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Empowerment in India

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There's a raging debate in India over the controversial Women's Reservation Bill which seeks to reserve 33% of positions in the Lok Sabha (Lower House) and state assembly seats for women. The Bill's opponents insist that the move will benefit only the "creamy layer" giving short shrift to underprivileged women. However, there are many cases in India to prove that women's empowerment at the grassroots level is the only way to usher in real change in society. Despite being a Dalit or "untouchable" woman **Roshni Devi**, 36, was elected in north India and has transformed the village of Kothal Khurd

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I was elected a sarpanch [a democratically-elected head of a village level local government institution] at the young age of 30. Generally, young Dalit women are not encouraged to fight elections in India, and I was pitted against 10 male candidates. But I managed to poll more votes than all of them put together.

I think I was able to succeed even without a political background because of my educational qualifications. I have a Bachelor's degree in arts and another one in education.

But my victory was not well-received by everyone in the village. On the first day in office, some upper-caste men stormed in and said they could not accept the authority of a woman in the village. They pulled me by the hair and pushed me out. But by trying to humiliate me that way, they emboldened me to further accomplish my mission.

When my family and I approached the local police to lodge a complaint, instead of tackling the situation they advised me to back off. They even quoted the case of a woman who was killed by upper-caste men for sitting on a chair in front of them. My reply to the cops was simple: "Look, I'll be sitting on the sarpanch's chair for at least the next five years because that right has been given to me by the people's mandate!" We then approached the police superintendant (SP) who warned the offending men who had obstructed me from performing my duties.

I have been able to initiate many developmental changes in my village in the last five years. We've built 27 houses for poor women including widows; improved the condition of our roads; and made the village more secure by constructing fences all around it. We've also laid down water pipelines so that the village has taps. Before, even pregnant women had to trudge long distances, carrying pitchers of water on their heads.

I'm also a member of the Nari Network (NN), a local campaign which teaches people against the social evils of dowry. With our sustained efforts, people have stopped taking and offering dowries in our village. Female foeticide has also come down due to our efforts and the male-to-female ratio is much better now.

However, my biggest achievement as a sarpanch has been my drive against alcohol which was ruining many families. In our village, about 20% of the village's 415 Hindu families are headed by Dalit men who work as day labourers on farms. Most of these men were alcoholics until just a few years ago.

This led to their families suffering and incurring bad debts, further leading to suicides. Children were dropping out of school as fathers couldn't pay their fees. Alcoholics were squandering away their meagre income on alcohol, leaving their wives and children to fend for themselves.

The worst impacted were the women who were scared that their husbands might beat them up in drunken fits. The wives would hide in the fields and wait for their husbands to fall asleep before they returned home in the dead of the night. This had been routine in our village for more than two decades.

Nobody was doing much to check this evil. I began by rallying the support of wives to eradicate alcoholism from our village. Of course, the women were more than willing. I advised them to help their husbands shun alcohol and collectively stand up to them. We caught many drunkards and abused them publicly. In some cases, we even assaulted men who tried to abuse or bully us.

With the help of the local police, last year we passed a resolution seeking the closure of the liquor shops within one kilometre of the village. This led to three stores being shut down. However, some desperate men still managed to obtain liquor from distant outlets. We then formed a women's group to confront these men when they returned home drunk. We refused to cook food for them or have sex. Gradually, they came around.

Soon, the number of alcoholics in our village began to dwindle and our efforts started bearing fruit. Today, I can say with pride that there's not a single alcoholic in our village. All families in Kothal Khurd are now at peace and alcohol is not a hurdle in the village's development any more. People continue to drink socially but they use restraint. The success of our anti-alcohol movement has spurred women in about 20 of Haryana's villages to set up alcohol resistance groups.

I've been able to achieve all this with the sustained support from my husband, my family and the women who have encouraged me all along. The success of our unique anti-alcohol campaign prompted the Indian president, Pratibha Patil to invite me to her residence and congratulate me for my efforts.

What could be a greater reward than this for a poor Dalit woman?

"Roshni Devi was interviewed by Neeta Lal

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