

A Million Voices of Change



A report on experiences with empowering women Panchayati leaders to further women's role and participation in local governance

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Introduction

India today stands on the threshold of a democratic revolution.

The landmark bill mandating 33 percent reservation for women in Parliament has been passed by the Upper House, Rajya Sabha. It is expected to see the light of the day soon after over a decade-long struggle and feet-dragging by political parties.

What does this mean for over a million women who have been elected to our Panchayati Raj Institutions? Are we approaching a moment that promises to ignite a million dreams for making it to the Sansad Bhawan, Parliament House, and shaping destinies of the marginalised communities?

Our engagement with community women informs us that this achievement would be just the first step towards effective participation. The struggle against patriarchy and poverty will be a much harder and longer.

This narrative report and selected case studies are drawn from an inspiring collaboration between ActionAid, its partner organisations and hundreds of community actors through a project supported by the United Nations Democracy Fund (UNDEF).

Over a period of two years the intervention spread across four states – Bihar, Karnataka, West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh – had a mandate to enhance women's role and participation in local governance.

ActionAid implemented this project through its partners, Prayas Gramin Vikas Samiti in Bihar, Samarasa in Karnataka, Jagmoria Sevabrata in West Bengal, Parmarth Samaj Sevi Sansthan in Uttar Pradesh.

The engagement, as the report captures, has not only offered new insights into the social and patriarchal challenges that elected women representatives in the village councils face, but has also translated into grounding of rights and entitlements for their community.

The canvas of engagement for the women from these villages ranged from circle meetings in the village – something unimaginable for many housewives in rural households – to getting work for women under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme.

Women from some of the poorest parts of the country and most marginalised communities have recorded inspiring success in creating political space at the community and village level. They have done this in the face of challenges of traditional stereotypes and patriarchy and have emerged as effective leaders by taking charge of village councils.



Rationale

The 73rd amendments to the Indian Constitution provided 33% reservations to women in rural self-governance, which from November 2009 has been increased to 50%. But the capacity of women to step into leadership roles continues to remain limited due to patriarchy, lack of literacy and low awareness of rights. In most cases male members work on behalf of their wives, mothers and sisters.

It is in this context that the project focused its work with local governance (Panchayati Raj) through:

- Initiating the use of human rights based frameworks for rural self-governance with a special focus on gender justice.
- By addressing the community with a special focus on women to generate awareness on their roles as democratic citizens of the country.
- By engaging with political parties, to respond to the needs of women and other marginalised groups

Enabling environment for women PRIs

In the four States where the project has been implemented, the women PRIs (Panchayati Raj Institutions) formed women's groups. They held regular meetings amongst themselves and with self-help groups and other associations. These village-level alliances have helped transform many elected women from frightened, uncertain individuals to articulate speakers.

Their trainings also outlined the nature of patriarchal system and how it subverts women's attempts to get into the mainstream as a part of a larger overview of society. They have also gained a deeper understanding on the rights and responsibilities of an elected member and on the better functioning of a Panchayat. This multi-pronged approach to training along with exposure visits to other States to see how a Panchayat should function better was valuable in:

- increasing the numbers of women who began attending Panchayat executive meetings
- speaking on issues suggested by Reflect Circle women and the community

The trainings on social auditing and micro-planning with particular focus on gender budgeting were crucial for women to monitor and demand greater transparency on national flagship schemes such as National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) and Public Distribution System (PDS).

The local NGO in each State made contact with local Govt. officials, sharing with them case studies to highlight the loopholes in functioning of Govt programmes and discussed how to address them. This collaboration on key issues further strengthens elected women's ability to be effective through their network.



Accessing rights and Government entitlements

Marginalised men and women across India are largely unaware of their rights and entitlements making it possible for officials at grassroots to get away with gross corruptions at all levels.

Village meetings (Gram Sabhas) are mandatory twice a year in all Gram Panchayats to bring issues of governance and implementation of development schemes to the village but are rarely held. The Panchayat Head therefore becomes more or less unaccountable to those he/she has been elected by.

In the four States where this project is being implemented the first year focused on building the capacity of elected women representatives and REFLECT Circles. More than seventy per cent of these women come from disadvantaged communities with little or no literacy. Women of upper-caste backgrounds have been negligible both in REFLECT circles and as active elected representatives.

REFLECT is a participatory methodology pioneered by ActionAid Internationally to bring poor and marginalized people together to raise their voice on issues concerning their lives. Based on the concept of the Brazilian educationist Paulo Friere it is an acronym which underlines **Literacy** through **Empowering** and **Community Techniques**.

REFLECT circles of community women have been formed to bring together the most marginalized from the community who then through regular weekly meetings pin-point issues, bringing them to the attention of elected women representatives as well as galvanizing the larger community to come together to demand their rights.

In 2009, in the second year of the UNDEF project the two above groups worked together to ensure that a minimum of two Village/Panchayat meetings (Gram Sabhas) were held.

A minimum of forty to two-hundred attended these meetings, bringing up a range of issues impacting the poorest, in the presence of the Panchayat Secretary and the Block Development Officer.

Key complaints in all four States were related to the flagship national common minimum programme, launched by the government - National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGA). Under this scheme any person willing to do physical labour has the right to 100 days of work a year.

However, where work was being given at all it was often at much lower rates. The subsidised Public Distribution System (PDS) was also either not giving them their entitlement of rations or at much higher rates. Other issues of mismanagement and corruption were the non-implementation of mid-day meal schemes for children in schools, teachers who did not teach but merely picked up their monthly salary, the absence of the Auxiliary Nurse and Midwife at the govt. run health centre when women were delivering their babies and other aspects related to integrated child development scheme.



In all the States a separate 'women only village meeting' (Mahila Gram Sabha) were held to ensure greater participation of women. In both of these meetings as well as within reflect circles women are increasingly voicing concern and finding solutions for specific problems that concern them, such as health, the lack of toilets, the lack of schools, problems with the integrated child development scheme, domestic violence especially caused by the mushrooming of illicit liquor shops in villages. In West Bengal issues of early child marriage and desertion have been of particular concern.

Social audits and public hearings carried out in the four Districts of the project further highlighted the levels of corruption in Govt. Housing schemes and began a process of redress.

Below are some instances of REFLECT Circle and EWR interventions:

Twenty new staff has been hired by the District Collector to oversee better functioning of NREGA within five sub-Districts including the UNDEF project District in Karnataka, after members of REFLECT Circles highlighted the mal-functioning system.

In village Itaha Salempur, Jalaun District, Reflect Circle women raised their voice against the unequal pay for men and women under the NREGA – men were getting Rs60 while women Rs50, though in fact both were entitled to Rs100.

The women also informed the District Magistrate at a Block level meeting. He immediately informed the head of NREGA that all wages must be paid in full. Also since this incident some frail women are now being given lighter work such as in the crèche or the primary health clinic 9km away on the urging of REFLECT Circle women.

In the villages of Murlipur, Barikapura and Jantapur in Gram Panchayat Kota Mustikal, in Jalaun District REFLECT Circle women have come together and succeeded in getting employment for 200 women under the NREGA scheme.

In Bidar District of Karnataka, of the 18 PDS shops in the project villages only three were functioning properly. The people in these areas too were unaware of what the rate of sale and hours of opening were. All rations were given with a surcharge of 10 rupees as the shop owner said the transportation charges had to be included. The REFLECT Circle women asked the ration shop-owners to put this 'fact' on paper and sign it.

Additionally, the local people were informed of the actual rates. This was done in conjunction with the male head of the Panchayat, who, according to the community, had until then been a beneficiary of the ration shop-owner's corruption. Seeing the collective action of the women however he had no choice but to change his ways.

In Jalaun District of UP, REFLECT Circle women have formed vigilance committees to monitor mid-day meals in primary schools. Now quality and healthy meals are being served in several Villages of the project area.



Another issue of corruption in the same area of Jalaun District relate to the Auxillary Nurse and Midwife whose salary is RS. 1200 per month. The Head of the Panchayat regularly demanded for 200 rupees for releasing the salary. On further investigation this was found to be the case with several schemes in which women are the beneficiaries including the Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) scheme. In both cases the doctor was informed and the corruption was brought to an end.

Advocacy and Alliance Building

At a country-wide level poor women have rarely left the village and at best have gone as far as the local 'large' town giving them little exposure to the active role women can play in governance.

In this project three National level meetings through the two years were held to share experiences, anecdotes and strategise on how to bring further and faster results in the women's local areas. These along with four exposure visits of five elected women representatives to other States to meet elected women and see them in action were invaluable in exposing and widening mindsets.

At least one Block-level and one District-level network was formed in all the Project States except in West Bengal. The UP forum is now a registered body known as 'Mahila Pradhan' Federation. At least fifty per cent (in UP 100%) of the members for these networks come from the Project areas reflecting the impact of UNDEF project.

These networks have raised issues such as how to prepare for Gram Panchayat elections, what are the rules of proper functioning for these bodies and other procedural issues related to transparency.

Intra-District and inter-District level networks and alliances have also been built and consolidated alliances as have the Mahila Gram Sabha's through the two years.

The partnerships between REFLECT circles and elected representatives in the first instance and the community thereafter have been a strong catalyst to change. As a result there has been a fifty per cent increase in employment through NREGA and similar percentage increase in access to Govt. subsidy schemes meant for the poor.

Challenges

In all four States the biggest constraint has been the mind-set of men, both within the family and at the official level holding posts at the village, Block or District levels.

While 50% reservations for women at local levels has become a reality in India, women remain primarily proxies used to sign cheques and stamps official letters. Nevertheless the extent of non-recognition - of women to take part - in the governance process varies from State to State, and even district to district. For instance in both UP and Bihar where the poverty is greatest and literacy levels lowest, men are both more hostile to women's entry into politics and fewer women leaders are readily available to become facilitators or active elected women representatives.



In the State of Karnataka where systems of governance function better relative to UP and Bihar and there is greater education amongst women, less time was needed for basic awareness raising and more time could be spent fighting for issues relevant to women.

In the Purulia District in the State of West Bengal, armed insurgents (Maoists) have been fighting the State for decades. While the rise and fall of tensions between the State and insurgents has become a way of life for local people, regular strikes called by the Maoist for as many as ten days of each month force local people to stay at home impacting their jobs, agricultural activities and businesses. In this environment it has been hard for the women of REFLECT Circles as well as EWR to both meet and build networks.

Additionally, the local police believing these women to be Maoists (as Maoists often let them move freely while threatening shop-keepers and other businesses daring to ignore the strike call) often harass and even jail briefly the REFLECT facilitators. Local panchayat elections held in the month of May 2008 delayed the project in two ways: one as no work could take place at that time and second, newly elected women representatives emerged from the new elections and had to be trained again. Also the national elections held in April/May 2009 have been a contributory factor. Therefore approximately fifty percent of the work has been possible in this State/District.







Stories, Anecdotes, Good Practices

The NGO's working in the four project states all mention that when they first went to meet the elected representatives in these villages, asking for them by name, no one seemed to know who they were. It was only when their father or husband's name was given that the neighbourhood recognised them despite their having won an election.

The formation of REFLECT Circles has been key to the active participation of women at the community level. Not only has becoming a member of these circles with the collective support of a 'sisterhood' empowered and transformed many of their lives but it has been the bed-rock promoting the cause of women in grass-roots politics and the need for women elected representatives. It is through their knowledge and articulation of women's issues that the Project Districts have created new vigilance groups and added a new dimension to rural governance.

Case Study 1:

Location: Panchayat Chilbili, Block Phulwarishariff, District Patna, Bihar

Sita Devi at just 42 years of age is the mother of six - four step-children and two of her own - having been married off to a much older man when she was just nineteen. She recently became a widow when her husband died. Yet notwithstanding her burdens she was keen to become an elected leader of her village.

She lost the first time she stood as a candidate but once 50% reservations were instituted in 2005, she won and since then there has been no looking back. As the head of her Panchayat the first year was daunting, trying to understand the ropes of local governance and find the courage to speak at meetings but her fortuitous partnership with the NGO Prayas Gram Vikas Samiti has helped her make enormous strides in both these areas.

She has, through a series of trainings and exposure visits become much more knowledgeable about how the system functions, a better administrator and a self-confident leader of the community.

But what really marks her out are the many successes she had in getting a proper road built between Nathupur –sirapar, languishing for twenty-five years. This had been unpaved and water logged for most of the year causing great inconvenience to the villagers. Sita was able to organize a 'transact walk' through the village, talking to people, persuading them to join this cause. She even managed to hold a Gram Sabha (public village-level meeting) at which she was able to get the order passed. The road is at last built and finally there is no water logging after 25 years.

Another transact walk covering villages Nathupur – paithani, Saichak, Makhdumpur and Hasanpura further broke the communication barrier between herself (the head of the Panchayat) and the people. Many complained of the illegal liquor manufacturing which in turn disturbed the peace of the area. On behest of the people Sunita Devi invited a Gram Sabha and for the first time even the police willingly and openly sided with the Panchayat leader and community and the liquor manufacturing was banned.



She has also been successful in getting a common room and a women's toilet constructed in the block office. If just one stint, now coming to an end as an elected Panchayat head can produce these and many more successes, what transformations might be possible with a second term?

Case Study 2

Ruby Kumari, Member, REFLECT Circle, Gonpura , Block : Phulwarisharif,

District : Patna, Bihar

Married at the age of sixteen Ruby has three children. Her husband is a habitual abuser who used to beat her at any pretext, refusing to give her money to buy food or allow her to work.

Domestic violence is a serious issue which in effect has social sanction ensuring that women usually get little or no support. Seeing Ruby's domestic situation the staff of Prayas encouraged Ruby to be part of the village REFLECT circle and quickly recognizing her potential made her a facilitator in the village. This inclusion in a group was transformative for Ruby.

She started interacting with the women and sharing her experiences with them. The first exposure visit followed by a meeting in Patna further opened the world to Ruby. Persuading an unwilling husband to let her go was hard but harder still was the accusations, on return that she was having an affair. Yet none of this deterred an emboldened Ruby now fiercely fighting back when being abused by her husband.

When pregnant for the fourth time she wanted to have an abortion. Her husband was against it. Yet his violence did not deter her from both stealing the money from him and getting an abortion. 'Joining the Circle has helped me enormously. This sister, that sister, their support has given me courage and where once my husband used to beat me every day he does so now some times.' Says Ruby with a smile.

Case Study 3:

Village Hokrana K, Gram Panchayat Barur, District Bidar, Karnataka.

The borewell in the village in Hokrana had been out of use for the last fifteen days making it very difficult for women to get water for their daily needs. Their repeated appeals to the Gram Panchayat Secretary and other officials did not yield results. The REFLECT Circle members decided to bring the President and the Secretary to their village by taking three elected Gram Panchayat members from their own village and locking them up together.

They then called the President and Secretary telling them what they had done. When the two officials came rushing to the village, they took them first to see the non-functioning borewell. Needless to say the borewell was immediately repaired.



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Case Study 4:

Shefali, Village Lewagara, District Manbazaar1, West Bengal

When Shefali was elected in 2008, she, like so many others around the country did nothing, compounding the prejudice that women are incapable of being effective elected representatives. But then a small incident, where members from outside the local Panchayat attending the public meeting asked her how often she got an opportunity to make decisions and on what issues.

She, to the disapproval of the local Panchayat body said truthfully that she neither knew the kind of issues effecting the people nor were any pending decisions discussed with her. The NGO Jamgoria Sevabrata swung into action.

With support from REFLECT Circles in the area she created an awareness camp where people from 30 self-help groups were invited. Much came out about the corruption regarding the integrated child development scheme (ICDS) in front of the Child Dev Project Officer and his team in charge of the scheme. These men promised things would change.

Since then she has led several meetings of elected women to find solutions for issues like desertion, a particularly potent issue in this area of India. Testimonies were heard, advice given on maintenance and other entitlements...and since then twelve elected representatives have been working with the effected people to sort out legal aid.

The Block District Officer has not only been appreciative of this work but also pointed out that this kind of meeting and dissemination of information was necessary at all Gram Panchayat levels.

NREGA and child marriages have been other issues she has taken up for awareness along with the Reflect Circle members with further encouragement from the Block District Officer.



Case Study 5:

Meera, village Salempur, Block Kuthond, District Jalaun – Uttar Pradesh

Meera Devi may be illiterate but is very keen that her four children learn to read and write. So she insists on their going to school and herself joined a REFLECT circle where she is learning to write her name. She also encourages her children to teach her at home and has made remarkable progress. Through the REFLECT circle she has also learnt much about her entitlements including the rates at which subsidised food and kerosene should be given to the poor.

For instance she learnt that the ration shop was charging her husband Ramkesh RS100 rather than at the official rate of Rs90. She realised that he had been getting rich on other people's hard earned money, charging every family an extra Rs10. She told her husband this time to insist on paying only Rs 90 for the rations. When her husband gave the ration shop-owner only Rs 90 however, he was furious. Ramkesh kept his peace suggesting that he was happy to pay the RS 100 but wanted a receipt, as his wife had suggested. It was the end of the ration shop-owners wrath as he knew he would be caught for corruption. Meera has now told everyone this strategy for getting rations at the right rate rather than being fleeced.

Case Study 6:

Village Tajlapur, GP Astur in Karnataka

Members of the REFLECT Circles gave an application for work under NREGA but got no response. fifteen days later they sent a letter to the Panchayat Head for unemployment benefit. Then, having still received no response, another application was sent to the Zilla Panchayat in the form of a complaint that no unemployment benefit had been received.

Finally after discussions with REFLECT Circle members a letter was sent to all the key functionaries of the District government. Five REFLECT members also went to meet The Director of NREGA in the Capital of the State, Bangalore in Aug 2009. Alongside the District Collector too was approached who then called all the NGO's together to discuss the issues that had been thrown up and how to improve the system.

Since then a scheme has been imposed whereby one NGO partners with one panchayat to ensure the effective working of NREGA. In Oct 2009 staff was chosen – 5 members from one sub-district (taluk). This has meant 25 new staff has been chosen to oversee the more effective functioning of the NREGA scheme. In addition one technical person from one GP (approx six villages) has been put in charge to log and computerize the details so that records are kept up to date. This scheme has been instituted in five Sub-districts of the project.





Action Aid works with marginal men and women at grass roots using the concept of REFLECT Circles. These circle members are representatives from the community slowly forged to become second and third tier leadership over the years. This concept has benefited the UNDEF project enormously as it has provided a strong base of support for both elected representatives and the community to lean on.

In some villages where particularly sensitive subjects are being tackled, where fingers may be pointed, the local facilitator will take a back-seat, letting another from a nearby village lead the discussions and appear to be in charge. This is to ensure that the delicate inter-personal relationships within small communities do not get jeopardized.

Though REFLECT was used in all the project areas, to illustrate its functioning and day-to-day negotiation one can look at Bihar's project areas as an example.

REFLECT in UNDEF Projects in Bihar

In the six Panchayats of the project, Dalit hamlets were first identified by the facilitators. They started first with women to break the ice and understand their specific needs and problems. After the confidence building process selection criteria for the circle were decided. Women had to be aged between 18-50 years, married, to ensure long term involvement in the circle. A circle has about 30 members each and it sits for two days every week.

After the selection process was the meeting to explain the importance of sitting together and collective action to solve the problems of the community. The Coordinator of the project also had a one-day meeting in each circle to explain the processes of REFLECT and the probable results. Maximum time was spent on forming the group and building rapport with the women.

There was protest from husbands who insisted on food being served to them only when the circle meeting was being held. There were taunts and comments that discouraged the women. Some drunken men purposely came and harassed the women. There was lack of confidence in the women themselves who did not believe that they could achieve some results. The priorities in the lives of the women had to be reset.

The Circle meets for two hours every day at the place and time decided by the members. PRA tools and games are used to identify and analyze the social problems. Maps have been created by the members on the social structure of the village, resources, health, health seasonal maps, health treatment maps, chapatti diagrams to show availability and access to resources, livelihood maps work load maps etc.

The maps were created around the topic of discussion and issues thrashed out. After analysis of the whole situation probable 'samajik sambhav kriya' (socially possible action) is thought of and then collectively a decision is then taken on solution and strategy formed to reach the goal. The approach is of and not always of confrontation. The group makes a strategy and action plan for handling the particular issue. Job responsibilities are also decided according to the capability and temperament of the members.



In project period the Circles have been able to address the issues of regular teaching in schools, quality of mid-day meals in school, services at anganwadi centers, functioning of health centers and construction of Indira awas, drains and brick soling in villages. Reflect Circle has also become a forum for addressing issues like alcoholism and domestic violence. The very obvious change in the lives of the circle member is their own personal health and hygiene.

Each member comes with her hair neatly combed and wearing clean sarees. The personal confidence in their speech and behaviour is also striking.

The children of all the REFLECT members go to school. After joining the circle they are ensuring that at least their daughters do not marry before 18 years of age. Planned family has become a mantra among them as mothers educate the daughters about the methods of contraception.

The success of REFLECT circles is not uniform all over. There is a variation depending on the social structure of the village, members and also the facilitator. Wherever the domination of upper castes was excessive the circles are still a little weak and are working on methods and strategies to go around it but in some other places it has been a roaring success with the circle women being involved in all the development works in the village.

A number of potential leaders have emerged who are being projected as future mukhiyas by the community.



Challenges:

The making and functioning of Reflect circles with Dalit women was full of challenges. The first and foremost challenge was convincing the women themselves. The initial experience of the facilitators was discouraging as the women threatened them to beat them up if they entered the village.

Lalti, one of the most active and vocal members was also most aggressive in the initial phase. With patience and perseverance this barrier was broken. After the first initiation the wall broke down for ever.

The next challenge was from the family. Husbands and other male members mocked and ridiculed the women. They purposely heckled them at the time of meeting. Some drunkards would create a nuisance around. The collective strength of the group could overcome this problem too.

The third problem was from the upper caste landlords. The collective action made them insecure and some political parties also tried to create a dissonance in the society. Converting the community from grant mode to right mode was also a challenge before the organization. Success of the circle created new enemies for the women. They had to rub the government system on the wrong end and this friction created tensions.

To diffuse some of the problems a change in strategy was done to include the husbands in the gender training program and familiarize them with the purpose and processes of Reflect.

This move bore result and acceptance of the circle and its activities increased in the area. New leadership has emerged in the village in form of the volunteers who support in running the circles. Potential EWRs have been identified among them who are consciously working towards the next elections. 'Rights ko lene ka social tareeka samajhne lagi hain.'



Impact of the project

This project has ably shown that empowering poor women can bring major systems change in rural government functioning because:

There are a number of Govt schemes and benefits especially created for the poorest which never get to them. When however this group becomes aware of and demands these rights accountability and infrastructural changes follow. A corollary to this is the fact that collective action on the smallest issue both empowers the marginalized and can often deliver results quickly. eg. In the project areas greater transparency in Govt. Schemes such as NREGA, PDS, has come into being as women and men have begun airing their views and demanding their rights.

Cheap liquor shops have provided a flourishing business in most villages but within the project areas many of these have been forced to close as women have objected to them on the grounds that men get drunk, beat their wives and become a public nuisance.

In the State of Karnataka, EWR came to know that all elected representatives are entitled to Rs250, (less than five dollars) a month, a fact kept to himself by the Head of the Panchayat but was greatly appreciated when made available to all. Another example is when women in West Bengal discovered that they were entitled to a pension and began fighting for their rights.

the trigger has been greater awareness and self-confidence amongst women EWR's and REFLECT Circle members to take active part in the governance process. Partnering with Action Aid which in turn has had a long association with grassroots NGO's in the four States meant the impact of work/training has been applied to a wide range of issues in their lives rather than remaining a concept. The sustained interactions of the NGO's to embolden and strengthen local women in these areas and push forward ideas and activities, has been crucial. Without it, at this early stage the same kind of impact could not have been possible.

There is therefore in the short span, a recognition within the communities of these project areas that women can be good leaders/EWR, that they can bring better governance to rural areas, both within the family and in the panchayat offices.

(Images: Firoz/ActionAid)



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