

TARTU UNIVERSITY
Faculty of Social Sciences
Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies

Alpana Malik

**EFFECT OF SOCIETAL CULTURE ON WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN THE
PANCHAYATI RAJ SYSTEM IN INDIA**

MA Thesis

Supervisors: Alar Kilp, PhD
Rampal Bhatti, PhD (India)

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Authorship Declaration

I have prepared this thesis independently. All the views of other authors, as well as data from literary sources and elsewhere, have been cited.

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Abstract

This case study focuses on assessing the impact of societal cultures on women's empowerment within the Panchayati system in India, particularly in the Khanpur Kalan and Ganwari villages of Sonapat district, Haryana. Employing a qualitative approach with open-ended interviews, the research explores the cultural factors influencing gender treatment in both the Panchayat and village contexts. Thematic content analysis, guided by Hofstede's Dimensions Theory of Culture and Kabeer's Instrumental Model, identifies four main themes: Cultural factors in the Panchayat system, Cultural factors in the village, Village empowerment determinants, and Council empowerment determinants. The study reveals a dominance of masculine cultures, emphasizing gender roles. Despite women having access to resources, findings indicate insufficient empowerment, with low agency and achievement status. Informal cultures within Panchayats and villages significantly impact women's participation and efficiency in the studied region.

Keywords: Societal culture, women's empowerment, Panchayati system, gender treatment, masculine cultures, gender roles, resource, agency, achievement, informal cultures

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Introduction

India is recognized for its diverse tapestry of ethnicities, cultures, and languages across its states (Ansari, 2015, p.7). Kasturi (1995, p.2) argues that this extensive diversity was further complicated by the impact of colonial rule, giving rise to a persistent clash between traditional and modern values. This conflict has generated uncertainties regarding the adaptation of gender norms to modernity. Moreover, Kasturi (1995, p.2) highlights that "the absence of social, cultural, and economic homogeneity makes it challenging to make generalizations about Indian women amidst change, and portrayals of Indian women are paradoxical and contradictory".

Like many other societies, patriarchal norms endure in Indian culture, regulating aspects such as reproduction, sexuality, and social production, such as creating goods and services (Sivakumar & Manimekalai, 2021). The authors also assert that Indian women face cultural discouragement from challenging discrimination, subordination, exploitation, and subjugation, as well as participating in specific significant activities governed by explicit norms and rules (Sivakumar & Manimekalai, 2021, p.427). Consequently, women's aspirations and empowerment are confined within the boundaries of Indian sociocultural values. Nevertheless, a positive cultural environment can enable women to contribute significantly to the values of the family, society, and the nation.

The contemporary emphasis on women's empowerment has attracted growing attention from researchers due to the imperative of achieving gender equality (Nagarajan, 2019) and freeing women from oppression entrenched in sociocultural beliefs (Billava & Nayak, 2016, p.7).

Historical patterns reveal that in a nation favouring males, women are relegated to a secondary status, resulting in the denial of certain rights and liberties; even while women have formal opportunities and rights under the law, the question of how equitably these formal rights may be realized in practice is a constant one. Formal equality in rights and opportunities can coexist with extremely unequal outcomes. Some argue that women's capabilities have been predominantly limited to domestic activities within the home (Naik, 2016, p.1).

So, what does women's empowerment entail? Kabeer defines it as "the processes by which those who were denied the ability to exercise choice, voice and influence – both within their personal lives and in the wider community – have been able to gain this ability". (Kabeer, 2018, p.4). It is a dynamic process involving continuous change and agency, which refers to the internal power within individuals (Kabeer, 1999a, p.437). Duflo (2012, p.3) outlines vital aspects of women's empowerment, including improved access to development elements such

as health, education, earning potential, rights, and political engagement. Thus, when women undergo substantial changes enabling them to possess a greater capacity for a fulfilled life, women's empowerment is deemed to occur.

Some researchers attribute women's empowerment to social and cultural factors (Khan & Mazhar, 2017). Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey in Minelgaite et al. (2018, p.235) define societal culture as shared beliefs, rules, values, and traditions that shape a society's value systems. According to Khan and Mazhar (2017, p.414), individual behaviour is influenced by social and cultural values, including religion, economic status, education, family, politics, and cultural values. Age, education, caste, religion, marital status, family income, and housing conditions impact women's empowerment and growth. These sociocultural factors are inherent in society, expressed through attitudes, values, norms, stratifications, practices, institutions, and related societal ways. This perspective suggests that a society with positive social and cultural values will foster favourable conditions for women's empowerment, and conversely.

This research examines how a specific political institution, in this case, the village council, dis(empowers) women, despite its mandate to empower them and culture's role in this dynamic. Existing studies, such as Bozzano's (2017) examination of Italian provincial data, highlight how religious marriage can be viewed as a disempowering institution due to involved norms and practices. Norris and Inglehart (2001, pp.127-128) argue in their study that post-industrial cultures exhibit more egalitarian attitudes toward empowered women, reflecting broad patterns of social development and cultural modernization. Another approach can be how an organization dis(empowers) its participants. Rye's (2015) study explores how organizations with social and political goals can empower or disempower participants. These studies show a connection between culture and women empowerment, which motivates the author to test this theory in a different geographical area.

In India, gender equality initiatives are evident through seat reservations for women in local governance. Unlike urban municipalities, Indian villages have their local self-government structure known as Panchayati Raj (council of five people at the village level), which allocates 33% seat reservation for women out of the total seats, constituting one-third of the entire political positions at the village level. 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992, facilitated this, Article 243-D (2)(3) (Constitution of India: Legislative Department: Ministry of Law and Justice: GoI). This reservation of seats was increased to 50% in the state of Haryana, where this study is anchored (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2021).

Despite the legal framework in India supporting women's empowerment, reports indicate that many women serving as sarpanches (heads) of village councils are essentially proxy representatives, with male relatives exercising control after their election (Vasudev, 2022). This situation renders them passive in decision-making and governance, raising questions about their ability to influence their electorate positively. Why do elected women indulge in this practice? Are they forced to do this, or do they willingly become part of it due to the influence of societal culture? While government initiatives may be effective in urban areas, rural regions grapple with sociocultural challenges in India.

This study aims to investigate the impact of societal culture on women's empowerment within the Panchayati Raj system in India. Previous studies have explored this topic, but this research takes a unique perspective by focusing on women as the primary stakeholders. It seeks to understand how women perceive the culture that may inadvertently hinder their empowerment, considering cultural elements are ingrained in their personalities and attitudes. The central focus of this thesis is to examine women's empowerment through a case study of the Panchayati Raj system, particularly delving into the possibilities of deeply embedded sociocultural transformations and identifying impediments within society that hinder achieving lofty developmental goals of equality. The research aims to develop a comprehensive understanding of empowerment and raise specific questions through this exploration.

Consequently, the questions that border the researcher's mind in the course of embarking on this study include:

1. What societal culture are women members of Panchayats exposed to?
2. To what extent do sociocultural factors affect women's empowerment?

The first question explores prevalent cultures among Panchayat members in India, aiming to identify their implications on women's status and provide practical solutions. The second question compares empowerment on two levels – public and private – considering extrinsic values, such as women's roles as leaders, and intrinsic values, such as their choices in family planning and decision-making on children's health and education. The research narrows its focus to the issue of political participation rights within the context of reforms.

Theoretical frameworks by social psychologist Geert Hofstede and Naila Kabeer's Instrumental Model will be employed to comprehend the intrinsic aspects of societal culture and empowerment. The study will adopt a qualitative research method, utilizing open-ended interviews to explore the effect of societal culture on women's empowerment in the

Panchayati Raj System. The interviews will be conducted in two villages in Sonapat district, Haryana, India, with selected women heads and council members.

After translating and transcribing the interviews, content analysis will be employed for data analysis. The findings are expected to contribute to national policies addressing inconsistencies in the Panchayati Raj system and fostering adequate sensitization of women's empowerment, particularly in rural areas. Additionally, the study's worldview will support advocacy efforts for women's empowerment, especially in rural contexts.

The state governments in India anticipate that Panchayats will handle administrative responsibilities while maintaining predominant financial control at higher levels (Ansari, 2015, p.7). There are notable differences in cultural, political, and economic aspects among states and even within villages of a state. This underscores the necessity for policy implications aimed at altering and addressing these sociocultural barriers. Consequently, the study's findings will contribute to developing national policies to rectify such disparities. Furthermore, the study's perspective will facilitate effective awareness and promotion of women's empowerment, particularly among rural women. Moreover, the study's outlook will endorse successful advocacy for the empowerment of rural women.

There will be five chapters in the study after the Introduction. The background of the study, the problem statement, the research objectives, the questions, and the significance of the study constitute the Introduction. Chapter One comprises major related theories, concepts, and a literature review that best explains the relationship between societal culture and women's empowerment. The Second chapter describes the study design used, the rationale for the case study and case selection, the data source, the method of data collection, the technique of data analysis, and the limitations of the study. In chapters three and four, a thorough analysis of (I)equality and empowerment will be presented to discuss the concept of empowerment being the nucleus of the study. Lastly, chapter five will present findings and discussion before conclusion.

1.Literature review

In this section, I articulate my dialogue derived from an engagement with existing scholarly works, serving as the basis for the theoretical and conceptual underpinnings of this research. The focal points of discussion within the pertinent literature encompass significant theories and concepts elucidating the correlation between societal culture and women's empowerment. Additionally, a comprehensive knowledge of the relevant literature, coupled with insights gleaned from empirical data gathered in the field, has contributed to the formulation of a coherent and reasoned conclusion in this study.

1.1 Conceptual review

1.1.1 Society and values

The term 'society' is commonly used to denote a group of individuals, yet its significance extends beyond a mere collective description in the realms of sociology and anthropology. Gandhi (2011, p.6) posits a more intricate definition, framing society not solely as a gathering of people but as a complex configuration of interaction norms. In this perspective, society becomes a network of individuals pursuing their interests within the framework of formal rules, overseen by specialists and enforced by the state. Alternatively, society can be construed as an aggregation of individuals, often unfamiliar to one another, yet interconnected through abstract categories such as gender, class, or nationality. Here, society becomes the tangible arena or institution where individuals enact their respective roles to achieve diverse goals.

Examining the symbiotic relationship between society and culture reveals a complementary association. Society, in essence, manifests itself through culture, and a group is identified by the cultural practices it adheres to — for instance, Indian society is recognized by its distinct Indian culture, while Asian society is characterized by its cultural attributes.

Cultural norms also play a crucial role in shaping gender roles. According to the World Health Organization, the functions, actions, and behaviours associated with a specific gender are dictated by the sociocultural context in which they occur (Malik, 2019, p.1524). This

context influences the societal beliefs, values, and attitudes assigned to the duties, roles, and status of each gender. The traditional bio-social theory regarding the division of labour and responsibilities between genders assigns women roles such as family management, caregiving, and child delivery, while men are seen as producers and controllers of economic affairs. Consequently, social respect and values are differentiated, often favouring males (Mallik, 2019, p.1524).

1.1.2 The concept of culture

The term 'culture' finds its etymological roots in the Latin word 'colere,' denoting cultivation, often employed with attributes like "the culture of grapevine" or "the culture of corn" (Matuchniak-Krasuska, 2003, p.233). Matuchniak-Krasuska (2003) suggests that Cicero, in his Tusculan Theses, was the first to metaphorically use the term "philosophy the culture of spiritual life. Culture, in essence, comprises patterned ways of thinking, feeling, and acting that are acquired and transmitted through symbols, with these manifestations embodied in artifacts. At its core, culture consists of traditional ideas and the values linked to them, deriving from historical processes (Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1952, p. 86).

Hofstede (2011, p.3) defines culture as shared mental software, referring to collective mental programming that distinguishes one group from another. However, this definition is considered narrow as it overlooks the broader dimensions of culture, encompassing established habitual lifestyles and activities of a group over time (Zamanabadi et al., 2015, p.45). Kingsley Davis, as cited in Hussain (2021, p. 40608), characterizes culture as a complex entity encompassing art, music, architecture, literature, science, technology, philosophy, social institutions, religious and moral values, and aesthetic values. This comprehensive view implies that culture touches every aspect of the ways, works, and behaviours of a group based on their beliefs.

Hussain (2021) further delineates the meaning of culture through four dimensions: learned behaviour, social heritage, superorganic nature, and a design for living. The first dimension underscores that culture is taught, learned, and shared among a collective group rather than acquired in isolation. The second dimension positions culture as an inheritance passed down through generations. The third dimension highlights the independence of culture from

physical and biological components, emphasizing its distinct meaning. Finally, the fourth dimension emphasizes the variation of culture across different societies or groups (p. 40608).

Nevertheless, in their examination of more than 100 culture definitions, Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) categorized cultural definitions into seven distinct types. These categories encompass descriptive, historical, normative, psychological, structural, genetic, and incomplete definitions.

The initial classification in Kroeber and Kluckhohn's cultural definitions is the 'Descriptive' category, often termed the "enumerative" group (Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1952, p.45; Matuchniak-Krasuska, 2003, p.234). Enumerative definitions, deemed by Matuchniak-Krasuska (2003) as falling below scientific standards, are considered shallow and insufficient in capturing the essential elements that constitute culture. An example is Tylor's evolutionary definition, stating that culture encompasses knowledge, beliefs, art, law, morality, customs, and various acquired abilities and habits within a society (Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1952), which combines anthropological elements and enumeration (Matuchniak-Krasuska, 2003).

Moving to the 'Historical' definitions, Kroeber and Kluckhohn identify those that delve into a society's heritage, traditions, and the accumulation of practices over time, including cultural diffusion. For instance, Stefan Czarnowski noted that culture is the totality of objectivized social output, emphasizing its objectivity, set, and spreading ability (Matuchniak-Krasuska, 2003).

In 'Psychological' definitions, as highlighted by Robert (2016, p.84), the focus is on four key elements: viewing culture as a 'tool' for problem-solving, emphasizing learning, understanding the habits of people, and providing a comprehensive psychological definition. Matuchniak-Krasuska (2003, p.236) notes that psychological definitions underscore individual socialization and acculturation, introducing individuals to culture, its norms, patterns, models, and values.

The 'Structural' definitions, also known as distributive definitions (Matuchniak-Krasuska, 2003), delve into the organization and components of culture, specifically system-related aspects (Robert, 2016, p. 88). Anthropologists like Ralf Linton, Ruth Benedict, Abram Kardiner, and Margaret Mead are noteworthy contributors in this category, studying diverse civilizations through extensive fieldwork (Matuchniak-Krasuska, 2003).

Lastly, the 'Genetic' definitions, as outlined by Robert (2016, p.91), encompass elements that become culture, factors determining its existence, and components emphasizing culture as a product or artifact. Genetic definitions also delve into immanent and communicable ideas, symbols, the origin of culture, and what culture is not.

1.1.3 Culture and women in India

Broadly, Indian culture is commonly perceived as patriarchal, irrespective of religious affiliations. Typically, males are accorded the role of family heads, responsible for providing for the family's sustenance, while women bear the responsibilities of children and household duties. In the traditional lineage structure, the eldest son assumes leadership, and post-marriage, the bride resides with the groom's family, adhering to extended family norms (Bharathi and Kaveeswarar, 2017, p. 94).

Traditional households have historically imposed constraints, particularly on women, contributing to gender disparities. Property inheritance followed the male line, and marriages were often arranged by elderly family members, with the bride and groom meeting only during the wedding ceremony. Women's mobility was restricted both outside and within their marital homes, where they had to carefully veil in the presence of senior male family members. Establishing one's position within the husband's family, especially for young brides, often took several years (Robinson, 2021, p. 4)

Over time, cultural dynamics have evolved, leading to changes in familial structures. According to Bharathi and Kaveeswarar (2017, p. 94), contemporary India witnesses an increase in nuclear families, with divorce becoming more prevalent. Despite these changes, the patriarchal lineage remains ingrained. Efforts towards gender equality have emerged, with legal measures facilitating equal property ownership and inheritance for women. Corporate boards are also mandated to include a minimum of one woman director (Bharathi and Kaveeswarar, 2017, p. 95).

1.1.4 Women experience during the pre- and post-independence period in India

The treatment and experiences of women in India have undergone notable changes in both the pre-independence and post-independence periods. The pre-independence era was marked by women being viewed as material objects rather than decision-makers, lacking education, economic and political power, self-confidence, and human capital development, with prevalent child marriages among females (Mallik, 2019, p.1525). The introduction of Western education, championed by many males, prompted social reform efforts for women's liberation and empowerment, spearheaded by Raja Ram Mohan Roy. This advocacy against societal injustices faced by women led to the legal abolition of the Sati¹ practice in 1829. Additionally, Christian missionaries' activities contributed to the establishment of girls' schools in India in 1848 (Mallik, 2019, p. 1525).

In the post-independence era, the Indian government implemented various policies, rules, and laws aimed at safeguarding women's interests, serving as catalysts for women's liberation and elevated status. These governmental measures have facilitated increased participation of women in economic and political spheres (Mallik, 2019, p.1526). Legislative actions related to occupations, property, and other aspects have, to some extent, contributed to the improvement of individual women's lives.

1.1.5 Women empowerment

Before delving into the concept of women's empowerment, it is crucial to clarify the term "empowerment," which carries diverse meanings stemming from various philosophical perspectives (Samah & Aref, 2009, p. 1). Kabeer (2008, p.14) notes that some authors have interchangeably used empowerment as a substitute for the term emancipation, as advocated by Kandiyoti & Kandiyoti (1987) to promote political and civil rights for women in Turkey. Pearson (2004, p.117) not only regards empowerment as a term but also considers it interchangeable with emancipation. However, Kabeer (2008, p.14) contends that treating empowerment as synonymous with emancipation is a misinterpretation, conflating two distinct concepts with diverse histories, missing the crucial distinctive meanings they offer in comprehending social change in women's lives. According to Kabeer (2008, p.14), empowerment is a relatively new term ... [a concept that] comes closer to what used to be called liberation in earlier literature. To her, liberation seems a more fitting term for interchangeability with empowerment.

Khan and Mazhar (2017, p. 413) define empowerment as the process of enhancing the capacity of individuals or groups through the expansion of assets and capabilities. Empowerment entails the internal ability to express oneself, acquire new skills, facilitate group action, and address underlying disparities. It encompasses an individual's social, political, economic, and spiritual fortitude, reflecting her self-assurance in her growth and the understanding that power is flexible.

This implies that through empowerment, one's skills and abilities are developed, leading to personal and collective benefits. The empowerment process holds the potential to transform individuals from illiteracy to literacy through education, poverty to affluence through development and support, and low social status to high social status, among other positive changes.

According to Kabeer empowerment is perceived to occur at various levels, appropriating a range of dimensions through diverse processes. Power remains central in the concept of empowerment, as it enables individuals to make choices. Denial of choice equates to disempowerment. In essence, empowerment involves a transformative process. Even those with numerous choices in their lives are not empowered in this sense if they were never made to feel weak initially (Kabeer, 1999b, p. 2).

Augustine and Michael (2015, p. 428) view women's empowerment as the means to enable them to have the necessary ability to undertake various tasks either individually or in groups, providing them with increased access to and control over societal resources. Khan and Mazhar (2017, 413) describe women's empowerment as a process of awareness and capacity building that leads women to greater participation, enhanced decision-making power, and transformative action. It also involves the reorganization of power in favour of women against patriarchal ideology and the dominance of male mentality syndrome (Khan and Mazhar, 2017, p.414). In essence, women's empowerment addresses gaps in women's abilities, welfare, and societal status. This aligns with Naila Kabeer's (1999b, p. 437) definition, where women's empowerment is seen as their ability to make strategic life choices that were previously denied to them. Women's empowerment aims to improve gender equality by igniting awareness of women's subjugation and enhancing their capacity to contest for power. In India, women's empowerment is contingent on various factors,

1 Satidaha or Sati refers to the practice of a widow sacrificing herself after her husband's death – either on his pyre or in some other fashion after his death. It is derived from a Sanskrit word.

including economic status, social status, geographical location, and educational status at a given point in time (Naik, 2016, p.3).

1.1.6 Challenges facing women empowerment in India

Kabeer's Instrumental Model establishes that women's empowerment revolves around their access to three fundamental elements: resources, agency, and achievements (Kabeer, 1999a). However, societal apprehensions about gender equality, fearing confusion regarding traditional gender roles, pose significant challenges to women's empowerment (Sivakumar and Manimekalai, 2021, p.428). These challenges manifest as socio-cultural barriers, stereotypical attitudes, violence against women, and denial of family and societal rights, creating obstacles in the journey towards gender balance (Sivakumar and Manimekalai, 2021).

a) Socio-Cultural Barriers: Specific cultural values prevalent in certain societies limit the development and expression of women's inherent potentials, favouring the male population. Socio-cultural norms confine women primarily to childbearing, child-rearing, and household chores, discouraging their involvement in work outside the home (Sivakumar and Manimekalai, 2021, p.431).

b) Violence against Women: Women face pervasive violence disrupting society, with rising crime rates against them. Kidnapping, rape, murder, and dowry-related incidents contribute to the daily victimization of women, as highlighted by the Central Home Ministry's Crime Record Bureau report (Afsana, 2017, p. 152).

c) Relegation and Denial of Family and Societal Rights: Women are often considered a weaker section of society, experiencing discrimination in various domains. The patriarchal family structure in India contributes to workplace and authority discrimination, impacting women's participation in public life, employment, education, health, and caregiving (Afsana, 2017, p. 152).

d) Others: Factors such as birth in a lower class or caste, low economic status, poor educational background, and residing in specific areas become barriers to women's

empowerment. Women of lower pedigree are often overlooked in decision-making processes (Naik, 2016, p. 3).

Additionally, Naik (2016, p. 12) identifies challenges in the qualitative political participation of Indian women, including lack of interest and experience in politics, minimal involvement in Gram Sabhas and Panchayat activities, and ignorance of their roles. Elected women representatives may lack genuine interest in politics, with their participation influenced by male family members. This leads to their distancing from Panchayat administration, and the male counterparts act as de facto representatives for them. The lack of interest, absenteeism from meetings, and ignorance of roles contribute to the barriers hindering women's empowerment.

Moreover, Khan and Mazhar (2017, p.415) identified key impediments to women's empowerment in India, which include:

- i) Persistent gender role expectations and rigid mindsets: These challenges are exacerbated by limited exposure to external influences in rural areas, where traditional beliefs about gender roles persist.
- ii) Limited educational penetration: Despite near-universal primary enrollment, retention rates are low, and enrollment in higher education remains inadequate. Women with limited education face increased vulnerability to various forms of abuse.
- iii) Adherence to caste identities in rural settings: Strict adherence to caste norms creates barriers for individuals, especially women, to transcend societal and self-imposed limitations.

The convergence of these factors compounds the challenges associated with achieving women's empowerment in India. The deeply ingrained patriarchal practices in such societies often label conforming women as 'the good woman' or 'the good wife.' Conversely, those who resist such norms face stereotypes and extreme reactions, as they choose to challenge traditional expectations (Khan and Mazhar, 2017, p.415).

1.2 Theoretical framework

This section delves into the philosophical underpinnings that form the basis of this research, particularly concerning the key concepts of 'societal culture' and 'empowerment.' These

concepts play a crucial role in addressing the research questions, which aim to explore the societal culture to which women in Panchayats are exposed and examine how socio-cultural factors impact women's empowerment. The research draws on Geert Hofstede's Dimensions of Culture to elucidate the cultural ratings assigned to India. Additionally, Kabeer's Instrumental Model is utilized to expound on the notion of women's empowerment.

Alternative theories such as the "GLOBE Dimensions" and the Seven Dimensions of Culture also delve into the impact of culture on societal expectations. However, both GLOBE Dimensions and the Seven Dimensions of Culture primarily focus on the effectiveness of leadership behaviour. The GLOBE Dimensions of culture, represented by the acronym 'GLOBE,' stands for Global Leadership and Organizational Behaviour Effectiveness, is a collaborative research project that primarily centers on the transformation of leadership cultural values (Gunnell, 2016). Expanding on Hofstede's groundwork, the GLOBE study encompassed 62 participating countries, involving a diverse group of academics. The study extended its data to include variables related to society at large, organizational practices, and the characteristics and behaviours of leaders (House et al., 2004).

While the GLOBE study introduces additional dimensions like human orientation, assertiveness, and performance orientation compared to Hofstede's model, it predominantly explores the relationship between leadership behaviour/performance and organizational practices. In contrast, Hofstede's study primarily focuses on socio-cultural behaviour across countries. Moreover, many of GLOBE's cultural dimensions, such as Power Distance orientation, Collectivism, Gender Egalitarianism, Uncertainty Avoidance, and Future orientation, are adapted from Hofstede's study. The study shows that even though GLOBE data used a different approach, it still reflected the same structure as the original Hofstede model. While there has been much debate on the GLOBE research in literature, there aren't many practical applications that cross-cultural professionals can use (Hofstede, 2011, p.18).

The Seven Dimensions of Culture model proposed by Fons Trompenaars identifies distinctions in people's preferences across seven dimensions but according to available data, Trompenaars' seven-dimension theory lacks support (Hofstede, 2011, p.18).

Some argue that the Hofstede country scores from the 1970s are no longer relevant but studies that have compared the previous nation scores with current data available annually have not found any weakening in the relationships. The measures will still be valid over

extended periods because of the relationship between the dimensions and fundamental societal issues. Cultural changes that undermine index rankings may take a long time or a catastrophic event. Disparities in national cultures were apparent by 1700s-1900s and they can still be included until 2100 or later (Hofstede, 2011, p.18). This underscores the relevance of Hofstede's model to this study, where the influence of India's societal culture on women's empowerment will be scrutinized. The author has chosen to use Hofstede's cultural dimensions for several reasons. Firstly, these dimensions refer to the cultural values and beliefs that are relevant to the study's theme of meaning formation. Secondly, this index is available for India, which is the location of the study. Thirdly, the model remains popular due to frequent validation in empirical studies (Vollmann et al., 2023). Thus, this study employs Geert Hofstede's Dimensions of Culture model to better elucidate a country's culture compared to a top-ranking country.

1.2.1 Geert Hofstede's dimensions theory of culture

According to Bharathi and Kaveeswarar (2017, p. 95), Geert Hofstede's Dimensions Theory of Culture (HDTC) stands as the primary and foremost paradigm in cultural studies, initially proposed by Gerald Hendrick, a prominent Social Psychologist in 1980. It is suggested that Hofstede's extensive experience as the founder and head of the human resources research department at IBM Europe provided him with the data that forms the empirical foundation of the cultural dimensions theory (Agodzo, 2015, p.3). Hofstede's Dimensions Theory of Culture serves as a robust model for cross-cultural psychology and communication, centering around six key parameters: Power Distance orientation, Individualism vs Collectivism, Masculinity vs Femininity, Uncertainty Avoidance Index, Long-Term vs Short-Term orientation, and finally, Indulgence vs Restraint. Each of these dimensions will be individually discussed below.

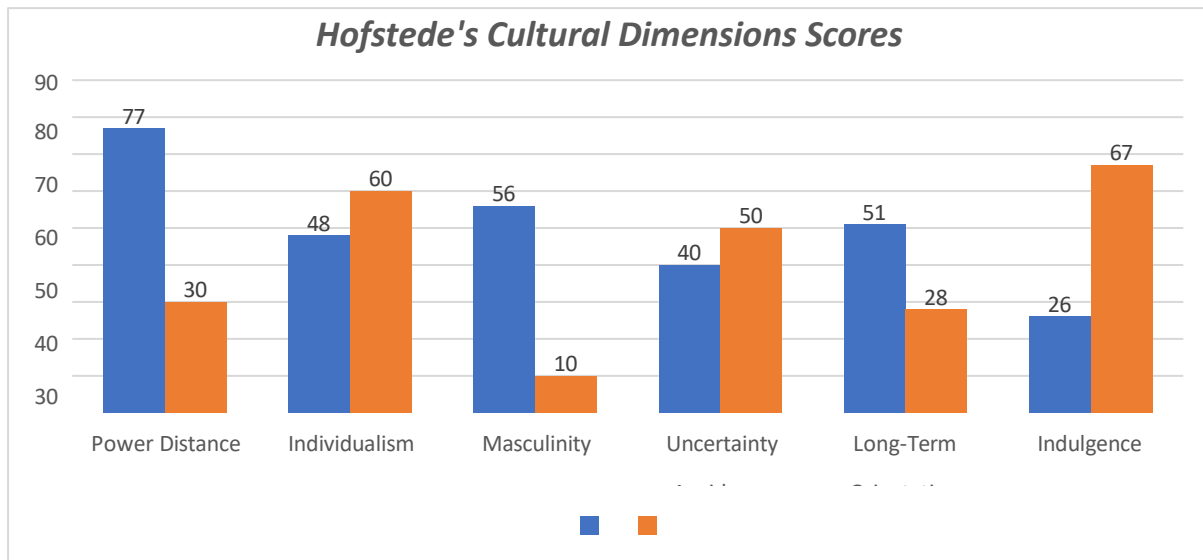


Figure 1: Chart showing a comparison made between India (blue) and Iceland (orange)

Source: author's Computation using Hofstede's study scores (See Appendix 1)

(i) Power Distance orientation examines the degree to which the less powerful members of organisations and institutions (such as families) accept and expect that power is allocated unequally is known as the "power distance." This illustrates inequality, which is defined as more versus less, but from below rather than above. It implies that the degree of inequality in a society is supported by both the leaders and those who follow, two of the most essential aspects of any society are power and inequality. While inequality exists in every society, some are more extreme than others (Hofstede, 2011, p.9). A high power distance suggests a culture that embraces hierarchical structures, while a low power distance indicates a culture that balances the gap through questioning and justification. In high-power-distance cultures, power is centralized, with a greater emphasis on rank and status, compared to low-power-distance cultures, where interpersonal interactions occur on more horizontal planes (Agodzo, 2015, p.4).

As illustrated in Figure 1.1, India has a high score of 77 on this dimension which indicates that an appreciation for hierarchy and a top-down structure in society Indian culture is comfortable with hierarchical structures characterized by unequal power distribution. Such a

culture values directive, autocratic leadership and parents teach children obedience, older people are both respected and feared. In contrast, Iceland has a low score of 30 which promotes horizontal structures and believes in equality of people.

(ii) Uncertainty Avoidance refers to the degree to which a society can tolerate uncertainty. It demonstrates how much a culture affects the comfort level of its members in unfamiliar situations. These situations are usually new, unusual, surprising, and not typical. Uncertainty-averse societies seek to reduce the likelihood of such events occurring by implementing strict moral standards, well-established laws, intolerance of opposing views, and a belief in a single, all-encompassing truth (Hofstede, 2011, p.10). Intolerance towards people and ideas that are different is perceived as a constant threat to be overcome.

India scores 40 on Uncertainty Avoidance, indicating a low preference for avoiding uncertainty. Iceland scores 50, reflecting an average preference for avoiding uncertainty. India's low score suggests cultural leniency, evident in the plethora of notions and cultures across diverse ethnic groups. In contrast, Iceland is more pragmatic and is more accepting of uncertainty.

(iii) Individualism Vs Collectivism ,cultures that place a strong emphasis on individualism are those in which people are expected to take care of themselves and their immediate families. On the collectivist side, we see societies where individuals are raised in strong, cohesive in-groups from birth, frequently extended families with grandparents, uncles, and aunts who defend them against rival in-groups in return for unwavering allegiance (Hofstede, 2011, p.11). Maintaining harmony is essential. Votes and opinions are set by the in-group, and breaking the rules brings shame.

In Figure 1.1, India scores 48 on Individualism, slightly below average, indicating that tasks are mostly accomplished as a group. Iceland scores 60, implying that task accomplishment is primarily done on an individualistic basis. India's score suggests a more collectivistic culture, emphasizing interdependence and subordinating individual aims for the group's welfare. Therefore, a person's actions are influenced by various factors, including the opinions of their relatives, extended family, and neighbours.

(iv) Masculinity Vs Femininity refers to how values, responsibilities, and gender roles are perceived to differ between men and women in a particular culture. Cultures that are more

masculine tend to emphasize traditional gender roles and believe that men and women are significantly different from each other, particularly in terms of women's participation in the workforce, domestic duties, and the representation of women in politics. In contrast, cultures that are more feminine view gender roles with less emphasis and recognize fewer differences between men and women in emotional and social contexts. In masculine communities, work is prioritized over family, and strength is highly valued (Hofstede, 2011, p.12). Typically, mothers are responsible for managing emotions, while fathers focus on practical matters. Boys are encouraged to stand up for themselves, while girls are often discouraged from doing so and are expected to be more emotional. Decisions about family size are usually made by fathers. Additionally, there are very few women who hold elective office in these communities (Hofstede, 2011, p.12).

India scores 56 on the masculinity-femininity scale, slightly above average, indicating a culture with moderate masculinity. Iceland scores 10, representing a highly feminine culture. The difference is highlighted in the analysis by Pande (2023), “Women politicians in India play roles choreographed by men in a system shaped by men” also Bharathi and Kaveeswarar (2017, p. 96), explains that Iceland being the most peaceful country globally, while India ranks as the 6th largest country in the world in military spending as of March 2017.

(v) Long Vs Short Term Orientation this component explains how any society must preserve some ties to its past while addressing the problems of the present and the future, and how various civilizations prioritise these two existential objectives. Low on this dimension, normative societies, for instance, are suspicious of social change and would rather uphold long-standing customs and traditions. Conversely, cultures with high scores adopt a more practical stance, encouraging contemporary education and frugal living as means of preparing for the future. (Hofstede, 2011, p.13). For short term oriented societies there are universal standards for right and wrong, and customs should be respected. Family life has certain guiding principles, and it is important to be proud of one's nation. Serving others is also a crucial objective.

With a score of 51 in this dimension, Indian culture does not exhibit a dominant preference, which is intermediate.

(vi) Indulgence Vs Restraint the concept of restraint versus indulgence refers to the extent to which individuals try to control their impulses and desires based on their upbringing.

Restraint indicates a comparatively high level of self-control, while indulgence refers to a relatively low level of self-control. This means that cultures can be categorized as either indulgent or restrained. (Hofstede, 2011, p.15). Cultures of restriction often lead to a sense of powerlessness, as if circumstances are beyond control. The main concern is not about speaking freely.

According to the cultural dimension score, India has a low score of 26, which indicates that it has a culture of restraint. Such societies are more likely to have a pessimistic and cynical outlook. People who identify with this perspective believe that social norms restrict their behaviour and that it is not appropriate to indulge themselves. According to the cultural dimension of Indulgence, Icelandic culture scores 67. This means that individuals living in societies where Indulgence is highly rated tend to indulge in their desires, particularly when it comes to enjoying life and having fun. They generally have an optimistic outlook and value their leisure time more. They tend to behave according to their wishes and spend money as they please.

1.2.2 Kabeer's instrumental model

Another essential model integral to this research is Kabeer's Instrumental Model (KIM). Despite its complexity, the concept of women's empowerment has been extensively studied and analysed. KIM offers a nuanced understanding of women's empowerment by incorporating three key elements: resources, agency, and achievement. It serves as a foundational framework for discussing women's empowerment in this study. Kabeer's model, outlined in her seminal work titled "The Conditions and Consequences of Choice: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment" (1999), posits that the core of women's empowerment revolves around these three interrelated components.

Resources need to be construed in a broader context, encompassing diverse human and social assets that augment the capacity to make choices. In this extended perspective, resources are obtained through diverse social interactions occurring within the various institutional spheres constituting a society—such as family, market, state, and community (Kabeer, 1999b, p.3). The resources acquired within these interactions comprise not only immediate allocations but also future entitlements and anticipations (Kabeer, 1999a, p.435). Access to both is influenced by the regulations and norms governing distribution and exchange within distinct institutional

contexts. These resources include norms and rules, often established through authority or allocation, that confer special privileges to women like improving women's access to finance, political participation, and equalizing educational opportunities (Kabeer, 1999a, p.462).

These regulations and norms confer specific institutional actors with the power to establish the guidelines for distribution and exchange. Whether as heads of households, tribal chiefs, corporate directors, organizational managers, or community elites, individuals in these roles possess decision-making authority within their respective institutional contexts. Rules and norms can be perceived as abstract social resources that either facilitate or hinder, depending on how they are employed, shaping the scope of choices available to distinct groups of individuals (Kabeer, 1999b, p.3). These resources can be in the form of legal support for women's access to free education and anti-dowry laws.

The second facet of power pertains to agency, which involves the capacity to articulate one's objectives and act upon them. Agency extends beyond observable actions, encompassing the significance, impetus, and purpose that individuals attribute to their endeavours—their inherent power, commonly referred to as the power within. While agency is often equated with decision making, it can manifest in various other ways. It may involve negotiation and bargaining, as well as tactics such as deception, manipulation, subversion, resistance, and more abstract cognitive processes of contemplation and analysis (Kabeer, 1999b, p.3).

Agency encompasses both favourable and unfavourable connotations within the realm of power. In its positive connotation, agency denotes an individual's ability to shape their life choices and pursue personal objectives, even when confronted with opposition, dissent, or resistance from others. Conversely, agency can manifest in a negative sense, signifying the capacity of an actor or group of actors to impose their objectives on others against their will. This negative aspect is particularly evident in situations of imbalanced interpersonal dynamics (Kabeer, 1999b, p.4). Nevertheless, power can function even without overt displays of agency. The established norms and regulations dictating social conduct often lead to the replication of specific outcomes without any noticeable demonstration of agency, aside from adherence to these established norms. For instance, the societal norms related to marriage in South Asia grant parents the prerogative to select partners for their children, yet this might not be perceived as a manifestation of power unless such authority is contested (Kabeer, 1999b, p.4).

Resources and agency collectively form capabilities, representing the capacity individuals possess to lead lives aligned with their preferences and to achieving esteemed ways of existence and engagement. Evidently, instances where the inability to realize valued ways of existence and engagement can be attributed to factors like indolence, ineptitude, or individual-specific reasons, the concept of power becomes inconsequential. Disempowerment becomes a relevant consideration only when the incapacity to achieve one's objectives is indicative of an underlying restriction on the freedom to choose. (Kabeer, 1999b, p.4).

achievements as empowerment which comprises of the presence of 'resources availability' as well as 'agency in action' in the path of making choices in ones' lives. However, where women fail to make the desired choice because of established socio-cultural barrier, then, it can be described as disempowerment. In other way, some women wilfully as their preference adhere to prevailing rules and norms, then at such instance, the issue of power is immaterial (Ansari, 2015). When women are unable to make desired choices due to established socio-cultural barriers, it can be termed as disempowerment. Alternatively, some women willingly adhere to prevailing rules and norms, rendering the issue of power inconsequential (Ansari, 2015).

This underscores that the women's empowerment agenda aims to provide equal opportunities for women. If this premise holds true, understanding the role and significance of 'choice' in the empowerment context becomes crucial. when people make choices that seem to benefit them, it makes sense to link those choices to the power they have. For example, if there are clear gender differences in important aspects of life, it could mean that women don't have much say in decisions, or men actively discriminate against them. However, things get tricky when it seems like women are choosing these gender differences themselves. This issue comes up in studies about gender and well-being, where some women's behaviour suggests they've accepted their lower social status. Kabeer (1999a, p.440) contends that the relationship between power and choice becomes complex when power and dominance operate within the agreement of the involved parties (women). In situations where evident gender disparities exist in well-being achievements, these disparities signal the operation of power, either as active discrimination by men or as a lack of choice for women. However, when gender disparity seems to be chosen by women, the relationship between power and choice becomes more challenging to accept. This is evident in India, where societal norms and rules restrict women from significant activities, and women are often discouraged from

challenging discrimination, subordination, exploitation, and subjugation (Sivakumar and Manimekalai, 2021).

Women's choices in such an environment, even though seemingly consenting to power, are undermined. They often conform to societal values of being a 'good and obedient woman,' prioritizing household and societal resources or satisfying their husband's preferences at the expense of their health and well-being (Kabeer, 1999a). achievements as empowerment which comprises of the presence of 'resources availability' as well as 'agency in action' in the path of making choices in ones' lives. However, where women fail to make the desired choice because of established socio-cultural barrier, then, it can be described as disempowerment. In other way, some women wilfully as their preference adhere to prevailing rules and norms, then at such instance, the issue of power is immaterial (Ansari, 2015).

Women's empowerment can be assessed and understood comprehensively with Naila Kabeer's Instrumental Model. This model emphasizes the importance of addressing socio-cultural barriers and promoting equal opportunities for women's individual and collective choices by integrating the intertwined elements of resources, agency, and achievements.

2.Methodology

2.1 Research design

The qualitative research method is applied in this study. A qualitative researcher examines phenomena in their natural setting, seeking to interpret phenomena based on the meanings people assign to them (Denzin & Lincoln ,2000, p. 3). Thus, using a multiple case design, this study investigates how societal culture influences women's empowerment within the context of the Panchayati system, particularly in the villages of Khanpur Kalan and Ganwari, and is guided by established theories such as Hofstede's Dimensions Theory of Culture and Kabeer's Instrumental Model. The case study design allows for a detailed exploration of the cultural factors influencing women's empowerment in the specified geographical and sociocultural context. Qualitative research is defined as a form of social inquiry that tends to adopt a flexible and data-driven research design, to use relatively unstructured data, to emphasize the essential role of subjectivity in the research process, to study a small number of naturally occurring cases in detail, and to use verbal rather than statistical forms of analysis (Hammersley, 2012, p 12).

2.2 Justification for a case study method

A case study is one of the most extensively used strategies of qualitative social research (Priya, 2021, p.94). Flyvbjerg (2006, p.221) makes two points in support of case study, that it generates context-specific knowledge needed to progress from novice to expert and human affairs only have context-specific knowledge, no epistemic theories. These characteristics of this method makes it a good fit for this research as this study deals with women's experience of culture in their life and how it effects their empowerment. In the context of this case study, it suggests that understanding the dynamics of women empowerment in Panchayat Raj would benefit from examining specific, context-specific details rather than relying on broad generalizations.

By conducting a case study, one can delve into the unique aspects of the Panchayat Raj system and the cultural influences affecting women's empowerment within that specific setting. This approach allows for a more nuanced and in-depth analysis, considering the intricacies of the local culture and its impact on the empowerment of women in the context

of Panchayat Raj. The focus on context-specific, concrete information aligns with the nature of case studies, which aim to provide detailed insights into situations rather than offering universal principles. Author is not [generalising] as the findings are limited to the cases under study. Studying human behaviour doesn't always lead to general predictions instead, it's often more helpful to focus on specific, real-life details in a particular context (Flyvbjerg 2006, p.224).

“A case study is an empirical method that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the “case”) in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident” (Yin, 2009, p.13). In this thesis, a multiple case study method (two cases) is used to examine women’s empowerment comprehensively. Several cases are intentionally selected to highlight different aspects or perspectives of the issue (Yin, 2009; Creswell, 2007). Since the evidence from multiple examples is often more compelling, the study is considered more robust overall (Yin, 2009, p.45). Though it may be challenging to carry out a multi-case study as it requires significant time and resources beyond the budget of a single student or independent researcher (Yin, 2009, p.45). This type of research design enabled me to have an in-depth insight on the effect of societal culture on women empowerment, as it allows for open-ended inquiries in interviews, verbal descriptions of observations, and literature evaluations that examine ideas. Thus, this design is appropriate for this study as author is interested in finding out the societal culture and women empowerment in the Panchayati raj system in a particular geographical area.

Yin (2009, p. 4) pointed out that case study could be descriptive, explanatory, or exploratory. Explanatory type of case study focuses on causal factors to the explanation of a phenomenon. The rationale for explanatory case study is to explain ‘why’ and ‘how’ certain conditions come into being. In other words, the concern is on why the sequential occurrence of certain events or vice versa. The explanatory case study is employed in this study as the researcher investigated how women empowerment is influenced by societal cultures.

2.3 Triangulation of methodologies

Providing answers to the research questions is of utmost interest to the researcher. One of the ways to achieve this is the use of triangulation of method. By reducing, eliminating, or offsetting the shortcomings of a single approach, triangulation aims to improve the

interpretability of the results (Thurmond, 2001). Noble and Heale (2019, p.67) posits that triangulation can help ensure that underlying biases resulting from the use of a single method, or a single observer are overcome by mixing theories, methods, or observers. Nonetheless, triangulation using several methods reflects an effort to obtain a comprehensive grasp of the topic under investigation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 5). This study employs data triangulation approach whereby making use of interview, observation, and relevant literature. Data triangulation relies on the use of various sources of data in research (Bans-Akutey and Tiimub, 2021).

2.4 Sampling strategy and case selection

On 19 January 2023, the author availed the opportunity to participate in a two-day training session, initiative and organised by the Women's Study Center of the university situated within the geographical scope of this thesis. The training was specifically tailored for recently elected women sarpanches, (Heads of council) affording the author a unique vantage point to observe actual dynamics of empowerment and its intersection with prevailing societal culture. The training program explained the concept of “sarpanch Pati,” when elected women's male relatives—mostly their husbands—manage the position in their place, serving as her proxy, and focused on various viewpoints of women's sarpanch (head) roles (Tiwari, 2023). Noteworthy was the discernment that, except for a singular participant, the majority exhibited reticence, manifesting a conspicuous lack of confidence, notwithstanding the positional authority and available resources. This observed phenomenon served as the incipient point for the author's subsequent selection of cases for in-depth analysis.

Most frequently, a mix of sampling techniques is used (Marshall and Rossman , 2016 , p.116). Thus a combination of convenience and criterion sampling is used in the study. Criterion Sampling consists of cases that fulfil specific requirements, which is crucial for ensuring high-quality results . Etikan et al (2016, p.3) describe the convenience sampling as a type of non-probability or non-random sampling that includes only the members of the target group who meet a set of practical requirements. These requirements could be ease of access, proximity to each other, availability at a specific time, or willingness to participate. While convenience sampling saves time, money, and effort, but it comes at the cost of credibility and information (Marshall and Rossman ,2016 , p.115). Convenience sampling was applied

for the selection of cases. Author had initially selected 3-4 villages which were near the university where she was to stay. Transport and safety is an issue in rural areas thus the author had to select cases which were near the university. Out of 3-4 cases (villages) two were selected finally as one had issue with the transport and head of the another was not available for the selected time. Convenience and criterion sampling was adopted for the women participants, participation in village politics being the only criteria. Therefore, accessed panchayat members who fulfilled the criteria in the selected villages (Khanpur kalan & Ganwari) were interviewed.

Even though women and men have equal legal rights under the Indian constitution, gender inequality is blatant and pervasive throughout the nation. There is a plethora of scholarly works that unfold the practice of gender inequality of multifaceted expressions as peculiar to India. However, a few will be highlighted here to buttress this assertion. Khan and Mazhar (2017, p 415) identified rigid mindsets with respect to gender roles and expectations as dominant practice in India. They found out that various socio-cultural norms such as male dominance practice and the belief that women are supposed to be led and not to lead, are the causes of women's discrimination. According to them, these practices have affected the level of empowerment that women are supposed to have in the family and society. Bharathi and Kaveeswarar (2017) asserted that, it is culture of Indians to have their men provide for the sustenance of the family and the responsibilities of the children and home are left for the women and in the lineage setting, the family's first son heads the family lineage. Moreover, Ansari (2015, p 7) reveals that India is peculiar with "deep-rooted hierarchies in terms of castes and gender". As seen above, strong patriarchal and patrilineal traditions form the foundation of Indian culture. In these kinds of social cultures, men are usually given greater rights than women. All the practices mentioned above are prevalent in rural Haryana to a greater extent, that's why author chose Haryana to see what women think about these cultures and how it effects their empowerment.

Specifically there are many reason to choose this geographical region in India for this study. Firstly, Haryana, one of the wealthiest and most developed states in India, the proportion of women to men is extremely low. (Sen,2010,p.4). Secondly, social problems are often overlooked due to its patriarchal sociocultural fabric that perpetuates gender inequality. Socialization enforces gender norms without recognizing their oppression and discrimination. The wearing of "*ghunghats*" (veils) is a powerful symbol of the rural patriarchy in Haryana.

Haryana is a state that defies legal enablement by preventing women from exercising their property rights (Mathur, 2017,p.145). It is also known for its senseless violence, as evidenced by the so-called "crimes of honour" or honour killing for marrying outside the community (Mathur, 2017, p.145; Chowdhury, 2023). Fourthly, it is a state that is well known for eradicating girls' potential to claim property by killing them in the womb. Women in Haryana bear equal responsibility for socio-economic development, but also face harsh realities of inequity (Mathur, 2017, p.145).Fifthly, author will be able to understand the language and the culture of the respondents as she is from a similar geographical and cultural region as the respondents .

On the other hand, a lot of complexities have been identified being associated with the empowerment of women in Haryana . These complexities range from the ‘Two-Child Norm’, and the historic women’s reservation (Ansari, 2015). The Two Child Norm (TCN) prohibits the participation of women Panchayat in political affairs if couple have more than two children particularly harmful to women, undermining the reservation of seats for women in panchayat with initial goal of empowering them. However, the flawed TCN requirement, which has occasionally worked against women, has also demonstrated promise in identifying the essential component of empowerment, such as being given a say in matters pertaining to reproductive rights (Ansari, 2015, p.3). The 50% reservation in panchayat (that is, Indian women’s participation at the lower tier of political structure) has not been fully achieved. Women are now more often enrolled as political leaders thanks to the reservation of seats for them in the Panchayat Raj institution's nonetheless, their participation is limited or mediated by male family members, such as their husbands or sons (Mathur, 2017,p.153). Moreover, elected women are often used as substitutes for their male relatives who wield the office's authority (Rani, 2021, p.427). Local organizations today display a public patriarchy where women are included but not allowed to participate, and their contributions are continuously underestimated (Rani, 2021, p.427).

Ansari (2015, p. 3) asserts that “in spite of the government’s efforts through the women reservation reform of providing resources to the rural women toward economic and social empowerment through political participation, the power terrains of caste, culture and religion withhold their agency”. Thus, in conclusion rationale behind selecting the cases is the prevalence of a strong patriarchal culture, which calls for study of this society with regard to the phenomena of women's empowerment.



Figure 2: Political map of India

Source: <http://www.indianorphanages.net/home/india/indiamap.html>

The red L-shape in Figure 2.1 shows the map of Haryana where the study is anchored in India. Haryana is a state in the northern region of India having a population of 25.3 million where male population is 13.4 million and female population is 11.8 million, female sex ratio is 879 per 1000 males, literacy rate is 65% where male literacy rate is 72% and female literacy rate is 57% (India Census, 2011).

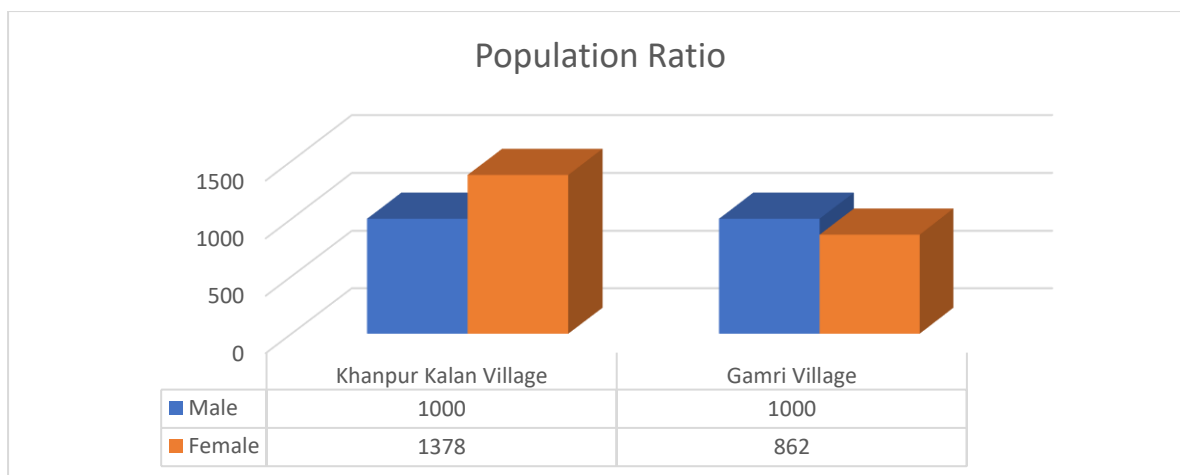


Figure 3: Sex ratio of the Khanpur Kalan and Ganwari village

Source: Author's computation using Indian 2011 census

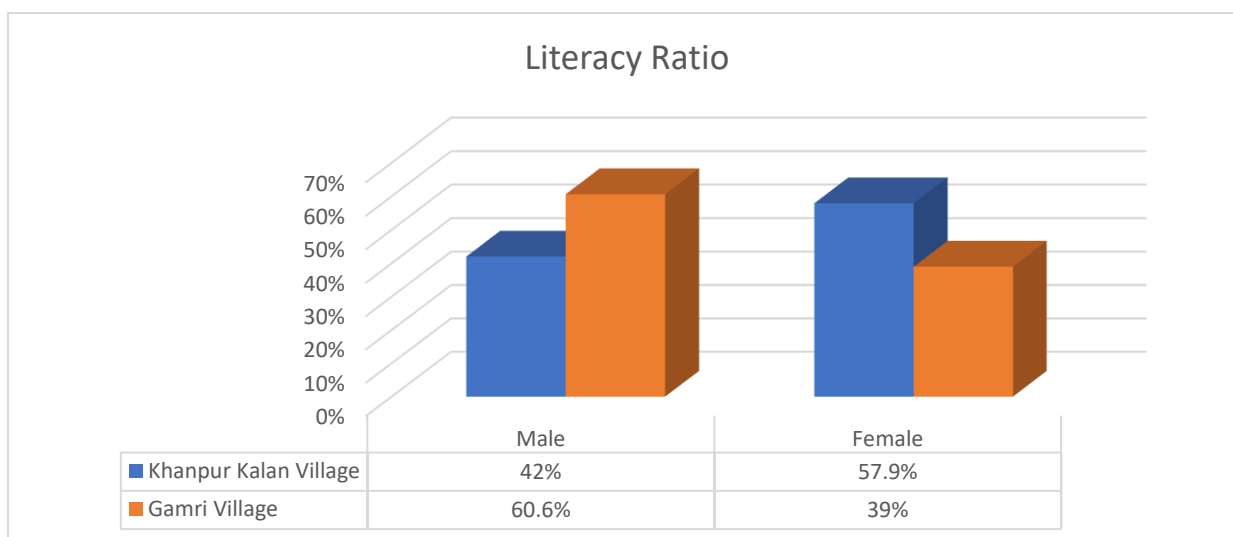


Figure 4: Literacy ratio of the Khanpur Kalan and Ganwari village

Source: Author's computation using Indian 2011 census

As seen in Figure 2.2 and 2.3 above, two villages Khanpur Kalan and Ganwari in Haryana are selected for the study. Khanpur Kalan has population of 12544, with high female sex ratio of 1378 per 1000 males as compared to even India (female sex ratio is 942), female literacy rate is 57.9% and male literacy rate is 42%. In 2011, literacy rate of Khanpur Kalan village was 80.75 % compared to 75.55 % of Haryana.

Ganwari is another village selected in the research. Population of this village is 3677, female sex ratio is 862 per 1000 males, literacy rate of Ganwari village was 76.42% compared to 75.55%, male literacy stood at 60.6 % while female literacy rate was 39 %.

2.5 Synopsis of the Qualitative Interview Guide

Three major sections (Section 'A', 'B' and 'C') were focused in the interview guide. Section 'A' reveals the demographic elements of the respondents. These elements elicit interviewees' name, region/village, position/charge, work experience, education level, and contact. Section 'B' contains the research questions employed in the research. And Section 'C' centers on the policy implications of the research. All the questions in the various sections were conducted using the open-ended interviews. All the sections are important but most emphasis will be placed on Section 'B' and 'C' as far as this research is concern. Section 'B' of the interview guide basically anchored on the two cardinal research questions in the research. These research questions seek to investigate what social culture that the women member of Panchayats are exposed to, and also to examine the extent to which socio-cultural factors affect women's empowerment. Effort to proffer answer to above research questions prompted me to ask about presence of gender inequality both in the village and council. The intention here was to ascertain if there is any disparity or segregation among the men and women in the village or council. Also, an inquisition was made on any approved or passed-on social culture(s) that encourage gender inequality. Response on this item will revealed whether there is any existence of an acquainted social culture that promote gender inequality. The duration as well as implementers of these culture were also asked about. This will tell whether the pro-gender inequality cultures are of short time of long time. Besides, the major people that implement the culture will be revealed. Next on the question guide was how inequality in village affect women's participation in council. This question will help to illicit whether inequality promotes or retards the women participation in the council. Participation here includes women's regular attendance in meetings as well as contributions in decision making. A positive effect, if any inequality, is one that promotes women participation in the council while a negative effect, if any inequality, is one that discourages women participation in the council. Furthermore, the extent to which socio-cultural factors affect women's empowerment was inquired. Typical areas such: how aware are the women on the cultures, how the cultures affect women both in the village as well as the council; the cultural influence on the woman Panchayat was not left out especially on her participation. This section ended with ascertaining the perception of the respondents on the term 'women empowerment'.

The last part in the interview guide being Section ‘C’ were questions that concerns the policy implications of the research. Prominent items in this section include: the motivation behind coming to Panchayats, whether any specific number of Panchayats positions for women, measures taken to change the social cultures promoting gender inequality. Field note was also taken on my observations, particularly at responses where the respondents were passionate and demonstrating. The duration of interviews was range between 20-30 minutes with the women Panchayat leaders and members each. The interviewees were allowed to use the local language (Hindi with Haryanvi dialect) to enable them to express their feelings, experience, and knowledge about the open-ended questions.

2.6 Method of data collection

Table 1: information about data

S/No.		
1	Number of villages	2 villages (Khanpur Kalan and Gamri villages), all in Sonipat district
2	Selection criteria for villages	Having a woman head of the council and women members in the council, as all villages do not have women members.
3	Number of respondents	<p>i) <u>One woman Panchayat leader</u> (head of the council) from each village.</p> <p>ii) <u>Two Panchayat members</u> (members of the council) from each village.</p> <p>In total 6 respondents</p>
4	Selection criteria	Participation in village level politics
5	How the interviews were recorded	Audio format using a USB digital voice recorder, duration of 20-30 minutes.

		<p>The local language of Hindi with Haryanvi dialect was used to enable them to express their feelings, experience, and knowledge about the open-ended questions.</p> <p>Later, the recordings of the interview in local language were translated and transcribed into English Language for the purpose of this research.</p>
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Source: Author's Compilation

Primary data using observation and open-ended interviews as the instruments, were employed to collect data from the sample. At a micro level, author conducted two sets of qualitative interviews from two different villages (Khanpur Kalan village and Ganwari village) in Sonipat district, Haryana, India. Two villages were chosen as each is having a woman head of the council and women members in the council, as all villages do not have women heads. The nature of interview was one-to-one with one woman Panchayat leader (head of the council) and two Panchayat members (members of the council) from each selected villages, making a total of six interviewees. The consideration of these set of women is because of their participation in the village level politics, commonly known as Panchayat (council of five members). A village is described as a population of minimum 5000 people of which more than two-thirds of the communities are agrarians. Besides eliciting their demographic data, major points of discussion of this interview will centre on their perceptions about various societal cultures that woman members are exposed to on daily basis, the extent to which socio-cultural factors affect women's empowerment, and plausible remedial measures for strengthening the women empowerment in India. For gathering rich and in-depth data, the researcher conducted semi-structured open ended interviews. During a semi-structured interview, open-ended questions were utilized to encourage participants to express themselves more spontaneously. This approach provides more freedom to respondents to organize their answers according to their own preferences (Aberbach & Rockman, 2002, p.674). Although, few participants were involved, DeMarrais, & Lapan, (2003) suggest that little can be more, when studied qualitatively and deeply to consider the idea that little is more when it comes to qualitative studies. Deeper interviews with fewer participants typically yield the kinds of understandings that qualitative

researchers are looking for. This has prompted the use of interviews on three Panchayat members each from two villages in Sonipat district. Choosing which interview method to use should consider the contexts of both the researcher and the participants. It has been said that in-person interviews are the "gold standard" and offer several advantages. A real conversation can be replicated, nonverbal clues and body language may be read and evaluated, and rapport can be developed (Self, 2021). Nonetheless, qualitative researchers believe that thorough observation and interviews will help them understand the participants point of view (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 10). The interview process's objectives are to produce new knowledge and validate or refute previously discovered information. While individual interviews provide a chance for more thorough investigation in contrast to focus groups, people could divulge more details about their viewpoints and experiences in individual interviews. Additionally, individuals may feel more at ease discussing potentially awkward or delicate topics in an individual interview as opposed to a group setting Brod et al. (2009, p.1263).

Creswell (2007, pp.132-134) views interviewing as a series of steps.

1. Selecting interview subjects using one of the purposeful sampling techniques
2. Ascertain the type of the interview, should be practical and helpful in acquiring important information which results in answering the research question.
3. Using suitable recording techniques for one-on-one or focus group interviews.
4. Create and follow a protocol for interviews.
5. Choose the location where the interview will take place. If at all feasible, locate yourself in a peaceful, distraction-free area. Check whether the physical environment is conducive to audio recording.
6. Once at the interview location, get the participant's consent to take part in the study.
7. Keep the conversation focused on the questions, try to finish it in the allotted time, act politely and respectfully, and ask only pertinent questions and provide guidance.
8. Pilot testing can help make further improvements to the interview questions and procedures.

Most of the steps were followed by the author though selection was based on criterion sampling in which only criteria required was the political participation in village governance. It was decided to have individual interviews as participants will have privacy and free to put across their viewpoint, also it is more thorough and there is less disturbance.

In a group some participants may not be as open as they are in individual setting. Another factor in selecting a type of interview was existence of caste (in India Hindu society is divided among four castes in hierarchical structure and this is very rigid in rural areas) and class in rural areas which may display power play among the individual participants. All the interviews were conducted in each participant home after taking their consent. Each interview lasted from 20-30 minutes though some conversation took place before and after the interview to build the trust. Interview guide which presents a list of topics or questions that the interviewer hopes to cover during interview was prepared and questions that use when, what, where, why, who, and how were encouraged in the qualitative interview (Decarlo, 2018). Shortage of time did not allow undertaking of initial tests.

The use of recording devices in qualitative research is an accepted material-discursive practice that both produces and incorporates objectivist and realist conceptions. Although, a lot of controversies abound on the suitable device for a qualitative interview, what is important is a device that can capture the needed voices of the participants and can preserve the data to the period of usage (Nordstrom, 2015). Consequently, the 'USB digital voice recorder' was used. It is a simple USB drive, portable, user friendly, and is designed for easy plug and play to the computer. It was used to record the interview for transcription for this research, having found suitable for better recording ability with the capability of filtering noise and durable security of data.

The participants were duly informed beforehand with regards to the subject of the research for a most convenient time for their active participation. All the interviews were recorded in an audio format after obtaining permission of the interviewees and thereafter and were later translated and transcribed. The duration of interviews was between 20-30 minutes with the women Panchayat leaders and members each. The interviewees were allowed to use the local language (Hindi with Haryanvi dialect) to enable them to express their feelings, experience, and knowledge about the open-ended questions. During interviews, author was more of a good listener than a frequent speaker (Creswell, 2007, p.134). Field notes were also taken of observations, particularly at responses where the respondents were passionate and demonstrating as suggested (Creswell, 2007, p.134).

Qualitative researchers encounter a variety of ethical dilemmas when gathering data in the field, analysing their findings, and disseminating their reports. A procedure was followed to maintain the ethical standards of the thesis by giving each participant a number or an alias, to preserve the anonymity. Participants were also informed about their participation in a study, clarifying the study's goal.

2.7 Method of Data Analysis

Content analysis were used for the data analysis after respondents' responses have been duly transcribed and interpreted. Following these interviews, the data obtained is analysed to derive conclusions based on the thematic content analysis technique which has been defined as a descriptive presentation of qualitative data (Anderson, 2007, p.1) Thematic analysis identifies themes in data and describes them in detail (Braun& Clarke, 2006, p.79).

For proper arrangement and grouping of the data, coding technique was used by the researcher. As the coding system is a technique recommended by Saldana (2013) that is suitable for a qualitative study like this, thus, the thematic content analysis (TCA) coding technique explained by Anderson (2007) was employed in this research to proffer answers to the various raised research questions as well as describing thematic aspect of the data generated. According to Saldana (2013, p.3), "a code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data". Such data for coding could comprise of interview transcripts, participant's observation field notes, literature, among others. Manually, the coding process was aided using Microsoft Word table appended as appendix 3, where relevant comments, highlight, themes as well as sub-themes were grouped into units, and later assigned codes.

The findings on the core concepts, major themes as well as sub themes as described by Creswell (2007, p.151), are described, classified and interpreted, which demands that the researcher go through them in a number of times. In the description, relevant themes and sub-themes are identified and explained. Then, with the aid of table, these themes and sub-themes are grouped into various categories before interpretations. Through the coding system, analysis of the research questions was dully made. The coding was strictly guided by the key themes found in the interview guide as overtly stated in section 3.2. Holistically, the interpretation of findings was done in relation to employed theories and relevant supported literature.

2.8 Limitations

The author had to use data from Indian census 2011 as no census has been carried out after that because of Covid-19. The Indian 2011 census paints ratio of greater male to female (i.e., 943 females to 1000 males), but a recent survey recorded ratio of female was seen as 1020 women to 1000 men (NFHS-5, 2019-21). As per BBC this number is not credible and next to impossible keeping in view the last 100 years census and claim that the bias against girls, accessibility of prenatal sex screening and preference for boys cannot lead to favourable sex ratio (Pandey, 2021). This survey was carried out on a limited population, it cannot be generalised on the entire India. For this reason, the study uses Indian 2011 Census data rather than 2023 data.

Another limitation was that (one) interview was conducted in an environment that was not quiet and had many distractions. These distractions arose from family members, the participant was not left alone and was being monitored (author told the husband and other family members of the participant). In rural areas privacy is not recognised and if somebody from outside comes many from the family sit around curious about the happenings. It does not carry any negative connotations, but one must make them (family) understand that this requires quiet, and privacy and author was able to take control of situation.

One limitation was, earlier the study was supposed to interview eight women in two villages but due to non-availability (two of the women were not willing to forgo their agricultural work/ a day's wage and the author could not compensate them being a student) of two thus total interviews were reduced to six.

3. Analysing (in)equality

The data collected from the field using audio recorded device (Dictaphone) as well as field notes are hereby interpreted and discussed in a manner that depicts research usefulness. The interviewees were allowed to use the local language (Hindi with Haryanvi dialect) to enable them to express their feelings, experience, and knowledge about the open-ended questions. Ideally, native speakers should conduct interviews in the language of the country (Brod et al., 2009).

3.1 Interpretation of interview transcripts

This section presents the interpretations of the responses gathered from the interviews conducted with the women Panchayat leaders and members as regards to (in)equality, and thereafter, a conclusion was drawn.

3.2 Responses from the interviewed participants

As earlier pointed out in Section 2.6 above, two villages (Khanpur Kalan village and Gamri village) in Sonipat district of Haryana State in India, were selected for the study. One woman Panchayat leader and two Panchayat members were selected from each village, making a total of six (6) interviewees in the interview process. Their detail responses as well as discussions on them are hereafter presented (in appendix 4 and 5) based on the respective sections as contained in the interview guide.

3.2.1 Respondents' demographic information

This section reveals the description of the various interviewees in the study. This comprises of their names, village, work experience, age, educational level as well as the date at which they were interviewed. This is shown in Table 3 below.

Table 2: Demographic information of the respondents

Interview items	Respondents from Khanpur Kalan Village			Respondents from Gamri Village			Remarks
Section A	Demographic information						
Interviewees names(anonymised)	Ms A	Ms. B	Ms. C	Ms. D	Ms. E	Ms. F	

Date Interviewed	3/11/202 3	3/11/202 3	2/11/202 3	4/11/202 3	4/11/202 3	4/11/202 3	Conducted the interviews within 3 days
Position	Sarpanc h/Head	Member	Member	Sarpanch /Head	Member	Member	2 Panchayat' heads and 4 Panchayat's members
Work Experience	One year	One year	One year	One year	One year	One year	All have one year work experience.
Age	36 years	24 years	62 years	42 years	30 years	40 years	Both young and adult women are among the Panchayats
Educational Level	8 th class	10 th class	12 th class	12 th class	12 th class	10 th class	Low level of education.

Source: Author's compilation from the field

3.3. Respondents' responses on the cultures in the Haryana region

The societal culture refers to the commonly held beliefs or values that exist and are agreed upon in each population. In a uniform culture, these beliefs are generally accepted by most of the people, but in a more diverse culture, many separate value structures coexist. Four major themes are identified from the data gathered. They are: Cultural factors associated with the Panchayat system in Haryana, Cultural factors associated with the village in Haryana, Village empowerment determinants, and Council empowerment determinants. The first two themes (Cultural factors associated with the Panchayat system in Haryana, and Cultural factors associated with the village in Haryana) identify the socio-cultural factors in relation to gender treatment both at Panchayat and village settings in Haryana. And each of the above theme is divided into two sub-themes that typically portray the informal cultures as well as formal rights/laws/rules in the region, while the third and fourth themes (Village empowerment determinants, and Council empowerment determinants) highlight the possible determinants as perceived by the respondents that influence women empowerment in the studied region. These are also split into three sub-themes – resources, agency, and achievement accordingly. In each case, the participants' perception on how resources, agency, and achievement influence women empowerment both at the village and council are analysed. This is expressed in table 4 below.

Table 3: Informal and formal culture in the panchayat and village settings in Haryana region

	Informal Culture	Formal rights/laws/rules
Panchayat	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Women's covering of heads and faces. ii. Women not allowed to speak in front of the men. iii. Inconsideration of women's opinions in decision-taking iv. Low orientation on council proceedings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Reservation of 50% seats for women ii. Two Child Norm that prohibits both sexes' participation in the Panchayat. iii. Even participation and discharge of duties
Village	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Women's covering of heads and faces. ii. Women not allowed to speak in front of the men. iii. Inconsideration of women's opinions in decision-taking iv. Female active involvement in domestic chores than males v. Female restrictions on freedom of movement and choices vi. Placement of much value and investments on the males than females 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Gender equality in education of children

Source: Author's creation

The informal cultures signify cultures practiced in the Panchayat or village but do not have any legal backing. Whereas the formal rights, laws or rules connote culture or enactment that have legal backings. Thus, hereafter, sub-themes under these themes shall be addressed as: 'Panchayat informal cultures', 'Panchayat formal rights/laws/rules', 'Village informal cultures', and 'Village formal rights/laws/rules', based on the participants responses.

3.3.1. Cultural factors associated with the panchayat system in Haryana

The Panchayat system in India which gained its authority from India's 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (Pradhan and Dutta, 2008), is a third-tier administrative framework in India that focuses on rural development. The primary aim of the Panchayat system is to promote democratic participation at the grassroot level to build districts, zones, and villages. Thus, it is of interest to analyse the societal cultures mentioned by the participants that place the males and females unequal or equal in the village setting in Haryana.

3.3.1.1. Panchayat informal cultures

As mentioned by the participants, the prevalent cultures that show gender inequality in the Panchayat include women's covering of heads and faces, women not allowed to speak in front of the men, inconsideration of women's opinions in decision-taking, low orientation on council proceedings. As observed from the responses, 67% of the respondents stated that GI in one form of the order exists in the Panchayat.

Ms. F revealed that the only gender inequality in the council manifests in the form of not allowing the women to partake in resolving contending issues or fight, if any, in the village. According to her,

...there is no inequality in council. Then said that we can only know by attending the Panchayat meeting.... I have not been there ...when there is any issue or fight in the village, then only men go to Panchayat to solve it ... women don't go.

Ms. F

More so, Ms. C attributed these social cultures (neglect of women's inputs in decision making, Purdah system, covering their heads and faces) as gender inequalities that have been promoted by passed-on teachings by the family and village elders to their daughters and daughters-in-law.

But the above claim was refuted by few members of the participants who perceived no GI in the Panchayat.

*... I don't see any gender inequality here [council] also.
Whenever I go, I don't see any gender inequality in Panchayat.*

Ms. A

In as much as this difference subsist among the women and men in Panchayats, Ms. B also pointed out the areas of equality among the women and men. Such areas include working together, and division of responsibilities. This shows that women are also carried along to feel belonging by assigning roles to play just as the men. The Panchayat Head asserted:

All members work together, and different members are allotted different work to look after. All work together so there is no equal or unequal in council.

Ms. B

A careful observation of the participants' responses indicates that both GI and GE occur in the Panchayat, however, most of the cultures in the Panchayat are dominated by GI treatment. Meanwhile, Ms. A's response also show that these societal cultures affect women Panchayats participation negatively. This is seen as some of the women lacked the capacity to actively participate in decision making that takes place in the Panchayats. And if so, this implies that much about women welfare and development will be less discussed and addressed, thereby, affecting women empowerment in the area. Here, is Ms. A's response:

We are not confidant when interacting during Panchayat meetings... I am less confidant and are not able to speak much ... but slowly I try to speak by saying yes to all thing's others are saying.

Ms. B (a Panchayat's Head) also affirmed that women play more of concurring role than initiative and argumentative in the Panchayat. According to Ms. B, "*Women in Panchayat agree to everything what men say...*". Also, Ms. C another women Panchayat member added, that sarpanch/head's husband does everything. Ms. C responded that even though some seats are reserved for the women, there is gender inequality both in her village as well as council. Thus,

Opinion of female is not taken in any decision in home... Yes, there is inequality in council also, though government has reserved seats for women, and they get elected, but women members are not involved much during decision making.

Ms. C

Sometimes, women are motivated to secure the position as 'reserved' for women but allow the men (husbands) to actively participate in the Panchayat decision making process. Ms. B in disguise pretend that both she and the husband attend their respective Panchayat's meeting, of which only one member of the family is entitle for that at a time. In her response, she said:

I go to attend the women panchayat and my husband goes to attend the men panchayat, [when reminded that there is only one panchayat in a family, then she replied that] my husband has been working hard in the village, but seat got reserved for the women, and he lost the chance to get elected, so I stood for election, so that his hard work pays off.

Husband has been trying for the last ten years to become sarpanch.

Ms. B

In other words, some women being a Sarpanch or member of Panchayat is not borne out interest and passion to represent the women, rather to compensate their husband. Such emerged positions may not be earning the women the desired empowerment. This domineering position of the men over the women panchayat has been in place for age-long time. However, the older administrations of Panchayat did not rate it as anything to them compared to the younger administrations of Panchayat. One of the Head responded:

Older women are not aware much, but younger women are aware of these cultures which push them back... We do most work by taking the advice of the village. Sometime when I ask women to come and take part in discussion or in the working of council, men don't allow the women to come out but after persuasion they agree. They say that if she (Ms. B) is going out so they can also go.

Ms. B

As a result, this practice in the Panchayat constrains the women only to what decisions, commands or instructions given to them by the men. The Panchayat Head asserted *that "If men of the house do not allow women to go out or do anything then the women do whatever men say"*. By so doing, the main aim women representing others which is women empowerment may be defeated. Furthermore, all the respondents with exception of Ms. E that showed no idea, stated that their council has also witness complaints especially from the girls on gender inequality (but not specific), and in such instance, the Panchayat council handles it in their own way (not also specific). But only men Panchayats settle the issue. And If not well settled, they hand the matter over to the Police for appropriate actions. Therefore, the societal cultures in the region inhibit the women Panchayat from being efficient, idea initiator, thereby, making them nominal women Panchayats and supporters to any decision taking by the men Panchayat. See the appendix 4 for a snapshot of the respondents' responses on the research questions.

3.3.1.2. Panchayat formal rights/laws/rules

As observed, greater number of the participants seem to have little knowledge about established formal rights, laws or rules guiding the operations and functions of the Panchayat system. In their responses – *"I don't know"* – given by four of the respondents, portray their ignorance on such legal laws. Just two (Ms. E and Ms. F) among the respondents demonstrated their awareness on regulatory laws. This shows that most of the

women Panchayats are lowly oriented on the regulatory laws on gender inequality especially as it relates to the operations in the Panchayat.

On the scratch, the reservation of one-third of the seats for women, and Two Child Norm (TCN), which prohibits both sexes' participation in the Panchayat), as well as participation and discharge of duties, are the common formal rights/laws/rules outlined by few of the respondents. For instance, on the ratio of women to men in the Panchayat, Ms. A posit that there are more women to men in the Panchayat, but Ms. B said that the number of men is more than women in the Panchayat.

...Women are few and Men are more in the council [but when told that there is reservation for women in council, then said] yes both are equal in council). I call the meeting for the council and sign also wherever needed.

Ms. B

All the respondents seem not to have adequate knowledge on the ratio of women to men in the Panchayat. However, they believe that increase in the number of women over the men will be helpful to their electorates.

Although, Ms. A demonstrated ignorance to some of the questions, however, she acclaimed that her mission being a member of Panchayats is to empower her village members. In her words,

I feel I can work for the betterment of my village...this is the strength I feel ...not for myself but for my village

Ms. A

Don't know... but if I do good work then villagers will elect me in next election.

Ms. F

It is revealing here that the women in Panchayat have the notion that they are elected there for the interest of their subjects and their re-election is premised on their performance. This implies that women have their role to play as members of the Panchayat. Both Ms. A and Ms. B responses attested to that.

In comparison, even though there is a strong formal rights/laws/rules in the Panchayat, the informal culture in the Panchayat dominates and overwhelms the formal rights/laws/rules. This implies that the Panchayat formal rights/laws/rules only guarantee for 'women inclusion into the Panchayat as a fulfilment to the requirement of the constitution, but the Panchayat informal cultures promote men's domineering and participation in the council.

3.3.2. Cultural factors associated with the village in Haryana

The village system in Haryana is a unique social system that is characterized by strong social ties, traditional values, as well as close-knit communities. The villagers are usually engaged in agriculture, alongside other occupations which include trade, handicrafts, and services. The concern here are prevalent societal cultures that place the males and females unequal or equal in the village setting in Haryana as revealed by the participants.

3.3.2.1. Village informal culture

In addition to women's covering of heads and faces, women not allowed to speak in front of the men, inconsideration of women's opinions in decision-taking that are also common in the Panchayat, other cultures such as: female active involvement in domestic chores than males, female restrictions on freedom of movement and choices, placement of much value and investments on the males than females, are some of the cultures in the region of Haryana identified by the respondents.

Yes, we have big gender inequality in our village. Females cannot go anywhere alone ... In the village women are behind and there is no equality. Ms. D

I don't practice this but yes, we have gender inequality in our village. More value is attached to sons as they will remain with parents even after marriage... Ms. E

Yes, we have gender inequality in our village... Ms. F and Ms. C

Opposed to Ms. C, Ms. D, Ms. E and Ms. F, that acknowledged that gender inequality exists in the studied region, Ms. A and Ms. B assert that there is no gender inequality both in their village (Khanpur Kalan) as well as council.

No, there is no gender inequality in our village ... Ms. A

Ms. B also responded that there is no gender inequality both in her village as well as council. She asserted that both genders are treated equally in the village and council.

No, there is no gender inequality in the village. All are equal and girls and boys all are sent to school and colleges to study and to work also. Ms. B

On areas of equality, five among the respondents attested that there are areas of gender equality or women more equal than men. Ms. C pointed that a case where both genders enjoy equal treatment. According to her, in the village, the female enjoys equal education as the male, and even do better than the male, perhaps because of the presence of a University in the village. This suggests that equal treatment is given to males and females in the village most especially in the field of education. But Ms. A and Ms. B later acknowledged that certain social cultures that promote gender inequality which are passed-on and practiced in their village. They were able to mention practice of women covering their faces daily which is encouraged by elderly males and females. Their inconsistency here can be attributed to a display of shyness as well as the phobia of being labelled for saying the truth. Because their later responses show that certain societal cultures exist which encourage gender inequality. Amidst these mixed responses on GI, all the participants concurred on the culture of women daily covering their heads, while Ms. B added that women are also subjected to face-bow whenever appearing in front of elders. Although, this is peculiar to the women, however, no injurious motive is attached but just a sign of greeting, respect and honour ascribed to elders especially when seeing them for the first time.

Elders of the family, both male and female (mother-in-law etc.) tell us to follow these cultures and we are supposed to do whatever they say. We must follow them. Ms. B

And it is a common practice that these cultures have taken place for a long time just as the Panchayats Head stated and are been enforced by elders in the family and village (both males and females), which is an indication of general acceptance to them.

As observed, the level of gender equality is greatly determined by the level of education attained by the parents. One of the respondents asserted:

Yes, we have gender equality in our village. [But only] educated villagers treat their sons and daughters equal to an extent but uneducated and old villagers don't treat their sons and daughters equally. They don't allow their daughters to go and study outside or far from their home. They allow boys to do whatever they want but put restrictions on their daughters.

Ms. F

Consequently, women in the village reacted to these cultures in diverse ways. As narrated by Ms. A, *“everybody has different attitude towards these cultures.... some women follow to do them, and some do not”*.

3.3.2.2. Village formal rights/laws/rules

As observed, it is obvious that majority of the respondents have little or no quality knowledge about formal rights or laws or rules on their societal cultures as concern the villagers. Gender equality in education of children, as pointed out by most of the participants is the only formal rights equally bestowed upon both sexes. According to Ms. E, *“... freedom is given to females to study in schools and place of choice”*.

Even at that, few comments show that only the children (sons and daughters) of educated parents benefit from such. For instance, Ms. F asserted that *“educated families treat their girls equally or highly than males”*. This implies that the less or uneducated parents still view resources channelled towards training the females (who at later time, are perceived to leave the family for another family's good) as waste, consequently, see no need of such commitments on the female children.

3.3.3 Conclusion

Although mixed responses were given by the respondents, making 67% of the respondents to attest that social culture such as gender inequality exists in the studied region, while 33% of the respondents initially said that there is no gender inequality in the region (this includes both the villages and council). But in further interrogation, they all attest that one form or the other of gender inequality exist in the region.

From the interaction, observation, and interviewees' responses, it is apparent that most women in the Panchayat are there to compensate their husbands, knowing that certain quota of the positions are reserved for women. This has led to the dominance of men over the women in decision making, but at the same time, both shares assigned responsibilities as member or head of the Panchayat. This was displayed by one of the Panchayat head (name withheld for ethical reason) who cannot tell her age without looking at her ID. Beside the fact that she addresses the husband as the 'Panchayat Head', instead of her, she also waited for her husband to return for permission on what to say before her weak participation in the interview. This shows that women are less informed legislatively on the nitty-gritty of their positions in the Panchayat.

4. Analysing empowerment

This happens to be the section that addresses the second research question in this research. Therefore, before the conclusion, this section discusses women empowerment in Haryana as portrayed by the participants using three-dimensional model of empowerment postulated by Kabeer (1999) as the scale. The three-dimensional model of empowerment advocated by Kabeer (1999) are resources, agency, and achievement. In addition to the three-dimensional model of employment scaling, the advantage of other extant research literature will be used to validate some of the findings in this research. Particularly, Mahajan (2021) and Singh and Kumar (2022) among others will be used to support the findings in this study. These literature address women empowerment in form of participation in political activities, as well as socio-economic and cultural dynamics in Haryana. Thus, they become relevant to buttress the discourse in this section. Just as highlighted in section 3.3, the third and fourth themes (Village empowerment determinants, and Council empowerment determinants) highlight the possible determinants as perceived by the respondents that influence women empowerment in the studied region. These are also split into three sub-themes – resources, agency, and achievement accordingly. In each case, the participants’ perception on how resources, agency, and achievement influence women empowerment both at the village and council settings are analysed. This is expressed in table 4.1 below.

4.1 Perceptions of the respondents on their resources, agency, and achievement in Haryana region

It is interesting to present the views of the respondents on their resources, agency, and achievement in the region of Haryana. The informal as well as formal empowerment both at the village and council settings are considered. And to Ms. B, ‘empowerment’ is when *“I feel that I can do some work which I want to do or can stop some wrongs also... I feel strong... Gives me strength”*. According to Ms. A, ‘empowerment’ is when *“I feel I can work for the betterment of my village.... this is the strength I feel not for myself but for my village”*. We see here that the participants understand ‘empowerment’ as causing positive change or improvement in the lives of the people.

Table 4: Respondents' Perceptions on their Resources, Agency, and Achievements in the Haryana Region

	Village Empowerment Determinants		Council Empowerment Determinants	
	Informal	Formal	Informal	Formal
Resources	i. Women loyalty to males and husband	i. Equal opportunity in the field of education	i. Equal opportunity to assigned commitments.	i. Women Reservation Bill ii. Opportunity of Panchayat Sarpanch position for Women in the council
Agency	i. Consideration rate of women's choices and opinions	N/A	i. Consideration rate of women's choices and opinions	N/A
Achievement	i. Rate of husband's commitment to community service	N/A	i. Rate of women Panchayat's proxy ii. Villagers' perception of the activeness level of women panchayat	N/A

Source: Author's Creation

The major themes here (Village empowerment determinants, and Council empowerment determinants) highlight the possible determinants as perceived by the respondents that influence women empowerment in the studied region. These are split into three sub-themes – resources, agency, and achievement accordingly. And because the empowerment in the village or council may be informally or formally induced, thus, hereafter, the sub-themes under these themes shall be addressed as: 'Village Informal/Formal Resources', 'Village Informal/Formal Agency', 'Village Informal/Formal Achievement', 'Council Informal/Formal Resources', 'Council Informal/Formal Agency', 'Council Informal/Formal

Achievement’, based on the participants responses. The informal empowerment signifies participants’ perceived women empowerment that is not entrenched legally in the Panchayat or village, whereas the formal empowerment signifies participants’ perceived women empowerment that is entrenched legally in the Panchayat or village.

4.1.1 Respondents’ perceptions on village empowerment determinants

4.1.1.1. Village informal/formal resources

The concern here is to evaluate the extent to which the women have access to resources provided by the State as well as the village for their empowerment. Political resources, economic resources and social resources constitute the resources that enhance the capability of the women to express their power of choice. For instance, the legal support for women access to free education as well as political positions. Kabeer (1999a, p.462) posits that resources may signify the ability for choice to be made than to be imposed upon.

At the village level, women loyalty to males and husbands which is counted in their bowing down when greeting, covering of their heads and faces, as well as not speaking in front of males is an informal resource that influences their empowerment. Formally, equal opportunity in the field of education is given to both the males and females in Haryana. This has resulted remarkable increase in the rate of women literacy in the area. For instance, all the participants except one attested to formal opportunity given to female in the field of education, such that, Ms. E posited that *“in the field of education there is equality and women can also go out of village and district to study, they can independently take public transport and even ride motorcycle”*. Ms. B also buttressed on this by saying that *“all are equal, and girls and boys are all sent to school and colleges ...”* Only Ms. D among the participants was contrary on this as she said that *“women are lacking behind in terms of development [which also include education] in the village”*.

4.1.1.2. Village informal/formal agency

Agency in this context indicates ‘power’ at women’s demonstration. It may occur in a positive or negative manner. Positively, agency is the ‘power to make choice’ that grants the women the ability to make decision despite conditions that are not pleasant. Negatively, agency can also be expressed in terms of ‘power over’ anything outside the will of the women that may appear in form of deception, negotiation, coercion, or manipulation on the women (Ansari, 2015, p. 12).

As observed from the participants, majority of the women lacked agency. The consideration rate of women’s opinions and choices is very low and highly insignificant. While the males have high rate to make choices and power their opinions, the females only consent to what the males and husbands decide. This influences the place of their studies, career, employment opportunities, as well as social ambitions. We see this in the response of Ms. C that asserted that “...*opinion of female is not taken in any decision in home*”. Likewise, the women are destitute of the power to resist any decision taken by the men in the village. This implies that wrong decisions taken, if any, will also be supported as women lacked the power to fight against. Women’s loyalty to the men extends to not speaking before them especially, being confrontational and antagonistic.

4.1.1.3. Village informal/formal achievement

Sen (1985) describes achievements as empowerment which comprises of the presence of ‘resources availability’ as well as ‘agency in action’ in the path of making choices in ones’ lives. However, where women fail to make the desired choice because of established socio-cultural barrier, then, it can be described as disempowerment. In other way, some women wilfully as their preference adhere to prevailing rules and norms, then at such instance, the issue of power is immaterial (Ansari, 2015, p. 12).

In this study, disempowerment could be described as the case, where the presence of established norms dissuade and deprived women of their ‘right choices’. Ms. C pointed out that “*opinion of female is not taken in any decision in the home*”... Even when this disempowerment is a pain to the women, they barely change the status quo. In the words of Ms. C, “...*beyond talking and discussing these cultures which create gender inequality, they [women] can’t do anything*”.

The esteemed value for male than female in Haryana (the studied region) as pointed out by Singh and Kumar (2022) has greatly limited women empowerment in the region. Thus, the

need for physical ability required for agricultural activities, heir to inherit family wealth; and quest for people that can handle conflicts, have engineered the preference for more males to females in Haryana. Consequently, female feticidal practice becomes the order of the day. For instance, looking at the development of Haryana's child sex ratio, Haryana being among the best two prosperous States, was ranked 28th out of all the States in India, with increase of 11-point rise in male to female ratio which is against the 13-point reduction at the national level (Singh and Kumar, 2022, pp. 329-340).

4.1.2 Respondents' perceptions on council empowerment determinants

4.1.2.1 Council informal/formal resources

As regards to women Panchayats' access to political, economic, and social resources in the region of Haryana, the Women reservation by the government of India, granted the women the opportunity to be elected as head and members of Panchayat in order to raise their concerns for appropriate attention. The respondents affirmed this opportunity given to the women to participate in the Panchayat system. In most cases, the women occupy up to 50% of the seats in the Panchayat. This implies that the Women reservation is implemented at the same time offers women the access to council formal resources.

On the other hand, the women Panchayats have also gained council informal resources in the form of equal opportunity to assigned commitments. But this response came from only one of the participants, Ms. B who said that “... *there is no gender inequality in council ... I call the meeting for the council and sign also wherever needed*”. She also asserted that “*all members work together, and different members are allotted different work to look after*”. Her response here could be attributed to the position of Sarpanch which she occupies. But this stance of hers' was not same with Ms. F who is also a Panchayat Sarpanch. According to Ms. F, “*I would encourage women to participate in Panchayat [meetings] but there are some women who fear their husbands...who stop them from coming to Panchayat ... so there will be less participation of women*”. This is an indication that the women have very low access to council resources practically.

4.1.2.2 Council informal/formal agency

The women's access to council informal/formal agency could be described as a situation of paucity. As observed from the participants, majority of the women lacked agency. This is so as most women Panchayats elections are induced by husband and other family male members. Apart from Ms. A who asserts that her motive for being a Panchayat is to improve the women's welfare, the rest participants attested that family members motivated them to secure the Panchayat seats. Likewise, the women are destitute of the power to resist any decision taken by the men in the council. According to Ms. C, "... *they get elected but women members are not involved much during decision making*". She also asserted that

"Our views and opinions are not considered. Even if I say or express my opinion on something related to Panchayat work in village, men in the Panchayat don't take it seriously saying, "what do you know" or just ignore it". Ms. C

In the words of Ms. F, "*our decisions or contributions are not considered. Even if we propose something, it is ignored*". This is to say that "*women in Panchayat agree to everything men say...*", according to Ms. B. This implies that even when wrong decisions are taken, if any, will also be supported, as women lacked the power to fight against. Women's loyalty to the men extends to not speaking before them especially, in a confrontational and antagonistic manner.

4.1.2.3 Council informal/formal achievement

In this research, council informal achievement could be seen as very low while council formal achievement is higher. However, council informal achievements take more prominence considering the dominance of 'Village Informal/formal Achievements' in region. For example, legal provisions are given that encourage good number of women Panchayat in the council, alongside making the woman to be Panchayat Sarpanch in the council. Ordinarily, this provision would have lent the women more advantages in issues that concern them. However, the reverse is the case, as women panchayats are deprived of their power and choice. Ms. A said that "*we are not confident when interacting during Panchayat meetings... I am less confident and are not able to speak much ...*" Also, Ms. C pointed out that "... *Yes, there is inequality in council also, though government has reserved seats for women, and they get elected, but women members are not involved much during decision making*". In fact, all the participants attested that men and their decisions dominate that of the women in the Panchayat. This renders the women Panchayat less efficient in

participating and discharging their proposed duties. According to India's Natural Resource Data Management System (2010), the law has provided not less than twenty-nine (29) tasks that the Panchayat can perform. These tasks include improvement in agricultural activities, land reforms and consolidation matters, minor irrigation, small scale industries, rural housing, drinking water, fuel and fodder, local transport and communication means, rural electrification, poverty alleviation programmes, adult and non-formal education, cultural activities, health, and sanitation, among others.

This connotes that the women Panchayats have crucial role to play to brace up the women, and not to be left out in the implementation and benefits of these projects especially the areas where they are affected most, such as agricultural programmes, educational as well as health services. However, a situation where their voices are not considered in Panchayat meetings and decision-takings, it poses a doubt for women to be full beneficiaries of such programmes. And where these are lacking, then, women's political empowerment as described by Mahajan (2021, p.2032) is defeated. According to Mahajan, women's political empowerment is premised on "three fundamental and non-negotiable principles: (a) the equality between women and men; (b) women's right to the full development of their potentials; and (c) women's right to self-representation and self-determination".

Other factors that inhibit women Panchayat's performance as listed by Mahajan (2021, p.2035) include lack of timely information, the concern for safety, transportation facilities, traditional set-up, hurdles in the family, social un-acceptance, etc. in the process of having Panchayat's meetings. But all these still stems down to GI in the system, otherwise, factors that enhance efficient participation of men Panchayat in meetings would have equally made women do same.

4.1.3 Conclusion

It is evidenced in this chapter that, when it comes to the empowerment by resources available for the women, there is strong village formal resources as well as council formal resources, however, weak situation is the case in village informal resources and council informal resources. In relation to women empowerment through 'agency' and 'achievement', there is skewness to only the informal setting both in the village and council. And upon this skewness, the empowerment is also weak, considering the low consideration rate of women's choices and opinions, high rate of women Panchayat's proxy, as well as the

poor perception of the activeness level of women Panchayat. Thus, weak, or low empowerment is experienced by women both in the village and council.

5. Findings and discussion

This chapter being the last section of the study highlights the summary of the findings, answers to the research questions, discussion of findings, and conclusion.

5.1 The summary of the findings

The engagement of paradigmatic analysis on the various participants' responses led to the identification of four major themes and ten sub-themes in the study. The basic themes are Cultural factors associated with the Panchayat system in Haryana, Cultural factors associated with the village in Haryana, Village empowerment determinants, and Council empowerment determinants. Let's briefly highlight these themes alongside their respective sub-themes.

The first two among them which are Cultural factors associated with the Panchayat system in Haryana and Cultural factors associated with the village in Haryana, are related with difference by Panchayat and Village settings.

The themes focus on the identification of those socio-cultural factors that portray inequality or equality in gender treatment of the people both in the Panchayat as well as the village in the studied region. And because, the informal setting differs from the formal setting, makes these themes to be sub-divided into two each, - Panchayat informal cultures and Panchayat formal rights/laws/rules, as well as Village informal cultures and Village formal rights/laws/rules respectively. Just as Hofstede (2011) pointed out that the role of women in the social setting occurs relatively less in many cultures compared to that of men, findings on this also confirm that Haryana region in India is dominated with the cultures of masculine which are ones that characterize much emphasis on the distinction between what roles/tasks the men and women should do. This is seen from the responses of the participants that greatly express masculine culture showcased in priority on competition, assertiveness as well as social status success.

Then, the remaining themes of the study which are Village empowerment determinants, and Council empowerment determinants depict the possible determinants as perceived by the respondents that influence women empowerment in the studied region. These are also split into three sub-themes – resources, agency, and achievement accordingly. And because the empowerment in the village or council may be informally or formally induced, thus, the sub-themes under these themes were addressed as: 'Village Informal/Formal Resources', 'Village

Informal/Formal Agency', 'Village Informal/Formal Achievement', 'Council Informal/Formal Resources', 'Council Informal/Formal Agency', 'Council Informal/Formal Achievement', based on the participants responses.

The findings on Village Informal/Formal Resource as well as Council Informal/Formal Resources show that women empowerment both in the village and council are induced by the informal and formal resources provided. These resources at the village level include women loyalty to males and husband, equal opportunity in the field of education, while at the council level, include equal opportunity to assigned commitments, Women Reservation Bill, and opportunity of Panchayat Sarpanch position for women in council.

The findings on Village Informal/Formal Agency and Council Informal/Formal Agency reveal that women empowerment based 'agency' is very low, looking at the little or no consideration of women's choices and opinions. Finally, the study also reveals on Village Informal/Formal Achievement and Council Informal/Formal Achievement, that women empowerment in the region based on 'achievement', is very low, as evidenced from the high rate of Panchayat's proxy, indifferent villagers' perception of the activeness level of women panchayat, as well as women nomination premised on husband's commitment to community service.

5.1.1 The answers to the research questions

The analysis of the data collected has provided a fertile platform to appropriately address the various research questions posed in the study. These research questions are hereby addressed.

RQ1: What societal culture are women member of Panchayats exposed to?

Answer to the first research question can easily be drawn from table 3.2 on the themes 'Panchayat informal cultures', and 'Panchayat formal rights/laws/rules. These societal cultures as contained in Panchayat informal cultures are age-long cultures that have prevailed in the region. And their sustenance from generation to generation has been foundational on the frequent teachings and implementers of these cultures by the family and village elders as asserted by all the participants. They insist that the upcoming females as well as daughters-in-law are being acquainted with these cultures to the letter. Even when globalization to some extent has influence the full adherence of few among Panchayat informal cultures, which has warranted some females to put certain prohibited wears like jean trousers; the rate of this liberation is insignificant as compared to the majority that are complying. On the other hand,

Panchayat formal rights/laws/rules are other social cultures observed in the Panchayats council. The Panchayat formal rights/laws/rules take their implementation from the constitution of the nation. It is necessary to point out here that while Panchayat informal cultures are possible cultural practices that challenge the women Panchayat, the reverse is the case with Panchayat formal rights/laws/rules which catapult the inclusion as well as the participation of the women Panchayats in the council.

RQ₂: To what extent do socio-cultural factors affect women's empowerment?

Approaching this question demands an understanding of women empowerment which justice has been done on that in section 1.2.5 For clarity's sake, this study views empowerment advocated by Khan and Mazhar (2017, p.414), that women empowerment "is a process of awareness and capacity building leading [the women] to greater participation, to greater decision – making power and control and to transformative action". It also means the "reorganization of power in favour of women" against the patriarchal ideology as well as the dominance of male mentality syndrome. In this context, the Kabeer's Instrumental Model was employed as the yardstick for measuring women empowerment in the Haryana. These yardsticks are the extent to which women in the studied region have access to 'resources', 'agency', and 'achievement'. Greater access in these parameters signify strong women empowerment and vice versa.

To this end, the two themes, Village Empowerment Determinants and Council Empowerment Determinants are used to address the research question. Looking at the Village Empowerment Determinants, it is obvious from its sub-themes (Village Informal/Formal Resources, Village Informal/Formal Agency, and Village Informal/Formal Achievements), that the women in Haryana village are exposed to resources capable of empowering the women capacity and ability. However, low level of 'agency' and poor 'achievement' status as concern the women indicate that the women are not adequately empowered in the region.

More so, the second theme – Council Empowerment Determinant - which focuses on Council Informal/Formal Resources, Informal/Formal Agency, and Informal/Formal Achievements as its sub themes, shows that a very high level of resources available for the women but very low level of 'agency' and 'achievements' available for the women. This implies that women empowerment at the council level is also below expectation. This means that there is low women empowerment in the region of Haryana.

5.1.2 Discussion

The major findings in this research are: One, there are Cultural factors associated with the village in Haryana. Two, there are Cultural factors associated with the Panchayat system in Haryana. Three, Village empowerment determinants in Haryana are low; and four, Council empowerment determinants are also low.

The Cultural Factors Associated with the Village revolve around gender inequality in the village. This inequality in village cut across all ages, especially from childhood to adulthood, whereby roles, appearance, responsibility, as well as social functions, that pertained to both sexes are being orientated distinctly on their respective conducts. Being a widespread acceptable culture, it's passed-on, in the form of training or indoctrination is overtly implemented by both family and village male and female elders. Consequently, the females are complacent in their domestic works, keeping of homes, covering their faces and heads as symbol of submission to the males. While the males anchoring on the transferred ideology, have the delights to make important family decisions and choices, as those that fend for the family. And if peradventure, any female person does otherwise, may be in dressing or social roles by reason of exposure and globalization, such individual is treated as a deviant and aberrant. The only exception in this inequality in village is the field of education. However, equality in education is only to some extent, as the educational status of the parents is a determinant factor. This implies the choice and place of study for the female children are determined by the level of education acquired by the parents, which is believed to have broaden their awareness and understanding the dangers associated with inequality in children training.

Although, these societal cultures are strictly taught, implemented, and monitored by family and village elders as confirmed by all the respondents, several reasons have been attributed to these practices. Beside the ideology, that the male remains with parents at their homes, some see the males as more productive than the females that have their best performances in domestic duties (Ansari, 2015, p.48), thereby, first-hand treatment should be given to them. These assumptions earn males the accolade alongside several privileges, opportunities as well as freedom of movements and choices than the females.

Furthermore, history has it that the main reason attached to the fronting and upholding of these cultures is traceable to the frequent invasions by foreigners into India through

Haryana-Punjab rout. Under those recurrent attacks, women had always been the most victims, such that, they were abducted, treated as invaders' wives or captives, and sometimes traded in slave trade (Singh and Kumar, 2022, p.330). All these has render shame and despise to the people across the geographical area of Haryana. Thus, one of the ways felt to handle this problem is to legalise female feticide (Singh and Kumar, 2022, p.330).

Also, Cultural factors associated with the Panchayat system in Haryana are found high. Although, the panchayat is a formal setting, however, by the prevalent practices, it is easy to say that the inequality in village precipitated the inequality in council. This is because, both share common traits in gender treatment. This has resulted neglects and inconsideration of inputs (opinions and ideas) of the women Panchayat in council deliberations, thereby, encouraging weak participation of women Panchayats in meetings, as well as making them incapacitated to the supposed tasks. This situation renders the nominal presence of the women Panchayats futile, even when they may outnumber the men in the council. Under such scenario, major aims, programmes, and earmarked schemes of activities tailored for the upliftment of the women will be disappointed.

Furthermore, Village empowerment determinants in Haryana were found low compared to standard. Evidence shows that the women are disposed to certain resources such as equal opportunity to education as well as their nomination premised on their continuous loyalty to the men and husband. However, these resources are not translated into 'agency' and 'achievement', thus, making the resources immaterial. Of what value is the so called 'equality in education', when after studies, the women cannot be meaningfully empowered economically or placed in a remarkable political position? They lack the power to make choice or correct any abnormality in the system. Sometimes, their nomination and election are induced by their husbands' commitment in the village. High premium and accolade are ascribed to men who have in one way or the other have rendered remarkable services to the villagers, therefore, compensating the wife with Panchayat position. And since the emphasis is on the husband and not the woman, the emergence of such woman panchayat generates a proxy which in most cases involves the husband, son, or any male in the lineage.

Lastly, the Council empowerment determinants were also found low as compared to standard. This is seen from the low rate of 'agency' and 'achievement' by women in the council, as evidenced from the responses of all the participants. This nominal nature of women's presence in the Panchayat adds little or no value to the electorates. The men

Panchayat dominate right from being proxy to the women Panchayat down to making and implementing decisions. At the end, the women Panchayat become inactive. In addition, Mahajan (2021, p.2035) identified lack of timely information, the concern for safety, transportation facilities, traditional set-up, hurdles in the family, social un-acceptance, etc. in the process of having Panchayat's meetings as the socio-cultural factors that restrain women Panchayat performance.

The findings of this study are in consonance with the study of Mahajan (2021, p.2036), where 167 which represents 92.78% of the respondents (members of village Panchayat) replied that they are not allowed to take free decision in their official work just as said by all the participants of this study. For instance, Ms. C said, *"Opinion of female is not taken in any decision in home"*.

Also, as revealed, this study shares similarity to the work of Mahajan (2021) which shows that male dominance is the major hindrance to women Panchayat's political activities and by extension, women empowerment in Haryana. Mahajan found out that 167 out of 180 respondents attested that the menfolk always dominate the women Panchayat (p. 2036). Moreover, it was found that family members such as husband, son or others attend Panchayat meetings frequently on behalf of the women Panchayat. This also confirms the study of Mahajan (2021, p.2035) where 131 representing 72.78% of the respondents stated that most of their Panchayat's meeting had been by proxy.

5.2 Conclusion

The thrust of this study has been on the "effect of societal cultures on women empowerment in the Panchayati system in India". And because the place of women empowerment is pivotal to national development, considering their multiplier effects especially when they procreate by being role models to their daughters and upcoming females, which aids to promote a positive trend in socio-cultural and economic upliftment of a nation (WEF, 2009, Ansari, 2015, p.54), identification as well as mitigating societal factors that inhibit the efficiency of women Panchayats is also important for that goal to be realized.

Consequently, societal cultures such as Panchayat Informal Cultures and Village Informal Cultures, as identified from the participants affects the participation and efficiency of women Panchayat. These prevalent GI cultures as seen in Panchayat Informal Cultures and Village Informal Culture have precipitated the low women empowerment in the Haryana region. Howbeit, the advent of globalization and awareness have contributed to the enlightenment on

women empowerment, such that some women Panchayats have realized their political roles in the Panchayat.

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Appendix 1: Countries' scores on Hofstede study

Country	Power Distance	Individualism	Masculinity	Uncertainty Avoidance	Long-Term Orientation	Indulgence
UK	35	89	68	35	51	69
Japan	54	46	95	92	88	42
France	68	71	43	86	65	48
Germany	35	67	66	65	83	40
Spain	57	51	42	86	48	44
United States	40	91	62	46	26	68
Italy	50	76	70	75	61	30
Portugal	63	27	51	99	28	33
Russia	93	39	36	95	81	20
Croatia	73	33	40	80	58	33
Austria	11	55	79	70	60	53
India	77	48	56	40	51	26
South Korea	60	18	39	85	100	29
United Arab Emirates	80	25	50	80	N/A	N/A
Libya	80	38	52	68	23	34
Qatar	93	25	55	80	N/A	N/A
Saudi Arabia	95	23	60	80	36	32
South Africa	49	65	63	49	34	63
Australia	18	90	61	53	21	71
Argentina	49	46	58	86	20	62
Chile	63	23	28	86	31	68
Mexico	81	30	69	82	24	67
Canada	39	80	52	48	36	68
Finland	33	63	26	59	38	57
Ireland	30	60	10	50	28	67
Norway	31	69	8	50	35	55
Belgium	65	75	54	94	60	57
Denmark	18	74	16	23	35	70
Hungary	46	80	88	82	58	31
Indonesia	78	14	46	48	62	28

Source: Adopted from <https://www.simplypsychology.org/hofstedes-cultural-dimensions-theory.html>

Appendix 2: Interview guide

Dear Mrs./Ms.

This interview is a part of a research of Masters study programme, “Politics and governance in digital age”, carried out by Alpana Malik in the UNIVERSITY OF TARTU

The aim of the research is to examine the effect of societal culture on women empowerment in the Panchayati Raj system in India.

Your responses are voluntary, the results will be confidential and will be used only for academic purpose.

Thank you for your receptiveness and your cooperation!

Section A: Demographic Information

Name and Surname

Region/Village

Position/Charge

Work experience in the council

Level of Education

Contact e-mail/Mobile no.

(Optional by interest of feedback)

Section B: Research Questions-based Related Questions

1. What social cultures are women member of Panchayats exposed to?
 - i. Do you have gender inequality in your village? If yes, in what areas do you have gender inequality?
 - ii. Do you have gender inequality in your council? If yes, in what areas do you have gender inequality?
 - iii. Are there areas of equality? If yes, in what areas and how do they manifest?
 - iv. Do you have approved/passed-on social cultures in your council that encourage gender inequality? If yes, what are these cultures?
 - v. How long has these cultures been in place?
 - vi. Who are the major players/implementers of these cultures?
 - vii. How does the inequality in village life affect women’s participation in council?

2. To what extent do socio-cultural factors affect women's empowerment?
 - i. Are the common women aware of these social cultures that encourage gender inequality? If yes, how aware are they?
 - ii. How do social cultures affect common women in village-region?
 - iii. How do social cultures affect women in council?
 - iv. How do these social cultures affect you as a woman Panchayat leader/member?
 - v. What areas do women become more equal or equal in the village-region as well as the council?
 - vi. What areas do women Panchayat leader/member become more equal or equal in the council?
 - vii. How do these social cultures influence your decisions/contributions as a woman Panchayat leader/member?
 - viii. What do you understand by women empowerment?

Section C: Policy Implication-based Related Questions

1. What political role has the women Panchayats in Indian politics?
 - i. What was your motivation behind coming to Panchayats?
 - ii. Do you have specified number of Panchayat positions for women? If yes, do you think that quota was helpful for making women effective in politics?
 - iii. If the chance is given, will you contest again for the Panchayat position? If yes/no, why?
2. What measures are taken to change these social cultures?
 - i. Have there been any complaint received against these gender inequality culture and if yes, then to which authority was the complained made to?
 - ii. How did the (regional) authorities handle the complaint?
 - iii. What regulatory/legal framework are initiated to dissuade such cultures?
 - iv. How can the (regional) authorities change these cultures?

Thank you for the answers!

Appendix 3: Consent form

INFORMED AND VOLUNTARY CONSENT

I have been told about the purpose and topic of the interview, and how my responses will be used. I have been able to ask questions about the interview and they have been answered. I understand that any attributed quotes from the interview will only be used for the purposes of published academic work. If I have agreed to conduct the interview anonymously, I understand that quotes will be attributed to ‘a party source familiar with the situation’. I understand that I am not required to answer any of the questions, and I can withdraw from the interview at any time. I agree to participate in this interview and to it being digitally recorded.

Name: (print name) _____

Signature: _____

Date:

Appendix 4: Themes coding table (qualitative coding)

No.	Theme label	Sub-theme label	Code	Definition	Example quote	No. of coded segments
1	Cultural factors associated with the Panchayat system in Haryana	i. Panchayat informal cultures	i. Women's covering of heads and faces ii. Women not allowed to speak in front of the men iii. Inconsideration of women's opinions in decision-taking iv. Low orientation on council proceedings	The informal cultures signify cultures practiced in the Panchayat but do not have any legal backing	"Yes, there are. Purdah system/covering their heads and faces. I cover my face when I attend Panchayat meetings. I also don't speak much there" (Ms. E) "I have not been there ...when there is some issue or fight in the village then only men go to Panchayat to solve it ... women don't go" (Ms. D) "...they get elected but women members are not involved much during decision making" (Ms. C) "Only seats have been reserved but women members are not called for meeting or other work where decision must be taken together. No meeting has been called so we don't know who women members are, otherwise, we women together can meet and discuss matter together. This is also because the husband of the Panchayat head acts as the head and not his wife who is the real head" (Ms. C) "They [women] agree to everything men say in the council" (Ms. A)	5
		ii. Panchayat formal rights/laws/rules	i. Reservation of one-third of the seats for women ii. Two Child Norm that prohibits both sexes' participation in the Panchayat iii. Even participation and discharge of duties	The formal rights, laws or rules connote culture or enactment that have legal backings on the council.	"If there was no quota, then women would have been less in the Panchayat" (Ms. E) "Government has allowed boys and girls of different caste to marry each other which is very wrong. Government gives protection to couples who say they face danger from their families... which is wrong. Government has deprived parents from choosing partners for their girls/boys which is their right (in the state of Haryana honour killing is prevalent... if children marry against the wishes of their family, they can be killed) ... here sarpanch /head is supporting these cultures)" (Ms. D)	2
2	Cultural factors associated with the village in Haryana	i. Village informal cultures	i. Women's covering of heads and faces ii. Women not allowed to speak in	The village informal cultures signify cultures practiced in the village but do not have any legal backing	"In the area of household work.... only girls do this work, and they are also not given equal opportunity to study as they are not considered to be good investment for parents (they will go away after marriage)" (Ms. E)	8

			<p>front of the men</p> <p>iii. Inconsideration of women's opinions in decision-taking</p> <p>iv. Female active involvement in domestic chores than males</p> <p>v. Female restrictions on freedom of movement and choices</p> <p>vi. Placement of much value and investments on the males than females</p>		<p>"Yes, we have big gender inequality in our village. Females cannot go anywhere alone" (Ms. F)</p> <p>"Gender inequality is prevalent in every sphere of life in village. Opinion of female is not taken in any decision in home" (Ms. C)</p> <p>"Yes, there are [gender inequality]. [Women experience] Purdah system/ covering their heads and faces, not going out alone" (Ms. F)</p> <p>"...women are supposed to cover their faces in public" (Ms. D)</p> <p>"all women in village have to cover their faces..." (Ms. F)</p> <p>"Educated villagers treat their sons and daughters equal to an extent but uneducated and old villagers don't treat their sons and daughters equally. Like they don't allow their daughters to go and study outside or far from their home. They allow boys to do whatever they want but put restrictions on their daughters" (Ms. D)</p> <p>"Yes, there are [gender inequality]. Men are always above women. Women walk behind them. Cultures like women must cover their head and faces in front of elders" (Ms. A)</p>	
		ii. Village formal rights/laws/rules	Gender equality in education of children	The village formal rights, laws or rules connote culture or enactment that have legal backings on the village.	<p>"Not much knowledge about them" (Ms. A)</p> <p>"I don't know" (Ms. B)</p>	2
3	Village empowerment determinants	i. Village informal/formal resources	<p>i. Women loyalty to males and husband</p> <p>ii. Equal opportunity in the field of education</p>	Evaluate the extent to which the participants perceive women have access to resources provided by the State as well as the village for their empowerment	<p>"In the field of education there is equality and women can also go out of village and district to study, they can independently take public transport and even ride motorcycle" (Ms. E)</p> <p>"No, there is no gender inequality in the village. All are equal and girls and boys all are sent to school and colleges to study" (Ms. A)</p> <p>"Educated villagers treat their sons and daughters equal to an extent" (Ms. D)</p>	6

					<p>"In the field of education there is equality and women even do better than men in this area" (Ms. C).</p> <p>"Yes, all are equal in our village" (Ms. B)</p> <p>"I did not come to panchayat by any [personal] motivation, but my family and village just proposed my name and I got elected unanimously" (Ms. C)</p>	
		ii. Village informal/formal agency	Consideration rate of women's choices and opinions in family and village	Agency in this context indicates 'power' at women's demonstration at the village. It may occur in a positive or negative manner. Positively, agency is the 'power to make choice' that grants the women the ability to make decision in spite of conditions that are not pleasant. Negatively, agency can also be expressed in terms of 'power over' anything outside the will of the women that may appear in form of deception, negotiation, coercion or manipulation on the women	<p>"...opinion of female is not taken in any decision in home" (Ms. C)</p> <p>"They [women] are not able to take decisions or not allowed to take decisions" (Ms. C)</p> <p>"Our decisions or contributions are not considered. Even if we propose something it is ignored" (Ms. D)</p> <p>"If men of the house do not allow women to go out or do anything, then the women do whatever men say" (Ms. A)</p> <p>"Yes, they are aware of these cultures, but they only talk [complain] about these among themselves [but can't take any action]" (Ms. E)</p> <p>"My family told me to fight elections...it was there wish. I did not come to panchayat by any motivation...." (Ms. E)</p>	6
		iii. Village informal/formal achievement	i. Rate of husband's commitment to community service	This refers to empowerment which comprises of the presence of 'resources availability' as well as 'agency in action' in the path of making choices in ones' lives.	<p>"...Beyond talking and discussing these cultures which create gender inequality they can't do anything (Ms. C)</p> <p>"...I stood for election, so that his hard work pays off. Husband has been trying for the last ten years to become sarpanch" (Ms. A)</p> <p>"things have changed now.... girls could not wear jeans etc. but now they can wear" (Ms. D)</p>	3
4	Council empowerment determinants	i. Council informal/formal resources	i. Equal opportunity to assigned commitments	Evaluate the extent to which the participants perceive women	"No, there is no gender inequality in council ... I call the meeting for the council and sign also wherever needed" (Ms. A)	3

			<p>ii. Women Reservation Bill</p> <p>iii. Opportunity of Panchayat Sarpanch position for Women in the council</p>	<p>panchayats have access to resources provided by the State as well as the council for their empowerment</p>	<p>“Some women say that who allowed women in Panchayat.... this place is for men” (Ms.D)</p> <p>“All members work together, and different members are allotted different work to look after” (Ms. A)</p>	
		ii. Council informal/formal agency	<p>Consideration rate of women’s choices and opinions in the council</p>	<p>Agency in this context indicates ‘power’ at women’s demonstration at the council. It may occur in a positive or negative manner. Positively, agency is the ‘power to make choice’ that grants the women the ability to make decision in spite of conditions that are not pleasant. Negatively, agency can also be expressed in terms of ‘power over’ anything outside the will of the women that may appear in form of deception, negotiation, coercion or manipulation on the women</p>	<p>“...and they get elected but women members are not involved much during decision making” (Ms. C)</p> <p>“Our views and opinions are not considered. Even if I say or express my opinion on something related to Panchayat work in village, men in the Panchayat don’t take it seriously saying, “what do you know” or just ignore it (Ms. C)</p> <p>“Mainly, when complaints handled at Panchayat level and the whole village, only men are called upon and problem is solved. Even if victim is women, then also, she does not participate only her husband participates. Solution is arrived at without the participation of women even if victim is woman” (Ms. C)</p> <p>“Our decisions or contributions are not considered. Even if we propose something it is ignored” (Ms. D)</p> <p>“Women in Panchayat agree to everything men say...” (Ms. A)</p>	5
		iii. Council informal/formal achievement	<p>i. Rate of women Panchayat’s proxy</p> <p>ii. Villagers’ perception of the activeness level of women panchayat</p>	<p>This refers to empowerment which comprises of the presence of ‘resources availability’ as well as ‘agency in action’ in the path of making choices in ones’ lives</p>	<p>“I will be less efficient as I have my face covered. But I have this responsibility to carry forward these cultures” (Ms. E)</p> <p>“It will take time for us [women panchayats] to learn work as we have not been out of the house” (Ms. F)</p> <p>“I did not speak much at Panchayat meetings...I didn’t want to speak...as I don’t know what to speak because I have not worked before” (Ms. F)</p> <p>“Wherever I go I am not able to speak freely not able to open my mouth even...” (Ms. E)</p> <p>“...but there are some women who fear their husbands... who stop them from coming to Panchayat ... so there</p>	8

					<p>will be less participation of women” (Ms. D)</p> <p>“...I will feel empowered only when male members allow me to work in Panchayat... which is not the case here” (Ms. C)</p> <p>“[increase in women Panchayats] won’t be much helpful as women are not allowed to speak in the Panchayat” (Ms. C)</p> <p>“I am less confident and are not able to speak much ... but slowly I try to speak by saying yes to all things others are saying” (Ms. B)</p>	
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Source: Author’s Compilation

Appendix 5: Interviewees' responses to research questions

Section B							
Interviewees' names	Ms. A (Head)	Ms. B (Member)	Ms. C (Member)	Ms. D (Head)	Ms. E (Member)	Ms. F (Member)	Remark
Presence of gender inequality	None, both in the village and council	None, both in the village and council	Yes. Both in the village and council	These is gender inequality especially among uneducated villagers but not in council	There is gender inequality especially in the village	>There is gender inequality in a high extent both in the village and council	Four out of the six participants attest that there is gender inequality.
Presence of gender equality	Yes. In all areas. including education	Yes, gender equality exists in both village and council	Yes. In the field of education, may be due to presence of University	>Educated families treat their girls equally or highly than males.	Gender equality prevails in the field of education as freedom is given to females to study in schools and place of choice.	No gender equality as women are behind in terms of development in the village	Mixed responses >But majority assert that there is gender equality but mostly in the field of education. But mostly influenced by educational status of parents. >In the council, gender equality occurs in the equal positions given as women quota
Gender inequality-based approved/ passed-on social cultures	None	Covering of head	>Female opinions are despised in decision taken both in village and council such as >Purdah system/covering heads	>The uneducated place restrictions on their female children than males, school and place to go. >Women cover their head and face in public. >No idea of the council as she has not gone to Panchayat meeting even once.	>Much values and investment is attached to sons >Girls do all the household works >Gone once to Panchayat meetings >Covering of head and face >Women not allowed to speak much in the council	>Females cannot go anywhere alone >Women must cover head and face both in village and council >Must not speak in front of men	Five among the six respondents pointed out various areas of gender inequality. These include: >Not regarding female opinions in the village and council >Covering heads and face >Women not allowed to talk in front of men >Restrictions of female movement and choices, especially by the less educated >Much values and investments are placed on the males >Low orientation about council proceedings
Duration of such culture(s)	Very old	Age-long time	Age-long time	Age-long time, but some girls have changed as girls wear jeans now	Since I was born	Age-long time	All concur that gender inequality has been from age-long time. Reason because, teachings on them are been passed from

							generations to generations.
Implementers of the culture	Male and female family elders	Male and female family elders	Men of the village and council	Everyone is an implementer as the culture is continually taught.	Elders teach children often	Male and female family/village elders	Both male and female elders in the family and village are instrumental in the teachings and implementations
Inequality's effect on Panchayat's women participation	Women Panchayats only agree to all men Panchayat's decision	No idea	>Non-inclusion of women in decision taking >In most case, husband of Panchayat's head acts on behalf of the woman	>The cultures instilled fear into women Panchayat for attending meetings	If not that quota is given, women Panchayat would have recorded the lowest number.	It does not. If it affected, I would not have been in the Panchayat	Gender inequality renders the women: >less efficient >Indecisive >Mostly supporters and not initiators of ideas >Dormant in the council deliberations
Village women awareness of this culture	Younger women understand the culture as detrimental than older women	Some women are aware and see it as normal	Women are highly aware but can't take action because of their menfolk	>Women are aware, and also raise their voice against it.	The women are aware but only discuss among themselves	The women are all aware in high extent, as daughters and daughter-in-law are been taught often	The awareness cut across all women but civilization has made the younger women to question these cultures but futile
Inequality's effect on women in the village	Women only adhere to men's instructions	Mixed attitudes. Some follow, some despise	Women views are not considered in decision taking	>Women only follow whatever their families say	Women can't go anywhere without permission from the male member >Women cannot work outside	Don't know much	>Women only do what their husbands/males instructed >Women are restricted on where to go >Their opinions are not considered in decision taking
Inequality's effect on women in the council	Agreement to everything men say	Lack of confidence at Panchayat meetings	Women views are not considered in decision taking	>Women see Panchayat council as for men	>The cultures render women less proficient in council	>It makes the women dormant as men mostly attend meetings	>Women only do what their men Panchayat instructed >Their opinions are not considered in decision taking >Thus, their empowering intentions become less effective on the people
Inequality's effect on you as individual	Not much	Only concur on men's decision	Makes me dormant Panchayat	>I am nervous in speaking as I'm not exposed to work >Whatever elders of	>They make me less efficient	>It limits my active participation >My opinions	

				the family told me to do I follow >But now, my orientation has changed. I will do the needful.		are not regarded	
Areas of women equality or greater equality in the village	>Engagement of all members in various duties. >Shared responsibilities	No idea	>Only in education	Not many areas... none actually... very few	>Equal in all areas (no specific area mentioned)	>No area in the village	>Mixed results >But equality is mostly in field of education
Areas of women equality or greater equality in the council	There equality in work among members	No idea	>Panchayat's head which is a must, although, in name not decision-taking	>Women panchayat head is equal or greater than men members.	>Equal in all areas	>No area in the Panchayat	>Mixed results >Equality in Panchayat positions >Equality is mostly in works distributed
Social culture's effect on women Panchayat's contribution	Men dominates, making women less active in decision making	I am less confident and are not able to speak much	Our decisions or contributions are not considered	Only men use to decide everything even if wrong ... even if issue involved a woman	I am not able to speak freely,... not to open my mouth even	>Not able to work or perform immediately	>Women opinions are ignored >Makes women Panchayat less efficient in council >Women Panchayat only play supportive role
Perception of women empowerment	The ability and courage to make corrections	To improve the women's welfare	>Having power to decide both at home and council	Non-related response	Memberships in Panchayat gives me strength to do work.	>What is needed when women lack power	>Most of their responses show shallow understanding of the meaning of women empowerment.

Source: Author's Compilation from the Field

Appendix 6: Interviewees' responses to policy implementation-based questions

Section C							
Interviewees' names	Ms. A (Head)	Ms. B (Member)	Ms. C (Member)	Ms. D (Head)	Ms. E (Member)	Ms. F (Member)	Remark
Motivation for women Panchayat	>To reward husband's commitment. >To justify the women's quota in council	To improve the women's welfare	>No motivation but nominated to be there.	My family wanted me to contest election to enter Panchayat.	>No motivation but my family instructed me to contest election	>No motivation but my husband instructed me to contest election	>Many lacked motivations for the position of Panchayat >Their elections were mostly influenced by family members, especially, their husbands who represent them in Panchayat's meetings
Number of Panchayat positions for women	No idea	20, with more women, but not certain on the number.	>50% positions reserved for women	Don't Know but more women will be helpful	Don't Know but more women will be helpful	Don't Know but more women will be helpful	>They all show limited knowledge on the quota given for women Panchayat. >But believed that the more women will be helpful to the electorates
Any desire for another tenure. Why?	Yes. To work for the village	Yes. To work for the village	Yes, if my opinions will be taken.	Indecisive, but my good works	Indecisive in her response	Yes, ...	Many are willing for another tenure if they are found worthy by their works
Any complain on gender inequality?	Yes, but few, mainly girls	Not frequent	Yes.	Yes	Not much idea.	Complains are brought to the council	Their responses show that complaints of gender inequality are brought to the council
How authorities handle the complaint?	The Panchayat's council handles it	The Panchayat's council handles it	Always handled by men Panchayats	The council handles but where not settled, then, the Police takes over	But if any complain, the Police handles	If not well settled at council, then, they involve the Police.	>The council handles all complaints. >If not settled, they hand them over to the Police
Regulatory/legal framework initiated to dissuade such cultures	No idea	No idea	No idea	>Government provides defence to couples that face danger from families. >Government allowed boys/girls to choose partners even against parent's which	There are laws but don't know them	No idea	>Just two among the respondents demonstrated their awareness on regulatory laws. >This shows that most of the women Panchayats are lowly oriented on the regulatory laws on gender inequality.
How regional authorities change	No idea	No idea	No idea	>The government cannot change.	Greater gender equality can be	Gender inequality will reduce if women	>Half of the respondents show no idea on this.

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