

Dalit Women's Right to Political Participation in Rural Panchayati Raj

A study of Gujarat and Tamil Nadu

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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“More and more Dalit¹ women should contest the elections and get elected to the panchayat, and help the Dalit community become liberated from their bondage. Like the dominant castes², the Dalits should join hands with other Dalit sub-groups and stand together against the dominant castes. They should be able to work independently in the panchayats and stop being proxies for the dominant castes. We Dalits need to focus on our progress, throwing off our subordination.”

- Annammal, village panchayat President in Madurai district, Tamil Nadu

“Reservation has meant little difference other than formal elections: it has not meant any real change for women other than their ability to move outside the house.”

- Dalit women elected representatives, Ahmedabad district, Gujarat

Direct political participation of Dalit women in local governance (Panchayati Raj) is a central human right in itself and enables the realisation of a host of other human rights. Political voice and decision-making power concerning basic services, economic development and social justice are critical factors in challenging and transforming structural caste-class-gender discrimination, and enabling Dalit women to realise their fundamental rights. Political participation also demands accountability from state and non-state actors to guarantee and respect these women’s equal political voice and development. This requires a transformation of power relationships both within institutions of governance and in the women’s social environment.

Recent legal and policy reforms in India to ensure the representation of marginalised social groups in decentralised governance, including Dalits and specifically Dalit women, through constitutionally mandated reservations (affirmative action quotas) in Panchayati Raj institutions bring these issues to the fore. They demand analysis to determine how Dalit women are enabled to claim their right to political participation in local governance, and the extent to which this participation is an effective tool for empowerment and realisation of human rights for excluded social groups. Annammal³, quoted above, calls on Dalit women to persevere with the ‘social revolution’ that the panchayat system and reservations therein have started in India. At the same time, the more tempered words by the Dalit women panchayat representatives from Ahmedabad district are an assessment of the present political situation and indicate where change is required: formal authority does not equal political power.

Key questions therefore posed in this research⁴ are:

¹ Dalits are defined in this research by the criterion of the social practice of ‘untouchability’. Thus, while the vast majority of the Dalit women in the research are Scheduled Caste (SC) in their legal identity, there are also a few Dalit Christians who are not legally SC. Nonetheless, Dalit Christians are very much ‘untouchable’, and therefore Dalit, in their social identity as defined by the communities in which they live.

² The term ‘dominant caste’ is used to refer to those castes, irrespective of any religious affiliation, which are socially, politically and economically dominant from the perspective of Dalits. In this usage, not only ‘upper’ or ‘Forward Castes’ but also a whole range of ‘Backward Castes’ are termed ‘dominant caste’ because, even though they may suffer discrimination at the hands of more ‘Forward Castes’, they nonetheless wield real political, social and economic power over Dalits. In most cases, everyone in a village or town who is not a Dalit or Adivasi, is dominant vis-à-vis Dalits.

³ The names of all the Dalit women interviewees have been changed to preserve anonymity, and this report mentions only (i) the title/status of the key actors who obstructed the women’s political participation, (ii) the panchayat tier and (iii) the actual names of the districts and states.

⁴ This research is based on interviews with 200 Dalit women across the two states of Tamil Nadu and Gujarat, including both women who had failed to access panchayat institutions as well as elected women presidents and members in all three panchayat tiers, spanning the last two panchayat *election* periods, i.e. 2000-2006. A series of focus group and individual interviews also were conducted with Dalit women elected representatives as well as various others stakeholders, including government officials, dominant caste elected representatives, and Dalit women and men villagers.

1. Are Dalit women able to access panchayat posts and, once elected, exercise freely political power and authority for the welfare of their constituency, Dalits and women in particular?
2. What factors and structures facilitate or inhibit Dalit women's access, participation and impact in Panchayati Raj?
3. What is the role of various state institutions in preventing and responding to obstructions⁵ against Dalit women in Panchayati Raj?

I. Access to Panchayat Posts

“In the patriarchal system, there are lots of struggles for women to win the election. And within the system, Dalit women have to struggle more than other women. It is very difficult for them to win the election because nobody believes that they have the ability to carry out panchayat works. Everyone plays politics with them and against them just because they – dominant castes and men – never want Dalit women to control the panchayat administration.... Men never accept women's leadership and there is a need for specific attention to this by making proper use of the reservation policy as Babasaheb's⁶ blessing to us. Dalit women have to reap the benefits of this opportunity by actively engaging themselves in creating models of leadership.”

- Lakshmiben, village panchayat President, Vadodara district, Gujarat

Only a minority of the 200 Dalit women in this research, approximately one-third, were able to act with independence and freedom to win the panchayat elections. Both personal factors such as education, experience on social issues, motivation to bring development to their community and others, prior performance in panchayats, political negotiation skills, as well as external factors including family support, good relations with other villagers, economic stability and family's political contacts, all played a supportive role in enabling women to access panchayat positions. Given the low social, educational, economic and gender status of these women, however, they could be challenged and overpowered relatively easily by dominant forces.

For the majority of Dalit women, the panchayat election process masks strong, caste-based patriarchal control over them and the enjoyment of their rights. Around 85% of Dalit women were pushed into panchayat politics primarily by dominant castes or their husbands, the former often working through the women's husbands. Dominant castes also for the most part sought to directly engineer elections by consensus, thereby making the reservation policy redundant. The primary tool for this, and the most significant factor drawn from this research, was *benami* or proxy politics.

Tactics of Control

The effective use of proxy candidature provided legitimised political space for primarily dominant caste men and secondarily Dalit men to exploit Dalit women, and reinforce their own interests and the suppression of these women. At the same time, this denied Dalit women's right to independent and empowered participation in local governance. For example, a dominant caste man in Anand district in Gujarat named Dalit woman Gangaben a consensus candidate for the panchayat President's post, alongside determining the entire panchayat membership and making his wife the

⁵ Obstruction in this study refers to the denial of Dalit women's right to participate in panchayat institutions perpetrated by non-state or state actors. Intended to hinder the fulfilment of panchayat duties, these obstructions may be verbal, physical or otherwise, may be caused either directly or indirectly through an intermediary agent, and may be overt or covert.

⁶ Babasaheb refers to Dr B.R. Ambedkar, a prominent Dalit leader who was also one of the drafters of the *Constitution of India 1949*.

Vice President. The night before the news of this consensus panchayat became public, the man came to Gangaben's house to tell her that she had been elected President while threatening to stop her husband's work if she did not allow him to control the panchayat administration through her.

To ensure success in proxy politics, various strategies were employed drawing on Dalit women's vulnerabilities: their low gender status in the family (as economically dependent and bounded within marital and kinship relations); their low gender, caste and class status (as woman and Dalit, as illiterate and labourer) in society; their old age or widowhood status; exploiting and deepening intra-Dalit divisions through supporting one sub-caste against another, often to prevent a more assertive or vocal sub-caste member from being elected. Livelihood dependency and lack of sufficient financial resources to meet election expenses also made the women vulnerable to proxy politics especially from dominant castes and political parties (dominated by dominant castes). Further, traditional, and in Gujarat state supported⁷, consensus politics was used to uphold the caste-class-gender hierarchical status quo. According to Dalit women elected representatives in Ahmedabad district in Gujarat, "*Consensus candidates who get selected are usually illiterate, poor people who are influenced by dominant castes on whom they depend for employment. Whoever becomes President through consensus always has to act as a pawn of the village.*" Similarly, Dalit women elected representatives in Cuddalore district in Tamil Nadu stated, "*It is completely wrong to be elected unopposed or unanimously. This way of election is an instrument to strengthen the power of the dominant castes. Not only this, it is against democratic rights, freedom and equality. This is another kind of violence that dominant castes use against us.*"

Active Obstructions during Electoral Process

Control over the election process was also achieved through other means, aiming to prevent or discourage the Dalit women from filing nominations (experienced by 12.5% of the women), or to force or push them to withdraw their nominations (14.5% of the women). This included pressure in the forms of caste and sexually-based abuse, allegations of immoral behaviour, threats, bribes and vilifying campaigns against women's capacity to govern, physical assaults and property destruction. It further included restrictions on freedoms through social norms preventing movement outside the home for campaigning, livelihood demands and compulsions of household responsibilities.

Obstructions also arose as a result of Dalit caste or sub-caste assertion, with identity politics playing a major role in the electoral process. A clear example was when dominant castes put up candidates from a smaller Dalit sub-caste, or divided the Dalit vote by supporting multiple candidates from one Dalit sub-caste to contest. This was done in order to obstruct independent and active Dalit women supporting Dalits' interests from nominating for panchayat posts, thereby challenging the norms of dominant caste authority and control. As a result of mainly dominant caste efforts, therefore, 34 women failed to secure a panchayat seat. Likewise, rival Dalit women candidates and their families sometimes obstructed women in their efforts to secure the reserved seat for their own sub-caste or other interests, or to ensure that Dalit interests were represented in the panchayat rather than dominant caste interests through proxy Dalit candidates.

⁷ Under the Samras Gram Panchayat Scheme introduced by the Gujarat state government in 2001, cash awards up to Rs. 1,87,500 are given to village panchayats whose members are elected by consensus.

The obstructions 10.5% of the women faced – primarily from dominant castes and other Dalit candidates/families – were heightened on the election day, when widespread breaches of the rule of law and electoral process were evident. Illegal voting practices included threatening or physically preventing the women candidates or other Dalits from voting or entering the election booths, attempted bogus voting, bribes given to voters to vote for rival candidates, and harassment or assault against the women. Further, 15.1% of Dalit women also faced problems following the release of election results, thus being denied their right to post-election safety and security.

Overall then, out of the 200 Dalit women interviewed, 166 women (83.0%) entered into the panchayats as either presidents or members. Out of these women, 83.7% did so through elections, 13.9% were nominated as consensus candidates and 2.4% were elected unopposed. The predominance of Dalit women entering through seats reserved specifically for them (SC women reserved) worked on the caste and gender biased assumption that general women reserved seats are for dominant caste women and SC reserved seats are for Dalit men. Dalit women then are effectively ghettoised into those seats specifically reserved for them.

II. Participation in the Panchayats

“Being the majority, the dominant castes could not accept the idea of being under a ‘low’ caste Dalit leader. So, for namesake they made me, a Dalit, the President. The dominant caste Vice President and other dominant caste members took away from me all powers and responsibilities. I did not even convene a meeting. I went to the panchayat office only when I was asked to go... I functioned like this because I have no education and belong to a low caste. Though I was given training, I was in such a situation that I could not do anything at all. We cannot speak against the dominant caste men. Even the [government] officials do not care for us. When they come to the village or panchayat office, they do not force us to come and attend the meetings. They simply speak with the Vice President, deal official business with him and then leave the place. How can Dalits function well in such a situation?”

- Thilagam, village panchayat President, Coimbatore district, Tamil Nadu

Once elected, dominant caste male control over panchayat resources and ingrained discriminatory attitudes continued to govern to a large extent the experiences of Dalit women panchayat representatives. At least three-quarters of these women were either proxies or faced strong opposition and obstructions while attempting to work for the benefit of their community. The study findings confirm the Concluding Observations of the CERD Committee on the Indian Government’s Report in 2007 that: *“Dalit candidates, especially women, are frequently forcibly prevented from standing for election or, if elected, forced to resign from village councils or other elected bodies or not to exercise their mandate.”*⁸

Fulfilment of Panchayat Roles

Only one-third of 119 Dalit women presidents were able to discharge their official responsibilities with freedom and independence. Taking three basic presidential roles, only 35.3% of women called panchayat meetings, 31.9% chaired them, and 27.7% voluntarily signed resolutions. Only 26.1% of women voluntarily authorised panchayat payments (or monitored the panchayat administration and supervised the work of the BDOs/TDOs or DDOs⁹ as per their role at taluka/union or district levels). Similarly, only 23.5% of women approved contracts for panchayat

⁸ Un Doc. CERD/C/IND/CO/19.

⁹ BDO/ TDO/ DDO refer to block/taluka/district development officers respectively.

development works (or reviewed them as per their role at taluka/union or district levels). Instead, a number of women spoke of rubber-stamping panchayat decisions and signing cheques at the behest of others. The motive for these actions by dominant caste panchayat members, according to a group of Dalit women villagers in Madurai district in Tamil Nadu, is: “[They] think that if they allow [the Dalit woman President] to function in the panchayat, she will work for the welfare of Dalits. And if they allow this once, it will become a tradition in future, so she should continue to be subjugated under them. Thus they take away all responsibilities from her.”

Power politics thus meant that dominant caste males, and to a lesser extent Dalit males and political parties controlled by dominant castes, were the real authority bearers in the majority of Dalit women headed panchayats. Data on proxy representation reveals that a little less than one-fifth of elected Dalit women functioned as proxies for their husbands and/or male relatives out of a total of 59% proxy representatives, as compared to the one-third of elected women who were proxies for dominant castes and less than one-tenth for others including political parties. Thus the generally accepted assumption that Dalit women are mostly proxies for their husbands, like other caste women, was disproved through this research.

Further, while over half (52.4%) of the 166 elected presidents and members attended many or all of the panchayat meetings held during their term in office, only around half these women were vocal in terms of raising development-related and other issues in meetings. The remainder, most of them presidents, did not raise any new issues during meetings. For just over half of the 90 Dalit women who raised issues in panchayat meetings (52.2%), however, their issues were never or only a few times discussed and approved. Moreover, what must be borne in mind is the number of women directed by dominant castes or their husbands as to what issues to discuss in meetings, essentially serving others’ interests. Otherwise, especially Dalit women panchayat presidents often faced opposition and had to struggle to get their proposals discussed and approved.

Active Obstructions and other Disabling Factors for Participation

Around one-quarter of Dalit women elected representatives (23%) were restricted by others from active participation in panchayat council meetings. For example: they were prevented from attending; their right to speak was opposed; others spoke in their place; they faced caste or sexually charged abuse; others reinforced gender and caste norms on them (eg: that women should remain in the home, that Dalit women should not speak in front of dominant castes) in order to restrict their space for participation. Women who asserted their right to freely express their views in meetings were often negatively labelled as ‘outspoken’. Dominant castes and men also refused to share knowledge that would enhance the women’s administrative capabilities. This was what a dominant caste Clerk did to village panchayat President Kowsalya from Coimbatore district in Tamil Nadu, in addition to which he wrote caste abusive words against her on the walls of the panchayat office, and along with dominant caste panchayat members tried to silence her in the panchayat.

More internal reasoning for low participation of the women elected representatives, mentioned by 120 Dalit women elected representatives (72.3%), concerned a number of interconnecting factors: their proxy status, fear, lack of self-confidence and knowledge connected to their poor educational status, and compliance with imposed traditional caste and gender roles. Less than one-third of women came from families with prior political experience in panchayat governance (30%) and very few had previous personal experience (16%). Viewed in light of the rotation of reserved seats, especially in Gujarat where seats rotate with every panchayat term, the implications are to

limit rather than encourage active political participation; that is, Dalit women often were offered little chance to develop their political skills over a longer period in office. As little as 44.6% of the women had never attended government organised trainings, while 75.3% have never attended trainings organised by NGOs. Hence, only between 10% and 20% of the elected representatives had solid knowledge of their own responsibilities, development programmes, officials responsible, funding issues and redress mechanisms.

Further, 37% of women presidents reported direct obstructions while undertaking their panchayat responsibilities, driven primarily from dominant caste men within or outside the panchayat. Note that the above percentage excludes the significant number of proxy presidents whose role was entirely appropriated by others. The obstructions referred to by the women included: being silenced or ignored; caste and sexually-based abuse; having bribes demanded of her; no confidence motions; denial of information on panchayat activities; harassment, threats and assaults on the women or their family members; etc. Village panchayat President Leela in Madurai district in Tamil Nadu was pushed to contest the 2006 elections as a proxy for the dominant castes. After the elections, they demanded that she submit title deeds to her house and land to them, to ensure that she would remain under their control during her term in office. Further, her panchayat powers were auctioned off to the highest dominant caste bidder. While eventually government officials intervened to arrest those participating in the auction, no further action ensued and Leela continues to be a proxy President for the dominant castes.

Discriminatory Practices

“As we are Dalits and women, we are forced to bear the brunt of double discrimination unlike our male counterparts... Other members of the panchayat do not give respect to us because we are born Dalit and female; they will even go to the extent of working against us. The dominant caste men do not let a Dalit woman function because of their wrong view that women are good for nothing, that they are simply proxies, that they cannot be permitted to involve in public life and if they do, then they are immoral women. They subject us to such discrimination precisely because they cannot bear the sight of a Dalit woman occupying a position of governance over them... In general we can say that Dalit women are forced to encounter more problems and more opposition than Dalit men, dominant caste men and women. That is to say, for a dominant caste woman, it is only her husband or a male member of her caste who can be a source of irritation, pressure and obstacles. But for a Dalit woman, such opposition comes from Dalit men, dominant caste men and women. She has to encounter three sources of obstructions. What is the reason? It is simply their anti-Dalit woman mindset; that is, these three sets of people are of the view that a Dalit woman is someone who need not be given any importance on any matter and hence can easily be dispensed with, who is incapable of asserting herself, who is ever submissive and patient, whatever is done or happens to her.”

Dalit women elected representatives in Thirunelveli district, Tamil Nadu

The fundamental right to equality and non-discrimination enshrined in *Article 15* of the *Indian Constitution* notwithstanding, 89.8% of Dalit women elected representatives felt they were treated differently from other elected representatives in their panchayats. These 149 women attributed this primarily to their status as women (90.6%) and Dalits (84.6%). Additional identities with negative connotations, such as widows or separated women, exacerbated discriminatory practices. A TDO's statement in Gujarat substantiates this data: *“Dalit women elected representatives confront problems of traditional gender and caste practices. They have to face all these challenges at the time of election and even after election as well. The caste system is an obstacle which exists at all the panchayat levels in many different forms.”* Even the Assistant

Development Commissioner in Gujarat openly stated that Dalit women faced a number of problems because “no elected representative supports Dalit women directly.” This was confirmed by a dominant caste village panchayat Vice President from Kheda district in Gujarat, in whose opinion “it is impossible for Dalit women to become capable elected representatives. If I make her capable, then she will go against me, so better not to make her capable.” Contrast all this with the statement of the Assistant Director of Panchayats in Tamil Nadu that “Dalit women do not face any problems at all.”

Aside from the caste or sexually-based abuse which over one-third of the women faced in carrying out their panchayat responsibilities, complex segregation methods surrounding seating arrangements as well as discriminatory practices related to water, tea and food were prevalent in the panchayat offices. These to a large part mirrored socio-cultural practices of untouchability prevailing outside the offices. Thus 38% of women stated that they were not allowed to sit on chairs alongside other elected representatives in the office. The extent of enforced segregation in seating is evident from the case of village panchayat member Rajniben from Ahmedabad district; in her panchayat there were two chairs for the President and Vice President, two mattresses for other panchayat members and a sack on the floor reserved for her. Over two-thirds of women (67.5%) still stood up when dominant castes entered into the panchayat office in deference to the latter’s ‘higher’ caste status. Discriminatory practices related to water, tea and food in the panchayats were also manifested in a number of ways: 64.5% of Dalit women reported that they were not able to drink water from the same container used by other elected representatives; 53.6% mentioned that they could not drink tea from the same cups used by other representatives; and 38.0% said that they could not eat food/snacks with the same plates/utensils used by the others while others indicated that food/snacks were not served in their panchayat offices.

III. Development and Social Impact

“Women’s participation, Dalit women’s in particular, in the panchayats is necessary so that society can develop. Only women will think about women’s issues. Only Dalit women can respond to and take a stand on Dalit issues and particularly on Dalit women’s issues. In as much as Dalit women’s participation is required, they also need to be given support and guidance. Then only can they become capable representatives... Nothing is attainable without exercising authority, and my desire is to increase the confidence of Dalits to fight and gain authority and power in society for their development.”

- Ramilaben, taluka panchayat President, Vadodara district, Gujarat

“[Dalit women’s political participation] is necessary for the Dalit community and its development, because if a Dalit woman comes then she will work for the Dalit community and Dalit women. Other castes will never work for the Dalit community. Moreover, they will eat up the money which comes under Dalit grants.”

- Jasodaben, village panchayat President, Surendranagar district, Gujarat

Few Dalit women elected representatives were able to exert any substantial influence in the panchayats to ensure development benefits for their communities, though many did put forward Dalit interests. Only 18.5% of Dalit women presidents felt that they had a significant say in the distribution of development schemes. At one level, the positive development outcomes for Dalits and women that some Dalit women elected representatives achieved took the form of primarily small projects for basic amenities – roads, housing, drinking water, etc. – rather than projects that would challenge existing gender-caste inequalities such as land distribution or alternative

employment opportunities for Dalits. According to a dominant caste union panchayat President from Coimbatore district, Tamil Nadu: *“To be able to function in a way that ensured distribution of resources/funds to all sections of the panchayat community, as President I saw to it that development projects were distributed to each section. However, to prevent disaffection from the dominant caste communities, prior allotment went to them, and then only to the Dalits. It also happened sometimes that one section of the dominant caste community returned for another allotment or wanted to enjoy the allotment meant for the Dalit community, thereby making the latter forego its due share...”*

Impact on Process of Resource Allocation

The second level of outcomes relates more to changing institutional rules and resource allocations in favour of Dalits and women. On this front, there was little success. The women’s ability to generate development outcomes remains significantly limited by government resistance in practice to the implementation of the Panchayati Raj system, including the full devolution of functions, powers and resources. Within this context, there was little evidence to suggest that the Dalit women panchayat representatives were able to significantly increase attention and resources to address the critical livelihood needs of Dalits or women. This was made apparent by their low participation in decision-making on the use of panchayat revenue, development and welfare funds, as well as in dominant caste male monopolisation of panchayat resources and benefits.

Accountability in Gram Sabhas and Financial Reporting

Lines of accountability to one’s panchayat constituency through the *gram sabhas* (local village assemblies) were disrupted most clearly in the case of proxies, where Dalit women elected representatives played no major role in convening these meetings and directing discussions on panchayat development works for the people. At the other end of the spectrum, a small number of active elected representatives stated that they were able to convene and preside over *gram sabhas*. In terms of financial accountability for funds received and disbursed for panchayat schemes, a large 59.6% of women (mostly proxies) could not review how funds were spent, either by monitoring accounts or the implementation of development works. The remaining roughly one-third of women elected representatives personally monitored development works, or checked the accounts to ensure that receipts reflected the funds paid out for actual work done, or took concrete action when they saw people misusing panchayat funds.

Obstructions to Dalit Development

Many Dalit women presidents/members indicated the following factors behind low development outcomes for Dalits: others’ influence over their decisions regarding development schemes to the detriment of the Dalit community (54.8%); the panchayat did not prioritise Dalit development needs (21.1%); their lack of knowledge of development issues and panchayat schemes (24.7%); active obstructions by others affecting development outcomes (29.5%). Obstructions included blocking approval of development projects; delaying the release of or misappropriating development funds; obstructing or not allowing approved development projects to be implemented; offering or demanding bribes, commissions or panchayat contracts; damaging or destroying panchayat property the women had seen built; caste and sexually-based verbal attacks on the women’s personal character and performance, etc. Consequently, dominant caste economic control was maintained through the panchayats by channelling development benefits towards their communities as well as securing development contracts. As Dalit woman elected representatives shared in a group interview in Kheda district in Gujarat, *“At least we [Dalit women] get our seat due to reservation. But still we don’t have any say in the panchayat because the dominant caste*

panchayat members, including the Talati, take away most of the ongoing work in the village as well as schemes available at the taluka level.”

Dalit women elected representatives who accomplished development gains for their communities, therefore, did so either individually amidst frequent opposition, or in several cases with the help of others. This included support from Dalit panchayat members, use of political party connections and support base in the panchayat, or negotiation with other caste panchayat members.

Social Impact on Structural Interests

Research data showed little evidence of the third level of change envisaged by Dalit women's active political participation, that is, the restructuring of gender and caste social relations towards social equality and justice. What changes occurred were mostly at the personal and family levels. Examples of personal changes were: greater self-confidence (55%); greater social contacts (37.5%); greater freedom of movement (31.5%); increased leadership skills (31%); and heightened awareness of socio-political problems in society (29.5%). The most common changes at the family level for 66 women (39.8%) were that families shared responsibilities in looking after the children while the elected women were fulfilling their official duties, consulted these women more on important family matters, and allowed them greater decision-making power in family affairs. Overall, greater freedom of speech in both the family as well as public spaces emerged as one of the most significant influences of active Dalit women's political participation. Further benefits included greater public participation and freedom of movement.

Changes to Dalit women's 'low' social status, however, were rare, reflecting entrenched caste and gender interests linked to dominant caste exercise of socio-political power and control over resources. Hence, while over half the Dalit women elected representatives (58.4%) felt they were more respected as a result of their position in the panchayat, few could exercise actual socio-political power and effect longer-term changes in social status. Village panchayat President Jasodaben from Surendranagar district in Gujarat was forthright in stating: *“because I was President and useful to them, both Dalits and non-Dalits respected me, but they never supported me as an individual. That was also because of reservations; otherwise who really respects Dalits?”*

According to 34.3% of Dalit women elected representatives, their political participation had generated some change among women, mainly that some women were able to speak up in their households and *gram sabhas* more freely. Other Dalit women also increasingly recognised their own capacities for leadership and expressed greater willingness to contest panchayat elections. By comparison, only 28.9% of Dalit women elected representatives indicated change in attitudes towards them from the Dalit community, mainly in terms of Dalits now approaching these women to represent their developmental problems to government officials; Dalits now settling disputes among themselves under the women's leadership; and other Dalits now feeling that they too had the capacity to play leadership roles in village administration. Some also noted greater confidence exhibited by Dalits (32.5%) as well as increased unity among them (22%).

The majority of the women witnessed little transformation of caste prejudices or reduced discriminatory practices either towards themselves or their community. Only 21.1% of Dalit women elected representatives mentioned some change, mainly in terms of greater ability to interact with dominant castes as a result of their public office, greater freedom to walk along dominant caste streets in the villages, and being able to wear shoes while on official panchayat

duties. To be noted, though, is that changes in support patterns, respect and attitudes of dominant castes towards Dalit women panchayat representatives that did occur did not include recognition of Dalit women's power and authority, especially as panchayat heads. This was most clearly highlighted through dominant caste support that was withdrawn following the women's support for Dalit development needs or assertions of independence. In the case of Kamachi, twice-elected village panchayat President from Coimbatore district in Tamil Nadu, she faced constant opposition from dominant castes during her tenure as President. Then, after her defeat in the 2006 election, her chair was removed from the office and the dominant castes performed a *pooja* (religious ritual) to 'purify' the office. Only after this did the next dominant caste President come and sit on the president's chair in the office.

By contrast, negative consequences included the reinforcement of gender and caste hierarchies and dominance, thereby helping to preserve the inequitable political status quo and deter Dalit women from active political participation in future. These included fear and insecurity of life caused by harassment, threats and violence, and decreased self-confidence among the Dalit women. In the case of Reshmaben, in addition to an attack on her and other Dalits after she won the election to the village panchayat member's seat in Ahmedabad district in Gujarat, her sub-caste was socially boycotted by the main dominant castes. The instigation of Dalit sub-caste divisions by dominant castes in order to control the exercise of Dalits' political power also raises serious concern, as mentioned by 22.5% of the women. This reality contrasts sharply with the recent statement of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on the impact of reservations for women in local governance, which he asserted "*constitutes a historic measure for gender equality. It has brought about a significant shift in public policy and in social attitudes towards women.*"¹⁰

IV. Responsiveness of the State

"I did not take other problems concerning the Vice President's cheating behaviour to the police. I was well aware it would mean more expense and no action would be taken against the dominant caste man. I suffered it all within ... Ever since I decided to enter the panchayat, I am fighting against injustice and atrocities ... Be it a Dalit or non-Dalit woman, their participation in the panchayat administration is never appreciated in this patriarchal country. Then what is the value of social justice here?"

- Pushpa, village panchayat President, Thirunelveli district, Tamil Nadu, after facing police inaction following her numerous complaints of obstructions during the election process

Overall, the Indian law enforcement machinery and district administration repeatedly failed in their national and international obligations to both prevent and respond to obstructions that Dalit women experienced while asserting their right to political participation. This denied the women their right to an effective remedy. These officials repeatedly failed to ensure the implementation of laws and to ensure access to justice for legal violations in relation to Dalit women's political participation. This demonstrated disturbing signs of impunity – impunity exercised in the name of caste power, leaving dominant caste and male perpetrators free from accountability. Dominant caste power therefore remained entrenched both within the state governance and law enforcement systems as well as the local social system.

¹⁰ Prime Minister Manmohan Singh speech at East Asia Gender Quality Ministerial Meeting, New Delhi, 06.12.2007, reported by Special Correspondent, "We are Committed to Providing Quotas for Women in Governance", The Hindu, 07.12.2007.

Women who did not Seek Redress for Obstructions

Given their socio-political situation, the majority of Dalit women kept silent in 71.3% of instances of obstructions: most felt unable to oppose caste-class-gender norms and discrimination (32.5%), or feared dominant caste reaction (16.3%), or felt it futile to raise protest (14.7%), or ignored or tried to resolve the problem with the support of their families (11.8%). For example, Sareekaben, a village panchayat President in Surendranagar district in Gujarat, while taking strong action in response to violations at various times, also let many go by without action. This was because: *“they [dominant castes] have money and contacts with the police station, bank, taluka and district panchayat, right up to the State Assembly. In such a situation, any person – no matter how courageous or determined – becomes tired of fighting and loses hope.the [dominant castes’] influence is everywhere.”*

Women who did Seek Redress for Obstructions

Dalit women who did seek redress found more often than not that justice was not accessible for them. The women rarely approached non-state actors, especially from their community, with their complaints (only for 1.3% of obstructions). This may be explained by various reasons, including the women’s understanding that it was the government officials and other formal actors that were actually responsible for taking action to remedy violations faced by them, or the pressure on Dalit village elders to conform to dominant caste interests out of fear, or simply because of the women’s lack of faith in the elders’ responsiveness. Overall, therefore, just over two-thirds of non-state actors – mainly Dalit elders, traditional panchayat elders, political parties, NGOs, and family members – approached by the women regarding obstructions did not support Dalit women to achieve effective redress.

The most common recourse for those women who did take action regarding 28.7% of obstructions, was to approach mainly government officials linked to the panchayats or the police. Just over half of responses from state actors – the police, administrative and judicial courts, government officials and government related bodies – also suggest a breach in duties. A total of 24.7% of responses from state actors involved further obstructions to the women’s efforts, such as chasing the women away, taking no action, demanding a bribe, and refusing to provide any assistance. Pressure or advice not to file any complaint, or pressure to enter into a compromise comprised another 17.9% of state actor responses. Finally, 13.7% of complaints led to registration, but state actors refused to investigate the matter or file a charge sheet, and 1.4% of FIR cases went no further than investigation. This may be due to both compromises outside of police engagement or police refusal to take the matter further.

Far from the norm were the experiences of state officials being responsive to Dalit women – 5.5% of state actors advised the women on how to approach the problem; 16.4% investigated and resolved their problems; and 11.0% filed the women’s complaints, investigated the matter and helped the women to reach a compromise or solution. For instance, the District Collector helped Janaki, a village panchayat President in Cuddalore district in Tamil Nadu, by pacifying the Vice President who opposed her, and ensuring the construction of the road she had planned.

Finally, a small number of cases went to the stage of judicial proceedings, with 8.9% of state responses leading to court proceedings. Breaking down these cases, 4.8% are still pending (seven through police action and one through a woman filing a petition directly with the court), 3.4% had verdicts in favour of the Dalit woman (four cases initiated directly with the court and one filed through police action) and finally, in one case Shiviben, village panchayat President in Kheda

district in Gujarat, lost against a no confidence motion brought against her when a witness turned hostile during the judicial proceedings.

Interactions with Government Officials

Government officials were often complicit in reinforcing dominant caste male power by adopting the role of neutral facilitator regarding Dalit women's political participation: that is, they failed to intervene when witnessing proxy representation and discrimination, or pleaded lack of power to take action. A BDO in Tamil Nadu stated, *"During my tenure [as BDO], many Dalit women members and presidents sought my help. When they come to speak about their problems, their husbands accompany them and they only speak."* In fact, some government officials suggested that their sole jurisdiction over issues Dalit women elected representatives brought to them concerned only development schemes and funds. As an Assistant Director for Panchayats in Tamil Nadu emphasised, *"There could have been caste discrimination or violence [in the panchayat]. But the panchayat representatives give more importance to administrative problems and not to any discriminatory practices. We cannot go and force them to talk about such problems... And it is not our duty or responsibility at all to respond to caste problems. We monitor only Dalit women's administration."* The afore-mentioned BDO similarly pointed out that officials had no duty to take action on complaints of caste or gender based discrimination. This was confirmed by a TDO from Gujarat, who while noting the problems Dalit women elected representatives faced due to caste and gender discrimination, insisted that government officials cannot intervene in these practices as these are *'very sensitive and emotional issues for the community'*. Thus, while constitutional provisions render illegal discrimination on grounds of caste or gender, and reservations in the panchayats aim to correct structural discrimination against Dalits and women, government officials expect those affected by discrimination to deal with such problems. The only conclusion to be drawn is negligence by these officials in the execution of their legally mandated supervisory roles over the panchayats.

For the 117 Dalit women elected representatives who visited government and other officials in connection with their panchayat responsibilities, positive indications are that 39.3% of women had their invitations accepted by officials to visit their panchayats; 36.8% mentioned how officials implemented schemes requested by them or otherwise supported them in implementing schemes; and 34.2% stated that officials took prompt action on the women's requests or complaints.

On the other hand, officials also harassed Dalit women elected representatives by making them frequent visit government offices to deal with the same matter, or delayed in implementing schemes despite repeated requests from the women, as mentioned by 23.1% of women. Linked to this, 17.9% of women had to wait for a long time to meet these officials to discuss official panchayat matters. A further 2.6% of women also mentioned how government officials expected bribes in order to render any service to the women. Further, as noted by Jasodaben from Surendranagar district in Gujarat, *"Whenever I approached government officials, they never responded immediately and they didn't do work fast. Only if they [dominant castes] approach do government officials respond quickly."* Another 6.0% of women experienced government officials taking little or no action on their requests. Finally, in the case of four women, they experienced overt forms of discrimination from government officials based on their caste and gender. Government officials also generally failed to adequately monitor the reserved panchayats, displaying a lack of accountability including turning a blind eye to corrupt practices such as the diversion of funds meant for Dalit development.

The Indian state, therefore, appeared to limit its obligation to providing free access to panchayats, vis-à-vis specially protected groups such as Dalit women, via the reservation of panchayat seats. This stops far short of ensuring that the women enjoy the benefits of this policy in its implementation – that they enjoy free and independent political participation. In a complex society structured along highly unequal caste-class-gender lines, to place the entire burden of safety and security in accessing political participation on the shoulders of Dalit women who are traditionally excluded from enjoying this right, and to expect them to act with freedom and independence in the electoral process, suggests abdication of state duty.

V. Key Recommendations

“Our challenge today is to institutionalise this system of local self-governance, but also to make it the world’s most representative and participatory democracy.”

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, inaugural speech, Conference of Chief Ministers, New Delhi, 29.06.04

The institutionalisation of the Panchayati Raj system – with all its aims and ambitions – must be further revisited on the basis of the core issues elaborated in this research. There are major weaknesses in the current interpretation and implementation of reservations in Panchayati Raj, as well as in broader strategies to transform a society pervaded by caste-class-gender discrimination. At present, these dramatically limit the ability of the panchayats to fulfil their core objectives of equitable development and social justice. Specifically, they impact negatively on the space for Dalit women to create development and social outcomes in line with these objectives.

Essentially, required reforms must recognise that political participation cannot be viewed in isolation: efforts to realise other enabling rights – especially the rights to education and information, to free employment, alongside the right to equality within the family and in society – must be integrated with efforts to ensure Dalit women’s enjoyment of their right to political participation. Sustained systemic change requires multiple state and non-state actors at the state and national levels working together to influence formal and non-formal local institutions of power and to strengthen Dalit women’s sense of confidence, skills, power and support networks. Creative ways must be explored, with Dalit women as well as Dalit men and non-Dalits, to capitalise on the success stories of Dalit women’s political leadership, and cultivate their growth. Inspiring examples of Dalit women elected representatives speak of the great potential for further political and social reform through active participation in panchayat governance. Ultimately efforts must lead to a supportive environment for these women’s political participation in order to transform access to and control over resources and benefits in society, as well as promote a human rights culture that itself demands accountable governance and equality for all.

1. To the Government of India, Governments of Gujarat and Tamil Nadu:

Panchayat Structure and Special Support Mechanisms

- Effectively enforce the reservation policy by ensuring the rights of Dalits to freely and safely vote and stand for election and to exercise their full mandate if elected to their reserved seats (as per CERD Committee Concluding Observations on Indian Government Report 2007). This includes adequate police and government official monitoring and protection of Dalit candidates as well as elected representatives.
- Devolve greater functions, funds and functionaries to the panchayats so that they have effective political authority and discharge their duties and functions as local institutions of self-government within the meaning contemplated by the *Indian Constitution*. This

includes lessening bureaucratic control over panchayat programmes and making bureaucrats more accountable to the panchayats, especially as regards abiding by panchayat decisions.

- Institute quotas in the lower level bureaucracy for SC women and men, ST women and men, and women in general as per panchayat quotas, to ensure that government officials, especially BDOs/TDOs, are representative of these sections of the population. Moreover, the reserved panchayats should come under the direction of these government officials. Similar quotas should be established in the local and district police forces.
- Establish a specific office in each district to act as a support mechanism for Dalit, Adivasi and women panchayat presidents, including providing advice, training and information as well as monitoring their implementation of duties and interventions by others such as panchayat members and government officials. These offices should mediate and resolve problems encountered by the above panchayat representatives and ensure the efficient and effective running of the panchayats. Dalit and Adivasi women and men, as well as other women, should be all represented as much as possible in each office.

Planning and Budgets

- Facilitate a mandatory process of village, taluka/union and district panchayats preparing a scheduled caste development plan with a clear gender component, which should become a charter to work towards the economic development of Dalit women and men in the panchayats (as per recommendation of National Commission for SCs/STs).
- *In Gujarat:* Allocate separate funds to the Social Justice Committees, which can independently decide on utilisation of these funds. These funds could be used to organise gender awareness camps and camps on the *SC/ST (PA) Act*.

Gram Sabhas

- Give the *gram sabhas* greater powers to monitor the functioning of the panchayats and decide on budgets and the allocation of funds and other resources, as well as the identification of beneficiaries for panchayat schemes. Village development plans should be formulated by the *gram sabhas*, which would then feed into development plans at the taluka/union and district levels. Information on gram sabha meeting agendas must be publicly shared in advance.
- Establish separate quorums for participation by SC women, SC men, ST women, ST men and women in general in *gram sabhas* and *sub-gram sabhas* (i.e. *ward sabhas*).

Panchayat Administration

- Make it mandatory for all panchayat cheques to be signed in the presence of members, for funds to be sanctioned with the signature of the panchayat president alone, and for all accounts to be compulsorily shared with members in all meetings.
- Mandate that in all government contracts related to common properties, these contracts benefit Dalits in proportion to their population.
- Announce incentives (for example, monetary resources, land, government employment or scholarships for children's education) before the period for filing nominations to panchayat seats to encourage Dalit women to file nominations for general panchayat seats, and award these to Dalit women who win these seats.

Economic Development

- In order to improve the economic conditions of Dalits in rural areas, necessary to facilitate their political participation, develop a national perspective plan with explicit short- and long-term goals for overall development of Dalit women within fixed time-bound targets and allocate separate funding for this plan (as per recommendation of National Human Rights Commission).
- Enforce land reforms and land distribution to the landless on a priority basis and initiate a drive to remove encroachments on government lands and other common lands.
- *To the State Election Commissions:* Establish a small fund to provide limited basic financial support for election costs for Dalits, Adivasis and women in general falling within stipulated low household income brackets.
- Establish a minimum salary system for all panchayat president posts and members' posts at the higher tiers, with increased travel allowance, dearness allowance and sitting fees considering their powers and duties, to encourage less corruption and more transparency in the panchayat administration (as per recommendations of Tamil Nadu Women Panchayat President's Federation).

Monitoring and Accountability Mechanisms

- Establish an autonomous statutory Directorate for all reserved panchayats at the state level to be headed by a Dalit/Adivasi woman IAS officer, and Assistant Directorates at the district level to function under the Directorate and to be headed by a Dalit/Adivasi woman officer below the rank of IAS. These two institutions should fall under the jurisdiction of the Legislative Assembly through the Governor, to perform such responsibilities as monitoring and reviewing the pre- and post-election performance of the reserved panchayats, and prepare annual reports to the Legislative Assembly. *Gram sabhas* as well as local non-governmental organisations focusing on Panchayati Raj should be made part of the monitoring mechanisms appointed by the Directorate in consultation with the Assistant Directorates, and the monitoring reports should be made publicly available to villagers in the *gram sabhas*.
- Make it mandatory for government officials in charge of Panchayati Raj to pay monthly visits to the panchayats and monitor development works in progress as well as, explicitly, issues of discrimination and other obstacles prevailing in panchayats. They should also check the panchayat accounts during their monthly visits.
- The District Collector should convene monthly meetings with all village panchayat presidents, and a separate meeting with presidents in the different categories of reserved posts – Dalit women, Dalit men, Adivasi men, Adivasi women and general women – on a monthly or bi-monthly basis, in order to understand the different needs and obstacles faced by these different groups, and to resolve their specific difficulties and problems. BDOs/TDOs attached to the respective reserved panchayats should also attend these meetings.
- Monitor regularly government training programmes to ensure women are attending and not sending their husbands in their stead, with sanctions applicable to government officials who allow this practice.
- Evolve strict government rules and programmes to eradicate the presence of proxy candidates, by ensuring that: at all panchayat tiers only elected representatives attend panchayat meetings and meetings with government officials; panchayat funds are sanctioned with the signature of the president alone; mechanisms for closer monitoring of panchayats with Dalit, women and Adivasi presidents; educational programmes for all

Dalit, Adivasi and women presidents and members with little or no literacy skills; comprehensive mandatory training at the commencement of the term for Dalit women, Adivasi women and other women on panchayat governance; establishing a rule that no two family members should contest elections for posts in the same panchayat.

- Implement strict legal sanctions against government and police officials who neglect to respond to complaints by persons who have filed nominations for panchayat posts or by elected panchayat representatives in reserved panchayats.
- Every five years, evaluate the performance of the panchayat institutions, with specific evaluation of all reserved panchayat posts, both presidents and members, and provide gender-and-sex data on the numbers and functioning of elected representatives, numbers of no confidence motions initiated and ending with dismissal, etc. (as per recommendation of Rajiv Gandhi Chair for Panchayat Studies).

Policy and Legal Amendments

- *In Gujarat*: Immediately withdraw the government Samras Gram Yojna policy (consensus panchayat scheme) and ensure that all panchayat posts are established through regular, democratic elections.
- *In Gujarat*: Promulgate a Government Order with a new rule to the *Gujarat Panchayats Act 1993*, to stipulate that reserved panchayats rotate after every two terms – i.e. ten years.
- Amend both the *Gujarat* and *Tamil Nadu Panchayat Acts* to ensure that where it is a SC women or ST or general women reserved panchayat, the Vice President and Talati/Clerk are from the same reserved category.
- Amend both the *Gujarat* and *Tamil Nadu Panchayat Acts* to impose an additional burden of proof on panchayats which dismiss presidents from office using no confidence motions. In addition, the use of no confidence motions against Dalit, Adivasi and women presidents should be strictly monitored by government officials, and timely investigations carried out in all cases to ensure that these presidents are given an equal opportunity to serve out their entire term. In this regard, in Tamil Nadu *sec. 205 Tamil Nadu Panchayats Act* should be repealed so as to remove the discretionary powers of the District Collectors to remove panchayat presidents.
- Amend the *SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989* to include offences related to interference with Dalits' political participation: that is, any person not being a member of a scheduled caste or scheduled tribe forcing, intimidating or bribing a member of a scheduled caste or scheduled tribe to function as a *benami* for them; and any person not being a member of a scheduled caste or scheduled tribe instigating false or malicious no confidence motions or complaints against panchayat presidents with the intention to remove them from office. The latter offence could be created through a suitable amendment to *sec. 3(1)(viii) SC/ST (PA) Act* – instituting false, malicious or vexatious suit or criminal or other legal proceedings against a member of a scheduled caste or scheduled tribe – to include no confidence motions in the panchayats.
- Mandate the National and State Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe and Women's Commissions with sufficient powers, funds and staff to specifically inquire into acts of political obstruction or violence committed against Dalit women, Dalit men, Adivasi women, Adivasi men and other women elected representatives.
- Provide free legal aid for Dalit women panchayat representatives who seek access to judicial redress for obstructions in the performance of their official duties, and review the reasons why Dalit women are unable to access legal aid in many cases.

Capacitation and Support Measures

- Conduct open information sessions in all panchayat union/taluka headquarters immediately after the announcement of panchayat elections on election procedures, the importance of reservations and Dalit, Adivasi and women's political participation.
- In addition to regular panchayat trainings for all panchayat representatives, devise and conduct special trainings for Dalits, Adivasis and women elected representatives, as closely as possible to the start of their term of office, in order to specifically capacitate them for their panchayat duties. All trainings should include a gender and caste perspective, as well as legal sanctions which apply to those who block Dalit women's political participation.
- Integrate gender and caste awareness training into all trainings for panchayat representatives, including methods of recourse in cases of discrimination and other rights violations towards Dalits, Adivasis and women. These trainings should further specifically focus on promoting a culture of inclusive development, accountability and transparency in the panchayat administration.
- Form associations/networks, or strengthen existing associations/networks of women panchayat representatives at the village, taluka/union and district levels with specific focus on the different experiences of Dalit and Adivasi women representatives. These should operate as both support networks to women elected representatives as well as an effective lobbying block to, among other things, restructure the allocation of resources for Dalit, Adivasi and women's development.
- Capacitate all officials concerned with Panchayati Raj, including election officers, rural extension officers and particularly lower government officials dealing with the panchayats, to understand and respond to issues of caste and gender discrimination, encourage greater information sharing and less bureaucratic control over panchayat development schemes, so that these officials are able to better monitor and support Dalit women elected representatives in the panchayats to ensure others do not coerce the women into relinquishing their powers.
- Conduct training programmes to increase the awareness and capacity of local police and the local and district courts to understand and respond to issues of caste and gender discrimination and violence, including in the panchayats. This should include awareness on national and international human rights laws, in particular legislation concerning Dalits, and implications for these officials' duties.
- Ensure the universalisation of primary education among Dalit women, and promote their further education. Current strategies for increasing the female literacy rate, especially among Dalit girls and women, must be strengthened.
- Conduct a widespread social education campaign through the media and local fora on gender and caste equality and non-discrimination in order to support broad change in social attitudes towards Dalits, Adivasis and women in particular. One specific component of this campaign should focus on promoting inclusive democracy through the free and independent participation of Dalits, Adivasis and women in the panchayats.

2. To Civil Society Groups:

- Build up a widespread campaign and lobby the respective Gujarat and Tamil Nadu governments as well as the national government in order to strengthen political will to implement the political reforms suggested above. This includes applying pressure through monitoring and further exposing the failure of government monitoring mechanisms for panchayat governance.

- Conduct regular trainings on public speaking, leadership and managerial skills, problem solving and how to interact with government officials separately for elected panchayat representatives as well as those aspiring to become elected representatives.
- Address the female burden of dual responsibility between panchayats and households through greater education and economic programmes targeting Dalit women, as well as lobbying the government to implement or directly providing support mechanisms such as child care facilities.
- Initiate gender sensitisation programmes specifically aimed at Dalit men, to encourage them to extend greater freedom to women in their families and to support Dalit women elected representatives both within and outside the panchayats. Gender and caste sensitisation programmes should also be conducted separately for all male elected representatives as well as government officials dealing with Panchayati Raj.
- Initiate a political awareness campaign on the right to political participation by Dalit women and men, in order to highlight the importance of political unity across Dalit sub-castes and their participation for community development. As part of this campaign, facilitate and support discussions among Dalit elders, men, panchayat members, husbands and male family members about the importance of Dalit women's free and independent political participation.
- Initiate district-level *sanghams* for women elected representatives, with a sub-group specifically meant for Dalit women, as a supportive network for all women and specifically Dalit women elected representatives. These *sanghams* should be strengthened through regular information inputs and capacitation trainings, and should then form a state-level federation. Support must be extended to the collective actions initiated by these groups, including their monitoring and taking action against government and police officials who fail to protect these women's right to political participation.
- Increasingly liaise with the media to expose discrimination faced by women elected panchayat representatives as well as highlight successful efforts and strategies employed by elected representatives.
- Independently monitor the situation of local reserved panchayats in order to ensure discriminatory and obstructive practices against Dalit, Adivasi and other women elected representatives do not take place, and if they do, are exposed and appropriate legal action taken against the perpetrators.
- Monitor the next panchayat elections, especially in reserved panchayats, in order to expose violations of the rights of Dalit and Adivasi women to access the panchayats and bring cases to the attention of the State Election Commissions.
- *Political parties*: Establish quotas on the numbers of SC women and men, ST women and men, and women in general, in their party structures, especially at higher levels of leadership.
- *Political parties*: Initiate specific trainings for all party cadre on gender and caste social norms and practices, legal rights and political participation for development, in order to foster a culture of accountability and transparency, as well as drive for local participation in development.

8.3 To the International Community:

- *To international human rights networks and academic institutes*: Take up the issue of Dalit women in local governance as a central concern, raising awareness of the issue in

their activities with government officials, United Nations bodies, civil society actors and the general public.

- *To UN states governments:* Take up the issue of Dalit women's effective participation in governance as a focus policy area, including through support for the implementation of monitoring and accountability recommendations made in this research and support for relevant Dalit, Adivasi and women panchayat associations.
- *To the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women:* Prepare a report on the effectiveness of and problems faced by Dalit women in local governance and foster dialogue and debate on this issue in the United Nations.
- *To the Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Racism, Special Rapporteur on Discrimination on the Basis of Work and Descent, and Independent Expert on Minorities:* Work with local Indian organisations to take up cases of violence and discrimination against Dalit women including in local governance through, among other ways, their reporting to respective United Nations bodies and in dialogue with the Government of India.