

## **Much thought on International Women's Day**

### **Take away from a village-level women leadership school**

*By Debika Goswami*

*"I raise up my voice—not so I can shout, but so that those without a voice can be heard...we cannot succeed when half of us are held back." —Malala Yousafzai*

Rajvati and Omvati of Muhammadpur Ahir village, Tauru block, Nuh district of Haryana, raised their voices against a reluctant *gram panchayat* (village council) for making sanitation services in their village more inclusive and responsive. Inhabited by scheduled caste families, the sweeper appointed by the village council refused to clean the streets and drains. This resulted in flooding the streets with waste, which coupled with water logging posed health hazards for the residents. When informal conversations with village council members and block level officials did not yield results, these two women followed the path of formal grievance redressal mechanism and approached the Chief Minister's Window in Nuh following which, within a fortnight, the village council received orders from the Block Development Officer to clean the locality. As Rajvati sums up, *"The villagers appreciate our leadership role in resolving this issue."*

These two semi-literate women managed to gather enough courage to voice their opinions and driven by a sense of agency they successfully changed the grassroots reality concerning them. The success of these women shows how through empowerment and collective action, structural inequalities can be fought and that the notion of women empowerment that limits to only providing parity in access to opportunities and resources like education, health or other services is a myth. It is when women prioritize their own agency they are able to realize their full potential and expand their opportunities and choices.

On International Women's Day, March 8, 2018, the Governance and Policy Advocacy team of Sehgal Foundation organized sessions of Women Leadership School in districts Nuh, Samastipur, and Kolar of Haryana, Bihar, and Karnataka respectively. The aim was to provide women with a platform to share and learn, and in addition make them aware about selected issues that concern their lives, thereby encouraging relevant thought-provoking

discussions. Approximately 400 women participated in the Women Leadership School sessions across these three districts.

The discussions began with the importance of observing and celebrating International Women's Day as a commemoration of women's journey across the globe to fight for their rights. Coming back to the context of our country, discussions around women empowerment and the existing constraints in the form of gender discrimination and asymmetric power relations between men and women in a patriarchal social set up where in women stand subordinate to men came up.

First session, *Are boys and girls different?* emphasized on definition of gender as a socially constructed role, responsibility, behavior in a given culture or location. At birth, people are divided into compartments of male and female based on supposed biological differences. Our society expects 'men' and 'women' to adhere to gendered norms that associates their 'natural' sex with masculine or feminine qualities, structuring gender identities and differences.

Second session, *Are men better leaders than women?* dealt with the social conditions and restrictions that hinder the growth of leadership skills and capacities in women and deter them from playing the role of effective leaders. Discussions began from women leadership to socio-political participation of women, especially in the context of rural India. Major challenges include a general lack of confidence, ownership and agency, tokenistic participation of women political leaders in Panchayati Raj Institutions, fear to voice their opinion in front of men in forums like *gram sabha*, school management committees, and other platforms due to age-old social customs. Coupled with this is the tendency of men to look down upon women's perspectives and opinions.

Third session on *Child Marriage* identified the custom to be a social illness that hampers girls to realize their full potential by depriving them of education and skill development opportunities, which in later lives often becomes a cause of poverty. In addition, child marriage takes a toll on girls' health forcing them into early pregnancy, making them vulnerable to not only maternal mortality but also forced sexual and emotional abuse. The session also highlighted the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act enforced in 2006, which identifies child marriage as a punishable crime.

Fourth session, *Stop Violence*, threw light on the types of violence women fall prey to. This includes physical, mental, sexual violence and harassment in general. In addition, there exists the whole issue of domestic violence, which often remains unreported and unrecognized. Discussions went around the

clauses of Protection of women from Domestic Violence Act, which came into force in 2005. Information on helpline numbers, addresses of women police station, women protection officer whom they can approach in times of need shared. Besides, there was a general reflection on the basic measures that women should take personally and share with their children to prevent violence include (a) learn to say NO to violence; (b) remain alert and shout for help; (c) no gift and money from strangers; (d) learn about good touch and bad touch.

Fifth session focused on *Women Role Models* underlining not only national level role models like women ministers, sports personnel, but also village-level role models. The session tried to emphasize on the point that successful women won their battles and overcame the age-old barriers with support from families, friends, and communities.

While these sessions gave a lot of food for thought on Women's Day, the Women Leadership School sessions that continue round the year aim to create groups of confident women who would stand in solidarity with each other, fight for their own rights and attempt to live dignified lives. These sessions contribute to empower women not only on the basis of structural and relational dimensions of empowerment, but also a lot of emphasis is laid on to developing their agency in negotiating and challenging the structural inequalities and inequitable power relations existing in society.

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