



The Silent Struggles of Mahila Sarpanch in Rural India

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Sub-head: In addition to being deprived of their rightful political representation within their community, women sarpanches also grapple with age-old problems of domestic violence in their personal lives. This is how SMART NGO's initiative 'Hinsa Ko No' is helping them break their silence.

"Mein Ayesha ka sasur hu aur main hi sara panchayat ka kaam dekhta hu. Wo sign karne aati hai wo pet se hai aur apne mayke me hai" (I am Ayesha's father-in-law. I take care of all her responsibilities as a sarpanch. She is pregnant, and staying with her parents)

Cloaked under the guise of caring for his pregnant daughter-in-law, these words emit the unmistakable stench of patriarchy, shedding light on the stark truth that we still inhabit a predominantly male-dominated world. and that women taking charge of their lives is still a dream. A woman's role remains limited to her family and her children, and her social or political empowerment is often relegated to a farce, with the male members grabbing the opportunity to exert power.

The Sarpanch is an elected representative and is a respected village leader who makes important decisions for the welfare of his/her community. It is a source of pride and an indicator of empowerment when a woman is elected a Sarpanch. But many times, these women have more of a symbolic role, and the real decisions are made by male family members.

Like several other women across the country, this is Ayesha's story too.. She is the Sarpanch of Shahpur Nagli village in Haryana's Nuh District. In this deeply patriarchal society, her role as a village leader is overshadowed by her duties as a daughter-in-law. This blog looks at her position as a female Sarpanch in the village, taking into account traditional customs that hinder social change.

The government passed a law reserving seats in the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies for women, amplifying the growing need for women in the decision-making process. In the Panchayat raj system, 33 percent reservation for women has been the norm for decades now, in Haryana there is a 50 percent reservation.. But women continue to face resistance when trying to assert their authority as elected leaders even after two decades since the rule was instituted through a constitutional amendment in 1992. Women are often pushed aside because of their traditional roles in the village.

When Ayesha's father-in-law says, "I handle village matters. We only call her for her signature," it reflects the deeply ingrained belief that women or their being elected is of no consequence. Power and control over the position is important.

"Gram Swaraj" or Village Self-governance was a vision of the freedom fighters. Mahatma Gandhi believed in Panchayati Raj as the foundation of India's political system, where each village manages its own affairs. But women still struggle due to deep rooted patriarchal mindsets, which is not unique to rural communities alone. The patriarchal structures are such that they make women feel less able than their male counterparts. Due to the oppression and subjugation women often feel trapped in a system filled with taboos, indignity and fear.

I witnessed these stories during my tenure with SMART NGO. In addition to being deprived of their rightful political representation within their village community,



women sarpanches also face violence at home. It's disheartening to note that despite the constitutional provisions that have granted women in villages a share in political and administrative decision-making, albeit within a system that is often feeble and flawed, they still lack agency within their own homes.

While having a female sarpanch is seen as a way to nurture women in leadership positions, they remain vulnerable to domestic violence. They rarely raise their voices against such atrocities, primarily out of fear that such discussions would tarnish their family's reputation.

It's been close to a year since I became part of a project that supports women's empowerment, across 8 states. I work with SMART NGO on the 'Hinsa Ko No' project, and we have over 100 women's groups, each with 20-25 members.

We teamed up with 25 Community Radio stations for the project panning 6 years. These radios stations have a good understanding of the community and are respected and trusted by the community members. Through the radio programmes we create awareness about domestic violence and how to speak up against such abuse, and we work closely with the staff at the station, invest in building their capacities and use their good will to conduct narrowcasts and have discussions with the community.

I have traveled across the states of Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, and Odisha, and have heard stories of violence from the survivors. The project has given me an opportunity to understand the status of women in far off villages and the work that needs to be done to even start talking about empowerment- despite women being elected as Sarpanches..

In the 'Hinsa Ko No' project, I have seen the tough situations that Mahila Sarpanches face. They have to deal with domestic abuse while carrying on with the facade of being an elected representative. Attend meetings, still have no voice, have financial powers but still just leave thumb impressions on files and cheque books. Ayesha's story tells me that while women are increasingly taking on leadership roles, they still have a long way to go to experience what it is to be a leader, to speak up and be heard. The 'Hinsa Ko No' project aims to break this silence.