

Examining Policy Gaps and Inequalities in Women's Participation in Local Governance: Insights and Implications

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I. The Context

To understand any political system, it is necessary to analyze the nature of political participation among its people since it is one of the most important ingredients of political power. In fact, according to the traditional democratic theory, participation by the individual in political activity is considered as a virtue in its own rights, a civic duty as well as sign of political health. (Ghatak, 2010). According to Sethi (1988), political participation is the involvement of an individual at various levels in the political process for authoritative allocation of resources and values in the society.

A different perspective of political participation is offered by Cclosky (1968), the author refers to political participation as principal means to grant or withdraw consent in the democracy which makes rulers accountable to the world. However, ensuring equal participation of women and men in representative bodies of various levels is a key ingredient of effective political representation and meaningful participation. Moreover, it is vital for inclusive and effective governance (UNDAW, 2005). Empirical evidence over the last two decades has observed a changing pattern of political participation which contradicts traditional democratic theory and practice.[1] (Pravin, 2017). It has been observed that globally and in Asian countries in particular, women are underrepresented in political institutions, particularly at local levels of governance. (Choi, 2018).

Available statistics of female parliamentary participation show that women are estimated to make up half of the global population (49.6 per cent), out of which only 19.6 per cent parliamentary seats are held by women in Asian countries. (Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU),2019). This is in spite of introducing measures which aims to promote women's advancement in politics, such as implementation of gender protocols like Platform for action, MDG (Millennium Development Goals), CEDAW (Convention on Elimination of all forms of discrimination against Women and more recently SDG (Sustainable Development Goals). While these measures have increased general awareness about the gender inequalities in the societies, however, it is observed that patterns of gender inequality in governance and other public activities still persists,

especially in Asian countries (Abakah 2018; Choi, 2018). A vast body of literature (for ex: Sethi, 1988; Pyeatt and Yanus, 2017; Hoy, 1994) have offered reasons/explanations for the paucity of women in politics. These reasons/explanations deal with two fundamental questions: a) whether male dominance in politics is because of women's reluctance (inability) or lack of interest to participate and engage in political activities than their male counterparts; and b) whether dominance of male in politics is natural or conventional and females may be socialize to get used to male dominance.

Women's right advocates and international funding organizations like UN Women and Global fund for women have been campaigning and investing their efforts to support the notion that women's political representation especially at the local level of governance will enhance grass root democracy and promote social equity (Choi, 2018). Globally most of the countries and Asian countries in particular have taken measures to improve female representation in politics by introducing reservations (quota system) (Rai, 2011). In 1993, India introduced gender based reservation policy in favor of women- the 73rd amendment act of the constitution which proposed reservation of one third of seats in all categories and at all levels of the grass root institutions.

Ever since the enactment of 73rd amendment act 'empowerment of women' through effective political representation and meaningful participation has been a much discussed issue with a wide range of opinions and differing views especially among academics, think- tanks, civil societies and policy makers in India. (Palanithurai,2002). Therefore, it is not surprising then, that there has been a lot of research in the last two decades on the political participation of women in rural governance.

Few of the recent studies (for ex: Buch, 2009; Vissandjee et al., 2006; Gupta, 2016; Rai, 2017) for instances notes that, women continue to be under-represented in national as well as at the local government institutions and their participation especially in Panchayats are still not accepted by large sections of the society in spite of reservation policy in favor of women. On a similar line Kalaramdam (2018), observes that the increased visibility of women as political subjects in national or local level governance institutions does not easily assure their empowerment through political participation or representation. Hence, the issue of women's participation in politics has become of crucial importance and a central question in the study of the relationship between gender and electoral success especially in the context of Asian countries. (Lawless and Pearson, 2008; Ghatak, 2010).

1.1.The Problem:

Gender inequality in political representation leading to deprivation of power is still a big challenge for both developing and developed countries. According to WEF's (World Economic Forum) Global Gender Gap report (2018), the largest gender disparity (77.1 per cent) is observed in Political empowerment. Out of

149 countries assessed, only 17 countries have women as head of the state, just 18 percent of ministers and 24 percent of parliamentarians globally. These statistics reveal an appalling state of affairs.

Status of Women in any society can be understood by two significant indicators; a) Political Participation, and b) Share in decision making bodies (Khanna, 2009). On political empowerment, India's ranking came down to 19 in 2018, from 15 in the previous year (Dhasama, 2018). Evidences from the recent studies suggest that though 73rd Amendment to the constitution of India mandated constitutional status to the panchayats and provided legal basis for the direct democracy at the local- level by reserving seats for women for people belonging to ST (Schedule Tribe) and SC (Schedule Caste), patriarchal social and religious norms and practices have created institutional as well as cultural barriers. As a result, women face a number of challenges like inadequate education, burden of productive and reproductive roles, lack of financial independence etc. which does not guarantee effective participation and also limits the active engagement of women in the political sphere.

In India, the Panchayat Act was adopted by most of the states to create three tier Panchayati Raj Institutions much before the 73rd Amendment in the constitution of India in 1992. The Government of Gujarat enacted Gujarat Panchayat Act in 1961 based on the recommendations of Balwant Rai Mehta Committee report. Later, the Gujarat Panchayat Act, 1961 was replaced by the Gujarat Panchayat Act, (GPA) 1993 in conformity with the 73rd constitutional Amendment Act. The act was extended to the scheduled areas of the state in 1996 after the Parliament enacted Panchayats (Extension to the Schedule Areas) Act, 1996 (Mehta and Ahuja, 1993; Guha, 2014). Thus with these initiatives, it was expected that a transition in the engagement of women in the electoral politics at grassroots level would take place giving them a constitutional status. However, in practice, these initiatives by the state government appear to have done little for the women's political advancement in rural governance. (Bhatiya, 2018; Guha, 2014; Makwana, 2009). On one hand some studies (for ex: Mehta and Ahuja, 1993; Hirway, 1989) argue that the lack of political voice and poor representation and participation of women in village panchayats is a result of centralized decision making, lack of political and bureaucratic support, insufficient devolution of powers and absence of functional and financial autonomy. Moreover, the policies which were meant to create substantive condition for women to battle patriarchy and achieve gender equality, gain access to and control of resources and to achieve new social outcomes, have remained unsuccessful to achieve these objectives (Batliwala, 2007; Kabeer, 1999) and therefore, the presence of women in politics especially at village level has not necessarily translated into their political participation (Everette, 2009; Vincent, 2004).

On the other hand, there are studies (for ex: Goswami, 2015; Bhatt and Ranjan, 2016) which dispute this argument and claim that after the implementation of 73rd Amendment in Gujarat, PRIs especially the village panchayats in Gujarat are no more gender exclusive but are quite inclusive. Democracy in a

comprehensive sense and grassroots democracy in specific cannot be successful without proper and adequate representation of women and their effective role as development participants and decision makers.

Thus, building upon insights from the above studies and within this framework of competing and divergent arguments, it is imperative to understand the policy gaps due to which the presence does not translate easily into participation and which factors are responsible for such drawbacks. It is in this context that the present study explores the problem of Political Participation of women elected representatives in five districts of North Gujarat.

No specific study has so far been conducted till date in this empirical setting pertaining to women empowerment following focusing on political empowerment of women. The present study is therefore relevant in this context. Specifically, study seeks answers to the following questions.

- Do women elected representatives effectively participate in gram panchayats?
- What are the policy gaps which hinders effective participation of women elected representatives ?
- Which are the ‘enabling’ and ‘disabling’ factors influencing political empowerment of women elected representatives
- What are the constraints faced by women elected representatives while discharging their duties?

1.3.Scope and Significant contribution of the Investigation:

The main focus of the study is to understand the Political participation of women elected representatives in five districts of North Gujarat. Realizing the limitation of time and other sources, the study is restricted to North Gujarat only. The replication of the study in different regions (South and Central Gujarat) would help in a more in-depth understanding of the issue.

The study will essentially contribute in the domain of New Knowledge by providing valuable inputs on status and role of women elected representatives in PRI's, social, economic, and political background of the women representatives of the PRIs, their role in the decision making, planning, implementation and evaluation process, the perception of the society in general and the male representatives of PRIs in particular with regards to women representatives, the process of empowerment through inclusive growth, constraints on the way of achieving political empowerment, strategic measures for achieving inclusive growth through inclusive governance, given the existing social inequalities, how essential it is for women to fight against the impediments of women empowerment which will enable them participate in the Panchayati Raj Institutions with confidence.

1.4.Limitations of the Study:

The present study has its own limitations. All the limitations are as follows:

- The first limitation of the study is cross -sectional design of the study as data was collected from WERs at a single point in time. A study on Political participation of WERs may be better explained using longitudinal design. The research did not choose such an approach because of the constraint of time.
- The Second limitation of the study is that; it is only confined to WERs of the village panchayat. Given the three tier structure of Panchayati Raj Institutions, consideration of Block and District level might have revealed interesting findings.

II. Related Literature

The main objective of the study is to examine the political participation of women elected representatives' in village panchayats of North Gujarat. The literature included in this chapter has been reviewed under four separate categories

- Panchayati Raj Institutions in India.
- Political participation of women elected representatives (WER) in Panchayati Raj Institutions specifically in Village Panchayats.
- Policy Gaps which influence the political empowerment of WERs.
- Constraints faced by WERs in participating while discharging their duties due to Policy Gaps

2.1. Participation of women elected representatives (WER) in Panchayati Raj Institutions specifically in Village Panchayats.

Medoff (1986) argues that these marginalities and multiple forms of exclusion are often socio-cultural and political constraints responsible for lower rates of participation in local governance. These constraints include;

- *Psychological belief that only men can be the part of authority to govern the system:* It has been observed that women who want to contest for the elections, such beliefs are deliberately perpetrated so that women do not participate in the elections. By chance if a woman gets an opportunity to participate and represent the interest of the community at large, her decision can be influenced very easily.
- *Education attainment:* The author notes that education is an indicator of women's attitude for political participation. It has been observed that there is a positive relationship between women's education attainment and their political attitudes and belief regarding political participation. Higher the education level of women the more likely they participate.

- *Structural restraints imposed by political campaigns:* As noted by the author, women candidates must seek and seek and use resources which influence the results in their favor. In general, the candidates who raise the most resources and money are likely to win. In case of women candidates, it is difficult to raise as much money as their male counterparts as a result they tend to sometime withdraw their candidature or end up losing the elections

On similar lines, Mohanty (1995) notes that political participation of women in PRIs is to a large extent influenced by the patriarchal value system. The decision of WERs in most of the cases are influenced by the male family members of the family. Apart from patriarchal value system, criminalization of politics, lack of awareness regarding legal and economic aspects of the administration of panchayats etc. are responsible for low participation of women in panchayats. The author further observes that, reservation of seats mandated by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment is necessary but not sufficient condition for women to effectively participate

Rai (2011) explains the factors responsible for low participation of women in national politics. The author argues that while there has been a significant increase in the voting turnout and election campaigning by women at national and state level, their participation and engagement in the electoral process is not satisfactory. The key determinants and factors responsible for low rate of participation are universal and gender specific in nature while some are country specific and localized. As far as participation at national level electoral politics is concerned, factors like lack of representation of women in political parties, existing social value systems, male dominance in political institutions are responsible for under-representation of women in formal politics. One possible solution to this problem as suggested by Keshwar (1996) is that the government and civil society should make concerted efforts to promote and encourage women for enhanced and quality participation in formal politics. This will change the nature and functioning of panchayats, which will positively affect the future development initiatives for the villages and create a gender responsive and equitable society.

Kaushal, (2013) documents the enriching experiences of working in the institution of local government for rural development. The findings of the study show that the PR system has failed in enhancing the participation and empowerment of elected representatives, especially women. According to the author, the following factors are responsible for the unsatisfactory outcome of the PR system: 1). Irregular meetings of the Gram Sabha and most often such meetings are held only for the sack of records. 2). Selection criteria of beneficiaries for Centrally sponsored schemes are manipulated on the recommendations of political elites based on the ability of the beneficiaries to pay bribes. 3). WERs are merely treated as 'puppets' specially in village panchayats. Rather than participating in the proceedings they remain as a

silent spectator. Illiteracy, lack of awareness, experience, administrative skills etc. are some of the factors responsible for affecting the participation of WERs in the political process.

Mathew (2003), has analyzed the women participation in Panchayats and Municipalities in the aftermath of the 73rd CAAct of 1992 by comparing the position of the women in Panchayats before and after the 1992. The findings of the study show that after the 73rd CA Act, different myths have been exploded, like the belief that women are passive and disinterested in political institutions, only the well to do, upper strata women will come through reservation, only the kin of powerful politicians will enter Panchayats through political connection etc. Further, the author discusses the constraints faced by WERs while discharging their duties. Following are the constraints which are faced by WERs; 1). Illiteracy; 2). Unawareness regarding the development issues and governmental programmes; 3). Patriarchal values; 4). Proxy participation; 5). Derogatory references to their lack of capacity; 6). Negative attitude of government officials; 7). Character assassination etc. The author concludes by recommending that the state governments should make policies which ensure effective political participation of women. Capacity building programmes should be conducted at regular intervals so that WERs remain updated with the current trend.

A Similar study was conducted by Vijayalakshmi (2002), in the context of PRIs in Karnataka. The author examines the issues related to gender and representation of women interests in the PRIs. The findings of the study show that lack of effective participation, multiplicity of identities and absence of gender specific concerns are three main factors which hamper the representation of women in PRIs in Karnataka. Further the author argues that debate on inclusiveness of gender cannot be confined to reservation of seats alone, there should also be some strategies to make local institutions more responsive to practice social and gender equity. Steps like Gender budgeting and gender sensitive policy will be positive steps in the direction of improving the overall social condition of women in PRIs.

Along with the factors discussed above, Sinha (2004)[1] points out that, 'Poverty' as a social and political phenomenon hinders the participation of women in local self-governance. The author further argues that equity cannot be achieved without representation of all groups from the society which are denied access to power and decision making. Hence, the need of the hour is to create a more enabling environment which would allow PRI to become a doorstep opportunity for empowerment of women. Inclusive participation in rural local governance is not just a matter of equity but it is also an effort to correct the unjust and unrepresentative system which was followed.

III. Methodology

The study was conducted in three phases as presented in Figure 1. In the first phase review of literature was done in order to get background information necessary to ensure a complete understanding of PRIs, the 73rd and primary indicators which contribute to the political empowerment of women. With this background information, the study proceeded to the next level where appropriate research tools were developed by the researcher. The study further moved to the final level which included data entry, analysis of the data and finally report writing.

Figure: 1
Preparatory phase of the study



3.1. Area of the study:

The State of Gujarat located in the Western part of India is spread over 1.96 lakh sq. kms and has 33 districts and 250 taluka which can be broadly divided into 4 regions- Central Gujarat, North Gujarat, Saurashtra and South Gujarat . Gujarat was one of the first states in India to implement the Panchayati Raj system in April 1963 under Gujarat Panchayati Raj Act 1961. The act was amended in April 1993 to incorporate the provisions of 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992. (Bandi,2013).

Table:1
Socio Economic background of selected districts

PARTICULARS	GANDHINAGAR	MEHSANA	PATAN	SABARKATHA	BANASKATHA
POPULATION	2141 SQ.KM.	4401 SQ.KM	5792 SQ.KM	7394 SQ.KM	10743 SQ.KM
NO. OF VILLAGES *	310	666	466	436	827
TOTAL POPULATION	1391753	2035064	1343734	2428589	3120506
SCHEDULE CASTE	108608	162288	123408	187685	327460
SCHEDULE TRIBE	18204	9392	13303	542156	287937
SEX RATIO **	923	926	938	952	938
LITERACY RATE URBAN	87.50%	88.40%	75.84%	84.60%	70.89%
LITERACY RATE RURAL	81.60%	82%	57.02%	74.20%	48.73%
** SEX RATIO HAS BEEN DEFINED HERE AS THE NUMBER OF FEMALES PER 1000 MALES					
* DETAILS OF NO. OF VILLAGES IS OBTAIN FROM PANCHAYAT, RURAL HOUSING AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT					

Source: District Census Handbook - Gujarat (2011)

3.2. Population, Sample and Sampling Procedure:

According to Polit and Hungler (1997), population is an aggregate or totality of all the subjects under the study that confirms a set of specifications. In the present study the population is Women Elected Representatives of Gram Panchayats in North Gujarat. A total of 756 WERs is the target population for this study. Table 2 given below describes in details about the population of the study

Table: 2

Details about population of the study

North Gujarat			
DISTRICT	NO OF TALUKA	NO OF VILLAGES	NO OF VILLAGES WITH WER
BANASKATHA	12	827	230
GANDHINAGAR	4	303	137
MAHESANA	9	607	150
PATAN	7	466	119
SABARKATHA	8	436	120
TOTAL	40	2639	756

Source: Panchayat, Rural housing and Rural development department, Gujarat

3.3. Sampling Procedure:

The process of inferring something about a large group of elements by studying only a part of it is called 'Sampling'. A sample is a subgroup of the population selected for the study and best describes the population based on the method chosen (Gupta & Gupta, 2011). For conducting the survey, to select the Women Elected Representatives, the researcher has used Multistage stratified random sampling which is a probability sampling method. This type of sampling involves two or more stages of data collection that are manageable, sampling was done sequentially across three hierarchical levels, such as first at taluka level/block level, second at village level and third at ultimate respondent level.

- **3.3.1. Selection of Talukas/Blocks (Primary Sampling Units):** The first step is to divide the target population into first stage units, often referred as primary sampling units which are the once sampled first. Here, one of the major considerations for selecting the Taluka/Blocks was the level of literacy among rural women in the taluka/blocks.
- **3.2. Selection of Villages (Secondary Sampling Units):** After having made the selection of blocks, names of all the villages in each taluka/block were recorded from the website of Panchayat, Rural housing and Rural development department. Further, seventeen villages from each block were selected at random in order to achieve proper representation of the population.
- **3.3. Selection of Respondents (Ultimate Sampling Units):** At the final stage of sampling, 17 women respondents, that is, Women Elected Representatives were drawn out from 17 villages of each block from Banaskantha, Gandhinagar, Patan, Mehsana, and Sabarkantha districts of North Gujarat.

IV. Findings:Policy Gaps & Constraints

Efforts to improve political participation of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) have often focused on Quotas or reservations. Hence, there are 13.54 lakh WERs including Women Sarpanch in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) who constitute 45.22% (nearly half) of total Elected Representatives (ERs). (UN Women, 2019). However, this increased *visibility* of women as ERs is a result of two crises – a crisis of representation and a crisis of democracy. While the former derives from the challenges and

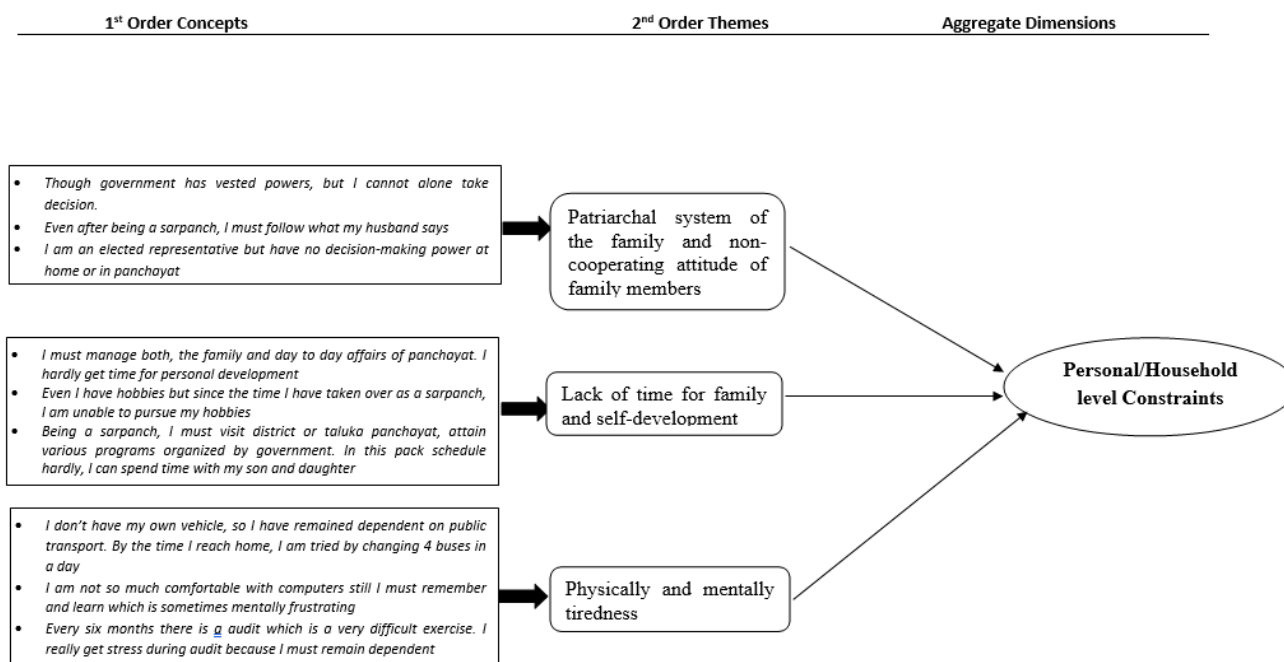
constraints WERs have to face in their line of work, the latter derives from 'marketing of democracy' which is called as legitimate deficit in which the state commitment to advocate women's development and their rights for representation has less to do with actual empowerment of women and more to do with state's drive to adhere to the demands to neoliberal global economy (Roy,2015; Paley, 2016; Kalaramadam, 2018). Therefore, the need of an hour is a nuanced approach which understands the underlying, interconnected constraints faced by women in their line of work. Thus, in this section, the researcher attempts to understand the interconnected constraints faced by WERs of village panchayats in North Gujarat.

In the present study, to understand the constraints faced by WERs at personal/household level, data was analyzed by employing a combined approach of quantitative research techniques. Qualitative approach was employed to create a general picture of the constraints and a quantitative approach was employed to understand constraints faced by WERs of all five sample districts in detail. In a qualitative research approach the data was analyzed by using direct content analysis followed by the procedures of the Gioia methodology. In the first part the researcher has used direct content analysis to analyze the responses followed by coding procedure to assign the responses to the categories on a sentence level (Saldana, 2009). This exercise served as a point of departure to understand the perspectives of WERs on constraints faced by them while discharging their duties. The second part of the analysis is inspired by the procedures of the Gioia methodology. Here, the researcher followed the creation process of 1st-order and 2nd order categories to structure the data. These subcategories were combined to form aggregate dimensions. Figure 1 explains the detailed data structure on constraints faced by WERs of village panchayats.

4.1. Policy Gaps/Constraints faced by WERs at personal/household level:

As shown in Figure-1: it was found that that majority of WERs in village panchayat face following constraints at personal/household level: -

- 4.1. Patriarchal system of the family and non-cooperating attitude of family members.
- 4.2. Lack of time for family and self-development.
- 4.3. Physically and Mentally tired.

Figure:1: Data structure for personal/household level constraints

4.2.1. Patriarchal system of the family and non-cooperating attitude of family members: -

Over the years, various studies conducted in different parts of India on political participation of WERs in village panchayats points to the constraints that inhibit effective political participation of women specially in village panchayats. These constraints are mainly because of the institutional design and social inequalities of gender and caste. (Joyal, 2006). In case of PRIs in India, specially the village panchayats the ERs often have to face a traditional strong patriarchal value system which favors sexually segregated roles, and 'traditional cultural values'. Moreover, these value systems continue to emphasize women's primary role as mothers and housewives and restrict them to these roles. These factors affect women's level of representation throughout the political process. (Sharma, 1998; Pai, 1998; Buch, 1999; Joyal, 2006).

The findings of the study show that interference of husband and male members of the family in day to day work of the panchayat makes it difficult for women to discharge her duties independently. As a result, women are unable to voice their opinion and thoughts on various developmental plans/activities of the village. Often women are overburdened with different household activities like taking care of kids, cooking and so on. Therefore, she is not able to wholeheartedly focus on panchayat activities as family becomes their priority. On similar lines, Damilola (2010) notes that along with the burden of household chores, inequitable access to higher education also limits the political participation of women.

4.2.2. Lack of time for self-development: -

Research by political scientists over the past half century strongly suggests that among the many practical constraints facing women who wish to effectively participate in grass root democracy, is lack of

time for self-development (Hoare and Gell, 2009; Pravin, 2017). This places women at a distinct disadvantage of ineffective political participation. Ineffective participation of women local self-governance institutions is attributed to continuing uneven distribution of family and work responsibilities. Studies (for ex: Phil, 2009; Simone, 2009; Joshua and Sabel, 2011) repeatedly demonstrate that there is a strong male bias in the work culture of local governance institutions where women are expected to undertake bulk of domestic and child care work, often in addition to the official responsibilities. As a result, they face tough time constraints balancing between family responsibilities and official responsibilities as work is rarely equally shared. Further, the studies point out that women are often victims of 'time poverty' which directly affects their self-development.

The need of an hour, therefore, is the need to change the attitude and household labor needs to be more equally divided among all the members of the family, men including. (Simone, 2009; Joshua and Sabel, 2011; Pravin, 2017). In fact, one of the respondent when asked to comment had a similar view;

"Look at the women leaders in our political system. They are successful because they don't have dependents to care for and are wealthy enough to buy care and other domestic help. Our society needs to change the attitude why should women handle all the responsibilities; men should equally share all the responsibilities"

Paxton (2017) reports similar findings. Along with family responsibilities women have to perform a number of tasks for smooth functioning of village panchayats like attending frequently held meetings, traveling to district and Taluka panchayats, participating in state government capacity building programmes etc. Hence, it becomes difficult for women to spend time for personal development.

4.2.3. Physical and Mental tiredness: -

As noted in the previous section, family and official responsibilities often possess challenges with respect to lack of time for personal development. In this section, we delve deeper into physical and mental tiredness because of work stress which is one of the key aspects relating to their quality of life. However, there are very few studies which focus on the aspect of physical and mental tiredness. Given that there are only not many studies, the researcher has summarized the findings of these studies. Along with the uneven distribution of family and official responsibilities, one of the major factor which contributes towards physical and mental tiredness is lack of institutional supporting mechanism like unhygienic environment in the workplace, poorly motivated helping staff, arrogance of higher authorities, burden to prove that they are as good as male representatives or members of the panchayat, lack of opportunities for career progression

Moreover, lack of support from other members of the panchayat increases their responsibility. As a result, they have to give extra hours to complete the task on time. This brings more physical tiredness. One of the

respondents who had contested for village panchayat elections emphasized the fact that WERs often have to work with supporting staff which are not at all cooperative or active in the office. This overburdens her with official responsibilities. Narrating her own experience she said that:

“The panchayat secretary is of namesake only. He comes once a week for two hours. I am responsible for all day to day work of the panchayat. My whole day is spent in running from one place to another which is mental and physical botheration”.

4.3. Constraints faced by WERs at Panchayat level:

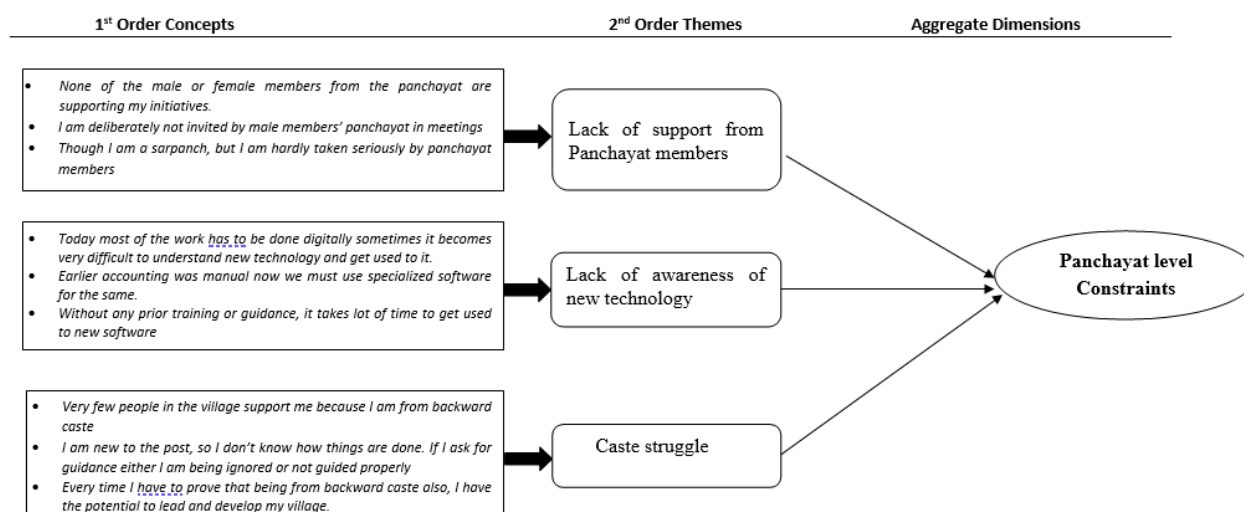
As shown in Figure-2: it was found that that majority of WERs in village panchayat face following constraints at personal/household level: -

4.3.1. Lack of support from male and female members of Panchayat

4.3.2. Lack of awareness of new technology.

4.3.3. Caste struggle and Lack of guidance.

Figure-2: Data structure for administrative level constraints



4.3.1. Lack of support from Panchayat members: -

All the constraints discussed above are common to all the WERs, however, during the course of fieldwork the researcher observed that this constraint is more specific to dalit WERs. Caste based discrimination is a source of embracement and controversy in local governance institutions. Most scholars take Srinivas's (1996) classic work on Caste and Gender as a point of reference to understand caste based discriminations in politics.

The Indian situation is no different. The reservations (quotas) for women have not been successfully able to empower women in PRIs. As a result many women experience lack of confidence in executing their role as an elected representative. WERs especially from Schedule Caste background are socialized to believe that

politics is a domain of upper caste representatives. (Rao,2018; Jadhav, 2019). This was a common sentiment expressed in interviews. Indeed, few dalit WERs shared the unanticipated effect of the quota system. According to them, because of the legal obligations, upper caste dominating leaders in the village nominate a female candidate from the scheduled caste who they know they can give orders to. A WET from Banaskantha district emphasizes this fact by stating that the idea of dalit women as an elected representative is not easily accepted at the community level or indeed even by the government officials. She asserts:

"Though I may not be a highly qualified woman, I am able to see a general perception among the people of the village as well as clearly sense a change in the approach of the people. Generally at the level of rural local bodies dalit women are not accepted as representative or a leader. Non dalit representatives can easily mobilize panchayat members for meetings but it is very difficult for a dalit representative to mobilize panchayat members for meetings because dalit leadership is not taken seriously".

4.3.2. Lack of awareness of new technology:

Over the past three decades, the emergence of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have transformed the democracy and governance space. (Wresch,2001). A review of extent literature showed that technological advancement in day to day official work have entirely reshaped the local governance institutions as well as increased the transparency and accountability in governance.

Due to such challenges it has become difficult for WERs to carry out day to day tasks and they have to remain dependent on clerks and secretaries. Hence, there is a need to develop polity guidelines with the goal of achieving gender equality in access and use of technology. A WER who had contested for the panchayat election emphasized the fact that women are not able to participate effectively because of technological challenges. Narrating her own experiences, she said that:

"Initially it became very difficult for me to get accustomed to computers because I had never used it in my life. I had to remain dependent on the panchayat secretary for small tasks. Lot of my work used to be pending and as a result I had often given up which caused delays in many development works in the villages. I think the government should conduct training programmes specially for WERs on the use of computers with different software."

4.3.3. Caste struggle:-

'Gender Quotas' in PRIs are considered as a crucial component of strategies which seek to empower women through increased participation in the grass root political system. (Kudva,2003). However, in recent decades, as pointed out by Fischer (2016) and Mosse (2018), Caste based Inequalities and discrimination have been the biggest hurdles for WERs especially from SC (Schedule Caste) in village panchayats. Similar results have been reported by Kudva (2003) in the context of Karnataka. The findings of the study show that Caste discrimination plays a major role in inhibiting the political participation of WERs in grass root governance. In the above context, an WER from Banaskantha district notes that,

"I belong to a backward caste and so people have preconceived notions for me. I have to face discrimination on a daily basis not only from panchayat members but from district and Taluka panchayat officials also".

V. Conclusion

From the findings it is clear that in spite of quota based reservation, WERs in village panchayats still have to face constraints due to institutional design and social inequalities of gender and caste. In addition to these factors, lack of education and economic dependence play a major role in inhibiting political participation of WERs. Nevertheless, it can be said that WERs in spite of these constraints have been reasonably successful in smooth functioning of the panchayats for the development of the village.

Along with the attempt to understand the constraints faced by WERs, the researcher also came across few respondents who claim that gradually they see a change in their husbands and family members and they have gained prestige in their family because of the work they do for the development of the village. In fact, it was also observed that the relationships within the family are changing as their husbands have now begun to realize the importance of being WERs which can be considered a radical departure from the traditional practices.

From the findings it is clear that political participation of women in Sabarkantha and Banaskantha district is less than that of males. This can be attributed to a number of reasons which includes lack of political interest of the women and also up to some extent a preconceived notion that they do not have the ability to make political change and their participation will make no change in the grass root democracy. This is evident from the fact that out of five districts, in Sabarkantha and Banaskantha women still occupy subordinate positions to the man in the panchayat being an elected representative.

This study also reveals an interesting trend of political leadership, in village panchayats of districts like Gandhinagar and Mehsana the women who are elected as a representative have reach or elite background. As a result, ordinary people especially the women are unable to establish a comfort zone with the elected

representative where they can openly share the problems. Thus, WERs in some areas of Gandhinagar and Mehsana districts are not aware about the problems of the people. In this context, the researcher feels that there is need to carry out further research on the real cause of stark disconnect between elected representatives and people of the village. Further, it was also observed that these elected representatives had the tendencies to sideline their fellow members of the panchayat especially the women members and portray negativity on their part.

This study has also attempted to understand the changes in lives of women after assuming charge as ERs. It can be conclusively started from the findings discussed in the study that women are experiencing changes in their lives after assuming charge as ERs at individual as well as societal level. However, it can be noted that the aspects of changes discussed in the study are not significant for WERs of Banaskantha and Sabarkantha districts. The quantitative analysis also shows that the WERs of Banaskantha and Sabarkantha districts are not positive about their role as ERs because of various factors like; lack of knowledge and awareness of conducting day to day affairs of Panchayat, lack of self confidence, hesitation to express views or opinions, non-cooperative attitude of male members of the panchayat etc. Further, the findings also suggest that struggling to bring about good governance at the grass root level with the recognition of efforts of male members of the panchayat only is like clapping with one hand. For good governance at grass root level, effective political participation of women is very crucial as it enables them to use their potential and talent, which are instrumental for effective governance at grass root level. Therefore, a comprehensive capacity building initiative, that addresses the issues/constraints faced by WERs, is required.

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