

A Brief Report of

National Seminar

on

*"Women in Local Governance:
Exploring New Frontiers"*

held on

3-5th February 1999

at Bangalore



UMA Resource Centre
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The Institute of Social Studies Trust (ISST), set up in 1964 is a non-profit, research organization working on issues related to gender and poverty. ISST established the National Resource Centre 'Utsahi Mahila Abhyudaya' (UMA) in 1993 with the assistance of Ford Foundation to strengthen the participation of women in local governance. UMA held its second national conference on 3rd, 4th & 5th February '99 to assess the participation of women in Panchayat Raj. It brought together NGOs and government officials, policy makers, researchers and publishers from across the country to exchange ideas, explore new and establish linkages to strengthen women's participation in local governance. There were papers presented from West Bengal, Orissa, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka. Our objective of having these reports was :

- ◆ to identify region - specific issues from participants across the country
- ◆ to record the effect of intervention programmes
- ◆ to record the existence and involvement of other movements
- ◆ to assess governmental and NGO initiatives supportive of the reservation policy
- ◆ to record greater sensitization of bureaucrat and others
- ◆ to assess the impact of linkages of PRI with livelihood aspects such as health, environment, legal awareness, education, and finally to assess the change in the priorities of the panchayat, the presence of women members and its impact on themselves, their family and social status

Besides, several experts were invited who shared their experiences with the participants. A separate session was scheduled for group activity for focussing on issues related to research, training and advocacy for women in PRI. All these issues were highlighted by Dr. Mukta Banerjee of ISST, Bangalore at the start of the seminar.

In his opening remarks, **Dr. K.S. Krishnaswamy**, Adviser to ISST, said, "The purpose of this conference is essentially to look ahead, keeping in mind what has, or has not, happened so far. The Karnataka Act of 1983, recommendations of Sarkaria Commission and finally the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts of 1992 have in principle ensured two things; first the PRIs of the district, taluk and gram levels are now a part of the Indian political structure, and second, 1/3rd of the elected seats in the PRIs are to be reserved for women. Thus technically women have become a part of local governance".

He however, questioned whether these Constitutional Amendments have decentralized political power effectively? Has the presence of EWRs had any impact on the working of the panchayat? And has their involvement made any difference to the economic and social status of women? According to the field studies done in Karnataka, the answers to these questions are negative. Giving the reasons, he said, "Panchayats have yet to take the role of self governing bodies with full powers of decision making, their access to resources is limited; their functions are restricted partly by the schemes entrusted to them by state and partly by lack of support of staff. The relative neglect of women's needs and requirements in matters such as education, health care, employment opportunities by families and societies are well known. The entry of women in local governance becomes in this context only an uncertain beginning".

He stressed on the need to change prevalent attitude in society. "Women should become active promoters of development; and when they do so, a very large human resource would be realized and this would contribute to economic and social progress.

Dr. Anand Inbanathan of ISEC compared the Mandal Panchayat Act of 1983 with the GP Act of 1993 to highlight the gap between representation and participation of women in local governance. According to him a large percentage of the EWRs are either illiterate or poorly educated and are not informed in their work. "They are not active participants in the Panchayat, instead function on behalf of their men". He also highlighted the influence of local elites, landlords who held dominant positions in the PRIs, and they act as a deterrent to the participation of women in local governance.

"In the given social milieu which is predisposed towards giving men the greater role in the political sphere, reserving a higher proportion of seats for women and other disadvantaged groups before setting in place a suitable system is to place the cart before the horse.

During the course of study on women's health, Foundation for Research in Community Health (FRCH) of Pune, Maharashtra had worked in the area of Pariche on elected women representatives of GPs. It was observed that women members were not aware of their duties. Information regarding the

issues was given to them through training. Programmes on awareness too had helped the women members as well as other community members. However different patterns of participation has been observed by women members in other parts of Maharashtra.

According to Mr. Balaji Pandey, ISED, Orissa, "Representatives of panchayats lack education and awareness, and the PRIs are undervalued. Women panchayat members in the scheduled caste tribe and backward areas are more neglected, compared to those in the coastal belt. Women in the coastal belt are treated on par with their men colleagues so far as sharing of panchayat responsibilities is concerned. Various training initiatives for women representatives in panchayat have taken place whereas the need is to pull the resources together and work in tandem to achieve better results. Men need to be sensitized in order to remove gender discrimination.

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment has created a healthy environment for women's political participation in governance. However due to the prevailing conservative attitude in most of the families they have not been able to avail this opportunity properly. Women's political participation is generally criticized and viewed negatively because there is a tendency to consider women as an independent entity in the society, which is unfortunate. If women's issues are viewed as an integral part of the society and women are considered equal it would improve women's status.

In order to improve women's political participation, the foremost task is to promote gender sensitization among men as well as among the guardians (including females) in the family. He further mentioned that since women are first timer entrants in panchayat, it would be premature to assess their efficiency and performance now.

Dr. Jos Chathukulam, Centre for Rural Management, Kerala, stated that unlike states like Karnataka where the percentage of women elected at all the levels of Panchayat Raj is significantly higher than the mandatory requirement, the percentage of women elected in Kerala approximates the national average. "Politics is so central in Kerala that elections to local bodies are fought along party lines. College and University representatives of students are chosen along party lines except in women's institutions". Quoting Robin Jeffrey, in her study of women and politics in Kerala, he said, "The

pressures working against women's public political activity are as great in Kerala as elsewhere in India. What is different, however, is the great opportunity for girls to go to school and for women to make decisions within families, rise to middle levels of authority in salaried jobs, take part in better health for women and their families. This has not led to any dramatic change in the status of women or in political structures. Women may do more things in Kerala than elsewhere in India, but they do not enjoy equality with men. If they leave the accepted spheres to enter public politics, they face innuendoes, ridicule and disappointment".

In a sample study done in Kerala, 85% of the respondents said that they did not want to contest the next elections on their own. With the reserved constituencies going to become general ones in the next elections, none of the respondents is likely to be renominated by their respective parties, whereas male members have already emerged in these reserved constituencies staking claim for candidacy. These women are unlikely to move to unreserved constituencies in other wards. None of these women have emerged as political leaders capable of contesting from wards other than their own, unlike the male party leaders. This gives a fresh opportunity to political parties to find new faces for the reserved constituencies in the next elections. The experience of the incumbent women is lost as a result, and some of them disappear from public life altogether. The inexperienced female members who may get elected in the next elections will have to start from the scratch. Such a development is indeed a set-back to the process of empowerment of women. The political experience gained by the female members in the last three years has not been acknowledged by the parties, who have not given them befitting positions in the party or have enabled them to move further up in the political ladder. This contrasts with the opportunities that male members, who were similarly placed, received.

Assessing the participation of women in local governance in West Bengal, Mr. Prodeep from CINI said. "Women's participation is very low in the political arena though they constitute almost 50% of the elected members. Almost 70% women suffer from anaemia and other reproductive health problems, their educational and economic status is much lower in comparison to the men colleagues".

Panchayat elections have opened a lot of creative political energy. People from disadvantaged communities have finally found a forum to be heard, to speak out, and, hopefully to act. A large

number of women have been elected as Gram Pradhans, Panchayat Sabhapati and Sabhapatis.

Many elected women representatives have been drawn from a wide cross section. The electoral process has been an effective political education campaign, especially for women.

Though women now constitute 1/3rd of the members, nothing much seems to have changed in West Bengal. According to a study, most women members said that they try to implement policies decided by the local political party to whom they owe their allegiance and election to. All political parties are dominated by men, who decide various issues and women are just asked to give their consent on the same.

A cross examination of family members reveal that with the election of their women to PRIs, their social status has increased. Local people also felt that reservation has provided opportunities to women which would not have been possible otherwise. They also felt that women were more honest than their male colleagues. Governmental officials, Gram Panchayats, Block, District ICDS felt that women's representation has helped in bringing greater participation of an important section of community earlier left out from local governance.

According to CINI, more women need to be inducted to the political bodies, issues that lead to suppression of women should be taken up seriously, linkages between the three tiers of Panchayat should be strengthened, panchayat should be involved with respective government departments to play an effective role.

According to Dr.Palanithurai, Professor, Rajiv Gandhi Chair for Panchayati Raj Studies, Tamil Nadu, women who come to power, neither try to understand the importance and implications of 73rd Amendment nor the Tamil Nadu Panchayat Act. Without knowing anything about the panchayats, they have put their signature in the nomination document. The elected women leaders come with an illusion that they can act like the MLAs and MPs. Contrary to expectation, they have not been considered as a factor to reckon with. Most of them consider panchayats as political institutions.

After their election to various positions, the elected women leaders have not been allowed to function

independently and they have been accompanied by male members of their family. Of course, there are a few exceptions. A few women leaders, who have been oriented in public organizations and ~~political institutions, have been freed from the family clutches.~~ The male members have been dominating in the decision-making process, which creates a lot of trouble to the elected panchayat leaders. Their sincere feeling is that they should be allowed to function independently.

Some women leaders feel that their male family members accompany to help them in their work. The male members, according to them, do not interfere in the administration. However, it has been noticed over the last two years that the domination of the male members in the administration of panchayats where women have held positions reducing.

In most places it has been felt that help of a male member was seen as an imperative need as the elected women leaders were totally ignorant of the responsibilities they were given in local bodies, some of them being illiterate.

Dalit women have no other option and hence they have to go with the traditional panchayats and the traditional panchayat leaders control over the panchayats indirectly. Of the elected women at the grass root level, especially, at the bottom, do not seem to identify themselves with political parties. Women leaders who attend training programmes, and have other interactions are slowly coming out from the clutches of the domination of the male members of the family and traditional panchayats.

Eighty per cent of the members of GP, Panchayat Union and District Panchayat Members are ignorant of their role and responsibilities as they are not oriented in the New Panchayat Raj System. They ought to know the provisions of the 73rd and 74th Amendment to the Constitution of India, salient features of the Tamil Nadu Local Bodies Act of 1994, major schemes for rural and urban development in both central and state governments. So far, there is no mechanism to take all that information to the elected leader, and there is no sincere and serious attempts on the part of governmental organization to bring all those information to the leaders. Of course, a few organizations mostly NGOs have taken effort, but they are effective only in a few pockets. Information is the most important aspect in the empowerment process, but it does not take place in Tamil Nadu. Very important details regarding the

schemes and programmes of the government are in the form of booklets. They are kept in the offices. But they do not reach the leaders. Even Government Orders do not reach the leaders. They reach only the officials.

The relationships between the officials and the panchayat leaders is not always smooth. In the rural local bodies, the leaders are treated in the offices contempt. However, those who have sound economic background and political support get the warmest treatment in the offices.

Most women leaders believe that they are leaders of women alone. Only those who have had some training have the right perspective that they are a representative of the people, and not the women alone. Well trained leaders have evinced interest in organizing Mahalit Mandram and women credit groups. They also have shown much interest in the issues of reproductive health care system, child development, women development and environment.

Felt needs of the Women Leaders

- All the schemes for urban and rural development should be in a printed form
- They would like to know how to conduct women's entrepreneurship programme
- They need more input on micro level planning
- They need more flexibility in administrative procedures
- They feel that more schemes have to be evolved in specific areas.
- They need orientation for the officials as they have a different mind set. The officials know everything and people's representatives should be educated and trained by the officials
- They need some honorarium for their work. Otherwise representatives are likely to get involved in corruption, or the only the affluent section can come forward to serve the people through local body institutions.
- They need more information on self employment and entrepreneurship opportunities for women.
- They need information to build women sangam and cooperatives
- They need training once in six months
- They need more replicable models
- They need more field visits
- They need regular information dissemination through a newsletter or a magazine.

The Pressing Problems in their hands

1. All-pervasive corruption in polity, society and administration

2. Interference of politicians in administration of the local bodies

3. Increasing caste-consciousness among people
4. Indifferent and corrupt bureaucracy in administration
5. Increasing expectation among the masses
6. Increasing schemes and unmet needs
7. Encroachment of the commons by private individuals
8. Paucity of funds.

Dr.K.Jayalakshmi of NIRD, Hyderabad, while presenting her paper said, in the post independence period, there has been an increased participation of women in various people's struggles and their own struggle for women's liberation, with this, the definition of women's participation in politics has acquired a new meaning. While accounting and analyzing women's participation in politics, one must keep in mind, what were the issues that women took up as elected representatives and what were the problems encountered in the male dominated political institutions? According to her, most women stated that space for them in the political institutions as decision-makers was unimaginable without reservation. In Andhra Pradesh, in the mid 80s, nine per cent seats were reserved for women in local institutions. The present reservation for the post of Chairperson, which is significant is invariably male occupied. Common problems encountered by them have at times upset their personal life and stature in society. With all the limitations expressed earlier, there is a silver lining. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment has paved a way for women to participate in local institutions. In Andhra Pradesh there are six All-Women Panchayats in all the three regions of the state.

The paper presented by ISST, Bangalore indicated that the number of women elected at all the levels is highest in Karnataka state followed by Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. As far as Karnataka is concerned, women elected at the GP are 37,689 which is 46.74%, at the taluk panchayat the figure is 1343 which is 40.20%. Similarly at the ZP there are 335 members which is 36.45%. All these figures are much higher than the national averages.

Age plays a very important role in the life of an individual in executing his/her duties. A very young woman who is inexperienced and has not seen life much cannot come up with the expected outcome. Moreover, she being young, nobody considers her suggestions/ideas as worthwhile or important. That is how she is left out.

Similarly, the outcome of very old members aged 65 years and above is negligible. Since they are at the fag end of their life, they have a typical "Given-up" attitude.

Therefore, the women in the age group of 30-45 years are often the right candidates for effective participation.

Women in middle class or lower class tend to participate better in the panchayat activities as compared to the upper class women. It is usually observed that women from higher classes are proxy candidates and their male counterparts function in their name. It so happens that even if they know the shortcomings of the systems, they are unable to articulate due to fear from patriarchal domination. On the other hand, women of lower classes/middle classes, are aware of the actual happenings of the surroundings and boldly take steps to set things right and are not bothered about their prestige/status.

Generally, it is felt that illiteracy restricts their level of political participation and it keeps them aloof from the principles of democratic decentralisation and devolution of power. But in reality low literacy level does not seem to be a deterrent factor. The so called educated ones often are inactive candidates and the illiterates or the neo-literates tend to be better performers than the literates.

Women panchayat members by and large, use informal, innovative methods in solving their problems. These informal, and at times "pressure mechanisms" are often devised by women themselves. This is partly because women who lack familiarity with formal political processes tend to create their own informal political spaces, mechanisms and systems to ensure that they can participate effectively. This can be seen as a vital survival mechanism which has the potential to transform the value of politics.

The handling of financial and technical issues in Panchayat by women needs to be reviewed. Hardly 10% of the total elected women representatives know about panchayat budget. Of late, however, they have shown interest in these matters.

Patriarchal set up and orthodox traditions in the rural society pose one of the most difficult and deep rooted constraints for women. The middle class and lower class men are comparatively cooperative and encourage women to participate in politics. They support them in performing their roles. Less effected by patriarchal pressure, women have been able to perform well.

NGOs have played a significant role in organising, mobilising and in participation of women to claim their rights in socio-economic and political fields. In this regard, NGOs have gained considerable attention as a platform of change since the government programmes in many countries are limited in their impact, particularly on women.

Ms. Anitha Gurumurthy of IIM, Bangalore, presented a paper on South-East Asian countries' profile to compare and understand the differences that exist in the political participation of women at different levels.

Bangladesh, comprising the former eastern province of Pakistan, became an independent democratic nation in 1971. Although the Constitution embodies democratic principles, the military intervened in politics twice between 1971 and 1990 and governed the country under martial law.

The Constitution of Bangladesh provides for formal political equality of men and women. In the parliamentary elections of 1972, 15 seats were reserved for women which reflects a patriarchal political culture of society. The number of seats increased to 30 in 1979 but women were elected indirectly.

The reservation of seats lapsed in 1987 after the President dissolved the Assembly. It was revived and direct elections for women seats were held in 1991 after the 10th Amendment to the Constitution was enacted in 1990.

At the local level, out of 12 seats, 3 seats were reserved for women in Union Parishad. Ten male members contest from one ward to Union Parishad as against one woman from three wards.

In the recent years, many organizations have evolved to fight for women's rights. FATWA is one such women organisation which has been constantly striving to promote women in the mainstream politics.

In Pakistan, Political leadership is traditionally vested in landed gentry because of which women have been denied access into politics. Very few women leaders have successfully dotted on the political landscape. Frequent subversion of democratic processes, since independence stunted their ability to take root in democratic institutions. Moreover, the mobilisation of women is found more on general issues than on women's specific issues.

Institution of Purdah or a female seclusion has also kept women out of political track. Political parties have been utilizing women's wings largely for their support base. These wings lack authority to pressurise government for their needs. Women have been severely facing the problem of registration for voting. Reservation without which it is unimaginable to mobilise women in politics was limited only at national and provincial levels. But in 1990, this reservation lapsed, and at present there is no reservation in Parliament and provincial bodies. However in April 1998, 20% reservation was announced at the local body level. Women organisations have been fighting for their rights to participate in political sphere.

Nepal has a monarchic democracy with a multiparty system. Ranas were the traditional rulers of Nepal. During the 1920s and the 1950, Nepal witnessed the revolts and mass movements against the Ranas. Again in April 1990, Nepal's political system underwent a fundamental change brought about by a mass movement initiated by the Nepali Congress and the United Left Front. This movement for democracy resulted in establishment of a Constitutional Monarchy in 1990. It is only in 1997, that women were given opportunity to participate at the grassroot level with reservation of 1 seat for women out of 5 members ward committee.

Nepali women's experiences have been diverse, shaped by their different cultures. The basic culture is the patrilineal inheritance system. Women in Nepal have not been given the right to inheritance.

Engagement in politics requires mobility. Women's organizations are politically active and have been affiliated to national political parties. They are fighting to bring about substantial change in the status of women in Nepal.

Imperialism has had its own impact on socio-economic land scape in Srilanka. With the advent of the Dutch and the British, many evil practices were eliminated. Srilanka has experienced many political ups and downs. In 1970, the Constitution was enacted, with President as the executive head. It introduced proportional representation, whereby the people do not elect an individual per electorate but party and candidates in party list representing an entire electoral district. It was in 1994 that the first woman president Ms. Chandrika Kumaratunge got elected with an unprecedented majority.

The striking feature in Srilanka is, that all-women advocacy groups are extremely articulate and analytical. They strongly opine that they do not need reservation at the grassroot level to restructure the participation of women. To them, reservation is required at the party level.

To summarise, it was felt that more elections do not constitute a democracy. Formal and informal spaces are required for women's participation. In many of the South-East Asian countries, political instability has not opened enough space for women, and economic growth is not linked to democracy. Socio-economic empowerment is necessary to secure political empowerment. Hence these aspects cannot be delinked.

According to Prof. A. Vaidyanathan of MIDS, Chennai and also Chairman of ISST, one of the most creative developments of the post Independence India is the incorporation of decentralization of power in the Constitution. Equally important is sizeable proportion of reservation provided for women and the socially disadvantaged section who have had no voice in the community affairs for many reasons. As far as the resources are concerned, the political parties are beginning to assert themselves that they get more command over these resources and autonomy. It is proving to be an

extraordinarily tension in every state though the Constitutional Amendment has created a space which nobody can erode. In every possible manner, the state level politicians and bureaucracy have been fighting for the devolution of funds and authority.

It is not only the financial devolution but also the election process itself that many find as stumbling blocks. For instance, even though the elections are mandated, there are a lot of loopholes by which the governments can suspend the panchayats, dissolve them and postpone the election. It is necessary to have some amount of diversity in electoral procedures in the states due to differences in their socio-economic and political conditions. But there needs to be some attention to the requirements of the mandatory elections and some general set of principles which should be followed across the country uniformly, with sufficient room for adjustment without compromising those non-negotiable general principles.

For centuries, women have suffered disadvantages in matters of family and community. Reservation artificially creates a protected space in which, it not only gives an opportunity, but essentially augments the pace of participation of women and the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

Women have a certain innate hesitation, not because they are incapable, but because of the system they are living in. But this hesitation is transient if the task of social mobilization of helping these women to overcome these problems is undertaken. Women should be given information about their specific conditions, on how the panchayats are functioning, the difference made by active involvement of women in the PRIs and their results.

PRIs are not out of the reach of political parties. They have been trying to influence people with the allocation of resources in the particular communities. This is the substance of local level patronage which higher level politicians exercise. By fighting it on the party basis, the local party functionaries are given a share, it is used both to placate or give power and resources to local functionaries of the parties and also strengthen the party's ability to contest the election in the larger arena. This will not disappear so easily. But the optimistic view is that over a period of time, the local level politicians understand two things.

They are,

- ♦ it is not the state or the central party people who can use this for exercising patronage,
- ♦ after two or three elections, people begin to realize the fact that fighting on party lines is useless as the resources available to PRIs should be used for the community's benefits.

There will be gradually a shift of focus in the local context with regard to resource mobilization and their utilization for the community both in terms of purposes and the efficacy in the administration.

Dr. George Mathew, ISS, New Delhi, in his speech, elucidated how the human investment, ideologically otherwise has produced a positive result in the development of political awareness in Tamil Nadu. Since screenplays and cinema culture have had an impact on the people, it is therefore, social capital that has emerged out of human capital, and has led to an increase in the education level and decreasing birth rate.

Though reservation has made women a part of the political structure, officials have been ill-treating EWRs in terms of recognition. It is true that the officials who are in the panchayats, are the products of a certain period. It is hence necessary to provide training to these officials with whom the EWRs are going to act with. Panchayat cadre should be carved out and separated from state cadre to increase their efficiency.

Another impeding aspect is caste. To breakdown this barrier, a churning process should take place to reduce its impact on the socio-cultural ambience. NGOs, media and other institutions must disseminate the message of the legislation, making these 'Little Republics' meaningful.

Dr. Poornima Vyasulu, while sharing her experience of training women members of panchayat at Grama Panchayat level through video documentation said, "Training of women members at the GP level is faster in Karnataka than any other state".

For a long time, Karnataka has had the reputation of being one of the most forward states so far as the PRIs are concerned. Forty six per cent of elected women members at GP level show the optimum

utilization of reservation. In this context, the training experiment in Karnataka has taken shape. The Govt. of Karnataka particularly the Women and Child Development Department felt that it was very important to train these new entrants in PRI. They subsequently launched a series of training programmes for women members. ISRO also came up with an offer of satellite technology and a three-phase training program called the Satellite Based Interactive Training Technology. This technology was offered to conduct training throughout Karnataka simultaneously.

The trainers involved in the training of the women members were from different NGOs, government, individual facilitator and various agencies. In the development of software, they felt that the training not only meant providing information on learning but confidence building and empowering women. Based on these principles, training modules were prepared. The technology used was 'one way video, two way audio'. The whole program was called "GRAMSAT". From the ground station set up in Bangalore, the transmission facility was connected to 19 districts along with telephone lines. About 45 women came to the training centre. At the end of the 20 minute-programme, women could call on phone and respond to the programme. The Government and experts from voluntary organisations answered their questions, and this lasted for four days.

Prof. Abdul Aziz, a well known economist from ISEC stated that women, being a distinct group in society, will have unique needs and aspirations. Therefore, recognizing this fact along with the fact that all those who are going to be affected by the decision need to participate in decision making. The Amendment Act to the Constitution has created a political space for women through reservation, enabling them to participate in PRIs in a large number. But the question arises, "What is the impact of the creation of political space for women? Has it resulted in social development of women themselves, and development of that area which is specific to the needs and requirements of this group?"

However, it is too early to evaluate the delivery of the functions of women. But women should realize the importance of political space for them and participate in the political process. Their participation must be qualitative in the sense they should discuss, articulate and identify the needs of women and the people as a whole.

It is true that there are certain internal and external constraints for women as individuals and as groups. They are:

- a. to be able to participate effectively, the degree of awareness must be high
- b. women's perception. Since women members legally represent the constituency they have to take care of needs of men and women equally.

Most of the women belong to the first generation politicians. Unlike men, they have least information about the political provisions. This leads to an asymmetry of information creating room for exploitation of women. This results ultimately in unequal distribution of power balance. All these reasons come in the way of women members when their impact on PRI is assessed.

In the transient process women may either falter in their articulation or seek the help of their husbands and other members of the family. But given an opportunity, it is possible to make women members efficient. Training in this regard can help them to expose their talents. It is therefore difficult at present to expect any miracle from this first generation of women members in the PRIs, as they need exposure to training programme, panchayat meetings, Grama Sabha meetings etc.,. Then only they may perform reasonably better in a society they are living in.

Mr. Srinivasa Murthy, Secretary, Department of Rural Development and Panchayat Raj interpreted the legal aspects of PR Act and explained the pros and cons that women face in the functioning of PRIs.

The 73rd Amendment to the Constitution has provided 33% reservation as against 25% which prevailed before the amendment took place. The proportion of women elected to GPs in Karnataka was as high as 44% even though the reservation was 33%. Hardly any case of a woman getting elected to an unreserved seat has been reported so far. It should not be concluded by this that the actual representation exceeded the prescribed reservation because 11% of women contested from unreserved constituencies. All the 44% became reserved by virtue of a certain difficulty in dividing the numbers. It was not on account of women contesting unreserved seats but on account of the pattern of reservation itself that they got elected in larger number than the legal stipulation.

During 1983-87 and also in 1993, majority of women members at the GP level had no previous experience. Regarding the quality of their participation, women did not dominate the proceedings and very few women made their presence felt. Another stereo-typed image of women members was that they were accompanied either by their husbands or the other members of the family. But there have been a good number of exceptions to this where women members have participated qualitatively on par with the male members. It is found that no such difference in terms of institutional structure between a panchayat with a woman as adhyaksha and panchayat with man as adhyaksha and no special area has been identified to give women a special role in the panchayat system. Probably there is a need to think of a kind of positive discrimination in designing the institutional structure for these panchayats.

Dr. Nagaraj, Additional Director of Reproductive and Child Health Programme while speaking on 'Linkages with Health', said, "linkages, mean to convey the policies and programmes down to the members of the PRIs".

"The health implementation in the first six years was just a mechanical compilation of figures and even after 12 years of a decentralized system, no PRI or ZPs have made any efforts in giving some baseline data, particularly reflecting the demographic scenario". Recently, after the involvement of the UNICEF and ISEC, tremendous changes have taken place. The Mahila Swastha Sangha, NGOs and other women's groups have been involved in working towards the bottoms-up approach to make women understand about family planning methods, women and child health.

A good linkage has been established in the planning process. But linkage in respect to decision making needs much attention particularly among rural women, which is still under the control of their husbands and influential persons. The program can prove futile unless the decision making process emanates from the women members who play a key role in the PRIs. The Department of Health took initiative steps to sensitize women with the issues related to health needs. But the difficulty that they have been facing is the availability of time to concentrate on these issues. It is true that the qualitative improvement of the programme is possible only when women are watchful.

Mahila Samakhya is a programme of the Department of Education, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India. Born out of the emphasis given in the new education policy of 1986, the programme has been playing a positive, interventionist role in bringing about women's equality. Mahila Samakhya emphasizes on linkages to address the needs of the women who require special focus from all structures, health, education, legal and others. PRIs at the grass root level can establish linkages. The women sanghas from federations or similar bodies at different levels have started interacting with the taluk and eventually ZP.

Linkages are established through interaction with other women candidates, learning strategies for canvassing, contesting etc, disseminating the same to sangha women in their local dialects through street plays, theatres, workshops, training camps, songs, Gramsat cassettes etc. Establishing linkages with the PRI is a must to achieve complete self-reliance in the sanghas.

OUTREACH is an organization which emphasizes the establishment of self-help groups in building confidence and awareness among women. A report was presented on these linkages which explained the work of these Self Help Groups (SHG) functioning in different villages in Karnataka.

"Women need a lot of confidence to articulate their demands in society" he said, Outreach recently facilitated a small unity to work together. The aim of these groups is providing credit facilities and capital formation out of their savings. These groups are homogeneous, small in size and non-political in nature. The members of these groups fully participate in the process of planning and decision making. PRs as one of the methods is being used by the people to express their problems. The whole process is monitored and evaluated by the members of these groups.

In the context of development of women, different perspectives should be implemented to judge the facts. Prof. Bhargava opined that with regard to women in Panchayat Raj, enough research has not taken place. As far as training is concerned, it is very important to look at training as a component of human resource development because formation of human capital leads to social capital. Although training in PRIs is going on, impact of the result is very less. It is found that training has become highly centralized. No centralization can work in this country where the decentralization of power is

the main objective. They seem to be contradictory. To quote M.K. Gandhi "This country cannot run by ten people sitting in Delhi". So decentralization should take place in a systematic way. In conclusion, women in this country are sincere, serious and task oriented. If women are encouraged, they would prove to be a counterforce to the rotten system at the grass roots level.

Explaining the importance of advocacy planning, Dr. Shanta Mohan of NIAS, said that research, training and advocacy have taken different ways of operating in the WOPRA unit of women's policy. Interventions such as research documentation and dissemination have become a part of whole process of working together. In this connection, a study on the status of rural women in Karnataka has brought out a lot of information. It has evolved information from a gender perspective. Focus has been given to women in research, training and advocacy but the whole process of gender relations has been viewed in the context to understand the underlying disadvantages in dissemination that women face in their real life. There is a need to look at the spirit of change from the pre-election period, the processes that are involved in nominations, campaigning and looking at the processes of change among elected members both men and women as to how they would change to be positive actors in the PRI system. To capture the changes, research should be planned to look at various interventions that are operating within the system. These interventions viz, Government, NGOs and other research bodies have to be synergised and find out the strengths and weaknesses in the process of learning from people. This would allow them to know the entry points that are available to make a headway and also identifying the factors and problems that play positively for men and women differently.

More importantly, advocacy is gaining some experience from previous action research studies. During this process, more autonomous women's groups were found who form 100% of the critical mass. These groups lend support to the women who have become part of institutional set up which amounts to 50% membership. Thus there will be a gradual shift towards 1/3rd environment which is a result of mobilization to help women become PRI members.

A PRI cannot operate in itself as an institution because it is supposed to reflect the concerns of the community it is located in, and the issues that are prioritized by the community and the response that they can lend out to the community. Therefore advocacy, research and training should become issue

based. Training which provides skill, knowledge, self-confidence and self-esteem should also be extended to men separately and later men and women together. Hence there has to be relearning for men also to define what is good governance. This facilitates women to negotiate their priorities. Effective tools have to be evolved which develop common indicators where men and women are gendered.

Dr.K.Subha of ISS, who presented a paper on women's participation in urban local bodies in Karnataka said that with reservation, leadership has shifted to different sections of the society. Women are getting involved in the local political process. A study found that the present system has largely new entrants, and many of the leaders are the first in their families to enter politics. They are confronted with tasks like services, amenities and administration which are complex. Therefore, the need for the political education for effective participation cannot be undermined.

One of the important issues plaguing the country is widespread corruption. It is in politics and administration that corruption is most prevalent. The nexus between politics and corruption is the strongest and is not new. Women are no exception to this. They too are deeply affected by it, be it opposing corruption or accepting corruption. Being new entrants to the political field, they find it difficult to face or challenge it. Women could play a major role in bringing corruption under control, if not eradicating it. A strong political will and sensitivity to the people's needs and accountability are important elements. Electoral system has to be further reformed so that money and muscle power is contained.

The quality of political participation is crucial. Electoral reforms is the major key. However, the system by itself has a crucial role to play. Transparency in the government functions, effective electoral machinery and above all, a sensitive and a responsive public together matter the most. Institutionalization of women's special problem can occur through the creation of mayoral advisors on women's affairs. Also, it would be appropriate to set up a standing committee for women having powers to review funds earmarked for women's welfare. In boards and bodies which are involved in the welfare of women in particular, it would be purposeful and useful if lady Corporators were the made ex-officio members.

Education can contribute in developing a more progressive outlook. Men and women should work in unison to develop the society and to give a better status to women. Last, but not the least, it is the question of application of philosophy and principles of 'social audit'. The need is for an audit that can evaluate the performance of an organization in relation to its goals. Social audit is being seen as a way of measuring, understanding, reporting and ultimately improving an organization's social and ethical performance. It should not be forgotten that women are the major 'stake-holders' especially at the grassroots. Now, the question is how to play the social audit methodology to strengthen the system.

Studies show that women are yet to be mobilized, and in the absence of awareness it is illogical to expect the local women leaders to adopt aggressive postures and to articulate their rights and demands in an effective manner. The need for training and orientation has, therefore, become urgent and necessary specially in view of the socio economic conditions of women. Training of women is also important as an investment in human resource development, and information of social capital.

Women have to be mobilized as a political force so that they challenge oppressive forces. It is only through training and discovering their own talents abilities, women can develop self-confidence in view of the socio-economic conditions of women. Women especially have to be trained to be a different kind of leader, unlike other leaders that political parties usually throw up.

Addressing the questions put forth by Dr.K.S.Krishnaswamy, a Staff member of TIDE-DRF, said "Most the women in panchayat were unable to understand the role of a panchayat and none of the women who were interviewed showed any interest in joining the PRI in future. One has to find reasons for their dissatisfaction with the PRI before analyzing the role of women in the panchayat". The main reason for their disinterest in joining the PRI is that they think that the panchayat is meant for a particular section of people. Secondly, they don't want to be in any sort of trouble after joining the PRI, and finally they feel that they cannot compete with men.

Talking about the independence of women in administration, it is sad to know that women are still under the clutches of men. It is very difficult for women representatives to take independent decisions

pertaining to the development work. Perhaps, the main reason for their dependence is that these elected women have to lead their lives in the same panchayat and the possibility of obstructions are high when a woman tries to take any hard decisions independently. But it is not true to say that women always dance to the tunes of men in the panchayats. There are instances where the women representatives were able to overcome these problems and take decisions independently.

Speaking about the prevailing difficulties with women representatives face, he said, "They lack communication skill. Perhaps, this has made most of them to play a dummy role in the functioning of the PRI. Though medicines are provided in the form of training to this kind of disease, not much improvement is seen in the knowledge with regard to women. Secondly, they do not have absolute support from their colleagues in case of a decision making process. Thirdly, they lack information on the role of a member in PRI and the administrative power that they possess in the PRI. There are many reasons for this. Most of training agencies assume that the participants have the ability to read and write. Instead of this, before the beginning of training, the agencies should make two group - women who have some formal education and women who are illiterates. Use separate methods of teaching for both of them after knowing their difficulties in carrying the administrative activities at the grass root level. This will certainly help both the categories of women representatives in understanding the nuances of the administration.

Dr.Sandhya Rao of HHS, said. Gender sensitization Training which brings about social change is a process where a large number of women group is a part of it. It includes timing of the programme, logistics of programme, location of the programme etc.

Hengasara Hakkina Sangha (HHS) has undertaken two types of training for women, training that makes women access their basic needs and basic rights. Secondly advocating women's rights "the methodology, content and process our programmes has been drawn primarily from feminist theory. It is not the women who are disabled to be enabled to join the mainstream, but the mainstream which has led to various kinds of devastations. There is hence a need for a social change", she said.

Elaborating further she asked, "What causes social change"? It is knowledge and behavioural science that causes social change. It is therefore the collective strength which is required to access any kind of right individually. This collective strength could be in any kind of formation, a social formation which has political overtones, in the sense interacting and intervening with other institutions. One such formation which is readily available is the women sanghas formed by the NGOs. These sanghas help women to access any kind of right individually.

Training in itself can do very little. Training is a component of larger developmental processes and larger political processes. These processes have to be undertaken to make training effective for social change.

Training brings about changes in people, groups, organizations institutions and society itself. So to complete this learning the change in behaviour is required.

"Training is required not only for women but also for men to cooperate with women members in the functioning of the panchayats", said Vijaykumar of ISEC while presenting his paper on training in the seminar, he explained the experiences of his field work undertaken during 1993-95.

In 1993, GP elections were held and in 1994 the training for women members had begun. The trainers went to the field where the women members of GP were called for training. Men also accompanied with women members. One of the male members asked the trainers "what was training for and why?" The trainers explained the need for training women members. But the men felt that the training for women would be useless. Then the trainers realized the need for training men along with women.

The trainers prepared a training kit as a reminder of functioning to bridge the gap between first and the subsequent trainings. The kit included a pictorial book with PR Act components, puppetry, songs etc.

Group Work - Advocacy

Advocacy is a plan and an organized action. It not only influences public policies but also implements them. Another motive of advocacy is to advance social justice and human rights. This is undertaken in a larger framework. It makes government accountable and transparent.

Advocacy is a continuous process of engaging and persuading to promote the poorer sections in society. Participation, in real terms, is accountability which is to be underlined in total advocacy effort. Hence it is very important to redefine women's political participation across different institutions.

Research, Advocacy and training are three corner stones. Each one is related to other. There must be some strategies to make these linkages effective. Firstly, the role of the Grama sabha or community in women's participation. Secondly, the factors responsible for women's reluctance in contesting elections. So the focus should be given on Grama Sabha because Grama Sabha can provide important mechanisms to women members. The basic thing is training which is needed not only for the PRI members, but also for the members of the family.

To make women participate effectively, it is necessary to establish local network of Grama Sabha or communities. Not only Grama Sabha but mahila mandals, NGOs, thrift groups and local groups have to be included to define the role to work towards a common goal. In this whole strategy, it is important to create a space for gender issues.

Another significant issue is access to information. It has been found that the media is a extremely powerful mechanism for advocating issues. In this connection, it is necessary to utilize different combination of media for different local conditions. A common fora should be created to share the experiences with officials. Establishing micro and macro linkages in the advocacy effort; consciousness among can be created men and women.

Group Work - Training

In the present context, Indian women are subdued in all spheres of life. Most women who enter the political life are illiterate. They are unaware of their rights. So training is needed to enable women to understand their existence in political arena. If women are not given training, they have less opportunity of serving the world. So training would help them in changing their behavioural factors, mainly knowledge, skill and attitude. It is important for women to develop confidence when they enter public life and make themselves accountable to the people as EWRs.

It is very important to know the Panchayat Raj system. Therefore, the importance of the concept of PR Act should be dealt in the training programme and the role of women as panchayat members. Apart from these factors, financial and administrative aspects should be dealt in training.

Training should be informal and participatory. Experimental learning method should be included. Role-plays, group discussion, demonstrations, interaction, sessions, pictorial, audio visual aids, mocks, flexies, charts can be used for training EWRs.

Training should take place in their respective areas and in a convenient season Residential training should be encouraged. The duration must be at least 3 days and the EWRs have to be compensated for loss of wages.

Group Work - Research

Keeping in mind the importance of initiating alternate development strategies which recognize women's contributions, research has to be action oriented. It should have two facets:

- To work closely with grass root activists and groups in conducting research, identifying information gaps, with due emphasis on both micro and macro aspects and building up a data base which records the reality of women's working lives
- To channelize the information obtained from field studies to reach decision makers and thereby to catalyze the required and desirable policy changes.

With these views in mind, the group activity on research came out with the following topics on research on PRIs.

- Women in traditional panchayats
- Common property resources management and PRIs
- Interface between women members and officials
 - (i) women and political parties
 - (ii) women and local bureaucracy
- Studying marginalised women
- Women's perception of panchayats
- Elected women representatives perception about panchayats
- Difficulties they face in administering the duties in panchayats - The administrative structure as they envisage
- Corruption/ethics in PRIs - women's perspective

Their sensitivity towards this issue,

- How women function in
 - (i) Movements
 - (ii) PRIs
 - (iii) Parties
- Role of training in these institutions, methods of training
- Problems of women in Panchayat: Regional differences
- The research should have a feministic perspective. They have to work with a hidden agenda
- Comparison of PRIs in the south and in the North India
- Gram Sabhas - issues to be raised in grama sabha

Dr. Poornima Vyasalu felt it difficult to sum up the papers presented and the experiences shared in the seminar. The observation brought out both relevant and irrelevant results. Intellectual, emotional feelings, various types of activities such as research, advocacy, training have taken place. Common elements of reactions and responses were very interesting. But there were many occasions of pseudo conflicts. PRIs, empowerment, gender, participation etc have been interpreted by different experts in different way.

"The PRI is an evolving institution. It needs time to figure out what gender role is to be", she said.

A lot of criticism was levelled against the papers during the seminar. Group presentation of advocacy was concise giving no room for abstract thought, and a lot of work has to be done in the field of research and training. Keeping the feminist perspective in view, research, advocacy and training have to be linked organically. There are many questions to be solved to make PRIs function effectively.

Thanking all the representatives and participants who shared their experiences in the seminar, Dr.K.S.Krishnaswamy enunciated the need for future courses of actions to be taken at the grass roots level for effective functioning.

He said PRIs and women's empowerment are evolving processes. These processes involve a great deal of change in environment in which they operate along with preparing PRIs and women to do a different job, research, advocacy and training ought to be addressed to empower women and to reduce disabling characteristics of the environment. These issues involve legal rights, their access to information and various kinds of freedom. Quoting Amartya Sen's point on social justice Dr.KSK said. "what we need is the concept of liberal society. This has to be enlarged and made effective in practice. Empowerment includes two kinds, one is empowering PRIs which is a larger political process, secondly empowering women which is a social process. Active participation and networking involves not only the NGOs who operate with PRIs or women directly but also networking with institutions which may be engaged in research or training that will affect the quality of these operations. In the whole process the initial process will appear very slow in redefining the structure of scope and content of training programme and enlarge the gender sensitivity of the entire society. Gradually the process gathers momentum to empower the PRIs and women".

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