

WHY WOMEN ARE THE GAME-CHANGERS IN LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

Relevant for: Indian Polity | Topic: Devolution of Powers & Finances up to Local Levels and Challenges therein - Panchayats & Municipalities

Women panchayat heads of over 150 panchayats at an interaction organised by Collector K. Shanthy in Dharmapuri, Tamil Nadu on August 12, 2022. | Photo Credit: N. Bashkaran

After the tremendous surge of participation by Indian women in the freedom movement, it was after the 73rd Constitution Amendment in 1992 that women returned into the local political sphere in large numbers. The 73rd Amendment provided for a minimum of 33% reservation for women in local governments. In a remarkable affirmation of women's role in local democracy, many States have over the years increased this to 50%. Furthermore, reservations for the post of president and vice president of panchayats have also made it possible for women to take on leadership roles. Today, over a million women across India are elected members of around 2.6 lakh gram panchayats in the country.

In the online Hindi series *Panchayat* set in Phulera, a fictional gram panchayat somewhere in Uttar Pradesh, four men are shown carrying out basic local governance functions – installing toilets, fixing street lights, and painting family planning messages on the walls. Life in Phulera is quiet, unhurried, and seemingly untouched by larger problems – until it is not.

At the beginning of the series, we are introduced to the Pradhan, head of the panchayat's elected body. Later we discover that according to the reservation for the panchayat, his wife is, in fact, the elected head. While Manju Devi (played by Neena Gupta) stays at home, her husband Brij Bhushan (played by Raghubir Yadav) struts around the village behaving as if he is the elected Pradhan. He chairs the panchayat meetings and takes all decisions. For all practical purposes, he is the Pradhan. But at the end of the first season, there is a clear rebuke to the husband for taking over his wife's democratically assigned role.

I thought of this episode when I read recently about some men [in parts of Madhya Pradesh](#) who took oath as panchayat members even though their wives or other women family members had contested and won the elections. Rightly, this was criticised as undemocratic and wrong. But the interference of male family members in the leadership roles of women in panchayats does not come as a surprise. Often, where the post of panchayat president is reserved for women, the contestants are the wives, daughters or other family members of locally dominant male leaders. They are regarded as proxies for the male leaders. In some places, there has even been a term for this – *Pradhan-Pati*, or Pradhan-husband. No power is ceded without a struggle.

When Esther Duflo ('Women as Policy Makers: Evidence from a Randomized Policy Experiment in India' with Raghavendra Chattopadhyay, *Econometrica*, September 2004) and other researchers started studying the impact of reservations for women in local governments, they found that women leaders were initially regarded as puppets and proxies. And yet, their studies showed, the women worked silently, below the radar; and the outcomes they delivered were different from those delivered by male leaders. Overall, panchayats reserved for women leaders delivered more public goods, of equal or better quality than those in non-reserved panchayats. Moreover, the women were less corrupt than their male counterparts. Strangely, perceptions did not seem to reflect this: residents of panchayats headed by women reported less satisfaction.

The participation of women in local democracy has an undeniable impact on developmental

outcomes. Admittedly, a seat at the table may not always guarantee the ability to speak out, or to influence decisions. Yet, there is an undeniable message even in being present. Where there are reservations for women leaders, there has been a positive impact especially for women and girls, from schooling to livelihoods. Further, women gain valuable experience and skills, and begin to be regarded as organisers and leaders. Young girls see them as role models.

During the training for newly elected panchayat members last year, one woman who was a three-term panchayat member from a north Karnataka district spoke about the role of women in local governance. “Men focus mainly on physical works: roads, drains, construction,” she said. “We women go from lane to lane, and house to house, interacting with families, asking about their everyday problems. We can keep an eye on how the anganwadi (rural child care centre) is functioning; the size and freshness of eggs. Whether children are coming regularly to school. Whether there is something we need to do for children in our panchayat.”

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Women members in panchayats can bring a special understanding of the struggles of other women. This helps them respond better. When one woman panchayat president in Madhugiri saw that Karnataka was providing daily hot cooked meals for pregnant women and breastfeeding mothers, she immediately decided to add fresh green vegetables and coconuts from her farm; she also set up nutrition gardens in the anganwadis. Another woman president in Kittur pointed out that beyond maternal nutrition, there was another reason why the programme was so important for rural mothers: “At home these women are always answering to their in-laws or husband; when they come to the anganwadi for the meal, this is their me-time. It gives them a short break in the day.”

Last year, after gram panchayat elections in December 2020, Karnataka began the induction training of newly elected members. There was a heated debate about whether the training should consist of three days or five. Some of the male experts felt that three days were enough, because women would not be able to leave their families and join the training for more than that. Women experts felt that women members would benefit from the additional two days. It was decided to go with five days of training. It worked. The training was well attended by all participants. Amazingly, more women than men attended on every single day.

One newly elected woman member even brought her months-old baby to the five-day training programme so that she wouldn't miss out on the training inputs, nor would the baby miss out on feeding. The women asked sharp and insightful questions: what is PESA — Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act — and in which States is it applicable? How can unwed mothers claim maternity benefits? What is the law on child marriage, and how can we protect girls against it? They asked questions, took notes, and grew in confidence.

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What a tremendous resource women grassroots leaders can be, if only we support them appropriately! They are at the first mile of providing social welfare services to those who need them most. Informed and empowered panchayat members can fundamentally improve the quality of people's lives. As local elected representatives who have gained the trust of their communities, they can prevent child marriage; they can ensure girls' enrolment, attendance, and retention in secondary school; they can support the menstrual hygiene needs of girls and women; they can prevent and reduce anaemia in girls and women; they can ensure that poor mothers receive antenatal care, maternity benefits, maternal nutrition, and postnatal care; and not least of all, to support women's livelihoods, they can not only provide work through the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) but also arrange

quality childcare and creche facilities.

Importantly, women members of gram panchayats can address the problem of exclusion of the poorest women – by reaching services to women working in brick kilns, poultry farms, plantations, sugarcane harvesting groups, and other migrant groups.

Women members can oversee the everyday functioning of anganwadis, primary schools, and health centres. They can monitor the quality of hot cooked meals for children and mothers, with fresh green vegetables, eggs, and milk, where provided. They can ensure that piped water, functioning toilets, and sustainable waste management are available in their communities. They can be oriented towards child protection, mental health, prevention of trafficking, and domestic violence.

Apart from their seats at the panchayat table, women in rural India can also participate in numbers in the gram sabha, the village assembly. Yet women's attendance and participation at these meetings remains low. It is necessary to increase the space and opportunity for grassroots mobilisation and collective bargaining.

One important way to improve women's participation in gram sabhas is with the involvement of women's self-help groups (SHGs). An exclusive focus on livelihoods of SHGs is not enough, as we have seen that economic empowerment alone does not lead automatically to social and political empowerment. Women's SHGs must be systematically oriented around women's rights, entitlements, legal remedies, and support systems; they should be actively educated about how to resist gender-based violence, discrimination, and exploitation. They should be supported to function as informal social networks of resilience and solidarity for their members. Some States, such as Karnataka, have special gram sabhas for women in addition to regular gram sabhas. At such assemblies, women can raise their issues to the elected panchayat members as well as to the field officials.

All of the above requires a deep rethinking and strengthening of the ways in which women panchayat members are trained. It requires investment in information, education, and communication (IEC). Further, contemporary tools like data visualisation, text to speech, and smartphone applications can greatly simplify and make accessible key information, without dilution, especially for women members who may be semi-literate or illiterate.

SHG women's interaction with panchayats through greater GP-SHG convergence can also provide a valuable civil society check on the working of the panchayats themselves. A woman in Kolar, president of the women's self-help group federation, spoke about her introduction to local governance: "For 18 years after I got married, I had never set foot in the gram panchayat office. But after becoming president of the women's federation, when the panchayat signed an MoU with us to take up the work of solid waste management, I have gone from house to house, educating people about the importance of segregation of waste."

Real-life gram panchayats may be like Phulera in superficial ways, but in many important ways, they are profoundly different. Real-life panchayats are filled with real people with complex everyday struggles. The local government must respond to their needs. Every additional round of local body elections brings a new generation of local leaders into the grassroots elected bodies. Perhaps the first generation of women in panchayats after the 73rd Amendment had more in common with Manju Devi. But in six rounds of panchayat elections since then, the profile of women members has changed. They bring courage and experience to the role. Local women leaders can and do make a difference. They can be a force for social change.

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