil code. Article 51A, which places a fundamental duty on every citizen to condemn actions that degrade women's dignity¹¹, was added with the 42nd Constitutional Amendment in 1976. In accordance with these constitutional principles, the Indian government and state governments started taking a number of actions to further women's emancipation in all areas of life. In addition, it was acknowledged that women should have the chance to engage in politics and share power with males because doing so would be essential to their development.¹²

¹¹Neera Desai & Usha Thankkar, *Women in Indian Society*,14-15(NBTI, 2001,)

¹²Premlata pujari, Vijaya Kumari Kaushik, *Women power in India*,9-48 (Kanishka Publishers Distributor, 1994)

LEGISLATIONS FOR WOMEN TO ATTAIN THEIR RIGHTS



LAWS RELATED TO MARRIAGE

- The Special Marriage Act of 1954 - This law permits people to get married regardless of their caste or religion if they are over the age of 18 for girls and 21 for guys.
- The Hindu Marriage Act, 1955 – This law sets rules for solemnizing and registering Hindu marriages and regulates marriages between Hindus.
- The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961 – This law makes it illegal to give, accept, or encourage dowries and treats them as serious crimes. It is a criminal offence that is punishable by a fine of Rs 15,000 or the equivalent in dowry and a sentence of less than 5 years in prison.
- The Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act, 1955, permits divorcees, widows, and single women of sound mind to adopt a child. Additionally, maintenance-related issues are covered.
- The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006—Passed on November 1, 2007, this law focuses on child marriage-related issues in order to fill in the legal loopholes left by prior legislation.

LAWS RELATED TO PROPERTY

- The Hindu Succession Act, 1956 – This law ensures that women have the same rights as men in regards to inheritance and property alienation.

- The Equal Remuneration Act of 1976 - This law promotes gender equality in terms of compensation by ensuring that men and women are paid equally for the same work.¹³

LAWS RELATED TO VIOLENCE

- The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act of 1986 is a byproduct of the International Convention on Immoral Traffic, which was established in 1950. Its main goal is to outlaw the illicit trafficking of people for the purpose of sexual exploitation or abuse.
- The Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987 – This law makes it unlawful to glorify or aid in the practise of sati, in which widows self-immolate.
- The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 – This legislation offers complete protection to women against a variety of domestic violence behaviours, such as financial, emotional, verbal, sexual, and physical abuse.
- The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) Act, 2013 – This law was passed to protect women from sexual harassment at work. It lays out guidelines for the prevention, and resolution of complaints involving sexual harassment, including issues relating to or incidental to such instances.

WOMEN'S RESERVATION BILL

The conversation surrounding the women's movement has changed since the 1990s. A significant milestone in Indian democracy occurred on March 9, 2010, with the Rajya Sabha's approval of the Women's Reservation Bill. A historic occasion was remembered by this occurrence. A 33% reservation for women in the Legislative Assemblies and Parliament was suggested under the bill. The Lok Sabha was then presented with the measure for approval. Unfortunately, the bill failed to pass in the Lok Sabha due to a lack of political will and consensus.¹⁴

The post-independence era recognised women as a distinct target group in light of these provisions in the Indian Constitution, which led the government to take the required steps to include women in the process of national development. As a result of these efforts, significant improvements were

¹³*The Gazette of India*, (Ministry of Law and Justice, New Delhi, 14 September, 2005)

¹⁴John. E Mary, *The Politics of Quotas and the Women's Reservation Bill in India* (www.cwds.ac.in/politics, 23 April, 2011.)

observed in the living conditions of women. Nevertheless, despite these improvements, socioeconomic barriers that prevented women from obtaining leadership positions and positions of power meant that their engagement in politics remained below the desired level. Women have been increasingly calling for equal representation in politics and a share of power at all levels as time has gone on. In response to these developments in the 1980s, political empowerment of women became a top priority on the government's development agenda. Consequently, a new strategy was devised, recognizing political empowerment as a crucial means for women's overall liberation. Thus, achieving political empowerment of women took precedence in policy-making, planning, and governance.¹⁵

In order to realise the goal of political empowerment for women, the government has two main goals: short-term and long-term goals. The short-term objective focuses on women's engagement in the ongoing development process, while the long-term objective aims to foster moral strength, self-reliance, and confidence in women, enabling them to initiate their own plans and independently address their challenges. It is emphasized for the government to trust and have confidence in the capabilities of women, providing them with opportunities to contribute, genuinely considering their ideas and perspectives, and effectively channeling their energy and resources to enhance their quality of life¹⁶. It is believed that more development activities should be combined rather than perceived in isolation when it comes to political empowerment of women, including increasing awareness and achieving gender equality in social and economic domains. Promoting a cultural environment that supports these objectives is particularly highlighted as an important prerequisite for the political empowerment of women.¹⁷

CONSTITUTIONAL REFORMATION OF THE PRI'S

BALWANT RAI MEHTA COMMITTEE: 1957

The committee put forth valuable recommendations encompassing several key areas:

- Administrative decentralization to ensure effective implementation of development programs.

¹⁵ Koteswara Rao, M., *Empowerment of Women in India*, 335 (Discovery Publishing House, New Delhi, 2005.)

¹⁶ Singh, U.B., *Empowerment of Women in Urban Administration*, 227-278 (Serial Publications, New Delhi, 2006.)

¹⁷ Singh, J.P., *Indian Democracy and Empowerment of Women*, 617 (The Indian Journal of Public Administration, Oct-Dec. Vol- XLVI, 2006)

- Emphasis on decentralized administration.

The committee highlighted the importance of devolving powers, functions, and responsibilities to elected local bodies. It also pushed for the swift creation of statutory elected bodies and the transfer of resources, authority, and power to these organisations. The committee also recommended that the zila parishad serve as an advisory body, with the samiti level serving as the principal level of decentralisation.

The Balwant Rai Mehta Committee made the following recommendations:

- The establishment of a three-tier panchayati raj system, with a natural link developed by indirect elections, consisting of gram panchayat, panchayat samiti, and zila parishad.
- Panchayat samities and zila parishads would have indirectly elected members, whilst gram panchayats would have had direct elections.
- The zila parishad will serve as an advising, coordinating, and supervisory body, with the panchayat samiti acting as the executive body.
- The Deputy Commissioner/District Collector should preside over the zila parishad.
- The distribution of authority and responsibility among the three layers.
- To allow the PRIs to successfully carry out their duties, adequate resources should be allotted to them.
- Create a framework to make sure there is a meaningful transfer of power in the future.

In 1958, the National Development Council meeting approved the Balwant Rai Mehta committee's proposals. The council refrained from proposing a rigorous and standard structure in favour of letting the states create their own frameworks that were appropriate for their own local circumstances. On October 2, 1959, in Nagpur, Rajasthan, Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru, the country's then-prime minister, officially inaugurated Rajasthan, which had taken the initiative to form PRIs. The second state to enact these reforms was Andhra Pradesh. "Over 217,730 panchayats, covering more than 96% of the 579,000 inhabited villages and 92% of the rural population" developed the PRI organisation in ten years starting in 1959. The establishment of PRIs, as recommended by the committee, provided an institutional framework and made it necessary for political leaders to establish connections at the grassroots level and seek the support of the local elected leadership through the panchayats.

Although the PRIs achieved some success in promoting the democratization of traditional leadership by ensuring the representation of elected members from marginalized groups, particularly women, Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Scheduled Castes (SCs), engagement of general public remained limited. The common people could not fully connect with these institutions, resulting in a widespread suppression of the panchayats. In many states, panchayat elections were repeatedly delayed without any justifiable reasons. Furthermore, these developments provided an opportunity for rural elites and affluent families to consolidate their power. Working in conjunction with local politicians and government officials, these elements created obstacles that had a detrimental impact on the efforts made to uplift the poor and disadvantaged sections of society.

SANTHANAM COMMITTEE: 1965

In 1965, the Government of India appointed a team led by Shri T K Santhanam to examine the issue of resources and finances of PRIs.

- The committee put forth the following recommendations:
- Establishment corporations that finance panchayati raj.
- Consolidation of all state-level grants and subsidies and distribution of funds to all PRI levels.
- Granting panchayats the authority to impose special taxes based on factors such as land revenue and house tax.

Minimizing the burden on the general public by avoiding excessive demands.

Regarding the relevance of panchayati raj finance corporations, the committee emphasized the need to investigate the following aspects:

1. The committee examined the financial resources available to PRIs at all levels.
2. It proposed providing loans and financial aid to grassroots-level institutions to support them in delivering essential services in villages.

Despite the efforts made to develop and strengthen PRIs, the administrative machinery, state legislature, parliament, and local authorities exhibited reluctance in granting additional powers to the panchayats due to vested interests. This was evident with the introduction of the Intensive Agricultural Development Programme (IADP), which bypassed the community development

programmes. The Jaiprakash Narain committee criticized this approach, stating that establishing executive agencies outside the purview of panchayat bodies after accepting PRIs as the responsible agencies for plan execution is highly undemocratic.¹⁸

A department of the ministry of food and agriculture was created out of the ministry of community development. The phrase "community development" was changed to "rural development" in 1971, thus ending the role of the "community" and "panchayat" as agents of growth and transformation.¹⁹

ASHOK MEHTA COMMITTEE: 1978

The committee's report, In 1977, instituted committee was led by Shri Ashok Mehta, to assess the structural and operational aspects of PRIs. The committee classified the institution into three historical phases: (1) a period of decline from 1952 to 1965, (2) a period of stagnation from 1965 to 1969, and (3) a period of deterioration from 1969 to 1977. According to the committee, the institution was never given the opportunity to undertake significant planning or development work. Instead, only small-scale projects were assigned to them, which undermined the objective of channeling all development activities through the block level institution. The committee also identified several major factors contributing to the weakening of PRIs, including a hierarchical system, lack of political determination, delays in holding panchayat elections, superseding of upper-tier PRIs for various reasons, the lack of interest shown by higher-up leaders in politics in bolstering these decentralised institutions. which included 132 recommendations, was released in August 1978. Its main recommendations were as follows:
Restructuring the PRIs from three tiers to two tiers, aiming to incorporate technical expertise and ensure the sustainability of rural development.

- Making the zila parishad the executive body in charge of creating district plans and overseeing district-level planning. To facilitate the essential economic flows, these strategies should analyse data on rural focal points and growth centres. Establishing a decentralized development administration alongside the zila parishad secretariat.
- Granting taxation powers to the PRIs to enable them to generate their own financial resources.

¹⁸A.K Sinha; *Panchayati raj and empowerment of women*;68(2004).

¹⁹L.C Jain, B.V Krishnamurthy and P.M Tripathi; *Grassroots*;44; (1985).

- Conducting routine social audits through a district-level agency and a committee of legislators to avoid the misuse of allocated funds.
- Ensuring the formal participation of political parties at all levels of panchayat elections.
- Separating Nyaya panchayats (judicial bodies) from the development panchayats, presided over by qualified judges.
- The state's the highest election officer, in coordination with the chief election commissioner, planning and managing panchayat elections. Encouragement should be given to voluntary agencies to actively engage in mobilizing rural support to strengthen PRIs.
- The creation of a panchayati raj ministry within the state cabinet is necessary to oversee PRI affairs.
- The committee stressed the importance of ensuring that directly elected representatives hold a significant majority over nominated members in PRIs. Additionally, representation for SCs and STs in panchayat bodies should be based on their respective population sizes.
- Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh embraced the recommendations and implemented new legislation on panchayats, establishing mandal panchayats. However, other states did not prioritize the recommendations and thus neglected their implementation.

G V K RAO COMMITTEE: 1985

The panel, which was created in 1985 to evaluate PRIs and rural development programmes, suggested combining grassroots social and economic development initiatives. It emphasized the importance of providing adequate support to PRIs to enhance their effectiveness as governance organizations, with the panchayat samiti serving as the central coordinating body for integrated rural development programs. The group argued in favour of giving PRIs control over tasks like the design, execution, and monitoring of rural development programmes.

The main proposals put forward by the committee included the following:

- Making the Block Development Officer (BDO) the key player in the rural development process, with the district acting as the basic organisational unit for formulating policies and carrying out programmes.
- Assigning specific planning responsibilities to state-level planning organisations to

promote effective decentralised district planning.

- Creating the position of District Development Commissioner, who will serve as the zila parishad's chief executive officer and be in charge of managing all district-level development initiatives.

Although the Indian government established committees, such as the Dantwala committee in 1984, whose goals were to evaluate the country's current multilevel decentralised planning system and investigate the principles of democratic decentralisation for advancing rural development plans, the GVK Rao committee's recommendations were different from those of those committees. The GVK Rao committee recommended reducing the district collector's duties related to development and emphasised the importance of PRIs in the management of development.²⁰ It advocated extensive support for PRIs, the regularization of elections, efficient decentralized district planning, and the implementation and monitoring of rural development programs.

It also urged the government to address obstacles and grant necessary powers and authority to PRIs so that they can effectively carry out their functions. However, ironically, the recommendations of all the implemented committees, which emphasized the importance of PRIs, were never given serious consideration by the government machinery and political establishment. The reasons for such a dismissive attitude were as follows:

- Politicians and bureaucrats were concerned that empowering PRIs would diminish their own authority.
- Existence of parallel bodies performing similar functions.
- Lack of sufficient financial resources.²¹

Thus, despite having a formal and legally established structure for PRIs, they merely existed as a distorted representation of local government, and the panchayati raj system was in decline.²² The village panchayat had lost its significance and had become a source of frustration, while the gram sabha had become more of a mockery.²³ The bureaucracy, business interests, the professional middle class, the police, and the political elite all conspired to prevent democratic decentralisation,

²⁰ Mathews, J.S Kumar and M.K Gautama; *Indian polity and constitution* 66 (2003).

²¹ Mathews, J.S Kumar and M.K Gautama; *Indian polity and constitution* 76 (2003).

²² Abhijit Datta; *Decentralization and local government reform in India*; (1983).

²³ George Mathew; *Panchayati raj: form legislation to movement* 11(2002).

which led to this difficulties. In light of this situation, the renowned scholar Rajni Kothari remarked that we have witnessed the formation of an impenetrable alliance between urban officials and the rural wealthy, effectively excluding the rural poor from it.²⁴

However, emphasizing the importance of grassroots democracy, Rajiv Gandhi, the former Prime Minister of India, expressed during his speech at the 13th All India Panchayat Parishad on 22nd September 1986 that we cannot achieve through centralized efforts what can be accomplished with widespread and vigorous participation at the grassroots level. He emphasized that if we desire a strong and united India, the work of the panchayats is of utmost significance, as the country cannot make progress without it.

L M SINGHVI COMMITTEE: 1986

A concept paper on the PRIs was to be written by the Singhvi committee. Its findings suggested that the downfall of the PRIs was caused by a lack of conceptual clarity, a lack of political will, and a lack of adequate research, assessment, feedback, and remedial measures. The committee suggested creating "nyaya panchayats" for clusters of villages and emphasised the need for sufficient financial support for PRIs. It saw PRIs as institutions of self-governance that would let people to participate in planning and development and saw the gram sabha as the cornerstone of a decentralised democratic system. The committee strongly advocated that local self-governments be recognised, safeguarded, and preserved in the Indian constitution. In addition, it criticised the politicisation of the PRIs.

The committee recognized the need for state-specific judicial tribunals to address disputes concerning PRI elections, dissolution, and other operational issues. It strongly emphasized the need to rectify irregularities in elections and envisioned PRIs as instruments for promoting unity, secularism, and the incorporation of natural values within society.

In 1988, the Sarkaria Commission, led by Justice R.S. Sarkaria, expressed strong opposition to the proposal of granting constitutional status to PRIs, as recommended in the concept paper by the Singhvi committee. The commission asserted that the authority to enact laws regarding panchayats

²⁴ Jain; *Grass without roots* (1985).

exclusively rested with the states, as specified in Entry 5 of List 2. Therefore, the commission argued against any interference in this matter. It further stated that ensuring uniformity of laws across the entirety of India was crucial, and it suggested the following alternatives in order of preference:

The commission proposed three alternatives for ensuring uniformity of laws regarding PRIs in India. The first alternative involved the enactment of a law by all state legislatures, based on a model bill developed through consensus at the inter-state council, which the commission recommended establishing under Article 263. According to the second option, Parliament could enact a law on this subject in accordance with Article 252(1) with the support of each state legislature. The third alternative proposed a parliamentary law that would be uniformly applicable across India, incorporating provisions similar to Article 172 and 174 of the Constitution.

The commission believed that the first two alternatives would not require any constitutional amendment. For the third option, though, certain components connected to Articles 172 and 174 would have to be taken out of the purview of Entry 5, List 2, and added as a separate item to List 2.²⁵

The panchayati raj system's continued survival has been credited to the support and willingness of the populace, making it extremely relevant. This acceptance stems from the numerous opportunities it offers for fulfilling the aspirations of the masses through decentralization. Within villages, PRIs serve as local governments responsible for planning and implementing development programs. They serve as a valuable source of feedback for state and central planners, enabling them to design development paths aligned with the needs of the people. Additionally, PRIs contribute to maintaining established interpersonal and intergroup relationships.²⁶ Their primary significance lies in their role as political educators and socializers, enlightening and training people about the functioning and effects of the system. Therefore, PRIs are crucial for realizing concepts like political socialization and participation, fostering a healthy participatory political culture in the country. Panchayats are considered the initial and foundational steps of democracy, and as such, they should be earnest and effective. By striving for inclusivity and involving every citizen

²⁵Kesar Singh; *Panchayati Raj in India* (2006).

²⁶Masaaki Fukunaga; *Society, Caste and Factional Politics: Conflict and Continuity in Rural India* (1993).

in the system, the democratic and altruistic nature of the system can be enhanced, resulting in greater efficiency.

By these reformations panchayat raj institutions attained their proper structure in the grass root level.

CHAPTER –III

INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE RELATED TO WOMEN

INTERNATIONAL VIEW ON STATUS OF WOMEN

The global prevalence of women's relative backwardness compared to men is a widespread phenomenon. Women have consistently been regarded as unequal and given only a secondary status in societies worldwide. Throughout history, women have been deprived of their rights due to prevailing social and cultural backwardness. Due to a variety of social and cultural restrictions placed by their families and the persistence of conventional societal structures, they have been prevented from taking part in the decision-making processes of their families. Additionally, numerous restrictions have been placed on their involvement in certain social and cultural activities, as well as their ability to leave their homes for specific purposes. Women have not been treated on an equal footing with men; instead, they have been relegated to performing household chores and confined within the confines of their homes.

Giving women equal rights is necessary for a democratic society to incorporate all societal groups in the decision-making process. This is because judgements made without taking into account the viewpoints of all society groups are unlikely to be egalitarian. Newland stressed the need and necessity of including women in the decision-making process in a 1975 argument.

"Many profound shifts will occur when women hold an equal share of political power, and these changes will go well beyond politics. Barriers that obstruct the growth of unique abilities and limit the pool of people with the skills necessary to meet societal needs will continue to be removed. The growing involvement of women in politics both signals and serves as a catalyst for societal change. The rise of women in politics is a global phenomenon that represents progress towards a more compassionate world. The awareness that any society that consistently excludes half of its

people from the processes of government would be governed in a manner that falls short is what is responsible for this improvement, not the fact that women are fundamentally more compassionate than men.²⁷

In his masterpiece, the Republic, the Greek philosopher Plato argued for perfect parity between men and women. There were a few examples of highly educated women in several civilizations, including China, India, Rome, and Western Europe. However, real efforts to raise the status of women didn't start until the latter half of the 18th century. Since the middle of the 19th century, major advances have been achieved towards establishing equality in areas including education, suffrage, property rights, equal employment opportunities, and the freedom to pursue careers and engage in public life. In general, the industrialization process accelerated the rise of two social movements: one that supported democracy and equality and the other that backed socialism and natural justice. In waves over the course of the 18th and 19th centuries, these philosophies radiated across society.²⁸

In her book "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman," published in 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft maintained that justice, not charity, was the real need of the world. The book looks at how women have fought for their rights in many nations. The women's rights movement underwent a new phase in the 1800s, which led to reforms in several countries. The laws governing marriage had to be changed in England, the right of women to divorce had to be recognised in France, and women had the right to run for office in China. Women's movements took off in a number of nations, including China, Iran, Japan, and Korea in the early 1900s. Women won the right to vote in nations like Austria, Germany, Turkey, and Uruguay within the first 40 years of the 20th century. Campaigns for women's reproductive rights were led concurrently by individuals including Margaret Sanger in the US, Allen Key in Sweden, and Shizue Ishimoto in Japan.²⁹ However, it is necessary to take into account and respect the following three principles in order to pursue women's

²⁷ Nevvland Kathleen, *Women in Politics: A Global Review*, 19-20 (Worldwatch Paper 3. Washington. DC.. December 1975).

²⁸ Vidva.K.C.. *Political Empowerment of Women at the Grassroots.2* (Kanishka Publishers and Distributors, New Delhi, 1997).

²⁹Mahajan. Snnhtra, "*Empowerment of Women. Philosophy. Goals and Achievements'in Yojana*, 5 (Vo! XXXXV, August 290T No. 8).

empowerment.³⁰

- (a) The idea of women and men having the same rights should be established as a fundamental idea. Through thorough policy reforms and forceful affirmative action, it is vital to identify and remove the social, economic, political, and cultural barriers that obstruct the realisation of equal rights.
- (b) Women should be acknowledged as beneficiaries and active participants in society progress. In addition to having inherent value, investing in women's abilities and giving them the freedom to make their own decisions is the most efficient way to promote economic development.
- (c) The gender-sensitive development approach seeks to increase opportunities for both men and women. It shouldn't, however, govern how other cultures and societies make use of these options. The most important factor is making sure that men and women have equal opportunity to exercise their agency in the process of making choices.

However, the obligation for caregiving is predominantly placed on women in almost all countries due to the division of labour based on gender, much of it is done unpaid within the home or as volunteer work within the community. According to the Human Development Report from 1995, women are thought to spend two-thirds of their working time on unpaid work, compared to males who only devote a quarter of their time to such jobs, with a large percentage of these hours going towards caring duties. Particularly in rural parts of impoverished countries, this employment involves physically taxing activities like carrying fuel and water. For instance, women labour an additional 21 hours a week in Nepal compared to men, and a differential of 12 hours exists in India. Girls in Kenya between the ages of 8 and 14 spend five hours longer on housework than males do. For women, these workload differences are a substantial barrier that limit their options and potential³¹.

It's critical to look at women's political standing in order to understand their place in society. Although women's political status and socioeconomic status are related, the political status of women has the power to change the socioeconomic system. The ability of women to vote and hold

³⁰ Ibid, pp. 5-6.

³¹ *The Human Development Report*. (The World Bank Publication.) 1995.

elected office is now largely recognised as being essential to their overall status.³² Women used to be prohibited from taking part in their countries' political processes. The desire for political equality for women started to arise, nonetheless, in the 18th century. Changes in women's status generally occurred before legislative action, with the noteworthy exception of suffrage, in Western Europe and North America, where the idea of gender equality first gained traction.³³

The first country to give women the vote was New Zealand in 1893. Australia and Canada followed in 1908. Before World War I, attempts to give women the vote in Britain had failed. All women over the age of 21 were, however, granted the right to vote by 1928 as a result of the tremendous achievements made by women throughout the war in many different professions. Women have to put up a constant fight in nations like the United States and France to obtain equal political rights. In the US, women won the right to vote in 1920; in France, it happened in 1944. Many Western European nations passed suffrage-related legislation after World War II. Greece, Italy, and France were a part of this. The Weimar Constitution of 1919 granted women in Germany the right to vote. Norway, Denmark, and Switzerland all gave women the vote in 1913, 1915, and 1971, respectively.³⁴

No legislation or agreement shall vary from the idea of women's equality with men, according to the Soviet Union's 1936 Constitution. Countries like Poland, Bulgaria, and Hungary all took the same position. Women are denied the ability to vote in a number of Middle Eastern nations, including Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen. By the late 1960s, however, other Arab republics had given women either partial or full suffrage. Universal suffrage is a legal practise in all of Latin America's states. By the 1960s, women had the right to vote across Africa, with Liberia awarding it in 1947, the Eastern and Western parts of Nigeria in 1960, Uganda in 1958, Botswana and Lesotho in 1966, and Uganda in 1960. Under white dominance and apartheid laws, South Africa denied the ability to vote to both men and women, especially to persons of colour. Women in South Africa did not fully have equal voting rights with males until April 1994.³⁵

³²Vidva.K.C..*Political Empowerment of Women at the Grassroots*.2 (Kanishka Publishers and Distributors. New Delhi. 1997).

³³*The New Encyclopaedia Britannica* .2369(Macropaedia.Encyclopaedia Britannica.Vol. 23. Chicago. 1975).

³⁴Subha. K., *Women in Local Governance*.2 (R3SA Publishers. Jaipur, 1994).

³⁵Vidva. K.C *Political Empowerment of Women at the Grassroots*,46(Kanishka Publishers)

Throughout history, the English Common Law exhibited a lack of respect towards women, and this policy was adopted by Commonwealth countries, leading to the inclusion of discriminatory provisions. Consequently, women in all Commonwealth countries face similar legal constraints stemming from these laws. These nations have united to adopt shared ideals through summits of the heads of state, ministers, and experts. All Commonwealth governments were obligated by the 1971 Singapore Declaration to work towards achieving equal rights for all people, including women. In 1980, the Commonwealth Secretariat established a dedicated unit called the Women and Development Division, aimed at advancing women's development. This division has played a significant role in raising awareness among other specialist divisions about the crucial issues affecting women, which are intertwined with various aspects of development policy.³⁶

About half of the 51 countries that make up the United Nations at the time of its founding in 1945 had given women the right to vote. Political rights were first the UN's main priority because they were seen as the most crucial. The UN Convention on the Political Rights of Women, which was ratified by the General Assembly in 1952, states that "women shall have the right to vote in all elections on equal terms with men, without any discrimination."³⁷

The International Women's Year was established by the UN in 1975, and the Year for the Development of Women was established in 1980. The United Nations designated the years 1975 to 1985 as the Decade for the Development of Women. With the ultimate goal of integrating women into the social, economic, and political realms of activity, the global society sought to focus its efforts and allot resources during this time on tackling the issues encountered by women.³⁸

Nevertheless, notwithstanding everyone's attempts made, the status of women remains unsatisfactory, even in developed countries, not to mention the developing ones. Examining some of the data from a UN report released in honour of International Women's Day makes this clear. Statistics from the UN show that women and children make up 70% of the estimated 1.2 billion people who live in poverty globally. Surprisingly, problems associated with pregnancy and

³⁶ Owen, Margaret. "Women in the Commonwealth: Breaking Legal Barriers" in *People*. 20-21 (Vol. i2. No 4. The Lavenham Press Ltd., England. 1985).

³⁷ Subha, K.. *Women in Local Governance*, 4 (RBSA Publishers, Jaipur. 1994).

³⁸ Subha, K.. *Women in Local Governance*, 4 (RBSA Publishers, Jaipur. 1994).

childbirth claim the lives of one woman every minute, and women are more likely than males to contract HIV. Significant discrepancies are also highlighted in the report, such as the fact that full-time female workers in Japan only make 51% of what full-time male workers make. In addition, only 14% of seats in the US Congress are held by women, and only 1 in 5 managers in Italy are female. These figures underscore the persistent challenges women face in achieving equality and representation across various spheres of society.³⁹

Once more, the investigation identifies a number of startling discrepancies: 62 percent of unpaid household labourers are women, yet only 1% of titled land worldwide is owned by women. Only 9% of judges, 10% of corporation directors, and 10% of top police officer jobs are held by women in the UK; 85 million girls worldwide, compared to 45 million boys, are unable to attend school; only 4% of girls in Chad have access to education; 67 percent of illiterate individuals are women; One in seven Ethiopian women pass away while pregnant or giving birth; 35 percent of lawyers in the US are female, yet just 5 percent of them are partners in legal firms; Only 3% of the chief executives of significant enterprises in the European Union are female. Only a small portion of the brutal realities that still exist on the ground are highlighted in these report excerpts.⁴⁰

The paper emphasises that the Millennium Development Goals connected to lowering infant mortality, raising educational standards, and reducing poverty would remain unachievable without swift action on the condition of women. The research recommends that there be adequate representation of women in all decision-making organisations in order to improve the situation for women. It suggests that at least 30% of legislative seats in every nation be held by women. This measure is proposed as a means to alleviate the challenges faced by women and enhance their participation in shaping policies and strategies.⁴¹

INTERNATIONAL BILL OF RIGHTS

Three important documents make up the International Bill of Human Rights: the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social, and

³⁹Frith. Maxine, *UN: Women Denied Representation* in *The Tribune*,9(Chandigarh. 9 March 2006) .

⁴⁰Frilh. Maxine. "*UN: Women Denied Representation*" in *The Tribune*. 9 (Chandigarh/ 9 March 2006).

⁴¹Frilh. Maxine. "*UN: Women Denied Representation*" in *The Tribune*.9 (Chandigarh/ 9 March 2006).

Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and its two Optional Protocols.

On December 10, 1948, the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which was created as a direct reaction to the Second World War's events. It serves as the first comprehensive statement that specifically defines a list of inherent rights for people of all genders. It is important to note that the UDHR is not a binding treaty, which means that member states are not directly required to abide by it.

Generally, treaties are legally binding for the member states that voluntarily choose to accept and fulfill their obligations. Despite the fact that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) not considered treaty, it has been referenced and utilized in various significant international human rights issues, thus acquiring binding influence through customary international law. Additionally, certain UDHR clauses have been incorporated into or expanded upon by a number of international agreements, regional human rights agreements, national constitutions, and laws.

The United Nations General Assembly formally ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) on December 16, 1966. The inherent rights to economic, social and cultural freedoms are universally protected by this treaty. In essence, it requires that member nations work diligently to ensure that their citizens' rights are realised. These rights include the right to social security, the right to a reasonable standard of life, the right to free education, and the right to healthcare.

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which was ratified by the United Nations General Assembly on December 16, 1966, is an enforceable treaty much like the ICESCR. Protecting the civil and political rights of both men and women is the main goal of the ICCPR, with a focus on defending the freedoms of conscience and religion. But even while the ICCPR is a binding agreement, not all of the rights it protects are thought to be unalienable. The right to be free from slavery and the right to be free from torture are two examples of rights that are considered absolute and are incorporated in the treaty.

CONVENTION ON ALL FORMS OF DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN

On December 18, 1979, the General Assembly formally ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), after more than 30 years of effort by the United States Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). The CSW was committed to monitoring the situation of women and promoting women's rights when it was founded in 1946. CEDAW is crucial because it highlights women's rights within the context of human rights and upholds the equality principle by requiring member states to take the necessary steps to guarantee the full growth and advancement of women. The Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (the Committee) expects member states to submit national reports describing the steps they have taken to uphold CEDAW's rules. During its annual meeting with state representatives, the Committee examines and considers the national reports that member states have submitted regarding the implementation of CEDAW. The Committee also makes broad recommendations to member states on topics related to the abolition of discrimination against women, where appropriate.

- (a) The legal system should integrate the principle of gender equality, removing any discriminatory laws and implementing appropriate legislation to prohibit discrimination against women.
- (b) It is important to establish tribunals and other public institutions that effectively safeguard women against discrimination.
- (c) Efforts should be made to eliminate all gender prejudice in its various manifestations.

According to CEDAW, there are a number of steps that must be taken in order to achieve gender equality, including giving women the same access to family benefits and financial credit as men, ensuring that rural women have adequate living conditions, allowing them to participate in development planning, and ensuring that they have access to healthcare and education. Women should have the same rights as males in regards to marriage, inheritance, and family ties, according to CEDAW.

Moreover, CEDAW emphasises the importance of fostering behavioural and attitudinal change in addition to recognising the negative effects of discrimination on women. This can be done by teaching men and women to get rid of their biases, preconceptions, and discriminatory behaviours.

THE BEIJING DECLARATION AND PLATFORM FOR ACTION

The Fourth World Conference on Women took place in Beijing, China, in September 1995, and participants came from a wide range of nations. The Conference, with the subject "Action for Equality, Development, and Peace," sought to critically assess the improvements in women's lives over the previous ten years and to develop strategies to make sure that women's issues remained high on the global agenda. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action were consequently approved at the Conference on September 15, 1995. Notably, the 189 countries represented at the event unanimously endorsed this proclamation and platform. Despite being separate declarations, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action build on the agreement and advancement made at earlier United Nations conferences and summits. The Nairobi Conference on Women, which took place in Nairobi, Kenya, in 1985 and produced the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women, is particularly important. The Beijing Declaration obligates Conference participants to actively advance the goals of gender equality, development, and peace for women around the world. Additionally, they are required to focus their efforts on overcoming the obstacles and difficulties that stand in the way of the advancement and empowerment of women around the world.

Beyond the Beijing Declaration, the Beijing Platform for Action (BPA) offers a comprehensive implementation plan for the promises and commitments made by Conference participants. The BPA aims to remove any obstacles that prevent women from actively participating in every sphere of public and private life. It is a platform for women's empowerment. This entails making sure that women participate equally and fully in political, social, economic, and cultural decision-making processes. Notably, the BPA seeks to create a basis for shared authority and accountability between men and women, both inside families and in larger national and international societies. It emphasises that for gender equality to be achieved, men and women must work together and form partnerships on a global scale.

When considering women in global politics, notable leaders such as Jacinda Ardern, Angela Merkel, and Sanna Marin come to the forefront. It is crucial to remember that women make up fewer than 25% of legislative members globally. Numerous nations have implemented affirmative actions to consciously increase women's participation and representation in parliaments and

governments in reaction to this underrepresentation. For instance, legislation reserving seats for women in each country's parliament has been passed in the Philippines, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. However, the results of these reservation policies did not necessarily result in substantive women's emancipation. The early death of female candidates occasionally reduced the effectiveness of the reservation policy to some degree.

Legislation to set quotas for women candidates on political party candidate lists has been introduced in many nations, including Argentina, France, and Nepal. On the other side, despite the absence of official quota laws in nations like Sweden, Germany, and South Africa, women are disproportionately represented in both national political parties and the national parliament.

CHAPTER-IV

CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN IN GRASS ROOT LEVEL

It is essential to first empower women in order to empower Town Panchayat Presidents through the existing resources and support. It is important to recognize and address the challenges faced by women representatives in their roles and responsibilities. These challenges can be classified into two categories: those related to their identity as women and those specific to their role as Panchayat representatives. The Rajiv Gandhi Chair for Panchayati Raj Studies at Gandhigram Rural university⁴² organised a special gathering to discuss the problems encountered by women leaders. Efforts are being made to address these problems to the best of our abilities.

The 73rd and 74th Amendment Act's reserve clause was designed to encourage women's considerable involvement in rural and urban rehabilitation. It gave them a chance to demonstrate their talent and their abilities as collaborators in the development process. However, numerous obstacles have been observed in the journey towards women's political empowerment. These obstacles arise from various causes, which are diverse in nature. While there are several underlying factors, a few fundamental causes warrant specific mention.

⁴² G.Palanithurai, *Empowerment of Women: (Problems Faced by Elected Women Representatives - Experience from Tamil Nadu, Gandhigram: Rajiv Gandhi Chair for Panchayati Raj Studies, 2002).*

GENDER DISCRIMINATION

There is still a gap between the rights guaranteed by the constitution and the actual rights enjoyed by women, notwithstanding the constitutional ban on gender discrimination and the promise of political equality between men and women. Despite more than fifty years of independence, with a few exceptions, women have largely been excluded from positions of power and political authority. Feelings of insecurity prevent women leaders from assuming leadership roles at the grassroots level. In practice, their membership is merely symbolic, as they are allegedly not consulted or included in decision-making processes.

Due to their historical dominance in patriarchal societies, men frequently point out that women face a number of obstacles that prevent them from effectively participating in local decision-making, including illiteracy, family responsibilities, poverty, a lack of experience, exposure, awareness, and communication skills. Gender discrepancies can be seen in areas like literacy rates, non-agricultural career prospects, high infant death rates, unfavourable child sex ratios, and rising violence against women. Women are seen as less valuable than males. In India, gender inequality permeates every element of life, affecting everything from education to health to economic possibilities to political engagement and even population dynamics.⁴³

Increased representation of women in Gram Sabhas, Panchayats, and other local bodies especially as a result of reservations does not inevitably signify their independence. Despite these developments, our society continues to reflect the helplessness and humiliation faced by women. The reservation system can be seen as a superficial form of freedom, as women are not truly free to express their opinions or make decisions, whether in personal, domestic, or social matters. Discrimination against women persists in property and asset-related laws, and even government officials exhibit significant bias. In the workplace, in public places, and in everyday life, gender discrimination and harassment are prevalent. From the moment they are born, women continue to experience violence, exploitation, and humiliation, putting their lives in risk.

Women are frequently portrayed as objects in need of mercy and charity, dependent and helpless, rather than being recognized as equal partners in the development process. This demonstrates a

⁴³ 'Grass root problems' 39-46 available, www.ijhssi.org (Volume 10 Issue 8 Ser. I August 2023).

lack of gender awareness and shows that the planned emphasis on gender equality has not been attained. Genuine women's empowerment depends on their qualitative participation, which is impacted by a gender-oriented mindset, attitude, and perspective, rather than just their numerical representation. One needs to have an open mindset or a fresh perspective that is sensitive to these issues in order to accurately assess and appreciate the amount of gender sensitivity in society.

LACK OF EDUCATION AND AWARENESS:

Education and awareness go hand in hand, with education serving as the cornerstone on which awareness is erected. The promotion of women's rights is greatly aided by education. While education is crucial for everyone, women are especially in need of it. Education has a significant impact on families and subsequent generations in addition to giving access to a wide range of opportunities and avenues for personal improvement. Women who have access to education are better equipped to make wise decisions for themselves, their families, and their communities.

Although the benefits of educating girls are evident, there is a prevalent bias among parents in favor of educating their sons. This erroneous perception frequently restricts a girl's function to the home, creating the impression that funding her formal education is a waste of money. It is a popular belief that any benefits from her schooling will pass to her marriage because she will eventually marry into another family. This societal attitude contributes to a higher prevalence of illiteracy among women.⁴⁴

The deprivation of education has long-lasting consequences for women, impeding their social, psychological, economic, and political aspirations. It confines them to a life marked by servitude, poverty, humiliation, and powerlessness. Despite the emancipation of millions of women through the 73rd Amendment, the lack of education forces them to rely on others for decision-making and functioning as representatives.

Women's awareness refers to their acquisition of knowledge and comprehension regarding their significant roles in social, economic, and political domains, as well as their efforts to enhance their status in society. For many years, women were compelled to live in isolation, devoid of a voice,

⁴⁴ Sharma, Sheetal *Educated Women, Empowered Women*, (Yojana, Vol 50, Oct 2006).

and were largely unaware of their rights and responsibilities. Despite the fact that there are now more elected women legislators as a result of reservation rules, it is clear that many of them have little or no knowledge of their responsibilities and authority.

Insufficient knowledge regarding the operations and protocols of the gram sabha and gram panchayat results in women assuming a passive leadership role. Additionally, it prevents them from participating in panchayat activities like meeting planning and interacting with elected officials. Additionally, this lack of awareness increases their reliance on men for administrative tasks and paperwork.

A major obstacle for freshly elected women lawmakers is illiteracy. They are nevertheless permitted to submit nominations even though they are unable to read or write. Once they start working, though, their illiteracy makes them unhappy. Their spouses discourage them from doing so because they are currently in charge of running the Panchayat, despite the fact that they have a strong desire to study and are eager to go through training. When elected women representatives make contact with NGOs, they are given the necessary direction and training by these groups, which enables them to successfully run the institutions on their own.

In the case of Selvarani from Theni District, who has never received formal education, she is subjected to further mistreatment. She is not permitted to sit on a chair in the Panchayat office and is forced to sit on the ground. Additionally, her son alleges that she has been coerced into signing false expenditure statements, and the money has been confiscated by the Panchayat staff.

LACK OF SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT:

Indian women are required to adhere to the established cultural norms and follow the traditions and practises of their society. They are assigned the responsibilities of household chores and raising children, while being excluded from participating in family decision-making processes. Exploring the outside world is often forbidden for them, and they are not granted the freedom to prioritize their own thoughts or the well-being of their children. Even in present times, there are individuals who believe that women should be confined to the domestic sphere, adorned with traditional attire and jewelry, and confined within the confines of their homes. Indian culture places

significant emphasis on preserving a woman's virginity, which further restricts their mobility. This societal practice and attitude towards women contribute to their limited opportunities for growth and education.

The traditional expectations placed on women impose excessive household duties on them, leaving little time for them to consider their own personal freedom. Consequently, their well-being in terms of nutrition, sanitation, healthcare, and education is often neglected. They are treated as all-purpose workers within the household, juggling numerous responsibilities. In conservative societies, men are often opposed to women venturing outside their homes. This distrust can lead to various family issues, including separation and divorce, as men may question women's moral conduct.

The absence of societal empowerment for women also acts as a barrier to their economic empowerment. Rural women work in agriculture and allied fields, such as raising cattle, processing food, caring for pets, and growing fruits and vegetables, in addition to their regular household duties. However, these tasks are often viewed as domestic chores rather than economic contributions to the household. Women are routinely paid less than men in both organised and unorganised sectors where they participate as workers. Compared to the total number of employable women, the percentage of women working in the service sector is noticeably low.

The political leaders have often been held accountable for the inadequate empowerment of the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). While they bear some responsibility for this unsatisfactory situation, the representatives within the PRIs also share equal blame. Despite the existence of progressive laws aimed at the emancipation and empowerment of women, their implementation has yielded limited results. Although there has been a reservation for women at the Panchayat level for more than 20 years, there has not been the same level of advancement in the parliamentary and state legislative procedures.

POLITICAL INTERVENTION

The local organisation of the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M), which had initially backed Fatima Suhra's candidature, interfered with her performance of her duties as the president of Puthige panchayat in Kasargode district, Kerala. Suhra correctly refused to submit to the party's

demands after it formed a subcommittee to manage the panchayat's business. A social boycott against her was subsequently enacted by the local CPI-M chapter in retaliation, which was an especially destructive strategy in the largely Muslim region of Malabar in northern Kerala. Suhra was ultimately forced to step down. She persevered in her dedication to justice in the face of such opposition.

CASTE DISCRIMINATION

In rural areas, the practice of untouchability persists, which creates challenges for Dalit leaders. When a Dalit individual assumes the position of heading the panchayati council and Gram Sabha, it often leads to chaos and disruption. Dalit leaders are not accorded the respect they deserve, and in many villages, the proceedings are still conducted by traditional leaders. During meetings, elected women representatives often find themselves relegated to the role of mere observers. Furthermore, the two-tumbler system, which is common in places where Dalit leaders occupy positions of authority, paralyses them and prevents them from raising crucial issues. The reality is that while having a duty to uphold social fairness, the panchayat frequently fails in this endeavour. Only a small number of political parties actively address the problems and difficulties encountered by Dalits, regularly sending critical reports to the administration.

DALIT WOMEN LEADERS MARGINALISED

Unless they receive direction and support from their political party, Dalit women MPs frequently feel helpless and unheard. They are not given the chance to discuss the problems that Dalits confront, and even if decisions are taken in the panchayat, they are not permitted to carry them out. Dalits are frequently refused access to facilities and services that are necessary. In other places, the traditional panchayat chiefs insist that Dalit women delegates cede their leadership roles to them. Many times, the chosen woman delegate is only allowed to participate in the Gramme Sabha, which is organised and run by the traditional panchayat head. She is compelled to sit in the audience with other Dalit women since she is voiceless and is unable to actively participate in the proceedings.

It is often argued that due to their economic disadvantage, Dalit women hand over their panchayat responsibilities to caste Hindu traditional leaders in order to secure their livelihood. This problem

cannot be denied. However, a closer examination of the situation reveals a deliberate strategy by caste hindu to elect economically disadvantaged Dalit women, as they are more easily manipulated and controlled. Economically successful Dalit women, on the other hand, are less likely to be coopted since they have the means to support themselves.

The caste hindus prevent elected Dalit women presidents from implementing programs specifically aimed at benefiting Dalits, as they themselves also require such programs. Furthermore, the government does not provide these programmes the approval or assistance they need to be implemented in rural areas. The Dalit presidents consequently have a poor reputation inside their own caste and receive little support from both people of Dalits and non-Dalits.

DOMINATION OF CASTE PANCHAYAT

Caste Hindu leaders in panchayats employ a subtle tactic of non-cooperation, rendering the elected Dalit women leaders ineffective and unsuccessful. This tactic is used to portray Dalits, particularly Dalit women, as incapable of managing public institutions. In several instances, this strategy has been implemented successfully. They are allowed to perform specific duties that do not benefit the marginalised communities if the elected Dalit representatives pledge to support the caste Hindus' interests.

The Hindus from the majority caste have cleverly come up with a plan to take over the power from the Dalits, which presents an additional obstacle for the elected female representatives in panchayats. The caste Hindus took advantage of the situation even during the elections in several gramme panchayats by extracting a pledge from the candidates that the Vice-President, especially a male from the caste Hindus, would be chosen. In addition, in order to win the support of the dominant group, the President was under pressure to accept the suggestion that the Vice-President be selected from among Hindus of the caste, specifically a male. The vice president effectively controls the panchayat administration in both cases, victimising the elected women Dalit presidents by pressuring them to comply with their requests. Many times, vice presidents pressure presidents into committing blunders, putting them open to the penalties of Tamil Nadu Panchayat Act Clause 205. Additionally, Dalit youth have frequently brought up the matter in the Gram Sabha that infrastructure amenities are primarily created in communities inhabited by Hindus from the

ruling caste. The Vice-President replies to these worries, placing the existing leader in the Dalit community in a precarious situation.

FAMILY INTERVENTION

IMPLICATIONS OF MICRO POLITICS

Politics, whether at the state or national level, has its own consequences and aspects. Previously, women were limited to the role of voters and did not actively participate in grassroots institutions. However, once these organisations began to provide reserved seats for women, they have started to take part in politics. Prior to this, they had not been involved in politics and therefore lack experience in this field. To familiarize themselves with politics, they require the support of men. However, when seeking support from men, the men make every effort to include women representatives in their own work. As a result, women representatives are now gaining knowledge and experience in the realm of politics.

DOMINATION OF MALE MEMBERS

It is clear from the experiences of the elected women legislators that the male family members have not valued their abilities. These women have been actively participating in meetings and training programmes since being elected, learning important information and developing their abilities. Initially, the male family members accompanied them to offices and public places, posing as helpers. However, over time, the elected women representatives have gained administrative expertise through interaction and training. Despite this, their male family members refuse to recognize that these women, elected to Panchayats, have become capable of managing the institution on their own. It is ironic that the elected women representatives believe they can handle affairs independently without any assistance from male family members, yet they struggle to convey this message to them. Additionally, the interference of male family members in the Panchayat administration presents difficulties for these women legislators. If the male family members refrain from intervening in the administration, troubles caused by other male members would be minimal and insignificant.

MOVEMENTS ARE RESTRICTED

Another difficulty brought up by the women delegates was that the villagers would approach them

at any moment with issues. Despite saying they would be willing to handle such problems at any time, their husbands or other family members forbade them. They also needed their spouses' or in-laws' consent before going to the hospital or police station late at night. People turned to these leaders for assistance during such pressing circumstances. The public would criticise the panchayat leader if they did not step forward and help those in need. As a result, these women's representatives' social mobility is limited.

MADE NOT TO RAISE THE ISSUES OF WOMEN

Despite facing numerous challenges, women in rural areas find that men prevent these issues from being openly discussed in public forums. This suppression greatly affects the women representatives. Alternatively, the women representatives believe that the affected women themselves should raise these problems in public gatherings. However, the affected women feel that it is the responsibility of the women representatives to raise these issues. As a result, the elected women legislators are under pressure from their family members, who prohibit them from speaking out in public on issues affecting women and the general public.

WOMEN LEADERS CO OPTED

During interactions between women village panchayat presidents and officials, the officials tend to direct their attention towards the male members accompanying the presidents, rather than addressing the representatives directly. Even when seats are assigned, the husbands and male family members are frequently given preference over the ladies themselves. Initially, this treatment caused significant dissatisfaction among the women representatives. However, over time, they have learned to disregard such occurrences and developed a habit of ignoring such discriminatory practices.

HUSBAND'S CO OPTED

When the husbands of Dalit women representatives hold positions as traditional or caste Hindu leaders, it becomes even easier for them to exert control over the panchayat office. To prevent disagreements and maintain an orderly life, the husbands insist that their wives must follow the rules set forth by the caste elders. Additionally, officials threaten the Dalit women leaders, compelling them to carry out their plans for rural areas regardless of the needs of the panchayats.

Without any resistance, the Dalit women legislators are readily forced into the dishonest administrative system. When misbehaviour is found, it is the poor Dalit women who are singled out and held responsible, while the officials are shielded from investigation.

BUREAUCRATIC INTERVENTION

LACK OF SUPPORT OF GOVERNMENT MECHANISMS:

The dominant presence and interference of the bureaucracy remain a significant obstacle to the active engagement of the people in Panchayati Raj activities. The bureaucratic system held sway during the British colonial era and continued to wield considerable power even after independence. Rather than providing support to the people, the bureaucracy tends to assert its authority and govern in a top-down manner. They find ways to exert their influence by working with entrenched interests inside the PRIs in spite of the laws in place that prohibit them from interfering in Panchayat activities.

The majority of selected representatives in PRIs have limited education and lack prior experience or training. Operating within a challenging environment, they often form alliances with local-level bureaucrats to maintain the ineffective functioning of these institutions.

Conflicts between the elite have surfaced locally with the passage of the 73rd Amendment Act. Women from the general category, Scheduled Castes (SC), and Scheduled Tribes (ST), among others, have joined a new elite group that has risen to prominence. Despite not actually being politically empowered, they are making an attempt to make themselves known. But administrators and male upper caste members are teaming up and deliberately impeding the advancement of female representatives in the PRIs.

NEGATIVE ATTITUDE OF THE OFFICIALS

When trying to convince government leaders, the elected women representatives face tremendous obstacles because they are not well-liked by these people. Officials frequently think that women lawmakers only hold their positions because of reservation laws, and that they are incapable of having independent thoughts or visions. The idea is that the female delegates will accept official guidance without question. Contrary to these expectations, however, female representatives who

enter offices with ambitions and high standards from the officials frequently leave feeling disappointed.

ILLTREATMENT

In government offices, it is the case that women who have been elected to public office from privileged social and economic backgrounds are treated with respect, while Dalit women, who are from lower socioeconomic origins, are treated poorly. A scenario is given here to illustrate the difficulties faced by Dalit leaders: an underprivileged Dalit lady who worked as a construction worker and helped a mason was elected as the Gram Panchayat President. In order to process a file for her panchayat, she went to the Panchayati Union office. She was, however, casually asked to fetch a cup of tea from a local tea shop without any consideration for her position after entering a room and greeting the concerned employee. She was then directed to make a visit to the clerk at his home, where she was charged with doing some work in his garden. She cooperated with the demands despite the insulting behaviour. She eventually got a bill from the clerk and was happy to go home. She was asked why she hadn't resisted when she spoke about the incident at a training session. She said that being asked by an official didn't surprise her because she had previously been used to taking tea to the mason at the construction site. This tale shows that abuse occurs frequently, even when Dalits are present movement.⁴⁵

It is well known that people from the upper class or upper caste have a significant influence over police authorities. The police have not favoured the Dalit community despite the repeated efforts of Dalit women representatives. Police officers refuse to accept the Dalit delegates' valid complaints. These representatives protest to the authorities about higher caste Hindu party leaders who are influential in rural areas encroaching on public property. The police are required to take appropriate measures and carry out evictions in accordance with legal requirements. Contrary to expectations, however, despite repeated requests, nothing is done to stop the encroachers.

ENCROACHMENT ENCOUNTERS

The common properties hold immense importance for the poor population. Unfortunately,

⁴⁵ G.Palanithurai, *Empowerment of Women: (Problems Faced by Elected Women Representatives - Experience from Tamil Nadu, Gandhigram: Rajiv Gandhi Chair for Panchayati Raj Studies, 2002).*

influential individuals, often with the backing of political parties, have encroached upon many of these common property resources. The president of the Gram Panchayat has the authority to deal with such encroachments in accordance with the New Panchayat Act. The panchayat presidents must receive the village map from the local administrative offices in order to start the eviction process. However, numerous administrative officers are refusing to provide the village map to the Gram Panchayat presidents, causing significant obstacles. Despite the challenges, the Gram Panchayat presidents have made determined efforts to reclaim the common property from the encroachers. The encroachers have started fighting back in return, providing yet another obstacle for the elected women MPs.

PROBLEMS ARISED BY NON DEVELOPMENT OF PERSONAL SKILLS INCREASING WORK LOAD

The workload of the elected women members quickly increased by four upon filing their nomination, along with a rise in restrictions. None of the women from rural areas who were interviewed said that their public duties had lessened the amount of work they had to do at home. A cooperative family approach prevents any reduction in the usual home chores. The elected women legislators must manage family matters gently at all times since failing to do so could get them into trouble. The elected women delegates were worn out from their public appearances due to a combination of family obligations and panchayat work. They had a finite amount of time to prove and increase their effectiveness. The elected women representatives generally opted to take part in joint sessions with the members of the family who are male.

USUAL SHYNESS

Due to their seclusion from society, particularly from men, elected women representatives encounter challenges when interacting with male individuals in offices and public life after assuming positions in panchayati institutions. Moreover, they lack experience in expressing their opinions and thoughts on various issues to men. However, as leaders, they are required to engage with the entire community, including both men and women. These inhibitions restrict their ability to interact openly and comfortably with men in public settings.

INFORMATION BLOCKADE

The journey towards women empowerment faces numerous obstacles and hindrances. One of the most potent weapons used by officials to undermine women's empowerment is the information blockade. Women typically lack access to newspapers, which further restricts their access to information. Additionally, government information is primarily circulated among officials within different departments, excluding women representatives. Officials tend to distribute information booklets and details exclusively to male representatives, displaying a reluctance to share their knowledge with women representatives.

LACK OF COMMUNICATION SKILL

In the modern world, having effective communication skills is essential for every leader to succeed. But elected female legislators frequently lack experience in public settings, which impairs their communication abilities. As a result, these representatives struggle to effectively manage council meetings and engage with the public. Due to this perceived lack, they face difficulties in achieving their desired goals. Additionally, it is a widespread phenomena to see male councillors or ward members threaten the female leaders.

POVERTY PREVENTS

There are people from the working class who rely on their daily salaries for subsistence among the elected women lawmakers. However, there is no provision to make up for their income loss because these representatives are tasked with a lot of obligations and responsibilities. Because of the disruption to their way of life, some are forced to use their position as a front for personal gain.

LACK OF MANAGERIAL SKILLS

Possessing managerial skills is crucial for attaining success. Effective administration and managerial abilities are essential for any administrator to thrive. However, elected women representatives often lack accounting and managerial skills. Due of this weakness, they are more prone to being misled by authorities and the male members of their families. Due to their lack of abilities, women may find themselves in precarious situations where they are coerced into engaging in different interactions with officials. The representatives have expressed their need for

managerial and accounting skills to overcome the challenges they currently face.⁴⁶

LACK OF MOTIVATION

Motivation is crucial for effective job performance in any role. The elected women representatives are relatively new to their positions, and not all of them have willingly or voluntarily taken up this assignment. Moreover, they have been encountering difficulties without any encouragement or support, leading to a lack of motivation. Consequently, many elected women representatives are experiencing mental depression. The situation has escalated to the point where there is a need for a counseling center specifically catering to mentally distressed elected women leaders.

NO SUPPORT BASE

The women also addressed another important issue: the support system for women leaders. Discussions were held regarding the factors that motivated women leaders to undertake specific schemes and programs. These leaders have encountered various challenges in the field and require the assistance of a supportive organization to overcome these obstacles. However, in reality, there is a lack of a support base for women leaders. Without such a support mechanism, it is difficult to expect remarkable accomplishments from women leaders at the grassroots level.

CROWD MANAGEMENT

They also have to deal with the problem of crowd control. Gram Sabha meetings must be held four times a year, according to the rules for gram panchayat presidents. Our rural population lacks the skills to communicate problems in a civil manner in public settings. In a crowd, it is common for people to resort to shouting. Even in the Lok Sabha and Legislative Assemblies, managing well-informed representatives is no easy task. However, in a Gram Panchayat setting, where there may be around four hundred individuals gathered in an open space, chaos often prevails. When women representatives preside over these meetings, anti-social elements deliberately use inappropriate language to intimidate and drive away women attendees. The only rule governing the meeting is the family members of the elected women representatives' ability to intervene. Other Gram Sabha members disagree when family members stand up for the elected women MPs. However, when

⁴⁶ G.Palanithurai, *Empowerment of Women: (Problems Faced by Elected Women Representatives - Experience from Tamil Nadu, Gandhigram: Rajiv Gandhi Chair for Panchayati Raj Studies, 2002).*

elected women representatives encounter challenges because of the existence of anti-social groups, these same Gram Sabha members fail to offer support. No one is willing to control the behaviour of those who attend meetings while under the influence of alcohol and cause disruptions.

PROCEDURE OF ACCOUNTING

The intricate accounting processes they must follow present another difficulty. Gram Panchayat Presidents must keep a total of 31 records in the digital age, all of which must be updated on a regular basis. Even postgraduate students with a background in commerce find it challenging to handle these 31 records. It is unrealistic to expect a poor, uneducated Dalit women representative to effectively manage such a large number of records. These representatives often lack proper training in accounting, yet they are held accountable for any mistakes made in record-keeping. This complicated process claims the lives of many elected women lawmakers. Either the procedures should be made simpler or their capability in accounting should be improved to handle this issue.

The aforementioned issues outline the challenges faced by women leaders in panchayat administration. These leaders have observed and identified the problems encountered by women in rural areas, which can be classified as follows:

Lack of respect and consideration for women's aspirations and feelings during decision-making processes. This issue is prevalent both within families and communities, where there is little distinction between the treatment of women from different economic backgrounds.

Gender discrimination persists in various spheres, including families, communities, offices, political parties, cultural organizations, and religious institutions. In terms of having access to facilities, services, and benefits, women are discriminated against. This discrimination is pervasive at all levels of society, including the federal government. Malnutrition affects female children who frequently receive poor nutrition. In comparison to male children, they are not given the same opportunities and treatment. Beyond primary school, girls are frequently discouraged from pursuing higher education.

Dual obligations and tremendous hurdles are faced by women, although their load is frequently

underestimated. Women's workloads grow when they take on additional obligations without somebody to share the workload with. Poor women lack proper amenities in their workplaces. Health facilities provided to women are inadequate compared to those provided to men. Women themselves may not be sufficiently aware of their own health problems. Women in many communities frequently deal with difficulties like female infanticide and foeticide. Women are disproportionately impacted by the lack of access to water, fuelwood, healthcare, and a proper public distribution system, making them the most vulnerable. In addition to sexual exploitation at work, women also deal with harassment in their homes.

Alcohol has a negative impact on the lives of underprivileged women living in rural areas. Women continue to be denied property rights notwithstanding the Equal Property Rights Act. Women workers receive lower wages compared to men, perpetuating their dependence. Assertive women often face character assassination. Panchayats lack a comprehensive plan for gender development, highlighting the absence of a clear perspective on addressing gender-related issues..

CHAPTER-V

INITIATIVES TAKEN TO EMPOWER WOMEN IN GRASS ROOT LEVEL

This chapter focuses on the steps the government has done to empower women and assist them in overcoming their obstacles. It examines government initiatives aimed at empowering women, the participation of politically active women, the presence of women in grassroots organisations, and the Supreme Court's rulings on matters affecting these groups. It had been a long-standing national objective to decentralise power at the local level, and in April 1993, the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Constitution made it a reality. In addition to other provisions, the 73rd Amendment gave the people authority at the panchayat level by allocating 33 percent of certain seats and important positions to women. Additionally, this amendment made municipal and gram panchayat elections a requirement for all states, giving these organisations the authority to carry out local development operations.

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT DAY

Women's Political Empowerment Day, observed on April 24 since 1994, aims to increase public understanding of the rights and obligations of elected women legislators. key objectives of this day

include promoting solidarity among women, facilitating the exchange of experiences among voluntary organizations, creating awareness in the media about women's issues, and developing strategies for the future. It creates the framework for expanding this social revolution to decision-making at all levels as women's participation in local panchayats eventually has an impact on grassroots governance. Only 6.7% of the total seats in Parliament are held by women at the moment. A consensus on reserving seats for women in Parliament is anticipated to be aided by the insightful information obtained from women-led panchayats.

Women's participation in neighbourhood panchayats has had a big influence, particularly in challenging social misconceptions. Initially, it was believed that women entering positions of power would merely serve as puppets for their husbands. They claimed that because of their perceived lack of knowledge or the restrictions placed by home duties, women would find it difficult to exercise administrative authorities successfully. There was a pervasive notion that women would have little effect and would merely act as rubber stamps, even in regions like West Bengal and Kerala where political engagement at lower levels was already common. But women are making their political efficiencies apparent.

SIGNIFICANT WOMEN IN LOCAL BODIES

The youngest Sarpanch in India is Ms. Rajawat, the first female Sarpanch (elected head) who holds an MBA. She has been the Sarpanch of Soda, her native town in Rajasthan, since 2010. 30 years of age, she made the decision to leave her corporate career behind and take on the role of Sarpanch. Her inspiration came from her grandfather, Brigadier Raghbir Singh, who had previously served as Sarpanch for three terms until 1990.

In 2010, the village of Soda faced a severe drought, causing significant challenges for the primarily agricultural community heavily reliant on monsoon rainfall. There are now health risks for both children and adults as a result of the contaminated groundwater. Ms. Rajawat assumed leadership after realising that something needed to be done and created a thorough plan that addressed essential issues like water, sanitation, electricity, and roads. She worked along with the appropriate parties by utilising her corporate knowledge to accomplish her goals.

Her initiatives included constructing toilets, ensuring electricity supply, improving road infrastructure, and providing quality education for female students. Additionally, Ms. Rajawat supported the opening of a State Bank of India branch in Soda, promoting financial literacy and self-sufficiency among the villagers. Additionally, she engaged corporate entities like Mahindra & Mahindra and Coca-Cola to support various projects aimed at uplifting the community. Soda changed from a backward community to a renowned "model village" under her energetic leadership."

The tireless efforts of Ms. Rajawat have attracted attention on a global scale. She was chosen as an Aspen Fellow, served as co-chair of the 2012 WEF India Summit, and was given the WEF's Young Global Leader designation.. Furthermore, she received the prestigious Yuva Award for her outstanding contributions to society.

Chandan Dutta of the Delhi-based NGO Participatory Research in Asia claims that it is typically seen that women sarpanch or members attend panchayat or block level meetings on their own and without the assistance of male relatives. As a result, there have been appreciable improvements in gram panchayat administration. Women sarpanches hold meetings during the daytime to avoid potentially shady late-night business. Moreover, they are more accessible compared to men who are often unavailable. These factors contribute to a greater level of honesty and transparency in local administrative affairs.

The accounts gathered from various villages across the country depict the commendable performance of these women. Uma Maiti demonstrated bravery in Kanthipad village, West Bengal's Midnapore district, by taking up corruption in the distribution of funding for the Indira Ahasan Programme. Ratna Roy Choudhury, a disabled person from the same area, battled for and was successful in obtaining cash under the same programme. Seema Chatterjee, an NGO worker, questions whether Tahmina Bibi, a woman from Barogharia village in north Bengal with limited formal education, can be labeled as a mere leader when she took a stand against the men in her panchayat and mandated the building of a culvert.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ 'downtoearth', available at: <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/indepth/panchayats-working-women> (last visited on 23, june2023).

Additionally, a female member of a gram panchayat in the Kolar region of Karnataka suggested some actions related land purchases, which saved the panchayat Rs 20,000. These instances serve as encouraging examples of the effective contributions made by women in their respective villages.

Furthermore, women are playing a significant role by providing valuable recommendations to improve educational standards and address challenges related to water sanitation and fuel. These are areas that have typically not been the focus of discussions among men. For instance, a female panchayat member organised a camp just for women in the Yavatal area of Maharashtra so they could openly address crucial topics like dowry. Additionally, she successfully persuaded women to adopt more efficient stove and biogas systems. These instances demonstrate the substantial contributions made by women in these areas, actively participating in discussions and implementing practical solutions for the betterment of their communities.

Although issues concerning natural resources often do not receive the attention they deserve, primarily because many of these matters fall beyond the jurisdiction of panchayats, there are exceptions to this trend. One such instance is the women pradhan (head) of Kashlog in Himachal Pradesh, next to Darlaghat, who has spoken out against limestone mining carried out by Ambuja Cements in the region. L.B.J.V. Subrahmanyam, the director of panchayats in Hamirpur, noted that the planting of fodder plants is gaining traction in Himachal villages thanks to money diverted from the Employment Assurance Scheme. Activist Kulbhushan Upmanyu from Chamba claims that Mahila mandals (women's organisations) have also protected and planted small patches of forests close to their villages in various regions of Himachal in response to the scarcity.

Women are increasingly developing the confidence to challenge social stigmas as they become more aware of their talents. Kantibai Dhurve, an adivasi (tribal) lady with a disability who lives in the Savalkheda gramme panchayat in Madhya Pradesh, is an illustration of this progress. Kantibai won the presidency with a clear majority of 273 votes despite resistance from seven persons. She has been instrumental in the village's development over the past four years, leading the effort to build a road and set up multiple handpumps. Kantibai expresses her belief that with support from the government, they can accomplish much more.

First female pradhan (leader) of the Siyoni block panchayat in the Uttarkashi district, Saroj Rana, has made significant contributions to her society. In her block panchayat, she took the initiative to build a school and a road. Rana also ended the long-standing practise of giving contractors who built unsatisfactory structures the money allotted to the panchayat under the Jawahar Rozgar Yojana, allowing both the pradhan and the contractor to take away some of the money. Rana, however, has brought about significant changes in this practice. Whenever funds are allocated, Rana ensures transparency by openly discussing her plans with all the villagers. She has also introduced a novel approach to the distribution of development funds. Rather than dividing the amount equally among the six villages in the panchayat block, she decided to allocate the entire sum to one specific village at a time. This allows each village to access a substantial amount of funds during its turn.

Women's involvement in local politics has also had a considerable impact on reducing alcohol's influence in many rural towns. "Over the past year, we have been successful in closing down two alcohol vending machines. It's interesting that both of these vends were found in panchayats with female leaders. According to Soma Devi, president of the informal federation of mahila mandals (women's organisations) in Chamba, Himachal Pradesh, "the pradhans (heads) of these panchayats stood with us in our fight". The support for anti-liquor movements led by women can be directly attributed to their key positions within the panchayati raj institution in various states.

According to early reports from panchayats led by women, they are more convincing and successful than men at rooting out corruption. Majah Wankhede, the sarpanch (head) of Metikhede village in Yavatmal district, Maharashtra, claims that dealing with government authorities was more difficult than actually winning the poll. Despite encountering several requests at every stage of her engagements with the government, Wankhede was successful in erecting 40 biogas plants, installing bathrooms in the school, and giving many households smokeless stoves. Furthermore, took a bold step by suspending two gramsevaks (village development workers) on corruption charges, even after receiving a warning from the block development officer about potential damage to her reputation if she proceeded with the suspensions. Wankhede fearlessly responded that the next person she would suspend would be the officer himself.

Women in diverse leadership roles confront difficulties and hindrances, from caste-based oppression to political party exclusion. Muktiben Patel, a member of a lower caste who was elected sarpanch of Nitaya village in the Hoshangabad district, faced numerous no-confidence motions from the thakurs, a member of a higher caste, in the community. Despite these obstacles, she is devoted to carrying out her responsibilities, which include acquiring a decent road for the hamlet and fixing school structures. Similar to this, men from upper castes threatened Kesarbai, a chamar (a scheduled caste) sarpanch of the Sona Savri gram panchayat in the same district, and even dispatched hooligans to attack her residence.⁴⁸

Bangalore's Institute of Socio-economic Change's Professor Abdul Aziz suggests that the gram panchayat level priority have shifted towards addressing issues such as water availability, establishing anganwadis (creches), and improving public amenities. These examples illustrate the persistence and resilience demonstrated by women in the face of adversity, as they continue to prioritize the needs of their communities.

SIGNIFICANT WOMEN IN PANCHAYATS IN TAMIL NADU

In Thirumanvayal Panchayat, located in Sivagangai district of southern Tamil Nadu, Sharmila Devi, the dalit sarpanch at 39 years old, brought potable water to the hamlet, a stunning accomplishment that none of her upper-caste male predecessors could do in 50 years. Due to the presence of saltwater (uppu thanni) in the area, Thirumanvayal had been experiencing a water problem for decades, forcing the locals to trek to other villages for their daily water supply. Sharmila, who had been aware of this issue since she was a young child, questioned why it had never been fixed. In 2011, when the job of panchayat president was only open to women from the scheduled castes, Sharmila, who had completed her studies up to the 10th grade, chose to run for it as a result of the water problem. The influential landed community in the area known as the Kallars had previously held the presidency.

The only workable approach, given the muddy soil of Thirumanvayal that prevented groundwater retention, was to request water from the close-by Sarukani Panchayat. The request first infuriated

⁴⁸ 'Downtoearth', available at: <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/indepth/panchayats-working-women> (last visited on 29, jun 3 2023).

the Sarukani panchayat members. They were naturally irritated because they were already sharing water with other panchayats, Sharmila said with a smile. Her primary objective, though, was to persuade them to figure out a method to share water with Thirumanvayal. S Gunasekaran, the MLA who represents Sivagangai, was also contacted by Sharmila for aid.. It took her more than a month of discussions with powerful authorities around the district before she was able to secure Sarukani's panchayat's support. It was the final time the village will give water to another village, according to the head of the community. A new borewell was subsequently dug at Sarukani, and a pipeline was put in place to carry water to Thirumanvayal. Sharmila set up a system of tiny power pumps and tanks throughout the 18 hamlets in the panchayat, as well as a 2,000-liter water tank in the main village. She said, "I don't know why it took so many years to solve such a basic problem.

A thorough four-part article on women panchayat heads who overcame gender and caste barriers to forge successful careers as local leaders was published by India Spend. The series showed that 60% of these women worked independently, defying the common perception that they were only serving as mediators for their power-hungry male relatives. They showed a thorough understanding of local bureaucracy, central and state financial schemes, and panchayat accounting. This five-part series examines the development of women's leadership in Tamil Nadu's villages during a 20-year period. Despite facing challenges such as limited finances, caste oppression, and violence, these women have managed to achieve success. However, they still encounter difficulties in progressing up the political hierarchy.

The introduction of 1996 saw a reservation for female leaders in panchayats has brought about significant transformations in rural governance in Tamil Nadu. These women leaders have proven to be proactive in investing 48% more funds compared to their male counterparts, particularly in the development of roads and enhancing accessibility. Moreover, they prioritize not only increasing the water supply in arid districts but also improving its quality. This reservation strategy has empowered women in a variety of ways, according to research reports. They now have a voice, more autonomy, and greater respect in their communities as a result of it. They now have access to the most senior levels of the bureaucracy as well, including district collectors, commissioners for rural development, and elected officials like MLAs (Members of Legislative Assembly) and

MPs. Women are now responsible for managing significant budgets and actively lobbying for additional funds to address pressing community needs.

WOMEN LEADERS WENT BEYOND ASSIGNED DUTIES

As indicated before, women panchayat chiefs have a propensity to devote more resources than their male counterparts to major capital expenditures, notably in the field of constructing roads. The capital expenditure per household was examined, and it was discovered that women paid Rs 15,515 on enhancing access while males spent Rs 13,488. Men allocated much more money (Rs 3,229.65) than women (Rs 343.42) for rural electrification. Men marginally outspent women on water supply, spending Rs 12,869 to Rs 11,537.

These significant investments are notable because they show that women are willing to assume responsibilities that go beyond those of gramme panchayat presidents. The Tamil Nadu Panchayats Act specifies that the provision of fundamental services including water, sanitization, drainage, streetlights, cemeteries, and road maintenance falls primarily under the purview of gram panchayats. However, the funding allotted for these programmes is frequently insufficient. As a result, the female leaders have actively fought for increased capital expenditures to address the requirements of their communities.

Despite having limited authority in the domains of education and healthcare, women acting as panchayat presidents in Tamil Nadu have taken up initiatives to develop schools and public health centres in addition to investing in necessary services. Additionally, these women have actively campaigned against social issues like child marriage. Moreover, women in rural leadership positions have taken on influential interest groups in the state, including those involved in activities such as sand mining and land encroachment. As several reports have noted, they have also been at the forefront of fighting against unlawful encroachments and dealing with industrial pollution. The leadership of women in rural regions also goes beyond the immediate problems. For instance, they have led political campaigns calling for the restoration of a state-wide prohibition on alcohol that was removed in 2001. Additionally, they have taken part in activities that cross state lines, including as demonstrations against the two-child rule that barred candidates with more children from running in panchayat elections in Rajasthan and Haryana.

NOT JUST INVESTING IN DRINKING WATER, ALSO MAKING SURE IT IS CLEAN

When Rajanikandham, a dalit, was appointed chairman of the Nachangulam panchayat in the Devakottai block, she was discouraged by the ineffective actions done by her predecessors to alleviate water scarcity. Her main motivation for contesting the position was to ensure access to water for everyone in the panchayat. During her tenure, Rajanikandham successfully carried out a number of initiatives, including the construction of 15 mini borewells, three overhead tanks and three large borewells. As a result, all the seven hamlets in Nachangulam now have access to water. In Devakottai block, women presidents, similar to their male counterparts in other panchayats, were allocating around 10% to 20% of their revenue towards water-related initiatives. However, this ratio rose to 30% to 40% of their total profits in three of the 12 panchayats governed by women. These ladies gave large and small water tanks, pipelines, and borewells in every hamlet first priority when making capital investments. This is notable since, up until that point, the pipeline systems largely supplied higher caste areas while omitting entire dalit villages.

As was already indicated, women were investing in innovative water systems to guarantee access to safe drinking water. In Kalaiyarkovil, where the water is brackish, data acquired from the block development officer showed that five out of the seven panchayats that had built reverse osmosis (RO) purification systems were led by women. K Kaleswari from Maruvamangalam, Rajeswari from Kuruthangudi, and Mazharkodi Dhanasekar from Melamarungoor all fought for more money, collaborating with their local Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA), to acquire these RO systems. The cost of implementing these systems exceeded Rs 600,000, which accounted for approximately 60% of the annual panchayat budget. These initiatives were undertaken to assist 2,000 people who live in outlying areas. Residents in these panchayats had been paying private operators Rs 30 per pot to get water from nearby villages prior to the installation of the RO systems. However, with the operation of the RO systems by the panchayats, residents now only need to pay Rs 5 for the purified water. Mazharkodi Dhanasekar explained the reasoning behind charging a small amount for the water, stating, "Water is a valuable commodity in these areas, and people should understand its value."

LIMITED FUNDING NECESSITATES THE NEED FOR VIGOROUS ADVOCACY TO SECURE ADDITIONAL RESOURCES.

Dalit president of Vadagapatti Panchayat in Harur Block, Dharmapuri District, Kalpana Ravindran encountered a specific demand from the villagers during her election campaign. They expressed their desire for the village roads to be constructed, emphasizing its importance. Kalpana vividly remembers a young girl who shared her struggles with a punctured bicycle due to the rough condition of the roads she had to traverse on her way to school. The girl's request left a lasting impression on Kalpana. Once she assumed the presidency, She immediately prioritised road building by allocating Rs 30 lakh from the Tamil Nadu Village Habitations Improvement Scheme.

In Devakottai block, women allocated a significant portion of their capital expenditure, ranging from 15% to 25%, specifically for road development. This exceeded the allocation by men, which ranged from 1% to 10%. Notably, 47% of Rajanikandham of Nachangulam's panchayat's income went entirely towards building roads.

It is important to note that the regular revenues of panchayats do not provide sufficient funds for significant capital expenditure on road construction. As a result, women leaders are exerting considerable effort in advocating for additional financial resources. Each panchayat is given an initial allocation of Rs 5 lakh under the State Finance Commission (SFC), which has been lowered to Rs 3 lakh as a result of the increased awards from the 14th Finance Commission. In addition, an additional sum is allotted based on the village's population. Nachangulam, for instance, receives SFC funds from Rs 530,000 to Rs 700,000.

WITH LIMITED POWERS, THEY STILL DO A LOT FOR EDUCATION, HEALTH

Irula tribe member Sidhamallamma, known for her snake-catching ability, assumed the role of the panchayat president in Padiganalam, Thally block, in 2011. In this remote region surrounded by granite mines, women face numerous challenges such as early marriages, frequent pregnancies, anaemia, and malnutrition. Data from the National Family Health Survey from 2019–21 show that Krishnagiri district recorded high rates of anaemia among rural women, with 47.4% affected and 2.2% severely anaemic. Recognizing the pressing need for improved healthcare in her panchayat, Sidhamallamma took it upon herself to undergo training as a health worker. The sub-collector

started a specific programme to train community health workers during her tenure, which Sidhamallamma eagerly joined due to her deep interest in women's health. Despite her illiteracy, she diligently made mental notes of all the knowledge imparted.

In contrast to Kerala and Rajasthan, where panchayats have authority over local education and health through the devolution index, Tamil Nadu's schools and health institutions are controlled by the state education and health departments respectively. Nonetheless, women panchayat leaders in Tamil Nadu, despite their limited powers, have achieved notable progress in their communities.

While serving at Nachangulam, Rajanikandham struggled as she steadfastly promoted the conversion of the neighbourhood primary school into a middle school. She put in a lot of work, making several trips to the district collectorate and the education department to explain her case and plea for the upgrade.⁴⁹

CAMPAIGNING AGAINST EARLY MARRIAGE FOR GIRLS

Shanti, the leader of the Anchetty panchayat in Thally block, is determined to prevent underage marriages, even if it means taking direct action herself. During her final year as president in 2016, she successfully intervened and halted four illegal underage marriages. On one occasion, she arrived just as the ceremony was about to commence. Recalling one incident, Shanti shared, "The girl's family had planned a quiet wedding during the night, but I learned about it. The next morning, I went there and compelled them to stop."⁵⁰

The remote regions of the Krishnagiri and Dharmapuri districts have a problem with early marriages. In rural Krishnagiri, 25.3% of women between the ages of 20 and 24 were already married when they turned 18. Data from the Tamil Nadu social welfare department showed that, between January and November 2017, Dharmapuri had the highest rate of child marriages. Six out of the seven panchayats surveyed in the forested and hilly panchayats of Krishnagiri and Dharmapuri districts were led by women panchayat leaders who fought against child marriage, as previously reported. Four of these leaders allocated funds to improve schools up to the higher

⁴⁹'Indiaspend', available at <https://www.indiaspend.com>(last visited on 9 July 2023)

⁵⁰'Indiaspend', available at <https://www.indiaspend.com>(last visited on 26 Jun 2023).

secondary level in order to reduce the dropout rates among girls, which is one of the reasons for early marriages.

Over the past five years, Shanti has conducted numerous awareness programs. Reflecting on her own experience of being forced to stop studying She emphasises the value of education for girls because she married at the age of 15. Families should remember that times have changed. There will be a lot of health issues. Give your daughters' education top priority.

FIGHTING SAND/LAND MAFIA DESPITE THREATS TO LIFE

In the Vedarnyam block of Nagapattinam district, Rani Muniyakanu, a former president of the Vaduvanchery panchayat, bravely took on the illegal beach sand mafia, a challenge no other male panchayat leader had ever taken on. Vaduvanchery, which is close to the coast, is abundant in minerals like monazite, which is valued as nuclear fuel and is shipped to nations like Singapore. Rani was aware of how mining had harmed the village's groundwater because she had seen sand trucks passing by her panchayat on a regular basis. The water level dropped because the sand miners were digging down to a depth of 15 feet, according to Rani. "In these places, the only thing you find if you dig down 18 feet is saltwater."

She gathered details regarding the licences issued for sand mining in her panchayat when she was president. The main sand miners working here were Sriram Industries and Ezhil Industries. We found that they were mining in places where they had no permission and operated outside the parameters of their licence licences, she stated. Rani Muniyakanu organised massive protests outside the locations of the concerned industries by organising her own panchayat as well as neighbouring ones. The demonstrators were detained, but their activities caught the media's attention as well as those of the MPs and MLAs who represent the area in the Legislative Assembly and Parliament. Rani then brought a lawsuit before the Madras High Court with strong documentary proof.

In the end, the Madras High Court upheld her decision, which resulted to the total shutdown of Ezhil Industries. Rani claims Sriram Industries tried to pay her with Rs 100,000 to drop the issue,

but they reduced their operations in her panchayat and moved elsewhere. Rani had achieved a big victory. To fight this legal struggle, she was forced to use her own time and money.

According to IndiaSpend's 2017 series, P. Krishnaveni is a brave dalit panchayat leader who was subjected to a violent attack close to her home in Thalaiyuthu Panchayat, Tirunelveli district. She became a target for those who opposed encroachment on private property and corporations like India Cements. Serving as the president of Thalaiyuthu panchayat from 2006 to 2011, Krishnaveni, 45, was subjected to a horrifying incident in June 2013. Two individuals assaulted her, severing two of her fingers and an ear, leaving her for dead. The attack was in retaliation for her efforts to reclaim encroached land so that she could construct toilets for girls in the village. Krishnaveni deserves recognition for bravely challenging the deeply ingrained caste prejudices and patriarchal system.

Similar to this, Jothimani Sennamalai, a former Gudalur West Panchayat councillor, organised the entire neighbourhood against unauthorised sand mining in the Karur district's Amaravati river. She began a five-year legal battle in the Madras High Court's Madurai bench. The court ultimately decided in her favour, recognising her persistent efforts.

PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS ARE HELPFUL FOR WOMEN

The country has undergone a slight change as a result of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, which went into force on April 24, 1993 and was integrated into the Constitution. When combined with the 74th Amendment, it facilitated the inclusion of approximately one million women in public life. The efforts undertaken by the Panchayati Raj institutions to empower women politically can be summarized as given below:

1. Women are becoming more self-assured and proactively addressing inequality.
2. A platform is given to women so they can exercise decision-making authority.
3. Women are taking the initiative to inform other women about numerous topics, including education, hygiene, and alcoholism.
4. Annual conferences on Panchayati Raj and women's political, social, and economic empowerment are organised by the Institute of Social Sciences (ISS). The elected representatives of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), members of NGOs, eminent

academics, social workers, government representatives, and media figures from all over India participate in these important conferences. The difficulties faced by Panchayats were given special consideration during the ISS meeting in 1995, with an emphasis on the difficulties faced by women members and office bearers. The group unanimously agreed on the steps that must be taken to improve the system, enabling women to play the vital role they were meant to play in building self-sufficient and successful communities and, ultimately, promoting a vibrant and flourishing society. In the spirit of self-governance and as committed citizens, women are rising to the occasion and getting ready to participate in politics at the grassroots level.

5. Due to the success of the Indian Panchayat Raj Institutions, more than a million women now actively participate in political life in India. Women are allowed to hold up to one-third of the chairman and member positions in panchayats.
6. Women are also trying to improve female education and abolish child labour and child marriage. Additionally, women have used their influence in politics to solve important issues like high-quality healthcare.

SELF HELP GROUPS

There are many self-help groups (SHGs), recognized as an effective approach to provide microfinance services to those in need. In addition to offering financial advantages, involvement in SHGs also fosters social and political empowerment among its members. The utilization of microfinance as a means to alleviate poverty is further emphasized.

The self-help group (SHG) is a small group of women who pool their financial resources through regular contributions. Serving as crucial microfinance structures, SHGs serve as platforms that foster unity among women, encouraging their cooperation on issues pertaining to justice, gender equality, nutrition, and health. By enhancing their skills and giving them opportunity to get involved in a variety of entrepreneurial endeavours, SHGs have already made a substantial contribution to the development of entrepreneurial talents among rural women.

During the 1980s, a significant development occurred in India as non-government organizations (NGOs) initiated the SHG movement, rallying impoverished rural communities and providing

them with structured avenues for both social and financial assistance. The National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) connected a select number of these organisations with banks, which helped the campaign gain momentum as Self-Help Group Bank Linkage Programme, this groundbreaking initiative facilitated access to formal financial services for group members, many of whom had never previously possessed a bank account. The approach was designed to be sustainable and expandable, marking a significant milestone in the movement.⁵¹

The findings indicate that greater engagement in SHGs leads to improved economic empowerment among members through various means, including increased employment opportunities, higher income, job stability, and enhanced entrepreneurial capabilities. Additionally, increased participation in SHGs also contributes to higher levels of social empowerment for members, enabling them to have a say in household decisions, access healthcare services, increase self-esteem and confidence, enhance communication skills, and conduct business with banks and NGOs. Moreover, heightened participation in SHGs is associated with enhanced political empowerment, characterized by increased political engagement and stronger community mobilization. It is crucial to remember that elements like socioeconomic level and the location of the group's members have an impact on how involvement in SHGs affects women's empowerment operations.⁵²

NATIONAL COMMISSION FOR WOMEN

The Commission's main objective is to make active efforts to ensure that women achieve equality and equitable participation in all spheres of life. This goal is achieved by promoting women's rights and entitlements through appropriate policy development, legislative action, strict law enforcement, efficient implementation of programmes and policies, and the creation of strategies to deal with particular issues and circumstances resulting from discrimination and violence against women. The National Commission for Women was founded with the goal of achieving constitutional and legal changes that would provide women in India with a fair and equitable means of subsistence. The Commission was established to combat this infringement and defend women's fundamental rights since it is understood that violence against women is a fundamental violation

⁵¹'Livemint,' available at: <https://www.livemint.com>(last visited on 29,june2023).

⁵²' Researchgate,' available at: <https://www.researchgate.net>(last visited on 23,june2023).

of human rights that cuts beyond national boundaries, cultural differences, social classes, and cultural traditions. The Union Government appoints five additional members to the Commission in addition to the Chairperson and Member Secretary.

- Conducting investigations and examinations of issues related to women's safety.
- Submitting reports to the Central Government.
- Providing recommendations based on the reports.
- Addressing situations where women's rights have been violated.
- Analysing and assessing the legal and constitutional framework for women's protection.

Inquiry and Investigation

The National Commission for Women possesses the authority akin to that of a civil court. It conducts inquiries and examinations into matters concerning the protection and welfare of women as guaranteed by the Constitution of India. It proactively takes notice of complaints regarding the non-implementation, non-enforcement, or non-compliance with laws, policies, and regulations intended to ease burdens and ensure the welfare of women. The Commission then talks to the appropriate authorities about these problems.

Action Research

In the planning process for the socioeconomic development of women, NCW members take an active role. They make recommendations for ways to increase the representation of women in all areas of society and evaluate the development achieved in this direction. The Commission also reviews the effectiveness of the protections for women contained in the Constitution and other legislation, suggests changes to address any gaps or flaws, and promotes policies to improve their efficient implementation.

Legal Intervention

A novel element is the Parivarik Mahila Lok Adalat (PMLA), that draws inspiration from traditional Nyaya Panchayats. It was established by the NCW to provide speedy redressal and resolution of cases concerning women. So far, it has handled 7,500 cases. A noteworthy feature of the PMLA is its emphasis on fostering cordial mutual settlements and flexible implementation,

with the ultimate goal of empowering women within the justice delivery system.⁵³

Complaints and Counseling Unit of the National Commission for Women

With its committed members, this department operates as the brain of the commission. The Union Government is in charge of choosing these individuals. The NCW Act's Section 10 grants the commission the authority to investigate complaints that are made orally, in writing, or suo moto. Domestic violence, harassment, dowry-related matters, torture, desertion, polygamy, rape, reluctance to file formal complaints, spousal cruelty, deprivation, gender discrimination, and workplace sexual harassment are only a few of the many issues covered by these complaints. The complaints are addressed in a variety of ways, including as speeding up and supervising police investigations, giving state agencies de-identified data to enable appropriate steps, and settling or mediating family conflicts through counselling services.

In situations where women are being harassed by men, the National Commission for Women provides assistance. Women in grass root level can approach the commission during their discrimination by gender, caste etc. commission works for the welfare of women.

WOMEN AND VOTING PATTERNS

Following its independence, India was one of the first nations to give all women the right to vote and universal suffrage. Although women have always had the same rights as men to vote, historically they have voted less frequently than males. The gender disparity has, nevertheless, greatly closed over time. Male voter turnout in the 2014 elections was 67.09%, while female voter turnout was 65.30%, a small difference of 1.79%. Throughout the 2019 elections, this difference shrunk even more. Surprisingly, in states like Bihar, Arunachal Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Tamil Nadu, and others, women turned out in greater numbers to vote in the general elections of 2014.

The social and general empowerment of women has also made significant improvements. More educated than their predecessors, the current generation of women voters is more informed and self-reliant in their choices. Three out of five women said in a survey that they would cast their

⁵³'Byjus,' available at: <https://byjus.com/free-ias>(last visited on june9,2023).

ballots for a candidate of their choosing without consulting their families.

Women who are politically aware, comprehend the fundamentals of governance, and utilise their voting rights without bias or influence are a result of the grassroots involvement of women. Although there are still fewer women in political office than in many other nations, there is no doubt that the overall empowerment of women in many areas is having a good effect. Women are no longer seen as simple shadows of males, and their leadership skills help people understand problems and put ideas into practise. As more women are entering various government posts, including those in administrative services, defence, planning commissions, and other areas, education has played a crucial role in this shift.

WOMEN IN POLITICS

Women in politics have developed a distinct and impressive presence over time. India has seen the ascent of several female chief ministers, as well as a female president and prime minister. Significant ministries and positions of authority have been held by women. There are well-known names that come to mind while thinking of Indian women politicians. These women are real, strong people with remarkable political grit and talent. They are not only scapegoats or puppets acting as or speaking for males. Because they compete on an equal footing with males in every way, women have continually shown to be true game changers in Indian politics. They have dispelled any notions of gender bias or stereotypes in leadership positions in political parties, foreign ministries, and even financial departments⁵⁴.

The Finance Minister is Nirmala Sitharaman, and numerous other women in politics, like Sonia Gandhi, Sushma Swaraj, Mamata Banerjee, Mayawati, Sheila Dixit, Jayalalitha, and Vasundhara Raje, have proven their strength and competitiveness to become strong forces. A new generation of female politicians has just entered the political scene with the same tenacity and fervour as their peers in other professions. In the world of politics, people like Mahua Moitra, Supriya Sule, Kavita Krishnan, Nusrat Jahan, Atishi Marlena, Mimi Chakraborty, Agatha Sangma, and many others are making their mark.

⁵⁴ 'Caledioscope,' available at:<https://www.caledioscope.in>(last visited on 11june2023).

ACTION TAKEN BY GOVERNMENT

The process of empowering women, particularly those belonging to the Scand ST community, takes time. It is not uncommon to witness cases where husbands, fathers, or brothers of women serving as village panchayat presidents take over their responsibilities, including signing checks on their behalf. An incident occurred in 2008, where the husband of a female member of a block panchayat in Dindigul attended a council meeting while she was busy cooking at home. Retired officer Ashok Vardhan Shetty stated that action was taken against both the husband and the wife in that particular case.

Additionally, Tamil Nadu's female leaders have significantly influenced state-level policy decisions. They established the first organisation of its sort in the nation, the Tamil Nadu Women Panchayat Presidents Federation, in 1997. Their goal was to promote important policy improvements.

These female leaders were successful in persuading J Jayalalithaa, who was then the opposition leader, to institute a 10-year term for panchayat presidents, in 2001. The first state in the nation to introduce a provision like this was Tamil Nadu. Kalpana Satish, who was instrumental in the formation of the federation and trained female panchayat leaders.

EFFORTS BY GOVERNMENT TO PROLIFERATE WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION

The government has put in place a number of noteworthy policies, like raising the percentage of women in parliament from 30% to 50%. India has progressed in passing laws promoting women's representation, however it is only the initial stage in enabling women to have equal decision-making authority as men. Merely having women represented is not enough to empower them in the public sphere; their active participation is crucial for removing limitations.

MINISTRY OF PANCHAYAT RAJ

The ongoing decentralisation and local government in the states are being overseen by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj, a division of the Indian government. The Union Government and the several State Governments each have their own set of duties and authority under a federal system of government. The division of powers and responsibilities has, however, been further distributed to

Local Self-Governments, which include Panchayats at the village level as well as Municipalities and Municipal Corporations in towns and large cities, since the passage of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments in 1993. As a result, India's federal structure now has three levels of government instead of the prior two.⁵⁵

All matters relating to the Panchayati Raj system and its institutions must be supervised and managed by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj. This ministry was started in May 2004 and is run by a cabinet-level minister. Shri Giriraj Singh is now in charge of the ministry.

RASHTRIYA GRAM SWARAJ ABHIYAN

- The new Centrally Sponsored Scheme known as Rashtriya Gramme Swaraj Abhiyan (RGSA), which will be implemented from April 1, 2022, to March 31, 2026, has received clearance from the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs. Notably, the plan will run concurrently with the 15th Finance Commission's term. Its main goal is to improve Panchayati Raj Institutions' (PRIs') capacity for governance. The Cabinet first approved the plan in 2018 with a view to its implementation between 2018–19 and 2021–22. The organisation responsible for carrying out this plan is the Ministry of Panchayati Raj.
- The central and state aspects make up the scheme's components. The implementation of the e-Panchayat Mission Mode Project, the national plan of technical assistance, and other operations at the central level are among the primary central components. However, the state component generally concentrates on efforts related to capacity development and training (CB&T), creating institutional frameworks for CB&T, and carrying out other smaller-scale activities.⁵⁶
- The scheme's main goal is to strengthen Panchayati Raj Institutions' (PRIs') governance capacities so they can successfully carry out the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). All interventions for developing capacity, including training modules and materials, will be designed in accordance with the SDGs' guiding principles, which include inclusivity, giving the least fortunate priority, universal coverage, and gender equality. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) would be the main focus of the program's execution and

⁵⁵ 'Panchayat gov,' available at: <https://panchayat.gov.in/> (last visited on 9jun32023).

⁵⁶ 'Drishtias,' available at: <https://www.drishtias.com/daily-updates> (last visited on 14june2023).

oversight, with a special focus on the 115 Aspirational Districts selected by NITI Aayog and the Panchayats recognised under Mission Antyodaya.

- The plan gives priority to national issues under various themes, including poverty eradication, improved livelihoods in villages, ensuring a healthy and child-friendly environment, achieving water sufficiency, promoting cleanliness and environmental sustainability, developing self-sufficient infrastructure, enhancing social security, fostering good governance, and promoting gender-inclusive development in villages.
- The redesigned RGSA will have central and state components in terms of funding. The Government of India will provide whole funding for the scheme's main elements. Except for the northeastern states, hilly states, and the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir, where the federal and state shares will be in a 90:10 ratio, the funding ratio for the state components will be 60:40 between the central and state governments. However, the central share will be 100% for all other Union Territories.

The goal is to achieve "Sabka Sath, Sabka Gaon, Sabka Vikas" by this endeavour.

The Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) will be the primary focus of the RGSA scheme. It intends to assist several PRIs in enhancing their governance capacities so that the SDGs can be achieved through inclusive local governance and efficient resource use. In the end, achieving gender equality, education, hygiene, sanitation, nutrition, and other related goals will be made possible by PRIs' accomplishment of SDG targets.

The programme seeks to ensure that women, members of Scheduled Castes and Tribes, and women are all represented in Panchayats, giving women political influence. Additionally, it aims to develop Gram Sabhas and Panchayats so that they may serve as powerful institutions that encourage social inclusion, particularly for underrepresented groups. The plan will create an institutional framework with sufficient infrastructure and human resources for PRIs to expand their capacities at the federal, state, and local levels. In the end, these PRI breakthroughs will empower women. The ideas and opinions of women will be given full consideration because the scheme's main focus is on women and development.

NATIONAL POLICY FOR EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

This Policy seeks to advance the development and empowerment of women. The Policy will be extensively disseminated to promote active participation from all interested parties in order to accomplish its goals.

1. One of this policy's specific goals is to create an environment where women may fully grow and reach their potential through sound economic and social policies.
2. Ensuring that women have equal access to all fundamental freedoms and human rights as males in all sectors of life, including the political, economic, social, cultural, and civil ones.
3. Enabling equal access for women to take part in and make decisions about social, political, and economic issues facing the country.
4. Ensuring that women have equal access to healthcare, high-quality education at all levels, career and vocational counselling, employment possibilities, fair pay, workplace health and safety regulations, social security, and opportunities to enter public office, among other things.
5. Improving legal systems' efficiency with the aim of eliminating all forms of
6. Changing cultural perceptions and local traditions with the active participation of both men and women.
7. Including a gender viewpoint in the development process as a whole.
8. Eliminating all types of violence and discrimination against women and girls.
9. Forming and fostering alliances with civil society, especially women's organisations

Assuring women's equity in power distribution and active participation in decision-making processes, including political decision-making at all levels, is necessary to achieve empowerment goals. In a variety of sectors, including the legislative, executive, judicial, corporate, and statutory worlds, as well as advisory commissions, committees, boards, trusts, and similar entities, efforts will be taken to ensure women's equal access to and full involvement in decision-making bodies. Affirmative action policies like reservations or quotas, especially in higher legislative bodies, shall be taken into consideration within certain periods to correct any existing inequities. To promote women's effective participation in the development process, women-friendly personnel policies will also be developed.

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT SCHEMES

The Beti Bachao Beti Padhao Scheme

The Indian Prime Minister's initiative to ensure the survival, safety, and education of girls was introduced on January 22, 2015, in Haryana. The diminishing sex ratio is addressed, and it aims to increase social awareness while boosting the efficiency of welfare benefits for females. The key objectives of the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao Scheme include:

- Prevention of female infanticide and other forms of gender-based selective elimination.
- Promoting education and the active engagement of girls;
- Ensuring the safety and protection of the girl child

One-Stop Centre Scheme

The goals of this scheme include:

- *Assisting women impacted by violence in both private and public settings*
- *Providing a comprehensive array of services in a centralized location, encompassing medical, legal, psychological, and counseling support*
- *Supplying immediate and emergency aid alongside long-term support*
- *Attempting to end all forms of violence against women*

Women Helpline Scheme

The Women Helpline scheme, which was introduced in April 2015, aims to provide 24/7 emergency assistance to women who have experienced abuse, whether in public or private areas. The government established a toll-free number (181) that women can call from anywhere in the country, including all states and union territories. This campaign not only offers urgent assistance but also raises awareness of women's safety and empowerment.⁵⁷

Mahila Police Volunteers Scheme

In 2016, the Ministries of Women and Child Development and Home Affairs introduced the Mahila Police Volunteers scheme in all states and union territories. This program, sponsored by the central government, aims to facilitate communication between the police and local communities in order to enhance the police's involvement in cases of crime.

⁵⁷'Fimoney,' available at:<https://fi.money/blog/posts>(last visited on 11june2023).

Under this initiative, Mahila Police Volunteers (MPVs) play a crucial role in serving as a link between the public and the police. They strive to eradicate a number of crimes against women, including as dowry harassment, underage marriage, domestic violence, and abuse. Additionally, scheme promotes a secure environment that encourages women to join the police force.

SWADHAR Greh

Introduced in 2018, this is among the women's empowerment schemes implemented by the Indian government. This initiative's primary goals are to ensure social and economic, and health stability, along with providing housing, food, and clothing support. The program also offers legal assistance to women and empowers them to proactively reintegrate into society.

STEP (Support to Training and Employment Program for Women)

The Ministry of Women and Child Development first presented the STEP scheme as a "Central Sector Scheme" between 1986 and 1987. underwent a revision in December 2014. The primary objective of this government-sponsored initiative is to provide women with job security and skill development training. The scheme offers financial support to institutions and organizations to conduct programmes for women's training.

Mahila Shakti Kendras (MSK)

Introduced in India in 2017, Mahila Shakti Kendra is a prominent women's empowerment initiative. It aims to provide women with integrated support services in one centralized location, enabling them to enhance their skills, secure employment, and enhance their digital literacy. This programme is active at the federal, state, and local levels, among others.⁵⁸

The government intends to reach out to the 115 districts with the greatest rates of poverty by establishing 920 Mahila Shakti Kendras. The program's goal is to give women access to a range of resources, such as good healthcare, education, work prospects, and counselling services.

⁵⁸ 'Fimoney,' available at: <https://fi.money/blog/posts/list-of-women-empowerment-schemes-in-india> (last visited on 11 June 2023).

Rajiv Gandhi National Creche Scheme

The national childcare programme, introduced by the Indian government in 2006, aims to cater to the needs of children belonging to working mothers by offering a range of facilities. This initiative provides working mothers with childcare services, concentrating on enhancing their nutritional and health status. Additionally, this programme for women's empowerment promotes the physical, social, and overall development of children, while also raising awareness among parents about childcare practices and methods to enhance their child's well-being.

NARI ADALATS, WOMEN CELL

An organizational unit, known as the women cell, was established to facilitate the work being conducted among women. The women cell was allocated a well-equipped office space. Staff members involved in legal aid activities were transferred to the cell, and a few new workers were recruited. Both existing and new workers received orientation to adapt to new challenges. Shortly after its formation, the women cell began developing strategies to support married women in need. One notable initiative was the implementation of Nari Adalat (women's court), initially scheduled for the 24th of each month, but later changed to the 10th. Influential individuals from the victims' community are invited to Nari Adalat to address the problems faced by the victims and seek solutions.

Since its establishment, the women cell has placed significant importance on documentation. Every case is carefully registered, and detailed records are maintained, including information gathered during field visits to verify the facts. This thorough documentation facilitates the effective follow-up of cases. The women cell maintains an updated repository of cases. Additionally, a female lawyer has been hired by the cell to provide legal guidance and advice on the legal aspects of various cases.

LEGISLATION PROTECTING WOMEN REPRESENTATIVES

The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (PREVENTION, PROHIBITION and REDRESSAL) Act, 2013,

The government passed the Act in 2013 to shield women from sexual harassment at work in reaction to the precedent-setting Vishakha v. State of Rajasthan case. Therefore, it is considered

sexual harassment if someone asks you for sexual favours at work, makes sexually suggestive comments, whistles or sings pornographic songs while staring at you, touches you improperly, or exhibits pornography. Every office or branch with 10 or more employees is required to create an internal complaints committee, and women have the right to report such instances to it. The District Officer must also set up a Local Complaints Committee in each district and, if necessary, at the block level. It is significant to highlight that sexual harassment is covered by section 354A of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), which entails a one- to three-year prison term.

PREVENTION OF ATROCITIES ACT, 1989

This Act's main goal is to stop atrocities against members of the scheduled caste from happening. It lays out guidelines for the prosecution of such crimes and the victim rehabilitation. In response to a court ruling that mandated prior approval before the arrest of the accused, the Act was recently amended to reinforce its effectiveness. The amendments restored the previous safeguards and protections provided by the Act.

50% RESERVATION FOR WOMEN

Over the years, women's representation in the Indian parliament has been steadily rising. In the most recent central elections, which were held in 2019, women made up 14.3% of the members of parliament. This percentage is relatively low when compared to other nations, such as the United States, where women make up 32% of parliamentarians, and Bangladesh, where women make up 21%. 21 states have included provisions for 50% reservation of seats for women in their respective State Panchayati Raj Acts, including Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarkhand, Karnataka, Punjab, Madhya Pradesh, Kerala, Rajasthan, Telangana, Tamil Nadu, Sikkim, Tripura, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Odisha, and Maharashtra⁵⁹. Below is a list of all the states and union territories in the nation, broken down by the number of elected women representatives in PRIs.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ 'Pibgov,' available at: <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1776866> (last visited on 3 June 2023).

⁶⁰ 'Pibgov,' available at: <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1658145> (last visited on 1 June 2023).

State / UTs	Total PRI Representatives	Total EWRs
Andaman & Nicobar Islands	858	306
Andhra Pradesh	156050	78,025
Arunachal Pradesh	9383	3,658
Assam	26754	14,609
Bihar	136573	71,046
Chhattisgarh	170465	93,392
Dadra & Nagar Haveli	147	47
Daman & Diu	192	92
Goa	1555	571
Gujarat	144080	71,988
Haryana	70035	29,499
Himachal Pradesh	28723	14,398
Jammu & Kashmir	39850	13,224
Jharkhand	59638	30,757
Karnataka	101954	51,030
Kerala	18372	9,630
Ladakh	NA	NA
Lakshadweep	110	41
Madhya Pradesh	392981	196490

Maharashtra	240635	128677
Manipur	1736	880
Odisha	107487	56,627
Puducherry	NA	NA
Punjab	100312	41,922
Rajasthan	126271	64,802
Sikkim	1153	580
Tamil Nadu	106450	56,407
Telangana	103468	52,096
Tripura	6646	3,006
Uttar Pradesh	913417	304538
Uttarakhand	62796	35,177
West Bengal	59229	30,458
Total	3187320	1453973

- Can Nagaland breach Constitutional mandate for 33% women reservation in local bodies
The Nagaland Government could potentially violate the constitutional requirement of one-third reservation for women in municipal and town council elections by repealing the Nagaland Municipal Act 2001, according to the Supreme Court's request for information from the federal government. The court emphasised that even while the state had made use of special provisions under Article 371A of the Indian Constitution, it had been unable to show that there were Naga community-specific social, religious, or customary practises that prevented women from participating in decision-making.

According to Article 31A of the constitution, the state of Nagaland is exempt from legislation passed by the parliament in regards to its social or religious customs, customary law and procedure, the administration of civil and criminal justice involving its customary law, and the ownership and transfer of land and its resources.

The Nagaland State Election Commission was ordered by the court's prior judgement to conduct local body elections with a 33% female reservation. The bench was debating a contempt complaint charging non-compliance with that order. The Nagaland Municipal Act and its regulations had been abolished, according to the state electoral commission, leaving it with no choice but to call off the poll.⁶¹

- Reservation of local bodies election cannot exceed more than 50% - High Court
- The Madras High Court ruled that the percentage of reservations for women in urban local governments cannot exceed 50%, invalidating a government decree for elections to the Greater Chennai Corporation. In the Greater Chennai Corporation, 105 of the 200 seats were reserved for women under the contested Government order, which was based on zone allocation. In a petition filed in opposition to this verdict, attorney Parthiban claimed that the Government order exceeded the 50% cap required by the Constitution. In his case against the verdict, Prabhakaran said that it was discriminatory against him and unlawful to give seats to women in the Chennai Corporation. Prabhakaran, speaking on behalf of the petitioner, claimed that 50% of the seats in local bodies were set aside for women as a result of an amendment to the municipal regulations in 2016. The phrase "not less than 50%" should not be taken to suggest that reservations for women can exceed the 50% level, according to Prabhakaran, who evaluated the seat reservations exceeding 50% in the Chennai Corporation⁶².

Only 84 seats in the general category should have been granted in accordance with the 50% reservation criteria for women. R. Shanmugasundaram, the Tamil Nadu Advocate General, argued that Rule 4(3) of the Tamil Nadu Municipal Corporation Act served as the foundation for the

⁶¹ 'Livelaw,' <https://www.livelaw.in/top-stories/can-nagaland-breach-constitutional-mandate-for-33-women-reservation-in-local-bodies-by-repealing-its-municipal-act>(last visited at june23 2023)

⁶² 'Timesofindia,' available at:<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chennai/reservation-for-women>(last visited on 6june2023).

government order (GO) and that it was proportionately based on that rule. The bench, however, dismissed these arguments and ruled that the GO had broken Article 243T of the Constitution. Furthermore, the constitutionality of the zone-based municipality division made it impossible to uphold it. *In K.Krishnamurthy and others vs union of India and another*, the writ petitions to assess the constitutional validity of certain provisions of the reservation policy laid out for the creation of elected local self-government organisations. Arguments have been made specifically about two issues: the rules permitting reservations in favour of underprivileged groups and the laws allowing the reserve of chair posts in elected local self-government entities. These clauses have come under fire for allegedly violating fundamental values like democracy and equality, which are seen as essential elements of the basic structure concept. Comparing reservations in local self-government to higher education and public employment reveals how substantially different their nature and goals are. Affirmative action is founded constitutionally on unique and separate concepts under Articles 243-D and 243-T that are distinct from those guiding reservation policies under Articles 15(4) and 16(4).⁶³

Articles 243-D and 243-T(6) are constitutionally legitimate and upheld because they allow state legislatures to designate seats and chair positions for members of underprivileged groups. If there are issues with excessive reservations, special legal actions against state laws should be taken to resolve them.

In *M.J.Simon vs Union of India*, the lawsuit filed to contest the modification that added a female-only reservation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). The knowledgeable attorney for the petitioners claimed that this sex-based amendment was in dispute. The matter was taken up by the Supreme Court for consideration since it is the highest court in the nation and has the power to interpret the Indian Constitution.

The constitutionality of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, as well as the related amendments to the Kerala Panchayat Raj Act of 1994 and the Kerala Municipality Act of 1994, were contested by the petitioner in this case. The petitioner claimed that the amendment's gender-based basis for introducing reservation in favour of women violated article 15, the principle of

⁶³ Indiankanoon, available at: <https://indiankanoon.org> (last visited on 3june2023).

equality contained in the Indian Constitution. The modification allowing for women's reservation was, according to the Supreme Court of India, based on gender. The amendment was a particular step to remedy historical discrimination and the underrepresentation of women in politics, the court noted. The change was also determined by the court to be a gender-based classification that was acceptable, stressing that it was not discriminatory. The court also acknowledged that the revision was in line with India's commitments to advance gender equality abroad. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, as well as the related amendments to the Kerala Panchayat Raj Act of 1994 and the Kerala Municipality Act of 1994, were therefore upheld by the court as being legal.

In *Udhay Shankar ohja vs Jharkhand state election commission*, the petitioner contested the Panchayat's decision to reserve six of its twelve wards for members of the STs and SCs. The petitioner argued that this reservation lacked objective standards and was arbitrary, and that it did not follow the principles of the Indian Constitution. On the other hand, the respondent contended that the constitutional requirements were followed and that it was essential to ensure the representation of STs and SCs in the Panchayat that seats be reserved for them. The court came to the conclusion that the reservation of seats for STs and SCs was necessary to ensure their representation in the Panchayat and that it met with the Constitution of India's provisions. The court also found that the reservation was founded on legitimate standards and was not arbitrary. As a result, the court dismissed the case and affirmed the Panchayat's seat reservation policy for STs and SCs.

In the case of *John Joseph vs State of Kerala*, the petitioner, provisions 12(1) and subrules (1A) and (1B) of the Kerala Panchayat Raj (conduct of elections) rules, 1995 and the Kerala Municipality (conduct of election) rules, 1995 were ultravires and also opposed to the intention of the parliament in enacting the 73rd and 74th constitutional Amendments. These rules were promulgated by the state of Kerala under the Kerala Panchayat Raj Act, 1994, and Kerala Municipality Act. The petition is rejected because the court determined that the petitioner is not entitled to the relief requested in the writ petition.

In *Nilesh singh vs State of U.P and 4 others*, the petitioner was chosen to serve as the gram

pradhan of the hamlet of Ahara in the Tehsil of Dhanghatta in the District of Sant Kabir Nagar on 3 May 2021. The Indian Constitution's Article 243-E specifies that his five-year term as gram pradhan would end on May 3, 2026. Unauthorised announcement, however, resulted in the establishment of a transitional area known as Hasar Bazar, District Sant Kabir Nagar, Nagar Panchayat. The respondents want to organise elections for the Nagar Panchayat, Haisar Bazar, and it also includes the area of gram panchayat Bahara, of which the petitioner is gram pradhan. The petitioner will thus no longer serve as pradhan of Gram Panchayat Ahara. Due to the constitutional framework and the requirements of the statute, the petitioner's Gram Panchayat had been abolished. The petitioner is now without the legal authority to object to the election of the recently constituted Nagar Panchayat or to continue acting as pradhan. Because the petition lacked merit, it was rejected.

CHAPTER – VI

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

There are now many more women engaging in Indian government mainly to the Panchayati Raj institutions by inclusion of women's reservations and subsequent increases in quotas by different states. In most states, the fourth or fifth generation of Panchayats is presently in place more than 25 years after the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendment acts were passed. The initial shaky start of women's leadership in the Panchayati setup has shown clear signs of becoming firmly established and recognized.

However, women in the Panchayat setup still face numerous challenges that prevent them from realizing their full potential. These difficulties include patriarchy, insufficient abilities, a lack of confidence, and term rotation. The federal and state governments are actively making substantial efforts to boost the standing of elected women legislators in light of these challenges. These efforts include initiatives such as capacity building, promoting networks, and fostering convergence between self-help groups and Panchayati Raj institutions.

Additional steps must be taken urgently to strengthen the position of elected women representatives (EWRs) in Panchayati Raj institutions. These measures can include providing 50% reservation for women in all states, implementing term rotation after a minimum of two terms,

offering refresher trainings, organizing exposure visits, and providing mentoring and support to EWRs. Through the joint efforts of NGOs, self-help organisations, legislations for women rights and schemes made by government to empower women, National commission for women and the government, EWRs in PRIs will make significant contributions towards achieving national goals such as Sashakta Bharat (Empowered India), The seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), to which India is committed, and Samriddha Bharat (Prosperous India).

In conclusion, women now have the chance to demonstrate their leadership, decision-making, and administrative skills by means of the creation of Panchayati Raj Institutions but not in all states, there are states in which women are still not empowered. The 73rd and 74th Amendment of the constitution is for the whole nation but still there are states in which women are not empowered in this 33% reservations. The states like Bihar, Arunachal Pradesh, Rajasthan, Jharkhand, Andhra Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Chattisgarh and Assam are low literacy rate states in India, due to lack of education even though reservations given to women they are not able to empower themselves and males of these states are not giving opportunity for women to empower themselves. The 73rd and 74th constitutional amendment acts are a noteworthy accomplishment since they give women a platform to show off their strengths. Women are now far more powerful since the passage of the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments. This constitutional amendment, implemented in 1992, has been a major step forward for women who were previously confined to domestic roles. However, it has been observed that in certain regions of the country, this system is dominated by a privileged section of society. To ensure that the terms of the amendment are successfully implemented, the government ought to mandate increased financial, administrative, and political assistance for women. In order to enable the efficient execution of the measures contained in the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments, the government should also promote research and development.

It is important to recognize that empowering women is a gradual and self-sustaining process. By providing women with support systems and opportunities such as reservations, we have the potential to initiate a sustainable chain of actions that can gradually dismantle existing gender power dynamics and enable females to rebel from societal constraints.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Several actions must be taken in order to increase the representation of women in government:

- Steps should be taken to implement 50% reservation for women in all states.
- In order to lead and inform the people about the many requirements of the Act, elected officials in these organisations must have a basic understanding of literacy.
- The importance of literacy in teaching and enlightening rural women about the political system. As a result, efforts should be undertaken to raise the literacy rates of women, especially in rural areas.
- Women's leadership and communication abilities must be developed if social mobilisation is to be improved.
- Women should be given training so they can interact with various levels of local self-government in the state and express their rights in the Panchayat.
- Women should be familiarized with the rural/women/child development programs implemented by the state and central governments.
- Party politics should be avoided during planning, especially when choosing where to put various projects. Effective project implementation is required to strengthen decentralised planning.
- These measures will empower women, encourage their active participation in governance, and enable them to overcome cultural barriers and improve their socio-economic conditions.
- It is crucial to methodically increase awareness among rural women, providing them with the knowledge and abilities needed to successfully carry out their new roles as local legislators.
- In order to better comprehend the roles and different developmental programmes, panchayati leaders and the general people should also be given publications relevant to the provisions of rural development. Furthermore, panchayati leaders and the general public should have access to comprehensive guidelines for rural development programmes.
- Women who work in panchayats should receive training that incorporates their local knowledge and actively involves them in the creation of a framework that will allow them to analyse and comprehend their roles and responsibilities in accordance with the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments.

- In the current digital age, it is crucial to prioritize the role of technology in empowering women across various domains, including politics. As part of the Digital India initiative, female representatives in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) should actively engage in utilizing technology for their personal growth as well as for the development of their villages.
- Discussions concerning issues at the village level should involve both men and women without any gender bias.
- Sexual discrimination should be universally condemned and appropriately punished at all levels.
- The establishment of a state-level training college should be considered to provide political training specifically for women. This would create opportunities for women to freely engage and interact with other ward members and sarpanches.
- Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) should put in significant efforts to promote the political empowerment of women by organizing more awareness camps.
- There should be some incentives offered to encourage participation. Monetary incentives could be given to ward members and sarpanches, as the current remuneration is insufficient to expect significant commitment.
- Salaries for sarpanches should be increased to recognize their responsibilities.
- Similarly, village ward members should receive a regular monthly payment.
- Strict rules must be implemented to ensure that no outsiders are present during panchayat meetings. If necessary, gatecrashers should be physically removed. This creates a more inclusive and open environment for women should take an active role in the meetings.
- Women friendly panchayat has to be made for women to work independently. So that women friendly panchayat awards will be won by many panchayats
- Mahila mandals should be established in every village, with the full assistance of the National Commission for Women.
- Women MLA's and MP's should frequently visit the women representatives to solve the issues faced by them and be the motivation for elected women representatives in grass root level.

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