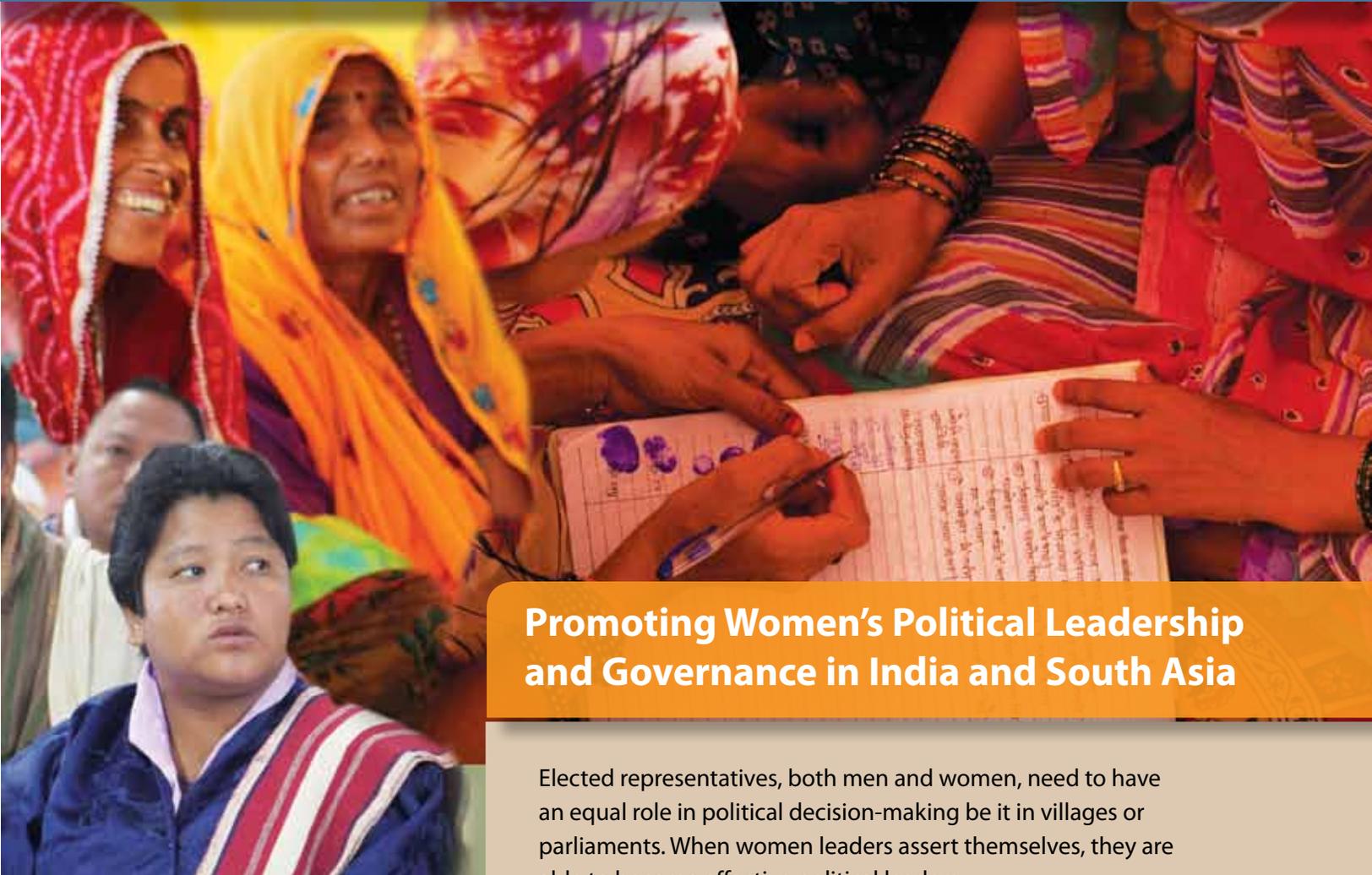


The Changemakers



Promoting Women's Political Leadership and Governance in India and South Asia

Elected representatives, both men and women, need to have an equal role in political decision-making be it in villages or parliaments. When women leaders assert themselves, they are able to become effective political leaders.

UN Women, along with the Government of India, works to strengthen the leadership skills and confidence of 65000 elected women representatives in *gram panchayats* (village councils bodies) and half a million women through gram sabhas (public meetings) so they can make decisions and become stronger leaders.

South Asia

Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal and Pakistan

India

Andhra Pradesh
(Mahabubnagar,
Srikakulam & Vizianagaram)

Karnataka (Dharwad,
Mysore & Uttara Kannada)

Madhya Pradesh
(Jhabua, Sagar & Sehore)

Odisha (Dhenkanal,
Gajapati, Sambalpur &
Bhadrak)

Rajasthan (Alwar,
Dungarpur & Tonk)



United Nations Entity for Gender Equality
and the Empowerment of Women

“ We should not only focus on what women can do for *panchayats*, but also on what the *panchayats* can do for women. ”

– Anne F. Stenhammer
Regional Programme Director
UN Women South Asia

Strategies

RESEARCH: Advocate for policy changes and legal reform

TRAINING: Build skills and knowledge of elected women representatives

CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE: Ensure and maintain high standards of training

Donor

The Royal Government of Norway

Budget

INR 50 crores (2009 - 2012)

Partners

National Institute of Rural Development; State Institutes of Rural Development; *Panchayati Raj* Departments; Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration; The Hunger Project; The International Centre for Research on Women; National Commission for Women and Children, Royal Government of Bhutan; UNDP Bhutan; United Nations Resident Coordinator in Bhutan; Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research (NIBR).

Why Women’s Participation is Important?

In South Asia only 7 per cent of women are members of political parties.

Representation of women leaders is low across South Asia – Bangladesh (18.5 per cent in the 2008 Parliament); Bhutan (8.5 per cent in the National Assembly); Sri Lanka (5.3 per cent in the Parliament).

Women’s representation in parliament stands between 3 per cent to 34 per cent across countries in South Asia.

Nepal’s 2007 Interim Constitution ruled that women must constitute at least 33 per cent of the candidates in parliamentary elections. It is currently the only country in the region that has reached the 30% critical mass threshold for women in parliament.

(Sources: World Development Report 2011, World Bank; Progress of the World’s Women 2011-12, UN Women; Country Review of Women’s Political Participation 2011, UN Women & ICRW)





India's Elected Leaders: Why They Need Support

To promote people's participation in planning and the delivery of public services, India created local self-governments or *Panchayati Raj Institutions* (PRIs) in 1993. This was brought forth with the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Indian Constitution. Since then, *gram panchayats* or village councils became the foundation stone of village life and devolved power to *panchayats*. They have helped to bring about the world's largest experiment in village democracy.

The Constitution also provided for one-third reservation for women. As a result, more than a million women have been elected to office thus far. Today women occupy more than 42 per cent of seats in local bodies – a number that exceeds the quota and demonstrates a strong desire to participate. In India, 14 states have passed legislation reserving at least 50 per cent seats for women.

Challenges persist that restrict women from running for office and exercising their rights as elected leaders. They now need support to influence decision-making in *panchayat* meetings. UN Women hopes that with the needed training, skills and confidence, women leaders will be able to carve their paths and lead the way.

Political Support

The Union and State Governments have provided unconditional support for the programme. India's Honourable Minister of *Panchayati Raj* and Tribal Affairs, Shri V. Kishore Chandra Deo has commended the joint Government of India-UN Women programme. "Changes can be brought about effectively and equitably at this basic (*gram panchayat*) level," he said at a consultation for the programme. "As far as I know, few projects have put such emphasis. I am happy that the Government of India and UN Women have positioned the issue at the right level." The Minister urged the "need to ensure that women can play an effective role as leaders without facing discrimination or violence".

“ Changes can
be brought about
effectively and
equitably at this
basic level ”

– Shri V. Kishore Chandra Deo
Honourable Minister of *Panchayati
Raj and Tribal Affairs*
Government of India



Standing Tall & Proud: Rajkala Devi

Rajkala Devi is a determined lady. She has made a place in the political arena in her village, one that was largely dominated by men for the last 60 years. Today, she stands tall as the first-ever woman *Sarpanch* (elected head of village council) of Hingwahera *Gram Panchayat* (village council) in Alwar district of Rajasthan. She is admired and respected by one and all.

Rajkala Devi focuses on addressing critical issues such as pensions for old people and widows as well as education for girls. Soon after she came to power, Rajkala ensured that poor families got Below Poverty Line cards. Besides her participation in the village and block level *panchayat* meetings, Rajkala takes education very seriously. She frequently visits the Anganwadi Centres (centres to combat child hunger and malnutrition) to ensure that children get proper meals and that there are adequate teachers.

Leadership training workshops held through UN Women's programme have clearly helped her evolve as a leader. She uses her leadership skills and position to encourage other women to voice their problems and take active part in the *gram sabhas* (public village meetings).

Collective action and support from other women has also meant a lot to Rajkala. *Mahila jagruk manches* (women's awareness platforms), formed by UN Women and The Hunger Project, bring together women citizens and other women members of the *panchayat*. Rajkala gets much needed assistance from these Manches where women discuss and find solutions to important issues such as alcoholism.

During the meetings, women leaders also regularly update Rajkala with the needs of the villagers and help her prioritize work. With support from her *ward* members, Rajkala confidently takes issues forward to the district authorities for action. "Though I am learning to articulate our needs to the district level functionaries, I am very sure of my priorities. I want to focus on roads, pensions, benefits for poor families and education," says Rajkala Devi.

“ My focus is on girls' education. I really believe that a village can only be progressive if its girls are educated. ”

– Rajkala Devi
Sarpanch, Hingwahera Gram Panchayat
Alwar district, Rajasthan



I Stand Committed: **Badam Devi**

Badam Devi has challenged many stereotypes and myths. Earlier, she was a leader in the fields where she was an agricultural labourer and reared cattle. Today, as the *Sarpanch* (elected head of village council) of Lahora *Gram Panchayat* (village council) in Rajasthan's Tonk district, she guides the community with her political acumen. Even though she never went to school herself, she understands the value of education for boys and girls. "If I were educated enough, I would have accomplished a lot more," she explains. Badam Devi, with support from her *ward* members, now regularly checks that schools in her village have teachers and that children get mid-day meals.

She monitors smooth access to government schemes on health, education, sanitation and nutrition. In a short span of one year as *Sarpanch*, she has learnt to identify and address issues of public importance. It took time, but through the trainings organized by UN Women with the State Government of Rajasthan and The Hunger Project, she has learnt the procedural intricacies of government schemes on health and education.

Progress

BETTER PARTICIPATION AND SUPPORT

315 *Mahila Jagruk Manches* (women's awareness platforms) have been formed with elected women representatives from 635 *gram panchayats* in Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Karnataka and Rajasthan.

Almost 13,000 elected women representatives and over 47,000 women citizens have participated in these *Manches*.

This experience has shown that discussion with other women citizens provides much-needed support and helps women leaders in prioritizing issues and taking important decisions.



My New Found Identity: **Sunita Rajawat**

Through the *Mahila Jagruk Manch*, young and energetic **Sunita Rajawat** transformed her identity from a housewife to a public speaker urging other women to help their community. "Initially I was a woman confined to the household, but I have now stepped out of that threshold. I can now speak out my mind, express my views and do something worthwhile," says Sunita Rajawat.

A *Ward Panch* (member of the village council) from *Vanasthali Gram Panchayat* (village council) in Rajasthan's Tonk district, her innate quality of leadership is manifest in the bold steps she takes in campaigning against domestic violence and for women's financial independence.

Progress

FILING NOMINATIONS

In Bihar and Odisha, SWEEP* campaigns helped women candidates file nominations and manage electoral campaigns in *panchayat* elections.

MARKED INCREASE IN CANDIDATES

During the *panchayat* elections in Bihar, there was a marked increase in the number of women canvassing during elections. More women contested from general seats, and not just those reserved for them.

*SWEEP – Strengthening Women's Empowerment through Electoral Processes



I Dream of an Ideal **Village: Indrani Chaurasia**

A born dreamer and an energetic social worker, 45-year-old **Indrani Chaurasia** dreams of making her village an 'ideal one'. As an Elected *Ward Member* of *Samaspur Gram Panchayat* (village council) from Muzaffarpur in Bihar, Indrani is

devoting all her energy to fulfilling her dream. Her active association with women Self Help Groups and *Mahila Pratinidhi Sangathan* (organisation of women's representatives), as part of the UN Women Programme, has increased her capacity and skills for the development of her village.

Standing Up to Violence: Manjulata Sahoo

Manjulata Sahoo does not know the word 'governance' or 'political participation'. But her story exemplifies the true meaning of what a woman leader can do.

As an elected women's representative from the Nadhara *Gram Panchayat* (village council) in the Dhenkanal district of Odisha, Manjulata has ensured that more than 100 old and disabled people in her village got pensions. Her efforts have meant that 25 poor people including widows got free housing. Three tube-wells provide drinking water to villagers, school children and young infants in the anganwadi centers.

When Manjulata tried to stop corruption in her village, she was severely beaten up. "I noticed that my *ward* member had wrongly allocated a house to herself. I protested and wrote to district officials. As a result, the house now has been allocated to a young widow," she explains. Despite her injuries, she will stand for the next *panchayat* elections.

People believe that Manjulata is as capable as any male *panchayat* leader. "Earlier women did not come out, but now seeing Manjulata, they come to meetings and express their views. They have become a part of the development process here," says Mayadhar Behera, President, Village Committee, Nadhara.

Manjulata says she got the courage to keep working from the trainings organized by UN Women with The Hunger Project and PIPFAR, a local Non-Governmental Organisation. "At these trainings, I got the confidence to deal with these challenges. I got tremendous support from the team, and they urged me to continue working despite all my problems," says Manjulata.



“ At these trainings, I got the confidence to deal with these challenges. I got tremendous support from the team, and they urged me to continue working despite all my problems ”

**– Manjulata Sahoo
Sarpanch, Nadhara Gram Panchayat
Dhenkanal District, Odisha**



UN Agencies Come Together to Empower Elected Women Leaders

UN Women, UNDP and UNICEF in India are working together to empower women political leaders. As a first of its kind, the partnership enables the UN agencies to combine resources at all levels. To improve training for elected women representatives across 13 states in India, the United Nations will develop a common capacity development strategy with a training plan, training resources and modules. Common deliverables, partners and locations will make programmes more effective.

A *Gram Panchayat* is the village council that looks after the economic and social development of the village. The members are elected for five years. They draw up village plans, monitor funds allocated to them and resolve disputes. The *Gram Panchayat* forms the foundation of the local self-government in India.

A *Sarpanch* is the elected head of the village council, elected for a period of five years. A *Sarpanch* presides over the meetings of the *Gram Panchayat*, supervises its work and also implements the development schemes of the village.

A *Gram Sabha* is the fundamental unit of local democracy in India. It is a village meeting in which all adult residents of the village take part to discuss important issues.

Progress

RESEARCH

Research in Bhutan and India gauges the status of women's participation in politics.

UN Women and the Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research (NIBR) will develop a Gender Responsive Index, to rate South Asian countries according to the participation of women in politics and governance.

STATE LEVEL AGREEMENTS

UN Women has signed agreements with State Governments in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha and Rajasthan to ensure that at least 100 *gram sabhas* (public village meetings) are held in each district, with substantive discussions and decisions on gender. So far 247 *gram sabhas* and 420 *mahila sabhas* have helped women discuss issues related to health, water and livelihoods.



United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women

Send your queries to suraj.kumar@unwomen.org. Read more at <http://www.unwomensouthasia.org>

Copyright © UN Women, January 2012. All rights reserved. Manufactured in India. Photos © Anindit Roy-Chowdhury/ Ashutosh Negi/ Gaganjit Singh Chandok/ Gurpreet Singh/ Sabrina Sidhu/ UN Women design@banyantreedesigns.com