Original Article

Empowering Women Leaders in Rural India - A Qualitative Study of Women Sarpanches' Experiences

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Abstract - *Patriarchy, colonial values, and legislative reforms have profoundly impacted women's rights and empowerment in India. Although there are constitutional and legal protections and progressive laws in place, women in India continue to face gender bias, discrimination and limited access to education and employment. The present study explores the experiences, perspectives, impact and unique challenges female sarpanches (village-council heads) face in Maharashtra, India. Developing a greater understanding of gender dynamics in Indian politics and understanding the obstacles they face and their strategies for overcoming these challenges is the main purpose of this study. The study utilizes a qualitative research design and uses purposive sampling. Surveys and telephonic interviews were used to gather data. The survey collected demographic information, while the interviews provided elaborate insights into their backgrounds, achievements, support systems, and future aspirations. Several themes emerged after thematic analysis: the role of family and community encouragement, the importance of education and training, work-family conflict and the remarkable resilience and dedication of these women in creating change. Although they face significant hurdles such as societal resistance, personal sacrifices, and limited resources, they have improved their communities' education, healthcare, environmental conservation, and infrastructural progress. This research underscores the need for targeted support, training programs and policies to motivate more women to participate in local governance effectively while highlighting the transformative potential of female leadership in rural governance.*

Keywords - Interviews, Women leaders, Women sarpanches, Work-family conflict, Patriarchy.

1. Introduction

The Panchayati Raj system was introduced in 1993, allowing women to take active local government roles as elected officials. The Sarpanch, who heads the village council (the Gram Panchayat), is responsible for managing day-to-day local issues like infrastructure, health, and education. This person acts as a primary point of contact between the villagers and the higher levels of government. Focusing on women's sarpanches is important because they face different challenges than their male counterparts. Nevertheless, women in these leadership positions bring valuable perspectives and solutions that can greatly benefit rural families. They tend to address gender-specific challenges and work towards more inclusive community well-being. Over the last few decades, the power and roles of women sarpanches in India have changed significantly. By looking at the historical context of women's roles, we can better understand their challenges and recognize the importance of their contributions to modern governance.

1.1. The Position of Women in Colonial India (1858-1947):

The British Raj heavily influenced the economic, legal, social and political position and the rights of Indian women during the colonial period (1858-1947). Numerous reforms that focused on improving women's rights were introduced. However, they were to fulfil colonial administrative needs (inspired by patriarchal and colonial values) and support the interests of colonial rulers and native elite men rather than actual concern for women's rights.

These reforms were often slow and faced resistance (Liddle & Joshi, 1985). Meanwhile, women in colonial India were greatly confined to traditional roles, domestic responsibilities and unorganized hard labour such as farming, crafts and household industries. Access to education and employment was minimal, and they had to bear unjust practices like child marriage, dowry, purdah and economic dependence on the male family members.

Key social activists and reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Savitribai and Jyotirao Phule, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, and Pandita Ramabai underscored the plight of women and strived for legislative changes. Certain positive reforms were introduced too, which did benefit women, such as the Sati abolition through the Sati Regulation Act of 1829, led by Raja Ram Mohan Roy, which criminalized the horrific practice of widow burning and the Hindu Remarriage Act of

1856, which legalized the remarriage of Hindu Widows, earlier considered as a taboo. (Nandwani & Roychowdhury, 2023)

1.2. Post-Independence Developments and Legal Progress

Throughout history, women have always been looked down upon as inferior to men and were confined to domestic chores and childcare. Social barriers like these have significantly reduced their access to education, employment and property rights. Moreover, they have also been subjected to harassment, violence and abuse, often leaving them vulnerable and marginalized. This societal framework, combined with a lack of legislative protections, has curtailed their freedoms while increasing their social and economic reliance on male family members. Amidst these struggles, the need for political empowerment was identified as a way to hear their unheard voices and address their predicaments. Women could advocate their rights, change policies, address gender bias and promote a more inclusive society through representation in decision-making bodies. Promoting women's issues has been considered a means of gaining electoral support. Economically, enhancing women's rights is crucial in increasing their involvement in labor and contributing to the country's overall growth. The Indian government was also pressured by international influence, specifically from global human rights conventions like the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), to improve women's rights. After the independence of India in 1947, the status of women s welfare in India saw major changes. Women were granted equal rights to divorce, remarry, and the rights to inherit ancestral property through the Hindu Marriage Act (1955) and the Hindu Succession Act (1956). The Indian Constitution, adopted in 1950 promoted gender equality principles strongly. Articles 14, 15 and 16 of the Constitution granted equality before the law, equality of opportunity in public employment and prohibition of discrimination based on sex.

1.3. Current Scenario and Ongoing Challenges

Various progressive amendments and legislation to improve women's rights were discussed. For instance, the Dowry Prohibition Act (1961) made giving, taking, or demanding dowry a criminal offense. Its goal was to reduce the economic burden on the bride's family and protect women from dowry related harassment and abuse. Some others include the Maternity Benefit Act (1961), which entitles them to get maternity benefits, the Amendment to the Hindu Succession Act (2005), the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005) to tackle domestic abuse and provide protection orders for women., the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act (2013). The Equal Remuneration Act of 1976 provides equal pay for equal work, and the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act (2013) mandates the establishment of internal committees to handle workplace harassment, thus supporting women's rights in the professional sector (Nayar et al., 2023). It is worth noting that

the Indian government has made a consistent and ongoing effort to provide women's rights, notably in the political sector. Women were granted universal suffrage in 1950, but their political engagement has slowly increased, with women's representation in parliament remaining below 15% in most countries (Sindhuja & Murugan, 2017). To further elevate women's political empowerment and representation in India, reservations for seats in local government bodies, known as Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), were introduced. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments enacted in 1992 made it compulsory for at least one-third of the total seats in local government bodies to be reserved for women, thus bringing them to the forefront of local development and grassroots leadership (Khan, 2023).

Constitutional rights and reservations in local governments have led to a notable increase in women's representation and participation in politics, with data showing that about 44% of total seats in local bodies are currently held by women (Women's Reservation Act, n.d.). However, factors like economic motivations lack adequate support structures. and inconsistent implementation has led to the misuse and manipulation of these laws primarily aimed at addressing dowry-related violence, domestic abuse, workplace harassment, and sexual offenses (Bahuguna, 2023). Laws have been criticized, and calls for reforms have been made. For example, false allegations under the Dowry Prohibition Act. Misusing these laws weakens their credibility and real purpose, making it more difficult for genuine victims to seek justice. Critics claim that these laws are insufficiently comprehensive and fail to address the underlying causes of gender discrimination and violence (Sinshupa, 2023; SreeKrishnaBharadwaj, 2016). A study mentioned that women continue to face significant challenges in politics, such as illiteracy and inexperience, overlooked opinions, low and delayed remuneration, difficulties in traveling long distances to attend meetings, and work-family conflict that limit them from fully excelling in their roles (Bhat & Amin, 2022). Some other barriers like cultural beliefs, lack of institutional support, violence against women, and lack of mutual support among women persist (Kurebwa, 2014). The inability to function independently in dealing with developmental issues due to local political parties exercising significant control over women panchayat members was seen in Kerala (Chathukulam & John, 2000).However, men are more motivated towards their political positions. This is due to the fact that men are more interested in leadership or political affairs, and women are passive decision makers and tend to follow the instructions of male family members like spouses or fathers (Monika & Baroda, 2023). Equal representation in politics has not yet fully been achieved. Elite men (men from dominant social and economic groups) continue to have a disproportionately high share of political office worldwide (Childs & Hughes, 2018). Bjarnegård (2013) held that informal institutions and recruitment practices that are biased towards men may be responsible for the continued dominance of men in politics.

Better support systems for women, including shelter, legal aid and counseling services, is imperative. States in India fare differently when it comes to the progress being made related to gender equality. A huge difference is seen between the northern states and southern states in most of the gender related indicators. States like Kerala and Tamil Nadu perform better, while states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh fall behind. States with better gender indicators have stronger policy enforcement and social support systems, while those with lower gender indicators tend to deal with challenges related to lack of awareness, patriarchy and weak implementation of laws (Srinivasan et al., 1998; Status Of Women And Gender Discrimination In India, 2013). The present scenario of women's rights in India indicates both progress and ongoing challenges. The laws have definitely contributed to a gradual shift in societal attitudes towards women and their rights. However, the gap between law and practice stays wide. While there have been positive developments in women's health, education, and economic opportunities, issues such as illiteracy, gender discrimination, cultural biases, weak enforcement, violence against women, unequal wages and limited social protections continue to exist.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Aim

The present study aims to understand the experiences of women sarpanches in rural Maharashtra, focusing on the challenges they face, their impact, and how they navigate leadership roles in rural communities.

2.2 Research Questions

The study addresses the following research questions:

- Are women sarpanches receiving adequate government funding and resources to implement community initiatives effectively?
- Do women sarpanches experience more significant work-family conflict than their male counterparts, and how does this impact their effectiveness as leaders?
- How do community members perceive the leadership of women sarpanches, and what level of support do they receive from their communities?
- Are the training programs provided by the government and NGOs effective in equipping women sarpanches with the necessary skills and knowledge?
- What measurable impacts have women sarpanches made in their villages regarding education, sanitation, health, and infrastructure?
- What systemic and cultural barriers hinder women from becoming sarpanches, and how can these be addressed?
- What motivates women to run for Sarpanch, and what are their long-term aspirations in leadership?

2.3. Participants and Sampling Technique

The present study was conducted among 13 female sarpanches from Maharashtra. The sampling technique employed was purposive sampling.

2.4. Instrumentation

A survey was created using Google Forms to gather demographic information from the respondents. The survey also asked the respondents to report the challenges they face as women sarpanches. Interviews of 13 respondents were conducted via telephone calls. Sarpanches were contacted telephonically to schedule interviews. Five sarpanches did not participate in the interview. 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.

2.5. Research Design and Analysis Approach

The present study makes use of a Qualitative research design. Thematic analysis was conducted to analyze the respondent interviews. The analysis was carried out manually. No software was utilized. This decision was undertaken keeping in mind that the respondents were only thirteen.

2.6. 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. Informed consent was sought from all the respondents.

3. Results

In Table 1, respondents were asked whether any other family members were involved in the panchayat, who provided support during their journey (such as friends or family), and what or who motivated them to pursue the position of Sarpanch.

The theme of family and external support comprises 3 codes: family support, external support and husband support. Five respondents held that they received support from family members, including in-laws, children, etc. However, *respondent 5* held that there was a lack of family support in helping her become a sarpanch.

"No one in the family was there. I was a simple farmer and housewife.*"*

5 respondents mentioned receiving external support, including help from villagers, community members, etc. Respondent 3 stated that.

"Gramsevak, leaders of the party in the village, and other members of the body helped me. No one from my family was there."

Table 2 shows the theme of *motivation/inspiration comprising four codes*: interested in bringing about

developmental change, motivation from family members, community encouragement and leadership experience in other capacities. 3 respondents stated that they were interested in initiating change and progress in their villages

Respondent 1 stated
"*I was interested in bringing developmental change. There were no female-oriented, feminist sarpanches before, and they had not done much development either. I wanted to make my village an ideal one through my work.*

Furthermore, Respondent 12 held the belief that
"*Earlier women sarpanches were only for namesake and signatures and did not know actual affairs of the village administration.*"

Additionally, 5 of them were motivated by their family members, while 3 of them also received encouragement from their community. 2 respondents mentioned carrying out leadership roles before becoming a sarpanch. In Table 3, the theme of education comprises four codes: belief in the impact of education, inability to complete education/less education level, high education level, and the ability to make independent decisions.

Three respondents stated they could not complete their education due to personal, societal, or economic reasons. 5 respondents accomplished higher levels of education. Moreover, 10 respondents firmly believed in the power of education to create a positive change.

Respondents held, "*I was interested in pursuing higher education but could not because I got married early at 18. In the village, there is no one to support women. If I get elected, I believe I can make them aware of the importance of education so their children can study and get better jobs.*"

" Everyone *told me you are well-educated, which is why you should stand for the post, and you can develop the village well. Before me, the women sarpanches were not educated. You should be well informed if you want to develop a village; hence, everyone believed I can do well.*"

"*I gained much knowledge through education on how to be independent, well informed and handle matters. It enhanced my decision-making skills.*"

Table 4 talks about the theme of common developmental challenges that comprises six codes that can be described as broken downtrodden roads, water scarcity, fewer trees, lack of electricity supply, and difficulties in managing wastewater and waste.

Different respondents stated that
"*Our village does not have a river, so we bring water from a different village about 6-7 kms away. We have enough water in the rainy season, but we face a shortage after Diwali and in summer. Through the Jal Jeevan scheme, water is being supplied to everyone's homes. Vadyavastis comprised about 1500 people who did not have water connections, but now they do.*"

"*The bridge in our village was completely submerged under the Krishna River, hindering our transport. Roads like these, pending for 35 years, have been improved.*"

"*Wastewater and waste management are the biggest problems at the moment.*"

Additional challenges were also identified. A respondent asserted that *while there are a lot of perks and benefits for politicians, there is nothing as such for sarpanches who also work hard. The monthly remuneration they receive is not enough compared to the demands of their work.*

Similarly, another woman Sarpanch also emphasized that *money from the sarpanches' end has to be spent for the welfare of the village as the government funding is not sufficient. They have to attend programs in the villages which strains them financially regularly.*

Another respondent mentioned *that Groupism, patriarchal mindset and* lack *of interest of villagers in bringing development are hindering our growth.*

In Table 5, respondents were asked how they cope with the stress and demands of the position and if they had to make any personal sacrifices. Of the total respondents (N = 13), 9 stated they could not *pay* attention to their children. At the same time, 6 of them admitted that they were struggling to fulfill their household duties while managing their work responsibilities. 4 of them mentioned that their personal well-being was being ignored due to the strenuous demands of their work.

Respondents said:
"*I have to make a lot of personal sacrifices as the village comes first. I have to attend people's functions and keep aside my own regularly. Children are neglected too.*"

"*My daughters get less attention now. Same with household* responsibilities *and my well-being. Since the village is so large, I must devote much of my time. I have to ensure I stand true to their faith in me.*"

"*I have to answer people's queries. I cannot be tired. If there are leakages or a shortage of bulbs somewhere, I stand there for days and get work done. Less attention is given to home and self, but I have chosen this for myself, so I cannot complain. Work and my community come first.*"

As shown in Table 6, respondents were further asked if they were satisfied with the support and funds they received

from the government. 8 respondents were happy with the help they received. At the same time, one of them was unsatisfied with the lack of monetary support. 2 also claimed that they were being overworked for less remuneration. 1 also mentioned that regular follow-ups are required from her end to get work done.

Respondent 5 mentioned
  "The MLA and his family help us with each problem and give us sufficient funds. Without his help, our work would be incomplete."

The same MLA was also held in high regard by respondent 1, and she said

  "If we take any problem to him, he considers it immediately. They have fulfilled all our expectations before. I am happy with our support and am proud of the government."

When asked if they received any support from NGOs or other organizations for resources and training, respondents said:

  "No NGO or company has helped us. I feel like they should. They help in mainstream Satara villages. Ours is on the outskirts. I will try to find out if they can help us." "CSR funds helped us give useful things to the villagers. SNS Foundation gave us machines to remove waste. Naam Foundation helped, too. Tata Motors provided us with diesel for the machines. These things are very expensive. SNS took our school kids on a trip. Paranjape company gave toilets and bathrooms to the school."

In Table 7, the theme of developmental accomplishments and achievements comprises seven codes described as infrastructural developments like roads, buildings, toilets, environmental conservation, healthcare facilities, educational facilities, increased employment and empowerment, increased awareness around difficult topics and improved electricity and water facilities.

Different respondents mentioned that.
  "We have planted about 1000 trees in a month. Book distribution took place in school today. Roads at 2-3 places are improved. Trees on the sideway obstructing transport have been removed in the last 15 days. High mast and LEDS of about 50 -60 have been installed. 70 - 80 small bulbs have also been brought. Through our funds, we organize tailoring, fashion designing, pickle, papad, masalas, and juice-making training for bachatgat women so that they become independent. There is not a single day when work is not done."

  "My village did not have a market. We started the weekly market. For women, we organized bakery products and parlor training programs. For senior citizens, we carry out regular health checkups. We encouraged bachatgat women to plant and look after 500 saplings this year. Halls for 3 temples are ongoing. Equipment needed by nurses and volunteers is made available to them. The distribution of toys for anganwadi children was done."

  "I also conduct awareness sessions like puberty and menstruation for adolescent girls. Young girls come to me for advice. The road and bridge, pending for about 40 years, have been done. There was no semi-English school in the village. I started one. I ensure that schemes reach people, e.g., the Laadki Bahin Yojna. I have ensured senior citizens and women benefit from the schemes."

  "Awareness for reducing plastic and waste segregation is ongoing. For waste management, we are buying a vehicle and we will also be starting manure production through it. In schools, to make children aware of global warming, its side effects, and the importance of plantations, we involve them in plantations. 15 Solar lamps and 10-12 other lamps have been provided in public places. The Jal Jeevan scheme has just been completed. Recent floodwater and dengue have been controlled."

  "Each home should have a proper waste segregation system; hence, we are implementing that. We have made available competitive exam classes free of cost to aspirants and are constructing a library for them. In the ZP school, new toilets, bathrooms and bore have been constructed. People usually get intimidated by documents and forms, but I make sure that they are aware of schemes, simplify them, and make it comfortable for them. "

Table 8 talks about the theme of the sarpanches' long-term vision, which comprises ten codes that can be described as improving infrastructure, health, education, environment, awareness, employment, financial empowerment, electricity and water, heritage and culture, and agriculture.

Respondents stated
  "I want to bring in solar energy and better lighting. A water purification unit will be installed as wastewater causes problems like kidney stones. I wish to start yoga classes, a gym for women, and a playground for children. Every 2 hours, in a nearby village, a siren is generated as a reminder, and the women children leave their work to drink water. I want to do something similar. I also want to install CCTV cameras as there were cases of thievery. I want the future generations to preserve our cultural heritage. My village should be called Selfie Point is my vision."

  "I want to encourage even more tree plantation. I want to bring in innovative farming methods and support organic farming. We are constantly discussing this with the Krishi Mandal officer. I want to ensure everyone gets a toilet and no one goes out. Underground electricity is to be done. I want the people of my village to have employment and be independent. The common people should benefit through me and be well aware of my main target."

"Schools are in the village, but I want to improve them. We wish to bring in more doctors for our health centers. Shortage of water, trees, and waste causes problems for people and their health. I am putting full effort into solving them and making my village ideal during my tenure. I want to do it if I can help or do anything more for women."

In Table 9, the theme of recognition/awards received by the sarpanches comprises three codes that are not received, received and award/recognition at a national level.

Respondents mentioned
"Not yet, as it has been only 1.5 years. Though I was invited to an award ceremony, I politely declined it as I felt I did not deserve it yet and much work still needs to be done."

"Not yet, but in 2024, I was invited to the Parliament of India in Delhi for the Panchayat se Parliament Tak program. The aim was that each woman should become independent and empowered and not restrict herself to home and kids. She has the power to go from panchayat to the parliament. Only 5 women from Maharashtra were invited, and I was one of them. The village people appreciated my efforts and invited me to the parliament. That in itself is the biggest award for me."

When asked about whether they participated in any government training programs and its effectiveness, respondents stated:

"I had no clue about Panchayats and the system. The programs were beneficial. We were informed in detail about online processes, rules, laws, duties and rights."

"We are a blank slate initially but we learn about so much stuff later after attending these sessions. We are eager to do development, but how to do it is what these programs teach us."

When asked about what they would recommend is necessary for motivating and training other women to take up similar positions, respondents asserted:

"Every woman should come out of household responsibilities of cooking and children and come forward to participate and raise their voice against injustice and become independent."

"Our entire body comprises women- about 16 females. I always want women to come forward and voice their opinions and encourage them to be present at events. They should come ahead and speak fearlessly, is what I tell them."

"Work in this field is difficult, but it is important too. Women should come forward if they have an interest. We become closer to our community and understand what is happening in the outer world. Education is not a prerequisite and should not hold them back."

"Women would not attend the monthly meetings. They had to be brought from their homes. In my first meeting, I told them they must be present and, since they are chosen, they must do their duty faithfully. Now they attend every meeting and actively participate."

Table 1. The theme for family and external support

Theme	Codes	Description
Family and External Support	Family support	Respondents who received support from family members such as in-laws, children, etc.
	External support	Respondents received support from villagers, community members, etc.
	Husband support	Respondents received support from their spouses.

Table 2. The theme of motivation/inspiration

Theme	Codes	Description
Motivation/Inspiration	Interested in bringing about developmental change	Eager to bring about development changes which lead to the progress of the village
	Motivation from family members	Family members, such as husband, mother-in-law, etc., have supported the journey.
	Community encouragement	The villagers and other community members have been a source of inspiration.
	Leadership experience in other capacities	Taking on a leadership role before being a sarpanch

Table 3. The theme of education

Theme	Codes	Description
Education	Educational impact	The belief is that education can help in personality development, giving direction to thoughts and leading to the growth of the individual.
	Could not complete education/ less education	Whether due to personal, societal, or economic reasons, being unable to complete their education.
	High education level	Respondents accomplished high levels of education.

Table 4. The theme of problems faced by the respondents

Theme	Codes	Description
Problems	Roads	Broken and downtrodden roads
	Water scarcity	Lack of adequate water supply in the area
	Wastewater management	Difficulties in managing wastewater
	Waste management	Managing waste, such as garbage, can be a challenging problem.
	Electricity	Most villages lack 24 hour power supply.
	Less trees	The cutting down of trees in villages is a rising problem.

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

Theme	Codes	Description
Coping with stress and sacrifices	Household duties neglected	Work-family conflict, which results in the respondent struggling to fulfill their household duties while managing their work responsibilities
	Children neglected	As mothers, respondents felt they could not give substantial attention to their children.
	Personal well-being ignored	Due to work and household responsibilities, respondents neglect their health.
	Prioritize village	Putting their duty to the village and its residents before household and personal well-being.

Table 6. The theme of government support received by the respondents

Theme	Codes	Description
Government support	Demands fulfilled by the government (Satisfaction with the government)	Respondents were satisfied with the government's response to the village's needs
	Overworked for less money	Respondents complain about heavy workload with limited compensation
	Not enough government funds	Respondents unsatisfied with the lack of monetary support

Table 7. The developmental achievements and accomplishments of the respondents

Theme	Codes	Description
Developmental Achievements and accomplishments	Infrastructure	Such as toilets, roads, and buildings.
	Health	Healthcare facilities include doctors and hospitals present in the area
	Education	Establishment of educational institutions in the vicinity for children of different age groups
	Environment	Planting more trees, preserving water, and caring for the natural resources.
	Awareness	Spreading awareness regarding difficult and different topics such as menstrual health, vocational training, etc.
	Employment and empowerment(Bachagat, etc)	Working to generate employment for the residents.
	Electricity and water	Jal Jeevan scheme has been incorporated.

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

Theme	Codes	Description
Future direction	Infrastructure	To change the infrastructure, such as relying more on solar energy, more security, etc.
	Health	Improving the healthcare set-up
	Education	Improving and building on the educational facilities available
	Environment	Via planting more trees, saving water, managing waste adequately etc.
	Awareness	Around difficult topics such as menstruation.
	Employment and empowerment	To generate more employment opportunities for the villagers

	Electricity and water (basic needs)	To improve the availability and accessibility towards power supply and clean water
	Financial empowerment	They want villagers to be economically secure and financially independent.
	Heritage and culture	Preserving the cultural heritage and identity of the village, investing in tourism
	Agriculture improvement	Bring in innovative methods for farming to yield better produce.

Table 9. The recognition and awards received by the respondents

Theme	Codes	Description
Recognition/Awards	Not received	Have not yet received any award for their work
	Received	Have been recognized for their work
	Recognition at a national level	Have received recognition for their work at a national level

4. Discussion

Female Sarpanches faced immense difficulties 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 used qualitative interviews and thematic analysis to understand the issues and challenges women sarpanches face in India. According to *Table 1,* the theme identified is that of family and external support, wherein 6 respondents reported receiving family support (N=6), 7 of them received external support (N=7), and 7 of them specifically reported gaining support from their husbands (N=7).

Dandiwal et al. (2019) held that encouraging women to participate in elections makes them independent and influences their overall well-being, self-esteem, and determination. However, many women sarpanches are still guided by the male family members and cannot exercise their power fully. Greater inter-role conflict in comparison to men or non-working women is experienced. Another study found that participation of women in Panchayati activities either opens up new avenues and opportunities for them or gets perceived as a burden. Her family often controls the woman's activities while she also receives crucial support and guidance from them. The Family's controlling role is especially visible in the cases of proxy representatives wherein the woman's husband holds the actual power while the woman is just a figurehead (Nolle, 2008). As shown in Table 2, the theme identified is motivation/inspiration. The theme primarily looks into what and who has inspired the respondents to step into power in the role of a sarpanch. Within the theme, the codes identified were interested in bringing about developmental change N=3), motivation from family members (N=5), community encouragement (N=7) and leadership experience in other capacities (N=2). Findings from a study revealed that some of the most pertinent aspects of professional development include the individual's background, support from family members, and literacy levels. Individual (self-motivation, perseverance, etc.) and interpersonal (communication, compassion, etc.) capabilities are the crucial personality traits required for success (Rosewell, 2007). In Table 3, the theme identified is education. The codes identified were belief in the power of education (N=10), high education levels (N=5) and inability to complete education(N=3). According to studies, compared to uneducated women, educated women are more likely to get employed, earn higher remuneration and have greater job security. They can make independent decisions, challenge gender norms, advocate for their rights, and raise their daughters to be educated and empowered (Reshi et al., 2022). Table 4 shows the theme of challenges faced by the sarpanches. The codes identified were problems of roads(N=4),waterscarcity(N=9),wastewatermanagement(N=4),wastemanagement(N=4),electricity(N=2), less trees (N=1). The women who are elected are not always treated with due respect. Many elected women complained that their suggestions were not considered seriously or consulted while decisions were being made. Some felt that their views were ignored only because they were women. At times, they were pressured by their husbands to approve the decisions made by the male-dominated Panchayats.(Kaul & Sahni, 2009). Thippeswamy(2024) held that lack of experience as leaders, lack of knowledge and training for women sarpanches, financial dependence and lack of funding from the government for development work, and delays in sanction and permission for development work from the upper level are significant barriers coming in the way of female sarpanches.

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=6), children feeling neglected (N=9), ignorance of personal well-being(N=4), and prioritizing the village by putting their duty first (N=2). A finding states that working women face immense role overload, role conflict, group and political pressure and tedious working conditions (Kumar, 2007). Another study observed that carrying out the responsibilities of home and children is a huge barrier for women to participate actively in their political careers. The husband's and the husband's parents' support is crucial for a married woman's political career (Varghese, 2020). Table 6

shows the theme of Govt. support received by the respondents. The codes identified were satisfaction with the government (N=9), not enough government funds(N=1), and overworked for less money(N=2).

Regarding government training programs for women sarpanches, almost all reported attending Yashada Pune and Talegaon's program and appreciated its effectiveness. Eight respondents (N=8) mentioned receiving no help or support from any NGO. One of them mentioned receiving help from SNS, Tata Motors, and Naam Foundation, while another one mentioned Bosch and Janaki Devi Bajaj. 3 of them received CSR funds. A study identified that the government should increase the sarpanches' remuneration and allocate more financial budget for the development of their villages (Kaur & Sharma, 2023). Another study found that NGOs play a significant role in the empowerment and development of women beneficiaries through various training programs, awareness activities and implementation of rural schemes (*ROLE OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS IN EMPOWERING RURAL WOMEN: A CASE STUDY OF SELECT NGO'S IN SIDDIPET DISTRICT OF TELANGANA STATE*, 2021). Table 7 talks about the developmental achievements and accomplishments of the respondents. During their tenure as a leader, findings revealed that most sarpanches worked to improve the infrastructure (N = 8), health (N=5), education(N=10), environment (N= 7), employment and empowerment (N=6), essential facilities like electricity and water supply for their village (N = 6), spreading awareness(N=8). Sathe et al. (2013) held that the availability of basic public services is remarkably higher in villages led by female sarpanches than those led by male sarpanches when the former has had a tenure of at least 3.5 years. In village-councils led completely by women, it was observed in a study that the accessibility of fuel, water and fodder improved, alleviating women's burdens and allowing girls to go to school. Women gained respect in their families, and their attitudes towards their daughters and themselves changed positively while the number of domestic violence cases also reduced (Gala, 1997).

Table 8 shows the future direction the respondents aim to incorporate in their village. They want to improve further the infrastructure (N = 2), health(N=2), education(N=5), environment (N= 9), employment and empowerment (N=6), essential facilities like electricity and water supply for their village (N = 6), spreading awareness (N=2), financial empowerment (N=2), heritage and culture (N=3), Agricultural improvement (N=1). Findings from research revealed that there is likely to be more investment in road construction and drinking water equipment where the Sarpanch is a woman. They are also keen on improving housing, electricity and the reach of welfare schemes, especially targeting women (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2001). Table 9 talks about the recognition/awards received by the sarpanches for their work. 4 of them reported receiving recognition, 7 of them did not

receive any recognition, while 2 received an award at a national level. A study reveals that institutional achievements and social recognition for work done play a crucial role in enhancing the self-confidence and long-term success of the sarpanches (Sangada et al., 2024).

5. Conclusion

Hi storically, women have faced innumerable issues like discrimination, limited access to education and employment and violence and abuse. However, the current scenario shows many women taking leadership roles and stepping into power. The results of this research showcase the determination and resilience of women sarpanches in Maharashtra who face significant challenges like gender bias, societal resistance, and limited access to resources yet have successfully balanced household duties with the responsibilities of public office. They have made immense transformations in their communities- improving healthcare, education and infrastructure. Their efforts highlight the transformative potential of female leadership in the rural government, indicating that women can not just overcome obstacles but lso drive tangible change at the grassroots level when given targeted support and training.

5.1. Limitations

The present study has a limited sample size, with only 13 women sarpanches being interviewed. This limits the range and scope of our study. Furthermore, the respondents were only from Maharashtra. This was a geographical constraint on mapping the experiences and challenges faced by women sarpanches. A non-probability sampling technique was employed. All of these factors limit the study in terms of its generalisability. Moreover, the interviews were conducted in Marathi (the native language of the sarpanches) and later transcribed in English. This could have altered the true essence of what they wanted to convey. Also, the process of transcribing interviews was a challenge. The nature of the study was qualitative, even though a Google Form had been applied to collect data from the respondents. It essentially collected demographic information and a checklist of the problems faced, which were later elaborated on in the interview schedule.

5.2. Future Recommendations

Future research can involve a larger sample size and include different states across India. A comparison of the experiences of women sarpanches between two or more states can increase the reliability and generalizability of the findings. A mixed methods approach can be employed wherein data can be collected from a wider group of respondents, and focused group discussions/interviews can be taken from a selected few. Furthermore, an in-depth evaluation of the effectiveness of training programs and policies can be undertaken. More targeted training programs like leadership development, resource management, and financial literacy would be important to develop their administrative and leadership skills.

Stronger financial and institutional backing (in the form of better remuneration, recognition, etc) and better infrastructure in rural areas can incentivise them to perform their duties more effectively. Women in leadership positions have to manage multiple roles and responsibilities.

A key role is that of motherhood. According to the present research, respondents reported their children feeling neglected. To overcome the same, a recommendation could be to provide childcare services.

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