

Women in Panchayat: Realities & Recommendations

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Give us a chance!

“Now that an opportunity to take the plunge presents itself, my brothers on the shore offers unwarranted advice - Beware! Or you will certainly drown. Learn to swim first or you will never swim! Oh? Such sudden an unusual concern for my well-being”. I exclaimed, “Give us chance to test the waters, our hands and legs are capable of keeping us afloat, we may swallow some water but give us a chance to endeavour!”

- Nurjahan Pathan, Ex-Woman Councillor, Andheri, Mumbai

Global and National Context:

This is just a beginning of women participating in governance on an extensive scale. The twentieth century ushered freedom struggles thwarting the shackles of dominant ideologies like racism, slavery etc. Before and after 1950 many countries attained independence from imperialist regimes, and achieved their sovereignty and embarked on their independent missions making it an era that nurtured attention to this section of the society. On the international front serious concerns were raised about communist regimes all over the world like Yugoslavia, Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, East Germany and later the disintegration of Soviet Union saw a downfall of Marx philosophy with free economy offered as the only viable option. The political environment simmered with discontent and it was an era ideal to cultivate new concepts. The first twenty five years were devoted to nation building, framing constitution; but soon the changing social, cultural, industrial and economical parameters made it impossible to ignore women's issues.

Even in Indian context, India became independent and framed its constitution. The Constitution of India has provided many safeguards for the social, economic, and political development of women trying to provide them with equal status in the society. However the oppressive dynamics of caste and class hierarchies in combination with gender inequality, work negatively for women. Secondly an added political dimension has been the Emergency that was declared in India in 1975 with restrictions imposed on movements of the Trade Union, and other social organizations. Similarly between the years 1978 and 1980 elections saw many upheavals on the political front and the youth disappointed or disillusioned by 1980 general elections turned their back to politics and formed or joined voluntary organizations and started working independently. It is imperative to note that the 80's also was important in terms of the Mandal Commission report, the Shah Bano case, Ram Mandir – Babri Masjid issues, that further lead to the polarization of the society.

Locating Women:

The year 1975 marked the watershed of the women's movement after United Nations declared it as the 'International Women's Year' which initiated deliberations all over the world on issues faced by women, rethinking on the concepts of liberty and equality as until then these topics were handled within the limited scope of Women and Child Welfare Departments. Most importantly United Nations declared the period from 1975 to 1985 as the '*UN Decade for Women*'. This declaration instigated debates on matters ranging from government policy, marriage and relationships, empowering women, their psychology, participation of women in politics, economy to their contribution as human resource at home.

Though international women's decade made a mark all over the country it had a profound impact on Maharashtra. After the emergency of the 1975, with these restrictions on the political activity, the women members of political parties, gaining clarity on the issues faced by women took initiative for

organizing poster exhibitions, panel discussions, songs, writing articles, columns, speeches and seminars, bringing significant problems faced by women to the forefront. Women as a group enjoyed freedom then and taking advantage of the opportunity - a '*Stree Mukti Sangharsh Parishad*' (A Women's Liberation Struggle Conference)' was organized in Pune which proved to be the basis of formation of an autonomous and pro-women's organizations where issues of women from middle class were tackled alongside those of women labourers.

In 1980s, '*Stree Purush Samanta Yatra*' (Women-Men equality tour) travelled to various parts of Maharashtra to spread the message of equality as propagated by *Stree Mukti Sanghatana's* street play '*Mulgi Zhali Ho! (A Girl is born)*' reaching out to members of different strata of the society. This play highlighted different women's issues that were almost like a Manifesto of women's movement! In the same decade *Mahila Mandals* (Women's groups/ collectives) were initiated in many villages, that motivated women and they were ready to imbibe new ideas.

Meanwhile a National Perspective Plan was developed in 1986 and the concept of 'Women's Welfare' changed to 'Women's Development'. Another vital change for the women's movement came during this period as the government began conceding that women were capable of being more than a weaker section that needed help as till then women's share in per capita income and their labour at home was never measured. For instance a '*Shramshakti*' report was published in 1987 that made a detailed documentation of women's contribution to society. This was followed by new laws that were result of the anti-dowry campaign, the agitations that ensued after the Mathura rape case brought about a fundamental change in the law regarding rape. It was underlined that women as a section of the society was denied an opportunity to develop and had become weak.

In 1994, Maharashtra announced its Women's Policy and it was the first state to draw a women's policy which bestowed property rights to women, allowed a child to affix mother's name to her/his name and also brought reservation of women in police forces - these were historic decisions. In the last 20 years, awareness in women had multiplied, which was reflected in the government policy as legal amendments were in process, the constitution had presented an opportunity to participate in governance – a sign that society was prepared to embrace these changes.

Core Realities

This is an attempt to highlight the challenges faced by EWRs at different levels as a result of their being a woman and understanding certain inadequacies in the existing structure that are affecting women's participation irrespective of their caste, class, religion and ethnic identities. At one level the patriarchal setup looks at women with the same distrust and doubt in handling village governance, the space allocated to women is thus hijacked by their family members, spouses or mostly men belonging to certain vested interest groups. But at the same time, the caste-class hierarchies along with other socio-economic and political background places women belonging to different marginalized communities into a more vulnerable terrain.

As an organization with 24000 members in 26 districts, 78 blocks and 2000 focused villages, MRA has faced many challenges, in the last 17 years. On one hand, it had its share of success stories, instances where villages have been transformed drastically. It bores testimony to the tremendous potential shown by the women and the way they used an opportunity that came their way for the welfare of the society. However, on the other hand, when you have to build a different brand of politics, promote value based governance, the endless obstacles are an integral part of the journey.

Violence as a tool to suppress EWRs:

The women in governance have definitely succeeded in creating unique milestones guided by the principles of the movement. However, male dominated society, ridden with caste and gender discrimination is forever on a look out for an opportunity to stop their successful ascendance. They allow only malleable candidates, who could be easily manipulated to contest elections, ask elected wives to be mute spectators physically assault a woman *Sarpanch* if she tries to actively take up an

issue, threaten and abuse family members and if all such tactics don't work, the last weapon they resort to is maligning her character. For instance,

"It was not difficult for Sunita Agham from Yavatmal to win election, an active SHG leader, as women from her SHG and bhajan group had insisted that she contests election. Everything was normal till she ascended the post. Villagers had gathered in large number and Sunitatai was happy to see the large crowd at the Gram Sabha. However as she got up to address the crowd, some one behind her shouted, 'close the meeting!' and she was stupefied! And then someone threw red chilli powder in her eyes and slapped her. It was later revealed that the previous Sarpanch had detested Sunita's election to his post."

"Soon after getting elected Pratibha Tayde from Akola began struggling to get water for the village. As she collected people's contribution, the opposition created many obstacles. As the village had no water people started creating a hate campaign against her and barraged her with questions. She could not take the constant pressure and finding no way out, Pratiba Tayde had no other option but to commit suicide to set herself free."

These are not the only experiences. There have been many serious incidents where if not the EWRs then their family members have also been targeted. For instance, in order to de-motivate her, Anuyatai's child was kidnapped; in some other place husband of an EWR was thrashed for no reason. When Shraddha Ramteke of Gondiya complained against false voting, police used vulgar language to embarrass her. After opponents realized that Ratnamalatai would be elected unopposed to the Bhandara Zilla Parishad her rivals defamed her character. After Jijabai Kharat resolved the village water problem, she was cleverly entangled in a murder case. In many such incidents the police have even refused to register a complaint, but things got moving after MRA stepped in.

Politics is not a place where women are admired any longer as men have realized that they are here to stay. It is feared by the power holders that the reservation in local self-government bodies can rise up to 50% and that they will enter Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha in a matter of years which according to them is not a good proposition. When a woman family member is asked to contest, she is given certain amount of freedom, some doors open, and to some extent she is ready to exercise her decision-making power and all this leads to change. When this new shift in power relation is experienced, and this new role and responsibility is difficult to comprehend, attacks increase leading to assaults and suspicions.

Liquor Prohibition:

Alcohol abuse by men has been a common problem that women across class and caste face. There are stories of families getting indebted due to money spent on buying liquor and there are narratives of domestic violence by drunken men. When 'prohibition' is brought up as topic for discussion at the Gram Sabha, men start walking out, branding it as women's subject. Women in their struggle to stop alcoholism fight with the men at home, in the village and most importantly the liquor shop keepers. Wardha district in Maharashtra has declared prohibition for years but liquor is sold illegally and rampantly just across its border with government and police turning a blind eye. The neo-rich class, in the last 20-25 years has also given a class status to alcohol and that has made the issue even more complex.

*"We are addicted to love
They to alcohol
It is easy to make laws on prohibition
Break liquor barrels
And at times
A procession of the drunkard
However there is no cure for addiction
Is the truth of the matter"*

Large number of liquor shops get license and justify that wine and beer do not fall in the category of 'alcohol'. Oranges, grapes and sugarcane are already used to make alcohol but in recent years the government also gave license to make liquor from foodgrains like *jowar* and *bajra*. Government of Maharashtra declared a subsidy of Rs. 10/- for this liquor from food grains. Although all sections of the society severely criticised this decision and a petition was filed in the High Court against it, the government has withdrawn the proposal but the main aim remains. The farmers association has backed the government citing that it will increase the value of their crop, so political leaders are happy and no party has opposed this move as all leaders have their nexus with one or another factory that will produce the drink. Established politicians control many power centres in the village like sugar factories, credit societies, educational societies, water supply society, milk society, newspapers, Television channels that are important in rural politics. Therefore, financial, human resources are available very easily.

Electoral Politics:

Election is one of the most important components of democracy. However in reality, corruption, supply of food items like meat, providing alcohol are means by which votes are bought. Instead of election manifesto, leadership qualities, development agendas, it is the above malpractices that influence a voter. Panchayat election is dominated by political parties, but without party symbols. It is like a cooperative election. General people's panel can take a lead to project them-selves with a creative remark of "new manifesto" based on LOOPHOLES of traditional power holders. Whole constituency can get involved in issue framing and planning for their own development.

Secondly Andolan Panel, i.e. Rajsatta Panel gets an advantage of 'non-party' but political symbol of linking village issues with village institutions. Image mapping of party and Andolan creates a very positive image of Rajsatta candidate as an innovation & gender justice.

Value based election with no liquor, no mutton/ meat and no money creates an impact of new beginning of the village development. 'My Village' concept is sometimes beyond the concept of nation building. Hence voters cast their vote for village building candidate than traditional Patil or landlord.

Unopposed Elections or Division of office in multi tenures

Under the guise of unopposed election to the post of *Sarpanch*, a new process has emerged - i.e., the post of *Sarpanch* is auctioned! The person who can buy the post gets it or it is divided for half term between two- three people. However, the practise to do so has percolated from the State Legislative Assembly and if chief ministers of Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh and Jammu Kashmir have shared their tenure, the villagers can hardly be blamed for doing so.

Two Child Norm in Panchayats:

Under the two child norm the person elected under PRIs should not have more than two children and if the third child is born after assuming the post, that person is removed from his/her post. This policy has been adopted by Maharashtra since 2001. If the third child is born after 2001, his mother/ father are barred from contesting elections. This law is being implemented in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh and in many other places.

These provisions are used to topple opponents and at some places the husband has also divorced his wife. It has been observed in Solapur district that the birth of third child is not registered and the most vulnerable are women and people from the tribal belts. Even today women have no control over their fertility and the number of children she can have. Many a times she is expected to bear children till a male heir is borne.

"Sutra" an institute in Himachal Pradesh studied the disadvantage of this law. It has published a report and giving into the discontent among the people the Himachal government withdrew it.

Though organizations are pursuing a similar withdrawal in Maharashtra the government has not taken any steps in that direction.

Travel allowance for Women *Sarpanch*/ ST Pass for Women *Sarpanch*:

MRA has repeatedly worked at various levels, pursued the demand for ST pass for women *Sarpanch* travelling to block places for village development work. However in spite of continuous assurances, there has been no decision at the state level. A woman MLA first raised this question in the winter session in 2004 and again in 2005, many MLAs even took up the matter in the budget session. But the ex-chief minister gave a standard reply, 'The state transport already gives a concession to 21 components of the society, so the matter will have to be studied and expenses understood before a decision could be taken!'

At a practical level, State Transport pass is an important demand as

- The woman *Sarpanch* has to ask for travel allowance from home and if that money is not given on time work remains incomplete.
- She has to visit the block places to understand various state and central schemes and for follow-up.
- If she cannot travel she has to depend on the *Gram Sevak* and that means inviting fraudulent methods practised by him To attend urgent matters she has to travel on a motorcycle with another man and if this happens often, it starts village tongues wagging and it gives space for character assassination by the community
- The travel allowance granted by the state government is meagre amount and there is no guarantee that the allowance will reach them on time
- State transport gives concession to Assembly members but today no MLA travels by a state transport bus.
- The total travel expenses of women *Sarpanch* will not be more than 60-70 crores and all MLA and MP who increase all their allowances as inflation grows, simply forget their counterparts in the village.
- Every Assembly session ends without sanctioning this demand.

Dual responsibilities: Family and Work

Responsibilities of home, children, illnesses, fields and daily wages still remain on women. If the woman is from an economically backward community, she cannot let go of her daily wage and it is a delicate balance to maintain. Political party meetings are invariably held at night after dinner and though women attend it after completing their chores they are not comfortable as the meetings prolong. Visits outside the village are a part of the job as they have to attend party meetings, accompany many men colleagues; it gives a chance for defamation. If the husband is suspicious, matters turn worse. If the husband is a supporter the rivals beat him up. Fighting corruption, inspecting ongoing work involves devoting a lot of time and energy and it is very difficult to do so along with looking after the household needs.

There is an absence of women from the minority sections of the society like Muslims, Sikhs and Christians in MRA movement. A few women came forward from each community but they are not a social unit as yet. Also tribal women become lone members of the movement and they are very few in the mainstream. Mahila Rajsatta needs to rethink on new ways for their inclusion.

Women's Front of Political Parties

"Go ahead not by circling the path but by proving your might"

The 73rd Amendment granted 33% reservation to women but empowerment of women's front of different political parties is not visible. This is a contrasting picture. Women are party leaders but within the party women's front have a secondary status. These fronts are neglected during distribution of tickets as well and they also have no say in developing the party policy. They are delegated chores like managing a programme, gathering women, presenting a bouquet to chief guests, welcoming guests, and looking after the catering needs. They are not included in the discussion regarding the main speech, structure of the event etc. Most women face the same problem after they are elected and want to be a part of the committee. Both they are never selected and if chosen all that comes to their way is either the Women or Child welfare or may be the Education department.

33 % reservation at National Level:

Today not only successful EWRs want to go further in local level politics but women now dream of upward movement/ mobility in politics. Many active women leaders and EWRs of MRA demand and support the 33% reservation in Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha. MRA had celebrated when the bill of 33% reservation was passed in Rajya Sabha by "Dhole Vajava" - playing one music instrument and distributing sugar/ sweets in the village.

Issues faced by single women in governance:

Single women play an important role in multiple ways as Aganwadi teachers and helpers, ASHA workers, Police Patil and supportive role in SHG's. However when the same single woman becomes a EWR then the villagers don't like it. It has been observed that single women faced lots of difficulties while functioning in Gram Panchayat. To overcome this, there is a need to build organisation of single women EWRs.

Future scope in politics (Panchayat Samiti/ Zilla Parishad):

Contesting election of Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad requires support from political parties. However it is difficult and challenging for women to get nomination and ticket from the party. Getting party nomination is a like a getting a passport. It is difficult to contest value-based elections alongwith traditional methods of politics.

Convergence of Inter-state Strategies and Policy Learning's:

MRA's team and activists have received an important and insightful opportunity to interact with other states and have a common platform or forum where the sharing of issues and concerns of EWRs could be dealt with. There have been some important learning's from these inter-state meetings like understanding the situation of PRIs in these states, new concepts and practices, challenges and strategies used by the EWRs. For instance, ward meetings of Rajasthan, meeting allowance of Kerala state and 50% reservation for women in Bihar. These interactions have also been useful for demanding policy changes. MRA is also an active partner in National Platform to Promote Decentralization (NPPD) at National level. But there is lack of systematic convergence and dissemination of people centred policies and practices.

Collaboration with Government Department and Agencies

Most of the people's movements are viewed by the Government as anti-state or anti law. It takes more energy and efforts to build rapport, and convince ones credibility while working on the same issues, with common minimum understanding. For instance, while working with the Maharashtra State Election Commission, sharing of information at various levels, it has been experienced that MRA has received limited support for solving the cases on election. MRA has only received the list of various roles to be performed by election commission internally and externally. It has also been

observed that there is no separate machinery for solving issues related to elections. The department of Central Government does not work efficiently without the support from State Government.

The relation with Election commission of Maharashtra was initiated through the Kranti Jyoti project that focused on Training for EWRs of *Gram Panchayat*. The role of MRA and RSCD has been of providing training and developing training materials. In this process, the College of Social work, Nirmala Niketan has also played an important role for organising training of 20,000 EWRs of 10 Districts of Maharashtra. It is equally important to note that in *Gramin Bharat*, unit of National news channel, two interviews on the Kranti Jyoti Projects were telecasted.

YASHADA is also an informal partner in creation of a pool of 300 Panchayat trainers in the State. MRA is also an active partner of LoGin - Asia and learning from 13 Country Partners.

Local learning's are converted into strategies at grassroot level.

We need to strengthen local democracy & work together to identify strategies to review our own outcome. Elected Women Representatives – EWR's are real creator of following strategies -

Struggles & Strategies

Level	Major Struggles	Strategies	Outcome
Self as a power Center	• Lack of exposure, • Lack of Confidence, • Poor self-esteem, • Lack of participation in decision making • Illiteracy/ years of gap in women's education • Lack of knowledge about village politics and Panchayat affairs, • Fear, anxiety and pressure to perform • Restrictions based on caste, class and religious ideologies, • Economic dependence, • Threat of all sorts of Violence in home and outside	✓ BOSS Course (Budget Order Schemes & Services), ✓ Abhinandan Patra (Congratulatory Certificates/ letters) and Melava (Felicitation program) ✓ Women Leadership Workshops and Training of Trainers ✓ Perspective Building Workshops ✓ Ideal Sarpanch Award in Conventions (Adarsh Sarpanch/ Karbharni) ✓ Information Dissemination (Karbharni Annual & Quarterly magazine, other need based material, reflexive games like Governance Snake and Ladder games etc) ✓ Membership and I card ✓ Crisis Support ✓ Involving women in (Protests and delegations) Dharna Morcha	- Increased self-confidence and Dignity - Increase in awareness and knowledge - Creates a new Identity in women - Struggle for Value based governance - Change in perspective - Courage to take up issues independently
Family as a power Center	• Restrictions on mobility, • Lack of support, • Interference by husband, • Burden of household responsibility, • Doubt on character,	✓ Parivar Sanman Patra (Family Felicitation), ✓ Jodi Sanman (Joint husband – wife felicitation) ✓ Dialogue with son's of Jyotiba ✓ Involving family members in MRA activities	- Increased Social acceptance - Turning interference into support - Increase in women's status within family

	• Non-cooperation, • Ego issues and jealousy		- Increase in family status - Acceptance of women as political actors - More space for women in decision making
Village as a local power Center	• Strong Traditional Power centers • Patriarchal Stereotypes, • Control and pressure of influential and powerful people, • Domination of Caste, class, religious ideologies, • Various political parties, • Vested interest groups, • Women are not a homogenous category, • Corruption and other mal-practices	✓ Gram Panchayat Darshan (Visit to Gram Panchayat Campaign) ✓ Gram Sabha Gaurav, ✓ Savitri Gatha, ✓ (Adarsh Gaon) Ideal Village Award ✓ VAG Campaign and Yuvati Sunvai ✓ Election Campaign ✓ Gaon Shakha – Village Branch ✓ Panchayat Raj Women's Front ✓ Krantijyoti Training ✓ Gram Karmchari Board	- Change in development agenda - Reaching out to the marginalized sections - Awareness building on new issues - Creation of new support systems - Rapport building and alliance with various stake groups - Effective and efficient GP - Change in power equations
Institutional power centers	• Bureaucracy, • Non-cooperation by the higher authorities, • Lack of Support and encouragement • Corruption, • Poor linkage from state to the village	✓ Hisob Dakhwa Abhiyaan (Show us accounts Campaign), ✓ Joint House Ownership Campaign ✓ Panchayati Raj Resource Centers ✓ Campaign on 10 % & 15% Reserved Budget ✓ 33% +++ Campaign ✓ State Convention of EWR's	- Creating new practices to change situation - Cross Section Alliances - Implementation of Government Resolutions and orders - Sensitizing the bureaucracy - Changing the mindset and perspective of people

Any struggle is the birthplace of strategy, which has been identified and applied by panchayat women leaders.

But to make them value based, issue focused & people centered leader we propose following recommendations:

POLITICAL RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Atleast 33% reservation for women in all national and state policy making bodies on the basis of policy for local self-governance.
- Provide reservation for women for the post of Sarpanch/ up-Sarpanch of the *Gram Panchayat's* in all the states.
- The minimum representation requirement for the women in the *Panchayat's* in all States should be 50%. It was one of the important recommendations of the 81st Constitutional Amendment Act passed by the 14th Lok Sabha.
- It should be made obligatory on all political parties to amend their constitutions in order to provide for 33% reservation for women at every level and every wing of party organization.
- Constituencies reserved for women must be determined not by a draw of lots but by a definite sequence in rotation. This will reduce uncertainty and also the arbitrary element and give some breathing space to the parties and the aspirants.
- Reservation of 1/3 seats in various committees of Municipal Corporations, State Legislatures and Parliament must be provided. This will expose women to all the intricacies of legislative affairs.
- A Standing Committee for Women's Development needs to be constituted in the parliament as well as in the State Legislatures wherein 1/3 seats must be reserved for men. This is very essential in order to establish that women's issues are not the concern of women alone
- Reservations need not be eternal phenomena. The policy must be reviewed after 15 years. After 15 years it can be assessed whether any natural processes have evolved during this period, leading to a greater representation of women in those constituencies which were always open like Rajya Sabha and Legislative Councils, as well as in such constituencies which have got de-reserved due to rotation
- Support Women's Charter of Demands – 1996 specifies the following :
 - a) an end to criminalization of politics and politicization of crime
 - b) public declaration of assets of candidates
 - c) right to recall elected members
 - d) right to information
 - e) public hearings on projects and policies that affect people to involve them in planning
 - f) the nexus between the liquor lobby and politics should be cut

ADMINISTRATIVE RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Ensure that due consideration is given by authorities at all levels to the proposals of the *Gram Sabha*, particularly those relating to issues of women and children
- Ensure adequate number of women *Panchayat* secretaries and entrust not more than two *Gram Panchayat's* to one *Panchayat* secretary/village development officer
- Ensure that preference is given by *Gram Panchayat's* to women's self-help groups in awarding contracts for village level construction work
- Implement the Women Component of the Five Year Plan through *Panchayat's*

- Ensure that the Government provides 33% funds for women's empowerment at the national, state and at local self-governance, along with concrete guidelines.
- Elected women representatives must be provided with an adequate EWR fund to enable them to perform efficiently.
- Women's participation in decision making need to be facilitated statutorily, at the level of
 - a) *Gram Sabha*
 - b) Village sub-committees
 - c) Financial Decentralization and control over natural resources
 - d) PRI administrative procedures & governance need to be in local languages.

LEGAL RECOMMENDATIONS:

- “Women’s *Sabha*” before every *Gram Sabha* need to be evolved statutorily as a national policy; which will support the process of women in governance.
- Ensure that every state Government opens a toll free helpline for elected women at the state and district levels to attend to emergent needs (adverse or otherwise) in terms of police assistance, information dissemination, legal assistance, counseling, etc with a view to strengthen women's participation in governance
- Provide for EWR’s protection law to deal with those committing violence against women candidates during and after elections
- Scrap the two child norm as applicable at present in respect of the representatives of *Panchayat*’s, which is against the reproductively rights and it will encourage girl-killing.
- Provide right to land and housing in joint names of spouses and even for single, deserted, Dalit, tribal, Devadasi, widowed and battered women and for those rendered homeless in caste/communal riots and due to displacement
- The motion of no confidence cannot be moved against him/her without 3/4th majority.
- Flag hosting by all elected women heads at all levels need to be a national policy; which will strengthen the “sense of freedom” for the women also.
- *Sarpanch*, woman or man, especially belonging to the deprived caste/class (from BPL category) must get travel concession for their mobility and as incentive for performance
- Finance guidelines need to be very effective, transparent& accountable to PRI’s by which they can govern their PRI.
- A cell at the district level, preferably in the Collector's office must be set up, where the women and Dalit *Sarpanchs* can approach if they face any functional difficulty.

SUPPORTIVE RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Establish HLP – (Horizontal Learning) Platform for mutual support & hand-holding which is a real need at block level.
- Introduce regular gender sensitive reorientation programs for MPs, MLAs and bureaucrats about the funds, functions and functionaries of the *Panchayat*’s
- Provide literacy training under special crash programs for illiterate women *Panchayat* members

- Facilitate internship programs for *Panchayat* women representatives inside and outside the country
- Give awards for outstanding performance by women representatives at all levels of the *Panchayat*'s in the country
- Political Education and Training must be imparted to the women representatives of the backward castes/classes and other marginalized sections of the rural society and elected representatives of the *Gram Panchayat*'s and other motivated and potential leaders from the *Gram Sabha* on their rights and roles in the account both the knowledge and significance of the political processes as well as the political dynamics. This must be mandatory in a sustained and focused manner.
- Every policy needs clear-cut implementation guidelines, mass awareness strategies, punishment mechanisms and review procedures to minimize wide policy practice gaps within the context of India.
- Need of orientation policy in all three tier local representation.

Way Forward

Many women mastered the art of swimming, some choked, at times lost their life, but many endured the struggle remaining afloat, hanging on to a log while yet others built boats to reach the opposite bank. Obstacles emerged in all forms - no-confidence motions, rivals trying to demoralize, conceited men and *Patils*, who had ruled on their own terms from time immemorial, along with the pain and suffering of being born as a woman and bearing physical abuse, the most distressing factor was the lack of support from a real partner who supported rival groups or governed in 'her' name, granting her the right to 'sign' as if he was a benefactor! It was a tight rope walk to humbly accept misgivings without bringing disgrace to family and yet make good of the opportunity and fulfill expectations of people who elected you. But amidst all this appreciation, motivation and helping hands gave strength in the form of the *Sanghtana* (organization), the training workshops toned knowledge, legal amendments helped face turbulent times and when this team of amateur swimmers compelled a champion to choke, it infused them with the might of a matriarch!

**Based on experiences & innovative experiments of two decade of
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