



Women Sarpanches: Challenges and Impact

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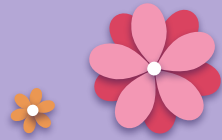
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Abstract



The historical and societal context of India has significantly influenced the rights and empowerment of women, with colonial and patriarchal values, and legislative reforms shaping their status. Despite progressive laws and constitutional guarantees, women in India continue to face challenges such as gender-based violence, discrimination, and limited access to education, employment, and economic opportunities. The present research explores the experiences, challenges and impact of female sarpanches (village-council heads) in Maharashtra, India. The purpose of this research is to understand the barriers they face, their strategies for overcoming these challenges and develop a broader understanding of gender dynamics in Indian politics. The study employs a qualitative research design and uses purposive sampling. Data were collected through a survey and telephonic interviews. The survey gathered demographic information and insights into the challenges these women face, while the interviews provided deeper context on their backgrounds, achievements, support systems, and future aspirations. Thematic analysis of the interview data revealed several themes: the role of familial and community support, education and training, the challenges of balancing domestic responsibilities with public duties, and the resilience and determination of these women in creating change. It was observed that female sarpanches in Maharashtra face challenges such as societal resistance, personal sacrifices, and limited resources, but have achieved success in education, healthcare, community engagement and infrastructure development. Overall, this research highlights the need for targeted support, training programs and policies to empower more women to participate in local governance effectively while underscoring the transformative potential of female leadership in rural governance.


Keywords: *women sarpanches, patriarchy, work-family conflict, interviews, women leaders*





Rationale of the study

In the Indian context, while the introduction of constitutional amendments like the 73rd and 74th have increased female representation in local government, the real impact of this political empowerment on women's overall rights remains underexplored. Existing literature often focuses on statistical data, such as the number of women in politics or the passing of gender-equality laws, but there is insufficient qualitative research that delves into how these reforms translate into real-world impact for women and the unique challenges and successes faced by women in rural governance. This research was chosen to address the gap in understanding the real impact of political empowerment on women's rights in rural India, especially at the grassroots level. Moreover, by focusing on female Sarpanches, this research brings attention to grassroots leadership and highlights the importance of women's voices in decision-making processes that directly affect their communities. This research is essential for shaping future policies that promote the inclusion of women in governance at all levels and also offers a lens through which progress can be assessed and areas for improvement identified. Ultimately, this research aims to provide meaningful insights into how women's political empowerment can be a transformative force in addressing gender-based disparities and how it can lead to tangible change in their communities and help reduce the gender gap in rural India.





Introduction



1) The Position of Women in Colonial India (1858-1947)

- **Historical Context:**

Women's rights in India during the British colonial period were shaped by patriarchal norms and colonial agendas. The British Raj introduced several reforms, but many were motivated by the desire to control and 'civilize' the population, rather than promote genuine gender equality.


- **Social Reforms:**

While social reformers like *Raja Ram Mohan Roy*, *Jyotirao Phule*, and *Pandita Ramabai* highlighted women's issues, the reforms were slow and often resisted.

Notable reforms like the *abolition of Sati (1829)* and the *Hindu Widow Remarriage Act (1856)* were significant.

- **Impact of Patriarchy:**

Despite these reforms, women were largely confined to traditional domestic roles, unorganized labor, and subjected to regressive practices like child marriage, dowry, and purdah. This reinforced their economic dependence on male family members, limiting their societal roles





Introduction



2) Post-Independence Developments and Legal Progress

- **The Shift After Independence (1947):**


With the end of British rule, India saw the introduction of more progressive legal frameworks aimed at improving women's status. The Indian Constitution (1950) marked a turning point, promoting principles of gender equality through *Articles 14, 15, and 16*, which ensured equality before the law, prohibition of discrimination on the basis of sex, and equal opportunities in employment.

- **Key Legislations:**

Laws like the *Hindu Marriage Act (1955)* and *Hindu Succession Act (1956)* gave women the right to divorce, remarry, and inherit property. These marked significant steps toward gender equality, yet their implementation faced cultural resistance.

- **Economic and Social Barriers:**

Despite legal progress, many women continued to face barriers in accessing education, employment, and property rights. Social stigmas, cultural biases, and harassment made it difficult for women to exercise their legal rights, leaving them vulnerable and marginalized within the patriarchal structure.





Introduction



3) Women's Political Empowerment and Ongoing Challenges

- **Political Empowerment as a Tool for Change:**


Recognizing the need for women's representation in governance, *the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments* (1992) mandated reservations for women in local government bodies (Panchayati Raj Institutions). These amendments ensured that at least one-third of seats were reserved for women, significantly increasing their political participation.

- **Progress in Representation:**

Women now hold around *44% of seats in local bodies*, a major step forward. Political empowerment has provided women with a platform to voice their concerns, influence policies, and challenge gender-based disparities.

- **Ongoing Challenges:**

However, issues like manipulation of dowry laws, domestic violence, workplace harassment, and unequal wages persist. Critics argue that the gap between progressive laws and their enforcement remains wide. While states like Kerala and Tamil Nadu have made significant strides in gender equality, states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh still lag behind, highlighting the uneven progress across India.






Methodology



1.1 Participants & sampling technique-

The present study was conducted among 7 female sarpanches from the state of Maharashtra. The sampling technique employed was purposive sampling



1.2 Instrumentation-


A survey was created using Google forms to gather the demographic information from the respondents. Additionally, the survey also asked to report the challenges they are facing as women sarpanches. In order to conduct the interviews, a set of questions was created to understand their background information, challenges and supports, achievements and impact, training and development, future aspirations and recommendations.

1.3 Research design and analysis approach-

The present study makes use of a Qualitative research design. Thematic analysis was conducted to analyze the respondent interviews.

1.4 Data collection procedure-

Informed consent was sought from the participants and the interviews were done telephonically. Each interview lasted between 30 to 45 minutes. The responses were in Marathi and were later transcribed in English. The survey form was made available to all respondents before the interview.



Results

Table 1 shows the theme for family and external support

Theme	Codes	Respondents	Description
<i>Family and External Support</i>	Family support	R1, R2, R4, R6, R7	Respondents who received support from family members such as in laws, daughters, etc.
	External support	R1, R2, R3, R5	Respondents received support from villagers, community members etc.
	Husband support	R2, R4, R7	Respondents received support from their spouse

Table 2 shows the theme of motivation/inspiration

Theme	Codes	Respondents	Description
<i>Motivation/Inspiration</i>	Interested in bringing about developmental change	R1 R7	Development changes which lead to the progress of the village
	Motivation from family members	R2, R4, R6	Family members such as husband, mother-in-law, etc. have been supportive in the journey
	Community encouragement	R3, R4, R5 R7	The villagers and other community members have been a source of inspiration
	Leadership experience in other capacities	R5	Taking on a leadership role before being a sarpanch

Table 3 shows the theme of education

Theme	Codes	Respondents	Description
<i>Education</i>	Educational impact	R2, R3 R4 R5 R6 R7	Education can help in personality development, giving direction to thoughts and leading to growth of the individual
	Couldn't complete education	R1, R5	Whether due to personal, societal, or economic reasons, being unable to complete their education
	High education level	R2, R3	Respondents accomplished high levels of education

Results

Table 4 shows the theme of problems faced by the respondents

Theme	Codes	Respondents	Description
<i>Problems</i>	Roads	R1, R3	Broken and downtrodden roads
	Water scarcity	R2, R3, R5, R6 R7	Lack of adequate water supply in the area
	Wastewater management	R1,R4 R6	Difficulties in managing the wastewater
	Waste management	R4, R5 R6	Managing waste such as garbage can be a challenging problem
	Electricity	R1	Most villages lack 24 hour power supply
	Less trees	R5	The cutting down of trees in villages is a rising problem

Table 5 shows the theme of coping with stress and sacrifices made by the respondents

Theme	Codes	Respondents	Description
<i>Coping with stress and sacrifices</i>	Household duties neglected	R1,R2,R3,R4,R5	Work-family conflict which results in the respondent struggling to fulfill their household duties while managing their work responsibilities
	Children neglected	R2,R3,R4,R5 R7	As mothers, respondents felt they were unable to give substantial attention to their child
	Personal well-being ignored	R1, R2,R4 R7	Due to both work and household responsibilities, respondents end up neglecting their own health
	Prioritize village	R1, R4	Putting their duty to the village and its residents before household and person well-being

Table 6 shows the theme of government support received by the respondents

Theme	Codes	Respondents	Description
<i>Government support</i>	Demands fulfilled by the govt (Satisfaction with the govt)	R2 R1 R3 R5 R7	Respondents were satisfied with government's response to the village needs
	Overworked for less money	R3	Respondents complain about heavy workload with limited compensation
	Not enough govt funds	R6	Respondents unsatisfied with lack of monetary support

Results

Table 7 shows the developmental achievements and accomplishments of the respondents

Theme	Codes	Respondents	Description
<i>Developmental Achievements and accomplishments</i>	Infrastructure	R1 2 3 4 5 7	Such as toilets, roads, buildings.
	Health	R1 5 6	Healthcare facilities include doctors and hospitals present in the area
	Education	R 1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Establishment of educational institutions in the vicinity for children of different age groups
	Environment	R 1 2 5 6 7	Planting more trees, preserving water, taking care of the natural resources.
	Awareness	R 1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Spreading awareness regarding difficult and different topics such as menstrual health, vocational training etc.
	Employment and empowerment	R 1 4 5	Working for generating employment for the residents
	Electricity and water	R 2 5 6	Jal Jeevan scheme has been incorporated

Table 8 shows the future direction that the respondents aim to incorporate in their villages

Theme	Codes	Respondents	Description
<i>Future direction</i>	Infrastructure	R1 2	To bring about change in the infrastructure such as relying more on solar energy, more security etc.
	Health	R 5	Improving the healthcare set up
	Education	R 4 5	Improving and building on the educational facilities available
	Environment	R1 2 3 4 5 6	Via planting more trees, saving water, managing waste adequately etc.
	Awareness	R 4	Around difficult topics such as menstruation .
	Employment and empowerment	R 1 2 7	To generate more employment opportunities for the villagers
	Electricity and water	R 1 2 6 7	To improve the availability and accessibility towards power supply and clean water

Table 9 shows the recognition and awards received by the respondents

Theme	Codes	Respondents	Description
<i>Recognition/Awards</i>	Not received	R1 R2 R3 R6	Have not yet received any award for their work
	Received	R5 R7	Have been recognized for their work
	Invited to the Parliament	R4	Have been given the honor of being invited to the parliament due to their quality of work



Discussion




Female Sarpanches faced immense difficulties in coming to power, often struggling against deep-rooted gender biases and societal resistance. Once in leadership, they encountered significant challenges in balancing their responsibilities, earning respect from their peers, and dedicating substantial time and effort to ensure their work was accomplished effectively. The present study made use of qualitative interviews and performed thematic analysis to understand the issues and challenges faced by women sarpanches in India.

According to *Table 1*, the theme identified is that of family and external support wherein 5 respondents reported receiving family support (N=5), 4 of them received external support (N=4) and 3 of them specifically reported gaining support from husband (N=3).

According to *Table 2*, the theme identified is motivation/inspiration. The theme primarily looks into what and who has inspired the respondents into stepping into power in the role of a sarpanch. Within the theme, the codes identified were interested in bringing about developmental change (N=2), motivation from family members (N=3), community encouragement (N=4) and leadership experience in other capacities (N=1).

In *Table 3*, the theme identified is education. The codes identified were belief in the power of education (N=6), high education levels (N=2) and inability to complete education (N=2). *Table 4* shows the theme of challenges faced by the sarpanches. The codes identified were problems of roads (N=2), water scarcity (N=5), wastewater management (N=3), waste management (N=3), electricity (N=1), less trees (N=1).





Discussion



According to *Table 5*, the theme identified is coping with stress and sacrifices made by the respondents. Within the theme, the codes identified were negligence of household duties (N=5), children feeling neglected (N=5), ignorance of personal well-being(N=4), prioritizing the village by putting their duty first (N=2)


Table 6 shows the theme of govt. support received by the respondents. The codes identified were satisfaction with the govt(N=5), not enough govt funds(N=1) and overworked for less money(N=1). *Table 7* talks about the developmental achievements and accomplishments of the respondents. During their tenure as a leader, findings revealed that most sarpanches worked in for improving the infrastructure (N = 6), health(N=3), education(N=7), environment (N= 5), employment and empowerment (N=3), essential facilities like electricity and water supply for their village (N = 3), spreading awareness(N=7)

Table 8 shows the future direction the respondents aim to incorporate in their village. They want to further improve the infrastructure (N = 2), health(N=1), education(N=2), environment (N= 6), employment and empowerment (N=3), essential facilities like electricity and water supply for their village (N = 4), spread awareness (N=1)

Table 9 talks about the recognition/awards received by the sarpanches for their work. 4 of them reported receiving recognition while 2 of them didn't.

When it comes to govt training programs for women sarpanches, almost all of them reported attending Yashada Pune and Talegaon's program and appreciated its effectiveness


3 respondents mentioned receiving no help or support from any NGO. One of them stated receiving help from SNS, Tata Motors, CSR funds and Naam foundation while another one mentioned Bosch and Janaki Devi Bajaj





Conclusion

While women have historically been marginalized, the current landscape shows an increasing number stepping into leadership roles, such as that of the sarpanch. The findings of this study highlight the resilience and dedication of female sarpanches in Maharashtra, who have successfully balanced household responsibilities with the demands of public office. Despite facing numerous challenges, including societal resistance and limited resources, these women have made meaningful contributions to their communities—improving education, healthcare, and infrastructure. Their efforts underscore the transformative potential of female leadership in rural governance, demonstrating that with proper support, women can not only overcome barriers but also drive significant change at the grassroots level.





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