

WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE

Sanghas and Women's Federations - Partners for Women and Girls' Empowerment

Executive Summary

Mahila Samakhya, a programme of the Ministry of Human Resource Development, working in ten states towards empowering women and adolescent girls through education has, over the years, built a large, robust base of women's collectives. These collectives, called **Sanghas**, of women at the village level are networked into **Federations** at the cluster, block and often at district levels.

Why are Federations important?

Sangha-federations are grassroots women's organisations in which:

- Women are seen as an embodiment of knowledge, the source of collective strength and as change agents working towards a gender-just society rather than just as individual beneficiaries of welfare schemes.
- The focus is on women's rights, voice and collective empowerment.
- Members are articulate, energetic and leaders in their own right, capable of challenging patriarchal norms that undermine the progress and intrinsic dignity of women.
- The approach is bottom-up and is accountable to *Sanghas* and their issues.



Policy Messages for Ministry of Panchayati Raj

- **Recognise rights-based women's collectives as grassroots partners in democratic processes**
Partnering with grassroots women's collectives for planning will ensure the creation of pro-poor, gender-sensitive plans.
- **Promote federation-driven, community-based governance mechanisms**
Federations can be centre-staged in planning, implementation, monitoring and in conducting social audits of programmes
- **Involve collectives of empowered women to engender governance**
Structured involvement of women's collectives in village institutions will ensure representation of women's issues in governance. Linking EWRs with the Sanghas and Federations can institute a participatory pathway of learning, reflection and tabling of women's issues in the Panchayat processes.



Ministry of Panchayati Raj and Federations: Possibilities for Partnership

Ministry Priorities and Contributions of Federations:

- **Furthering an inclusive process of decentralisation:**
Federations play an important role in mobilizing grassroots women, creating awareness about their entitlements, strengthening community participation, tabling planning priorities, conducting social audits, and most of all, in making the planning process inclusive at the Gram Sabha, Gram and Block Panchayat levels. Finally, they build the capacities of women leaders' as Elected Women Representatives (EWR) to participate in governance.
- **Providing structured inputs into planning processes:**
Federations have innovated planning and monitoring tools which enable the involvement of the entire community in the planning process. They are able to provide information (especially with respect to the budget) in Gram Sabhas and promote transparency and accountability.
- **Empowering and engendering institutions of self governance:**
Federation members participate in village level committees engendering these institutions and priorities. Federations represent a critical mass of marginalised women, often the repository of Common Property Resources, which is an important aspect of the provisions of the Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA) and forest related matters.

CHALLENGES FOR MINISTRY OF PANCHAYATI RAJ

Programmes under the Ministry of Panchayati Raj (MoPR) have one crucial common agenda - to ensure participatory planning from below. The Backward Region Grant Fund (BRGF) emphasizes participatory planning to incorporate works and interventions to reduce human and infrastructural lacunae of the area. Integrated district planning is an inclusive process, by which planning priorities are generated, gradually integrating them spatially, vertically, and across sectors. It is vital that grassroots civil society is aware of, and lends its thought, support, and priorities to this planning process. For the MoPR to achieve its mandate, some of the hurdles and possible solutions through the federations are outlined below.

Challenge 1: Lack of awareness of local governance processes, especially among marginalised sections of society

Ministries have taken a number of steps to institutionalize community participation in their programmes. However, lack of knowledge about the planning process and consciousness of the potential role of civil society are the major hurdles in operationalising the concept of decentralized planning. In particular, structural issues like gender-based discrimination, exclusion of the invisible - the poorest, widows, dalits and adivasis among others - act as barriers to their participation in planning processes. Community participation would be needed to ensure that their rights under Acts like PESA and the FRA (Forest Rights Act) are enforced, particularly in relation to the Gram Sabha's powers over common property resources, leasing of common property for business use, and ensuring forest land rights.

Solution 1: Recognize federations as partners to promote awareness of, and participation in, democratic processes

Federations can play an important role in building community awareness, demanding fair and equitable distribution of resources, networking and linking with departments and institutions, and ensuring that public resources are used for their intended purpose. They can be instrumental in raising popular voice in setting planning priorities.

Sanghas and federations provide the ideal forum for interventions at the grass roots. On the one hand, it combines the poor and invisible while on the other, it is based on egalitarian, secular, inclusive human rights principles.

Through their reach, federations can host awareness programmes for women and the community to enable their participation in governance (see Box 1). MoPR materials such as posters and videos can be disseminated through federations. The strength, capacity and reach of *Sanghas* and federations in developing a pool of grassroots women leaders, and capacitating elected women representatives can make them effective partners in governance.

Sanghas and federations can be recognized as partners in all PESA and forest related matters, concerning Common Property Resources (CPRs) where women have been the repository of these CPRs from time immemorial.



Box 1: The Panchayat Literacy Programme

The Panchayat Literacy Programme for Women of MS Uttarakhand is a powerful awareness creating initiative. This has brought thousands of *Sangha* women into power expanding their sphere of influence and their ability to exercise their rights as citizens in the democratic process. The following strategies are adopted to engender the democratic process:

- Village awareness campaigns on governance
- Training women on their rights and responsibilities to participate in the Gram Sabha
- Promoting all-women panchayats
- Intensive training for ward members and pradhans on their roles and responsibilities
- Capacity building of EWRs in areas of financial management, programmes (eg: MGNREGS) and laws such as the Domestic Violence Act
- Gender sensitization of EWRs' family members on their roles

Impact

- A critical mass of mobilized, aware women participate in the political sphere
- Women table their issues in the panchayat agenda, thus engendering the political process
- Increased awareness among EWRs and the community on the overall Panchayati Raj system and of the roles and responsibilities of the elected representatives
- Improved ability to interact with, and access information from officials at police stations, block and panchayat offices
- Increased access of women to resources through Gram Sabha participation

Challenge 2: Lack of Decentralized Planning Mechanisms

Many attempts were made by the Government of India to promote decentralized planning for development. However, the lack of proper planning mechanisms and integration of developmental activities at the micro level remains an obstacle in realizing the goal of participative planning. The gap in community participation, due to the lack of proper information, results in services reaching incorrect beneficiaries, corruption, and non delivery of services and benefits.

Solution 2.1: Explore local participation through institutions

The Ministry of Panchayati Raj, championing the cause of participation and local democracy, has created institutions like the Village Education Committee, Village Health and Sanitation Committee, Rogi Kalyan Samity and Forest Rights Committee. Inclusion of federation members in all committees of the Gram Panchayat could be made mandatory to engender these institutions and their priorities.

Solution 2.2: Developing a community information base for planning

To enable the involvement of the entire community in the planning process, federations of Mahila Samakhya Assam have innovated the Data Exhibition, a powerful planning and monitoring tool (see Box 2).

A crucial lacuna in the panchayat planning process is the lack of availability of official data disaggregated below district level. This gap can be closed by ensuring the role of the federation in providing information (especially with respect to the budget) in Gram Sabhas and using the Data Exhibition instrument as a tool for promoting transparency and accountability.

Federations can be centre-staged in planning, implementation, monitoring and in conducting social audits of schemes in the Gram Panchayat. MoPR could allocate funds to the federation to monitor the implementation of all programmes.



Box 2 : Data Exhibition

The federations along with Assam Mahila Samata Society have designed an innovative process of citizen monitoring of government programmes at the panchayat level to promote transparency. The term 'Data Exhibition' refers to a display of information collected and exhibited in a public place such as a community hall or a school, for the benefit of the entire community.

Data on status of actual beneficiaries of programmes is compiled by federations through detailed household surveys and positioned against official data obtained through RTI. This information is presented at an exhibition which reveals gaps between the ground reality and information reported by the Gram Panchayat (GP) or line departments. The entire community, panchayats and representatives of government departments are invited to this event.

The Data Exhibition can be instrumental in providing data for panchayat planning, making it participatory in spirit. The Data Exhibition can be far more effective if integrated with the recent Planning Commission of India Guidelines on Decentralized District Planning. One guideline requires that the community takes stock of its needs by examining its information base for which data can be easily provided by the Data Exhibition process.

Impact:

- Communities have an information base to assess their needs for GP plans.
- Increased awareness of Gram Sabhas on entitlements and programmes
- Communities are mobilized and aware while participating in Gram Sabhas
- Marginalized populations are able to access their entitlements.
- Women and girls participate in the planning process and in public life.



OVERALL POLICY MESSAGES

Sanghas and federations have the requisite strength, scale and quality to be equal partners in social change. Being a rights-based grassroots democratic women's organisation, the *Sanghas* and federations are the best fit for social audits, gender audits, and for community oversight required by the Ministry. These federations, built on democratic principles, have evolved non-hierarchical structures that can ensure transparent, participatory and decentralized planning. In recognition of the need to universalize this approach across the country, a number of corollaries emerge:



1. Recognise rights-based women's collectives as grassroots partners in democratic processes

Recognition as a partner by MoPR will provide *Sangha*-federations the credibility and acceptance of bureaucracy. It will transform planning processes by ensuring that plans are tailored and relevant, to the needs of local communities, especially those of women, the poor and the marginalized. The national effort of integrated district planning requires assimilation of themes, geography, as well as focus on marginalised communities, for which the *Sangha*-federation can be considered to be a partner or Technical Support Institution from village to block levels. PESA recognises the importance of common property resources as central to preservation of livelihoods, and the environment. The FRA ensures communities can exercise their rights over common property resources in forest areas. From time immemorial, women have been the repository of common property resources. *Sanghas* and Federations representing women could be recognized as a partner in all matters related to PESA, FRA and CPR.

2. Promote federation-driven community-based mechanisms to create awareness of entitlements and monitoring of government programmes

Federations can be centre-staged in planning, implementation, monitoring and in conducting social audits of programmes in the Gram Panchayat. MoPR could allocate funds to the federations for their innovative participatory monitoring tools to monitor the programmes.

3. Involve collectives of empowered women in village committees and Panchayats to engender governance

Various national missions have promoted village based community oversight committees to achieve their overall mission. Village health committees, village education committees, watershed committees, village forest committees, forest rights committees, are some important examples. Each committee has provisions for the participation of women to bring in their perspectives. The *Sanghas* and Federations, with their knowledge and understanding of women's rights and issues, are best suited to present their cause. Thus, these and the standing committees of the Panchayats should ensure their representation. While the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments provide the legal backbone of including women in the governance process, meaningful participation would require that elected women representatives individually and collectively exercise their agency and voice their priorities in the local developmental process. Linking EWRs with the *Sanghas* and Federations can institute a participatory pathway of learning, reflection, and tabling of women's issues in the Panchayat processes. The *Sangha*-federation can be considered an effective partner to build capacities of EWRs and to mobilize community participation in the Gram Sabhas.

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