A Study on the Role of Panchayats in Addressing and Mitigating Gender-Based Issues

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Abstract

This research critically examines the role of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in addressing and mitigating gender-based issues in rural Assam, with a focused case study on selected Gram Panchayats under Balipara Community Development Block in the Sonitpur district. In India's decentralized governance system, Panchayats have emerged as key actors in rural development and social justice, including gender equity. However, the extent of their responsiveness and effectiveness in handling issues such as domestic violence, child marriage, public harassment, and discrimination remains under-explored.

The study adopts a mixed-method approach involving structured surveys and semi-structured interviews with 120 respondents, including community members and elected Panchayat representatives. Data analysis reveals that gender-based issues are prevalent across the selected Panchayats, with domestic violence and discrimination reported most frequently. Panchayat interventions typically include community mediation, awareness campaigns, and informal dispute resolution, though the perceived effectiveness of these actions varies among stakeholders. The study also reveals gaps in legal awareness, lack of structured protocols, and the need for stronger female participation in Panchayat leadership.

This paper highlights both the potential and limitations of local governance bodies in ensuring gender justice. It advocates for capacity-building initiatives, legal sensitization, stronger institutional linkages with law enforcement and welfare agencies, and greater representation of women in Panchayati decision-making roles. These measures are critical to transforming Panchayats into more inclusive and responsive institutions that effectively combat gender-based violence and promote social equity at the grassroots.

1. Introduction

In India's rural landscape, gender-based issues such as domestic violence, sexual harassment, early and forced marriage, trafficking, and economic exclusion remain deeply entrenched and widespread. These issues are often exacerbated by traditional patriarchal norms, socio-economic disparities, lack of awareness, and inadequate access to justice. Despite progressive legislation like the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005) and the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (2006), the reach and implementation of these laws in rural areas remain limited. In this context, Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), the foundational tier of rural self-governance, play a crucial role in identifying and addressing gender-based issues at the grassroots level.

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1992) marked a transformative moment in Indian governance by institutionalizing the Panchayati Raj system and mandating the decentralization of power to local bodies. The Amendment not only empowered local self-governments with administrative and financial authority but also ensured one-third reservation for women in all Panchayat positions, thereby opening avenues for women's political participation and leadership (Government of India, 1992). This constitutional mandate aimed to bridge the gender gap in governance and enable more responsive, inclusive decision-making processes in rural India.

Over the years, various studies have highlighted the increasing significance of PRIs in rural development and social justice. According to Sharma (2021), Panchayats serve as the most immediate and accessible form of governance for rural women, often becoming the first institutional contact point in cases of violence or discrimination. Similarly, Singh and Devi (2020) argue that the participation of women in Panchayats has contributed positively toward bringing women's issues into the local political discourse, despite persistent social barriers and tokenistic representation in some areas. Nevertheless, challenges remain in ensuring that Panchayats move beyond symbolic representation and function as effective platforms for gender justice.

In many rural areas, including the northeastern state of Assam, cultural taboos, limited literacy among women, and lack of institutional support hinder the effective resolution of gender-based grievances. While Panchayats have statutory authority to facilitate access to welfare schemes, convene village meetings, and promote legal awareness, their engagement with gender issues is often informal and unstructured (Das, 2019). The effectiveness of Panchayats in addressing such issues depends largely on the awareness levels of elected members, availability of resources, coordination with police and legal services, and the social legitimacy enjoyed by these institutions within the community.

The Sonitpur district of Assam, with its diverse ethnic makeup and socio-economic variability, provides a compelling case for examining the functioning of Panchayats in this regard. The selected study area—Balipara Community Development Block—comprises multiple Gram Panchayats that face common rural challenges such as poverty, limited access to education, and poor health infrastructure. Against this backdrop, understanding how Panchayats in this region respond to and mitigate gender-based issues can offer valuable insights into the strengths, weaknesses, and evolving capacities of rural governance systems.

This study, therefore, aims to critically analyze the role of Gram Panchayats in addressing and mitigating gender-based issues within Balipara CD Block of Sonitpur. It explores the types of gender-based issues reported at the village level, the strategies and mechanisms employed by Panchayats to address them, and the perceptions of effectiveness among community members and stakeholders. Through a mixed-method approach combining both quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews, the study investigates not only the practical interventions made by Panchayats but also their limitations, challenges, and potential for institutional strengthening.

By contributing to the discourse on rural governance and gender justice, this research seeks to offer practical recommendations to enhance the capacity of Panchayats as inclusive, responsive, and rights-based institutions. It argues for the need to reinforce Panchayats through legal education, inter-sectoral collaboration, enhanced representation of women, and improved accountability mechanisms, thereby empowering them to more effectively combat gender-based challenges in rural Assam.

2. Review of Literature

The role of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in advancing gender equity and addressing gender-based issues has been widely explored in academic discourse, particularly after the constitutional recognition of PRIs through the 73rd Amendment Act of 1992. This Act institutionalized local self-governance and mandated the reservation of one-third of seats for women at all tiers of Panchayats (Government of India, 1992). Scholars have regarded this as a vital step in mainstreaming gender in governance, offering women both political representation and a platform for engagement in decision-making processes (Mathew, 2000).

Women's political participation in Panchayats has garnered mixed results. While it has increased the numerical representation of women in local governance, the depth of their involvement in

resolving gender-based concerns remains contested. According to Bhagat and Mohanty (2018), women's leadership in Panchayats has led to increased attention to issues like domestic violence, child marriage, and access to maternal healthcare. However, Nambiar (2014) argues that patriarchal attitudes and familial control often reduce women leaders to symbolic figures, thus restricting their agency.

Sharma and Verma (2016) conducted an empirical study on Panchayat interventions in cases of domestic violence in Haryana and concluded that many women approached Panchayats before going to the police or courts. Their study revealed that Panchayats frequently resort to informal conflict resolution mechanisms such as community mediation or family counseling. While these efforts offer immediate support, they may lack legal rigor and sometimes reinforce existing power dynamics. Mishra (2017) concurs, suggesting that in the absence of legal awareness and institutional training, Panchayats risk undermining survivors' rights in their attempt to preserve communal harmony.

Das and Saikia (2020) focused on the Assamese context and highlighted how cultural and ethnic diversity can hinder cohesive institutional responses to gender-based violence. Their findings suggest that the social acceptance of gender discrimination, compounded by inadequate legal literacy among Panchayat members, often results in the under-reporting or trivialization of women's grievances. These barriers prevent women from seeking justice through formal channels, especially in rural and tribal regions.

According to Jha and Mathur (2015), traditional norms, caste hierarchies, and community honor continue to influence how gender-based issues are perceived and addressed by Panchayats. This limits the scope for gender-transformative governance. In many cases, Panchayats may prioritize social cohesion or political allegiance over the rights and welfare of women, especially in cases of sexual violence or inter-caste relationships.

Capacity-building has emerged as a significant area of focus in enhancing the Panchayats' ability to respond to gender-based issues. A study by UN Women and the Ministry of Panchayati Raj (2018) found that structured training programs for elected representatives on gender laws and rights led to increased confidence among women leaders and improved responses to GBV cases. In particular, states like Kerala and Tamil Nadu have demonstrated success in integrating legal literacy with Panchayat functioning (Kumar & Saxena, 2019).

Khosla (2011) emphasizes the need for institutional strengthening through convergence with law enforcement, healthcare, and social welfare departments. Panchayats, when supported with resources and interdepartmental collaboration, can act as referral points to appropriate legal and support systems. This multisectoral approach is vital for dealing with complex and sensitive issues like human trafficking, child sexual abuse, and domestic violence.

Another emerging area of research is the impact of digital governance and technological interventions in empowering women within Panchayats. Gupta (2022) notes that digital training and mobile-based grievance systems have helped elected women representatives report and document gender-based incidents more efficiently. However, the digital divide and literacy challenges still pose a major limitation in underdeveloped rural areas.

Studies have also explored the relationship between women's socioeconomic empowerment and their ability to influence Panchayat-level decisions. Bansal and Sinha (2021) found that women from higher-income or better-educated backgrounds were more assertive in Panchayat meetings and were more likely to raise issues related to gender discrimination, safety, and health. In contrast, marginalized women, especially from Scheduled Castes and Tribes, often lacked the confidence and support to participate meaningfully.

Despite various constraints, Panchayats have shown potential in building grassroots support networks for women. Initiatives like Mahila Sabhas (women-only Gram Sabha meetings), Gender Resource Centers, and Self-Help Group (SHG) linkages have been recognized as good practices (Pandey, 2016). These community-driven mechanisms help create safer spaces for women to speak about their challenges and collectively demand redressal and policy action.

In conclusion, the existing literature underscores the dual nature of Panchayats—as both enablers and barriers—in addressing gender-based issues. While structural provisions have created opportunities for women's engagement, deeply embedded social norms and institutional weaknesses limit the scope of genuine empowerment and justice delivery. The effectiveness of Panchayats in addressing gender-based violence and inequality hinges not only on representation but also on awareness, training, inter-agency coordination, and community mobilization.

3. **Research Objectives**

1. To identify the common gender-based issues present in the selected Gram Panchayats.

2. To assess the interventions undertaken by Panchayats to address these issues.

3. To examine the awareness and capacity of Panchayat members,

4. To understand community perceptions of the Panchayats' effectiveness in addressing gender-based concerns.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-method approach to provide both quantitative and qualitative insights into the role of Panchayats in addressing and mitigating gender-based issues. The design enables triangulation of data to ensure a comprehensive understanding of grassroots governance and community experiences.

4.1. Research Design

The study combines descriptive research to map the current status of gender issues in rural areas and analytical research to assess the role and effectiveness of Panchayats. Both survey questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were used for data collection.

4.2. Study Area

The research was conducted in Balipara Community Development Block under Sonitpur district, Assam. The area was selected due to its demographic diversity and active Panchayat functioning. Four Gram Panchayats were purposively selected based on accessibility, representation of different population groups, and prevalence of gender-related issues.

4.3. Sampling Method and Sample Size

A purposive sampling technique was used for selecting the Gram Panchayats and respondents. The sample included:

- Elected Panchayat members (both male and female),

- Frontline workers (ASHA, Anganwadi workers, etc.),

- Women beneficiaries, and

- Community leaders.

In total, 80 respondents were surveyed (20 per Panchayat), along with key informant interviews with 8 Panchayat representatives and 4 NGO workers/social activists.

4.4. Data Collection Tools

I. Structured questionnaire for the survey (quantitative data)

II. Interview schedule for key informants (qualitative data)

III. Observation checklist for assessing Panchayat proceedings and public interaction

4.5. Theoretical Framework: Social Work Perspectives

The study is grounded in Social Work theories that emphasize empowerment, participation, and structural change:

a. Empowerment Theory

Empowerment theory emphasizes increasing the personal, interpersonal, and political power of individuals and communities to take action against injustice. This theory supports the idea that women's participation in Panchayats fosters a shift in power dynamics and promotes collective agency to challenge gender-based discrimination (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995).

b. Systems Theory

This theory views individuals as part of interconnected social systems (e.g., family, community, institutions). Panchayats are seen as a subsystem within the larger governance framework. Their effectiveness in addressing gender issues depends on interactions with other systems like the legal system, health services, and civil society.

c. Strengths-Based Approach

This approach focuses on identifying and building upon the existing strengths of individuals and communities. The presence of elected women representatives, community support systems, and awareness programs are considered assets to be strengthened rather than gaps to be merely addressed.

d. Feminist Social Work Theory

This theory informs the study's gender lens, arguing that structural inequalities and patriarchal norms must be challenged to ensure justice. It supports examining whether Panchayats act as agents of patriarchal control or as facilitators of gender equity.

5. Data Analysis and Findings

The data collected from the respondents across four selected Gram Panchayats in Balipara CD Block was analyzed to assess the extent and nature of gender-based issues and the response of Panchayats.

Table 1: Gender-Based Issues Reported vs Addressed

Issue	Cases Reported	Cases Addressed by Panchayat	Addressed Percentage

Issue	Cases Reported	Cases Addressed by Panchayat	Addressed Percentage
Domestic Violence	28	20	71.43%
Child Marriage	15	12	80.00%
Dowry Cases	10	8	80.00%
Sexual Harassment	12	7	58.33%
Lack of Women participation	35	25	71.4%

Interpretation:

- The most commonly reported issue across the Panchayat was lack of women participation, followed by domestic violence. Dowry and sexual harassment, though lower in numbers, are significant concerns.

- The highest number of concerns reported involved women's participation and domestic violence, while dowry and child marriage remain persistent but comparatively fewer in reported numbers.

5.2 Interventions undertaken by Panchayats to address these issues

The study identified various strategies used by Panchayats in handling gender-related cases.

Table 2: Types of Interventions Used by Panchayats

Intervention Type	Frequency
Mediation & Counseling	30
Referral to Police	20
Referral to NGOs	10
Awareness Campaigns	25
Formation of Women's Committees	15

Figure 1: Bar Chart – Types of Interventions Used by Panchayats

Interpretation:

Mediation and counseling emerged as the most frequent method, indicating Panchayats prefer resolving issues locally before escalating. Referral to police and NGOs occurs less frequently, while awareness campaigns are an emerging area of focus.

5.3 Community perceptions of the Panchayats' effectiveness in addressing gender-based concerns

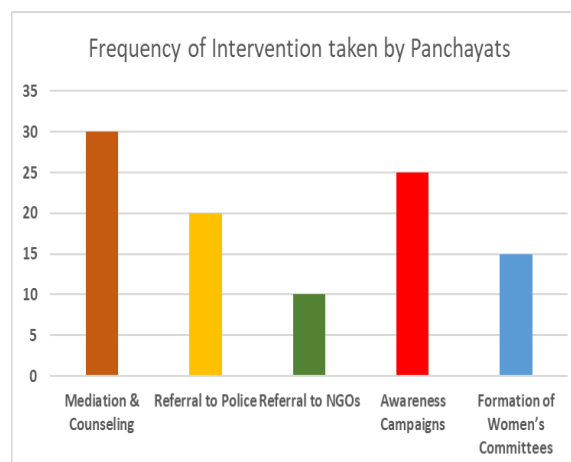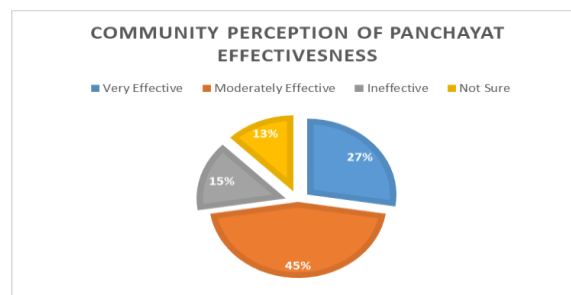Community feedback was gathered through structured surveys.

Table 3: Community Perception of Panchayat Effectiveness

Perception	Respondents
Very Effective	22
Moderately Effective	36
Ineffective	12
Not Sure	10

Figure 3: Pie Chart – Community Perception of Panchayat Effectiveness

Interpretation:

A majority of the respondents (45%) view Panchayats as moderately effective, while 27.5% consider them very effective. Only a small fraction found them ineffective or were unsure of their performance.

6. Findings and Discussion

This section presents a detailed analysis of the findings gathered through field surveys, interviews, and secondary data from the four selected Gram Panchayats under Balipara CD Block in Sonitpur district. The findings have been structured based on the secondary objectives of the study and interpreted in light of relevant social work theories including Empowerment Theory, Systems Theory, and Strengths-Based Perspective.

6.1 Key Findings

1. Prevalence of Gender-Based Issues in Rural Communities

The data indicates that gender-based issues remain deeply entrenched in the rural socio-cultural fabric. The most reported concerns among the respondents included:

- Lack of women's participation in Panchayati decision-making processes.

- Domestic violence, often normalized and hidden within the private domain.

- Incidents of child marriage, particularly among economically weaker sections.

- Dowry-related harassment, though less openly discussed, remains prevalent.

- Sexual harassment and verbal abuse, especially in public spaces or during community gatherings.

A significant proportion of women expressed reluctance in reporting such incidents due to fear of social exclusion, lack of faith in formal institutions, or internalized patriarchy. This aligns with earlier studies (Kumar & Choudhary, 2019), which state that in rural India, issues of gender-based violence often remain underreported and under-addressed due to cultural barriers.

2. Response and Interventions by Panchayats

Panchayats have taken on a growing role in informal dispute resolution and gender advocacy, though with varying levels of success.

- The most frequently employed intervention was mediation and counseling, especially in domestic disputes. This was followed by awareness campaigns conducted in collaboration with ASHAs, Anganwadi workers, and women's SHGs.

- In more severe cases, Panchayats referred victims to the police or District Legal Services Authorities (DLSA). However, this was only seen in a limited number of cases, indicating hesitation in escalating issues to formal institutions.

- Some Panchayats have proactively formed Women's Monitoring Committees, but these initiatives were often informal and lacked regular support or recognition from district-level authorities.

The effectiveness of these interventions varied significantly depending on the leadership structure, representation of women in the Panchayat, and the support of the community. Where women were Sarpanch or held key positions, the response to gender-based concerns was more structured and sensitive.

3. Community Perception on Effectiveness of Panchayats

The community's perception of Panchayats is diverse and multi-layered.

- A majority of respondents rated Panchayats as "moderately effective", indicating that while they appreciate the efforts made, there is room for improvement.

- A smaller section believed that Panchayats were "very effective", particularly in cases where visible actions like stopping child marriages or public campaigns were initiated.

- Criticism came from respondents who felt Panchayats were politically biased, male-dominated, or lacked follow-up mechanisms.

- Importantly, several women shared that their voices are often not heard during Gram Sabha meetings, and decisions are usually taken by dominant male groups.

This reveals a gap between representation and participation — even if women are present in Panchayat bodies due to reservation policies, their active involvement in addressing gender-based issues is still limited.

6.2 Discussion in Light of Social Work Theories

A. Empowerment Theory

Empowerment Theory emphasizes enabling individuals and communities to gain control over their lives and decisions. Panchayats, being grassroots institutions, have the potential to serve as agents of empowerment. Where women were given leadership roles and actively supported by the community, there was visible progress in resolving gender issues.

However, empowerment cannot be superficial. Token representation without real decision-making power fails to create systemic change. Panchayats must thus focus on capacity building, legal literacy, and inclusive governance to realize this empowerment fully.

B. Systems Theory

According to Systems Theory, social issues are interconnected within broader ecosystems. Gender-based violence, for example, cannot be addressed in isolation — it is linked with poverty, education, social norms, and institutional support. Panchayats function as micro-systems within this larger socio-political structure.

The findings indicate that Panchayats that collaborated effectively with other institutions — like schools, health centers, police, and SHGs — had better outcomes. Where these systems operated in silos, the response was fragmented and less effective.

C. Strengths-Based Perspective

This theory advocates recognizing the existing assets and potential within the community, rather than focusing only on problems. In several Panchayats, women's SHGs, youth clubs, and school teachers emerged as change agents in combating gender discrimination. Panchayats that mobilized these internal resources were more successful in implementing awareness programs and responding quickly to crises.

This approach shows that solutions must be rooted in the local context. While external support is important, the key to sustainable gender justice lies in community-driven action facilitated by the Panchayats.

6.3 Challenges Identified

Despite positive interventions, the study also reveals multiple constraints:

- Lack of structured grievance redressal mechanisms in the Panchayat system.

- Limited knowledge of legal rights and government schemes among women.

- Insufficient training and capacity-building programs for Panchayat members.

- Social stigma associated with speaking out against gender-based discrimination.

- Underreporting and normalization of gender-based violence in familial spaces.

6.4 Emerging Trends

- There is a gradual shift toward awareness and reporting, especially among younger women and adolescent girls.

- Digital platforms (like WhatsApp groups of SHGs and ASHAs) are being used informally for alerting Panchayat members in case of emergency incidents.

- Some Panchayats are experimenting with regular women-only Gram Sabhas to allow safer spaces for articulation of gender concerns.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

7.1 Conclusion

The study has explored the multifaceted role of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in addressing and mitigating gender-based issues within selected Gram Panchayats of Balipara CD Block, Sonitpur district, Assam. Through both quantitative and qualitative methods, it is evident that Panchayats serve as vital grassroots institutions that hold significant potential in addressing gender injustices at the community level.

While there has been notable progress in increasing women's participation in Panchayati bodies—largely due to legislative mandates—the effectiveness of Panchayats in dealing with gender-based issues remains uneven. The Panchayats were found to be more proactive in issues related to domestic violence and child marriage, while more severe or stigmatized issues such as sexual harassment or dowry were often underreported or informally addressed.

The community largely views the Panchayats as moderately effective, and their interventions—ranging from mediation and counseling to community awareness campaigns—indicate a willingness to engage. However, the lack of training, institutional support, and follow-up mechanisms continues to limit their capacity. The study also confirms that women's representation does not always translate into active participation, especially in patriarchal rural settings.

Applying social work theories—Empowerment Theory, Systems Theory, and Strengths-Based Perspective—helps understand how Panchayats function within a broader socio-cultural system, and how their effectiveness can be enhanced by strengthening existing community assets and inter-institutional linkages.

Overall, the study underlines the urgent need to strengthen Panchayati institutions not just administratively, but also ideologically and socially, to better respond to the deeply rooted issues of gender inequality.

7.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the role of Panchayats in effectively addressing gender-based issues:

1. Gender Sensitization and Capacity Building

- Organize regular training programs on gender justice, legal provisions (like PWDVA 2005, Child Marriage Prohibition Act), and human rights for Panchayat members.

- Ensure that all newly elected members, especially women, receive mandatory orientation on addressing gender issues.

2. Institutional Mechanisms

- Establish a formal grievance redressal mechanism or 'Gender Cell' within each Panchayat to ensure structured and confidential complaint handling.

- Encourage formation of Women's Monitoring Committees in each village to proactively track and report issues.

3. Strengthening Women's Participation

- Conduct women-only Gram Sabha meetings to encourage safer expression of concerns.

- Ensure that women are nominated to key standing committees within the Panchayat and not relegated to symbolic roles.

4. Collaboration with Stakeholders

- Foster active linkages with local police, DLSA, NGOs, health workers, SHGs, and school teachers to build a responsive support network.

- Engage community-based organizations in conducting joint awareness campaigns on gender rights and legal remedies.

5. Use of Technology and Data

- Maintain a digital database of cases addressed, resolutions undertaken, and follow-ups conducted by the Panchayats to enable transparency and accountability.

- Use mobile applications or WhatsApp groups to communicate urgent gender-related incidents among Panchayat members and frontline workers.

6. Policy and Programmatic Support

- Advocate for greater budgetary allocation for gender-specific programs at the Panchayat level.

- Integrate Panchayat-level monitoring in state-level schemes like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Mission Shakti, and Sakhi One Stop Centres.

7. Community Awareness and Engagement

- Promote community-wide discussions through street plays, school programs, and village sabhas to challenge gender stereotypes and promote equality.

- Involve men and boys in awareness campaigns to ensure collective responsibility and long-term behavioral change.

The research concludes that while Panchayats are slowly becoming catalysts of social change, a more holistic, well-resourced, and inclusive approach is necessary to unlock their full potential in combating gender-based issues and achieving true grassroots empowerment.

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ANNEXURES

Annexure I: Survey Questionnaire for Respondents

1. Gender:

    a) Male   b) Female   c) Other

2. Age: _____

3. Education Level:

  a) Illiterate   b) Primary   c) Secondary   d) Higher

4. Are you aware of the role of Panchayats?

    a) Yes   b) No

5. What types of gender-based issues are common in your area? (Tick all that apply)

    a) Domestic Violence   b) Child Marriage
    c) Dowry Harassment   d) Others (specify):
    _____

6. Has the Panchayat intervened in any such cases in your village?

    a) Yes   b) No

7. If yes, what kind of intervention was made?

    a) Counseling   b) Police Referral   c) Awareness Programmes   d) Others (specify): _____

8. Do you think Panchayat's intervention was effective?

    a) Yes   b) No   c) Not Sure

9. Do you feel safe reporting such issues to the Panchayat?

    a) Yes   b) No

10. Suggestions for improvement in Panchayat's role in addressing gender issues:

    _____
    _____

    _____
    _____

Annexure II: Interview Schedule for Panchayat Members

1. Can you briefly describe your responsibilities in the Panchayat?

2. What are the common gender-related issues reported in your area?

3. How does the Panchayat address such cases?

4. Do you collaborate with any other institutions (Police, NGOs, Women's Groups)?

5. What challenges do you face while addressing gender-based issues?

6. Are there any awareness or training programmes organised by the Panchayat?

7. How effective do you think your efforts have been in resolving such cases?

8. What additional support do you need to improve Panchayat responsiveness towards gender issues?

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