

Women panchayat leaders still battling a reluctant community

Himanshi Dhawan | TNN

New Delhi: Even as political parties battle over the women's reservation bill under the glare of arclights, a woman's struggle in India's villages has not got any easier. For every success that a woman panchayat leader achieves, there are untold stories of humiliation, lack of support or cooperation from a reluctant community.

Bhavi Patel from Chausar village near Ahmedabad, Gujarat is reduced to tears as she recounts years of struggle to get justice against effluents released by factories in the Vatva industrial area. Despite a High Court order, trucks continue to dump waste in the Khari river making it impossible for her village community to survive.

"We filed RTIs, took pictures with our mobile phones when the trucks were releasing poisonous acid in our river, but we are still waiting for



STRUGGLE CONTINUES

a response. There is no one to hear our voice but we continue to fight," Patel, the village sarpanch, said. In the past decade, children and adults have fallen sick, both livestock and harvest have suffered.

If her poignant story of a community's fight for clean water and air appears to have no silver lining, Roshni Devi, sarpanch of a Haryana village, spoke about the community's resistance to re-

form. "When I decided to take regular rounds of my village for monitoring of infrastructure development, the people of the village opposed it at first. Had a male sarpanch done the same, he would have been lauded for his initiative," Roshni Devi, a presidential awardee, said.

The panchayat leaders were attending a workshop on strengthening women's political empowerment organised

by the Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA). Attended by more than 75 elected women panchayat representatives, the two-day meeting provided a common platform for experience sharing and constituency building and training on public speaking.

PRIA's programme manager Neha Chaturvedi said, "There is a general lack of acceptance from leaders in the village community but our work continues. We work with partner NGOs to ensure women are more assertive and know about schemes like NREGA, RTI, local governance."

Chhattisgarh's Uma Sav, however, gives hope to the struggle. Sav — from village Sinha — is a class five dropout and has been elected for the second time from an unreserved seat. She has to her credit initiating mid-day meals in the village school and infrastructure development like deepening the village pond under NREGA.