



**SPECIAL GRAM SABHAS
FOR WOMEN**
Unlocking Potential

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EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

India has witnessed a slew of progressive measures aimed at increasing women's participation in decision-making within the Panchayati Raj system. The Constitution mandates that at least one-third of all seats in PRIs (Panchayati Raj Institutions) be reserved for women, and some states including Maharashtra, have gone further by enacting legal provisions for 50% reservation. These measures reflect the collective aspiration of Indian society to see more women in positions of power and influence.

There are countless stories of women's resolve and leadership in Panchayats, stories that not only highlight the empowerment of women but also contribute to the broader development of entire communities. We have numerous examples of resolute women emerging out from the restraining shadows of patriarchy, carrying the torch of community leadership, and creating lasting change.

Despite these promising strides, women continue to face persistent challenges in grassroots governance. These challenges include the gender digital divide, gender-based discrimination, and feeling sidelined in Panchayat decision-making processes. Addressing these systemic bottlenecks requires a collective campaign, one that helps women assert their rightful place in grassroots democracy.

This compendium of impact stories showcases the unwavering resolve of women's collectives to demand and organize special Gram Sabhas and to elevate their community's development agenda to the decision-making table. These are stories of dogged persistence, collective will, steely resolve, and, most importantly, the communitarian spirit of women. It is immensely gratifying that the Jeevan programme, implemented by ten partners in Maharashtra, has achieved remarkable success in mobilizing women into collectives that now spearhead community development efforts in some of the most backward regions of the state.

These impact narratives would not have been possible without the generous financial contribution and unwavering support provided by Misereor, Germany, to the Jeevan programme.

I also salute the persistence, resilience, and industrious spirit of rural women who have dared to break free from the imposing chains of patriarchy and gender orthodoxy. This compendium of impact stories is a tribute to the immeasurable strength and courage of these women!

Fr. Antony Fernandes
Executive Director

INTRODUCTION

Mahatma Gandhi once famously said, “If by strength is meant moral power, then woman is immeasurably man’s superior.” This insightful connection between moral strength and women by Gandhiji highlights the pressing need for greater representation of women in governance and decision-making, especially in a world yearning for power systems rooted in moral integrity. Women have long been celebrated for their resistance to corruption, indifference, criminality, nepotism, and bigotry. Wherever women have assumed positions of power, their leadership has been transformative marked by compassion, a communal spirit, inclusivity, transparency, and accountability.

Despite several constitutional measures designed to address the gender deficit in grassroots governance and decision-making, the progress women have made remains below its full potential across the country, barring a few pockets of exceptional success. While Indian democracy has made commendable strides in ensuring the quantitative representation of women in grassroots governance, this has not fully translated into qualitative impacts in areas such as participation, ownership, and the inclusion of women’s issues in governance.

The development priorities men and women bring to community decision-making often differ significantly. Women, unlike their male counterparts, tend to prioritize a communitarian agenda, focusing on issues such as food, safe drinking water, healthcare, education, sanitation, and hygiene. On the other hand, men typically emphasize livelihoods, agriculture, credit, public facilities, and transportation. There is strong evidence of a direct causal link between women’s presence in local governance and improvements in sanitation and healthcare. Equally convincing is the evidence of a direct relationship between women’s participation in community decision-making and enhanced accountability, responsiveness, efficiency, and inclusiveness in governance systems.

Gender parity in decision-making and women’s leadership have the potential to generate significant community development dividends and social capital. The introduction of gender quotas and legislation to promote women’s political participation has indeed provided a constitutional framework for fostering female leadership. However, women often struggle to overcome socio-cultural stereotypes, particularly the deeply entrenched patriarchal norms that consign and confine them to the four walls. Beyond these socio-cultural barriers, women have to grapple with stiff challenges in having their voices heard in the community decision-making spaces. These challenges include illiteracy, male relatives proxying them, usurping of powers by husbands or male family members, long distances to Panchayats, restraining burden of household chores, the digital divide, and the threat of physical, verbal, and emotional violence.

Caritas India, along with ten partners in Maharashtra, has been implementing the JEEVAN-Women Led Empowerment Action (WLEA) project in Maharashtra to foster women’s leadership at the grassroots level and help women fulfill their democratic aspirations. Caritas India and its partners firmly believe that greater decision-making power of women leads to tangible benefits for democracy, including enhanced responsiveness and sensitivity within governance structures, as well as improved quality of life for communities reflecting as the priorities of families, women, children, and groups and communities with preexisting vulnerabilities.

A key strategy of the JEEVAN programme was to provide citizenship education to women, empowering them to understand their rightful roles within democratic spaces and systems. Women were educated on grassroots democracy, with a focus on the Panchayat and the functionality of the Gram Sabha, the general assembly of the Panchayat. In addition to the Gram Sabha, the Panchayati Raj system provides



for the organizing of Ward Sabha, which allows smaller hamlets or constituent villages to hold their own assemblies to finalize local development agendas that feed into the Gram Panchayat Development Plans (GDPs). In traditional communities where patriarchal forces disadvantage women, they can demand special Gram Sabhas or Ward Sabhas. These Mahila Sabhas are highly effective platforms for raising awareness, strengthening women's participation, and enabling them to voice their demands, which can then be integrated into the GDPs.

Over the past three years, JEEVAN has been organizing and capacitating women for helping them have a decision-making participation in grassroots democratic processes. In addition to democracy literacy trainings, JEEVAN has conducted various capacity building sessions on public speaking, issue representation, application writing, collective follow-up, and measures for ensuring transparency and accountability. The zeal and zest of women in engaging with grassroots democracy has been remarkable. In the past two years alone, women in the JEEVAN intervention areas have successfully demanded and organized 198 special Gram Sabhas exclusively for themselves. This collection of impact stories narrates the resolve, courage, and persistence of women who have historically been marginalized from decision-making processes, as they come together to deliberate on agendas that truly belong to and unite them.

These stories of special Gram Sabhas reflect the tenacity and grit of women who refuse to yield to opposing forces in their pursuit of making grassroots democracy gender transformative. These also showcase the indomitable spirit of women, not content to remain a sub-stream, but determined to emerge as a powerful force capable of steering and driving grassroots development.

Dr. Saju MK
Zone Programme Lead, Caritas India

01

“We are treated as untouchables. We visit many government offices seeking the benefits of schemes, but senior officials do not even allow us to sit inside the office. What is our fault that we are poor?”

- Ms. Manda Gurudas Shil, a 55-year-old differently abled Dalit woman, expressed her grief at the discrimination and apathy of government officials.



FROM STRUGGLE TO SUCCESS: DALIT WOMEN OF SHIRPUR WIN LAND AND HOUSING RIGHTS

The exasperation of Ms. Manda is understandable. Her family is among 272 families, including 67 Dalit families, from Shirpur village in Nagpur district who have received two eviction notices from their own land. The government has declared Shirpur a coal belt, meaning all land will be acquired, and the residents will be relocated elsewhere. While the forcible eviction has not yet begun, the looming threat was not far off. Compensation and rehabilitation will be provided only to households with land records. Unfortunately, Ms. Manda and many other Dalit families do not possess such records. These families faced the scary prospects of being dispossessed of their homes without any compensation, resettlement, or rehabilitation.

The Nagpur Multipurpose Social Service Society (NMSSS) launched the Misereor-supported Jeevan programme in Shirpur in 2022, aimed at strengthening women's leadership in community development and agriculture. One of the key objectives of the Jeevan programme was to empower communities to actively participate in local governance processes and secure access to various development and welfare schemes offered by the government. A common challenge faced by Dalit families in Shirpur is the lack of land records, which significantly restricts their access to government schemes. As in many communities, Dalits in Shirpur have historically faced layers of marginalization, stemming from longstanding systemic discrimination and social disabilities.



In response to the looming displacement and the absence of land records among Dalit families, the NMSSS organized the women of these households into a village-level organization. In addition to focusing on good governance and securing access to government schemes, this organization began working to obtain legal documentation, or 'Patta', for the land on which these families have lived for generations. NMSSS provided leadership training to the women, including public speaking skills, education on grassroots governance, and preparation to present their demands during Gram Sabha meetings and submit applications to government offices. To further enhance their confidence and skills, NMSSS also conducted Demo Gram Sabhas, or mock Gram Sabhas, to offer practical exposure to the proceedings and conduct of these meetings.

The women's community-based organization (CBO) of Shirpur submitted a written application to the Sarpanch or the village headman in August 2022, requesting a special Gram Sabha meeting exclusively for women. As a result, a special Gram Sabha was held on November 17, 2022. During the meeting, the women submitted 23 individual applications for land assessment for tax calculation purposes. In some parts of India, tax penalty certificates and payment receipts are considered valid land records in the absence of a formal land title deed. Since panchayats levy taxes on house buildings, tax assessment records and receipts are accepted as proof of house ownership.

During the special Gram Sabha, the women demanded that the panchayat immediately assess their land for tax purposes. "The deputy Sarpanch tried to mislead us, saying there would be no benefit in assessing or levying house tax since the entire village is going to be rehabilitated," said Ms. Sunanda Ghuguskar, a CBO member and widow. "However, we insisted to the Sarpanch that we want the land assessment, as it will serve as the basis for any housing claims after relocation," she added. Ms. Sunanda also mentioned that the Sarpanch assured them in the Gram Sabha that a memorandum would be prepared and submitted to the higher authorities.

"The deputy Sarpanch continued to create obstacles for the Dalit women, even when they collectively approached the local lawmaker, the Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA). He even tried to stop us on the street, saying our demands were baseless and our efforts would be futile," Ms. Sunanda recounted, describing the local resistance they faced.



Defying this opposition, the women CBO members submitted a memorandum to the local MLA, Mr. Sudhir Parve, on January 5, 2023, demanding housing rights for 45 Dalit families. "The MLA was sympathetic to the distress of the women. He assured us that he would take the matter to the Deputy Chief Minister, Mr. Devendra Fadnavis. Eventually, we managed to meet Mr. Fadnavis on February 16, 2023, and submitted a memorandum demanding land and housing rights," Ms. Sunanda said, ecstatic while recounting the success of their efforts.

The deputy chief minister sympathetically listened to the women's concerns and assured them that he would intervene to secure housing rights for the Dalit families of Shirpur. "The deputy chief minister was particularly impressed by our unity," said Ms. Rachna Ramteke, another woman leader from the village. "He told us that he would ensure that housing scheme benefits are made available to all Dalit households in Shirpur, even if their land has not been properly assessed."

With the intervention of the deputy chief minister, the once-reluctant administrative machinery began moving swiftly. Barely two months after the women submitted their memorandum, the land assessment for the 45 Dalit families of Shirpur was finally conducted.

The day of celebration arrived sooner than expected. True to his word, the deputy chief minister ensured progress. On May 30, 2023, six Dalit women were invited to represent the 45 Dalit households of Shirpur at a grand ceremony for land assessment and housing scheme distribution. During the event, Mr. Devendra Fadnavis personally handed over certificates of land assessment and housing scheme entitlements to the six women of Shirpur.

"We fought hard for shelter. We fought together. Now, we have a roof over our heads," said Ms. Archana Ramteke, beaming with satisfaction after the long and arduous battle for land rights had finally borne fruit.

02

“The Panchayat installed water taps in our village under the Jal Jeevan Mission, but we never received any water from them. As a result, we spend the entire day fetching water from distant wells and borewells.”

-Ms. Rukminibai Khandarkar summarized the daily hardship faced by the women of Anandguda village in Maharashtra's Chandrapur district.



A THIRST FOR JUSTICE: ANANDGUDA WOMEN LEAD THE FIGHT FOR CLEAR WATER

Anandguda, located in Chandrapur—one of the most underdeveloped districts in Maharashtra—has a population of 383, consisting almost entirely of tribal people. These residents rely on small-scale farming and occasional wage labor to sustain themselves. Due to widespread illiteracy, the community remains unaware of their rights. The village's isolation, with no mobile network, internet access, proper roads, or shops, has only deepened the disconnect from the outside world, disproportionately affecting the women of Anandguda.

“Even though we have a woman Sarpanch, the water crisis remains unresolved because all the decisions are made by the village secretary and other male leaders,” explained Ms. Sarubai Khandekar. “The Gram Sabha was never held. We doubted that a special Gram Sabha would have been convened even if we had asked for one.”

In May 2022, Loksamgraha Social Service Society (LSSS) launched the Jeevan Project, aimed at promoting women's leadership and increasing their participation in grassroots decision-making processes. Supported by Misereor and Caritas India, the project introduced civic literacy campaigns to educate women about their rights and entitlements as citizens. In addition to this, Jeevan focused on empowering women in agriculture by enhancing their decision-making power. A key objective of the project is to equip women to raise their own development agendas within local governance structures.





As part of this initiative, LSSS organized multiple rounds of orientations and trainings for women, offering them hands-on experience through mock Gram Sabhas. The Jeevan team also provided training in writing applications, public speaking, and how to effectively follow up on submitted applications in government offices.

Farm laborer Ms. Ayyubai Sidam highlighted the ongoing water crisis: “Our entire day is spent fetching water. Those who own land can afford to be late for farm work, but what about us? We lose several days of wage labor because we have to collect water from far-off sources.”

Women's group leader Ms. Ashwini Salgar voiced a pressing concern: “We receive no water supply, yet the Gram Panchayat collects water taxes from us.” Other community members expressed frustration with how the Panchayat was managing water resources. Mr. Mohan Maske raised an alarming issue: “The Panchayat failed to address water contamination risks while digging a new open well intended to meet the majority of the community's water needs. Despite our warnings, they dug the well near a drainage line, which poses a serious health hazard to the community.”

Determined to resolve the water crisis, the women of Anandguda took action. “All the women, under the banner of the local women's group, gathered and drafted a memorandum, which we submitted to the Gram Panchayat on April 19, 2023, demanding the immediate convening of a special Gram Sabha for women,” said Ms. Dhurpata Pole. The memorandum, signed by all the women in the village, called for urgent administrative intervention to address the water crisis. Initially, the Panchayat secretary claimed he was overburdened with responsibilities from managing two Panchayats and couldn't hold the meeting immediately.

However, after persistent efforts by the women, he assured them that the special Gram Sabha would be held within two weeks.

Despite the assurance, two weeks passed with no Gram Sabha. Undeterred, the women regrouped on April 28, 2023, and followed up at the Gram Panchayat office. The secretary apologized, citing overwork, but promised that the meeting would be held in May 2023, assuring them of a notification in due time. The women decided to wait.

Finally, on May 9, 2023, the special Women's Gram Sabha took place. During the meeting, the women raised concerns about the contamination of the village well and the ongoing water supply crisis. They demanded the construction of a new well away from the village, near a clean water source, and insisted on a consistent daily water supply through the taps. The women's persistence paid off, as local officials agreed to include the construction of the new well in the Gram Sabha resolution and forwarded the proposal to the district council for approval. Additionally, the Gram Panchayat agreed to provide daily water supply and temporarily waived the water tax until the taps were fully operational. Some men from the village also lent their support to the women's cause.

The proposal for the new well was approved, and construction began in late June 2023. By October 2023, the well was completed, providing the village with access to clean, safe water. “Since the water issue was resolved, the health of the villagers has improved, and women no longer have to waste hours fetching water. Now, women with farms can focus on their land, and laborers can return to wage work, easing the financial strain on poor families,” Ms. Nikita Pole, a female farmer, said with a smile.

03



FROM SILENCE TO STRENGTH: THE RISE OF WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

In the heart of Bakarwadi, a small village in Maharashtra's Beed district, a quiet revolution is underway. For years, the women of Bakarwadi had been silenced and marginalized, but with the support of the Jeevan-Women-Led Empowerment Action project, the village experienced a historic breakthrough: the first-ever Women's Gram Sabha. This event marked a significant step toward gender equality and empowerment.

For generations, the women of Bakarwadi were confined to their homes, their voices excluded from the village's decision-making processes. Social issues such as alcoholism, caste-based discrimination, and illiteracy compounded their struggles. "We were never given the chance to speak. Our place was in the home, and even there, we were invisible," recalled Ms. Rekha Kale a local resident.

The seeds of change were planted through an intense awareness campaign led by the Jeevan team. In Bakarwadi, patriarchy was deeply entrenched, and the idea of women participating in the Gram Sabha—the vital meeting where community decisions were made—was unthinkable. "We were taught that leadership was for men, but we knew things had to change," shared Savita Gade, another resident.

The Aurangabad Diocesan Social Service Society (ADSSS) launched the Jeevan project, supported by Misereor, to help women take on



leadership roles in community decision-making, agriculture, and economic activities. ADSSS organized focus group discussions and training programs to educate the women of Bakarwadi about their rights, citizenship, and the Panchayati Raj system. The transformation took root when ADSSS began organizing mock Gram Sabhas in January 2024. During these practice sessions, the women learned how to raise their concerns and participate in decision-making. “We practiced for months, learning how to present issues, write applications, and hold discussions. It was all new to us, but we were determined,” said Poonam Gade, a young woman filled with excitement.

Despite their progress, resistance from the men and elders in the village was inevitable. “Many men laughed at us, saying it wasn't our place to lead,” said Sunita Gade, one of the women who spearheaded the mobilization. However, the mockery only strengthened the women's resolve. Faced with pressing issues like the lack of civic amenities, the women decided to demand a special Gram Sabha for women. On January 20, 2024, they formally submitted an application to the Sarpanch, requesting this historic meeting. Convincing male leaders, overcoming scepticism and antagonism, and breaking through cultural barriers built over centuries was no small feat. But their persistence paid off, and after tireless efforts, the Sarpanch agreed to hold Bakarwadi's first special Gram Sabha for women on February 7, 2024.

The atmosphere in Bakarwadi was charged with anticipation as 10 women—who had long been invisible

in their own community—led the discussion. In the special Gram Sabha, they raised critical issues such as child marriage, alcoholism, the high dropout rate in schools, and the rights of widows. “We were fighting for the future of our daughters,” declared Neelam Kale. “No longer will they be forced into early marriages or be deprived of education. This is our time.”

The Gram Sabha was not only a success in execution but also sent a powerful message: women's voices matter. “I never thought I would ever stand up in a Gram Sabha and speak for my community. We weren't just participants. We were leaders,” recalled Anita Gade, one of the village's emerging women leaders.

After the special Gram Sabha, the women continued to follow up on the resolutions that had been approved. Slowly but surely, development in the village gained momentum. Two internal roads were constructed with an investment of ₹5 lakhs, a cremation ground was developed at a cost of ₹8 lakhs, and a 70-meter-long drainage line was built with an outlay of ₹3 lakhs. The Gram Panchayat also banned child marriages, imposing penalties on violators, and linked twelve widows with pension benefits.

Through education, solidarity, and collective action, the women of Bakarwadi not only transformed their own lives but also sparked a broader movement for gender equality. Their efforts inspired neighboring villages to follow suit. “We've learned that women's voices matter. We will not be silent anymore,” declared Shubhangi Tange, a woman from Ghatsavli, a nearby village.



04

“We didn't know what a Gram Sabha was or why it was held. We never attended because it was always held three kilometres away in Kodepur, where the Panchayat office is located,”
-Gaurubai Gedam, a resident of Gharpana, as she reflected on the general indifference of her village towards these meetings.



CLAIMING JUSTICE: THE WOMEN OF GHARPANA TAKE CHARGE

This is a common situation in many villages across central India. Small settlements or hamlets often are aggregated to form a Panchayat, but many of these hamlets are located far from the Gram Panchayat office, making participation in meetings difficult.

“Although Gram Sabhas were held in Kodepur, we were never properly informed. Sometimes, notices of these meetings were posted in our village, but we ignored them because we didn't understand their importance. Going to Kodepur also meant losing a day's work, so we avoided attending altogether,” explained Pattubai Marskolhe, another woman leader from Gharpana, describing the general apathy of her community towards Panchayat affairs.

Gharpana is a tribal village nestled in the mountainous region of Chandrapur district, Maharashtra. The 79 families in the village primarily depend on farming, agricultural labor, and occasional work under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). However, the community's experience with MGNREGA had turned sour in recent times.

“We stopped working under MGNREGA because of unpaid wages. Whenever we inquired with the Gram Panchayat about the non-payment of wages, we were told that the funds hadn't arrived. Later, we found out that our wages had been transferred to the bank accounts of officials' relatives,” said Jana Bai Ade, shedding light on



the rampant corruption in MGNREGA payments. “We wanted to take this issue to higher authorities but didn't know how.”

The civic literacy campaign, initiated by the Loksamgraha Social Service Society (LSSS) under the Jeevan project, provided much-needed guidance to the villagers. Supported by Misereor, the Jeevan project aimed to organize women into community-based organizations and promoting women's leadership in governance and agriculture. LSSS introduced a series of activities, including leadership development, literacy programs on government schemes, and training on public speaking, conflict resolution, and community representation. Importantly, the community was informed about their rights under the Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas Act (PESA), a law that grants special powers to Gram Sabhas in tribal regions.

To give the villagers practical exposure to Gram Sabha proceedings, LSSS organized mock Gram Sabhas, beginning in October 2023. These demonstrations were designed to educate the community about their right to call for special Gram Sabha meetings to address local issues.

“Women of the village decided to work together to claim our unpaid wages. We submitted a petition to the Sarpanch requesting a special Gram Sabha in our village during which we could pass a resolution to for the payment of our unpaid wages. We also demanded

the formation of an independent PESA committee, as is our right as a tribal community,” recounted Ms. Pattubai Marskolhe.

Women faced stiff resistance as expected. “Neither the Sarpanch nor the revenue officer were willing to organize the special Gram Sabha. They were both relatives and were afraid that such a meeting would expose their misconduct,” said Radhabai Pendore, a woman farmer leader from the village. “But we remained determined.”

Recognizing that local officials were stalling, the women decided to escalate their demands to higher authorities. On November 16, 2023, they submitted a petition to the Block Development Officer (BDO), outlining their grievances. “The BDO assured us he would intervene and even promised to personally attend the special Gram Sabha for women,” Ms. Radhabai shared.

But despite assurances, no action followed. After waiting a month, the women returned to the BDO to remind him of his promise. Once again, they were given assurances of immediate action. Despite their growing frustration, they decided to wait a little longer and trust the BDO once more.

Their persistence finally paid off. On February 26, 2024, the first-ever special Gram Sabha for women in the region was held. “During the meeting, we raised our concerns about unpaid MGNREGA wages and the formation of a PESA committee for the village,” said Dhurpata Marskolhe, brimming with joy. The special Gram Sabha not only accepted several of the women's demands but also passed resolutions on key development issues for the village.

Soon after, the results became visible. The villagers received their overdue wages, a PESA committee was established to oversee local development, and the PESA committee of the village received funds under the PESA act.

“This victory was a significant step toward justice. We fought not just for our rights but for the future of our entire community,” Dhurpata concluded, expressing her pride and newfound confidence.

05

"We tribals live far from the city with limited resources. But does that mean we don't deserve a proper road? My question to the Gram Sabha is: Why do city people get good roads, while it's assumed that any kind of road is enough for us? We will not accept this anymore!"

thundered Ms. Pavani Ladak Nadage from Kinhawali-Khoripada village in Palghar district.



UNITING FOR CHANGE: HOW TRIBAL WOMEN BUILT MORE THAN JUST A ROAD

Ms. Pavani's frustration was deeply rooted in the lived reality of her village. For the 86 tribal households in Kinhawali-Khoripada, there was only one road connecting them to the city, and it could hardly be called a road. It was a treacherous, pothole-riddled stretch, barely navigable, especially for those in dire need.

"The village road was in a terrible state. Pregnant women struggled immensely to reach the hospital, and two had already met with accidents. Despite raising our demands multiple times with the Gram Panchayat, nothing was done," lamented Ms. Chaiti Bandu Ravte, expressing the painful reality of their public road.

The administration's neglect was not accidental. Kinhawali-Khoripada is home to the Warli tribe, one of the most marginalized communities, lacking political or economic leverage. However, in May 2022, the Vasai Janhit Trust (VJT) initiated the Jeevan Project in the village to organize the community and amplify women's involvement in grassroots governance. As part of the project, several community-based organizations were formed, including the Nisarga Women Farmers' Group, which consisted of 21 women farmers. VJT provided leadership training and organized demo Gram Sabhas

to equip the women with practical knowledge of governance processes. Through these initiatives, the women were empowered to access welfare schemes and demand transparency and accountability from the authorities.

One of the first issues the Nisarga Women Farmers' Group decided to tackle was the redevelopment of their village road. Five women from the group had attended the trainers of trainers (ToT) course conducted by VJT, where they learned the finer aspects of community leadership. These women took charge, leading the group to meet with their local legislator.

"We submitted an application in January 2023 requesting immediate reconstruction of the road. The legislator assured us that it would be done soon," said Sarita Ravte, one of the trainers. But as time passed, no action followed. "We followed up with the Gram Panchayat multiple times, informing them of the legislator's promise. Yet, nothing moved. Frustrated, we went back to the legislator," Sarita added. During the second meeting, the legislator explained that the process could only move forward once the Gram Panchayat passed a formal resolution.

On January 5, 2023, the women submitted a request to the Gram Panchayat, seeking a special Gram Sabha exclusively for women to pass the

road construction resolution. "As expected, they didn't take us seriously, thinking we would back down. But we didn't. We kept pushing and made several representations demanding the special meeting," Sarita recalled.

Their perseverance paid off. After relentless follow-up, the Gram Panchayat finally scheduled the special Gram Sabha for women on January 26, 2023. The women came together with unwavering resolve, passed the resolution, and secured the much-needed road construction for their village.

The Public Works Department (PWD) soon began work, and by the end of February 2023, the road was complete. But the women didn't stop there. They took shifts overseeing the construction to ensure quality and prevent any misconduct. Their dedication was contagious—eventually, even the local woman Sarpanch, Ms. Shelu Dumada, joined them in supervising the work.

"Our women worked tirelessly to get this road built. Their determination and continuous follow-up were vital," said Ms. Shelu, the village Sarpanch. Reflecting the newfound confidence and solidarity among the village women, Ms. Jagruti Sharad Ravte added, "If we unite and make a collective effort, we can overcome any challenge and achieve success."



06

“Why should we pay taxes to the Gram Panchayat when our village roads are in such poor condition? It's our right to demand answers from the Gram Panchayat about why no attention was paid to road construction,”

said Ms. Chhaya Jadhav, a women's leader from Utane village, gushed with conviction and confidence.



FROM SLUSH TO CEMENT: THE COLLECTIVE STRENGTH OF UTHANE'S WOMEN

Ms. Chhaya and the villagers of Utane, located in the Thane district of Maharashtra, had valid reasons for their frustration. Commuting becomes a nightmare during the monsoon season when the roads turn into muddy, slippery tracks. These conditions pose a serious risk, especially for bike and cycle riders. “I've seen many two-wheeler riders get injured after slipping on the muddy roads,” shared Ms. Vaishali Khutle, another local leader.

The Utane community needed an urgent solution to the problem of slushy, unnavigable roads. Nearly all 171 households rely on regular travel, whether for wage labor or managing their petty trades. However, the village had seen little infrastructure development, largely due to the predominance of households belonging to economically and socially backward households who were powerless to move the cumbersome administrative structure.

“Slippery, slushy roads were especially difficult for women, who had to navigate through the dirt while doing daily chores like fetching water,” explained Ms. Sunita Jadhav, another village resident. “We wanted a solution, but we weren't sure how to push the administration to address our urgent need.”

In May 2022, Karunya Trust launched the Jeevan project, supported by Misereor, with the aim of fostering leadership among women and helping them bring their welfare and development concerns to



grassroots decision-making platforms. As part of the initiative, women were educated about civic rights, leadership, and community decision-making processes.

“Karunya Trust provided us with the knowledge of how the development administration works and how women can participate as informed citizens in local governance,” said Ms. Savita Bhoir, a member of the women's collective formed under the Jeevan project. “We learned how to write applications and present community issues in an organized way,” she added. On December 27, 2022, the women collectively submitted a written request to the Gram Panchayat for road repairs. However, they received no favorable response, prompting them to become more persistent.

Determined to be heard, the women intensified their campaign. They united and submitted a memorandum to the Sarpanch, requesting a special Gram Sabha exclusively for women to address the road issue. Their goal was to present the demand collectively and get the ratification of the memorandum from the Gram Panchayat. “The special Gram Sabha for women was held on January 23, 2023. During the special Gram Sabha meeting, we submitted a memorandum requesting road construction and pressed the Sarpanch for a timeline,” said Ms. Manisha Jadhav, who led the collective campaign of the women. “The Sarpanch informed us that the work would begin once the tender was approved.”

Undeterred by the slow progress, women continued to follow up on the issue. “On January 28, 2023, we visited the Panchayat to check on the status of the tender. We were informed that the tender had been approved and construction would start soon,” said Ms. Manisha, clearly excited. Progress was swift, and by February 11, 2023, the new cement road was completed.

“We fought together, and our demands were met. Now we have an all-weather road. We can walk and travel comfortably,” Ms. Manisha said with pride and satisfaction .



07

“Awareness and education are powerful tools for bringing about change,”

reflected Ms. Renuka Maske from Shivni village.



VOICES UNMUTED: RURAL WOMEN REDEFINING LEADERSHIP IN GOVERNANCE

Far from the hustle and bustle of city life, in the four villages of Rui Limba, Shahjahanpur, Moujwadi, and Shivni, a quiet revolution was taking shape. Here, women who had long been relegated to the margins of society were stepping into the spotlight. Their journey towards empowerment and recognition began with the establishment of a distinct identity, transcending their traditional roles as mere members of Self-Help Groups.

Many of these women from Beed district hadn't even completed formal schooling, but they boldly defied societal norms to make their voices heard. In May 2022, the Aurangabad Diocesan Social Service Society (ADSSS) launched the Jeevan Project to organize women and help them assume leadership roles in rural governance. The project also aimed to free women from the stereotypical gender roles that confined them to domestic responsibilities.

Through neighbourhood meetings with the women, the Jeevan team educated them about their rights as citizens and how they could leverage special constitutional provisions to take on leadership positions in grassroots governance.

As the monsoon arrived, issues with roads, drainage and other civic facilities became apparent, and, as always, women were the hardest hit. The Jeevan team sensitized the women about the possibility of seeking redress for these civic problems by raising their voices in the



Gram Sabha. Rather than simply complaining, the women were encouraged to take proactive action and present their demands in Gram Sabha meetings. They were taught practical skills, such as speaking at the Gram Sabha and articulating their demands in writing, to empower them further.

Numerous informal meetings became platforms to inspire and motivate the women. Whether gathered at the temple or on their way to the fields, conversations gained momentum. A few brave women took on leadership roles, approaching the Sarpanch to submit their demand for a special Gram Sabha for women to discuss the villages' development. Women from all four villages, clustered under one Panchayat, collectively submitted a written application to the Sarpanch, demanding special Gram Sabha meetings exclusively for women.

Despite initial indifference from the authorities, the women persisted, following up with the Sarpanch relentlessly. After weeks of insistence, special Gram Sabhas for women were finally conducted in all four villages. These meetings were historic, because special Gram Sabha for women were previously unheard of in the region. The special Gram Sabhas took place on January 27, 2023 in Shivni; February 2, 2023 in Moujwadi; and February 3, 2023 in Rui Limba and Shahjahanpur. For the first time, the women stood before the Sarpanch, voicing their concerns and submitting resolutions that reflected their aspirations for their villages' development.

Their resolutions addressed crucial issues like tree plantation and protection, marriage registration, the inclusion of women's names in land documents, the construction of a new building for the Gram Sabha, the provision of new toilets for women, road construction, and the implementation of MNREGA works. These women were no longer passive participants; they had taken an active role in shaping the future of their communities.

The first-ever women-led Gram Sabhas set off a wave of local development initiatives in these four villages. In Shivni, a 2 km road was constructed, seven soak pits were dug, two garbage bins were installed, and tree plantations were carried out by the Panchayat. Moujwadi saw the renovation of its school and Gram Panchayat building. Limba Rui benefitted from the construction of a 1 km road, two public toilets for women, and a new drainage system. In Shahjahanpur, a drinking water tank was installed, and public toilets were built in both the village and the local school. All these facilities were created as a response to the resolutions that women had passed in the special Gram Sabhas conducted for them.

Empowerment and happiness radiated through the women as they realized they were now equals in decision-making, standing shoulder to shoulder with men to develop their communities. This success story from Rui Limba Shahjahanpur, Moujwadi, and Shivni became a beacon of hope, showing that when empowered, women can become formidable agents of change, even in the most patriarchal societies. “We don't want our children to be ignorant and suffer like us, so we've decided to keep working and bring change. No one can stop us,” said Ms. Surekha Shinde, one of the women leaders from Moujwadi village.

As these initiatives continue to gather momentum and societal attitudes shift, there is hope that the struggles faced by women in rural villages will eventually give way to a more equitable and empowered future. “When women support women, magic happens,” said Ms. Ashatai Sonavane from Shahjahanpur, expressing her newfound confidence.



08



WOMEN TRIUMPH: SPECIAL GRAM SABHA HELD AFTER PERSISTENT CAMPAIGN

For the first time, the women of Pimpoli village made a collective decision: to boycott the Gram Sabha meeting scheduled in the Rayte Panchayat. They had a clear message. “If an exclusive women’s Gram Sabha is not held in our own village, we will not participate in any meetings elsewhere,” declared Ms. Bharti Rohane of Pimpoli, with conviction.

Pimpoli, located 19 kilometers from Kalyan city in Thane district, consists of just 66 households, most belonging to the economically and socially backward Kunbi community. As a result, Gram Sabha meetings were rarely held in the village itself and usually took place in Rayte, about 4 kilometers away. Until recently, the villagers of Pimpoli showed little interest in engaging with grassroots democratic processes, focusing instead on their livelihoods—farming, farm labor, and small home-based trades. Women, in particular, had rarely participated in Gram Sabha meetings or visited the panchayat office to demand welfare entitlements.

In 2022, Karunya Trust launched the Misereor-supported Jeevan program in Pimpoli, aimed at mobilizing women and enhancing their leadership within the community. Women were organized into groups and provided with citizenship education, along with training on grassroots governance systems and processes. “It was on September 19, 2022, when the Karunya Trust team informed us about the possibility of demanding and organizing a special Gram



Sabha for women,” recalled Ms. Anita Bhoir. These meetings and subsequent governance literacy trainings empowered the women, helping them grasp the administrative procedures needed to address development and welfare challenges at the village level.

“Our village faced numerous issues, including problems with sewerage, garbage dumping, drinking water, and the lack of basic civic amenities such as an Anganwadi, community hall, and burial ground,” explained Ms. Manju Pawar. “Though community members had raised these concerns with the administration in the past, they were ignored due to a lack of follow-up.” Under the guidance of Karunya Trust, the women of Pimpoli organized themselves into a mothers' group, determined to tackle these long-standing issues through collective action.

“In one of the trainings organized by Karunya Trust, we learned how to write formal applications and how to demand a special Gram Sabha exclusively for women,” said Ms. Darshana Rohane, a leader of the mothers' group. This marked the beginning of a determined campaign by the women of Pimpoli to ensure their demands were heard by the administration.

“We submitted a written application on January 9, 2023, to the Sarpanch, requesting a special Gram Sabha for women to be held in Pimpoli,” Ms. Rohni Rohane recounted the efforts of the village women. “Although we received some assurances, none were fulfilled, and no Gram Sabha was organized in Pimpoli.”

“We were surprised to hear that a special Gram Sabha for women had been arranged, but it was scheduled to take place in Rayte. We boycotted the meeting because our demand was clear—we wanted the special Gram Sabha to be held in Pimpoli itself.” Ms. Rohni spoke on the unanimous decision of the women in the village.

The women of Pimpoli remained exceptionally persistent in their demand, regularly visiting the Sarpanch with a single request: to hold the special Gram Sabha in their village. “We were resolute, and every woman had committed not to back down,” said Ms. Pooja Rohane, one of the movement's key leaders. “On September 15, 2023, we submitted another application to the Sarpanch, renewing our demand for the special Gram Sabha. We followed up regularly

because we knew that without constant reminders, nothing would move forward”, she added.

The persistence of the women of Pimpoli finally paid off when a special Gram Sabha, exclusively for women, was organized on October 5, 2023. “We were thrilled to learn that the meeting would take place in our village,” said Ms. Aarti Rohane, brimming with excitement. “All the women prepared thoroughly, developing a detailed agenda for the meeting. During the special Gram Sabha, 45 women attended and submitted a memorandum demanding the construction of civic amenities. We even ensured we got a signed receipt from the panchayat officials,” she added with pride. “It was a completely new experience for us. We presented our agenda confidently, without any fear of men,” Aarti said, giggling.

Soon, the development process in the village gained momentum. Garbage dumping within the village boundaries was stopped, a garbage collection van was deployed, and the panchayat distributed bins to all households. Additionally, other development projects were put into consideration.

“The special Gram Sabha was a momentous occasion for the women of our village. For the first time, we stood up and voiced our demands—and, most importantly, our demands were heard,” said a beaming Ms. Shobha Choudhary, who led the women's campaign in Pimpoli.

09

"Naarit aabe shakti bhari,"
declared Renuka Maske, with an undeniable proof of the immense strength that women possess.



WOMEN'S PERSISTENCE: PAVES THE WAY FOR CHANGE

In the once sleepy village of Shivni in the Beed district, a remarkable and silent revolution unfolded, led by determined women who envisioned a brighter, more empowered future. For the first time in Shivni's history, these women took the lead in driving the village's development, mobilizing and organizing themselves with unwavering persistence and resolve.

The low participation of women in community decision-making in Shivni has been shaped by a complex interplay of factors, including patriarchy, social orthodoxy, illiteracy, and deeply ingrained cultural prescriptions regarding women's roles. Shivni exemplified how entrenched patriarchy can dominate village life, with men holding all positions of power and authority within families and the community, thereby limiting women's autonomy and agency. Against this backdrop, the success of the village women in demanding and organizing a special women's Gram Sabha was particularly remarkable, given the array of disabilities and barriers stacked against them.

The journey of community organization in Shivni began in May 2022 with the launch of the Jeevan program by the Aurangabad Diocesan Social Service Society (ADSSS), supported by Misereor. The project team empowered the women with knowledge about their citizenship and constitutional rights, enabling them to actively participate in grassroots governance. Inspired by a vision of





progress, the women of Shivni embarked on a transformative journey of self-discovery. Through intensive discussions and training on good governance and sustainable agriculture, they awakened to the untapped potential within their village. Using Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), they identified the construction of approach road to the village as a crucial step towards building a better future.

As part of their sensitization efforts, ADSSS organized demonstration Gram Sabhas exclusively for women in all villages. These sessions allowed women to learn the procedures of Gram Sabha meetings and how to effectively raise issues in these decision-making forums. Additionally, some women acquired the skills to draft applications that could be formally submitted to the Panchayat or other village decision-making bodies, further enhancing their ability to advocate for their needs and rights.

Empowered with knowledge, the women of Shivni encouraged one another to take the bold step of engaging in community decision-making, despite the risk of facing backlash at home from husbands or in-laws. The Jeevan team regularly organized neighborhood meetings with women's groups to build consensus and prepare them for active participation in Gram Sabha meetings. Gradually, the women gathered the courage to submit a memorandum to the Sarpanch, requesting the organization of a special Mahila Gram Sabha. This memorandum encapsulated their aspirations, calling for the construction of approach roads, installation of streetlights, improved drinking water facilities, and better housing. "These

needs were not just demands; they were our dreams for community progress. We cannot change what we are unaware of, but once we become aware, we cannot help but change," said Ms. Manisha Kale, one of the women leaders who spearheaded the movement.

After much persuasion from the women, a special Mahila Gram Sabha was finally held at the Gram Panchayat office in Shivni on January 27, 2023. Over forty women participated in the meeting, presenting a memorandum that outlined their demands. However, their efforts did not yield immediate results, and their journey was far from over. "The Panchayat wasn't giving our memorandum the attention it deserved. We had to continuously follow up with them on our demands," Manisha recalled. The women's persistence eventually paid off when approval was granted for the repair and redevelopment of the village's approach road.

The commencement of road construction signaled a new era for the women of Shivni. The newly built road became a powerful symbol of their unity and determination.

"The success in getting the road constructed gave us immense confidence that, together, women can achieve anything," said Ms. Ramabai Kute, reflecting on the transformative journey. Empowered by their collective accomplishment, the women are now resolute in their pursuit of fulfilling all their demands, determined to continue their efforts and persistently follow up with the village Panchayat.

10

"In our Gram Panchayat, all decisions were made by men. Whenever women attended Gram Sabha meetings, they were asked to stay quiet. Even when they mustered the courage to speak, no one listened. Eventually, women stopped going to the Gram Sabhas altogether," lamented Ms. Sangita Kale from Marai Patan village in Chandrapur district.



UNITING FOR PROGRESS: THE WOMEN WHO REFUSED TO STAY SILENT

The marginalization of women in the Gram Sabha had long been systematic. "At one point, the women raised concerns about the pathetic condition of the village road during a Gram Sabha meeting, but the Panchayat took no action. Disillusioned by the Panchayat's indifference, the women gave up asking," Ms. Sangita added.

Marai Patan is a small village of 117 households, made up of the socially and economically disadvantaged Mahar and Gond tribe communities. The villagers depend on seasonal farm labor and small plots of land on the mountainsides for their livelihoods. Beyond the scarcity of economic opportunities, the community's distance from local governance processes had worsened their backwardness.

In May 2022, the Loksamgraha Social Service Society (LSSS) launched the Jeevan Project in Marai Patan to help communities access welfare and development schemes and empower women in agriculture and governance. With support from Misereor, the project aimed to elevate women's voices in local governance by organizing special Gram Sabhas focused on their needs and priorities.

Through the efforts of Jeevan, the community began to see results. Some members of the women's groups formed by the project contested in the recent Panchayat elections, and several women were elected as ward members and Sarpanch. The project also conducted awareness sessions on grassroots democracy, informing women of

their constitutional rights and how to demand special Gram Sabhas to advance their own development agenda.

One issue that united the women was the terrible condition of the road connecting their village to the nearest city, 8 kilometers away. "The road was in such bad shape that the government bus service stopped long ago. Our village school only goes up to 7th grade, so children had to walk 4 kilometers to attend higher secondary school," explained Ms. Suman Kamble, one of the women leaders mentored by Jeevan. "Villagers had no choice but to hire auto rickshaws to reach nearby villages for wage labor. But traveling in those autos was risky due to the bumpy and dangerous roads," she added.

Armed with knowledge of their rights, the women decided to demand a special Gram Sabha meeting exclusively for women. In January 2023, they approached the Panchayat officials with a memorandum, insisting to convene a special Gram Sabha for women. Despite initial resistance, the women persisted, and for the first time in the Panchayat—and even the region—a special Gram Sabha for women was held on January 25, 2023.

"At the special Gram Sabha, the women raised critical civic issues, and a resolution was passed demanding the construction of the road," said Ms. Sangita Kale, one of the village leaders. However, despite their efforts, there was no immediate progress. "We warned the Panchayat officials that we would organize a general strike and sit-in at the Panchayat office if our demand was not met," Ms. Sangita said.

The women's determination paid off. Faced with mounting pressure, the Gram Panchayat expedited the approval process, and in February 2023, the Public Works Department (PWD) began constructing an unpaved road. By April 2023, the asphaltting work had started, and the road was completed in June 2023.

"Seeing the road finally completed feels like a dream. It's hard to believe we achieved this through our own special Gram Sabha for women," said Ms. Lalita Kale, a dynamic leader who spearheaded the push for the special meeting.

The completion of the road marked a significant victory for the women of Marai Patan—proof that collective action and determination of women can bring about real change, even in the face of longstanding neglect.





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