

# Women's Political Leadership — Supporting Elected Representatives in Panchayats

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Women Empowerment

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Lakshamma (name changed) is an elected panchayat member from Karnataka's Raichur district, documented in a 2025 field study. She attended meetings regularly and signed official documents. In discussions, her voice was rarely heard. Decisions were made by the men in the room — including her husband, who accompanied her to meetings as a matter of course, and who answered questions directed at her.

This is the Pradhan Pati or Sarpanch Pati phenomenon: not a practice where husbands overtly seize power, but one where authority drifts toward men through a combination of social expectation, institutional socialisation, literacy gaps, lack of governance knowledge, and a community culture that treats male decision-making as natural.

The pattern is consistent across states including Odisha. Women who are elected in first terms in reserved seats tend to have: lower economic status than male counterparts; lower formal educational qualifications; less prior exposure to governance processes; and less familiarity with the legal basis of their authority. The gap between the seat and the voice is bridged — slowly — by experience, by knowledge, by peer solidarity, and by external support structures. NGOs can provide the last three.

The Ministry of Panchayati Raj's own expert committee (2023) recommended "exemplary penalties" for proxy leadership — a recommendation that reflects how seriously the government now takes the gap between reservation and real

representation. The committee also recommended the Sashakt Panchayat-Netri Abhiyan training programme and the formation of a federation of women panchayat leaders for peer support. These government initiatives create a framework that NGO programmes can amplify and complement at the local level.

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## **What Elected Women Representatives Actually Need**

Field research with elected women panchayat members across India consistently identifies the same gaps. These are the starting points for NGO support.

### **Gap 1: Knowledge of their own legal authority**

Most elected women representatives do not know what their position legally entitles them to do. They know they "have a position." They don't know that:

- As a gram panchayat member, they have the right to access all panchayat records, meeting minutes, and financial accounts
- As a sarpanch, they have the authority to call gram sabha meetings on any matter of public importance — without needing permission from the BDO or DPO
- The gram sabha under their chairpersonship has the power to audit MGNREGS implementation, approve or reject development projects, and allocate panchayat funds within government guidelines
- Under PESA in Fifth Schedule areas, their gram sabha has additional powers — over minor forest produce, over land acquisition consent, over development project approval
- The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, the SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act, and other laws give them specific obligations to act on cases brought to their attention in their official capacity

This knowledge gap is structural, not personal. Governance training provided by state governments is infrequent, conducted in Odia (which may not be the elected representative's most comfortable language), and rarely followed up with on-the-job coaching.

## **Gap 2: Practical governance skills**

Knowing the legal authority is necessary but not sufficient. An elected woman representative also needs the practical skills to exercise it:

- How to chair a gram sabha meeting — setting the agenda, managing discussion, producing a resolution, documenting decisions
- How to read and interpret a panchayat budget statement — where the funds are, what they are earmarked for, what the rules are for reallocation
- How to file an RTI application — requesting information that should be public but has not been provided
- How to write a letter to the BDO or DPO asserting a position or requesting action
- How to use a smartphone and government portals to access scheme information, track MGNREGS payments, and participate in digital governance processes

## **Gap 3: Peer solidarity and role models**

Elected women representatives who know other elected women representatives — who have a peer network to call when they face a difficult situation, who see other women in similar roles exercising authority confidently — are substantially more likely to exercise their own authority. Isolation reinforces deference. Community creates confidence.

The best evidence for this comes from Kerala's Kudumbashree model, which specifically linked elected women panchayat members into structured support networks — creating the peer solidarity that allowed individual women to challenge

proxy dynamics even in households and communities where male authority was deeply embedded.

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## **What NGOs Can Specifically Do: A Five-Part Framework**

### **Part 1: Legal literacy training — knowing the role**

This is a structured, one-day programme for elected women representatives in a specific block or cluster of panchayats. Not a lecture. A facilitated workshop using role play and scenario discussion.

#### **Content:**

- What does your position legally authorise you to do? (Covered using the specific language of the Panchayati Raj Act, simplified)
- What gram sabha powers exist in your area? (Standard powers, plus PESA powers if in a Fifth Schedule area)
- What information are you entitled to access from the panchayat office?
- What should you do if you are excluded from decisions that should include you? (Who to complain to, how to document exclusion)
- What are your obligations when community members bring cases of violence, child marriage, or scheme denial to you?

Conduct this workshop in the first month after elections, before the proxy dynamic becomes entrenched. Women who learn what their authority is before male relatives have established the habit of exercising it on their behalf are significantly better positioned to use it.

**Language:** In tribal blocks, conduct the workshop in the community's primary language, with a bilingual facilitator. A workshop in Odia for Gondi-speaking elected representatives produces lower retention and lower confidence than one in which women can ask questions in their own language.

## **Part 2: Governance skills building — doing the role**

This is a series of shorter, practical sessions spread across the first year of the term.

Each session addresses a specific skill:

Session 1 (Month 1): How to chair a gram sabha — agenda, facilitation, resolution, documentation. Practice in pairs, then feedback.

Session 2 (Month 2): Reading the panchayat budget — where to find it, what the line items mean, how to spot discrepancies.

Session 3 (Month 3): MGNREGS monitoring — how to check that work is being sanctioned, wages are being paid on time, and assets are being built as approved.

Session 4 (Month 6): Filing RTI applications — when to use RTI, how to frame a request, what to do if it isn't answered.

Session 5 (Month 9): Digital governance tools — whichever government portals are most relevant to local governance in the specific district.

Sessions should be half-day, practical, and held at a time and location that women can reach. Not in the block headquarters at 11am on a Wednesday — somewhere accessible, at a time that doesn't conflict with agricultural or domestic responsibilities.

## **Part 3: Peer solidarity networks — the collective support structure**

The most powerful support for an elected woman representative who is facing proxy pressure, institutional exclusion, or community resistance is connection to other elected women representatives who have faced and navigated similar situations.

### **Practical design:**

Facilitate a monthly women EWR (Elected Women Representatives) meeting covering all elected women in a cluster of panchayats — typically 10–25 women. Not a training session. A peer support and problem-solving meeting. Agenda:

- What happened in each panchayat last month? (Brief round)
- What challenges did you face? (Problem statement, collective discussion)
- What worked? (Share with the group)
- What does anyone need help with before next month? (Specific commitments)

The NGO facilitates — not leads. The women in the room have the knowledge and experience. The facilitator creates the space and the structure. Over several months, the group develops its own leadership and sustains itself with decreasing facilitation requirement.

Connect the local network to district-level women EWR networks where they exist, and to the state-level Mission Shakti structures where Mission Shakti has developed political leadership components.

## **Part 4: Direct accompaniment for specific challenges**

Some situations that elected women representatives face require direct support — not just training — in the moment.

### **When to accompany:**

- First time chairing a gram sabha: an NGO staff member attends as an observer, available to provide quiet guidance if the meeting goes in unexpected directions
- When a male relative has taken over a panchayat function and the elected representative wants to reassert authority: joint visit with the NGO field staff to the BDO or DPO, who can provide institutional backing for the elected representative's authority
- When an EWR wants to file a complaint about exclusion from gram sabha decisions: help drafting the written complaint and submitting it to the appropriate authority

Accompaniment is different from doing it for her. The NGO field staff is present, supportive, and available — not taking over the action that the elected representative

should take for herself.

## **Part 5: Monitoring proxy dynamics — naming what is happening**

The most uncomfortable aspect of this work is naming the proxy dynamic directly. Many programmes avoid it — treating elected women representatives as if they are exercising their authority even when they clearly are not, because acknowledging the dynamic feels confrontational.

The evidence from field studies is that naming the dynamic — respectfully, privately, without blaming the elected representative — produces better outcomes than avoiding it. A conversation with an elected sarpanch that includes "I've noticed that your husband speaks in your place at panchayat meetings — what would it take for you to feel comfortable speaking yourself?" is more useful than pretending the pattern doesn't exist.

This requires fieldwork sensitivity, trust built over multiple interactions, and non-judgmental framing. It is not a script. It is a relationship competency.

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## **The Tribal Odisha Specific Context**

In Odisha's tribal areas with 50% reservation, several factors compound the standard proxy dynamic challenges:

**Literacy rates:** Female literacy among Scheduled Tribes in Odisha is significantly lower than among non-tribal women. Written governance processes — minutes, accounts, RTI applications — are more inaccessible.

**Two-child norm barrier:** Odisha's two-child norm, which bars candidates with more than two children from contesting panchayat elections, disproportionately affects tribal women who have less access to family planning. Many communities have this provision informally communicated by local officials even where legal application is contested. This structural barrier limits which tribal women can stand at all — making

the women who do stand especially important to support.

**PESA authority:** In PESA areas, gram sabhas hold significantly expanded powers. Elected women representatives in these areas hold more authority than their non-PESA counterparts — and are typically even less aware of it. The PESA-specific legal literacy module (what your gram sabha can do that others cannot, specifically around minor forest produce, land acquisition consent, and natural resource management) is high-value and almost never delivered.

**Language of governance:** Government training programmes and most NGO legal literacy materials are in Odia. For elected women representatives in tribal blocks who are most comfortable in Gondi, Kharia, Kui, or another tribal language, this is a practical barrier to the knowledge they need. Investing in vernacular-language legal literacy materials — even simple printed cards or audio recordings in local languages — produces access that Odia-medium materials cannot.

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## What to Measure

- Percentage of ward/sarpanch meetings chaired by the elected woman representative (not by a male relative or official) — track over 12 months
- Number of gram sabha meetings called on the elected woman representative's initiative
- Percentage of EWRs in the network who can correctly describe at least three legal authorities of their position at 6 months vs. 12 months
- Qualitative change in peer network solidarity — do women call each other between monthly meetings? Do they advocate for each other?

These are not easy metrics. Some require observation. They are the right metrics because they track the actual exercise of authority, not the inputs provided.

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*Related Knowledge Commons content: Women Empowerment Sector Primer (Sector 02) · Practice Note: SHG Federation Models — Beyond the Savings Group · Practice*

*Note: Land Rights for Women in Tribal Odisha*

*Evidence Grade: B — Multi-study. This Practice Note draws on the ORF assessment of elected women representatives (2024), the WellLabs field study from Karnataka (2025), the Ministry of Panchayati Raj expert committee report (2023), the Chattopadhyay-Duflo RCT evidence on panchayat reservation outcomes, and Odisha-specific field documentation from tribal districts. Last reviewed: April 2026.*

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