

# Women Engaging Politically in Rajasthan Finding Spaces through Winding Paths of Power

Kanchan Mathur

The enforcement of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment in India mandated the representation of at least one-third women through elections and was in direct contrast to the earlier token inclusion of one or two women nominated by government or co-opted by the predominantly influential, powerful male membership/leadership of the panchayats. In 2010, reservation for women increased to 50 percent in Rajasthan and this has enabled an even larger number of women to be elected for the first time and engage in grassroots democracy as independent leaders in their own right. This paper aims to critically understand the 'positionality' of Elected Women Representatives in the state at multiple levels - political, social and economic with the aim of analyzing the factors enabling and constraining women's political pathways through the intersections of gender, caste, ethnicity and class.

Key words: Rajasthan, local governance, gender, positionality, reservation, decentralised

## Introduction

Men and women entering the public domain bring with them different histories, roles and responsibilities, and there is a need for structures to be sensitive to differential constraints. An unequal gender representation along with other intersecting variables of religion, caste, class and regional disparities affect the quality of governance. Historical subordination coupled with lack of resource endowment and denial of entry into the socio-political milieu distance women from the public arena and results in their unequal status and participation in the process of governance. Women, particularly those belonging to the most marginalized groups face greater violence and insecurity. Hence, women 'more than any other group' need state intervention to create spaces for their participation in the public sphere (Mukhopadhyaya 2005).

Three points are key to the argument for gendered representation and gendered citizenship: firstly, on the grounds of justice, 50 % of the population should have 50 % representation. Secondly, women's and men's different experiences need to be separately represented so that men's experiences are not taken as the norm and the basis for political decisions. Thirdly, since women's and men's interests are different and often conflict, they should both be represented in decision-making bodies (Mukhopadhyay and Meer 2004).

A gender sensitive agenda is also seen as encompassing equal distribution of power and resources, more accountability to gender equitable outcomes, and increased participation of

women in the decisions affecting their lives, households and communities (Panda 2008). It has been argued that several issues pertaining to women and to the trajectories of gendered notions of power are still only addressed nominally in the processes of governance (Tambiah 2003) and making gender equality a core concern in governing development would involve engagement with institutions to change norms, rules and practices, as well as working with the most marginalized women and men to develop their 'voice' and agency.

The principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution in its Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties and Directive Principles of State Policy. The constitution not only guarantees equality to women, but also empowers the state to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women. Decentralised governance through the Panchayati Raj system along with quotas for women, implemented since 24 April 1993, has brought over a million elected women into positions of responsibility and has been hailed as a 'silent revolution' (Gol 2011). This significant achievement has come about through explicit affirmative action interventions in political institutions and processes to favour women's participation. However, as Goetz argues there is a difference between a numerical increase in women representatives and the representation of women's interests in government decision-making (Goetz 1998). The one does not automatically lead to the other, not just because individual women politicians cannot all be assumed to be concerned with gender equity, but because of institutionalized resistance to gender equity within the apparatus of governance.

This paper attempts a critical inquiry into the 'positionality' of Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) in Rajasthan with the aim of (i) analyzing factors enabling and constraining women's political pathways through the intersections of gender, caste, class and ethnicity (ii) understanding how women negotiate with patriarchal structures and hegemonic institutions of society which cast an exclusionary web to inhibit their participation. Drawing on women's voices it attempts to underscore what needs to be done at the policy level to create a more enabling environment for EWRs moving beyond 'blueprints and technical fixes' designed without taking into consideration the differential positions of women cutting across caste, class and educational backgrounds.

The methodological tools for the larger study<sup>1</sup> included separate questionnaires for women within the three tiers of rural local governance, the Zila Parishad (ZP), Panchayat Samiti (PS) and Gram Panchayat (GP) levels<sup>2</sup>. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were also conducted at all three levels, and in-depth interviews were held with key stakeholders at state, district, block and GP levels. Life histories of selected women drawn from each of the levels were also documented. A random sampling design was adopted for the selection of the sample for the study. Seven districts, one from each of the seven divisions of the state were selected where female Zila Pramukhs are in position. At the district level, the Zila Pramukh and two female

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1. Data for this paper was collected as part of a larger study conducted by the author and a team of researchers at the Institute of Development Studies, Jaipur for the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and Indira Gandhi Panchayati Raj Sansthan (IGPRS) and Gramin Vikas Sansthan (GVS) Rajasthan in 2012. I wish to gratefully acknowledge the critical comments provided by Dr. Mariz Tadros, Fellow, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, on the draft of the paper.

2. The Zila Parishad is at the district level, the Panchayat Samiti at the block level, and the Gram Panchayat at the village level. At the Village level the Panchayat consists of elected representatives of the people, a chairperson is elected from among its members and is known as the 'Sarpanch'. The Panchayat is accountable for all its actions to the Gram Sabha, the general body of villagers. The chairperson of the Panchayat Samiti is called a 'Pradhan'. The Zila Parishad, at the top level is headed by the Zila Pramukh.

members of the Zila Parishad were selected. Two Panchayat Samitis from each selected district, headed by female Pradhans, were randomly chosen and the Pradhan and two female Panchayat Samiti members were interviewed in each. From each Panchayat Samiti, two Gram Panchayats, headed by female Sarpanchs were selected and the Sarpanch and two female ward members were interviewed in each. Thus a total of 147 personal narratives of EWRs at all three levels were obtained through interviews.

The paper is structured thus: The section following the introduction briefly discusses the evolution of decentralization in India, including the limited roles played by women within it. The main features of the decentralization reforms in the 1990s and debates on women's participation in this new structure are presented subsequently. The paper then focuses on selected EWRs in Rajasthan to understand the obstacles and impediments women encounter in their trajectories to political power and ways in which they negotiate within and challenge hegemonic centres of power. The concluding section highlights some policy implications emerging from the study.

## **Section 1**

### **Gender and Decentralised Governance in India**

In India, Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) are basic units of rural local governance particularly since the inception of 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments on 24 April 1993 and 1 June 1993. However, decentralized governance to strengthen democracy and to reach development at the grassroots level has been the government's agenda even before the 1992 Panchayat Raj Act. The Balwant Rai Mehta Committee Report (1959) saw democratic decentralization as a way of making good the failure of community development programmes. This was followed by the recommendations of the Ashok Mehta Committee (1978), which emphasized the importance of PRIs for strengthening democracy and local development. However, women's representation was not mentioned in either report.

India has witnessed the world's largest experiment in grassroots local democracy triggered by the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution. It has revived a clear mandate for democratically elected panchayats at the village, district and block levels with provisions for (a) regular elections, power and resources including the preparation of plans for economic development and social justice and power to impose taxes by, and funds of the Panchayats (b) for representation of the hitherto socially and politically marginalized sections of scheduled castes (SC), scheduled tribes (ST) and women. Since 1995, four rounds of PRI elections have been held, with one-third of the seats reserved for women (increasing to 50 % in several states) out of the total 2,800,000 elected Panchayat representatives, about 1,000,000 are estimated to be women. With the amendment to Article 243 D of the Constitution of India in 2009, which provides for a 50 % quota for women in seats and also in the role of chairperson in all three tiers of Panchayats, the number of EWRs is expected to rise to more than 1,400,000 (GoI 2008). According to Buch (2000) this mandated minimum one-third reservation has ensured entry of women, in a critical mass, into mainstream politics at the grassroots level. It is a major step towards 'inclusive' politics as it embraces the most marginalized groups and as it addresses their continued political marginality, it has the potential to change existing gender relations.

One-third reservation of women in PRIs is also seen as giving women constitutional powers and responsibilities for a range of issues including resource management, family planning, education and health. Devaki Jain argues, 'the success of the PRIs lies in the possibility of women transforming the State from within. The new arrangement provides the first step to converting grassroots leadership into State leadership' (Jain 2006). Here women are not just beneficiaries from, but also contributors to the development processes. According to Narayanan, PRI experiences from different parts of India show that there is hope of greater equality in governance structures as women are asserting themselves on issues closer to their lives, such as drinking water, bore wells, sanitation and loans from government credit institutions (Narayanan 2002).

Other studies highlighting factors enabling women's participation in institutions of local governance assert that women's collectives such as Self-Help Groups play a catalytic role in facilitating women to organise and articulate their interests better and engage in decision-making in the family and community. Women belonging to such groups are more likely to undertake a leadership role and develop their skills and confidence and the support base required for entering PRIs as elected representatives (Purushothaman *et al.* 2010; Sharma and Sudarshan 2010).

However, a vast literature has raised questions on the nature and participation of women in local governance institutions and women's experience therein to understand whether issues related to equity and empowerment have been addressed. It has been argued that one third reservation for women has shown mixed results and their experience in decision-making processes, especially at the local level has been chequered. Exclusion is seen as the hallmark of the Indian system even several years after the village councils have been instigated under Part IX of the Constitution. Baviskar and Matthew assert that considering Indian women's long history under patriarchy, they now seem to be on the path to empowerment albeit at a slow pace. It has also been posited that, political representation of women through the quota provides them with recognition but does not ensure the redistribution of resources thereby limiting its transformative potential. Enabling structures like reservations for women in PRIs, although important, cannot on their own be the impetus for the exercise of gendered governance (Baviskar and Matthew 2010; Rai 1999; Mohan 2008).

Others assert that promises of decentralised planning have not been transferred into practice due to several factors, which act as roadblocks for equality and justice. For instance, women lack formal qualifications and face communication problems with officials in addressing the grievances of their constituents. Besides, women elected to local politics come under the moralistic gaze and become targets of character assassination (Tambiah 2003). Men often resort to violence and coercion to prevent them from engaging in political governance systems (Anandi 2002; Devika and Kadoth 2001).

Important limitations to women's participation in PRIs due to the continued existence of certain institutional and social barriers that propagate gender inequality have also been exposed. Jayal for instance highlights inadequate devolution of functions, a lack of financial and planning autonomy, bureaucratic influence, and the policy of seat rotation as some of the institutional barriers and lack of education, oppressive patriarchal and caste structures, lack of respect of

women in PRIs as social barriers ( Jayal 2006). Training programmes are considered instrumental in helping EWRs understand their roles and responsibilities and to develop their administrative, technical and financial knowledge to help them function more effectively (Sharma 2004). But a national level study commissioned by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj (Gol 2008), points that 50 % of the EWRs in the country did not receive any training after being elected.

In Rajasthan, Mayaram asserts that society's attitude towards EWRs has not changed. In fact, opinion is firmly against the public appearance of women because it is still believed that women should be strictly confined to the home. Violence against EWRs is an important factor in the context of Rajasthan, since it points to a particular kind of power structure within which these women are negotiating and creating their gendered spaces as a result of their own subjectivities originating from their caste, class and ethnic identities (Mayaram 2002).

The role of the state is also apparent in this regard, evident from policies like the 'two child norm' made applicable at the panchayat level by the state government. Section 19 (1) of Rajasthan Act debar and disqualifies a person from being a member of a panchayat if she/ he has more than two living children, at least one of whom was born on or after 27 November 1995. The number of children produced before the cut-off date is immaterial and the law is not applicable in such cases. It is expected that, the *Panches* and *Sarpanches* will maintain the norm of two children as an example to the public (Mathur 2008).

What follows is an exploration of the political engagement of EWRs in institutions of local governance in Rajasthan to analyse spaces and places providing opportunities for women to assume leadership and the trade-offs inherent in political apprenticeship.

## Section 2

### 2.1 Women's Political Participation in Rajasthan

Women's political participation in Rajasthan has to be viewed against a backdrop of feudal history, rigid gender norms and deep-rooted disadvantages which pervade all spheres of domestic and social life. In a deeply ingrained system of patriarchy, a woman's identity and role continues to be defined through her (subordinated) relationship to men. Gender relations are not only shaped by men's power over women but also by gendered behaviour which is deeply embedded in social structures and institutions (Mathur 2004). A resultant factor has been that women have always been on the fringe of political and social power.

There was slow progress in agency to improve the condition of women in Rajasthan just after independence. *Mahila mandals* had been an important tool for women's autonomy for about a decade after independence. However, women continued to be excluded from politics. Not a single woman candidate was elected in the 1952 Legislative Assembly elections. The representation of women was 4 % in 1967 and reached 8 % in 1985. The average percentage of women legislatures continued to be low at 5 % until 2004 (CSDS Data Unit 2010).

The enforcement of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment in India mandated the representation of at least one third women through elections. In 2010, the reservation for women increased to

50 % in Rajasthan enabling an even larger number of women to be elected for the first time and to engage in grassroots democracy. However, several critical issues emerge in the context of the state. Has the numerical presence of women led to their increased participation in institutional structures? Has the presence of women transformed institutional structures and made them more receptive to women's needs and concerns? The section below attempts to answer these queries through the experience of women who are recent entrants to the Panchayati Raj system.

## 2.2 Profiling the Sample Elected Women Representatives

Of the 147 EWRs covered by the study, 62 % were in the age group of 21-45 years. They were energetic and have begun taking the initiative in influencing political decisions/agendas. This could lead to an expansion of spaces for younger women within local governance bodies. However, belonging to a younger age group involves a continuous struggle between roles in the domestic/private and public domains. Data also shows that 13.6 % of EWRs belong to the 60 + age group. The reason for this could be that they do not have to bear the double burden of household responsibilities along with participation in PRI activities, which the younger EWRs face.

In the current context of the state 'marriage is a must' and there is tremendous social pressure on girls to get married, which is reflected in the marital status of the EWRs selected for the study. The majority of the EWRs were married (88 %); the only two never married EWRs were Zila Parishad members. The number of widows in the sample participating in local governance was higher at around 11 %. One of the reasons for the entry of widows is that the politically powerful elite often use them to continue their hold over local level politics.

## 2.3 Education and occupational structure

A majority of the EWRs (57 %) were non-literate or had attained only functional literacy. Around 22 % had educational qualifications up to primary/middle level, 14 % up to graduate, 7.5 % are post graduates or hold professional degrees including LLB, B. Ed, MBA. One of the EWRs is pursuing her PhD. Significant differences in educational status across positions are evident with most of the EWRs within the district assemblies i.e. *Zila Parishad* members/*Zila Pramukhs* falling into the highly qualified category. Whereas, the majority of the EWRs in the lower rungs i.e. *Pradhans*, *Panchayat Samiti members*, *Sarpanchs* and *Ward Panchs* are non-literate or have attained only functional literacy. Interestingly, an increase in literacy levels had a positive impact in lowering social constraints faced due to factors such as *purdah*, inability to speak openly in the presence of village elders, and facing the moralistic gaze. Many EWRs determined to educate their children especially daughters, because they did not want them to suffer on account of low literacy levels.

It is important to emphasize that the majority of the EWRs are not involved in individual economic activities. This would have helped us to assess their individual economic status. However, even those EWRs who have land in their own names assist their family/husband in agricultural work. Therefore, it is not possible to ascertain their individual income from their land. For 39.5 % of EWRs, their family's main occupation is agriculture and animal husbandry, and for 29 %, their

families are self-employed in mining and stone cutting or engaged as contractors or trade in auto parts. For 17 % of EWRs their families are employed in service sector and 7 % earn their livelihoods through farm and non-farm labour. For another 5 % the main source of income is pension or they hail from families of retired government servants. The income levels of EWRs show that majority of the *Zila Pramukhs*, *Zila Parishad* members and *Pradhans* fall within the higher income group, whereas most of the *Panchayat Samiti* members as well as *Sarpanchs* and *Ward Panchs* fall in the lower income strata.

Hence, those with higher incomes and larger landholdings reach the upper echelons of local governance with relative ease. They also contest elections twice or more times primarily because they have the money, power and political background backed up by experience.

#### *2.4 Paradoxical Role of the Family*

The familial/political background of the EWRs plays an important role in both their entry and performance in politics. It is apparent that EWRs belonging to families with a political background/affiliation have an advantage over those who are not drawn from similar backgrounds. They do not have to struggle to enter politics; besides they already have some exposure to the functioning of PRIs. In addition, many of them have high educational qualifications and belong to economically better off families. According to Rita Singh, who belongs to a politically influential family:

I did not have to struggle to get an entry into politics; besides, the political background of my family had provided immense exposure to the working of local governance institutions. I was elected for two terms as a Panchayat Samiti Member in the years 1995 and 2005 due to the positive image of my father-in-law and his hold over local politics. Gradually, I began interacting with the local community and became involved in Panchayat Samiti level meetings and implementation of development programmes along with my husband. Due to this my image and status improved among the community members. In 2010, I stood for the elections for the third time not as a veteran's daughter-in-law but in my own identity and was elected as a Zila Pramukh on a General seat reserved for women. ( Rita Singh, Zila Pramukh, 45 years old)

We also came across *Zila Pramukhs* who had not been able to use their family's political background to their advantage. Durga Devi, another *Zila Pramukh*, is 58 year old and belongs to the SC caste group and has passed Standard VIII. She won the general seat reserved for women. Durga Devi's father and husband have been involved in party politics for a long time. Her father has been involved in politics since her childhood and is an ex-*Sarpanch*. Her husband has been in politics during the past 12 years. Due to the political environment within her natal and marital family, her husband encouraged her to contest elections. However, once she won the election her husband and son began to indirectly perform all the PRI related functions on her behalf, thus usurping and controlling her political space. She laments, *I was made to take a backseat and was actively discouraged from taking any initiative in performing my PRI related work on my own.*

It is also evident that many women have been forced to join politics due to the political ambition of their marital family.

My father-in-law has been involved with party politics for a long time and has been politically influential in the district. I never wanted to contest elections, but was compelled by my marital family to do so as they did not want to lose their stranglehold over local politics. The men in my family conduct all the PRI related work on my behalf and take all political decisions. I have little knowledge about the functioning of PRIs and have never been encouraged to learn more about political systems (Reshma Choudhary, Pradhan).

#### Dual Responsibility of Home and PRI Related Activities

It is evident that though many of the EWRs have taken on non-traditional roles and entered the public arena of local politics they continue to view themselves in stereotypical roles as 'housewives/homemakers' or 'caregivers'. Women's domestic lives have a considerable influence on their political efficacy. If they choose, however, to take on both the roles of homemaker and occupying a political position, they accommodate both domestic and public commitments (Mathur and Sharma 2010). Men, on the other hand, usually cope by withdrawing from the family to pursue political ambitions.

EWRs reported that the burden of domestic chores has increased for the female members of their family post elections. However, the household related workload on EWRs themselves seems to have decreased. Prior to the EWRs being elected, around 41 % of other female household members were helping in domestic chores whereas post elections this has increased to 50 %. A similar situation is apparent where their daughters are concerned. However, not much change is evident in the workload of male members in the pre- and post-elections. Most EWRs stated that, 'involvement of male family members in household chores would definitely lead to reducing women's work burden'.

### Section 3

#### 3.1 Why Politics?

Though the political trajectories of women entering rural local governance vary, reserved seats were cited as the main reason for joining politics by 85 % of the EWRs. Caste and voters' support, prior political experience of marital/natal family, and support and encouragement provided by the marital/natal family were some of the other reasons. A few women, however, said that they joined politics because they had a strong desire to raise women's issues /rural development issues.

My family has no political background or affiliation. Though I came into politics due to the reservation of seats for women candidates but it was not the only reason. I also had a strong desire to raise women's concerns. I have succeeded in this task by taking up issues related to education of girls especially those belonging to the most marginalized communities, fought

against dowry and succeeded in enabling many women to get widow pension (Sunita Ghathala, Zila Parishad Member).

### *3.2 Caste as a Determining Factor*

Interviews with EWRs revealed that caste is one of the main factors impacting differences in access, participation and influence of women in local politics in the state. Thus, in Rajasthan, caste evolves into an exclusive system of control to consolidate and perpetuate exclusion. Caste works not just in conjunction with patriarchy but often becomes patriarchal itself. Distinctions along caste lines reveal a larger number of EWRs belong to the Other Backward Classes (OBC) and ST/SC groups. Therefore, the mandatory provision of reservation based on caste has provided the space for disadvantaged groups to represent and participate in institutions of rural local governance. However, for the EWRs belonging to the lower castes the struggle to create spaces within these institutions becomes extremely challenging as they bear the double burden of being women and belonging to lower castes.

### *3.3 Proxy Governance*

To ensure women's active participation in meetings no male member of the EWR's family are supposed to be present in the meetings, though they can accompany them to the venue. None of the EWRs admitted that male members of their families were present in meetings - but the presence of husbands, sons, brothers-in-law, and fathers-in-law was often observed during field visits. Not surprisingly, no female members of the EWRs' families were present in the meetings. 60% of EWRs reported that their husbands helped them in their day-to-day PRI related activities. 10% of EWRs are assisted mostly by their sons and around 8% by other male members of their families, while 23% EWRs said that they mostly managed their own work with assistance from others. The assistance of male members is more visible in the case of first timers who had won elections. However, the dependence on male members reduced as women are elected for a second or third time.

There were mixed responses on the issue of proxy governance. Only 10% of EWRs felt that the involvement of male family members in their PRI related work was unnecessary. 60% of EWRs across the range of positions/levels felt that the presence of men was useful as they helped them to understand different dimensions of their work. They said that men had greater knowledge and information related to government schemes and programmes and could guide them in making decisions. Since many of the EWRs were first timers their dependence on male family members was expected, as they need time to become totally confident regarding their roles and responsibilities.

### *3.4 Overt and Covert Forms of Violence against Women*

Several EWRs, particularly those belonging to disadvantaged groups, reported facing acute problems having to work among males who used sexual innuendo. Others reported being threatened, abused, and harassed both during and post elections. 8% EWRs reported that they had faced several forms of violence during elections. The majority of the EWRs facing violence belong to the SC community and have low literacy levels. 5% of EWRs also encountered instances of booth capturing and proxy voting.

I faced several forms of violence. Initially I was not allowed to sit in the meetings and people would address me as a 'Chamaran'. Men said a woman of low caste should not be allowed to enter politics. The present, Up-Sarpanch (Vice Sarpanch) and the Gram Sewak, both belong to the Meena (ST) community. They do not share the minutes of the meetings of the Gram Panchayat with me or receive my phone calls. They often hurl abuses at me behind my back and try to create problems in my work. I worked hard to improve the sanitary conditions of my village, but my work was constantly inspected. Despite holding the position of a Sarpanch for two and a half years, I continue to receive threats (Santoshi Devi, Sarpanch).

Violence is not always external. Some EWRs face covert forms of violence at the hands of family members. A case in point is that of Sangeeta Bai. Sangeeta is 25 year old and belongs to a teli OBC family. Her political career began in 2010 when she was elected to the post of Sarpanch. Her family has no prior political experience. She was not interested in entering politics but her husband forced her to contest elections as the seat was reserved for an OBC woman candidate. Since Sangeeta is young, she is not allowed to go out alone by her husband. Restricted social mobility and strict instructions to observe *purdah* have rendered Sangeeta ineffective. She rarely attends meetings and when she does her participation is minimal.

### *3.5 Other Constraints Faced*

Low educational level was cited as a major constraint by many EWRs. A large majority of them thus faced problems in filing nominations. They expressed an inability to understand the technical language of the nomination forms. In addition, they have no prior experience of contesting elections and lack supporters who can sign the nomination form on their behalf. Once elected, many of them are made to sign documents/cheques/minutes of meetings without being told the contents. This leads to a danger of unwittingly being involved in financial irregularities.

Many of the EWRs also faced problems due to persisting social customs and practices including the prevalence of *purdah*, an inability to speak openly in the presence of village elders, and facing the moralistic gaze. Restricted social mobility also proved to be a problem for some of them.

Some of the EWRs (14 %), especially first timers, stated that they were unable to either frame or explain the election manifesto to voters. 35 % of EWRs also reported not receiving the support of women workers who could have helped them during campaigning. 26 % of EWRs could not garner votes during elections as they were unable to resort to conventional practices like the distribution of alcohol, cash and other bribe – a common electoral ploy used by male candidates.

### *3.6 Devolution without Transformation*

The study also shows that the constraints faced by EWRs are exacerbated by lack of response to issues raised by them. Many of them stated that no action is taken by the authorities on complaints/suggestions put forth by them. This leads to frustration and bitterness.

The devolution of power of various government departments has taken place only on paper. This is a mere formality as the actual transfer of power has not taken place. The funds, functions and functionaries have not been transferred and we have no freedom to implement the decisions taken at the Panchayat Samiti and Zila Parishad level. Even if I suggest the transfer of functionaries, the actual implementation of the order is carried out not at the level of the Zila Parishad but at the level of the head of the department concerned (Indu Choudhary, PS member).

Often EWRs end up being dependent on family members/government officials and other politically powerful people within the community for all PRI related activities. They are therefore, unable to take independent decisions and end up becoming frustrated. As Shobha Singh, Zila Pramukh asserts:

The actual devolution of power to five departments of Panchayati Raj has not taken place. We are constantly dealing with the domination of bureaucrats who grossly undermine the importance of the PRIs. They are neither disbanded nor made accountable to the PRIs. The CEO does not feel accountable towards either the Zila Pramukh or the Zila Parishad. Many of the decisions taken by the Zila Parishad are not implemented because the CEO feels that he is the representative of the District Collector.

Another common problem expressed by all EWRs at the *Zila Parishad* and Panchayat Samiti level during the FGDs was the low budgets available for implementing development works. The *Zila Pramukhs* and *Zila Parishad* members were unanimous in voicing that they are allocated only 3 % of the total budget. This was inadequate for implementing and monitoring development programmes within the geographic area covered by them at the district level. Besides, the *Zila Parishad* members and the Panchayat Samiti members stated that they had not received any honorarium or sitting fee to participate in general body meetings.

A new phenomenon emerging in rural politics is women challenging many patriarchal notions about women's leadership in a public space. They are expanding spaces by obtaining greater respect within the institution of household and community, becoming more articulate, confident in handling issues within local governance institutions, and learning to negotiate. Their increased mobility, even if accompanied by male members of the family, is bringing them closer to governance system. This invariably problematises the rejection of women as 'proxy actors'.

### 3.7 Shifts in Status at the Level of the Household and Community

Interactions with the EWRs revealed that 86 % felt that there was a distinct increase in their status at the household and community levels. 78 % of the EWRs said their involvement in family decision-making had increased post-elections.

According to 69 % of the EWRs, their family members now consult them in decisions relating to marriage of children, and 66 % reported being consulted on decisions relating to children's

education. 59 % of the EWRs stated that they were being involved in purchase of household goods. More importantly, 57 % of the EWRs stated that the male heads of households had begun involving them in the sale/purchase of household property, something that had never happened earlier. Where family health related decisions are concerned, 44 % of the EWRs reported playing a role. Therefore, there is a clear increase in the EWRs' involvement in decisions taken at the family level after their entering positions of power within local government.

In addition, 57 % EWRs stated that they were invited to religious meetings, whereas 69 % were being invited to various functions/gatherings at the community level. However, it is also clear that the *Zila Pramukhs, Pradhans* and *Sarpanches* were more likely than ordinary members to be invited as chief guest at social functions and on National Days like Republic Day and Independence Day. 36 % of the EWRs also stated that they had begun participating more frequently in caste organization meetings. Hence, it is obvious that once elected, the EWRs gain greater respect and honour at the household and community level.

### 3.8 *Enhanced Mobility*

In Rajasthan women's entry into political space has enhanced their mobility, though for many of them it is because the male members of their family accompany them. It needs to be emphasised that first time contestants often experience less mobility than second time contestants.

Some of the women at the *Zila Parishad* and Panchayat Samiti levels stated that they did not require male members to accompany them for their official or personal work. Participation in training and capacity development programmes and visits to government offices, Members of Parliament (MPs), Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs), as well as to the offices of other political leaders has also enhanced their confidence levels.

Earlier I could not travel anywhere alone, even when I visited my natal family someone accompanied me. After being elected as a Pradhan I attend meetings both at the Panchayat Samiti as well as at the Zila Parishad level. However, travelling alone to Jaipur (state capital) for the training programme and other meetings has given me the maximum sense of freedom. (Sangeeta Choudhary, Pradhan)

### 3.9 *Increase in Confidence Levels*

A key indicator of women's empowerment is the level of confidence they display in public spaces. Over half (53 %) of the EWRs reported that their new role had enabled them to raise issues with greater confidence within the community. 42 % stated that they raise issues related to social change at the community level. 33 % of the respondents felt confident to visit the upper primary schools, while 29 % have gained confidence to talk to the headmaster and school teachers. 25 to 30 % of the EWRs said they had also begun visiting the primary health centre, the auxiliary nurse and midwife (ANM) centre and the Anganwadi centre and also check the records pertaining to women/children's immunisation.

Within local government meetings, maximum number of ERWs in our sample, 70 % stated they had made an effort to ensure access to drinking water for the local population. However, many of them stated that they had been unsuccessful in fighting corruption with only around 14 % believing that they had succeeded in making some headway. 15 to 20 % of the ERWs stated that they raised issues related to women including the immunization of women/children, institutional delivery and violence against women within local government meetings. According to 23 to 30 % ERWs, they had made efforts to organize community meetings, increase girls' enrolment, fight social evils like dowry, early and child marriage, and help people access benefits from government schemes. 40 % of the ERWs stated that they had fought their inhibitions and were making an effort to discuss issues with government officials. This demonstrates that many of the ERWs are now making an effort to raise issues and take on leadership roles in an attempt to create and expand spaces for themselves in institutions of local governance

Kiran Choudhary is a *Zila Parishad* member. Her family has no prior experience in politics. She contested election from the seat reserved for an OBC woman candidate. Though, her father encouraged her to contest the election, the main reason was her own motivation to join politics.

I make it a point to go well prepared for the meetings. I have learnt to negotiate and put forth my views strongly. Despite the male dominated environment of the meetings, I make sure that I am heard and my points included in the agendas and decisions of meetings. Life for most women in Rajasthan revolves around water as we face frequent droughts. Women have to walk long distances to fetch it. I have therefore pushed for inclusion of issues of drinking water and women's health. (Kiran Choudhary, Zila Parishad Member)

### *3.10 Would they Re contest Elections?*

Interestingly, despite several constraints and challenges, 47 % of the ERWs stated that they would re-contest elections if they were given the opportunity to do so and provided that a more conducive environment was created for them by the state. Similar responses came forth during Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with the ERWs which was indicative of change. According to them, 'If women in government and other jobs can perform dual responsibilities by taking on 'inside' as well as 'outside' roles, we too can take on dual roles related to the 'home' as well as PRIs'. More negative responses were received from the lowest tier of PRIs with *Ward Panches* and *Sarpanches*, asserting that they would not want to/were unsure about re-contesting elections. The main reason given was that the majority of them continue to be non-literate or have only functional literacy, belong to low caste groups, and to families with no prior political experience.

## **Section 4**

### **Conclusion**

This paper underscores that the 73rd Constitutional Amendment has provided substantive space for women, particularly for those belonging to the most marginalized sections of society, to

participate in politics. They are learning to negotiate political power through democratic institutional mechanisms.

In the context of Rajasthan, existing social norms, cultural practices and societal power structures often result in the exclusion of EWRs from decision-making processes, despite affirmative action providing for women's inclusion. However, many of the narratives of current EWRs in all three tiers of local governance, demonstrate that women are beginning to boldly face various challenges confronting them within societal and governance structures. They have gained greater confidence, ability to articulate and to expand spatial mobility. Their voices are slowly but steadily influencing political agendas and meetings.

It is also evident that women have often contested elections at the behest of their family, caste or the powerful political elite who are in a position to force or manipulate them. Some women, however, have contested elections on their own initiative and joined politics because of their desire to bring change in society and do 'good work'. It needs to be highlighted that earlier notions of EWRs being mere proxies for male relatives have gradually led to recognition that given the opportunity to participate in the political system, they are as capable as their male counterparts. EWRs have also succeeded in using their office to fulfill some of the practical gender needs that have a special impact on the lives of women belonging to their communities, i.e. health, sanitation, early childhood care, education, and drinking water. This is an emerging positive trend in local politics.

While policy prescriptions emphasize devolution of power to the five key departments in the state, -- Agriculture, Elementary Education, Women's and Child Development, Health (including the National Rural Health Mission) and Social Justice and Empowerment to the PRIs at district level with 'funds, functions and functionaries' as per the XIth Schedule of the Constitution dated October 2010. However, women's narratives clearly communicate that this move has only taken place on paper as they do not have the freedom (the most important ingredient) to use these. For any meaningful transformation to take place there is a need to make devolution of power a reality to enable EWRs to enhance their capacities in governance structures.

Women's trajectories underline that enabling and constraining factors in Rajasthan vary along intersections of gender, caste, class and educational levels. EWRs with higher income and larger landholdings are able to reach higher levels of local governance more easily. They also continue to contest elections twice or more times, primarily because they have money, power and political background/backing, as well as the political experience to do so. Family members of some of the women have enabled their entry into politics but withdrawn support thereafter in order to usurp the power that the position in politics offers. This is particularly true of women with low educational levels. These women would need greater support by way of policy initiatives.

In the context of Rajasthan caste becomes one of the main factors impacting differences in access, participation and influence of women in local politics. Caste works not just in conjunction with patriarchy but often becomes patriarchal itself. Today a large number of women belonging

to the most marginalized caste groups have been enabled to enter politics due to the mandatory provision of reservation based on caste. However, EWRs belonging to these groups face multiple constraints and have to struggle to create spaces within local level institutions as they bear the double burden of being women and belonging to the most marginalized groups. Formation of federations of EWRs, networking among them and systematic capacity building could strengthen their negotiating power within governance structures.

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**Kanchan Mathur**

**October 2014**

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Please send suggestions and comments to  
S. Mohanakumar, (Mohanakumar.s@gmail.com)  
Convenor, Publications

**Institute of Development Studies**

8-B, Jhalana Institutional Area

Jaipur-302 004 (India)

Phone : 91-141-2705726 / 2706457 / 2705348

Fax : : 91-141-2705348

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