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The reservation of women in Panchayats and their representation in village level institutions has not necessarily led to their meaningful participation in village governance. The 73rd constitutional amendment reserves one third of seats in Panchayats for women. Under the Right to Education Act, 2009, School Management Committees (SMCs) are formed to manage the activities of school; 50 per cent of its members are women. The members of Village Health Sanitation and Nutrition Committees (VHSNCs) formed under National Rural Health Mission are mostly women. However despite this representation, the women continue to remain subservient to men and most of their work as members of these institutions is done by the male family members due to patriarchal societal norms. Mahila Sangathans (womens' collectives) is an initiative to break these societal norms and provide a platform to women to escape this vicious cycle and contribute as effective members in political affairs of village. This paper explains the work of these sangathans created by Sehgal Foundation in Mewat district of Haryana (now renamed as Nuh district).

Introduction

Over the past few decades, Government of India is working towards increasing the role of women in village governance. The 73rd constitutional amendment reserves one third of seats for women in *panchayats* (village councils) and calls for their participation in the village political arena. Under the Right to Education Act, 2009, School Management Committees (SMCs) formed to manage the activities of school also have 50 per cent women members. Similarly, the members of Village Health Sanitation and Nutrition Committees (VHSNCs) formed under National Rural Health Mission are also mostly women. However, representation of women in these spheres of governance has not necessarily led to their sufficient participation. They are largely figureheads and the work related to their roles and responsibilities is being done by their husbands, sons or other male members of the family. Various factors such as patriarchal societal norms and culture;

lack of education and awareness among women; restricted mobility; and financial dependency inhibit women representatives from actively participating in the affairs of gram panchayats, gram sabha (village general body meeting) and other village level institutions.

Many times women perpetuate their own isolation in the public sphere. Their feeling of low self esteem emerges in many cases from lack of education. In a study conducted in Mewat in 2010, the women stated that being illiterate; they were less knowledgeable and hence inferior to men (Godyal, Makhija and Oberoi, 2010). The socialization process creates gender stereotypes which shapes and directs the roles and responsibilities of men and women in the society. The culture of individuals, influences stereotypes through information that is received from sources such as parents, peers, teachers, political and religious leaders (Crespi, 2003). In many cultures, traditionally women are confined to reproductive roles whereas men are expected to take care of the livelihood, and represent the family in social and political spheres. With limited exposure to the outside world, the women become subservient. Such is the case in many parts of rural India. Even if the women get elected or represented at various platforms of governance, they merely become puppets at the hands of the men in the family allowing men to function and take decisions on their behalf. This renders the whole purpose of ensuring participation of women through reservation or representation meaningless. The men continue to dominate the decision making process and women continue to be subjugated. The voice of women is not heard at public forums and their interests, priorities, and needs remain neglected.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) seek to realize human rights for all with a universal agenda. If we are to achieve the SDG of gender equality and empowerment of women and girls, it is imperative to take action and break the vicious circle of subjugation of women at various levels. Numerous micro-level

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experiments and programs are needed that have the potential to grow and multiply. Working with women to facilitate them in finding ground in the political arena is one such program. This will further help in meeting another SDG of building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions to promote inclusive societies for sustainable development.

Power of Collective Action

There have been various initiatives undertaken across the country at both individual and organizational levels to provide a dynamic space for women to participate in the political sphere. One such initiative is to form women's collectives. This has yielded effective results and serves as one of the successful practices. *Mahila Samakhyas*'s initiative in Andhra Pradesh to organize women into village-level collectives-the *mahila sangha* (women's groups) is a commendable practice. These *sanghas* think, decide, act, and reflect collectively with a thrust on addressing women's issues with social agenda (Prashanthi, 2015). The power of collective action of women has given way to a movement in Maharashtra in the form of *Mahila Rajsatta Andolan*. Their campaign "vote hamara raaj hamara" (*our vote, our power*) has changed the power dynamics in many parts of the state. One of the impacts of this *andolan* (movement) has been that women related problems have found a priority in the development agenda of the villages.

Aastha Sansthan in Rajasthan has promoted various people's organizations consisting of women. They have effectively mobilized elected women representatives to become members of association of Ward Councilor and Village Councilor. *Kadumbashree*, a joint program of Government of Kerala and NABARD has created a network where women participate in the gram sabha and bring the needs of the poor to the attention of the local governments.

The women collectives formed by Grassroots International in 1994 work with rural women farmers in Tamil Nadu to increase their self reliance through use of ecological farming practices and establishment of collective farms (Simas, 2014).

S M Sehgal Foundation (Sehgal Foundation) has also organized women into *mahila sangathans* (women's collectives) to foster collective action in district Mewat in the state of Haryana. It is an endeavor to impart confidence among women representatives of panchayats, SMCs and VHSNCs. Becoming members

of *sangathans* increases the bargaining power of women and gives them a platform to come together, address common problems, and contribute to the development of their villages. As members of these village-level institutions, women will begin to have a say in village governance and their perspectives will be integrated in village plans and projects.

Strategies of Working with Mahila Sangathans

Sehgal Foundation has adopted several strategies to work with *mahila sangathans*:

Environment Building:

This strategy is adopted to enroll the interested candidates as members of *mahila sangathans*. Group sessions are held with women to discuss the problems faced by them in their villages and explore possible solutions. In these meetings, power of women collectives and reservation of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) is discussed and they are motivated to organize themselves into *sangathans* to address the problems collectively.

Perspective building:

Once the women are organized into *sangathans*, guided sessions on perspective building are held in which they develop a framework for their groups. In these sessions, the women deliberate on the objectives and activities of their *sangathan*, choose a name for their *sangathan* and design a logo for their group. They also take collective decisions on membership fees, choose their president and treasurer and prepare the rules and regulations of the group.

Trainings and Capacity Building:

The *sangathan* members get trained on various governance issues such as the 73rd amendment, decentralized planning, composition, roles and responsibilities of PRIs, SMCs and VHSNCs, budgets, and *gram sabha*. These interactive trainings provide information and skills to the members so that they can identify issues, address them and implement solutions.

Mahila Gram Sabhas:

Mahila gram sabhas (women only meetings) are powerful platforms for planning and decision making. In Mewat, as in many other rural areas in India, the participation of women in *gram sabha* is negligible. Further a woman sarpanch will hardly ever convene a *gram sabha* meeting. *Mahila gram sabhas* are

organized with an objective to mobilize women to participate in *gram sabhas*. These sabhas provide a safe space for women to express their concerns, address development issues, and prepare action plans. *Mahila sangathans* are motivated to mobilize other village women to participate in these *sabhas*. 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"*.

Micro Planning:

Micro planning sessions with women in separate groups have found better acceptance, as women are able to express themselves, identify their needs, and participate in the planning process. Separate sessions on decentralized planning are held with *mahila sangathans* and other women in the villages. Issues such as low female literacy, access to clean water, toilets and alcoholism, which did not find a mention in development plans when such sessions were held only with men surfaced in these meetings. Vimla, sarpanch of village Sarai in 2014, 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, the panchayat undertook a micro planning exercise here and organized 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"*.

Mahila Sammelan:

A *mahila sammelan* (women's conclave) organized every year provides an opportunity to *sangathan* members to interact with each other, learn from *sangathans* of other states and engage in a dialogue with government officials so that they can effectively implement the government programs in their villages. It also gives visibility to their initiatives at the district level.

Small Successes

In a study on increase in information after three months' sessions on perspective building and trainings in Mewat, 99 per cent *sangathan* members were found to be aware about VHSNCs compared to 17 per cent

other VHSNC members who were not part of these groups. 78 per cent *sangathan* members became aware about Right to Education (RTE) compared to 58 per cent SMC members (Saxena and Saxena, 2015).

In our two years of rigorous work with *mahila sangathans*, there have been many successes, some of which are shared below.

- Village Kalwadi was facing acute and erratic electricity shortcuts. This was affecting the water supply and studies of children during evening hours. The *mahila sangathan* got together and approached the electricity department. They also gave a written request on their letterhead. Seeing the power of solidarity, the department promptly resolved the problem, fixed the hours of load shedding everyday and started providing electricity for remaining hours.
- In village Sarai, the transformers of two borewells became dysfunctional affecting the water supply in the village. Repeated complaints to the block office did not yield any result. The women *sangathan* members got together and approached the Additional Deputy Commissioner (ADC). The ADC gave instructions to his team and both the borewells were repaired within a week. The village now has regular water availability.
- In village Gohana, there were muddy pools of water on the streets. Lack of cleanliness resulted in mosquito breeding and the villagers faced difficulty in crossing the lanes. When during the training sessions, the *mahila sangathan* got to know that VHSNCs can access an annual grant from the health department, which can be utilized for sanitation activities, they decided to apply for the funds. The *sangathan* approached the *anganwadi* worker, who is the signatory of VHSNC funds to share their decision. The worker though initially reluctant, was convinced to give the funds to the *sangathan* to clean up the village. The *sangathan* successfully executed the sanitation work because of which the village now looks clean.

There are numerous other stories of change that speak of the good work of *sangathan* members in addressing social issues. The successes have given them confidence to continue with their endeavor and mobilize more women to join their collectives. The initiative of

forming *mahila sangathans* and capacity building has transformed these women into effective members of village level institutions. They actively participate in the functioning of their institutions as members of panchayats, SMCs or VHSNCs. Their knowledge and skills have grown through a process of exploration, discovery and growth; that has also been envisaged in National Capability Building Framework of the Ministry of Panchayati Raj. The women have broken the shackles of "traditional authority" to give way to "legal-rational authority". As sociologist Max Weber has written, a particular authority can transition into other types (Williams, 2003), the *sangathan* members have also started exercising their authority by virtue of their mandatory presence in these institutions. The power of collectivism has led to this change. This indicates a breakdown of traditional authority, which has been passed down to their male counterparts over generations.

Lessons Learnt

While there are successes in our work with *mahila sangathans*, there are also inherent challenges. At the onset, many women want to join the *mahila sangathans*, but feel disempowered to step outside their villages to attend trainings. We address this problem by mobilizing and creating a group of women in the village itself who are members of village institutions. This group is called *pragati samooch* (*development group*). These women are trained at the village level on the functioning of institutions and the importance of gender equity. After they become confident to convince the families and can take decision to step outside the villages for training and capacity building, they can join the *mahila sangathans*.

Since women in Mewat have limited livelihood opportunities and are mostly engaged on agricultural fields there is a need to diversify their skills to expand the scope of economic avenues available to them. The *mahila sangathans* want to look beyond their roles as members of institutions and explore such opportunities for them, such as linkages with Haryana State.

Livelihoods Mission and Training for other Employable skills.

We feel that networking with *sangathans* of other states can widen the perspective of *sangathans* and boost their confidence. We provide them such opportunities by inviting *sangathan* members of other states in *mahila sammelan* and organizing exposure trips for women.

In order to overcome the barrier of low literacy, it is important to choose the right Information Education Communication tools to provide information to trainees. Pictorial handbills with minimum text are effective tools to disseminate information to the members and their families. Even if women are illiterate, they ask their children to read it out to them. To drive home the message in an entertaining way, short animation movies are made. Community media is another powerful tool. We develop and broadcast various programs on governance and women empowerment from our community radio *Alfaz-e-Mewat FM 107.8*. Since the recall level of trainings is generally low, several communication tools are required to sustain the interest of women so that they also remember the information disseminated to them at various forums.

Moving Ahead

Participation in Gram Sabha:

The *mahila sangathan* members are empowered but there are many others who still do not experience a sense of power. It is the right of all men and women who are registered in the electoral rolls to participate in the gram sabha, but women think that it is the "privilege" that only men should have. "Issues that challenge existing power systems can be raised if women have a) understood their own oppression b) are interested in using their positions to alter the nature of the community they live in and c) have the courage to take on the community" (PRIA, 2001). The *sangathan* members now realize that they have been subjugated to male dominance for years and they want to change the power dynamics. They exercise their power by participating in the gram sabhas; but they have a bigger task to serve as role models and mobilize other women to participate in these sabhas. Organizing *mahila gram sabhas* can be an important initiative that can be implemented on a large scale.

Women's Role in District Planning:

So far, *mahila sangathans* operate at the gram panchayat level. However, for their voices to be integrated in the larger planning process, it is important that they create synergy with all the three tiers of PRIs - gram panchayat, panchayat samiti and zila parishad; and also with District Planning Committee (DPC). Planning at district and local level would generate developmental impulses at all territorial levels; it will help solve problems wherever they are and would involve people in developmental process (Misra, 1990).

It is therefore important that development issues identified in microplans with women groups reach the DPC and that more panchayat samiti and zila parishad members also get associated with *mahila sangathans*. This will give sangathans more power to represent themselves in the overall planning process and their agenda will reach the right forum.

Creating Synergies:

Collaborations are important to understand diverse perspectives, bring initiatives to scale and promote growth through inter group learning. There is need to facilitate this process by collaborating more intensively with *sangathans* and women's collectives across other states, civil society organizations, academia and individuals. As a way ahead, our focus is on creating networks and developing synergies with other collectives to generate a movement.

Conclusion

The goal of National Policy for Empowerment of Women, 2001 is advancement, development and empowerment of women. It calls for equal access to participation and decision making in social, political and economic life of the nation. Under this policy, active participation of women is to be ensured in decision making in political process at all levels. The state has done this through reservation and mandatory provision of representation in various village level institutions. A new policy is also being currently devised by Ministry of Women and Child Development, which hopefully will further emphasize this mandate. Concerted efforts are needed by other stakeholders including civil society organizations to make this a reality. *Mahila sangathans* is one such step towards this direction. We hope many more such initiatives are replicated nationwide to make this a movement, which can transform the lives of women and give them equal footing in all spheres of life.

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