Women Leaders in Village Panchayats

'We are here to make a difference'
“To be a Panchayat leader means that I have been chosen by the people of my village, and entrusted by the Constitution to lead my community to achieve a healthy and productive life. A life where everyone’s basic rights are met. As a Panchayat leader, I promise to use this opportunity, power and responsibility to ensure the wellbeing of everyone in my village.”

～Oath taken by all elected women representatives at the end of a Women’s Leadership Workshop
States in which THP is working

- Jammu & Kashmir
- Himachal Pradesh
- Uttarakhand
- Arunachal Pradesh
- Assam
- Tamil Nadu
- Karnataka
- Maharashtra
- Orissa
- Uttaranchal
- Rajasthan
- Madhya Pradesh
- Bihar
- Gujarat
- Maharashtra
- Karnataka
- Tamil Nadu
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The award ceremony of the Sarojini Naidu Prize held annually on Gandhiji’s Birthday at the capital has become an occasion for elected women representatives to forge the partnership with media. They come from various corners of this vast country to honour the journalists who have earned the award through their outstanding writing. This year, on October 2, fifty one elected women representatives from 13 states will congregate in New Delhi to congratulate the media and the awardees.

These 51 women represent the one million elected women leaders in Panchayats who struggle every day to change the development agenda of their villages. They are trying to bring a positive change; bringing food security, water, electricity and health facilities to their villages and communities.

Even after a decade after the 73rd Amendment mandating reservation for women in all three tiers of the Panchayat, many still talk about these women leaders as proxy candidates. These cynics sitting in far away cities and state capitals may shed their negative mindset if they come to know the commitment and confidence these one million women leaders demonstrate in their work daily, despite all obstacles, to make a difference.

This publication is a compilation of the profiles of the 51 women leaders who are here to honour the journalists. Reading these stories, one gets a sense of their levels of confidence, the struggles they go through and most importantly their desire to fight these obstacles for a better tomorrow. Each woman leader knows best what is most required in her village and fights to get every government scheme for her village. These confident women in these pages reveal how reservation has helped them gain a voice in local governance and show an amazing sense of enthusiasm for others to emulate.
ASSAM
I was interested in social work right from my childhood. I contested the election because the people of the village wanted me to. However, initially I faced several problems in my job. Dergaon Panchayat is a small Panchayat largely occupied by people of general caste and the fund allocated to my Panchayat is limited. With this meager fund, I managed to organize Gaon Sabhas with all the members of Panchayat and the villagers. At the Gaon Sabha we make various plans for the development of the village.

I have constructed four public roads, constructed houses under the Indira Awaas Yojana for 180 families, distributed rice to 105 persons under the BPL scheme and 145 persons under the Antodaya scheme, distributed Randhan Jyoti scheme to 43 persons and accessed family benefits to 6 persons. I have facilitated the formation of 64 Self Help Groups, constructed two rooms for the Panchayat office, installed 20 tube wells. These are a few of my achievements.

While serving as a Panchayat President, I have faced several problems. Once a confrontation with the local MLA relating to the selection of beneficiaries led to the question of passing of no confidence motion against me. However, as I had the support of the people of the village the effort of the MLA bore no fruit. I make sure that the Panchayat office remains open everyday upto 5.30 p.m and all necessary information relating to the Panchayats functioning is available there.

I pledge to continue my service to society with all my determination.
It is because of the support I get from my husband and the rest of my family that I am able to serve the people of my community.

I was interested in social work and wanted to work for the poor and the deprived in society. I contested the last Panchayat election and won, although initially I had some difficulties in managing both home and office.

In 2001, the Assistant Engineer of my block formulated a construction committee for construction of various structures in the village. But as time went by, I noticed that there was widespread corruption happening in the construction committee. A fund of Rs 14 lakhs from the Panchayat was swindled by the committee members with the signature of the President of the committee but without my knowledge. I then decided to take necessary action on this issue. I not only appealed to the local MLA, but also brought the issue of corruption to light in the block office and later ensured that necessary action was taken against the committee members to punish them.

Despite all these, I managed to do certain development works in my area. I could not only reconstruct the Panchayat office but also arranged for important office assets like maps, table, chairs, provision for drinking water etc. I made it mandatory for the members of the Panchayat to be regularly present in the office. Panchayat meetings are often held to select beneficiaries and the list of beneficiaries is hung on the bulletin board in the office. With permission from the Deputy Commissioner of the district, I arranged to issue important certificates to the people in the Panchayat itself for which they otherwise had to go to towns. I organized a health committee of three members and organized medical camps in the village. In this camp old people, widows and the physically handicapped are given certificates.

Besides this I have done a host of other things like getting schemes, sanctioned the construction of concrete bridges, roads, school buildings, public toilets, a community storehouse, Indira Awaas Yojana houses, tube wells, old-age pensions, widow pensions etc.
I have learnt to maintain a fine balance between my household chores and my responsibilities. Amidst the mountain ranges bordering the states of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh are swiftly flowing mountain streams. And on the banks of one such stream is my village named Shantipur. Mine is a nuclear family consisting of my husband and two sons and our main means of livelihood is agriculture. I have studied upto higher secondary.

My ward is full of people belonging to OBC and ST category. The predominant means of livelihood of the people of the village is agriculture and bamboo craft. I never expected to be a representative of the people until the people of my village encouraged and inspired me to contest the election in the reserved category. I won it too. I never had to spend a single rupee in campaigning. My participation in local governance is teaching me new things each day thereby enriching my experiences. Today, the people in my community accept and respect my opinions and suggestions.

I know how to discharge my responsibilities in the Panchayat office and how to prepare for the schemes that come to the Panchayat, arrange funds etc. I am glad that like the ministers and MLAs, I too can work for the development of my region.

This has given me courage to question and challenge the corrupt development officers, even the President and Secretary of the Panchayat. I am now well versed with the Panchayat Act of Assam. After reading the bulletin of NEST ‘O Moor Desh’ and going through the guidelines of schemes, I have gained a lot of knowledge about the Panchayati Raj system as well as about the execution of schemes. I try to give the benefits of the schemes to deserving beneficiaries. Besides this, I have constructed five Indira Awaas Yojana houses, four concrete wells, given Rs one lakh to two schools, facilitated the formation of fifteen Self Help Groups and helped engaging people in income generating projects.

A lot of development work still remains in my village where 80% people live below the poverty level. If the people of my village want, I will contest
the elections again next term. This term, however, I have been very dissatisfied with the performance of the President and Secretary of the Panchayat. They decide the beneficiaries on their own and don’t respect the decisions of the Gaon Sabha. I raised this issue with the President and finally brought a no confidence motion against him with the cooperation of other members.

It is difficult for honest people to find a place in politics. Where party politics plays an active part, it is difficult for people like us to perform in a Panchayat. I think it is important to raise awareness among the people of the village.
I hail from a very remote place of Assam. Before getting elected to the Panchayat, I was a President in a Mahila Samiti, a teacher in the Adult Education Programme and a health educator in my village.

Presently apart from being a ward member, I am the President of All Assam Bodo Women's organization. During all these years, I had to face many hurdles from my male counterparts in the office. However, I ignored their criticism and continued with my responsibilities. At the beginning, I had great difficulties in understanding the schemes of the Panchayat. The President took advantage of my ignorance and never shared any information or work with me. I could not stand it for long so I approached the members of Zilla Parishad and Anchalik Panchayat and learned about the schemes from them.

The Gram Panchayat members passed their vote of no confidence on the President and made the Vice President the President of the Panchayat owing to his lack of transparency. Although things are running smoothly, I regret the two years that got wasted in sorting out all this.

During my tenure as a ward member I have been able to provide 18 houses under the Indira Awaas Yojana scheme, distributed rice at Rs 3 per kg to 20 families, given old age pension to 10 persons and provided special facilities to 2 widows. I have undertaken a total of twenty six other works including construction of roads, school buildings, culverts, theatre hall, temple under SGRY scheme etc.

I regularly attend the office and firmly believe that if one is elected as a people’s representative, one must work for the people. The question of political parties does not arise in social service. I have also organized various meetings addressing the issue of women’s leadership.

I wish to contest the next election, but am constantly facing problems from my male counterparts. Hence, I am connecting with the women of the village so that local governance in my region rests in the hands of women, who I believe are far more sincere and transparent.
I got a morale boost after joining the Panchayat. I am concerned about the problems of the society which include growing alcoholism, flesh trade, little intervention in the field of primary education for children, child marriage, lack of electric connectivity in tea garden areas, atrocities against the female tea garden labourers, havoc of wild elephants, recurring flood problems etc.

I try my best to help support the people in my Panchayat to come together as a unit and fight anti-social attitudes and activities. However, as a Panchayat member, I initially had to face several problems. The President refused to share information and work with us and we were kept completely in the dark.

I tried to contribute towards the village’s development. I persuaded the MLA to give an Indira Awaas Youjana house to a poor person. Being a member of the district minority cell I could help the poor minority community. I formed a Self Help Group and helped the women of the village to become financially independent.

I along with other women of the village raised funds for the cause of flood-affected people, for the education of the poor and provision of health facility for the most needy.

I could also accomplish a host of other work as a Panchayat representative such as road construction, making of culvert, constructing a theatre stage, bringing electricity connection, construction of a crematorium, getting tube wells dug, distribution of old-age pension and looms, cycles, rice and the construction of a health sub center etc.

Besides this, I try to make people aware about Gaon Sabhas and the Panchayati Raj system. I wish to contest the election next time for the post of Zilla Parishad member.
I am associated with social service for a long time and this helped me in winning the last Panchayat election. After winning the election, I took a pledge that I will work for the upliftment of the backward classes of my village especially the tea garden labour community. Keeping this in mind I started the formation of Self Help Groups.

I have installed four tube wells for drinking water, given old-age pension to five persons, constructed six houses under Indira Awaas Yojana, and built two roads. But the corrupt President of my Panchayat, along with his son, never lets the women ward members handle the work. I protested against this system but failed to bring any change in the working of the President. So, I appealed to the local MLA, the Chief Minister of Assam and also to Ms. Sonia Gandhi about this issue.

Once, without my knowledge, a sum of Rs 25,000/- was drawn from the Panchayat fund (for construction of road) by the President. They forged my signature and ultimately embezzled the money. The President also used to take away the Durga Puja bonus from my share. I was totally unaware of this. When after a long time I realized what has been happening I took appropriate action to punish the President and Secretary of the Panchayat. The President also selects beneficiaries close to him to benefit from for government schemes rather than those who are deserving. I finally had to lodge a complaint against the President at the police station.

Inspite of all these hindrances I am quite focused in my mission and because of the love and support of the people of my village I am motivated to contest the next election for the post of President.
I was chosen by the people to represent them, may be because I was one of the few educated women in the village. Though I was initially reluctant, I have come a long way, taking up responsibilities without even realizing what would be in store for me. In my Panchayat, I am a force to be reckoned with these days. I believe collective leadership works best for the people and hence I try to ensure participation of all.

I had to face discrimination as a woman leader. Government officials and my male colleagues tried to suppress me. I had to fight my way through to get things done. My male colleagues often posed as obstacles in my path as they wanted things to be done their way. As leader I need to look after the welfare of the entire Panchayat and cannot afford to be cowed down.

The Hunger Project Women’s Leadership Workshop was an eye opener for me. It was a big turning point. Usually women leaders are not even allowed to speak in Gram Sabhas. But after attending the workshop, I understand the need to exercise our leadership and fight for our rights. Initially I had to force my way and but now I am invited everywhere to speak on the rights of the women leaders.

I try to ensure that whatever little funds allocated to my Panchayat are used for the welfare of the poorest. I will contest the next elections, even if my segment falls under the general category. I have much more to do for my people. The Hunger Project has honed my leadership skills to a great extent and I want other people to benefit from it.
I got elected from Changlang Zilla Parishad in the year 2003. My previous exposure in politics as Block Mahila Congress President for the Miao-Vijayanagar constituency gave me confidence and courage.

Whatever funds I receive from the State or the Centre as a Zilla Parishad Member, I try to distribute it equally to all Gram Panchayats - mainly for work on approach roads, ring wells and toilet construction. One of my special achievements was the construction of a market shed. It brought great relief to the poor villagers who come to sell their products in the weekly market. I plan to construct drains around the market area, in future.

I feel that at times I have to make an extra effort, as the government officials do not readily disclose information on schemes. Only on voicing my displeasure about the incompetence and disinterest of the district head to the Department of Horticulture authorities, was I informed about paddy husking machines lying in the department godowns. I availed the opportunity and distributed 10 husking machines to villagers.

Inspite of being a woman who has to look after her home, the fields and other family matters, I have always attended Panchayat meetings, be it the Anchal Samiti level meeting or Zilla Parishad level meeting at Changlang.

As a ZPM I need to build rapport and co-ordinate with experienced and seasoned politicians, public leaders, government officials as well as bureaucrats of the district. I have acquainted myself with various government schemes, rules & regulation etc. We women have to make many adjustments. But I feel that being a woman has its advantages as I can look into matters and handle them differently with love and care. Like the incident of Kaikhepathar village of Kharsang where two jawans from the 2nd Rashtriya Rifles had molested a minor girl. When that incident occurred, I reacted as a woman but tackled it as a ZPM. I, along with the villagers of Kharsang went to the R.R. Camp and demanded that the officials handover the accused to the civil authority. After the arrest, I did not allow an out of court settlement. I could provide moral and emotional support to the victim and
her family and encouraged them to fight a legal battle. The jawans are at present awaiting trial.

In a place like Kharsang and Miao where most people have surrendered themselves either to religion or drugs, I have been raising my voicing against it time and again. Fighting against odds, I am desperate to get my people out of this spell of social corruption. My aim is to bring positive change in the lives of my people.

I passed high school before getting married and even as a student I used to actively participate in community activities. I always wanted to work for the development of the village and dreamt of being a leader who is approachable, helpful and sensitive to all. My husband is a businessman and has always supported me in all my endeavours. I have the full support of my husband and family members and it was with their support and blessings that I was nominated to the post of a Panchayat leader.

My village is situated in Assam-Arunachal border that witnesses a lot of clash and tension. Hence my role as a leader becomes crucial.

I hope to address the problems of power and water shortage of my village in the Gram Sabha meetings.
My village, Paya, is situated at a distance of eight kms from the district headquarters of West Siang. The village consists of 68 families and the population of the village is around one thousand. The village also has a Primary School.

I always wanted to improve the living conditions of the village people especially the women. Even before my nomination as a Panchayat leader, I had formed Self Help Groups in my village to enable women to earn some income of their own. After I became the Anchal Samiti Chairperson, I regularly called meetings and with the cooperation of my colleagues have been able to carry out most of the resolutions passed in these meetings.

I have attended the Women’s Leadership Workshops (WLW) conducted by The Hunger Project and Panchayat orientation programmes conducted by NIRD, Guwahati. Through these programmes I have learnt a lot about government schemes. I visit the Block office at Along regularly to learn about the latest government policies regarding village and rural development. I share a healthy relation with other Panchayat leaders and the general impression about me is positive.

During my tenure I have been able to establish a drinking water connection for Lower Primary School at the village, constructed an Anganwadi center building for pre-school children, constructed C.C drains for proper drainage and better hygiene in the village and distributed old age pension and widow pension provided.

The women, because they have found in me a leader who shares their problems and helps them to find solutions, support me. I want to contest the elections for another term because I feel there is much work left and there are certain areas that I have started to work on in the village and am afraid that if someone else comes in my place they might leave the work unfinished. If I am elected for another term, my dream will be to work towards an upgraded school in my village.
I was elected from a reserved seat. It was my own decision to contest the election as I was keen to do some constructive work for my village.

Kabu village is one of the relatively prosperous villages of West Siang district and the majority of the villagers are engaged in some income generating activity besides being paddy farmers. The village is only three kms away from Along, the largest town in the district. There is a middle school and a Kindergarten school in the village but due to proximity to town and availability of transportation the children do not have to face much trouble to pursue higher studies outside the village.

Even though I had to face various problems during the course of my work, my determination and the support of my husband helped me to deal well with them. I attended the Women’s Leadership Workshop conducted by The Hunger Project. It opened my eyes to the roles and responsibilities. Most importantly it boosted my confidence.

I could help implement several government schemes in my village such as MIP, NSAP and Indira Awaas Yojana. I want to continue doing the work that I have been doing for the last three years and plan to stand for re election. The people of the village agree with me as they feel that I have done my work successfully.
BIHAR
I am 42 years old and have continuously won the ward member elections. The reason behind this is my hard work, dedication, positive thinking and cooperation. After winning the last elections, I had to work with cunning and a dominating Mukhiya. However, I fought for the needy families to get them the yellow, white and red cards. With it I also got them other benefits. My focus is the needs of the women in my area. I am a strong woman with a confidence that other women will come out and walk every step with me to bring about positive change in our lives. I am certain because of this collective approach there will be change.

Aaina Devi
Ward Member,
Ward No. 6
Kanholi Panchayat
District: Sivan

I have always had an inclination towards social service and have worked for the Bihar Education Project. It gave me an opportunity to know and understand various social problems. It was the condition of the women of my own community that led me to take a decision to contest the election. I live amongst them and have seen their problems from a close proximity. They do not have access to education, health and other basic necessities as they have no representative who could fight for their rights and ensure their basic entitlements from the government. I got elected to the Panchayat with their support and today I am here for them. My husband also supports me.

Kavita Devi
Panchayat Samiti Member
Dharhara South Gram Panchayat
District: Munger

I won the election on my own steam and I do not have any political affiliations. My focus is more on the upliftment of marginalized communities because they lent me their full support and they are the ones who truly deserve the benefits of any government scheme.
I have always been socially active. I have provided help to the poor in marriages and illness, given free tuitions to village girls and boys and during need, I even provided economic support to several girls in completing their Class 10 board exams.

Though I actively participate in the decision-making process at home and also play the role of head of the family, I had never thought of contesting elections. But when Bihar Sewa Samiti sent me to attend the women’s leadership programme (WLW) I came to know about the importance of women’s participation in Panchayats. I realized that women should go out, should know about their rights, or they would remain in backward position all their lives.

I learnt that a woman can contest from a general seat. This infused in me a new enthusiasm and I shared the idea of contesting for the post of Mukhia in the coming elections with my co-participants. I did not hold a meeting before the nomination, but had told everyone the date of filing my nomination. Many people supported me, including the activists of the organization. All of them came with me to the block office together for getting my nomination filed.

Immediately after the allocation of the election symbol, I started meeting people; visiting their houses, seeking information about their families; urging people to caste their votes in my favor. After the nomination, some people from the Mukhia’s side called my husband for a meeting and demanded that I should withdraw from the fray. My husband said that I would withdraw only if there was a better candidate. They persisted and pressurized him. They said how could a Dhobi or a Chamar become the Mukhia. How could they greet me with folded hands? These kind of comments based on caste offended some people and a fight was about to break out.

My husband came back home and related the experience to me. The mastermind behind all this was the incumbent Mukhia, as he did not want me to win. He was insecure that if I win I might expose his corrupt practices.
and he might have to go behind bars. I lodged a written complaint at the police station and they said that they would lock up everyone pressuring me. I did not name the people who were involved to avoid further violence. The police made a visit to the village and only then things rolled back to normalcy.

Post-election the results were declared and I won from the general category seat. I won with a margin of 245 votes. If the counting had been proper, I would have won by 1000 votes.

I will try to ensure that the benefit of schemes reach the eligible during my tenure. I refuse to pay bribes even if I have to fight the BDO or the CEO. My victory has boosted my confidence and morale. I will now focus only on carrying out development activities in my village.
I have been elected as an unopposed Ward Panch. And at this moment I am campaigning for contesting the Panchayat Samiti elections. Belonging to the Mallah community, I have studied only till 8th class and I got married at the age of 14. When I had requested my in-laws to allow me to continue my education, they said that I am educated enough and there was no need to study further.

Now the domestic decisions are taken collectively in my family. Regarding my contesting the election, I am doing it because the people of my village strongly encouraged me. Except my passbook, I have no other property in my name. I had never participated in any training or meeting in my life before this.

After marriage, I joined a Self Help Group and thereafter started attending various meetings and workshops. I also contribute financially for my family. I am the first person in the family to contest any election. The people in my area belong to a lower economic class and a large majority of them are wage labourers; few are in regular jobs.

I have no support from any political party or leader. I enjoy the support of all the castes. Women also extend their cooperation to me generously. The whole election expenditure is being born by the village community. I am also getting some financial support from the family. I am against all forms of caste discrimination and superstitions. I fully support the education of girl children and believe that women can make progress only if they bring about a change in their thinking and living.

People have started getting aware about the importance of education and they are now ready to fight for their entitlements. There are no caste equations in the village, nor are the influential people exercising their clout. People belong to Mallah, Dusadh, Pasi, Rajput, Teli and Chamar communities in my Panchayat. Here the elections are not fought on caste or religious lines.
I planned my own strategy for winning the election. I organized meetings of women and sought their support. I also appointed a man as my election agent. I did not face any problems with the Government officials and do not have regrets about my decision to contest the election. I have got a small handbill published for the election campaign.

I have faced many ups and downs in my life. I have suffered the stigma of being from the lower economic class all my life. I was married off at 12 years and became the mother of four children at a very young age. To add to this, I did not get the affection and the cooperation of my husband at all.

I kept on finding ways to ameliorate my poor economic condition. I came in contact with an organization called ‘Parivartan Vikas’ working in Tilothu block and with the support of the organization, I got associated with a Self Help Group. It had an inspiring affect on me and I started helping my husband financially. With the support and encouragement from the organization I decided to contest for the post of Ward Panch.

The women generously supported me during the election. But my husband opposed my contesting the election and he left the village on the day of the election. I got elected as the Ward Panch from Tilothu South Gram Panchayat. Finally I can experience a feeling of achievement after all these years of struggle.
HIMACHAL PRADESH
I have contested the village Panchayat elections thrice in my life. My Panchayat has a population of 1639 with three men and two women Ward Panchs and there are 296 households.

In the 1995 Panchayat elections, the post of Pradhan in Hudang village Panchayat was reserved for women from scheduled castes. The villagers persuaded me to contest for the post. I, who has studied only till standard 10th, had no knowledge or experience about politics, but I did not lose courage. Eventually, I got 360 votes, while my opponent could get only 300. I won by 60 votes.

During my first tenure, I did not have much knowledge about the functioning of Panchayati Raj but I gradually understood the workings when I started attending the block and the Panchayat meetings. At that time there were five ward Panchs in our Panchayat, three women and two men. People would say running the Panchayat was something beyond women’s capability and the Panchayat would survive not even six months in their hand.

Those who opposed me, also insulted and hurled innuendoes and comments whenever I happened to go to some office. But that did not deter me from doing my work.

There is a women’s organization in my village and I am a member of it. In the meanwhile, I came to know SUTRA and they provided me with the knowledge about the functioning of the Panchayat. Whenever I came across any problems in my work, I would get in touch with the activists of SUTRA and they would always find a solution for me.

We got Rs. 80,000 for water channels and some people alleged I had embezzled the money. An inquiry was instituted against me. Though initially I was slightly scared, I thought I should not be scared, as I had done no wrong. The charge was found to be baseless.

When I contested for the post of the Pradhan the second time, the seat was
reserved for women of general category. I got support from the whole Panchayat. I again contested for the post of the Pradhan in 2005 for the third time on a general seat.

The members of the women’s organization decided that the Pradhan would be a woman. They encouraged me to contest the election and promised their support. I told the people that I would not withdraw from the election as I had already filed my nomination and would accept the verdict of the voters. They went back in anger and started a campaign against me across the villages on caste basis. They said the post belonged to the Rajputs and not the SCs.

I kept visiting the villages without fear. They threatened to snatch my seat even if I won the election. I was elected to the Panchayat for the third time. This time I won by a margin of 60 votes.

Development works are in progress in my Panchayat. Whenever, I submit any demand to a leader, the money sanctioned would reach the BDO office. I would collect the money from there and carry on with the development work.

During these 12 years, I’ve not missed even a single Gram Sabha meeting. For making it more efficient, the Panchayat should generate awareness among people and more villagers should attend Gram Sabha meetings.

In the beginning, I came across many problems. I did not have any idea about various offices, from where to sanction schemes and money. But during these last 12 years, I have overcome my fears and have learnt that one must do one’s work with perseverance and should treat everyone as equal. I’ve tried to work constructively for their development. I consider myself to be a successful public representative, but the people can make better assessment of my performance.
Our society is predominantly patriarchal and a woman becoming a Panchayat Pradhan is still seen as an aberration from the norm.

I am associated with Sarva Shakti Sangam for last 20 years and have been its president. I also work with an organization called SUTRA. I had also contested the Panchayat election 10 years back, but there were five male contestants against me and I could not succeed. Moreover, at that time, the people thought that the women from a Mahila Mandal would sow the seeds of disharmony in families, hence only men should be Panchayat Pradhans.

Once the reservation for women in Panchayati Raj was implemented, I made up my mind to contest elections again. This time there were four women contestants against me and they gave me a tough fight. I am not associated with any political party. I am associated with 6 Mahila Mandals and I got immense support from them. We spent Rs. 5,000 on the election. I did not come across any major problems as I had the support of all the women in the Mahila Mandals.

During my tenure, a conjugal dispute case was brought to me. The husband worked in LIC and resided at Solan. He was having an affair with a girl and had not been sending any money to his house. I called him to the Panchayat. I told him, ‘you have to pay money and support your family’. Finally he agreed to send Rs 1200 per month.

Since my Panchayat happens to be big, convening a Gram Sabha is difficult, but the most important thing is that both the higher caste and Dalit women participate equally in the Panchayat. I firmly believe that there cannot be any improvement in the Gram Sabha unless women from all castes and classes participate and understand the significance of the role of Gram Sabha in their lives.

In my view, woman and man are equal. Women are in no way lesser than men. There is no gender discrimination in our Panchayat.
JAMMU AND KASHMIR
I am a mother of two. I got married and moved to village Chuchot of Leh Block from a nearby village called Thiksay. I was lucky to have an opportunity to go to school, unlike most other girls in my village, but could not pursue it beyond Class 10. This was possible because my parents were progressive enough to let me get an education when even boys were hardly sent to school.

I feel that it is because of my open-minded husband that I could be a Panchayat leader and perform my duties as a Panch. However, at the same time I feel that society still does not accept women being a part of any decision-making body. Women are still not given the importance and respect they deserve as leaders.

Khatija Malo
Panch
Chuchot Gram Panchayat, Leh
District: Ladakh

I was one among the first few women Panches elected to Panchayats in Leh. Besides working for the development of my village, I have also been instrumental in creating awareness about women’s participation in governance, particularly in Panchayats.

Mutup Wangmo
Panch
Panamik Gram Panchayat
Nubra Valley
District: Ladakh
I am the head of my family and one of the two women Panch members (nominated) of Likir village. The other one left the village after getting married but I continued as the only woman Panch of the six-member village Panchayat of Likir.

I have publicly criticized corruption; addressed women’s issues and motivated the women with success. My role as a Panch made a difference in village development despite the lack of funds. I and other women of the village were able to get rupees 50,000 from the Hill Councilor’s fund to build three toilets in the village.

Apart from this, I actively take part in the Panchayat meetings and speak for the well being of the village. I even pay from my pocket to travel in a bus to attend meetings in Leh town.
I am a mother of two children (one boy and girl) and I feel that they should get equal education. It is unfortunate that I could not study further after Class 10.

I feel that the Sarpanch and other Panchayat leaders do not give me the due importance as a Panchayat leader. I and the other women Panchs are not invited for the monthly meetings and are also not consulted on the day to day development affairs.

However, I feel quite happy that I have managed to raise women’s issues in the village and the meetings. I am happy about being able to get a house made for a very deserving family under the Indira Awaas Yogna (IAY) scheme.

I feel that women should be represented adequately in Panchayats and at least 40% seats should be reserved for women, as women count for more than 50% of the village population in our villages and also because women have a better understanding of the village development compared to men-folk.
KARNATAKA
My Panchayat has a population of approximate 6000 people.

For the last one and a half years, I am deeply involved in providing drainage systems, roads and houses under the Ashraya & Indira Awaas Yojana schemes. I have managed to get Rs.50,000/- sanctioned from MLA funds for concrete roadwork. Normally in my village, the children at the Anganvadi center used to wait for the food in the afternoons because of shortage of plates. I have managed to provide stainless steel plates for them now.

I am actively engaged in mobilizing and motivating women to participate in large numbers in the Gram Sabha and Ward Sabhas.

K Manjula
President
Muduvadi Gram Panchayat
Kolar Taluk
District: Kolar
I belong to the Scheduled Caste community. Though Ramanagaram Taluk is very close to Bangalore city, it is very difficult for women to come out of their doorsteps. Even after the elections we were not aware of our roles in the Panchayat. I was not even interested to know, as I always thought politics to be a dirty job where my reputation would be tarnished and my name compromised. Later I went to attend a training program, which was conducted by Sakthi and The Hunger Project. It was very useful and I finally understood the functioning of the Gram Panchayat and my role in Gram Panchayat as a member. And now I am so confident that I can handle any problem.

My ambition is to empower women in all sectors so that they become self-reliant. I want more and more women to participate in the Gram Sabhas. In the next Panchayat Elections, I want more and more women to contest. Most people think that the general seats belong to men, which is false. I am going to contest for Taluk Panchayat or Zilla Panchayat in the next elections.
First I was not interested in politics. Because of the interest and encouragement of my family and the members of my Self Help Group members I contested the election and with their support I won.

In the beginning as I was not confident I always sat at the farthest end in Panchayat meetings, and never talked or shared any opinions. I had an opportunity to attend the trainings of The Hunger Project and after the training I found confidence and courage. There was an enormous change in my attitude. Now, I actively participate in the meetings and also raise issues that are pertinent to the development of the area.

I always wanted to do something for the women of my Panchayat. The men in my village drank locally brewed arrack and the women were very unhappy, as all the hard earned money would be spent at the arrack shop. Also, the men would be a nuisance and break out in fights around the shop. I arranged to shift the arrack shop, which was in the middle of the village, to a place 2 kilometers away from the village. This incident gave me the confidence to take more steps towards development activities like getting drinking water facility to the Dalit colony, pensions for handicapped people and widow pensions. From Panchayat funds I also sanctioned education grants to the SC & ST students.

Now my focus is towards starting a Skill Development Training Centre through my Gram Panchayat for unemployed women of the village.
I belong to a SC community and I am a physically challenged person. I have done my Pre – University course. Being a physically challenged person, I really felt it would be too tough for me to contest in the election but the women members of my Self Help Group supported me and I won the election. For the first six months, other Panchayat members were not able to accept a young physically handicapped woman like me amongst them. But slowly I changed their mindset showing my ability and leadership.

With the support of villagers I was able to do lot of work in the village. My aim is to turn my village into a model village before my five years tenure is over.

Till now I have provided safe drinking water facilities to 120 families, widow pensions for 10 women, installed 4 streetlights on Suvarnavathi Road. I struggled to get 4 houses for deserving BPL families.

I would like the Primary Health Center in my village to function properly so that the poor people in the village can get medical attention and they do not need not go to the neighboring town for their medical problems.
MADHYA PRADESH
I am 35 years old, and am married into a family of four brothers, two of whom are sightless. My husband has had some political experience in the past. He has political ambitions and under pressure from him and some supporters from the village I agreed to contest the elections. Since I am only semi literate, my husband filled my nomination form. But I personally went from door to door to canvas during the elections. I did not have to go alone, there were always with a posse of other supporters with me. Everyone worked hard to get me elected and I have to say, I was never happier than on the day I won the elections. I attend and conduct both the Gram Sabhas and Panchayat meetings regularly.

I see a change in myself since I became the Sarpanch, and my growth has been phenomenal. Earlier talking to anyone was impossible, but now, I speak my mind - even to Government officials. I have persuaded them to bring development schemes to my Panchayat. I attend Block-level meetings on my own and am very proud of these personal achievements.
I was married into a BPL family. My foray into political life began in 2000 when I successfully contested for a seat at the (Janpad) Panchayat Samiti level. Before that I was a housewife. I did not even know what the words ‘participation in politics’ meant. I never dreamt that one day I would be leading the entire village.

My husband has a keen sense of the politics of the region and it was at his insistence and the support of my community that I successfully contested not once but twice- winning each time! My success in the second elections was primarily because of my hard work and contribution as a member of the Panchayat Samiti. A major part of my success as Sarpanch is due to the support and motivation I receive from my husband. Even though I have not faced any major political or administrative hurdles, whenever anything comes up my husband and I rally together to resolve it there and then.

When I set out as a Panchayat Samiti member all those years ago, I was a quiet person; I wouldn’t say a word or take any decisions without my husband’s advice and consent. I would not attend any meeting without him and was totally unprepared for this new role I was supposed to play. But slowly things changed, and this change is a result of a combination of factors. Apart from the fact that I gained in experience and confidence, after becoming the Sarpanch I attended a training program, was taken on an exposure visit to other Gram Panchayats to see how they function and became a member of the local ‘Women Sarpanch Network.’ The combination of experience, exposure, training and the availability of a support group helped me get rid of my shyness and inhibitions. I learnt to speak out and express what I was feeling. Today I am unafraid to speak to any Government Official however high his position may be. I conduct Gram Sabhas on my own. My husband continues to be a supporter and an ally but is no longer the doer or the decision maker.

Since becoming the Sarpanch I have done a few things. I have got 2 hand pumps installed, converted a 2 km stretch of road to ‘pukka’ road and
brought social security (pension) schemes to over 200 individual beneficiaries. 10 women have benefited through the Rasktrya Mahila Kosh. I have also got a community toilet (Sulabh Sauchalaya) constructed in the village.

My current mission is to ensure that the shortage of teachers in the Junior Higher Secondary School is dealt with as soon a possible. Once I manage to get the adequate number of teachers for the school then I shall start work for its upgradation to a Higher Secondary School. I am constantly in touch with the District Authorities for the school, but it is very difficult to get some things done.

I dream of a village that is peaceful, developed and in which education is a priority for all.
I have no qualms in stating that the encouragement to contest the Panchayat elections was given by the local Pandit. In fact, since I cannot read and write it is he who filled out my nomination form for me. He took the help of a local advocate also. However once I agreed that I would contest the elections, I went out canvassing from door to door on my own. I visited each and every home in the Panchayat during the time. But Mr. Drivedi’s support to my campaign ensured that I did in fact win the election.

From the first time that I visited the Secretariat as a shy and quiet ‘first time Sarpanch,’ there has been an enormous change in my personality. I am now unafraid to address District officials – I call them by name. Since I have been elected I convene and attend Panchayat meetings as well as Gram Sabhas regularly. I have to be truthful though and say that I am not very regular when it comes to attending block-level meetings.

While I am proud of the small changes I have been able to bring about in the ‘adivasi basti’(tribal hamlet) in my Panchayat, I know there is a long way ahead till I am able to fulfill all the promises I made to the people when I went around asking them to vote for me. This weighs heavily on my mind. But I am hopeful that the three years ahead of me will allow me to fulfill all their wishes.
Eighty percent of the population of Petlavad belongs to the Bhil & the Bhilala (Tribal) communities. Agriculture and wage labour is the main source of their livelihood. During some months of the year, the tribal families are forced to migrate to other districts and states for seeking employment opportunities. My family is one of these hundreds of families who have to make their living in these arduous conditions. I have succeeded in earning the confidence of my family and have attending meetings outside my village. There is a huge difference between my attitude in the past and my present personality. Six years ago, I would feel shy while talking to educated people outside my village, but I’ve come to acquire an understanding regarding the development of my village by going to the meetings of the women’s Self Help Group, on exposure visits and attending workshops. Presently, I’m engaged in saving village families from the clutches of the moneylender through the Self Help Group, helping families in the village in their economic development, promoting savings and making the people aware so that they spend less money on marriages and Rakhi etc.

Having understood the significance of the Panchayat in village development, I take my role very seriously as the village people have voted for me and I need to fulfill their expectations. Seeing my active role in the village, they elected me and that is how thus I came to be a Ward Panch. I attend all the Gram Sabha and Panchayat meetings, keeping in mind the development of the village; though being a woman I do face problems in doing Panchayat work. As the Sarpanch happens to be a man, neither the villagers nor I are ever informed of the time and the venue of Panchayat and Gram Sabha meetings. As Panchayat and Gram Sabha meetings are not being held regularly, the villagers are not getting wages for the work they have done.

Generating awareness among Panchayat representatives and the people is necessary for strengthening the role of Gram Sabha and the Panchayat, only then they would be able to focus on village development. As a woman Panch, I will always keep striving towards this goal.
Jhabua district has a distinct identity on the map of the Country as well as the world because of its efforts for preserving its unique culture and the richness of its natural geographical landscape. 600 households of various communities inhabit my village Panchayat. It’s population is predominantly tribal and in comparison to other communities, their economic condition is relatively weaker.

I belong to the Bhil community. My family is engaged in agriculture. I became the Sarpanch in the 2005 Panchayat elections by defeating 15 candidates.

During my tenure of one and a half years I have faced many problems in doing my Panchayat work. In the initial period of my tenure, there were many irregularities in ration cards and the PDS. Most upper caste families of the village had two-three ration cards. Consequently, the provisions would get exhausted before the poor families could get their share. Due to this villagers argued with the ration dealer frequently. When I came to know about it, I called a meeting of the Panchayat and in consultation with other Panches decided that the whole process of providing ration cards be started anew. The upper caste people opposed the decision and exerted pressure on me. The village got divided into two factions. During this phase, I went through tremendous mental tension.

After this incident, the two village factions got engaged in politics over the issue of appointment of a new Panchayat Secretary. One faction wanted a higher caste man to be appointed to the post, while the other one wanted a tribal incumbent. This division in the village created a problem for me and the other Panchayat representatives. Both groups would come to my house and sit there. I was in a dilemma. Finally, with the help of other Panches, a consensus was evolved.

These two incidents in the first phase of my tenure had frightened me, but it eventually helped me to develop confidence.
MAHARASHTRA
I have contested the Panchayat elections for the second time and won unopposed. Over the period of last 10 years, I have slowly managed to strengthen my knowledge and build my constituency. I have undertaken several small, but important development works in the village. My people strongly support me and through my work I have been able to win the confidence of the pressure groups of the village. I encourage them to join hands in the developmental activities for the village.

Mayatai Sorte
Panch
Wadwal Panchayat
District: Latur
I am an every day kind of ordinary woman. Like all other women, I was married off at a young age to a teacher in Dahagaon. As I gradually came to know about the conditions of the village I had married into, I started thinking that something needed to be done to redeem the situation. I made efforts for adult education, school programmes and formation of a women’s group. I started a ‘haldi-kunk’ programme for women. I made my own, independent identity because of my interaction with various people while doing the work of the Mahila Samiti. I started making agarbattis and chalk and soon other women began to do the same. The work, which started in this small manner took a dramatic turn. Because of the prestige I earned through this work, the eminent people of the village motivated me to contest the Panchayat elections. On the one hand, I had my social work to do, on the other, I had no knowledge of Panchayat work, and thus I contested the election in a dilemma. I won. At that time I had no knowledge about Panchayats, its functioning and my responsibilities as a public representative. But I accepted this new challenge.

At this point it is important for you to know another aspect of my story. It has to do with the Panchayati Raj Act in Maharashtra. Here the election for the post of Sarpanch is indirect. Which means that the people elect ward members and the ward members then elect a Sarpanch from amongst themselves. The post of Sarpanch was reserved for women. I wanted to contest for it. So did another woman from amongst the elected ward members - Anita Dalvi. Both of us had known each other from the time of our marriage and had been fast friends. We decided that we did not want to jeopardise our friendship, so we took a decision that the tenure of the Sarpanch would be equally divided between the two of us. She would be Sarpanch for two and a half years and I would be the Sarpanch for the remaining two and a half years. Anita was the Sarpanch first. After the completion of the two and half year tenure of Anita, I became the Sarpanch. I had the benefit of two and a half years to prepare for the post. We worked together and I benefited from all the trainings that Anita was invited to as Sarpanch. We
were lucky that the transfer of power didn’t, in any way, affect our friendship. Even today, both of us continue to work together for the development of our village.

During my tenure I have ensured the proper distribution of rations as well as the presence of the Gram Sewak in Panchayat meetings. There was a problem with regard to the schooling of the children on the fringe settlements of the village, the school is far away and the smaller children find it difficult to commute. So I started an Aanganwadi center there, in order that the little children can benefit from some pre-school education.

I am working to ensure that my Panchayat wins the competition for the cleanest Panchayat under the statewide- Sampurna Gram Swachta Abhiyan and Nirmal Gram competitions. I also worked hard for providing the benefits of Sanjay Gandhi Niradhar Yojana (Family Grant Scheme) to the people of my village.

I tried very hard to include names of eligible families neglected in the BPL list but was not successful in this endeavor. I still feel a pang in my heart that I was not able to get justice for these families despite my best efforts.

Apart from this, I am striving to make water available throughout the year in the tribal settlements and getting streetlights installed. I dream of a village that has education, water, electricity, health and the spirit of love and mutual respect among the villagers. Where the village women could lead a life of respect and dignity. I dream of giving a different direction to the concept of women’s organization by bringing more and more women into its fold.
Littérature like N. R. Shinde and the erstwhile Forest Minister, Nasik Rao Tirpude also hail from my village. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar had lost an election from Bhandara district. It is historical facts like these that lend our village an identity of its own. I got the opportunity to contest Panchayat election the very first time after the declaration of the reservation policy. I entered the election fray and won. I was made Up-Sarpanch. I had no understanding of politics; but I had made just one resolve, “I’ll not indulge in corruption, nor allow anyone else to do so.” Work on the Jawahar Rojgar Yojana had commenced in our village and the contractor of the scheme was selling cement. I caught him red handed. Gradually, the Sarpanch came to understand me and said, ‘This woman neither appropriates Panchayat funds herself, nor allows me to pocket them.” He brought a no-confidence motion against me. The motion was passed. I had committed no mistake and yet I was immensely pained by the outcome of my commitment and integrity. I thought of resigning from the membership also, but my husband consoled me and persuaded me to continue working as a simple member. Thereafter, I contested two more Panchayat elections and both the times, I won.

Earlier, I never thought about politics, nor I had any knowledge of it. But, now I feel that a great social change is needed and to usher in this change, there is no other option but to come to power.

The women coming to Panchayats for the first time have no experience, no information about Panchayat functioning; hence imparting them training is an imperative. But this training shouldn’t be just a hollow ritual. It should be a training that can develop an understanding of the real dynamics of politics. I participated in a training meant for Up-Sarpanches and it was there that I gained an important learning from a workshop game. We, the women participants, were made to stand in a circle. Some stones were placed at the center of the circle. We were asked to run and pick up the stones the moment the trainer blew her whistle. All of us ran. Some got even their bangles broken. Because of the stampede created by the rushing participants, I ran only a few steps and couldn’t pick up even a single stone.
Thereafter, everyone was asked inside the class the number of stones each one of them had picked. When my turn came I said I couldn’t pick up any stone. When the trainer asked for the reason I told her I didn’t make any effort because of the rushing crowd formed by women participants at that time. It was then that the trainer made a remarkable comment, ‘If you lag behind here in such a game, how would you be able to work as a Sarpanch in your village? One has to make considerable efforts for getting more and more schemes sanctioned from the Panchayat Samiti for one’s Panchayat. If even there you think ‘why should I embroil myself in all this! You won’t be able to get anything for your village. Your village would get schemes only if you make efforts. People would like you and your work only when you serve them and fulfill their needs without thinking of your own discomfort.’ It was my first lesson in politics. This kind of learning should be provided in the trainings.

Neither those in power, nor the bureaucracy are worried about the poor people of villages. Once, during the rains the village river, Vaitarna, swelled with water and the village got flooded eight times. 11 houses collapsed and water entered 20-25 other houses. All food and other things got ruined. Interim lodging arrangements for these people were made in the village temple. The relief and the assistance from the Government were delayed. I went together with all the village women to the concerned Minister. We could meet him only at 8.00 PM at the circuit house. After reading our application, the Minister asked the Patwari regarding the delay in relief work. At first, the Patwari straightway said that the village had not been flooded. In other words, he had prepared and sent a false report to the Government. Responding to our application, the Minister ordered him to prepare another report. Subsequently, the women were given Rs. 500/- in cash, 5 kilos of oil and 35 kilos of grains as immediate relief. Though the people did get relief, the politicians and the officials got angry with me, as my efforts had laid bare their corruption. They alleged that I was a woman without moral character, that’s why I’d gone to meet the Minister at such an odd hour.
But other village women had been with me, so their allegation proved to be wrong.

In 1997, the literacy mission was launched in Bhandara. A number of volunteers came on their own initiative for this mission. No remuneration was to be paid to them. The mission took off from one to other villages and I also participated in it. Because of the commendable efforts made by us in the mission, our district was bestowed an award by the Government. After the sanctioning of the Nirantar Shiksha Yojana for literacy classes, the Government officials issued appointment letters to their own people, ignoring the rightful claim of the experienced volunteers as an honorarium was to be paid to those involved in this scheme. I along with the volunteers started an agitation protesting against these appointments. We staged dharnas and also moved the Nagpur High Court. The Court held our claim to be legitimate and ordered that the volunteers be appointed immediately till the Court comes out with its verdict on the matter of appointments. Ignoring those who had laid the foundation stones of the scheme and making arbitrary appointments is also a form of corruption. We are fighting resolutely against it.

One is in a specific role in the social and the political sphere and when one puts emphasis on values and norms, opposition is natural. Facing this opposition increases one’s strength. This is my experience.
When I was studying in class VI my father expired. My mother shouldered the family responsibilities after him. I left my school education half way to help and support the family and traveled to Mumbai in search of work. Later I also managed to complete my education along with my work. Though I wanted to study further, the circumstances did not allow me to do so. Whatever hardships I faced in my childhood built my strength and courage to overcome barriers. I was married in a joint family and got myself totally engrossed in household responsibilities. I had never thought of entering the politics before, but the provision of reservations gave me the opportunity to contest election. I won the election and became the first ever woman to hold the post of Sarpanch in Valote village.

Initially when I took charge of the post, I was hardly aware of my role and responsibilities as a Sarpanch. However, lack of knowledge did not deter me from work and I decided to make most from the opportunity I could get. It was a critical time for me and I did not even got adequate family support. My self-confidence and courage helped me to face challenges and move forward.

A few months after I became the Sarpanch, I came in contact with Parivartan and The Hunger Project and participated in one of the Leadership Development Workshop organized by them. The workshop was a real learning experience for me in many respects. I became aware of my role as a Sarpanch. The inputs in the workshop on varied topics - such as women’s social and political status, concern for various sections in the village, especially women and marginalized groups, available resources, visualizing ideal village and importance of a collective - renewed my vision towards development of my village.

I am still trying to grasp the rules and politics of how a Gram Panchayat functions. My experiences of eachs of the workshops reflects in the village level processes I have initiated. The development of my village remains top priority. I worked intensely to implement government schemes meant for
needy and poor people. The schemes benefited the poor families, widows, destitute, aged, handicapped, scheduled caste and orphan people in the village and brought me close to them.

The village had no shortage of water. However the conventional cropping pattern was not proving profitable. In order to find out an alternative I initiated agricultural experiments in my land. I tried out innovative methods that I learnt in the training and consulted agricultural officers in the block office. My hard labor succeeded in demonstrating a profitable cropping pattern in the village. I showed that how the cultivation of vegetables, oil seeds, pulses and rice not only satisfies the needs of the family but also yields surplus for market sale. I hope that more and more farmers in the village would take up this profitable cropping pattern as a viable option.

The village has received several honors in past few years since I became Sarpanch. Previous police records show that disputes and in-fighting were a common trend in the village. These have completely stopped since I have taken office. I started a new trend. Disputes are settled by mutual discussion and decision to resolve them is taken by collective consensus. Under the Sant Gadgebaba Village Cleanliness Campaign the village won second best prize in the block. I made home visits to convince villagers the significance of sanitation. My single most achievement was the setting up of a government school at the village level. The village purchased 15 guntha land plot and the construction of the school is underway.

My work is appreciated and recognized not only in my village but in my Block as well. I am an active member of various Block-level committees, such as Block Co-ordination Committee of the Revenue Department and Police Monitoring Committee. I am board member of the block level committee of Nationalist Congress Party. I think that these various posts help me to take my village issues at the block and district level for proper resolution.
ORISSA
Bhagyalakhmi Yayak  
Sarpanch  
Kerandi Panchayat,Gosani Block  
Gajapati District

I belong to the OBC category and am educated. Before becoming the Sarpanch, I was practicing law. When the position of Sarpanch was reserved for women, I was requested by the people in my village to contest the election, which I then won. I have attended several capacity building training programmes such as the Women’s Leadership Workshops which helped me to get a clarity on the functioning of the Gram Panchayat, its rules and regulations and my roles and responsibilities. I make every effort to see that the Palli Sabha and the Gram Sabha meetings take place regularly in the Panchayat. I am also a member of various district level committees.

Suryamani Bhuyan  
Chairperson  
Rayagada Block  
Gajapati District

I am an Adivasi woman and Chair Person of Rayagada Block in Gajapati District.

I have had only limited education. It was because of the 33% reservation for women and SC/STs was I able to even file my nomination. I was made the chair person uncontested. While both my knowledge and experience are limited, I try to make up through sheer hard work, concern for my fellow villagers and my honesty.

In my district corruption is very rampant and I try to be vigilant about the corrupt practices of the Block level Officials.
This is my second tenure as the Sarpanch of my Panchayat. The second time I contested from a General Seat. Though most people think that the Open Seat or the General Seat are meant only for men, in my Panchayat we know that it is not so. Anybody can contest from a General Seat. While filing my nomination papers I faced stiff opposition from all the male contestants and also from various people with vested interests. But I somehow found the courage to face the challenge. I am semi literate but the people of my village supported me.

I try to constantly keep in touch with the families in my Panchayat and also supervise education centres. A number of non-performing teachers have been transferred on my intervention. I have now asked the District Collector to appoint a woman Secretary in the Panchayat. Male Secretaries create problems and look down upon us. It will be easy for me to work with a woman Secretary. Together we would be able to accomplish a lot more than I am currently able to achieve.
RAJASTHAN
Even at the age of 55 years, I am fully engaged in village welfare work. I have a deep faith in the strength of a group. If the sisters of a group stage a dharna, the chair of the District Collector would be shaken.

During the initial days after being elected as Ward Panch, I was not allowed to sit in the Panchayat meetings by the Sarpanch. But now I fearlessly go to any Government office with an application and work for the betterment of my Ward.

I formed a women’s Self-help Group facilitated by Mahila Mandal Barmer Aagor, an organization working in the area. Starting with small thrift and credit transactions, the Group now makes transactions worth 30,000 - 40,000 Rupees. Transcending sheer monetary transactions, the women of the Group have played an important role in village development. I ensured the supply of the grains issued under the Integrated Rural Development Programme. Using the strength of my organization, I got a lot of work done - from getting the names of the women of the Ward written in the muster roll to getting a separate school opened for girls.

To elucidate, in the first instance despite the fact that the village women being eligible, their names were not being written in the muster roll. I, along with Mahila Mandal Barmer, wrote a letter to the Collector and handed it over to him. I kept a copy of it with me. The application did leave its impact and names of 20 women from the village were included in the muster roll.

The other incident gains significance due to the challenging geographical conditions of western Rajasthan. The village was facing a severe water crisis. The women of the Ward approached me, demanding water. I wrote an application to the Junior Engineer and while submitting it I took 20-30 women with empty pitchers to his office. He responded immediately and arranged for water supply. Since that day, there has been no water scarcity. It is because of these achievements that I beam with confidence.
I succeeded and solved the water problem of the women of my village. Earlier, women had to traverse a distance of 3 - 4 kms every day for fetching water and during drought their whole day would be wasted in arranging water for their families.

I won the election in 2005 by 595 votes defeating three other contestants on a seat reserved for women.

I waged a continuous struggle demanding water in which I was supported by my family, fellow villagers and the organization working in the area. After much effort, I succeeded in meeting the ADM, but the officials paid no heed to my entreaties. Eventually, I had to change my attitude and mode of articulation and I confronted them. After days of struggle, the village got water.

I want a girls high school in the village and desire that all of them should study. For years, the Panchayat didn’t have an ANM. In the event of illness, people, particularly women, have to face immense difficulties. For getting treatment, they have to travel 10 kms and the area doesn’t have adequate transportation facilities.

My perseverance has transformed me from a simple housewife into an able woman leader. I am now respected in the Panchayat. The support of the villagers, the participation in the workshops organized by the Hunger Project and Mahila Mandal Barmer Aagor has significantly contributed in this transformation. These workshops and trainings have not only made me a more confident being, I have also acquired a store of new information from them. I have been able to evolve a fuller understanding about the rights and responsibilities of a Sarpanch and believe that if a woman makes a resolve, she can brave all kinds of challenges. This belief, and the courage and confidence that I have gained enable me to work efficiently as a Sarpanch despite being disabled. I advise every woman to go ahead and take the first step - empower the fellow being.
I’ve come to the Panchayat for women. I will not fear anyone. I belong to a Scheduled Caste community. I had a one-month old daughter when I was elected Sarpanch. This did not stop me from participating in all the village Panchayat meetings or keep me from visiting various Government offices.

I balance these two roles - as a housewife and a Panchayat representative. Now, my daughter is one and half year old and during this period I worked really hard to bring development to my village. I had to get a CC road constructed from the Balaji temple to the Senior Higher Secondary School in our village. I’d made a firm resolve to do so. My Ward Panches were also with me. A proposal to this effect was passed in the Panchayat. However, despite many efforts, funds for the construction couldn’t be arranged. Finally, I talked to a local leader and got an amount of Rs. 4 lakhs sanctioned from the MP quota. When the money was sanctioned, the local leader said that I was not to worry. He would get the road constructed. I objected fearing that my name would be smudged if the road turned out to be of low quality. I told him that it was my name that was at stake since no one knew him in my Panchayat. I resisted his threats for two days and one night.

The local leader wrote a letter surrendering the money, but I went to the bank the very same day and withdrew Rupees 2 lakhs out of the total amount of four lakhs. I borrowed the other two lakhs from my family and completed the road. The local leader became my enemy and he even tried to throttle me, but I remained unfazed. I took the matter to the High Court, but couldn’t get justice. Despite all this, I’ll still fear no one. A woman can’t do much single handedly. One must work forming an organization of women representatives.

If we make a sincere effort to understand the needs of the village, undertaking developmental work becomes easy especially when the executive and elected representatives work in tandem.
My joy knew no bounds after getting a cheque worth 80 thousand rupees. The amount has a prolonged history of struggle behind it. Even today, the words repeatedly echo in my mind “If you dare stop the Jal Rath Yatra, you will have to go to jail.”

Kaliahedi village of Dhudharia Panchayat had been facing acute water problem because of official neglect. I repeatedly appraised the administration of the problem, but my words fell on deaf ears. I finally decided to confront the administration and announced I would stop the Jal Chetna Rath Abhiyan. I didn’t budge from my resolve despite repeated threats from the administration. Finally one day before the Abhiyan, the administration relented. It was a day of jubilation for the whole Panchayat.

I always wanted to challenge problems and archaic customs, but I found myself helpless. Because of gender discrimination prevailing in my village, I was forced to give up my studies in the middle of tenth class. I had to accept the bondage of marriage at the young age of 15 only.

Once the official announcement for the elections of 2005 had been made, the idea was to elect the Sarpanch from Dhudharia village. All the villagers had thronged to the chaupal and unanimously an 11-member committee was constituted for selecting an able and acceptable woman candidate for the post of Sarpanch. The committee decided that I was the most appropriate candidate. Until that time, my family was not aware of the decision and they were not prepared for the election. The committee had given its decision keeping in mind the fact that I had always extended my active cooperation in the development of the village.

Defying the decision of the Committee, a woman of the village, Santosh wife of Sh. Satyavir, had announced a month before the elections that she would file her nomination for the post of the Sarpanch. There were four contestants in the election. I got 1449 votes as against 1250 secured by Bimla Devi, winning by a margin of 199 votes.
After being elected as Sarpanch, apart from home and agricultural work, an added responsibility of the Panchayat fell on my shoulders. In the beginning, I couldn’t assume an active role, as I was ignorant of Panchayat work. But because of my desire to learn, I can now manage on my own. My husband doesn’t intervene in my Panchayat work any more. I take all Panchayat decisions independently.

Regarding the transformation in personality, my husband says that earlier I wouldn’t go alone out of home for Panchayat work and meetings. But after attending a number of training programmes and having acquired the experience of Panchayat work, I go to all the meetings by myself and take my own decisions. My one year and six month tenure as the Sarpanch has been a productive period for the Panchayat in terms of development work. Until date, the Panchayat has completed development work worth Rupees 13 lakhs and ninety five thousand. It has been possible only because of my personal efforts, my links with relevant officers and knowledge of various Government schemes.

Further, I am always ready to help the poor families, abandoned women and widow in getting the benefits of the schemes intended for them. For me they are priority. I regularly monitor various Government services available in the village for ensuring their accessibility and quality.

I am a role model for those women who are moving away from a state of disempowerment by breaking the shackles of ancient customs, traditions and inequality and assuming a role where they can take their own decisions.
The reason I won the elections by 1261 votes in the Panchayat election was because of my ability to take people belonging to various schools of thought, different life styles and varied livelihood activities together while doing my Panchayat work.

My husband runs a gota shop, the only source of family income; but I devoted my whole time to social development. I made innovative efforts each day to make the town of Bansur a clean and a beautiful place. I get the full support of the elected Ward Panches in my efforts. It is the result of the efforts to establish harmonious relations based on mutual cooperation among the 33 Ward Panches of Bansur Panchayat that a strong team spirit is evident in the whole Panchayat.

The road seems to be changing for the better after years due to these efforts. It was very difficult for vehicles to negotiate this road because of numerous encroachments made by traders. The people praised me liberally for my successful efforts to remove all encroachments from the road and for getting it repaired. Moreover, the local hospital lying almost defunct due to lack of health professionals is now running efficiently.

I listen to the problems of the villagers with patience, extend my advice and whenever necessary accompany them to Government offices for getting their problems solved. Because of my tireless work, I am able to do numerous development works during my tenure. I have constructed four CC roads, installed six hand pumps, built a community house and a scout hall in the Senior Higher Secondary school. I have managed to get a doctor appointed in the hospital, renovated the main roads of the town, upgraded the primary school.

Initially, I was slightly hesitant, but now I am actively performing my role. After the training, my self-confidence has got a boost. The committees formed officially are functioning well. I expect increased active role from women in my area in the coming years.
When the post of the Sarpanch of Garudvasi village Panchayat came to be reserved for women, I wanted to contest the election. My husband and the villagers supported me. Assured of my victory, I filed my nomination with the help of Ex-Ward Panch and eventually became the Sarpanch, winning by a margin of 195 votes.

I was happy, but my supporters were simply jubilant at my victory. Before the first Panchayat meeting I was very anxious as to how would I conduct the meeting. If I happen to sign some wrong paper, what would happen? Would I be implicated? Such were the apprehensions crowding my mind when I went for the first Panchayat meeting. I accorded respect to all in the meeting including my opponents. I think everybody was happy with my behaviour.

I was able to solve a long-standing problem of my village that had been causing much inconvenience to the people of the village. My village has a canal and it used to become immensely difficult for people to cross it when it was filled with water. First of all, I got a proposal passed in the Panchayat for constructing a bridge. Thereafter, I was able to get an amount sanctioned from the MLA development fund. I constructed a bridge over the canal.

I also want a lady doctor to be appointed in the village so that the women of my Panchayat can get treatment for reproductive health problems. Further, higher education of girls, transportation facilities and provision of electricity figure prominently on my priority list.

My family and the women of the Panchayat have fully cooperated with me. I have resolved that I will not get my children married at a young age and will not allow child marriages even in my village. I feel only a woman Sarpanch can draw out the women of the village. The women can now come to the Panchayat without any inhibitions; relate their problems and talk freely.
TAMIL NADU
I belong to the schedule caste. I have 3 children and work as an agricultural coolie in a tea estate. I live in a hut and do not have a house of my own. My Panchayat is located in a deep forest in the Nilgiris and the nearest town, Kothagiri, is 28 kilometers away. 85% of the population are tribals and the rest belong to Scheduled Castes. This is the smallest Panchayat in the Nilgiris district.

There are 12 hamlets in our Panchayat and I was able to arrange street-lights in all hamlets. Electricity connection to all households has also been arranged. Drinking water supply to all the houses has been ensured. Pathways to various hamlets have been cleared and expanded. Now I am concentrating on providing housing to all tribes in our village.

I have constructed a women’s center at Koppaiyur, a tribal hamlet at a cost of Rs. 2 lakhs.

G. Lakshmi  
President  
Kedinamala Panchayat,  
Kothagiri  
District: Nilgiris
Jyothimani
Member
Panchayat Union Council
Gudalur West Panchayat
Union
District: Karur

I hold a M.Phil degree and my thesis was on Women’s language in Tamil Poetry. I was elected for two consecutive terms (1996-2001, 2001-2006) and I am planning to contest for the third time in the ensuing elections.

Recently, I was invited by the US Government to the US under its Young Leaders’ programme. Inspired by Gandhiji’s life, I entered the public service through Panchayati Raj at the age of 21 years. My first priority was to ensure drinking water supply at equal terms to a Dalit colony in my village. Slowly I was able to achieve 100% water supply to all the villages in my Panchayat. I was also able implement Rain Water Harvesting programme in my constituency and it has helped address the water problem. Now we are harvesting around 75% of the rainfall.

I took a lead role in bringing to halt the indiscriminate sand quarrying from the River Amaravathi. I mobilised people and sought a legal ban on the quarrying operations. My proud moment was establishing a Village Knowledge Center (VKC) in my village, with the help of MS Swaminathan Research Foundation and ISRO. It is the first ever VKC in my district.

I am a writer in Tamil and have won many awards, including the best short story of the year for 1999. I have two books to my credit. I am an insurance consultant by profession.
I am 25 years old and am a graduate. I belong to Scheduled Caste. In our Panchayat there are 395 families and they live in 3 villages.

Sand quarrying is the biggest problem in our area. Because of mindless sand quarrying for years, our soil lost the water retaining capacity and the water table has gone very low. When we sank bore wells to address the water problem, we didn’t get any water. The walls of the huts near the quarries became weak and gave way. The trucks that were coming to load the sand were polluting the area and one child was killed in an accident.

So the first task I undertook was to stop the quarrying. Sand quarrying came to a halt in the day but continued stealthily at night. We them caught red handed. Those involved in the quarrying became angry and made an attempt to kill me on a day when I was alone at home. I was saved by the people of my village.

I have constructed public toilets for women by utilizing the MLA fund. I have also sunk 3 bore wells and constructed 2 roads by utilizing the SGRY scheme. If the funds are allocated in time, more construction work can be undertaken.
I am 45 years old and was elected in a keenly contested election. In the first election four candidates contested against me, and I won the election with 126 votes. The seat was reserved for women.

Our Panchayat has a population of 5000. Agriculture is the predominant livelihood activity. Water was the major problem and a constant source of worry. I managed to construct two overhead tanks to provide drinking water to the entire Panchayat. Though tanks were ready, due to lack of consistent power supply water could not be distributed from the tanks. With great difficulty four transformers were purchased and installed and the water problem was solved. The bad roads were relaid using the revenue generated by the Panchayat.

The area is rich in silicon and it is mined illegally. When I mobilized people in my Panchayat and organised protests, I got arrested. The village people organised roadblocks demanding my release and only then was I freed. Since then I have approached the court for a stay on silicon mining. I am actively involved in all the upcoming activities for the promotion of the village infrastructure and also for the development of the village.
UTTARANCHAL
I have been elected twice and at present am the elected functionary who has contested against the men in Panchayat elections and won my place in governance through an “OPEN SEAT”. I have also undertaken many activities such as providing trainings for generating awareness among the women’s of the village on various issues.

I have also filed a complaint to the higher officials for irrigation work that was being done in an unsystematic manner. The officials stopped the work immediately and it was re-started in a proper way. This proved a great example of women’s leadership in my village. The villagers now acknowledge that I am as capable as anybody else and women can not only undertake development work efficiently but they also tackle it sensitively.
Ever since my election I have undertaken many constructive activities for the development of my village and also for improving the existing infrastructure of the village.

I mainly focused on the following areas:

- Establishing pipeline for providing water supply in the villages.
- Reconstructing the existing channels of water supply.
- Preparing Ani-Cut for preserving the rainwater for agriculture purpose.
- Reconstructing the Panchayat Bhavan and also constructed the CC road in the villages.

Apart from these, I also actively promoted the development of Self Help Groups in my Panchayat. The existing Self-Help Group has already reached the next level and the women members participate actively. Trainings are also being given to the groups on horticulture so that the members may become self sufficient and their numbers help to raise the awareness of other villagers.
I belong to a Muslim Community and contested for the post of Pradhan from a reserved seat. I have undertaken various activities such as construction of CC Road, a small bridge and also the Panchayat Bhavan.

I regularly attend all the Gram Sabha meetings and other Block level meetings. I also keep the other Ward members regularly updated on all the development work.

I have been actively involved in all the upcoming activities for the promotion of the village infrastructure and also for the development of the village.
‘.... to make a difference’