

WOMEN'S Leadership Schools

Empowering Indian Women

Sarah Berry talks about a pioneering initiative by S M Sehgal Foundation, Gurugram, Haryana, that empowers women in a few Indian states to become advocates of their own development, by providing them information and support and making them aware of government programmes to ensure better delivery of public services. At Women's Leadership Schools, women learn about crucial issues, such as food security, health and nutrition, their right to information, and social security programmes.

"alone cannot change the world, but I can cast a stone across the waters to create many ripples." These words by Mother Teresa hold a deep meaning, especially when it comes to the role of citizens in the governance of a country. Why is this role so important? As Mahatma Gandhi said, "Be the change you want to see in the world," it could not be a more apt answer.

In India, the role of citizens is accentuated; India is the largest

democracy in the world—for the people, by the people, and of the people. However, ensuring citizens' involvement is easier said than done. Factors, such as awareness, collaboration, and finding practical solutions to valid problems are vital.

In India, almost 70 per cent of the population inhabits rural areas, of which approximately 50 per cent are women. Poor literacy levels and sociocultural restrictions place rural women in

India, most of the time, in a position of disadvantage. How can these women be empowered if they are not aware in the first place? Most women in rural villages are not even aware of the government schemes, which, if availed, could enhance the quality of their lives as well as those of their families.

Women's Leadership Schools: Learning by Doing

One such initiative which empowers women to become advocates of their own development, by providing them information and support and making them aware of government programmes to ensure better delivery of public services, is the Women's Leadership Schools. Here, women learn about crucial issues, such as food security, health and nutrition, their right to information, and social security programmes. Women are trained to apply for and claim their entitlements and to appeal to the appropriate government official if their rights are delayed or denied.

This initiative, under the Good Rural Governance programme, started by the S M Sehgal Foundation, empowers



rural women by engaging them in these schools under the 'Sushasan Abhi' (Good Governance Now or GGN) initiative. A platform is provided for a cadre of 25–30 women leaders, in each village, who participate in a year-long training programme, which educates them about their legal/constitutional rights and entitlements, and teaches them to use the existing accountability mechanisms to avail benefits. Women's Leadership Schools promote 'learning by doing' in order to encourage and equip rural women for a meaningful participation in grassroots governance.

Metamorphosis of Women

This initiative has 'metamorphosed' these women into more aware and involved citizens. Neelam Devi, from Gopalpur village, Samastipur, Bihar, says: "I was inspired by one of the training sessions on health and nutrition as part of the Women's Leadership School, and created a small kitchen in my backyard. Within a few months, my garden had multiple



varieties of vegetables, including bitter gourd, okra (ladies' finger), ridge gourd, amaranth, and cucumber. The regular intake of these nutrient-rich vegetables has provided my family with food and nutrition security, besides helping me save money. After ensuring adequate vegetables for my family intake, I sell the surplus in the nearby market, which provides me with an additional income."

Trainees of the Women's Leadership School in Khan Mohammadpur village in Nuh district, Haryana, acted against the corrupt practices by the local ration depot holder, who was not distributing the stipulated amounts of subsidized food items as promised under the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS). The women complained about this to the *sarpanch* and the officer of the food and supply department. This alarmed the depot holder and he soon distributed wheat to approximately 1,000 beneficiary households!

One can only imagine the thrill of being liberated and empowered—liberation from ignorance and the empowerment of the self.

These success stories bring to mind Helen Keller's powerful words: "Until the great mass of people shall be filled with the sense of responsibility for each other's welfare, social justice can never be attained." And if social justice is not attained, how will a country move forward?

"Health and nutrition of women is a big concern. Women suffer from health problems primarily because of unhealthy diet patterns. Basic awareness is all that is needed for leading a healthy life. If health is absent, then the important support that the women of the house provide





to their families is absent. This is what my domain is—imparting awareness to the women of the village, especially about themselves and their health and wellbeing,” says Heena Kumari, one of the trainers under the GGN initiative.

Germination of the Idea

Vikas Jha, the director of Good Rural Governance, Sehgal Foundation, describes the journey of the initiative: “The idea of Women’s Leadership Schools germinated from a keen observation: though the participation of women in Village Leadership Schools, which was an initiative started in Mewat in 2013, was significant, the voicing of their opinion in public was minimal. This could be attributed to the dominant presence of males in the same gathering. With the concept of Women’s Leadership Schools, initiated in both Mewat, Nuh district, Haryana, and in Samastipur, Bihar, women have literally found their voice and, most importantly, are not afraid of expressing their views and suggestions.”

The Interactive Sessions: Paedagogy

Two sessions (each session lasts for two hours), are held twice a month. The ‘student–teacher’ ratio is 1:25, which facilitates active interaction. All age groups are welcome. The trainer and the trainees are all women. The sessions are lively, involving group discussions, question-and-answer sessions, and active problem-solving. So what exactly encourages women to “come out of their shells”?

Jha explains: “Women are concerned about their families. They also realize that the content of the session addresses their needs. It empowers them. Results emerge, enhancing their confidence levels. More importantly, it is not required to be literate to understand the content of these sessions. This is because the paedagogy is designed in a manner that encourages ‘learning by doing.’ The bond formed between the trainer and her group is sometimes so strong that it becomes like an extended family.”

The subjects covered include midday meals, pensions, schemes for marriages of daughters, health and nutrition, the RTI, the RTE, schemes for expecting mothers, and so on.

Women Proving their Resolve

Who says that these women cannot speak to the *sarpanch* or the collector? Many times they have proved their mettle by sorting out problems faster and more efficiently than could be imagined. “I recall an incident where a group of women had been waiting patiently for the village collector to listen to their issue. After waiting for almost an-hour-and-a-half, the collector appeared, only to quickly board his car. The women were quick to act and before he could depart, they surrounded his car, voicing their request—proper and clean water supply. Media attention was not far either. The pressure created through the entire episode ensured speedy redressal of their concern.”

Women cannot pursue high-level advocacy? That is a mere myth.

Jha adds: “In places like Bihar, where men have out-migrated, and women and children are the major populace of the village, their participation is vital. The challenges, however, are many: household chores, family pressure, lack of confidence, and so on. Once the benefits start to flow, which they do, all doubts are quashed. Amazingly, the concerned women fight all these challenges. Time helps them prove all the questions they are posed with at the beginning, wrong.” Over the past 1.5–2 years, approximately 300 women have been trained in both Samastipur and Nuh.

As Kofi Annan once said: “When women thrive, all of society benefits.” Now who would refute that! ■

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