

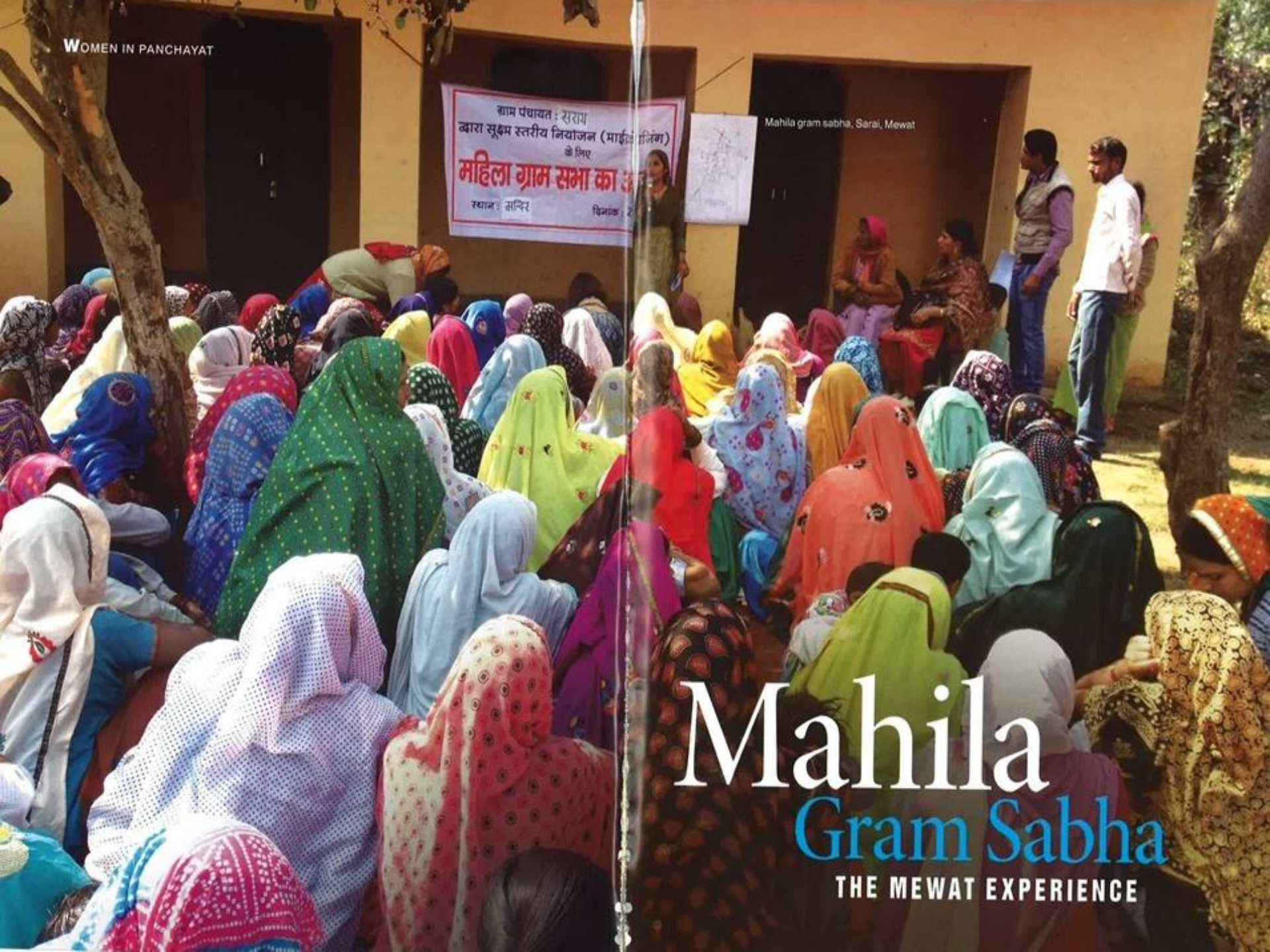
WOMEN IN PANCHAYAT

ग्राम पंचायत : सराय
द्वारा सूक्ष्म स्तरीय नियोजन (माईकेलिंग)
के लिए
महिला ग्राम सभा का उद्घाटन
स्थान : सन्दिद
दिनांक : 2

Mahila gram sabha, Sarai, Mewat

Mahila Gram Sabha

THE MEWAT EXPERIENCE



Reservation alone does not suffice meaningful participation of elected women representatives. This initiative needs to be complemented by providing space and opportunities for the women leaders to discharge their duties and exercise their power. In addition, a platform is required for women to voice their needs. A mahila gram sabha is one such platform in the planning and decision making process.

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act was so emphatic that it pulled women with no training or experience out of their homes, and put them in public life amidst the ruffle of politics and governance. Approximately one million women have been elected since the Act came into force. However, these women were seen as a source of status sweetening, not as pillars in governance at the local level. Factors such as patriarchal societal norms and culture, lack of education and awareness, restricted mobility, and financial dependency inhibited elected women representatives (EWRs) from actively participating in the affairs of the panchayat and gram sabha. Male relatives, fathers, husbands, fathers-in-law or sons, were doing their work. As a consequence, they were conceived as proxy or absentee members with a new denomination 'sarpanch pati', to depict male chairpersons, entailing them to execute the panchayat's work. Though reservation for women in PRIs has gone up to 50 per cent in some states, Haryana, where Mewat is located, still offers 33 per cent.

Capacity building in Mewat

The Institute of Rural Research and Development (IRRAD) is working in the villages of district Mewat for more than a decade now to mainstream elected women panchayat leaders. The programme suggests that providing training and capacity building alone may not suffice; there is a need to work intensively with EWRs and simultaneously educate men about the importance of women

in governance.

Mewat, with a population of over 10 lakh (Census 2011), is the most backward district of Haryana and one of the minority concentration districts of India. It is inhabited by Meo-Muslims whose origins can be traced back to the early Aryan invasion of Northern India, when they called themselves Kshatriyas. They embraced Islam during the invasion of the Tughlak dynasty in the 14th century, and at the same time preserved their social and cultural traits. As a result the community possesses a distinct ethno-cultural identity influenced by both Hinduism and Islam.



Horizontal learning workshop, Ghagas, Mewat

Mewat performs poorly in social indicators, especially those related to women. The female literacy rate is 36.6 per cent, against a total literacy rate of 54 per cent (Census 2011). The maternal mortality rate in Mewat is 275, as compared to all India figure of 212 (Sample Registration System, Census of India). The District Level Household and Facility Survey-3 records that 85 per cent deliveries in Mewat take place at home as compared to the all India figure of 53 per cent. Mewat has only one lady medical officer in the 12 primary health centres.

The social, economic and political freedom of women is severely restricted. A substantial number of women reported that they are not allowed to take decisions at the household level and almost all the women reported that they are not allowed or even expected to take decisions at the village level. Men, and even women, have doubts about the leadership capabilities of women (A Godyal *et al.*, 2010, 'Training needs analysis for gender equity'; IRRAD). Though women have come out to fight elections to fulfil the parameter of reservation of women in the panchayat, their status remains subservient.

Women in PRIs in Mewat

The position of elected representatives of three tiers along with representation of women, scheduled caste and backward caste based on elections held in July, 2010 (Fig 1.) shows the status of reservation in Haryana. The picture is similar in Mewat where IRRAD trained 1203 male and 638 female panchayat members in 2010-11. The participation of women in this training programme was nearly 50 per cent less as compared to men. Moreover, a near similar per cent of elected representatives were found to be illiterate, most of them being women.

The district level training was followed by grass root work with village representatives. Initially, women panchayat members were prohibited from attending training sessions with men—husbands cited social and religious reasons for their non-participation. IRRAD started holding separate women centric training sessions. At the outset it was noted that women participation in the gram sabha was negligible and a woman sarpanch

Fig 1: Women in PRIs in Haryana

Panchayat
Elected Members **64866**
SC **13990**
Women **23761**
OBC **5846**
PER CENT OF WOMEN
36.63

Panchayat samiti
Elected Members **2772**
SC **697**
Women **956**
OBC **119**
PER CENT OF WOMEN
34.87

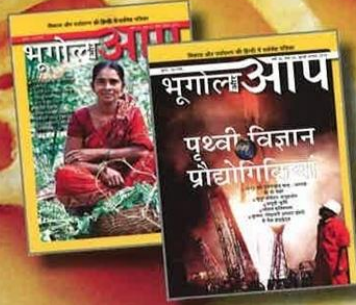
Zila parishad
Elected Members **374**
SC **82**
Women **132**
OBC **21**
PER CENT OF WOMEN
35.29

Source: www.harpanchayat.gov.in

would never convene a panchayat or gram sabha meeting. Micro planning sessions exclusively for women found better acceptance, as women felt safe and were able to express themselves freely, identify their needs and participate in the planning process. Thus the mahila gram sabha was priori-

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
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tised and mahila panch or sarpanch were trained to convene and conduct these meetings. The issues were then shared in the main gram sabha and subsequently included in the micro-plan documents prepared for the village. Issues that arose were a need to enhance female literacy, provide access to clean water, build toilets and eradicate alcoholism, which otherwise did not find mention in the village plans.

One of the participants of mahila gram sabha, Memuna from village Khedli Khurd said, "The presence of other women motivated me to speak. I have never attended such an event before and hope that the mahila sabha is held regularly in my village." Vimla, sarpanch of Village Sarai, added that she is today enthused with a need to make a positive difference in her village. "Earlier I used to be apprehensive about talking to government officials as I did not know how to read or write. But as I started meeting them regularly, my confidence grew. Last January (2013), the panchayat undertook a micro planning exercise here and organised a mahila gram sabha in which the entire village participated, and applications were submitted. We leveraged government funds for paved roads and street lighting in the village".

Endnote

IRRAD's Mewat lessons point towards the efficacy of the mahila gram sabha in this area. The all-women meetings help women improve their communication skills, and give them confidence to express their views and opinions in public gatherings. Once aligned, women can use this platform to collectively advocate and demand their rights. The Mewat experience however shows that in areas where women are severely marginalised, hand holding by an external group, which may be an NGO or a government initiative, is imperative. With the ultimate aim to provide vigour to the movement and allow women leaders of Mewat to contribute to the planning and execution of village development plans as equal partners, IRRAD is planning to organise elected women representatives into collectives. This will give strength to this momentum. 

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