

## Challenges and Achievements of Women Panchayat Leaders in Promoting Rural Development in West Bengal

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### **Abstract:**

*Women's participation in local governance in West Bengal has increased dramatically since the 73rd Constitutional Amendment (1992) mandated gender reservations in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). This review examines the achievements and challenges of women panchayat leaders in advancing rural development in West Bengal over the past decades, with a focus on the post-73rd Amendment period and especially the last ten years. Women leaders have contributed to improved provision of basic services such as drinking water, sanitation, and roads, and have influenced social outcomes like education and health in their communities. Their presence has also had empowering symbolic effects, raising aspirations among girls and increasing responsiveness to women's needs. However, women panchayat leaders continue to face significant challenges. These include deep-rooted patriarchal norms leading to "proxy" leadership by male relatives, limited mobility and education, lack of training and resources, and political party dynamics that constrain their decision-making power. West Bengal's unique political context – from long-term Left Front rule to the Trinamool Congress era – has shaped both the opportunities and obstacles for women in local governance. While women now occupy over half of all panchayat seats in the state, their effective empowerment and influence on higher-level politics remain limited. This paper highlights key sectoral achievements in rural development led by women, analyzes the persistent socio-cultural and institutional challenges they face, and suggests that sustained capacity-building, institutional support, and shifts in societal attitudes are needed to translate women's numerical presence into substantive power in rural governance.*

**Keywords:** *Women's empowerment, Panchayati Raj Institutions, West Bengal, rural development, gender quota, local governance, women leaders, political participation*

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### **Introduction:**

Women's leadership in local government has been heralded as a transformative force for rural development and gender equity in India. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 marked a watershed by mandating that at least one-third of all seats in Panchayati Raj Institutions (village, block, and district councils) be reserved for women (Mahanandia&Tripathy, 2025). West Bengal, which has a long history of decentralized governance, embraced these reforms and even expanded them – reserving 50% of panchayat seats for women since 2012 (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2025). As a result, women's representation in West Bengal's three-tier panchayat system has surged from negligible levels in the early 1990s to majority status today. This dramatic change raises critical questions: What

have women leaders achieved in promoting rural development? And what challenges hinder their full and independent participation in governance?

West Bengal presents a compelling case for studying women panchayat leaders. The state pioneered panchayat elections in 1978 under the Left Front government, initiating regular five-year elections ever since (Hazra, 2017). However, for the first few cycles, women's presence was minimal – less than 1% of elected local representatives were women before 1993 (Hazra, 2017). The introduction of the 33% reservation for women in the 1993 panchayat elections was a turning point. Thousands of women entered local politics for the first time, significantly altering the composition of local councils. By the late 1990s, women held around 35% of gram panchayat seats in West Bengal (Hazra, 2017). The reservation quota was raised to 50% in 2012, and by the 2018 panchayat elections women comprised just over 51% of all elected panchayat members in the state (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2025). This numerical representation is among the highest in India and exceeds the mandated quota, as some women also win in open (unreserved) seats.

The increase in women's participation is significant not only in numbers but in its potential impact on governance and development outcomes. Research from West Bengal and other Indian states suggests that women leaders can bring different priorities and approaches to local development, often emphasizing issues pertinent to women's daily lives and family welfare (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004; Singh et al., 2025). At the same time, the extent to which women panchayat leaders are able to exercise real decision-making power and overcome patriarchal constraints remains debated (Buch, 2013; Roy, 2018). West Bengal's experience illustrates both the achievements and the hurdles: women leaders have spearheaded notable improvements in infrastructure, health, sanitation, and social development at the village level, yet many continue to struggle against gender biases, lack of respect from male colleagues, and structural disadvantages such as lower education and resources.

This paper provides a comprehensive review of the achievements of women panchayat leaders in promoting rural development in West Bengal, and the challenges they face in doing so. The analysis focuses on the period since the 73rd Amendment, with particular attention to developments in the last 10–15 years (post-2010, after the quota was raised to 50%). Key rural development sectors – including water and sanitation, infrastructure, education, health, and women's empowerment – are examined to evaluate women's contributions. In parallel, the paper explores the multi-faceted challenges confronting women leaders: socio-cultural barriers (patriarchal norms, "proxy" leadership), institutional and political hurdles (party control, lack of training), and practical constraints (illiteracy, workload). The geographic scope covers the state of West Bengal as a whole, noting where relevant any district-level variations or case studies that shed light on diverse experiences across the state.

The review draws on a mix of academic journal articles, government reports, and scholarly studies focusing on West Bengal and India. The emphasis is on peer-reviewed research findings to ensure reliability, supplemented by reputable sources such as government data. By synthesizing these sources, the paper aims to present a balanced picture of how women panchayat leaders have influenced rural development in West Bengal – celebrating their

successes, while critically assessing ongoing challenges. The discussion is organized into two main analytical sections: one highlighting achievement in key development domains, and another detailing the challenges and constraints. The paper concludes with reflections on the way forward to strengthen women’s leadership in local governance for inclusive rural development.

### **Achievements of Women Panchayat Leaders in Rural Development:**

Women panchayat leaders in West Bengal have made significant contributions to rural development, leveraging their positions to address community needs in various sectors. While individual performance varies, studies indicate several broad areas where women leaders, as a group, have had a positive impact. These include improvements in basic infrastructure and services (especially water supply and sanitation), greater attention to social development priorities like health and education, and intangible gains in empowerment and accountability. Table 1 summarizes selected research findings on the impacts of women-led panchayats in West Bengal on development outcomes.

**Table 1. Selected Impacts of Women-Led Panchayats on Development Outcomes in West Bengal**

<b>Development Indicator</b>	<b>Impact of Women Leaders (vs. Men)</b>	<b>Source</b>
Drinking water facilities (wells, taps)	<b>Increased investment.</b> Women pradhans invest more in village drinking water projects, aligning with women’s expressed needs for convenient water access.	Chattopadhyay&Duflo (2004)
Rural road infrastructure	<b>Increased investment.</b> Female-led panchayats build or repair more local roads, improving connectivity. Women tend to prioritize roads that facilitate daily activities (markets, schools).	Chattopadhyay&Duflo (2004)
Irrigation and agricultural infrastructure	<b>Reduced investment.</b> Some decline in irrigation spending under women leaders, as they shift focus to drinking water and roads. (Male leaders invested slightly more in irrigation works.)	Chattopadhyay&Duflo (2004)
Education and school infrastructure	<b>Lower investment in physical infrastructure.</b> Female leaders in West Bengal invested less in school buildings, but...	Chattopadhyay&Duflo (2004)
Girls’ educational aspirations and attainment	<b>Improved outcomes.</b> Adolescent girls in villages led by women showed higher aspirations and better school attainment, inspired by female role models in leadership.	Beaman et al. (2012)
Health and sanitation (e.g., toilets, immunization)	<b>Positive focus (qualitative evidence).</b> Women leaders actively promote sanitation drives (toilets, clean villages) and support health programs like immunization and	Hazra (2017); Kumar&Ghosh (2021) *

Development Indicator	Impact of Women Leaders (vs. Men)	Source
	maternal care. (Outcomes improved in some documented cases.)	
Reporting of crimes against women	<b>Increased reporting.</b> Incidence of reported crimes (e.g., domestic violence, dowry harassment) rose in areas with women leaders, suggesting women citizens feel more encouraged to report issues.	Iyer et al. (2012)
Poverty alleviation program targeting	<b>Mixed results.</b> No significant overall improvement in targeting of anti-poverty benefits to the poor; in some cases, benefits to the poorest or to lower-caste groups worsened slightly under inexperienced women leaders.	Bardhan et al. (2010)
Transparency and corruption	<b>No worse (and possibly less patronage).</b> Studies find women-led councils were not more corrupt; some evidence suggests women leaders were less likely to engage in clientelism, though they faced more interference by male elites initially.	Bardhan et al. (2010); Beaman et al. (2012)

*Sources marked with ()* indicate evidence based on qualitative or case studies rather than broad quantitative data.

As Table 1 indicates, one of the clearest impacts of women’s leadership has been a shift in development priorities toward basic needs like water and roads. Pioneering research by Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004), based on a randomized study in West Bengal, found that gram panchayats led by women invested significantly more in drinking water supply and village road improvement than those led by men. Women pradhans (heads of panchayats) were more responsive to issues that women voters typically raised – for instance, the time-consuming burden of fetching water and the poor condition of rural paths – and directed funds accordingly (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004). Conversely, the study noted that female-led panchayats spent somewhat less on irrigation and school buildings, areas that male leaders had traditionally favored. This suggests that women leaders bring different preferences and problem-awareness to the table, often prioritizing the practical daily needs of households (drinking water access, passable roads) over capital-intensive projects like irrigation canals. Such reorientation of local development agenda is a noteworthy achievement, as it has direct effects on quality of life – for example, easier water access saves women’s time and improves public health, and better rural roads enhance mobility and economic activity.

Women panchayat members have also been proactive in health and sanitation initiatives, although these outcomes are less documented quantitatively. Qualitative accounts indicate that many women leaders championed programs related to cleanliness, nutrition, and healthcare in their villages (Hazra, 2017). In West Bengal’s Nadia district, for instance, women representatives were integral at the village level in the “Sabar Shouchagar” (Toilets for All) campaign that eventually made the district open-defecation-free and earned it a United Nations Public Service Award in 2015. Women leaders often leverage their influence in self-help

groups and village committees to promote the construction of household latrines, regular garbage disposal, and utilization of health services by women and children (Kumar & Ghosh, 2021). Immunization drives and mother-and-child health programs are areas where women pradhans have shown strong engagement, helping to organize village health camps and ensuring that entitlements (like Janani Suraksha Yojana maternal health benefits) reach eligible women. These efforts align with evidence that women in governance tend to devote more attention to social welfare and well-being-oriented projects. While not every woman pradhan is equally active, many have become local champions for sanitation and health awareness, contributing to improved outcomes such as higher toilet usage rates and better outreach of nutritional programs (Kumar&Ghosh, 2021).

Education is another domain where women panchayat leaders have left a subtle but important mark. As noted, female-led councils did not always invest heavily in building new school infrastructure; however, their impact emerges in less tangible ways, particularly in changing social attitudes toward girls' education. A landmark study by Beaman et al. (2012) demonstrated a remarkable "role model effect": in villages that had reserved pradhan positions for women (and thus experienced women leaders), parents and girls themselves exhibited higher aspirations for the girls' education and careers. Teenage girls in these villages were more likely to attend school and scored better on school exams, narrowing the gender gap in education outcomes (Beaman et al., 2012). The presence of a woman in a position of authority – running the local government – sent a powerful signal to families that girls can and should study and take on public roles. This is a profound achievement in the realm of social development, as it can have long-term multiplier effects on female literacy, workforce participation, and social status. Moreover, women pradhans have been observed to be more accessible to other women and children, often holding informal meetings to discuss schooling issues or lobbying for teachers to be present in local schools (Hazra, 2017). In West Bengal, where female literacy and school attendance have historically lagged behind male rates, such changes are significant strides toward closing gender gaps.

Another achievement attributed to women panchayat leaders is improved accountability and responsiveness of local governance. Women tend to be perceived as more approachable and empathetic by villagers, which can encourage greater community engagement in development discussions (Singh et al., 2025). For example, women often encourage other women to voice their concerns in gram sabha (village assembly) meetings, something that was relatively rare in male-dominated forums. Although women's attendance in gram sabhas is still not on par with men's, there are instances in West Bengal where female leaders mobilized women's groups to participate and vote on local decisions (Datta & Sen, 2003). Furthermore, some studies suggest that female-led panchayats have lower levels of bureaucratic corruption and nepotism. The logic is that many women leaders, being new to politics and without entrenched patronage networks, may handle beneficiary lists and project funds in a more rule-bound manner (Bardhan et al., 2010). In West Bengal, Bardhan et al. (2010) did not find that women's reservation improved targeting of anti-poverty programs overall, but they did note that traditional elite capture dynamics were somewhat altered under inexperienced female

pradhans. Women leaders were less likely to have pre-existing political ties and thus, at least initially, local power-brokers found it harder to manipulate them compared to seasoned male politicians. Though over time some women may get co-opted, this disruption of old patronage networks can be seen as a modest gain for governance quality.

Crucially, women panchayat leaders have achieved a measure of empowerment and voice for rural women at large. Their very presence in office breaks stereotypes and creates acceptance of women in public decision-making roles. In West Bengal, several all-women gram panchayats have functioned successfully. One notable example was the Kultikari Gram Panchayat in Paschim Medinipur district, which in the early 2000s had its entire council composed of women and earned a reputation for efficient administration (Hazra, 2017). Such cases, though not widespread, demonstrate that women can handle all aspects of local governance competently when given the chance. Even in mixed councils, having women in leadership positions has *sensitized* local bodies to issues like gender-based violence and women's welfare. An important outcome observed nationally and mirrored in West Bengal is that crimes against women tend to be reported more frequently in areas led by women (Iyer et al., 2012). For instance, villages with women pradhans saw an increase in police reports of domestic violence and harassment – not because women leaders create crime, but because they likely foster an environment where women victims feel supported to come forward and authorities take such issues more seriously (Iyer et al., 2012). This indicates a greater responsiveness of local institutions to women's rights and justice.

Lastly, it is worth noting that women panchayat leaders have been instrumental in strengthening community development groups, especially self-help groups (SHGs) and cooperatives that empower women economically. In many parts of West Bengal, elected women have worked closely with SHGs on initiatives like microcredit, income-generation projects, and nutrition programs (Hazra, 2017). For example, in Murshidabad district, a women pradhan helped facilitate an NGO-led microfinance project that enabled hundreds of landless women to start small businesses and improve their household incomes (Hazra, 2017). Such synergies between women-led governance and women's grassroots organizations amplify the impact on rural development by combining political authority with community mobilization. Women leaders often emerge as role models and mentors in these networks, encouraging others to take initiative. This has a cumulative effect of enhancing women's agency in rural society – itself a developmental outcome, as empowered women are strongly linked to better health, education, and productivity in a community (Datta, 2023).

In summary, the achievements of women panchayat leaders in West Bengal span tangible improvements in services and infrastructure, and more subtle yet far-reaching social changes. They have improved access to water, sanitation, and roads, aligned local spending with family welfare needs, and brought women's concerns from the private sphere into public policy. They have also helped in changing mindsets – among constituents and administrators alike – about women's roles and capabilities. Rural development, in its holistic sense, includes not just economic assets but human and social development; in this regard, women leaders have been drivers of change by promoting education for girls, health awareness, and women's

participation in governance. These accomplishments, however, have not come easily. The next section examines the myriad challenges women panchayat leaders have encountered, which often temper or limit the extent of these achievements.

### **Challenges Faced by Women Panchayat Leaders:**

Despite their growing numbers and contributions, women panchayat leaders in West Bengal face persistent challenges that impede their effective functioning and leadership autonomy. These challenges are multi-dimensional – stemming from patriarchal social norms, political structures, and institutional constraints. Understanding these hurdles is crucial for contextualizing the achievements discussed above and for identifying areas where further intervention is needed to ensure that women’s representation translates into genuine empowerment and rural development impact.

### **Patriarchal Norms and “Proxy” Leadership:**

One of the foremost challenges is the enduring influence of patriarchal norms, which often manifest in the phenomenon of “proxy” leadership or the sarpanch pati syndrome (where a male relative, typically a husband, effectively wields the power of an elected woman). In West Bengal, this issue has taken different forms under different political regimes. During the Left Front era (1977–2011), the Communist Party’s grassroots committees had strong oversight over panchayat decisions; while the party did not generally impose candidates’ relatives as proxies, it curtailed the independence of women representatives by making them answerable to (male) party superiors (Bandopadhyay, as cited in IANS report, 2023). Women members during that time often had to follow party directives closely, which limited their individual voice (Roy, 2018). In the more recent Trinamool Congress era, anecdotal evidence suggests an increase in women being fielded from powerful families – for instance, the wife or daughter of a previous male pradhan is nominated when a seat becomes reserved for women (Roy, 2018). These women sometimes end up nominally holding office while the husbands or male kin continue to make decisions behind the scenes (a classic proxy situation).

Such proxy leadership undermines the very intent of women’s reservation, as it deprives genuinely capable women of agency and can reinforce cynicism about women’s competence. Some surveys have tried to gauge the extent of this problem. A study in a northern state (Punjab) found as many as 75% of elected women reported interference by husbands in their work (Singh et al., 2025). While comparable recent survey data for West Bengal is scarce, earlier studies indicated that initially many West Bengal women pradhans were inexperienced and relied on male family members or local party men for guidance (Datta & Sen, 2003). Over time, there is evidence that West Bengal’s women representatives have grown more assertive and less willing to be figureheads. Hazra (2017) notes that “by and large they do not need to function as proxy members” in West Bengal’s panchayats as of the 2000s, indicating progress. Nonetheless, the risk of proxy decision-making persists, especially in areas where social conservatism is strong or where a woman’s personal authority is not accepted by male colleagues and villagers.

The cultural expectation that women defer to men plays out in everyday governance. Female pradhans have reported being ignored or ridiculed by male members in council meetings, or not being taken seriously by bureaucrats. One former woman panchayat member from Murshidabad admitted that from the first day of her term, her work “was well-defined and there was hardly any scope to go beyond that” – implying her male counterparts or party handlers set the limits of her role (IANS, 2023). Some women also face opposition or lack of cooperation from villagers who are not accustomed to women in public authority. Traditional gender roles – which relegate women to domestic spheres – mean that a woman leader struggles to command the same respect a man might receive automatically. This is a long-term battle of perceptions and attitudes. While younger generations may gradually become more accepting, many current women panchayat leaders still have to fight stereotyping and even hostility.

### **Limited Mobility, Education, and Confidence:**

Another cluster of challenges relates to the personal capacity and resources of women leaders, which are often constrained by gender disparities in education, economic means, and mobility. Rural women in West Bengal, as elsewhere in India, tend to have lower literacy rates and less formal education than men. Although the situation is improving, a significant number of women who enter panchayats (especially when reservations first took effect) have only basic schooling. In a study of Birbhum district, out of 64 women panchayat members surveyed, 24 were just literate (could barely read/write) and 4 could only sign their names; only 12 had completed primary education and very few had higher schooling (Hazra, 2017, citing Ghosh, 1997). Low educational attainment can hamper a member’s ability to read government documents, understand budgets, or articulate proposals confidently. It often made women more dependent on the panchayat secretary or male members for information, which in turn could be exploited. While the education profile of women representatives has been rising in recent years (more educated women are contesting now than in the 1990s), gaps remain. In more remote or socio-economically backward regions of West Bengal, women leaders may still lack the technical knowledge or bureaucratic savvy that their roles demand.

Closely linked is the issue of training and capacity-building. Many women enter the panchayat system with little prior experience in public office or administration. The government has recognized this and initiated programs (like the Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan training modules specifically for Women Elected Representatives). However, the reach and effectiveness of training are uneven. Some women complain that training sessions are too few or too superficial, and sometimes husbands attend on their behalf (defeating the purpose). There is also the factor of mobility and time constraints – women leaders often have to manage household responsibilities alongside official duties. In rural West Bengal, a newly elected woman might still be expected to cook, clean, care for children and elders, and work on the family farm. These obligations severely limit the time she can devote to learning about government schemes or monitoring development works. Unlike men, women may not be free to travel to block or district headquarters for meetings due to family restrictions on mobility (“a woman shouldn’t travel alone”) and safety concerns. Consequently, they might miss out on

important networking opportunities or information sessions that happen at higher administrative levels (Roy, 2018).

The double burden of domestic work and public service is a common refrain in interviews with women representatives. Nirmalya Banerjee, a social commentator, pointed out that most women panchayat members come from financially weak backgrounds where they “have to handle too many things at a time, starting from domestic work to helping their male family members in agricultural work, in addition to their work as elected members” – leaving them little time or energy to build a political career (IANS, 2023). This affects their performance and confidence. Many women initially feel hesitant to speak up in meetings, either due to self-doubt or fear of backlash for appearing “too assertive,” given societal conditioning that values modesty in women. Some studies have observed that women’s participation in panchayat debates is often low; for instance, Ghosh (2000) noted that important standing committees with substantial funds rarely had women as chairpersons, and women members sometimes remained passive, accounting for less than one-fifth of speaking turns even when they were one-third of the body (Hazra, 2017). Overcoming this internalized low confidence is a significant challenge requiring mentorship and peer support.

### **Political and Institutional Barriers:**

The structure of political competition and party dominance in West Bengal also creates hurdles for women leaders. West Bengal’s panchayats are highly politicized, with major parties (previously the CPI(M)-led Left Front, and now the Trinamool Congress, among others) treating panchayat elections as important political contests. Political parties play a decisive role in candidate selection, agenda setting, and even in day-to-day functioning of panchayats. For women, this can be double-edged. On one hand, party backing can facilitate their entry into politics (many women got tickets because parties had to fulfill the quota). On the other hand, once elected, these women are expected to toe the party line. The party apparatus can overshadow individual initiative, particularly if the local party bosses are male (which they usually are, since women are underrepresented in higher party ranks too).

Under the Left Front, as noted earlier, the party committees decided which woman would contest a reserved seat and often guided her actions in office (IANS, 2023). Family ties were supposedly not favored by the CPI(M) in candidate selection – which meant many women representatives were not from political families, but grassroots cadre. This had an interesting outcome: such women were often politically inexperienced and hence heavily reliant on the party organization for direction, which again limited independent decision-making (Roy, 2018). In the current regime, the familial aspect has grown – “the wife or daughter of the outgoing male member is fielded when a seat rotates to women” (IANS, 2023). As Bandopadhyay noted, in many cases these candidates remain “representatives only in name with control being in the hands of their husbands or fathers” (IANS, 2023). Thus, the party gatekeeping and nepotism in candidate selection can perpetuate a cycle where women are placed as figureheads to fulfill legal requirements, while actual power dynamics remain unchanged.

Another institutional challenge is exclusion from key committees and resources. In panchayat samitis (block level) and zilla parishads (district level), which handle larger budgets, women have historically been underrepresented in executive positions. Even when women are present, they are often assigned portfolios like social welfare or women and child development, which are important but receive comparatively smaller budgets than portfolios like public works or agriculture usually held by men (Datta, 2023). At the gram panchayat level, internal committees (such as the finance committee or construction committee) are often chaired by men. This gendered division of responsibilities means women leaders might not get hands-on experience in managing big development projects or funds, reinforcing perceptions that they are not as capable in those areas. Furthermore, women pradhans sometimes face non-cooperation from their panchayat secretaries (government-appointed administrators) – there have been instances reported where secretaries would bypass the woman pradhan and take files to a male member, or delay action on the pradhan’s requests, under the assumption that “she doesn’t understand these technicalities.” Such bureaucratic bias can frustrate women leaders and stymie their initiatives.

Security and violence present another serious challenge in West Bengal’s panchayats. The state’s panchayat elections have a notorious history of violence and intimidation. For women candidates and leaders, electoral violence and political aggression can be particularly deterring. There have been reports of women facing threats or harassment during elections, which can discourage them from contesting again (Kumar & Ghosh, 2021). Additionally, women in authority might face gender-based harassment – slander or character assassination by political opponents, something female politicians often endure more than male politicians. These hostile tactics are aimed at undermining their public image and can be very traumatic at a personal level, further dissuading active political participation.

### **Post-Reservation Challenges: Sustaining Leadership and Advancement:**

A nuanced challenge that has emerged over time is the post-reservation scenario – i.e., what happens when a reserved seat becomes unreserved in the next election cycle. Many women who served as pradhan or member for five years find that when their seat is no longer reserved for women, they are not given party tickets or they lose to male candidates in general competition. This raises the issue of sustainability of women’s leadership beyond quotas. Prabhat Datta (2023) notes that despite inherent structural constraints, women leaders in West Bengal have proven their competence and brought positive changes in governance agendas; however, continued political engagement of these women requires a proactive effort by the state and parties to support them beyond one term. In practice, that support is often lacking. Women are frequently seen as “seat-fillers” for the duration of the quota and then replaced by men. This attrition means the system loses many experienced women after one stint, and it also sends a discouraging message to women aspirants that their prospects in open competition are low.

Factors behind this challenge include lack of mentorship, financial constraints, and party biases. Women often have less access to the patronage networks and funding needed to sustain a political career. They might also prioritize family once their term ends, especially if their

entry into politics was circumstantial rather than by passion. Additionally, political parties might not be keen to promote women to higher offices (MLA, MP positions) – the pipeline from panchayat to state legislature for women is weak. In West Bengal, it is telling that no woman panchayat leader has yet risen to become a prominent state-level political figure (IANS, 2023). This glass ceiling demotivates women from viewing local office as a stepping stone to higher leadership, which can limit their ambitions and investment in political life.

### **Social Backlash and Work Environment Challenges:**

Women panchayat leaders sometimes face social backlash for defying traditional roles. In conservative communities, a woman asserting authority over men (e.g., admonishing a male contractor for shoddy work, or resolving a family dispute as an arbitrator) can provoke resentment. There have been cases (noted in other states and relevant anecdotally to West Bengal) of women sarpanches being physically manhandled or publicly humiliated by male colleagues or villagers who refused to accept a woman's verdict. Such extreme incidents underline the hostile environments some women must operate in. Even in less extreme form, everyday sexism – such as male members interrupting or talking over women in meetings, or making disparaging remarks – is a routine challenge that women have to navigate with patience and resilience.

Finally, the lack of supportive infrastructure can be a barrier. For instance, meetings often run late into the night, which is not convenient or considered proper for women in rural contexts – yet decisions might get made in those late hours, effectively sidelining women who left earlier for home. The timing and venue of official activities are not always gender-sensitive. Moreover, women rarely have the informal socializing opportunities (like tea stall or club discussions) where a lot of political consensus-building happens among men. This networking gap means women may not be in the loop on certain political negotiations or resource-sharing discussions, putting them at a disadvantage in panchayat power politics.

In summary, women panchayat leaders in West Bengal contend with deep-rooted patriarchal attitudes, dual burdens, skill gaps, political marginalization, and sometimes overt intimidation. These challenges can considerably dampen their effectiveness and morale. It is a testament to many women's personal fortitude and commitment that they still manage to perform and bring positive changes under such conditions. Nonetheless, the challenges illuminate that representation alone is not enough – it must be accompanied by supportive measures and shifts in social norms to truly empower women leaders.

### **Discussion: Bridging the Gaps and Looking Ahead:**

The experiences of women panchayat leaders in West Bengal reveal a dynamic interplay between policy-driven change (quotas enabling women's inclusion) and social reality (patriarchal structures resisting that change). Over roughly three decades since women's reservations were introduced, West Bengal has made considerable progress in terms of numbers and initial outcomes. Women have proven that they can govern effectively, bring fresh perspectives to development issues, and improve the inclusiveness of local governance. Yet, the myriad challenges they face mean that the full potential of women's leadership is not

yet realized. In this discussion, we highlight a few key insights and potential approaches to bridge the gaps between presence and power for women in panchayats.

1. **The Importance of Capacity Building and Education:** The need to enhance women leaders' capacities is evident. Targeted training programs can help women understand administrative processes, learn leadership skills, and build confidence. In West Bengal, NGOs and academic institutions have at times collaborated to conduct workshops for elected women – covering topics from budgeting to legal rights. Scaling up such efforts, with regular follow-ups (perhaps a mentorship scheme pairing novice women members with experienced ones or retired female officials), could bolster women's effectiveness. Additionally, broader societal investment in girls' education will over time produce a more educated pool of women candidates. There is a virtuous cycle here: the more educated the women representatives, the more effectively they can push for development initiatives, which in turn improves education and awareness in the community (Datta, 2023). State agencies should also ensure that practical constraints (like meeting timings, childcare support) are addressed – for example, by scheduling meetings at times convenient for women and providing crèche facilities during training sessions so that women with young children can attend.

2. **Fostering Support Networks and Solidarity:** Women panchayat leaders often find strength in collective platforms. In some regions, Elected Women Representatives (EWR) federations or associations have been formed, allowing women to share experiences and advocate for their interests as a group. West Bengal could encourage district or block-level federations of women panchayat members. These can serve as forums to discuss common problems (such as dealing with uncooperative bureaucrats or opposing domestic violence in their villages) and to represent women's voice to higher authorities (Singh et al., 2025). Peer support is a proven confidence booster – a woman is more likely to stand firm in a male-dominated board meeting if she knows she has a group of other women backing her outside. Such networks can also help break the isolation of being perhaps the lone woman pradhan in a block. Additionally, involving successful women panchayat leaders from other states or from earlier generations as role models and resource persons can inspire and guide current leaders.

3. **Engaging Men and Changing Community Attitudes:** Because many challenges are rooted in societal norms, efforts to sensitizing men and communities at large are crucial. Gender sensitization programs targeting male panchayat members, local party leaders, and even husbands of women representatives could gradually reduce the bias and resistance women face. In some cases, simple steps like officially discouraging the presence of spouses in panchayat offices (to curb proxy involvement) or publicly commending male colleagues who support women-led initiatives can set the right tone. Community dialogues involving traditional leaders, explaining the importance of women's leadership for the whole village's progress, might also help. Essentially, the empowerment of women leaders should not be seen as a "women's issue" alone; it is a development issue that benefits all villagers. This message needs to be consistently communicated by policymakers, media, and civil society. Indeed, the West Bengal government's own Women's Policy and the West Bengal Commission for Women have

roles to play in advocating for and protecting women representatives, by addressing grievances like harassment and by highlighting success stories to the public.

4. **Political Will and Party Reforms:** Real change in women's political empowerment will require commitment from political parties. Parties ought to see women panchayat leaders as assets and not just quota fulfilment. This means giving women a fair chance to continue in politics beyond the reserved term. For instance, parties can decide to back performing women incumbents even in unreserved seats (some states have witnessed women winning general seats after proving themselves in reserved terms). Parties can also consciously increase the presence of women in their decision-making hierarchies so that women's interests are championed internally. In West Bengal's context, where women now form a significant portion of the political grassroots, there is an argument for parties to leverage this by grooming them for higher offices – otherwise parties risk stagnating in ideas and missing voter appeal among women constituents. Encouragingly, the national parliament has recently passed the Nari Shakti Vandan Act (2023) to reserve one-third of seats for women in state legislatures and Parliament in the future. This heightened focus on women's political representation at all levels might trickle down to changes in party attitudes and a recognition that women leaders must be taken seriously as a political force.

5. **Safeguarding Women's Agency:** Legal and procedural safeguards can also help mitigate challenges. Strict enforcement of rules against proxy attendance and against any form of coercion of elected women should be in place. If a woman pradhan feels she is being undermined or that her husband is usurping her role, there should be confidential avenues to seek remedy – for example, the district administration or women's commission intervening. While it's difficult to police informal power dynamics, even symbolic actions (such as removing the term "sarpanch-pati" from any official vocabulary and discouraging officials from entertaining instructions from anyone except the elected woman) can underscore that the woman is the legitimate authority. West Bengal's Panchayati Raj Department could consider issuing guidelines emphasizing the roles and responsibilities of women office bearers and warning against gender-based discrimination within panchayats.

### **Highlighting Progress and Best Practices:**

Amidst challenges, it is also important to highlight best practices and progress, as these can be replicated. West Bengal has had villages that thrived under women's leadership – whether by achieving 100% immunization, efficient use of development funds, or innovative schemes like biogas programs led by women's groups under panchayat guidance (Hazra, 2017). Documenting and disseminating these success stories across the state can counter stereotypes and provide learning material for others. State awards or public recognition for outstanding women panchayat leaders could motivate more women to take initiative and demonstrate that their work is valued.

It is also worth noting that challenges are not static; as education improves and more women gain experience, some issues (like lack of confidence or knowledge) will naturally abate. Indeed, compared to the first generation of women panchayat members in the 1990s, today's

women are generally more aware of their rights and more assertive, thanks in part to the trailblazing efforts of those early entrants. The presence of second-generation women leaders – daughters of former women pradhans, for example – is slowly emerging, which could indicate a gradual normalization of women’s political participation.

### **Conclusion:**

The journey of women panchayat leaders in West Bengal encapsulates a broader narrative of social change through political inclusion. From being nearly absent in local governance a few decades ago, women today form the backbone of rural councils in the state, numerically and often functionally. They have leveraged quota opportunities to make meaningful contributions: improving basic infrastructure like water and roads that directly affect daily life, advancing social development agendas in health and education, and making governance more responsive to half the population’s needs. These achievements underscore the value of women’s leadership in promoting inclusive rural development. Villages in West Bengal have benefited from women’s empathetic and pragmatic approach – whether it’s prioritizing a tube well in a hamlet that lacked water or ensuring the anganwadi (childcare center) runs properly for the community’s children. Moreover, women leaders have served as agents of empowerment, altering perceptions about women’s capabilities and inspiring young girls to envision a life beyond traditional confines.

Yet, this review also makes clear that challenges temper the success story. Deep-seated patriarchy, manifesting as resistance or manipulation of women’s authority, remains a formidable barrier. Institutional inertia and party politics at times reduce women to tokens rather than true decision-makers. Personal barriers of education, resources, and confidence continue to limit many women from fully utilizing their platform. The West Bengal experience thus illustrates that while policy interventions (like reservations) are necessary conditions for change, they are not sufficient on their own. Social support systems, capacity building, and attitudinal shifts must complement the policy for it to achieve its intended outcome of women’s emancipation and improved governance.

Looking ahead, the case of women panchayat leaders in West Bengal provides valuable lessons. It shows that sustained political will and societal encouragement can gradually erode patriarchal constraints. For instance, the fact that women’s actual representation slightly exceeds the reserved quota in West Bengal (51% in panchayats vs. 50% mandated) suggests that women are also winning some open seats and that communities are becoming accustomed to women in leadership (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2025). This is a positive trend. To build on it, stakeholders – government, civil society, political parties, and the community – need to collaboratively address the challenges. Empowerment is a process, not an event; the first step was bringing women to the table, and the next steps involve equipping them with the tools and environment to speak up and lead effectively.

For West Bengal specifically, strengthening training programs, enforcing zero tolerance for gender discrimination in panchayats, and creating channels for women leaders to influence higher-level policies (for example, involving seasoned women panchayat leaders in district

planning committees or state advisory boards) could make a significant difference. The state can leverage its rich legacy of grassroots mobilization to now champion gender equality at the grassroots.

In conclusion, women panchayat leaders in West Bengal have navigated a challenging landscape to register commendable achievements in rural development. They stand as pillars of grassroots democracy, bringing development closer to those on the margins and voicing concerns long overlooked. Their story is one of progress amid struggle – a testament to resilience and a reminder that true empowerment requires continuous effort. As West Bengal and India move forward, the hope is that the foundation laid by these women – in transforming local governance and challenging social norms – will lead to an even more inclusive and just rural society. The achievements to date should be celebrated, and the challenges should invigorate stakeholders to act, so that the vision of gender-equitable development through Panchayati Raj becomes a full reality in the years to come.

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