

The Grassroot Women Leaders Project



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AUGUST 2024

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PREFACE

Throughout India, there are several instances of women leaders at the margins— affecting change and driving leadership in critical policy and governance areas in their local communities. These are the Grassroots Women Leaders, who play a crucial role in mobilising communities and drawing attention to policy issues that may have structurally been ignored. The SPRF Grassroots Women’s Tracker outlines a group of such women, who have driven crucial policy changes from the bottom, in sectors such as education, local governance, sanitation, labour, livelihoods, and justice.

The Grassroots Women Leaders project, with the YIF fellows from Ashoka University, aimed at exploring the challenges and experiences of such leaders through semi-structured interviews and FGDs. The project outlined the basis and context against which such leaders emerge, the policy vacuum they try to address, and the specific challenges that emerge as they take on various leadership roles at the grassroots level. The study underscores the need to share and learn from these stories, for civil society and policymakers, as these leaders are often the first responders to gendered issues that affect the community, and are often ignored due to patriarchal structures and policy-blindness.

The project was conducted over a year, with mentorship and guidance from Yashorop Dey, Research Lead and Anusha Arif, Research Associate at SPRF. SPRF worked with the fellows to identify existing literature, prepare questionnaires, and discuss results and findings. The culmination is a report that outlines the experiences and challenges of women’s grassroots leadership in the country, and recommends future inclusion in policy discussions.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Grassroots movements are community-driven initiatives to address the issues of ordinary people on matters, which are not always on the national or global agenda (UNHCR, 2019). They employ collective action to assert their cause, including but not limited to petitions, demonstrations, civil disobedience, and lobbying. They can be traced back to the 20th century with the emergence of many social movements around the world that were questioning the status quo. The rapid industrialization, urbanisation, and the spread of democratic ideals facilitated these developments further. *“The movements of the 1960s reshaped politics and society in the United States, Western Europe, and beyond, and their impact resonates even today in themes of civil rights, women’s advances, and the rights of those in a variety of gender-based categories”* (Jon Van Til et al., 2008). This provided new avenues for such movements and aided immensely in sustaining them for longer durations and to farther corners of the world, which we are witnessing today.

The world has seen a plethora of remarkable grassroots movements which have had a strong positive impact on various spheres of society. The Brazilian land reform movement (Carter, 2010), the Chinese rural democracy movement (Zhang & Li, 2017) and the American civil rights movement (Massey, 2011) are a few prominent examples of such movements. One movement which argued for the ordinary and marginalised groups in the Indian context is the anti-caste movement. Sugunakararaju (2012), states that *“The anti-caste movement, which began in 19th century under the inspiration of Jyotirao Phule, carried on in 1920s by non-Brahmin movements in Maharashtra and Tamilnadu, and then developed under the leadership of Dr. Ambedkar.”*

Numerous inspiring people, such as Mahatma Gandhi, have also come from grassroots movements. Gandhi focused on enhancing rural communication services at the grassroots level and empowering the local people such that their voices make up the development processes (Nair & Sharma, 2016). Ella Josephine Baker, the most significant woman in the civil rights movement in the United States for promoting racial equality and one of the most significant American leaders of the 20th century (Payne, 2004), Nelson Mandela (Boehmer, 2018), Aung San Suu Kyi and Wangari Maathai (Brinkmann, 2023) are other well known grassroots leaders.

Women have been pivotal in these movements in addressing issues around a multitude of areas including livelihood, gender and the environment. Women have been at the vanguard, from the early 20th-century suffragette movement (The National Archives, 2022), when they battled for their voting rights to the Chipko movement in India (Shiva & Bandyopadhyay, 1986), in which village women clutched trees to stop them from being cut down. These initiatives highlight the strength and capacity for leadership that women possess, especially in patriarchal cultures.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

GLOBAL HISTORY OF WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS

Women's movements have shaped and redefined the social landscape of the world, empowering countless women to challenge the status quo and attain greater equality. During the French Revolution, although women participated actively, their contributions were marginalised. Olympe de Gouges wrote the Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen in 1791 to challenge this, but was executed for her advocacy. (Feminism and Women's Rights Movements, n.d.). In the United States, the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 marked the organised efforts for women's suffrage (Wellman, 2010). The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), also known as the International Bill of Rights for Women, was enacted by the UN General Assembly on December 18, 1979, which established legislative guidelines to advance real gender equality.

Legislative milestones like the U.S. Equal Pay Act of 1963 aimed at wage equality (The Equal Pay Act of 1963, n.d.). The Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) was established in India in 1972 with the goal of promoting women's rights in the unorganised sector (Ela Bhatt, n.d.). The 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing further globalised the agenda for women's rights (Beijing Declaration, 1995). A recent example is the #MeToo movement, which started a global dialogue on sexual harassment (Mendes et al., 2018) and has spread awareness about sexual assault and harassment. The UN Women's HeForShe campaign, which encourages males to join the battle for gender equality, is another important recent development (HeForShe, 2014).

WOMEN AND LEADERSHIP PERCEPTION: BIASES, LEADERSHIP STYLES AND CULTURAL DIMENSIONS

Historically, women have been underrepresented in leadership positions in various fields, including politics, business, education, and health. This underrepresentation in leadership can arise due to the perception of women's leadership effectiveness that may be caused by stereotypes, gender bias, leadership styles, and other cultural values (Nahavandi & Malekzadeh, 2021). Although women have advanced considerably towards holding leadership positions in society's various areas such as business, politics, education and health, they constantly experience the barriers of stereotypical and gender-based prejudices that hinder the effective appraisal of their leadership.

One of the main frameworks concerning the cultural elements of leadership is the Global Leadership and Organisational Behaviour Effectiveness (GLOBE) (Javidan et al., 2006). It identified nine cultural dimensions across sixty two countries of which the first dimension comprises the norms, values, beliefs and patterns structuring the interactions between the leaders and their followers in a given culture. This framework establishes that women leaders are more challenged by cultures having high – power distance¹, assertiveness² and low

humane orientations⁴, gender egalitarianism³. However, these cultures prefer an autocratic, hierarchical, competitive, and masculine leadership approach, which might not meet the women leaders' and subordinates'* tastes and expectations.

The other area of women's perceptions of leadership is the style of women's leadership; the behaviour or personality characteristics necessary for the exertion of influence on others and achieving personal goals. According to Transformational⁵, transactional⁶, and laissez-faire⁷ leadership styles: A meta-analysis comparing women and men research, women leaders are more likely than men to exhibit transformational leadership styles, which means they are more likely to inspire, motivate, empower, and develop their followers (Eagly et al., 2003).

Moreover, women are likely to rely on soft skills such as communication, teamwork, empathy, and cooperativeness (Goethals & Hoyt, 2016) to build trust, rapport, and consensus, but they may be judged negatively for being too soft or too hard (Goethals & Hoyt, 2016). This brings to light a third aspect of international work-family research that has to do with women and leadership perception.

With an increasing number of women joining the workforce and taking up senior positions across different settings balancing work-life balance becomes crucial amongst women. The interface shows how workplace and home demands and provisioning interact. Several cultural factors influence women leaders' work-family conflict or enrichment, according to studies (Goethals & Hoyt, 2016). For example, work environments in cultures with high institutional collectivism⁸ show a greater tendency towards supporting and being flexible to working mothers than cultures with low institutional collectivism. Similarly, there is an equal distribution of chores in the house for a culture that shows high levels of gender equality as compared to those that don't. It is therefore important to understand the role of culture on the work-family balance of female leaders in designing policies and strategies for their welfare and better performance (Goethals & Hoyt, 2016).

GRASSROOT MOVEMENTS AND WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN INDIA

Mehrotra (1997) states that, "Historically women's activism in India has been clearly delineated into two phases right from mid-nineteenth century to the present juncture. The first phase was confined to the pre-independence era and emerged in the context of the freedom movement, lobbying around issues of women's education, widow remarriage, child marriages, Sati, and property rights of women etc." In the pre-independence era, historical figures such as Begum Rokeya, Rani Lakshmi Bai, and Begum Hazrat Mahal are still celebrated for their resistance against colonial rule (Shah, 2004). During the revolt of 1857, as the first grassroots revolution against the Britishers, and marked the beginning of women participation. During the struggle for independence, women like Anusuiya Kheda became a torchbearer in the All India Mill Worker Association, and Usha Mehta, who used radio broadcasts emerged as symbols of women leadership. Sucheta Kriplani, Margaret Sisters and Annie Besant made lasting contributions across various domains, whose contributions manifested as they raised voices for the marginalised (Shah, 2004). After a significant pause, the 1970s saw the emer-

gence of the new women's movement which dealt with problems that went beyond caste, class, religion, and ethnicity. The main focus was on battling violence against women, especially the increasing incidents of dowry-related deaths and rape cases. These problems became strong symbols of women's discontent as it revealed the intricate social barriers and vulnerabilities that women deal with (Mehrotra, 1997).

The Chipko movement, started by Gaura Devi, involved women hugging trees to protect them from deforestation. Women in tribal movements, like Phoolan Devi, and in peasant movements, such as Medha Patkar who started the Narmada Bachao Andolan, have played vital roles in preserving cultural heritage and advocating for marginalised communities (Mehrotra, 1997). For Dalit women, the march was carried by Bhanwari Devi, who led campaigns against caste-based discrimination. Women from disadvantaged backgrounds have contributed to movements such as the Mandal Commission protests, promoting social and economic justice. The women's movement in India, represented by activists like Kamla Bhasin and Aruna Roy, have repeatedly advocated for gender equality, addressing issues like domestic violence and female empowerment (Krishnaraj, 2012)

However, women in grassroots movements face several challenges. Women often encounter barriers to leadership roles, due to the patriarchal structures that have been existing in our society for ages, and we face resistance in changing them (Krishnaraj, 2012). Traditional values conflicting with modern aspirations create a difficult environment for female activists. Caste-based discrimination, regional disparities, and religious divides add complexity to women's efforts, who already deal with the intersectionality of issues (Mohanty, 2010). Many women in grassroots movements face financial constraints due to their disadvantaged backgrounds. Grassroots politics can be competitive and hostile, making it challenging for women to access resources and support (Batliwala, 2007).

GRASSROOTS WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP AND THE EVOLVING SOCIAL LANDSCAPE IN INDIA

India has seen significant socio-political changes that have fostered the growth of women's grassroots leadership. Legal reforms like the reservation of one-third of seats for women in local bodies, through the 73rd & 74th Amendment in 1993 have been crucial (Khan, 2023). The promotion of Women's Self-Help Groups (SHGs) has further empowered women, both economically and socially, preparing them for leadership roles (Pandit, 2023). Moreover, initiatives focused on education, women's movements, and economic empowerment have contributed to women's increasing influence in their communities (Shah, 2023). Changing mindsets and attitudes toward women in leadership roles, as well as the growth of media and information technology, have also been influential factors (Gupta & Leung, 2011). These have allowed women to connect, mobilise, and raise awareness about women's issues, amplifying their voices. Additionally, supportive non-governmental organisations and international initiatives have offered resources and training for women interested in grassroots leadership such as International Women's Alliance and Gender at Work; the concept of Self Help Groups and Cooperative Societies are also relevant in the Indian context. Lastly, political will at the state and national levels has played a vital role in promoting women's participation in politics and

governance (Pandit, 2023). The passing of the Women's Reservation Bill in 2023, is a further step in the same direction. Despite these positive developments, it is important to acknowledge that challenges persist, including gender-based violence and discrimination. However, the progress made in recent years reflects the determination and resilience of Indian women as they assert their leadership roles in grassroots initiatives.

Emerging trends in women's grassroots leadership in India highlight their expanding roles and impact in community development. These trends encompass a wide range of domains, from harnessing technology and digital platforms for advocacy to embracing intersectionality and addressing a multitude of social issues (Shah, 2023). Women leaders are taking on vital roles in environmental conservation, advocating for economic empowerment through entrepreneurship, and actively engaging with the youth to ensure the continuity of their leadership efforts (Shah, 2023). They are also championing health and well-being initiatives, using art and culture as powerful tools for advocacy, and venturing into local governance beyond reserved seats (Shah, 2023). In doing so, they promote inclusive decision-making and foster collaboration with various stakeholders, amplifying their influence and reach.

Thus, despite multifaceted challenges, women leaders are increasingly recognized as catalysts for positive change in their communities, leveraging technology, diversity, and their varied skill sets to drive impactful initiatives (Pandit, 2023). As women continue to break barriers and extend their reach into various sectors, the future of grassroots leadership in India appears promising, marked by a commitment to inclusivity, innovation, and collaboration to address a wide array of societal issues.

The present study was designed because of lack of contextualised research about the experiences of grassroots women leaders in India, with regards to their achievements, their successes and the challenges they face with them. The aim of the present study is to conceptualise and explore the key challenges faced by grassroots women leaders and devise policy recommendations to bridge the gap.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

PARTICIPANTS PRELIMINARIES

The participants in this study were female grassroots women leaders, belonging to the age range of 22-64 years, in the region of Delhi NCR and Maharashtra, working on a diverse range of issues, such as education, women safety, childcare, waste management, and empowering vulnerable populations. The inclusion criteria for the study was selecting individuals from a non-governmental organisation with an experience of 1 year.

The participants were chosen through the purposive sampling method. A purposive sample is the one whose characteristics are defined for a purpose that is relevant to the study, and in the present study, the age range, the region and their active participation and leadership in grassroots movements were defined as the inclusion criteria.

DESIGN

The research design followed for this particular practicum was a qualitative design. This is a qualitative study in which data was gathered through text and written content rather than numerical data. Thematic data analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2013), was used to find patterns or themes in the qualitative data.

MEASURES

The data was collected using a semi-structured interview, which is designed to cover specific areas (e.g., work history, education, home situation) while also allowing the interviewer to steer the dialogue into side channels and ask questions on points that need to be clarified. This measure was used because it allows the interviewer to ask additional questions to obtain in-depth answers. An interview schedule was created with approximately eight questions designed to elicit information about how and what they learned and contributed as a result of their involvement in grassroots level community service. Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) is a flexible interpretive technique used in qualitative data analysis to identify and analyse patterns or themes. However, many researchers mislabel their analysis or draw from various methods, which may be incompatible. Braun and Clarke differentiated RTA from other forms of thematic analysis by dividing it into three principal approaches: coding reliability TA, codebook approaches to TA, and the reflexive approach to TA. The coding process is fluid and organic, generating themes and sub-themes supported by codes.

PROCEDURE

To understand the experiences and challenges faced by Grassroots Women Leaders in the Indian context, participants from different grassroots movements and NGO groups will be identified. Based on the inclusion criteria, suitable participants were identified, and online interviews were scheduled. To assure that the participant feels comfortable providing any type of information in the semi structured interview, proper rapport was established. Consent was obtained for participation in the study, and confidentiality was also ensured. The interview began by gathering essential demographic information, and each interview took 30 minutes to 1 hour to complete. The interview concluded with a positive note of gratitude for sharing their experiences and participating in the study.

IV. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

KEY CHALLENGES

Grassroots women often begin exploring their leadership roles locally, whether by voicing opinions, disseminating information and knowledge, or applying their enhanced understanding of systems to assist friends, family, and neighbours (Lockley & Brown, 2020). The interviewed grassroots women leaders faced distinct systemic challenges impacting their communities which in turn motivated them to develop solutions that bridge the gaps between policy, implementation, and their reach at the grassroots level.

Around the world, women who assume leadership roles at the community level encounter stigmatisation, harassment, and outright attacks. A joint study by the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) and UNESCO found that 73% of women journalists experienced online violence, with an additional 20% reporting offline attacks linked to online incidents. These acts aim to silence and discredit outspoken women leaders. Research by the Inter-Parliamentary Union reveals that more than 80% of women parliamentarians faced psychological violence. Adding and owing to this, grassroots women leaders have to navigate through a complex landscape due to the impacts of pressures from their community and gender-related stereotypes. Hence, their work has the potential to bring about a larger societal change as it transcends mere leadership. Their mere existence challenges problematic attitudes as could be observed in the experience of a prominent gender activist from Uttarakhand who has been fighting against sexual violence for over four decades. She leverages education to work for the cause where she makes it possible for the survivors to study law. She considers this to be her biggest achievement as this innovative approach challenges the perception of women solely as victims, elevating them to agents of change. She has faced threats and harassment, including from a group of 21 rapists, highlighting the very real threats women leaders confront. Stereotypes about the role of women have influenced how women are perceived in society and as leaders (Vasvada, 2012). Expectations and norms surrounding leadership are frequently rooted in masculine ideals, leading to challenges and barriers for women in similar leadership roles (Lämsä & Sintonen, 2001; McEldowney et al., 2009; Debebe, 2009; Eagly, 2007). A child rights activist from Alwar who works diligently against child marriage shared how, initially, she would often face a lot of issues from her community and would often have to deal with comments like “she is spoiling our girls”. Despite her work’s clear benefits, she continues to face resistance and even threats of violence from villagers clinging to tradition (Eswar, 2018). Her story aligns with research by Basu (2015) and Abdullah et al. (2018), which highlights the violence often faced by women leaders who challenge deeply entrenched cultural norms, particularly those related to women’s rights and autonomy. These leaders continue to dismantle stereotypes and reshape cultural narratives by fostering inclusive dialogue and inherently advocating for gender equality.

Beyond gender, these women leaders also encounter resistance linked to caste and class. Waste pickers primarily originate from marginalised communities, including the lower class, lower caste, or Dalits, and are frequently disregarded or harassed by society (Pastor et al., 2024). They are commonly perceived as unclean and unwanted (CSE, 2021). Class and caste dynamics create disparities in the experiences of individuals working in the same field. This

sentiment is echoed by a grassroots woman leader who, reflecting on her life as a ragpicker, stated, “They would label us as thieves and blame us for collecting waste from the streets. We never understood why, because our sole aim was to earn a livelihood.” This leader now works within a prominent waste management cooperative. Bhaskar and Chikarmane’s research (2012) reveals that workers from marginalised communities in the same waste management corporation as the grassroots leader are frequently labelled as ‘rude’, ‘abusive’, and ‘irregular’. This labelling stems from actions by individuals from dominant communities engaged in similar waste picking activities. These responses underscore underlying caste and class biases, where ‘higher class’ citizens may deem it beneath their dignity to interact with ‘waste pickers’ from ‘lower castes and classes’. A study by Shepherd et al. (2022) explores the challenges faced by rag pickers from lower castes, detailing experiences of discrimination and social exclusion. Anecdotes from NGO employees highlight the mistreatment of rag pickers from marginalised castes, who are often viewed as “untouchables” (Worker, Children of God NGO). This demonstrates how caste, class, and occupation intersect in the lives of women leaders coming from marginalised communities like ragpicking, contributing to the challenges they face.

Adding to the inherent challenges that come with the kind of work they do and their identities as women coming from various sections of a stratified society, there are external factors such as mentorship and funding that these leaders have to constantly deal with. Several of the participants concurred and shared the challenges they faced in building their organisations, as there was an absence of effective mentorship and role models, across various fields. According to Yokwana (2014), a lack of mentorship for women and women-to-women peer networks leads to delayed career advancement, and a large proportion of junior female employees choose to leave their organisations. One of the participants, a leader working in the space of early childhood care stated, “We are always looking forward to collaborating with other agencies, and taking more women into our fold. I believe that as women at work, we must be more confident of our gender, of the experience we bring in, and of our capabilities.” Mentoring appears to be a significant factor in improving women’s leadership capacity (Mate et al., 2019).

The story of women leaders from a waste picker collective in Pune echoes the impact of such mentorship. One of the leaders who is also a board member of the collective shared how various activists from the region had guided her and other women to first form a women’s collective which is now their source of strength and then the waste picker collective improving their lives and giving strength to them to fight for their cause and community. There is a need to build appropriate formal mentorship and peer networks, exclusively for women, and they must be able to express their ideas and opinions clearly (Gandhi & Sen, 2020). Quality mentorship also generates prospects for securing stable and sustainable funding which is a challenge that these leaders frequently encounter more so as financial independence is still a huge issue among women. The endeavour to identify appropriate sources for fundraising and to establish channels for continuous financial support is a significant challenge. Many companies and initiatives offer fundraising assistance; however, the commission fees they impose can create financial strain on non-profit organisations (NGOs), thereby reducing the net amount of funds available for their primary missions.

The funding landscape for NGOs is complex. Grassroots organisations often face legal and administrative barriers that complicate their operations within civic spaces. Activists and organisations are subjected to intimidation and scrutiny, which can lead to restrictions

or outright bans on both foreign and local funding (Candid, n.d.). This environment has led to a phenomenon known as “shrinking civic space,” which adversely affects the human rights agenda globally. According to the **India Philanthropy Report 2024** by Bain & Company, India’s social sector spending has witnessed an annual increase of 13%, reaching approximately INR 23 lakh crore (\$280 billion) in FY 2023, which constitutes 8.3% of GDP (India Philanthropy Report 2024, 2024). Despite this growth, a significant portion of corporate social responsibility (CSR) funds are allocated to larger, more established NGOs, leaving grassroots organisations in a precarious position. Private philanthropy expanded by 10% in FY 2023, amounting to INR 1.2 lakh crore (\$15 billion). This growth was predominantly driven by family philanthropy, which saw a 15% increase, and retail giving, which grew by 12%. In contrast, corporate social responsibility (CSR) and high-net-worth individual (HNI)/affluent donations experienced a moderate growth of 7%.

A survey by CRISIL found that most corporations allocated a substantial part of their CSR budget in 2019-20 to COVID-19 relief, leaving limited resources for other causes. This shift in focus has made it even more difficult for grassroots organisations to secure funding for their diverse initiatives. (CRISIL et al., 2020). Moreover, commission-based fundraising compensation is deemed unethical for non-profits, as it prioritises personal gain over long-term success, and development staff and consultants should be compensated based on experience and work value (Commission-Based Compensation for Fundraising: WeConservePA Library, n.d.). In terms of sustainable funding channels, one key strategy for building a sustainable funding model is to diversify the organisation’s funding sources. This can include a mix of government grants, corporate sponsorships, individual donations, and earned income streams, such as fees for services (Author, 2023).

Hence, while grassroots organisations play a critical role in advancing societal progress, they face significant challenges in funding and grants. The reliance on companies and initiatives that charge commission fees can be financially burdensome. To mitigate these challenges, it is imperative for NGOs to explore diversified and sustainable funding models, and for funders to recognize the value of supporting grassroots organising directly. This approach will ensure that grassroots organisations have the necessary resources to continue their vital work without undue financial distress.

SUCCESSSES AND IMPACT OF GRASSROOTS WOMEN’S LEADERSHIP

A leader’s effectiveness hinges on advocating for and safeguarding the interests of the community they serve, requiring keen awareness of community needs and strategic planning for the successful execution of development initiatives, thereby putting their innovative capacity to the test in addressing community requirements (Kaur, 2008). Grassroots women’s leadership has become a powerful catalyst for social change and sustainable development in communities. By uniting people, tackling local challenges, advocating for justice, they thereby serve as role models. They have made remarkable progress in promoting gender equality, social justice, and inclusive development, creating lasting impacts that resonate far beyond their immediate surroundings.

Community mobilisation entails bringing together a diverse group of stakeholders to increase public awareness and backing for a particular initiative. This effort aids in the effective allocation of resources and services, while also enhancing community involvement to foster sustainability and independence (Khasnabis et al., 2010). One of the grassroots women leaders' experience echoes the same as she discusses how she mobilized the community to address child rights and protection as preventive measures against child exploitation through child marriage. She advised local councils against these harmful practices and established a Children's Parliament (Bal Panchayat). With 11 members of the Children's Parliament, they began to speak out against child labor and child marriage in their village. She highlighted how most girls were engaged in child labour, farming, and household tasks, resulting in very few being sent to school to continue their education. She thereby went ahead to promote the importance of child education and collaborated with Kailash Satyarthi's Bachpan Bachao Andolan, making her village central to campaigns against child labor and forced child marriage. To sustain and expand the impact of her initiatives, the mentioned leader extended her efforts to additional villages by establishing more Bal Panchayats. She also connected these groups virtually and organised workshops for the children to further their development and engagement. This effort directly contributes to community empowerment by providing safe spaces for the children by encouraging them to be actively involved in policy making as well. By engaging directly with policymakers, these grassroots leaders not only bring visibility to specific issues but also work towards systemic change, demonstrating the profound impact that focused, grassroots advocacy can have on governance. Grassroots movements have evolved into powerful transnational actors capable of challenging global policies and promoting democratic governance across borders (Batliwala, 2002).

Historical women leaders, who pioneered new paths in leadership, serve as sources of inspiration for aspiring leaders whereas contemporary women leaders, actively in leadership roles today, provide more immediate and relatable examples for women to emulate (Naqbi, 2023). Many grassroots women leaders motivate others to harness their leadership potential and contribute to societal and community development. Highlighting this, another woman leader, a Gender activist who works in supporting and educating the survivors of sexual assault, mentioned that they offer a 50k fixed deposit incentive for women who help other survivors by introducing them to the support network through this initiative. This initiative particularly supports women in communities where financial independence is rare. By offering financial incentives, they encourage women to engage in leadership roles, which can lead to a deeper understanding and commitment to community and women's empowerment. One of the women leaders shared her experiences conducting various awareness campaigns aimed at women, focusing on educating them about their rights and encouraging them not to give up on their aspirations. These efforts significantly influenced many women in her village. Contemporary role models are especially crucial, as they offer clear and relatable examples of women who have achieved success across various sectors (Naqbi, 2023).

STRATEGIES AND APPROACHES EMPLOYED BY GRASSROOTS WOMEN LEADERS

To bring about any positive change in a community, the most crucial aspect of work is to build trust and rapport with the community. It is through assimilating oneself with the people at the site of the change that it is sustained. This is precisely why grassroots leaders present a holistic approach to work on matters of any community. These leaders bring with them an in-depth understanding of the context in which the community exists, and they already have some rapport with the people on the ground. In the case of women grassroots leaders several challenges pop up on the ground as discussed in the paper. These challenges inhibit their impact; therefore, to combat this and work well with the community, they employ a diverse array of strategies and approaches to empower their communities and drive positive change.

At the heart of their efforts, they focus on establishing trust and rapport with the communities they serve. This involves creating authentic connections, actively listening to the needs and concerns of community members, and demonstrating a strong commitment to their well-being. The data gathered during the research for this paper demonstrates that these leaders believe in a collective approach and often form collectives of women from the community which in turn empowers the women by making them change makers and benefits the community as well. One grassroots woman leader, who is a part of a waste management cooperative, shared how these collectives give women the strength to raise their voice against domestic exploitation as well and none of the women feel alone as long as these collectives continue to exist and thrive. Another strategy these leaders employ on the ground is to conduct awareness camps, and on-the-go support facilities, facilitating open conversations as well as involving the community in the cause thus producing a sense of ownership towards the goal. By building trust, grassroots women leaders lay a solid foundation for implementing meaningful and sustainable change.

These leaders often use their deep understanding of local communities to their advantage. They appreciate the unique dynamics of the places they serve and know how to tap into local expertise and resources. Whether it's drawing on traditional wisdom passed down through generations or discovering untapped natural resources, these leaders leverage local knowledge to come up with creative solutions for the challenges the communities face. In doing so, they not only empower their fellow community members but also foster a sense of pride and ownership in the local assets they work with. One of the interviewees, a young grassroots woman leader working relentlessly against child marriage and child labour, employed this approach very well. She made use of her local knowledge regarding the culture and social structure of her village, and combined it with the resources she had, such as knowledge about the issue and the judicial provisions for the same as well. She then went ahead and came up with a successful plan of having collectives of children in the village called Bal Panchayats who were tasked with spreading awareness on the matter as well as reporting back in case of any incident of child marriage. The success of these solutions by leveraging local knowledge led to the linking of these Bal Panchayats with the Gram Panchayats, thus, strengthening the work that they were trying to do. It also helped in making the authorities realise that kids also need to be part of policy-making groups.

These leaders understand that no single individual or organisation can tackle complex societal issues alone. They actively seek out opportunities to work with other stakeholders, including government agencies, non-profit organisations, and community-based groups. Moreover, the kind of challenges that are faced by women grassroots leaders necessitate a support system of fellow women leaders. All the leaders who were interviewed shared that there is a lack of female support networks and opportunities for collaboration with other women leaders and organisations. They believe whenever they have the opportunity to collaborate, it strengthens as well as motivates them to keep striving for their cause. Hence, often these leaders host workshops and projects in collaboration with each other as well as with the local authorities. By forming strategic partnerships and alliances, grassroots women leaders can amplify their impact, share valuable resources, and pool their collective expertise to achieve common goals.

These strategies and approaches generate a holistic impact. However, a key factor in the lives of these leaders is adaptability and resilience. They possess the agility to navigate changing circumstances and the resilience to overcome setbacks and obstacles. This reflects very well in the journey of all the grassroots women leaders who were interviewed. One of them who has been working against sexual violence for over forty years, shared that she has received threats from a lot of criminals many of whom have joined hands to defame her. She also shared that she faced various issues regarding basic supplies at her community centre such as the water supply being cut for which, she proudly shared that she constructed a water supply system from the nearby stream. Hence, they can push through the various challenges that make it possible for them to generate the kind of impact they do. Whether facing political turmoil, environmental disasters, or economic challenges, grassroots women leaders remain committed to their cause and work.

V. DISCUSSION

POLICY INTERVENTIONS AND INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

Policy interventions are essential for creating an enabling environment for grassroots women leaders. For example, diversifying funding sources is essential for the sustainability of organisations led by women. This can include government grants, corporate sponsorships, individual donations, and earned income streams such as service fees. Policy interventions should also focus on diversifying funding sources for grassroots women-led organisations to ensure their long-term sustainability.

Governments can play a pivotal role in supporting grassroots women leaders and their organisations by providing institutional support through various programs and schemes. These can include offering comprehensive training programs that equip grassroots women leaders with essential skills, such as leadership development, project management. Establishing dedicated funding streams and grants specifically designed to support grassroots women-led organisations and initiatives; providing access to necessary infrastructure, such as community centres, workspaces, and transportation facilities; Instituting awards and recognition programs that celebrate and honour the achievements of grassroots women leaders, raising their visibility. Mentoring, in particular, has a significant impact on improving leadership capacity. The success of women leaders from a waste picker collective in Pune, who were guided by various activists to form a collective, is a testament to the power of mentorship. These leaders have improved their lives and strengthened their community by leveraging their collective strength. Organisations such as the International Women's Alliance and Gender at Work have been at the forefront of providing resources and training for women interested in grassroots leadership. These initiatives have contributed significantly to women's increasing influence in their communities (Shah, 2023).

PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY AND ADDRESSING CULTURAL BIASES

The promotion of gender equality and the dismantling of cultural biases are fundamental to empowering women in grassroots movements. Activists like Kamla Bhasin and Aruna Roy have been instrumental in advocating for gender equality and addressing issues such as domestic violence and female empowerment. However, women often face barriers due to patriarchal structures, caste-based discrimination, regional disparities, and religious divides. Addressing these intersectional issues is critical for creating an environment where female activists can thrive. The growth of media and information technology has been influential in changing mindsets and attitudes toward women in leadership roles. These platforms have enabled women to connect, mobilise, and raise awareness about women's issues, amplifying their voices (Gupta & Leung, 2011).

FACILITATING ACCESS TO RESOURCES AND NETWORKS

Access to resources and networks is vital for grassroots women leaders. Despite their crucial role in driving social change, grassroots women-led organisations often face significant challenges in securing funding, building partnerships, and mobilising resources. One of the primary obstacles faced by grassroots women-led organisations is the lack of access to adequate and reliable funding sources. To address this challenge, it is imperative to establish dedicated funding streams and grant opportunities specifically designed to support these organisations and initiatives. This can be achieved through the following measures:

1. **Government funding programs:** Governments can allocate a portion of their budgets or create specific grants programs targeted at supporting grassroots women-led initiatives. For example, the Ministry of Women and Child Development in India has launched the Nari Shakti Puraskar, which recognizes and honours exceptional work by grassroots women leaders and organisations (Ministry of Women and Child Development, n.d.).
2. **Corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives:** Corporations can direct a portion of their CSR funds towards supporting grassroots women-led organisations, aligning with their commitment to gender equality and sustainable development. The India Philanthropy Report 2024 highlights the growing CSR spending in India, providing opportunities for grassroots organisations to tap into these resources (India Philanthropy Report 2024, 2024).
3. **International development agencies and foundations:** Global organisations and foundations can prioritise funding for grassroots women-led initiatives, recognizing their potential for driving transformative change. For example, the Global Fund for Women provides grants and resources to support women's rights organisations and movements worldwide (Global Fund for Women, n.d.).

Building strategic partnerships and collaborations is crucial for grassroots women leaders to amplify their impact and access valuable resources and expertise. To facilitate this, it is essential to create networking opportunities and platforms that connect these leaders with potential donors, policymakers, and other stakeholders. Some effective strategies include:

1. **Hosting networking events and conferences:** Organising dedicated events that bring together grassroots women leaders, donors, government officials, and other stakeholders can foster valuable connections and facilitate knowledge-sharing and collaboration.
2. **Establishing online platforms and communities:** Leveraging digital technologies to create virtual spaces where grassroots women leaders can connect, share experiences, and explore potential partnerships can greatly expand their reach and networks.
3. **Encouraging cross-sector collaborations:** Promoting collaborations between grassroots women-led organisations, government agencies, private sector entities, and civil society organisations can create synergies and leverage diverse resources and expertise to address complex social issues.

Securing funding and mobilising resources can be a daunting task for grassroots women-led organisations, many of which may lack experience or expertise in grant writing, fundraising strategies, and resource mobilisation. To address this gap, it is crucial to provide tailored training and guidance on these topics, equipping grassroots women leaders with the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively navigate the funding landscape and access available resources. This can involve capacity-building workshops and training programs, mentorship and coaching programs such as pairing experienced professionals or successful grassroots women leaders with emerging leaders to provide personalised guidance, advice, and support in navigating funding opportunities and resource mobilisation processes. Supportive non-governmental organisations and international initiatives offer resources and training for women interested in grassroots leadership. The concept of Self-Help Groups and Cooperative Societies in the Indian context provides a framework for resource allocation to women leaders. The passing of the Women's Reservation Bill in 2023 is a testament to the political will at the state and national levels to promote women's participation in politics and governance (Pandit, 2023).

FOSTERING INCLUSIVE AND COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE MODELS

Fostering inclusive and collaborative governance models is crucial for empowering grassroots women leaders and ensuring their active participation in decision-making processes. Grassroots women leaders often have a deep understanding of the challenges faced by their communities, making their involvement in decision-making processes invaluable. However, traditional governance structures have frequently marginalised or excluded these voices, leading to policies and programs that fail to address the real needs of the people. To address this challenge, it is essential to promote inclusive and participatory governance models that actively involve grassroots women leaders at all levels. One effective approach is to establish quotas or reserved seats for women in local governance bodies, such as village councils or municipal boards. This measure has been implemented in several countries, including India, where the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments mandated the reservation of one-third of seats for women in rural and urban local bodies, respectively (Khan, 2023). Research has shown that such measures can increase women's political participation and influence, leading to better representation of community interests and more effective decision-making (Bhalotra & Clots-Figueras, 2014).

Addressing complex social issues and driving sustainable development initiatives requires a collaborative effort involving various stakeholders, including grassroots women-led organisations, government agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and private sector entities. By fostering collaboration and partnership among these diverse actors, we can leverage their collective expertise, resources, and networks to develop comprehensive and effective solutions. One successful example of such collaboration is the Kudumbashree program in Kerala, India, which brings together women's self-help groups, local governments, and NGOs to address poverty, employment, and social empowerment (Krishnan & Chakraborty, 2021). The program has been instrumental in promoting women's entrepreneurship, improving access to credit, and enhancing decision-making power within households and communities.

To ensure that the perspectives, concerns, and recommendations of grassroots women leaders are integrated into policymaking and program implementation, it is essential to establish mechanisms for regular consultation and dialogue.

These mechanisms can take various forms, such as:

1. **Community forums or town halls:** Regular meetings where grassroots women leaders can directly engage with policymakers, government officials, and other stakeholders to share their experiences, concerns, and proposed solutions.
2. **Advisory councils or committees:** Establishing advisory bodies of grassroots women leaders from diverse backgrounds and sectors, which can provide valuable insights and recommendations to policymakers and program implementers.
3. **Participatory research and data collection:** Involving grassroots women leaders in data collection and research processes to capture their perspectives and ensure that policies and programs are informed by accurate and contextual information.

By fostering inclusive and collaborative governance models, we can ensure that grassroots women leaders are empowered to contribute their unique knowledge and experiences to decision-making processes. This approach not only promotes gender equality and women's empowerment but also contributes to the development of more effective and sustainable solutions to the challenges faced by communities.

LIMITATIONS AND SCOPE

The present study provides valuable insights into the challenges faced by women in leadership roles at the community level. However, it also has its limitations. Firstly, the study has a limited sample size, potentially affecting the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the research has focused primarily on qualitative data, overlooking quantitative measures that could offer a more comprehensive understanding. Furthermore, the paper has not been able to explore the impact of factors such as caste, class, and religion, which could significantly affect women's leadership experiences. Despite these limitations, the future scope of this research holds promise. Future studies could employ a mixed-methods approach to provide a more nuanced analysis, incorporating quantitative surveys alongside qualitative interviews. Moreover, exploring the impact of various socio-economic factors on women's leadership trajectories could enhance the understanding of their challenges and successes. Additionally, comparative studies across different regions or countries could offer valuable insights into the contextual differences in women's grassroots leadership. Overall, while the current research sheds light on an important issue, there is ample room for further exploration and refinement to advance our understanding of grassroots women leaders in Delhi NCR.

CONCLUSION

The study identified history, present status and several key challenges faced by these women grassroots leaders. Gender stereotypes, caste and class discrimination, and a lack of mentorship and funding were significant barriers (Lockley & Brown, 2020). Despite these hurdles, the research underscores the vital role these women play in driving positive change. Their work transcends leadership, dismantling stereotypes and advocating for gender equality at the community level. The women profiled in this research addressed critical issues like child marriage, waste management, sexual violence, financial independence and most importantly, access to education. Their leadership empowers others, particularly those facing similar marginalization. By fostering inclusive dialogue and challenging entrenched norms, they pave the way for a more just and equitable society (Abdullah et al., 2018).

Grassroots women leaders are crucial agents of social progress. Addressing the challenges they face – through mentorship programs, diversified funding opportunities, and dismantling discriminatory structures – is essential. By supporting these women, we empower not just individuals but entire communities, fostering a more inclusive and flourishing future for India. Moving forward, policymakers can play a critical role in supporting grassroots women leaders. Public policy can incentivize mentorship programs (Gandhi & Sen, 2020, MPA), establish dedicated funding streams for grassroots organisation and dismantle discriminatory structures that hinder their work. Additionally, fostering a culture that celebrates and values the contributions of grassroots women leaders is essential. By recognizing their agency and amplifying their voices, we can create a more equitable landscape for social change in India. By investing in the growth and sustainability of grassroots women's leadership, we can unlock the transformative potential of these change-makers and accelerate progress towards a more equitable and just world.

TEAM

Manasi Prabhakaran

Manasi Bhagyashri Prabhakaran (she/her) is currently pursuing the Young India Fellowship at Ashoka University, building a career in public policy research & communications. She graduated with a degree in Applied Psychology from Gargi College, University of Delhi, and is a passionate crusader for mental health and gender rights. Her artistic liberation comes through her engagements with poetry, dance, and films.

Smriti Rawat

Smriti Rawat (She/Her) is currently a fellow at the Young India Fellowship programme of Ashoka University. She has been a software engineer by profession who then transitioned into explorations of the social sector with the 52 Parindey Fellowship where she traveled solo across India and engaged with social initiatives to get a deeper and realistic understanding of women's issues, an area of keen interest for her. Additionally, one would find her creating art through poetry, painting and photography.

Sandra Sreekumar

Sandra Sreekumar (she/they) is a BTech Computer Science Graduate, who has a work experience of three years. In the pursuit of exploring her other interests, she is now pursuing the Young India Fellowship at Ashoka University. Her major interest areas are Gender and Sexuality. Alongside, she harbors a keen passion for both music and fashion.

Simran Kapoor

Simran Kapoor, with a background in Geography and Humanities, is a Young India Fellow at Ashoka University. Simran's journey includes leading roles in prestigious organizations, receiving awards like the DG NCC Commendation Card and the Russian International Rally of Young Patriots, and performances at esteemed events like the Shanghai Folk Dance Festival and the Commonwealth Championship for Weight Lifting. Passionate about impactful societal transformation, Simran also runs an NGO for girl child education in Dehradun, alongside pursuing hobbies like dance, yoga, swimming, martial arts, and running.

Diksha Pandey

Diksha Pandey is a versatile professional with over five years of experience in the tech industry, currently pursuing a Young India Fellowship at Ashoka University. Her career spans roles at EA Games, OPPO & OnePlus, and Deloitte USI, where she excelled in project management and process optimization. Diksha's technical expertise is complemented by her passion for social causes, evidenced by her volunteer work with non profit organizations like Vidyapeeth and Make A Difference. Her recent research with the Social Policy Research Foundation showcases her commitment to policy advocacy.

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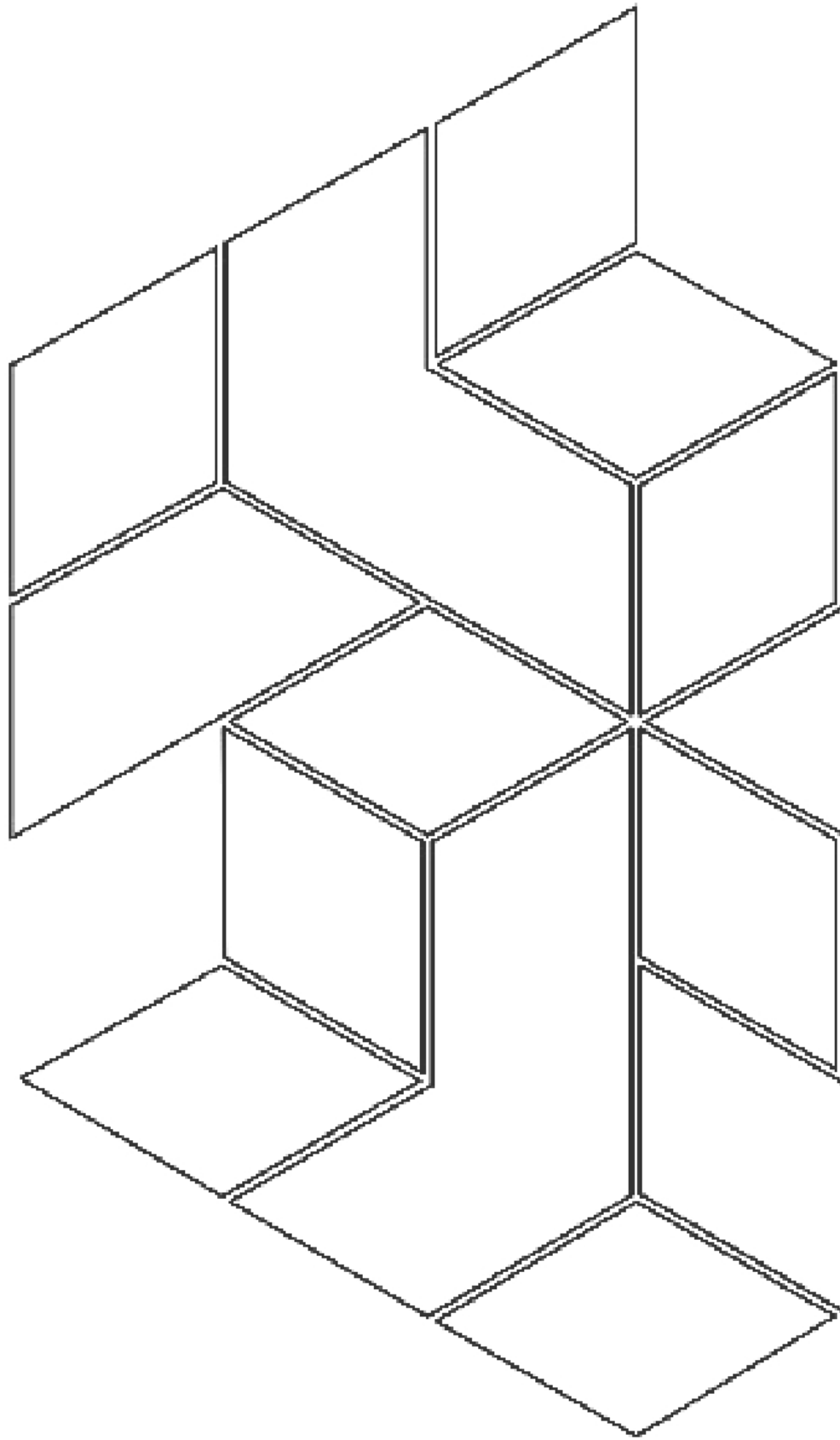
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