

## Women's Empowerment, Community Engagement, and Sustainable Development Goals

S M Sehgal Foundation, a charitable trust established in India in 1999, works to strengthen community-led development initiatives to achieve positive social, economic and environmental change across rural India. The foundation collaborates with communities in Mewat district, Haryana; Alwar district, Rajasthan; and Samastipur district, Bihar; among others. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5, Gender Equality: "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls" lies at the heart of all core development areas in which Sehgal Foundation works, namely, good rural governance, water management and agriculture development. Sehgal Foundation supports all its rural development work with communities through rural research and community media.

The organization has a well-defined gender policy in place and all its activities, trainings and performances are viewed through gender lens to be sure to meaningfully include women and girls in all aspects of programming. In its agriculture program, which initially worked only with male farmers, for example, Sehgal Foundation now trains women farmers in coordination with Ibtada, an NGO working with women's self help groups in Rajasthan and is integrating the learning in other work locations. Community radio, Alfaz-e-Mewat, which Sehgal Foundation launched with community broadcasters in Mewat in 2012, reaches women at home, creates awareness, and invites callers on health and sanitation, agricultural practices, governance and government schemes, among other relevant topics. Sehgal Foundation has also been extensively involved in gender-related research work. Critical impact of women's participation and leadership is reflected in the foundation's good rural governance program in which women learn and disseminate awareness on good health and well being (SDG 3), monitor the quality of education in their village schools (SDG 4), facilitate clean water and sanitation in villages (SDG 6) and strive to build sustainable communities (SDG 11).

The good rural governance program trains both members of village institutions and citizen leaders. Women members of village institutions, including *panchayats* (village councils), school management committees, and village health sanitation and nutrition committees, learn about their roles and responsibilities as members of these institutions. Citizen leaders of the village community learn about their rights and entitlements under various government schemes, and how to monitor decision-making and public service delivery in their village. In this way, good rural governance generates awareness in the community to raise demands and strengthens the institutions to deliver efficiently.

To achieve this, we follow four major program strategies:

**Women's Collectives:** Select members of village institutions come together at the block level to form '*Mahila Sangathans*' (women's collectives). The *Sangathan* members receive training every month, discuss the problems of their villages, chalk out development plans, and collectively implement solutions. Those members of village institutions who cannot come up to the block level are constituted into smaller village level groups called '*Pragati Samooh*' ("progressive group") for information dissemination. The village community receives training on important government schemes/programs such as *Swachh Bharat Mission*, public distribution system, integrated child development services, midday meal, and more.

In Mewat district of Haryana, where Sehgal Foundation has been working for the past 15 years, the trainings for members of village institutions are organized separately from the trainings for the general community members. However, from learning from those experiences, the governance team has altered the model in Alwar to form village information and support groups composed of the members of village institutions as well as other key persons from the village. This model has the potential of better enabling the community members and institutional members to interact on the same platform and make collective efforts for village development.

**Micro planning with women's groups:** Micro planning is a comprehensive exercise in which the village development plan is made by the community for the community. It is a door-to-door exercise that is conducted by involving *Sangathan* members, key persons from the village, and Sehgal Foundation team members. The participants undertake a transect walk across the village, collect the history of the village, prepare social maps and resource maps, and identify the needs of the village. Using the insights from these interactions and the data collected, the participants prepare a village-specific micro plan that is submitted to the concerned government departments at the end of the extensive exercise.

**Mahila Gram Sabha:** At the end of micro planning exercise, Sehgal Foundation facilitates a *gram sabha* in the village. But before the general *gram sabha*, a *mahila gram sabha* is organized specifically for women in order to provide them a comfortable environment in which to openly express their concerns. This activity is meant to identify the problems and needs of women, prioritize the listed problems, and prepare a plan that is presented in the general *gram sabha*. In the general *gram sabha*, when the village development plan is finalized, the problems listed by the *mahila gram sabha* are incorporated.

**Life Skills Education:** The Life Skills Education program is an approach to involve adolescent girls of a village in village governance by empowering them and educating them about their rights and entitlements, improving their self esteem and

decision making ability, along with providing knowledge on health and vocational skills.

The success stories of these women include facilitation of construction of 1285 toilets across Mewat in a span of one year under *Swachh Bharat Mission*, obtaining registry of 'Below Poverty Line' (BPL) households, and support for the government immunization program *Mission Indradhanush* to successfully bring 836 children back onto the immunization schedule. Women meet annually at *Mahila Sammelans* (women's gatherings) to share and celebrate the sangathan success stories. Sehgal Foundation also facilitates interface workshops to promote linkages and synergies between district administration and the community. The success of Sehgal Foundation does not lie in providing handholding support to these women; instead, it rests in empowering them to stand for their own rights and become promoters of development in the future.

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