



THE PARADOX OF EQUALITY: EMERGING ETHICAL CHALLENGES IN PARTICIPATION OF ELECTED WOMEN REPRESENTATIVES IN RURAL LOCAL GOVERNANCE

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

Following the enactment of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment in 1992, India institutionalized the equal participation of women in grassroots democracy through the implementation of 'gender quotas' (reservations). Consequently, more than 14.5 lakh women in rural India formally assumed the responsibilities of allocating state-sponsored welfare programs, rural development schemes, and adjudicating daily village social issues by assuming in India's local governance. However, despite such a large scale of implementation of the act, with the passage of time, social and ethical challenges such as class, caste, religion, etc., became resilient and hindered participation, representation, and equality for women in rural local governance. The presence of such intersecting forms of ethical challenges in rural local governance makes India an exciting case study for examining how, despite these ethical challenges, WRs successfully negotiated and remade 'political space' for themselves within everyday life situations. Drawing upon in-depth semi-structured interviews of 50 WRs in four districts in the western Indian state of Gujarat, who were elected to office for 2016–2021 village panchayat elections. The results suggest that the participation of women in rural local bodies varies widely, and various social, attitudinal and structural barriers distinctly shape this. Though the quota (reservation) system has proved to be an effective means for the participation/ representation of women, social ethical challenges of class, caste, and religion affect WRs' ability to participate effectively in grassroots democracy. This research makes significant contributions to the academic literature by emphasizing the resilience of women in settings where ethical challenges hinder their participation in grassroots democracy.

Keywords: *Grass-root democracy, Gender, Gujarat, India, Local Governance, Social-Ethical Challenges*

Introduction

The persistent disparity in women's political representation, leading to a lack of authority for women, is a significant ethical concern globally (Maguire, 2018). This disparity persists despite most countries, including those in South and Southeast Asia, being signatories to human rights treaties and conventions like CEDAW and the Beijing Declaration. These conventions aim for a minimum of 30% female representation in decision-making positions, highlighting the ethical challenge of ensuring gender equality in the political participation & representation of women (Azizuddin & Shamsuzzoha, 2023; Meaza, 2009; Ferdaus & Rahman, 2011).

Statistical data concerning female parliamentary engagement reveals that approximately half of the global population (49.6 percent) is composed of women. However, in Asian countries, only 19.6 percent of parliamentary seats are held by women (Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), 2019). This situation persists notwithstanding the implementation of various initiatives designed to facilitate women's advancement in the political arena, including gender protocols such as the Platform for Action, Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and most recently, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Amidst the significant efforts undertaken to raise awareness regarding the ethical challenges posed by gender inequalities in society, patterns of gender disparity in governance and other public activities persist, particularly within Asian countries (Abakah, 2018; Choi, 2018). An extensive body of literature (e.g., Sethi, 1988; Pyeatt and Yanus, 2017; Hoy, 1994) offers explanations for these enduring ethical challenges. These explanations address two fundamental inquiries: a) whether the dominance of men in politics can be attributed to women's reluctance or lack of interest in participating in political activities compared to their male

counterparts; and b) whether male dominance in politics is inherent, conventional, or whether women may be socialized to accept male dominance.

Gender Quotas & Women's Participation in Global Local Governance

To truly understand any political system, we need to delve into how its citizens participate in politics. Political participation is considered a key component of political power. Traditional democratic theory views participating in politics as a virtue, a civic duty, and a sign of a healthy political system (Ghatak, 2010). According to Sethi (1988), political participation involves individuals engaging in the political process at all levels of governance to allocate resources and values within society.

In the context of Local Governance, women's rights advocates and international organizations like the UN Women and the Global Fund for Women have been working towards the idea that women's political representation, especially at the local governance level, can augment democratic processes and foster equity in terms of political participation within society (Choi, 2018). Several countries, especially in Asia, have introduced reservation (quota systems) to improve female political representation (Rai, 2011). Globally, nearly half of the countries with elected local government bodies have implemented legislated gender quotas to enhance women's representation in local governance. These measures aim to address historical gender imbalances and accelerate the inclusion of women in local governance. Additionally, they aim to address diverse ethical challenges that impede the empowerment of women. They are explicitly detailed in electoral laws and further enshrined in national constitutions (UN Women, 2021).

Gender quotas have substantially increased women's participation in local governance in developing and developed nations. Research using official data confirms that the implementation of quotas resulted in more women being elected to leadership positions in local governance institutions. For instance, France's parity law, introduced in 2000, significantly increased women's representation in local councils (47% by 2001) and the National Assembly (39.5% by 2022), with local councils approaching parity. Similarly, in South Africa, the Municipal Structures Act in 1998 boosted women representation in local government.

The Indian Scenario

India, in 1993, enacted a gender-based reservation policy, the 73rd Amendment Act of the Constitution, reserving one-third of seats in all categories and levels of grassroots institutions. However, the lack of political participation by women at the local level remains an ethical issue, perpetuating gender inequality and denying women the chance to influence decisions that directly impact their communities. This exclusion undermines principles of justice and equity, emphasizing the need for more effective implementation of policies that empower women politically. Despite this initiative, which aimed to transform women's participation in local governance and provide them with constitutional status, the outcomes have been disappointing. Instead of fostering significant advancements in women's political roles at the local level, these legislations have had a limited impact and, paradoxically, have heightened ethical challenges within the system. (Bhatiya, 2018; Guha, 2014; Makwana, 2009).

On the one hand, certain scholarly investigations (for instance, Mehta and Ahuja, 1993; Hirway, 1989) contend that the absence of political voice and inadequate representation and involvement of women in local governance result from centralized decision-making, a paucity of political and bureaucratic support, insufficient devolution of powers, and a lack of functional and financial autonomy. Furthermore, policies intended to address ethical challenges for women to confront patriarchy and attain gender equality, gain access to and control of resources, and achieve new social outcomes have been unsuccessful in achieving these objectives (Batliwala, 2007; Kabeer, 1999). Therefore, the presence of women in local governance has not necessarily translated into their political participation or representation (Everette, 2009; Vincent, 2004).

Conversely, several studies (e.g., Goswami, 2015; Bhatt and Ranjan, 2016) challenge this assertion, positing that following the implementation of the 73rd Amendment, Local Governance Institutions, particularly village panchayats in India, are no longer exclusively gender-based but rather inclusive. This supports the notion that legislation aimed at addressing ethical challenges has been successful.

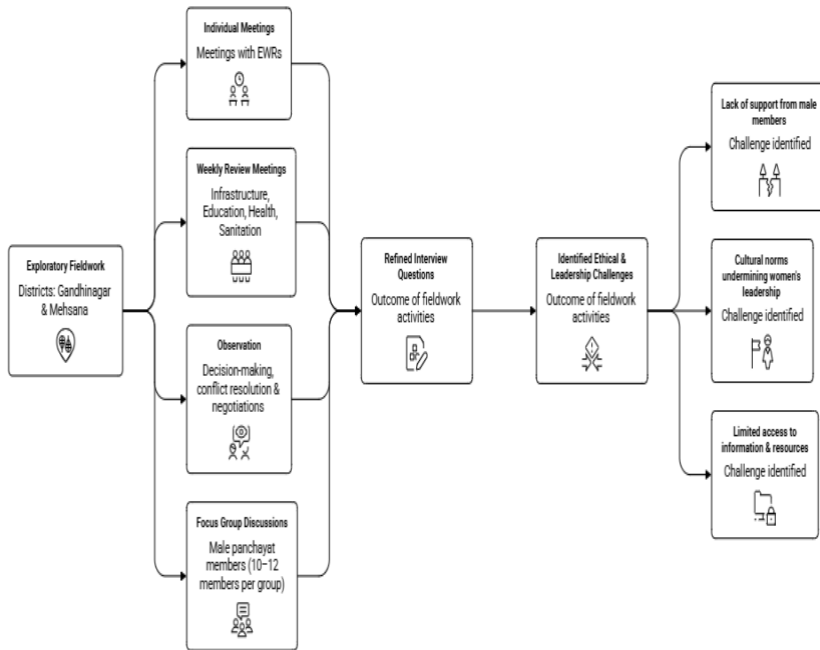
Study Methodology

Research Design, Method & Data Collection

This systematic approach allowed the author to refine the interview questions and to understand various ethical challenges along with leadership issues, such as the lack of support from male members, cultural norms that undermine women's leadership, and limited access to information and resources.

The findings of the study are based on fifty (50) semi-structured interviews with an equal number of elected Women Representatives (WRs) from fifty village panchayats in Gandhinagar, Mehsana, Sabarkantha, and Banaskantha districts of North Gujarat (Table 1). We aimed to include as many elected WRs as possible from each district.

PHASE 1 – Exploratory Fieldwork Process



Phase 2: In-Depth Semi-Structured Interviews

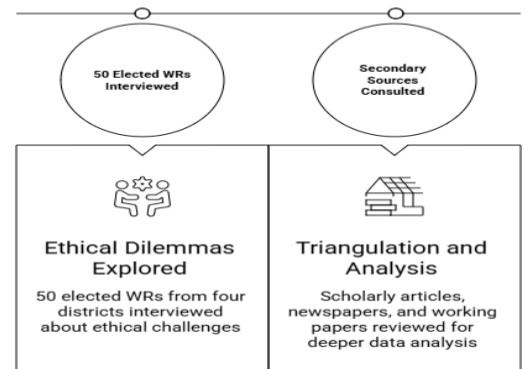


Table 1
Details of the Interview Schedule

Sr. No	District	Taluka	Sr. No	Panchayat
1	Gandhinagar	Mansa	1	Anodiya
			2	Ishwarpura
			3	Kuvadara
			4	Himmatpura
			5	Badpura
			6	Chadasana
2	Mehsana	Unjha	7	Pali
			8	Mahervada
			9	Sinhi
			10	Surpura
			11	Ranchhodpura
3	Patan	Chanasma	12	Khokhala
			13	Mesra
			14	Galolivasna
			15	Sardarpura
			16	Jhliya
4	Sabarkantha	Himmatnagar	17	Ilol
			18	Rangpur

			19	Katvad
			20	Ghadhoa
			21	Pural
			22	Desa
			23	Badoli
			24	Bhutiya
			25	Bolundara

Notably, the study used a cyclic process to collect the desired data based on previous informants' insights (theoretical sampling). The first interview guided the course of the second interview, and so on (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Varkkey, Korde, & Wadhvaniya, 2022). We stopped sampling after the 50th interview when further questioning did not yield new insights or codes (theoretical saturation), as suggested by Pandey and Varkkey (2017). Ultimately, we had usable data from interviews with 50 elected WRs from both phases. These elected WRs were chosen primarily because they held leadership positions, such as village panchayat sarpanch (President) & deputy sarpanch (Vice-President), and were directly or indirectly involved in the decision-making process for various development projects within their village panchayats.

Interview Protocol

The initial interview protocol was developed based on the understanding drawn from the first phase of the fieldwork, literature, popular media and authors' knowledge of the ethical challenges faced by elected WRs. The author started with his introduction to the respondent, explained the study's objective, requested an audio recording of the interview, and assured the respondents' anonymity. The author also maintained detailed field notes during the interviewing process. At the initial stage itself, a few personal questions were posed to the respondents to capture their demographic details. Questions regarding the ethical challenges followed; for instance, Have you encountered any ethical challenges while performing your functions in the panchayat? How do you overcome constraints in your work? Do you believe that all the decisions you make are effectively implemented in practice? Have you ever experienced ethical challenges related to caste struggle, patriarchy, discrimination, abusive language, corruption, or unnecessary interference from authorities?

Broadly, the interviews were open-ended and free-flowing, mainly veered towards understanding the ethical challenges faced by elected WRs. Each interview was conducted in either Hindi or Gujarati and lasted 35-40 minutes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, and were translated into English by the author. As the interviews progressed, the author used probes and cross-questioning to understand the respondents' perspectives. During the interviews, the author paid close attention to the stories and incidents narrated by the respondents. This helped the author not only in data aggregation but also in validating previous information.

Data Analysis

The research employed qualitative approach by using Gioia Methodology procedure¹, beginning with initial data coding. Subsequently, 1st and 2nd order categories were developed to organize the data, leading to aggregated categories. While the 1st order categories mirrored informant terms, the 2nd order categories represented abstract theoretical themes (Gioia et al., 2013). This approach facilitated the creation of a structured data framework, visually illustrating the process and guiding the identification of themes from raw data. These findings were then integrated within the context of relevant literature, as detailed in the following section.

Results & Discussion

Within the framework of the semi-structured interview technique, the interview questions were designed to primarily explore the ethical challenges encountered by elected WRs during their participation and representation within village panchayats. The content of the questions was centered around the identification of these ethical challenges and the potential solutions proposed to address them. The ethical challenges were primarily recognized at two distinct levels, namely:

- Personal Level (Table 4)
- Administrative/Panchayat Level (Table 5).

Ethical Challenges at Personal Level

Table 4

Voice of Informant	Second Order Dimensions	Aggregate Themes
"Despite holding governmental authority, I am unable to make decisions independently."	Gendered Power Disparities	<u>Ethical challenges at Personal level</u>
"As a sarpanch, I am obliged to adhere to my husband's directives."		
"Although I am an elected representative, I lack decision-making authority both at home and within the panchayat."		
"I must manage both my family and the day-to-day affairs of the panchayat. I hardly have time for personal development."	Balancing Dual Responsibilities	
"Even though I have hobbies, since assuming the role of sarpanch, I have been unable to pursue them."		
"As a sarpanch, I am required to visit district or taluka panchayats and attend various government programs. Due to this packed schedule, I have little time to spend with my son and daughter."		
"I do not have my own vehicle, so I remain dependent on public transport. By the time I reach home, I am exhausted from changing buses four times a day."	Mobility and Technological Challenges	
"I am not very comfortable with computers, yet I must remember and learn to use them, which can be mentally frustrating at times."		
"Every six months, there is an audit, which is a challenging exercise. I experience stress during audits because I must rely on others."		

Data Structure- Ethical Challenges at Personal level

- a. **Gendered Power Disparities:** Over the course of time, numerous empirical investigations conducted in diverse regions of India pertaining to the political participation/representation of women in village panchayats have identified certain ethical challenges that hinder their effective engagement in the political process. These challenges are primarily attributable to the institutional design and prevalent social inequalities based on gender and caste (Jayal, 2006). In the context of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) (Local Governance Institutions) in India, particularly the village panchayats, elected WRs often encounter a traditional and robust patriarchal value system that advocates for gender-segregated roles and upholds "traditional cultural values." Furthermore, these value systems continue to emphasize women's primary roles as mothers and housewives, thereby restricting their participation in other domains. These factors have a profound impact on women's level of representation throughout the political process (Sharma, 1998; Buch, 1999; Jayal, 2006). In this study, the findings encompass the broader issue of gender-based power dynamics. Despite holding formal positions of authority within the panchayat system, such as sarpanch or elected representative, elected WRs face significant limitations in their decision-making autonomy. These constraints exist both within their households and in their official roles within the panchayat system. In fact, the respondent when asked to comment had a similar view;

"I feel I am holding the position of namesake. Most of the decisions are taken by my husband. My in-laws believe that my job only to raise children and take care of family" - R14(F)SAB2021

"Sometimes it becomes difficult for me to fulfill the expectations of my family members. In many instances, I have to prioritize panchayat work but unfortunately my in-laws are unable to understand and cooperate with my responsibilities. This is sometimes stressful. In addition, I have to do what my husband keeps on interfering in official works" R13(F)MEH2019

Similar findings have been documented by Bhatia and Bedi (2011). The study's results indicate that the interference of husbands and other male family members in the daily operations of the panchayat makes it challenging for women to carry out their responsibilities autonomously. Consequently, women are unable to express their opinions and ideas regarding various developmental plans and activities within the village.

- b. **Balancing Dual Responsibilities:** Over the past five decades, political scientists have conducted research suggesting that elected WRs who seek active participation in grassroots democracy face practical ethical challenges, particularly the challenge of balancing dual responsibilities. A significant impediment to women's effective engagement in political processes is the scarcity of time for personal development (Hoare and Gell, 2009). The persistent imbalance in the allocation of family and work responsibilities contributes to the ineffective participation of elected WRs in local self-governance institutions. Empirical studies (e.g., Phil, 2009; Simone, 2009; Joshua and Sabel, 2011) consistently reveal a pronounced male bias within the work culture of local governance institutions. Women are expected to shoulder a disproportionate share of household and childcare responsibilities, frequently in conjunction with their official duties. Consequently, they encounter difficulties in balancing family and professional obligations, as work-related tasks are seldom equitably distributed. Additionally, these studies

emphasize that women frequently experience "time poverty," which directly affects their opportunities for self-development. This research study presents similar findings, highlighting the complexities of managing family obligations and responsibilities as a sarpanch. It emphasizes the challenges of finding personal time for self-development, pursuing hobbies, and spending quality moments with family members due to the demanding schedule of attending government programs and handling daily panchayat matters. In light of this finding, the respondents held the following viewpoints:

"Since childhood, I have loved reading Gujarati short stories and would narrate them to my young children to help them sleep. Now, as a Panchayat official, I hardly have time to read. These stories not only enriched my knowledge of our country's history but also motivated me to read more. I feel I have compromised my personal development." R14(F)GAN2021

"As a sarpanch, I am required to visit district and taluka panchayats and attend various government programs. Due to this packed schedule, I have little time to spend with my son and daughter." R15(F)GAN2021

In line with previous research, Paxton (2017) reports similar observations. Elected WRs, in addition to their family responsibilities, are tasked with numerous duties crucial for the smooth functioning of village panchayats. These duties include regularly attending meetings, traveling to district and Taluka panchayats, and actively participating in capacity-building programs organized by the state government. As a result, women often find it challenging to allocate time for their own personal development and well-being.

- c. **Mobility and Technological Challenges:** Along with the uneven distribution of family and official responsibilities, dual challenges of managing mobility limitations and adapting to technological demands, alongside the stress of regulatory audits acts as an impediment to effective political participation/representation in local governance. It underscores the strain on personal resources and skills needed to navigate these obstacles effectively. These challenges, according to Hewlett (2007); Williams (2000) and Crittenden, (2002), are not just related to time and effort but to the far greater penetration of traditional gender-role ideology in the society. Based on this finding, the respondents narrated the following experience:

"I do not have my own vehicle, so I remain dependent on public transport. By the time I reach home, I am exhausted from changing buses four times a day." R16(F)BAN2021

"The panchayat secretary is a nominal figure, only coming once a week for two hours. I am responsible for all the day-to-day work of the panchayat. My entire day is spent running from one place to another, causing both mental and physical strain." R17(F)BAN2021

Ethical Challenges at Panchayat/Administrative Level

Voice of Informant	Second Order Dimensions	Aggregate Themes
"None of the male or female members of the panchayat support my initiatives."	Gender Bias in Panchayat Governance	Ethical challenges at Administrative level
"I am deliberately excluded from meetings by the male members of the panchayat."		
"Although I am a sarpanch, my contributions are rarely taken seriously by the panchayat members."		
"Times have changed, earlier we used to accounting manually now we have to use dedicated softwares for the same"	Constraints in adapting to Technological advancements in Governance	
"New technology is time consuming without adequate training and capacity building"		
"Family time now is rare because as a Sarpanch there are various operation tasks I need to perform in time-bound manner"	Social and Institutional Barriers in Leadership	
"My cast is unfortunately is a barrier even now as very few people in the village support me"		
"I am new to the system so I face a lot of issues learning governance. I often face ignorance while seeking guidance"		
"Every now and then I have to prove that despite i belong to the backward cast I am capable of good governance"		

Table 5
Data Structure- Ethical Challenges at Administrative level

Gender Bias in Panchayat Governance: Scholars often refer to Srinivas's (1996) influential work on Caste and Gender to understand how caste dynamics influence politics. This perspective argues that power and politics are deeply intertwined with caste relations, leading to lower levels of women's political participation. Franceschet and Piscopo (2008), in their study of Argentina, find that while reservations have increased women's participation in politics, especially in local governance, it has not necessarily empowered them to effectively exercise their roles as representatives.

The situation in India mirrors this pattern. Despite reservations (quotas) for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), these measures have not effectively empowered women. Consequently, many women lack confidence in fulfilling their roles as elected representatives. Elected WRs particularly from Scheduled Caste backgrounds, are socialized to perceive politics as dominated by upper-caste representatives (Rao, 2018; Jadhav, 2019). This sentiment was commonly expressed in interviews. Indeed, some Dalit Elected WRs shared concerns about the unintended consequences of the quota system. They noted that due to legal requirements, dominant leaders from upper castes in villages nominate female candidates from Scheduled Castes whom they can easily instruct. An elected WRs from a village in Banaskantha district highlighted this issue, stating that the community and government officials often struggle to accept the idea of Dalit women as elected representatives.

"Despite not having high qualifications, I've noticed a prevailing perception among villagers and a shift in attitudes. In rural local bodies, Dalit women are often not accepted as leaders. Non-Dalit representatives can easily mobilize members for meetings, but it's challenging for Dalit representatives because their leadership is not taken seriously." R18(F)BAN2021

Similar findings were documented by Dak and Purohit (2008). Their study indicates that Women Elected Representatives (WERs) are frequently overlooked by other Panchayat members, often being denied the opportunity to voice their opinions. If they oppose Panchayat members, they typically receive little to no support for their initiatives. In this context, a elected WRs from Sabarkantha district remarked that

"When I was first elected as Sarpanch, I had no prior understanding of how things functioned. To seek advice or support from fellow Panchayat members, I had to comply with their directives." R19(F)SAB2021

Constraints in adapting to Technological advancements in Governance: Over the past three decades, the advent of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has significantly transformed the landscape of democracy and governance (Wresch, 2001). A comprehensive review of existing literature indicates that technological advancements in day-to-day official work have fundamentally reshaped local governance institutions, while simultaneously enhancing transparency and accountability in governance. However, both empirical and anecdotal evidence suggest that gender discrimination and digital illiteracy have exacerbated the digital gender gap among elected WRs in local governance institutions. (NDI, 2014; Taylor, 2018). Consequently, it has been observed that the usability of various ICT tools in day-to-day official work has become a challenge for WERs, as they often lack adequate training in the use of technological devices such as computers.

The challenges faced by elected WRs in accessing and utilizing technology have hindered their ability to perform their daily tasks effectively. This has led to a dependency on clerks and secretaries. To address this issue, there is a need to develop comprehensive policies aimed at achieving gender equality in technology access and usage. These policies should include regular digital literacy programs specifically designed for elected WRs. (Coffé and Bolzendahl, 2010; Dolan, 2006; Reingold and Harrell, 2010). One elected WR who ran for a panchayat election highlighted the technological barriers that prevent women from participating effectively. Drawing from her personal experiences, she emphasized that these challenges make it difficult for women to fully engage in their roles.

"Initially, I struggled with computer use since I had no prior experience. I relied heavily on the Panchayat secretary for basic tasks, resulting in delays and pending work for village development. I believe the government should organize training programs specifically for elected WRs on computer skills and software." R20(F)MEH2021

Social and Institutional Barriers in Leadership: Gender quotas in local governance institutions are regarded as a critical component of strategies aimed at empowering women through enhanced participation in grassroots political systems (Kudva, 2003). However, as highlighted by Fischer (2016) and Mosse (2018), social and institutional barriers in leadership have emerged as significant barriers for elected WRs, particularly those from Scheduled Castes, in village panchayats.

Along similar lines, Inbanatha and Sivanna (2010) observe that seats reserved for women of Scheduled Castes (SC) are occupied by them, but once they assume the role of Sarpanch, they face discrimination and are marginalized in the deliberations and decision-making processes of the Panchayats. They are often prevented from making decisions by higher-caste individuals and those dominant in the village. The electoral participation of SC elected WRs in grassroots politics is often seen as symbolic, influencing their political involvement by assimilating them into a casteist and male-dominated system (Kudva, 2003). In this context, a elected WRs shares her experiences:

"I belong to a backward caste, and consequently, I face daily discrimination, not only from fellow panchayat members but also from district and taluka panchayat officials." R20(F)BAN2021

A study by Kudva (2003) yielded comparable results, the study highlighted that electoral participation of elected WRs from Scheduled Castes (SC) in grassroots politics is often viewed as a symbolic gesture, influencing their political engagement by assimilating them into a casteist and male-dominated system. Evidence also indicates that elected WRs, especially those who are Dalits or Adivasis, face harassment and taunting not only from their male counterparts but also from female members of the panchayat, amidst official apathy

Conclusion

In the current study, several conclusions emerge. Although constitutional provisions for reservation and efforts through Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) aim to empower women in local governance, substantial ethical challenges remain. Entrenched patriarchal norms restrict women's decision-making autonomy in households and official roles. Additionally, social inequalities based on

gender and caste impede women's effective engagement. Balancing family responsibilities with the demands of public office and inadequate support systems and technological barriers further marginalize women elected representatives (WERS).

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Endnotes

Gioia method offers an accessible and theoretically flexible approach to cover unexplored phenomena by means of contrasts, propositions and process models designed to bring "qualitative rigor" to research (Gioia et al., 2013).

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