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A study on the socio-political empowerment of women Sarpanch in Sikar District, Rajasthan

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Abstract

This study examines the socio-political status of women Sarpanch in the Sikar district of Rajasthan, with a focus on their experiences, aspirations, and the impact of reservation policies on their representation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). Given Rajasthan's patriarchal social fabric, the research investigates the empowerment of women representatives, particularly their role in decision-making and the influence of socio-economic factors on their political status. A pilot study was conducted in four Panchayat Samitis of Sikar district, namely, Dodh (32), Khandela (26), Fatehpur (21) and Lakshmangarh (21) with highest number of women Sarpanch. Respondents were selected through census method. In-depth interviews were conducted with the respondents through semi-structured interview schedule with both closed and open-ended questions. Mixed method approach was adopted for data analysis. The findings reveal a significant increase in the number of women Sarpanch in the district, facilitated by the reservation policy. The majority of these representatives belong to the Other Backward Classes (OBC) community, with 65% being literate and 25% having completed high school education. However, despite these gains in representation, the study highlights the challenges faced by women Sarpanch in asserting their authority. About 70% of respondents reported relying on their husbands or sons for decisions related to local development, reflecting the continuing dominance of patriarchal norms. Political liaising, a critical aspect of governance, is also predominantly managed by male family members, limiting the autonomy of the women Sarpanch. Gender-based discrimination remains a significant challenge, with many women reporting not being taken seriously by male colleagues, government officials, or even villagers. Despite holding the title of Sarpanch, their voices often carry less weight in decision-making processes compared to their male counterparts. This marginalization highlights the gap between formal representation and substantive empowerment. On the other hand, 54 % women Sarpanch view themselves as role models for other women in their communities, inspiring them to pursue education, financial independence, and leadership roles. Nearly 68% of the women come from financially stable families, suggesting that economic security influences access to political opportunities. However, their empowerment is largely symbolic, as socio-cultural barriers continue to restrict their autonomy. The study concludes that while the reservation policy has successfully increased the number of women in leadership positions, it has not fully translated into genuine empowerment or equal participation in governance. Policy implications include capacity-building initiatives for women leaders, community sensitization to reduce gender bias, and institutional mechanisms to support independent decision-making. These measures are critical to bridging the gap between numerical representation and substantive empowerment, ultimately fostering gender-equitable governance in Rajasthan.

Keywords: Gender, India, Panchayati Raj, Rajasthan, women empowerment, women Sarpanch

1. Introduction

The 73rd Amendment, ratified in 1992, was a landmark reform that decentralized governance and enhanced political representation at the grassroots level. It mandated the reservation of at least one-third (33%) of seats in Panchayati Raj institutions for women, along with proportional reservations for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) based on their population. While the amendment did not mandate reservations for Other Backward Classes (OBCs) at the national level, many states later introduced them through their own legislation. This reform significantly improved women's political participation, challenging deep-seated patriarchal norms that had historically relegated them to subordinate roles in society.

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By empowering women in local governance, the amendment became a catalyst for social change, gradually altering traditional power structures and paving the way for greater gender equality in political decision-making (Sharma, 1998; Thakor and Patel, 2021; Kumar *et al.*, 2023) [17, 20, 9].

1.1 Sustainable development goals and political participation of women

The political participation of women is closely linked to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) five, i.e., Gender Equality, which emphasizes women's full and effective participation in political, economic, and public life. The 73rd Amendment in India aligns with SDG Target 5.5, which seeks to ensure women's equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making. By reserving one-third of seats for women in Panchayati Raj institutions, the amendment has helped increase their representation, fostering inclusive governance and empowering women to influence policies on health, education, and economic development. Additionally, SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions highlights the importance of inclusive and participatory decision-making at all levels. Women's leadership in local governance contributes to transparent and accountable institutions, ensuring that policies reflect diverse societal needs. Strengthening women's political representation through legal frameworks like the 73rd Amendment is thus a critical step toward achieving sustainable and equitable development.

1.2 Gender and women's political participation

Women's underrepresentation in politics stems from legal and institutional barriers stemming from the differences between genders (Tong and Tong, 2021) [22]. Gender barriers in politics can be attributed to several causes, including culture, family, and friends, who discourage or delegitimize political participation (Krook & Sanín, 2016) [8]. Right from the process of socialization, women are pushed to focus on domestic chores and perform the role of a care-giver, while men are directed into public areas and positions of more social prestige, such as politics. Moreover, the idea that women's inclusion in politics threatens masculinity is rooted in patriarchal structures where political power has traditionally been a male domain (Connell, 2005) [1]. Further, Connell & Pearse (2015) [2] emphasize how gender roles are socially constructed, with women traditionally confined to domestic and maternal responsibilities, while men are expected to be the breadwinners and decision-makers. These entrenched norms create multiple barriers for women in politics, limiting their autonomy and reinforcing male dominance in governance. Women who challenge the socially constructed gendered division of spaces and enter politics are often perceived as intruders in a male-dominated field (Miguel, 2012) [11]. Despite political quotas and legal provisions, they continue to face deep-rooted biases and resistance from both societal and institutional structures. One significant challenge is the double burden, where women in politics are expected to efficiently manage both public responsibilities and private domestic roles (Fernandes & Lourenço, 2023) [5]. This expectation places an undue strain on women, often forcing them to prioritize family obligations over political ambitions, thereby reinforcing existing gender hierarchies. Furthermore, this struggle creates incongruence between

gendered expectations and the roles women perform in governance, leading to scrutiny, skepticism, and even backlash (Eagly & Karau, 2002) [4]. The perception that leadership qualities are inherently masculine further marginalizes women in decision-making positions, limiting their substantive participation in political spaces.

1.3 Caste and women's political participation

Caste remains a significant structural barrier for women in politics in India, especially for the women in PRIs as rural areas have more enhanced and deep-seated caste-based connotations. Caste intersects with gender to create multiple layers of discrimination and exclusion. The tussle between gender-based quotas and caste-based political aspirations highlights how women from marginalized castes face dual oppression (Rege, 1998) [14]. While the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1992) mandated 33% reservation for women in Panchayati Raj institutions, women from lower castes, particularly Dalits and tribal, continue to face systemic resistance and social exclusion (Krook & O'Brien, 2010) [7]. Studies indicate that many Dalit women Sarpanches encounter opposition from upper-caste elites, who refuse to acknowledge their authority and often obstruct their decision-making power (Rege, 1998) [14]. The practice of proxy representation (Pradhan Pati) is even more pronounced for lower-caste women, as male relatives or dominant caste groups often control governance on their behalf (Rai, 2007) [13]. Additionally, social boycotts, verbal abuse, and even physical violence have been reported against Dalit women leaders, further limiting their substantive participation.

The intersection of caste and gender thus, results in a hierarchical political structure, where women from marginalized communities struggle for autonomy and legitimacy within local governance. This study hence, aims to examine the socio-political status of women Sarpanches in the Sikar district of Rajasthan, focusing on their experiences, aspirations, and the impact of reservation policies on their representation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). Despite the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, which mandates 33% reservation for women in local governance, Rajasthan's deeply patriarchal social fabric continues to pose structural and cultural barriers to their effective participation. The research seeks to analyze whether these women hold real decision-making power or serve as mere symbolic or proxy representatives, often overshadowed by male relatives in the form of proxy Sarpanches (Pradhan Pati). Additionally, the study explores how socio-economic factors, caste dynamics, and local power structures influence their leadership roles and ability to function autonomously.

2. Literature review

According to a study by Theppeyswamy (2024), on women's participation in Karnataka politics, the Karnataka Panchayat Raj (Amendment) Bill, 2010, which reserves 50% of seats for women in local governance, presents a paradox in the larger discourse on women's political representation in India. While such policies aim to enhance women's participation PRIs, they often fail to translate into substantive representation, as many women continue to function as proxies for their male relatives. This phenomenon, commonly referred to as the Pradhan-Pati (Sarpanch-Pati) culture, is not unique to Karnataka but is

widespread across states where deeply entrenched patriarchal norms limit women's autonomy in governance.

Menon (2022) ^[10], in her study on role of women in PRI in Gujarat confirm that, women in politics often find themselves dependent on male family members such as, fathers, brothers, husbands, or sons who influence or control their decision-making. Moreover, illiteracy, the absence of quality leadership opportunities, and restrictive social norms such as the *purdah* system further impede their ability to function as independent leaders. The lack of self-esteem, leadership skills, confidence, and social presence among many elected women representatives significantly affects their effectiveness in Panchayat administration.

Another study by Tripathi (2022) ^[23], on proxy participation by women in Panchayati Raj Institutions, evince that the reservation policy in PRIs has enabled a greater number of women to enter local governance structures, yet evidence suggests that many of these women have functioned merely as mouthpieces for their male family members. This reflects the broader issue of patriarchal control over women's political roles. While on-paper representation of women has increased, the real agency of women leaders' remains constrained.

According to Sharma (2016) ^[18], lived experiences of women Sarpanches and ex-Sarpanch under PRIs in Uttar Pradesh, confirm that women Sarpanches who belong to nuclear families, particularly those whose husbands work in cities or outside their villages, tend to exercise greater political power compared to those in joint family settings. The absence of an immediate patriarchal authority allows these women greater autonomy in governance.

Moreover, in a primary data-based study on four women Sarpanches in Man Taluk, Maharashtra, highlights the coercive nature of their political participation. The study reveals that these women were compelled to assume the role of Sarpanch by male family members, effectively reducing them to proxy representatives rather than autonomous decision-makers.

Also, a study by Yaragopp and Tiwari (2016) ^[24] on political participation, empowerment and experience of women representatives in Bhiwani, Haryana highlights the caste-based stratification in women's political representation. The findings indicate that 70% of elected women leaders belonged to dominant castes such as Jat, Thakur, and Brahmin while only 30% were from Backward Classes (BC) and Scheduled Castes (SC). This skewed representation reflects the caste-based hegemony in political access, where women from dominant castes are more likely to secure leadership positions, often due to their familial and social capital.

Chaudhary (2024) ^[9], in a study on women's involvement in grassroots-level politics in north-west India from an anthropological perspective, confirms that women have limited access to political information. The study attributes this gap to prevailing social norms that discourage women's engagement with political affairs and reinforce their subordinate status within village communities. The patriarchal mindset further restricts women's participation by maintaining male dominance in decision-making and governance structures.

Examines the challenges faced by women leaders in Panchayati Raj institutions in Gujarat, particularly those belonging to SC, ST, and OBC category. The study finds that a majority of these women Sarpanches come from

economically disadvantaged backgrounds and remain dependent on landowners and dominant caste groups for their livelihoods. This economic vulnerability creates significant barriers to their effective governance, as their financial dependence limits their ability to assert authority or challenge existing power structures. Furthermore, their marginalization is exacerbated by a lack of representation and influence at higher administrative levels. The study highlights how the close relationship between dominant caste groups and government officials at district and state levels further restricts these women from seeking institutional support or addressing governance challenges effectively.

As per the study by Neto *et al.* (2024), on multiple gender barriers faced by women in politics, political parties often lack genuine commitment to gender justice, leading to the tokenistic inclusion of women in governance without meaningful support for their political agency. Studies indicate that frequent illegal practices, electoral fraud, and the misuse of women's reserved seats go largely unpunished, reinforcing a male-dominated political environment that actively discourages more women from entering politics. Moreover, a study by Sathe *et al.* (2013) ^[15] on the analysis of women's Sarpanch's contribution in development with special reference to Maharashtra affirm that having a female Sarpanch affects the political participation of women in a village positively.

A recurring theme in the literature is the prevalence of proxy representation, where women occupy leadership positions in name but remain under the control of male family members such as husbands, fathers, or sons who exercise real power. The studies overwhelmingly highlight this issue, emphasizing that women leaders often lack the autonomy to make independent decisions. Societal and institutional barriers, such as entrenched patriarchy, lack of administrative training, and limited access to networks of political influence, further reinforce their subordinate position. Additionally, economic dependence on dominant caste and class groups restricts their ability to assert authority, making governance a male-dominated space despite formal reservations for women.

2.1 Gaps in the literature

While extensive research has been conducted on women Sarpanches and their political empowerment across various Indian states, significant gaps remain in the existing body of literature. One notable gap is the lack of studies focusing on Sikar district in Rajasthan, which has the highest number of female Sarpanches. Despite this remarkable representation, there is little empirical evidence exploring whether this numerical strength translates into substantive political empowerment. Existing studies predominantly highlight the prevalence of proxy leadership, socio-cultural barriers, and the limited decision-making power of women in PRIs. However, without region-specific research, it remains unclear whether the same challenges persist in Sikar or whether a higher representation of women leads to different governance dynamics and levels of political agency.

3. Methodology and Methods

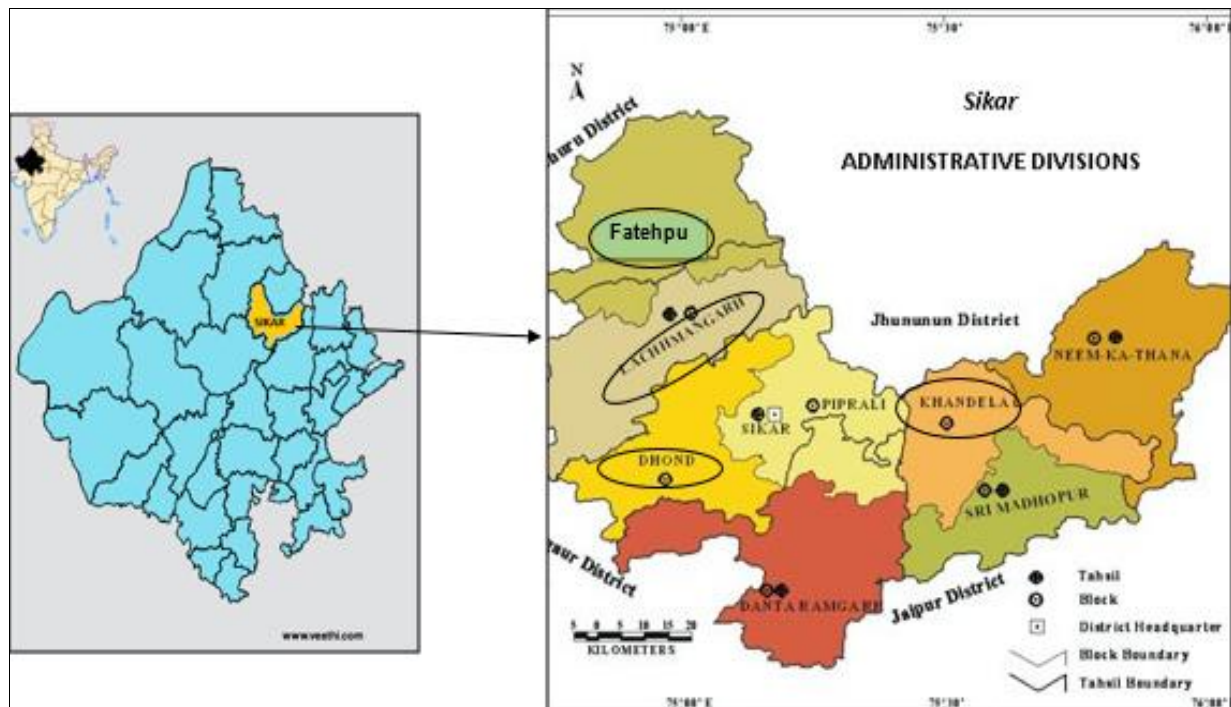
A pilot study was conducted in four Panchayat Samitis of Sikar district, namely, Dodh (32), Khandela (26), Fatehpur (21) and Lakshmangarh (21) with highest number of women Sarpanch. Respondents were selected through census

method. In-depth interviews were conducted with the respondents through semi-structured interview schedule with both closed and open-ended questions. Mixed method approach was adopted for data analysis. The findings reveal a significant increase in the number of women Sarpanch in the district, facilitated by the reservation policy.

3.1 Area of study

According to the 2011 Census of India, Sikar district in Rajasthan comprises six tehsils: Danta Ramgarh, Fatehpur, Lakshmangarh, Neem-Ka-Thana, Sikar, and Sri Madhopur. The district has a population of 2,677,333, with a sex ratio

of 947 females per 1,000 males, which is higher than the state average of 928. The literacy rate stands at 71.91%, with male literacy at 85.11% and female literacy at 58.23%. Women's political participation in Rajasthan reflects a complex interplay of progress and persistent challenges. At the state level, the 16th Rajasthan Legislative Assembly comprises 200 members, of which 21 are women, accounting for 10.5% of the assembly. In Sikar district, known for its relatively higher number of female Sarpanches, there is a notable gap in empirical research examining the depth of women's political empowerment.



Source: Census of India 2011

Fig 1: Map of the study area

3.2 Sampling and sample size

Despite efforts to ensure maximum participation, not all women Sarpanch from the selected Panchayat Samitis in Sikar district could be interviewed (refer to Table 1). Several factors contributed to this limitation. Many of the women were not available at the time of data collection due to their household responsibilities, official engagements, or travel commitments. Additionally, some women Sarpanch

were reluctant to participate in the study, either due to apprehensions about speaking openly on governance-related challenges or due to social and familial constraints. In certain cases, the influence of male family members or dominant local political figures also played a role in their refusal to give interviews. These factors highlight the persistent socio-cultural and structural barriers that women leaders face, even after attaining political positions in PRIs.

Table 1: Number of women Sarpanch in Sikar district of Rajasthan

Sl. No.	Selected Panchayat Samiti of Sikar	No of Women Sarpanch	Women Sarpanch Interviewed
1	Dodh	32	20
2	Khandela	26	10
3	Fatehpur	21	10
4	Laxmangarh	21	09
Total no of respondents			49

Source: Compiled through field survey

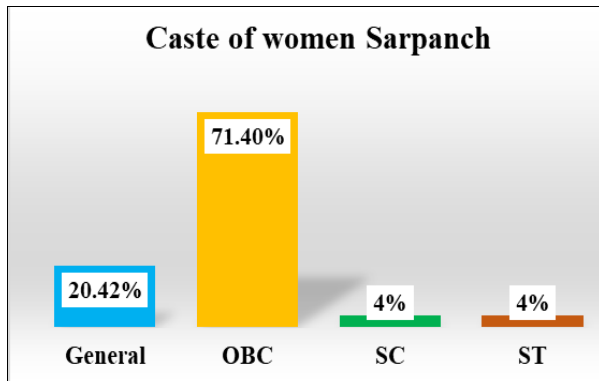
Hence, the total sample size for the study comprised 49 women Sarpanch, selected through the census method. In-depth interviews were conducted with these selected respondents using a structured interview schedule that incorporated both closed and open-ended questions. To gain deeper insights into their experiences, challenges, and leadership roles, a subset of 10 women Sarpanch was further

approached for qualitative analysis through the case study method. This approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the socio-political dynamics influencing women's participation in grassroots governance. The analytical themes included, socio-economic profile of respondents, their autonomy in governance, awareness and responsiveness towards women's issues, and experiences

related to governance. Responses were coded and transcribed in the form of narratives.

4. Results

The study reveals that a majority of the women Sarpanch (71%) as depicted in Chart 1 belong to the OBC category, particularly from dominant castes aligning with renowned sociologist, theory of dominant caste. According to this theory, caste dominance is determined by factors such as landownership, numerical strength, political influence, and access to resources. Similar findings were traced in the field.

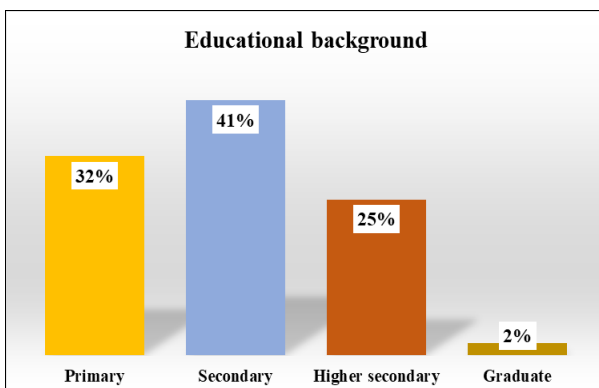


Source: Compiled from field survey

Chart 1: Caste profile of women Sarpanch

4.1 Educational background of the respondents

The educational attainment of women Sarpanch in the study reveals a varied distribution. A significant proportion (41%) of respondents had completed secondary education, while 25% had studied up to the higher secondary level. A smaller percentage (two per cent) were graduates, whereas 32% of the respondents had received only primary education (refer to Chart 2).



Source: Compiled from field survey

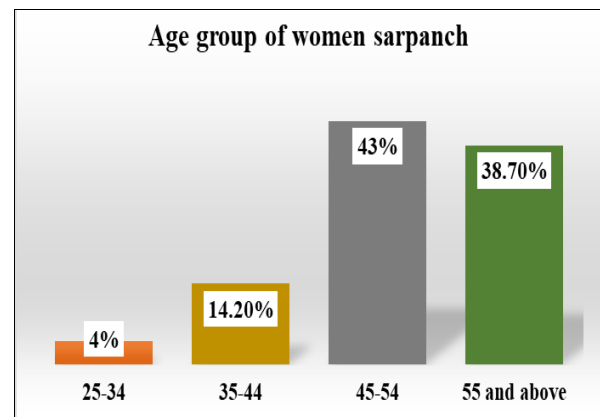
Chart 2: Educational profile of women Sarpanch

As per findings, a notable hesitancy among the women in openly discussing their educational qualifications. Many respondents appeared reluctant to disclose their exact level of education, often displaying a lack of confidence in acknowledging their academic background. This reluctance was observed particularly among those with lower levels of formal education.

4.2 Age group of respondents

A majority (43%) of the respondents belonged to the age group of 45-54 years, followed by 38.7% who were aged 55

years and above. In contrast, only 4% of the women fell within the 25-34 age bracket, while 14% belonged to the 35-44 age group as shown in Chart 3.



Source: Compiled from field survey

Chart 3: Age group of women Sarpanch

This distribution suggests that women's entry into political leadership at the grassroots level is largely delayed, often occurring later in life. The predominance of older women in positions of local governance may be attributed to socio-cultural factors, including traditional gender roles that prioritize domestic responsibilities of child bearing and rearing and becoming a caregiver, delaying their political participation. Additionally, in many cases, women's political engagement is facilitated by family support, which often becomes available only after their children are grown and household responsibilities are reduced.

4.3 Socio-economic background

The socio-economic background of the women Sarpanch in the study reveals a strong association with agrarian communities and traditional family structures. A significant majority (58%) of the respondents belonged to financially stable families engaged in agriculture and landholding, indicating that land ownership continues to play a crucial role in shaping political participation at the grassroots level. Additionally, 85% of the respondents were from joint families, reflecting the continued prevalence of extended family structures in rural governance. The dominance of joint family systems suggests that women's political participation is often influenced by familial support and collective decision-making processes.

4.4 Political journey and leadership

The motivations behind women's participation in local governance reflect the interplay of individual agency and structural influences within a patriarchal society. While 20% of the women Sarpanch reported that their decision to contest elections stemmed from personal interest, a significant 80% stated that they were encouraged or convinced by their immediate family members. These findings highlight the persistent constraints of patriarchal norms, where women's agency in political decision-making remains restricted. Viewing this through Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus, the normalization of male dominance in decision-making reinforces a political culture where women's leadership is often dependent on familial approval and support. Women imbibe the social order to subordination in such a way that they start considering men

as superior and they automatically take a subordinated position.

The study reveals that 41% of the women Sarpanch had prior experience in the role as a Sarpanch, having served for more than five years, while only 4% were newly elected. This highlights that the re-election of 41% of women Sarpanch reflects not only their governance experience but also the strong political backing and dominance of their families. From a Bourdieuan lens, the concept of social capital plays a crucial role in these re-elections. Women from politically dominant families have greater access to networks, resources, and electoral support, giving them a significant advantage over first-time candidates who lack such backing. This explains why only 4% of the respondents were newly elected, indicating barriers for women without pre-existing political connections. Moreover, the study reveals that 80% of the women Sarpanch admitted to having little or no prior knowledge about the responsibilities of their position before assuming office. 90 per cent admitted of getting trained before assuming office.

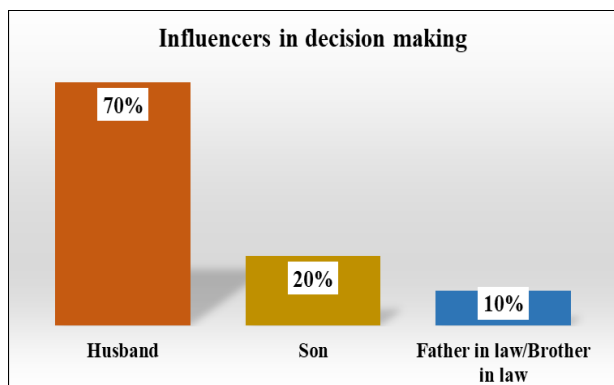
4.5 Decision making and governance

While reservation policies have successfully increased women's numerical representation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), their substantive empowerment remains limited. The lack of independent decision-making power indicates that women Sarpanch, despite being elected, struggle to translate their formal authority into real governance power.

An interesting finding of the study suggests that 70% of women Sarpanch were guided or influenced by their husbands in decision-making, indicating the prevalence of proxy leadership in local governance (see Chart 4.4). Uganta Dangi (56 years, OBC) affirmed that,

"I never wanted to become a Sarpanch. It was my husband who told me to become one. I was reluctant, but he was adamant. At last, I had to say yes. He told me not to worry as he would take care of everything. And since then, he is handling everything by himself. I become too tired of the household chores and don't get enough time to interact with people. Thanks to my husband that he is managing everything smoothly"

This also aligns with the concept of *Sarpanch Pati* or *Mukhiya Pati* a widely recognized trend in rural India where elected women representatives serve as figureheads, while men exercise de facto authority.



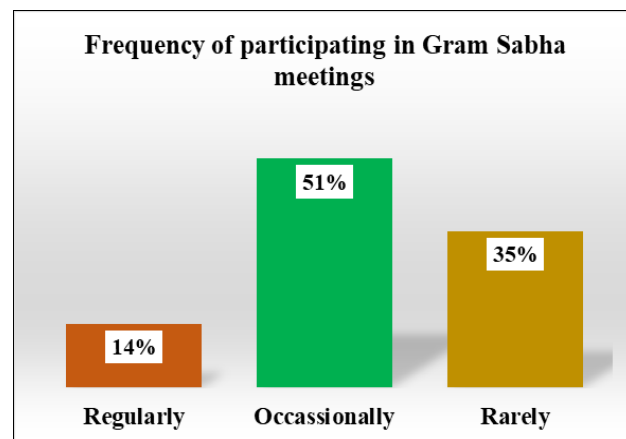
Source: Compiled from field survey

Chart 4: Influencers in decision making

The study reveals that 51% of women Sarpanch attended meetings only occasionally, highlighting the persistence of gendered constraints in political participation. This limited engagement can be attributed to proxy leadership, where male family members, particularly husbands, exert significant influence over decision-making and often attend meetings on behalf of women. Ramna Kotwal (50 years, OBC) admitted that,

"I have only attended three meetings in five-year long tenure of mine. My health doesn't allow me to go and also the household chores. My husband goes on my behalf. He has a good reputation and very helpful. He likes to help people. He is definitely more knowledgeable than me. I support him in whatever decisions he makes as I know that he will only do the right thing. I sometimes deliberately refrain from going to the meetings as I am not very vocal. I prefer to send my husband."

Additionally, Panchayat meetings remain male-dominated spaces where women's voices are frequently dismissed, discouraging their active involvement. Societal expectations further reinforce this exclusion, as women continue to shoulder domestic responsibilities, restricting their time and mobility for governance-related activities. The findings underscore the gap between numerical representation and substantive participation (refer to Chart 5).



Source: Compiled from field survey

Chart 5: Frequency of participating in Gram Sabha meetings

Another significant factor limiting their participation was the distance of the meeting venue, which often requires extensive travel, making it difficult for women to attend regularly, especially in rural areas with inadequate transportation facilities. Moreover, 80% of women Sarpanch admitted to feeling intimidated while sharing their views in Panchayat meetings, further reinforcing the structural and social barriers to their active political participation.

To exemplify, Bhajan Devi (46 years, OBC) affirms that,

"There was the problem of water scarcity and I had to discuss about it, when I started sharing my views, the male colleagues started laughing and some of them were not even looking at me. I felt ashamed and sat without explaining my point. I stopped participating afterwards".

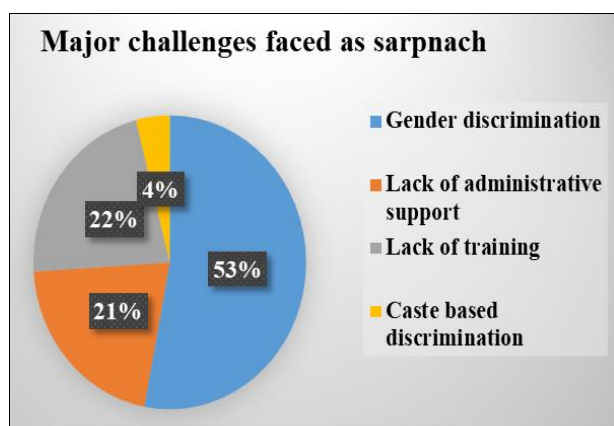
4.6 Challenges faced by women Sarpanch

The most prevalent challenge, reported by 53% of respondents, is gender discrimination, reflecting the deeply entrenched patriarchal norms that continue to undermine women's authority in political decision-making.

A respondent named Manju Rani Patel (46 years, OBC) revealed that

"Despite becoming a Sarpanch, we are bound to do all the household chores and behave the same as earlier. There are many male members in the community who never take me seriously. At time of any problem in the community they approach my husband neglecting me. They consider him more important. My husband then discusses it with me and sometimes he himself takes the decision without even informing me."

The lack of training (22%) and administrative support (21%) suggests that while women have gained representation through reservation policies, they are not provided with adequate resources or institutional backing to exercise independent decision-making. Furthermore, caste-based discrimination, although reported by a smaller percentage (4%), underscores the intersectionality of gender and caste in shaping women's experiences in governance (refer to Chart 6).



Source: Compiled from field survey

Chart 6: Major barriers faced by the women Sarpanch

55% of women Sarpanch admitted to not being taken seriously in their leadership roles, highlighting the persistent societal perception that questions women's authority in governance.

Mitu Bairwa (30 years, SC) complained that

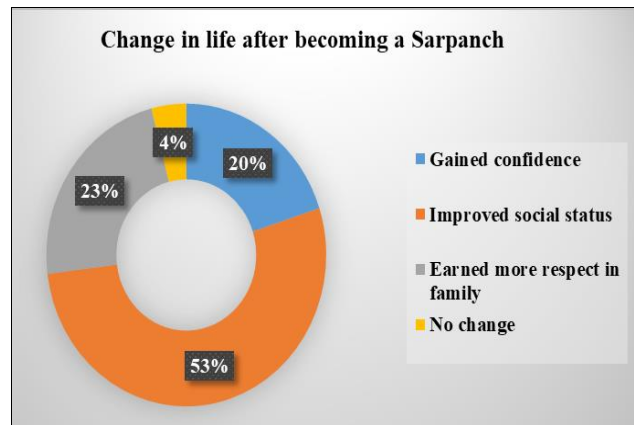
"When I became Sarpanch, I thought I will be able to change the perception regarding my caste and my identity of a woman, but I failed. In meetings, nobody listens to me, higher caste males don't even consider me worthy of voicing my opinion. A dowry incident happened in the village, I tried to know the perspective of the survivor woman, but I wasn't allowed to meet her since she belonged to a higher caste."

This underscores the deep-rooted caste based and patriarchal attitudes that continue to view political leadership as a male domain, despite constitutional provisions ensuring women's

participation in PRIs.

4.7 Impact of reservation and perception of empowerment

The findings of the study indicate that an overwhelming 90% of women Sarpanch recognize the reservation policy for women in PRIs as a significant and commendable intervention.



Source: Compiled from field survey

Chart 7: Change in life after becoming a Sarpanch

A majority, 53% of respondents, reported an improved social status, indicating that leadership brings increased recognition and influence within the community. Additionally, 20% gained confidence, suggesting that the role enhances self-assurance in decision-making and public interactions. Arti Devi (53 years, Yadav) shared that

"Earlier nobody listened to me. But after winning the election, something has changed. Now my husband takes care of me, more than before and tells others to respect me and help me out when needed. I feel valued."

Another respondent, Santara (45 years, Gurjar) confirmed that

"When I came to this village after marriage, I was too shy, never interacted with anyone and remained confined to the fourwalls. Didn't even know who was my neighbour and where was the Anganwadi centre. Its only after becoming the Sarpanch that I came to know this village better. People recognize me and come to meet me when they are in need of any help. It makes me feel wanted and responsible".

23% felt they earned more respect within their family, reflecting the personal impact of leadership on familial dynamics. Notably, only four per cent experienced no change, emphasizing that for most individuals, assuming the position of Sarpanch leads to substantial social and personal growth (refer to Chart 4.7). The findings suggest that holding a leadership position in local governance plays a crucial role in shaping one's identity, status, and self-perception.

Furthermore, 54% of women admitted to encouraging other women to join politics, highlighting the role of female leaders in inspiring greater political participation and fostering empowerment among women in their communities. Respondent named Rekha Rawat (54 years,

OBC) revealed that

“After becoming a Sarpanch, my social relationships have improved a lot. Seeing me attending meetings and participating in rural development, my daughter says that she will also become a Sarpanch. My sister-in-law and nieces too wish to become like me. It feels as if I am doing something good for the society”.

When asked whether women will contest elections again, 35% said yes, indicating that while leadership may provide temporary empowerment, the structural and societal challenges associated with holding public office remain a major deterrent, potentially limiting the participation of new and diverse voices of women in governance. Lastly, 75% of women leaders expressed the need for timely and relevant awareness programs and regular training sessions, highlighting a major gap in capacity-building and institutional support. This suggests that many women do not feel adequately prepared or empowered to navigate the complexities of political leadership, leading to a lack of confidence and reduced long-term participation.

Case Study I: This case study examines the lived experiences of Chhotu Devi, a female Sarpanch from Khandela Gram Samiti (Chaukdi Gram Panchayat), through the lens of postmodernist and feminist theories. By analyzing her journey into political leadership, it explores the interplay between governance, gendered subjectivities, and the socio-political structures that shape women's participation in decentralized governance.

Chhotu Devi's case exemplifies the intersection of gender, power, and govern mentality within rural governance structures. At over 72 years of age, her official records inaccurately state her age as 62, reflecting bureaucratic discrepancies often found in rural documentation. Though illiterate, her educational qualification is recorded as fifth pass, underscoring the performative nature of official narratives. Coming from an OBC background and a joint family, she was married at 14, with her political journey orchestrated by her son rather than personal ambition. Her son, a government employee, manages all Sarpanch-related responsibilities, ensuring no opposition from the community. Postmodernist theories, particularly Foucault's (1967) concept of *govern mentality*, help deconstruct this phenomenon, illustrating how power operates through domestic structures, reinforcing patriarchal control even within seemingly progressive democratic spaces. Chhotu Devi's reliance on her son reflects the internalized subordination that Spivak's (1996) ^[19] notion of the *subaltern* articulates she occupies a position of authority yet remains voiceless, conforming to an embedded patriarchal order. Her case challenges the authenticity of women's political participation in rural India, demonstrating how governance structures are often co-opted by male family members, turning elected female representatives into symbolic figures rather than autonomous decision-makers. This underscores the limitations of policy interventions in achieving genuine gender empowerment. During the household visit, Chhotu Devi's political agency or lack thereof became evident through subtle yet telling interactions. When the research team arrived, her grandson opened the door, appearing visibly perplexed and anxious. He quickly stated that she was not home and unavailable for

the interview, hinting at a deliberate attempt to avoid external scrutiny. The reluctance of the family to allow her to participate suggested underlying control over her narrative, reinforcing the patriarchal structures that often dictate women's political engagement in rural India. It took multiple attempts and the intervention of common sources to convince her son, who ultimately permitted the interview after several days. When Chhotu Devi finally agreed to speak, her silence was striking as she struggled to articulate any details regarding her role, responsibilities, or decisions as a Sarpanch. This reinforced the idea that she functioned as a symbolic (proxy) leader rather than an active political agent, with male family members governing in her name. The discomfort surrounding the interview, both from her family and herself, reflects broader issues of performative representation in local governance, where elected women remain figureheads while real power continues to be exercised by men in the household.

Case Study II: Surili Devi, a 66-year-old Sarpanch from Gadhbopji Panchayat Samiti in Sikar district, exemplifies the deeply entrenched patriarchal and caste-based hierarchies that continue to shape women's political participation in rural India. Belonging to the Scheduled Caste (SC) community, Surili Devi was married off as a child to Suresh Kumar, who now actively manages her official responsibilities as a Sarpanch. She studied until class six and knows how to sign her name. Her role remains largely ceremonial. Initially, she expressed happiness upon being elected but soon realized that her husband would wield the actual power while she was expected to remain in the background. Suresh Kumar, a farmer and small-scale businessman, saw her position as a means to gain social prestige in a region where their caste status placed them at a disadvantage. While she formally holds the position, she attends only the mandatory monthly meetings, with her husband handling all administrative and public affairs, including interactions with higher authorities and dominant caste groups. Her lived experience underscores the intersection of caste and gender in political representation, she admitted to feeling intimidated by upper-caste individuals and deliberately avoiding public meetings, allowing her husband to act in her place due to his greater knowledge and social capital. The interview process further revealed the layers of structural and internalized subordination. Initially unwilling to speak, Surili Devi only agreed after persistent insistence from her husband. Throughout the interaction, she appeared visibly restless, leaving the interview midway on three occasions and refusing to discuss any substantive aspects of her role. A follow-up session was necessary, during which she eventually admitted that fear of the dominant caste groups prevented her from engaging in governance. Surili Devi's case serves as a striking example of Crenshaw's (1991) theory of intersectionality, which highlights how overlapping systems of oppression such as gender, caste, and class compound the marginalization of certain groups. As a SC woman, her experiences double jeopardy-facing both gendered subordination and caste-based discrimination, which together restrict her political agency and social mobility.

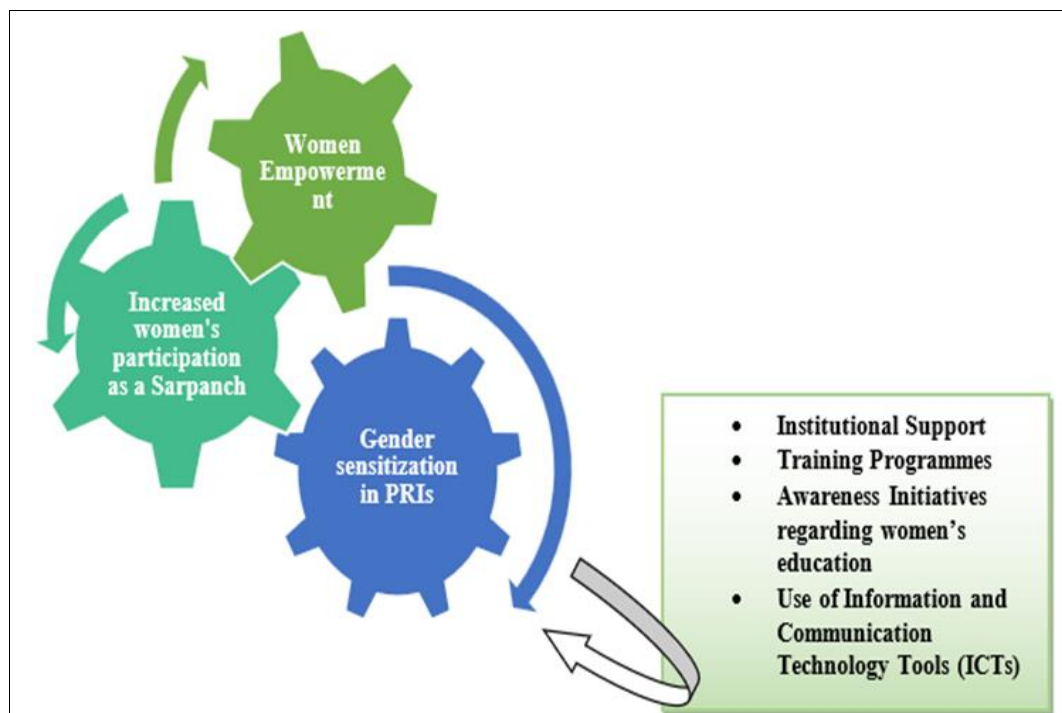
5. Conclusion and Recommendation

Women leaders in Rajasthan continue to face systemic

barriers, including deep-rooted patriarchal norms, gender-based connotations, political interference, lack of institutional support, and inadequate training opportunities. The prevalence of proxy leadership (Sarpanch Pati syndrome), where male relatives influence decision-making on behalf of elected women, further restricts their autonomy and effectiveness in governance. While serving as a Sarpanch has been found to boost confidence, improve social status, and encourage long-term political engagement, these challenges must be addressed to ensure meaningful and independent participation of women in local governance.

To strengthen women's leadership in Rajasthan's PRIs, several measures must be undertaken. Regular capacity-building programs and leadership training are essential to equip women Sarpanches with political, administrative, and financial knowledge, reducing their dependency on male

counterparts. Institutional mechanisms, such as mentorship networks and dedicated resource centers, can provide sustained support and guidance. Moreover, gender sensitization programs targeting male leaders, government officials, and communities must be implemented to create an enabling environment for women's leadership (refer to Dig 4.1). Efforts to curb political and bureaucratic interference, including stricter enforcement of policies against proxy leadership, will be crucial in ensuring women's autonomy in governance. Additionally, financial incentives, leadership fellowships, and policy frameworks should be introduced to encourage women to re-contest elections and take up higher political roles. Finally, grassroots awareness campaigns and media initiatives must be leveraged to challenge traditional gender norms and encourage more women to actively participate in political processes.



Source: Compiled through field survey

Diagram 1: Cycle of Women's Political Empowerment in PRIs

By addressing these structural and socio-cultural challenges, Rajasthan can strengthen its commitment to gender-inclusive governance, ensuring that women's leadership in PRIs is not just symbolic but results in meaningful, independent, and sustainable political empowerment.

Declaration

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