
UNIT 10 TRAINING AND EMPOWERMENT CASE ANALYSIS

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10.1 INTRODUCTION

"What I hear, I forget.

What I see, I remember.

What I do, I understand."

- Confucius

In 1992, India took a historic step towards democratic decentralization when it passed the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution recognizing Gram Panchayats as Constitutional bodies. One of the significant features of this Constitutional Amendment was to provide reservation for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and women in all three tiers of Panchayati Raj Institutions. It formally mandated 33 per cent reservations for women in local governments bringing more than one million women to public office, which has since then been increased to 50% in several states across India. The amendment increases de jure representation of women and stresses on equality in the public sphere. For most women, it was a critical gain, given their low status in society and their almost consequent negligible representation in public life. It provided an opportunity for women to be a part of the political decision making process, an opportunity to influence change, a status in the public domain which was hitherto denied, and a sense of self-

worth that comes when you are a part of the nation building process. However, customary or religious practices codifying women's personal, professional and sexual subordination to men continue to distort women's political voice and limit their capacity to compete equally with men (Goetz, 2010). Despite these structural challenges more than 4 million women over the last 20 years have been constitutionally elected from across 2,38,054 Gram Panchayats in India and are **effectively representing** their constituencies.

10.2 OBJECTIVES

After studying this Unit, you would be able to

- Explain 73rd constitutional amendment act;
- Describe case study of elected women representatives; and
- Critique the impact of training or capacity building programme on different levels.

10.3 73rd CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT ACT AND WOMEN REPRESENTATIVES

The 73rd Amendment to the Constitution also made it the responsibility of the Gram Panchayats to provide basic public services like drinking water, sanitation, toilets, nutrition, education and health to the village population. The well-being of people in rural areas therefore, depends on the efficiency of the Gram Panchayat and the leadership of its representatives. The aim of this democratic decentralization was to bring political representatives closer to people so that policies formulated and implemented would fulfill the needs and aspirations of the electorate. It would enhance greater civic participation and in turn would improve the efficiency of services, increase equity amongst the people through inclusion and enhance overall development. It was expected that in turn it would make representatives more accountable to people. Women's representation in this democratic process was invariably aimed to engage with and improve the lives and status of women in the rural communities.

This paper elaborates on the need for training for elected women representatives (EWRs) if local self-governance is used as a tool to measure development and transform women's lives in rural areas and critically reflects on the impact of The Hunger Project training interventions. It examines trained elected women's participation and leadership in Gram Panchayats across India on Gram Panchayat's primary mandate – village development and social justice and reflects critically on their empowerment in the private and public spheres. It discusses the context in which they become transformative leaders and examines elected women's relationship to their constituency, their work related in empowering other women, their work in strengthening democratic processes and in building an equal and equitable society. This paper will use the vast resource of field interviews and case studies available to The Hunger Project during the course of its work in empowering elected women representatives in the last 13 years.

The Hunger Project is a capacity building and leadership training organization supporting elected women representatives in Gram Panchayats so that they play greater roles in the public domain and impact democratic decision making processes. It empowers EWRs by building their capacities vis-à-vis perspectives, information, knowledge and skills. It derives its mandate from the 73rd Constitutional Amendment and aims to strengthen the commitments made by various national laws, policies, and action plans towards the political empowerment of elected women in local government. The Hunger Project also sees its mandate as fostering critical consciousness amongst EWRs so that they are able to practice transformative leadership, above and beyond the minimum duties required for effective political participation. The intervention operates through a 5-year program cycle building the capacity of elected women representatives and their communities through trainings in social citizenship, negotiating skills, political citizenship, identification and prioritization of issues, program planning and public speaking simulations. To build on the critical mass arising from the minimum 33.3%, and in some states 50% reservation for women, the 5-year cycle also includes building Block level EWR federations, women's support groups such as the MahilaJagrukManch and a linkage with politicians of the higher tiers such as the Members of the Legislative Assemblies and Members of the Parliament. Implemented through partner organizations at the grassroots, THP program objectives are to strengthen elected women's leadership for increased and effective participation in Panchayats, enable women to forge alliances with one another, and ensure that decision-making processes are participatory, responsive, equitable, and inclusive. The larger aim is to engender governance and achieve gender-responsive decision making.

The Hunger Project has trained over 120,000 elected women representatives in the last 13 years. Trained constitutionally elected women in local governments have not only managed to engage in decentralization processes with success but their presence have also increased the political participation of women and marginalized groups in democratic decision making thereby increasing the efficiency of services by redefining the development agenda. Challenging social practices such as child marriage, sex selective abortion, violence against women through the governance framework has helped to move these 'women's issues' out of the private sphere and into the political framework of 'rights'. The critical mass of their presence therefore influences the public domain, enhancing public belonging and citizenship, with the demand for equal rights and entitlements. The 'Study on EWRs in Panchayati Raj Institutions' commissioned by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj in 2008 concludes that 'Imparting training emerged as a critical determinant of the performance of elected women representatives. 'A large proportion of women who received training have performed better' and further recommends that 'training should not only be made mandatory for all elected representatives, but it should also be organised regularly, covering multiple dimensions including rules and regulations, administrative issues, budgeting and finance and the implementation of development schemes'.

Training has therefore played a critical role in empowering elected women to be effective leaders in their constituencies. Viewed as a structured learning process – training supports learning of new skills, concepts and behavior. The Hunger Project uses participatory training techniques in which our existing experiences and knowledge are recognized and valued. The premise of participatory training emerges from the principles of adult learning: that adults can develop themselves through their own actions and reflections. The Hunger Project training workshops are designed to provide more than knowledge and information. It aims to bring about a conscious change in the women – both as women and as Panchayat leaders. The workshops helps the women take a step towards transformation setting aside social inequities and coming into their roles of Panchayat leaders as equal citizens of the country. It helps them to build support structures at the family, community and political level. As they become aware of their surroundings and their own rights, they discover their leadership skills, envision a future of their ward/village/Panchayat and understand the basic tenets of making the vision a reality by being inclusive, transparent and responsive. They leave with the knowledge of a support structure available to them and a shift in their consciousness - from a feeling of ‘I cannot’ to ‘I can’. Every elected woman leaves the workshop venue determined to take the next step in her leadership.

10.4 POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND GENDER EMPOWERMENT

Rural women in India have a background of poverty, deprivation and subjugation. Trapped in a patriarchal and feudal society, they have had little opportunity of getting a formal education or enhancing knowledge through participation in the private and public domain. Discriminated on the basis of caste and gender, their sexuality and mobility controlled, women have had no control over productive assets or any say in decision making.

The 73rd CAA has been radical in subverting years of subjugation by giving women the Constitutional right to participate in political decision making. According to Yamin (2009), the rights based approach aims to make those impacted by problems to be active participants in finding solutions to those problems. They become agents who have a say in defining policies and programs which affect them. Participation therefore becomes critical within a rights framework – it is the right of rights as it allows us to claim our other rights (Participation: The Right of Rights by Jeremy Waldron).

Do elected women feel empowered to participate in local governance processes immediately after winning the election? Are Panchayats equal playing fields where women have access to all public information and their voices are heard? Or do external social forces malign their newly gained electoral victory and try to control their Constitutional mandate? Though the Constitution mandates representation of females, participation till date remains difficult. Elected women are disrespected, snubbed and misguided. They are expected to remain in the background while their

work is conducted by their husbands. Their lack of education is the biggest weapon that is used to intimidate them. While Ajmeri Devi is non-literate and not able to take immediate control of Panchayat proceedings, Navali on the other hand, who had studied till Class XI says that “I would sit silently beside another Ward Panch who was illiterate but here I was quite literate. Both of us felt equally ignorant about the state of affairs in the Panchayat and both were felt extremely intimidated.” Suddenly thrust into the public political domain, non-literate and semi-literate elected women representatives require adequate inputs to understand not just their roles and responsibilities but to negotiate for their voices to be heard.

Living on the margins of society, women like Sunita Devi in Rajasthan or Pratibha in Karnataka remember being frustrated when their names had been nominated by their community for seats reserved for women. Non-literate and daily wage laborers by profession, they had never stepped out of their houses but had been chosen as candidates. With no prior political experience, no understanding of their role or responsibilities, elected women like Sunita and Pratibha quickly became pawns and vulnerable to exploitation. Sarpanchpatis and proxy candidates became common parlance and cynics found themselves vindicated as husbands and male relatives coerced elected women to relinquish their seats and remain obsequious as they took over the reins of leadership. While several were persuaded by family members to stand for the constitutionally mandated seats reserved for women, others were intimidated, threatened and assaulted for usurping seats that traditionally had belonged to men.

‘We had never stepped out of the house before this. To file our nominations we had someone accompany us and we just lent our thumb impressions. We just didn’t know what was expected of us. No one came to tell us anything. Our information came through the male household members and it was all distorted’, says Fundi Bai of Madhya Pradesh when she filed her nomination in 2001. For the rural women of India, her first entry into public life showcased her powerlessness and became an agonizing experience.

Power is central to political participation as it defines the degree to which elected women can participate in political decision making. An understanding of power is critical to understanding participation in this scenario. Having been dominated all their life, women accept their secondary status as they see no alternative to it in a patriarchal society. Their grievances have been prevented by shaping their perception in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things (Lukes, 1974) and are complicit in their own powerlessness. Therefore for participation to be effective there is a need to raise critical consciousness amongst women at all levels. The Hunger Project trainings are designed to support the elected women representatives to perceive the social, economic and political oppression that they are subjected to, the control that is exercised through patriarchy and women’s gendered roles that in turn marginalize and restrict them from claiming their rights, have equal access to information on public issues, and negotiate their space and voice in decision making. Their own experiences of oppression and subjugation provide a learning ground to struggle against internal prejudices and beliefs that

socialize women to hand over power to others. This transformation which starts with the understanding of self and the oppressive external environment forms a critical component of The Hunger Project trainings. It helps them to understand their heterogeneity and multiple identities of caste, class, education and religion. It is designed to help women become agents of change in their own development as well as that of their constituencies by practicing transformative leadership which informs their decision making in local self- governance.

Ask any of the elected women trained by The Hunger Project what gives them the strength and confidence to take on these first time leadership roles in challenging local milieus and participate in democratic processes and they are unanimous in their replies that trainingworkshops have helped them to increase their political understanding and prioritize local issues. Up-Sarpanch Rakhi says that if she had not got guidance and training from The Hunger Project, then her dream of working for her Panchayat might not have been realized. ‘I needed to be empowered with information and understanding of rights, not least with Panchayat roles and responsibilities. Only then can I effectively participate’, continues Rakhi. She has learnt a lot about the Panchayati Raj, various government schemes, duties and responsibilities from these trainings. And when these trainings have a rights based approach, elected women reveal it helps them to challenge the status quo and question age long traditions and discriminations in the process transforming and improving women’s status in society.

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

Note: i. Use this space given below to answer the question.

ii. Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this Unit

1. State the 73rd constitutional amendment act and its significance

10.5 CASE 1 - REDEFINING DEVELOPMENT

Jayamma is the President of Gram Panchayat Namagondala of Gowribidanur Block in Chickballapur District of Karnataka. Fifty year old, she belongs to the Scheduled Caste and though she has studied till Class 6, she can barely read and write. She has always dreamt of solving the problems of her village. ‘I would have never had any say in decision making if it had not been for reservation for women in Panchayati Raj. It has given me a platform and a hope’. THP’s pre-election trainings helped her to chalk out an election strategy. So in 2010, Jayamma

stood for the post of a ward member in the Gram Panchayat elections. Winning the elections by a huge margin and elected for the Post of the President, Jayamma swung into action and today can be credited with developing her Panchayat by fully utilizing the resources of the government. Her Panchayat is large, with 22 members, out of which 13 are men and nine women. Immediately after attending The Hunger Project's three day residential Women's Leadership Workshop, she called a meeting of the Panchayat to understand the problems of different communities and prepare a list of things to do. Jayamma says, 'I learnt that as an elected representative, my primary responsibility is to represent the interests of the people and influence political decision making so that it benefits the people'. Over the next year, Jayamma attended other need based workshops of The Hunger Project.

Under Jayamma's leadership, MGNREGS was used to undertake dredging work in the tanks in all the seven villages. Water was then collected in the tanks. Thereafter, rain-water harvesting system was put in place for hospitals and schools. The panchayat was provided with 4-5 bore-wells. She says, "To tackle the water crisis, rain-water harvesting has to be taken up for the entire Panchayat". However, over time, water levels depleted in all the bore-wells. "That is why we abandoned it and dug up another. We discussed amongst ourselves and ensured proper distribution of water for the entire village", says Jayamma. In addition, drinking water facility has been set up for all these seven villages. She has also been instrumental in re-opening a defunct Primary Health Centre (PHC) with no electricity, water or other services. Electricity and water was provided by the Panchayat. The PHC now annually receives Rs. 1,70,000/- under the NRHM programme. Cleanliness and hygiene is strictly maintained in the PHC. Gloves, medicines and the necessary equipment required for the delivery room have been purchased. Two doctors and four nurses work in the PHC. The delivery ward of the PHC is now acknowledged to have the best equipment in all of Karnataka. It has led to many from other GPs accessing child birth services from PHC in Namagondala. Being part of a state wide federation – SUGRAMA - has given Jayamma an opportunity to ideate with other members on many such issues.

Always distressed at the dirt and filth in the villages, Jayamma made sanitation a priority. 130 toilets were allocated to BPL families along with awareness and education on hygiene and water borne diseases. Today her Panchayat has become eligible for the Nirmala Grama Pursakar given out every year by the President of India. She ensured a centralized switch to turn off /on the street lights ensuring power doesn't gets wasted due to light being on during the day.

Namagondala Panchayat increased its income from tax under Jayamma leadership. Understanding its importance, she educated and motivated the members to pay and collect tax. Ward Members conducted house visits and today 70% of the villagers pay tax. Jayamma has been instrumental in creating a Panchayat watch committee to monitor the quality of food given in the mid-day meal in schools. Jaya in Kannada means victory and Namagondalu GP with Jayamma as its head is definitely moving towards victory in ensuring basic amenities.

Like Jayamma, trained elected women representatives of Gram Panchayats are redefining the development agenda; putting nutrition, education, health, water, sanitation and livelihood first. They allot job cards, ensure timely payments, and help citizens to access their widow and old age pension and other safety net programs. While prioritizing these practical needs demonstrates their political participation, ensuring the participation of marginalized groups in the planning and decision making processes and their inclusion as beneficiaries becomes an act of transformative leadership as it changes and alters the mindset of society at many levels. Success at many levels has in turn helped them to understand and respond to the needs and aspirations of their constituencies better.

10.6 CASE 2 – BRINGING LOCAL GOVERNMENTS CLOSER TO PEOPLE

In Lakhakhera Panchayat of Block Badvara, Katni District in Madhya Pradesh, access to schools, health centers and community halls were all limited to people belonging to the dominant caste. The Panchayat boundaries were demarcated along caste lines where the mobility of its dwellers was severely hampered. Dropout rates of students were the highest amongst the children belonging to Schedule Caste and Tribe. Services of the Anganwadi centers were not availed by small children and pregnant women and lactating mothers. The entire local governance was in disarray with the powerful and dominant group exercising control in the Panchayat.

Eighty five percent of the members belonging to Lakhakhera Sajha Manch belong to the marginalized community. Sarpanch Tulsa Bai who was trained by THP on gender, politics and federation building, formed the Sajha Manch to provide a common platform for elected women and women citizens in the Gram Panchayat to advocate for good governance and accountability in their Panchayats; and ensure that their Panchayat is sensitive to issues of social justice and gender justice. She discussed these issues in the first meeting of Sajha Manch.

To begin with, she ensured that women from all castes and class attend the Gram Sabha meetings and participate in the discussions. Seeing the proactive steps taken by Tulsa Bai in including the marginalized in the development discourse, the members also started visiting hamlets and motivated mothers to send their children to schools and visit the Anganwadi Centre to get their nutritional supplements. Under the able leadership of Tulsa Bai, they kept track of all the malnourished children in the Panchayat. Citizens became regular in accessing services leading to a sizeable increase in the number of beneficiaries for various development schemes.

Another problem identified by everyone was pending wages of laborers who got work under MGNREGS. For over six months wages had not been paid to the laborers. This problem was brought to the notice of Tulsa Bai, who with eight other Sajha Manch members, presented a letter to the District Officer requesting him to process the payment immediately. The pending payment was released without further delay. Buoyed by this success, Tulsa Bai along with the Sajha Manch

members have pledged that issues that call for a larger action will be taken up collectively by them.

Sarpanch Tulsa Baihas achieved her objective of engaging women citizens in demanding accountability and entitlements. Issues of governance are percolating to the common people, with them enhancing their political understanding of rights, roles, responsibilities and duties of citizens, elected representatives, local bureaucracy and the State.

Elected women are seen to understand the need to disseminate information on rights and entitlements so that government schemes and programmes are properly accessed by historically marginalized disadvantaged groups. Women claim that their increased gender and social awareness comes from THP's trainings on social citizenship and regular collaboration with federation and Sajha Manch members who belong to diverse caste groups. Regular monitoring of implementation of schemes has resulted in checking malpractices, thereby establishing the identity of elected women as responsible representatives.

10.7 CASE 3 - STRENGTHENING DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment has provided women and the marginalized to exercise their right to participate in the political decision making processes, thereby strengthening the very foundation of a representative democracy. Planning and designing an election campaign, participating in it as a candidate, voter, campaigner and a polling agent has facilitated them in engaging with democratic processes at close quarters.

Shyama Bai was a goat herder from the Gond tribal community of Posta Gram Panchayat of Rampurnaikin Block in Seedhi District of Madhya Pradesh. One day she met 'outsiders', who were talking about elections, Panchayat development and role of women representatives. They were from The Hunger Project. Shyama says, "I had never before heard anyone talk about women being important for decision making." From them, she also came to know that the seat for Sarpanch had been reserved for women. Weighing her chances to contest, Shyama Bai listened to the discussion. Being fairly articulate, when she talked about real development issues in her Panchayat like water and sanitation, livelihood and education women vouched their support. Encouraged by the spirit of her community, confident about her own need to participate, and empowered by all the information gained from THP's potential leadership workshops, Shyama Bai filed her nomination papers for the 2010 GP elections. Shyama Bai had studied only till Class II, so she took help from others.

So keen was Shyama Bai that she sold off all her goats without discussing it with her husband. She knew she had to raise money for the election campaign. She was determined not to use any illegal means but wanted to use posters and pamphlets. As soon as Shyama Bai filed her

nomination papers, problems started. She was allocated a particular election symbol based on which she printed pamphlets and started campaigning. Well into the campaign she was informed that the symbol had been allocated to another person. Shyama Bai saw the hands of the powerful trying to weaken her chances. She remembered her lessons learnt at the workshop and complained to the district Election Officer. At the same time printed another sets of pamphlets, and doubled her energy to campaign. Shyama Bai demonstrates that women can strategize for themselves and triumph over social and bureaucratic attacks in the process transforming the concept of women's gendered roles.

Shyama Bai won by a margin of 82 votes against 8 other candidates and became the Sarpanch of the Gram Panchayat. One of the key achievements of her campaign has been to increase women's democratic participation from marginalized groups. Her priorities are to increase participation of women ward members in Panchayat affairs, bringing water, ensuring sanitation and working towards arresting migration in her Panchayat. She says, "Had it not been for The Hunger Project I would never have known of the rights given to me by my Constitution. I would have continued to work with goats and would never work with people."

Khatun Bahan is a Ward Member from Gram Panchayat Karamseevas in Tijara Block of Alwar District in Rajasthan. She too led a nomadic existence as she belongs to the nomadic Gadia Lohar tribe who are blacksmiths. She says, "While travelling from one village to another, I would see that people asked for votes in the name of development but after winning the elections they would never show up again to ask about our problems. Therefore, when I got the opportunity to stand for elections from Karamseevas Panchayat due to the reservation for women, I grabbed it. I had to mortgage my jewellery to raise money for my election campaign but it is an honor to serve the village and the people and solve their problems."

Democratic decentralization has the required impact only if there is representation and participation from different communities. Khatun has decided to represent her Lohar caste and respond to their needs and aspirations. While Panchayati Raj has empowered her to respond to these needs, society has thrown its fair share of challenges. The powerful people in the Panchayat tried to dominate given her low caste. 'The pre-election training helped me to understand that this is my Constitutional right', says Khatun. She refused to be cowed down, and continued with the campaign. She won the elections only to be faced with more taunts regarding her capability to work as a Ward Member. She is well aware of the problems in her ward and has focused her attention in responding to the developmental needs. She has worked on getting regular drinking water supply and electricity to her ward and also proper implementation of the Indira Awas Yojana for the BPL families. Khatun Bahan has made several representations to the authorities on these issues apart from getting resolutions passed in the Gram Sabha and Panchayat meetings and she is certain that soon action would be taken.

She says, 'My aim is to gain recognition for my community of Gadia Lohars who have been neglected and exploited for centuries. When people come to us to ask for our votes then why do

they not do anything for our upliftment? I have decided to use my post to campaign for better entitlements and development for my community'. KhatunBahan's struggle showcases the deep urge for recognition as a citizen and identity that marginalized communities such as the GadiaLohars nurture in their hearts amidst a milieu of severe neglect. As women like Khatun explore their own identities and understand its influence on decision making, it suggests transformation of traditional, elite controlled, male dominated spaces as well as the creation of new spaces. By actively representing the demands of the citizens in the constituency, women ensure that local democracy is deepened and citizenship, especially of marginalized groups, is strengthened.

10.8 CASE 4 – BUILDING AN EQUAL AND EQUITABLE SOCIETY

“Even today, women are bought and sold like animals in our society. After becoming the Mukhiya, my first responsibility was to improve the condition of women. This is what I have learnt from the women’s leadership workshop of The Hunger Project,” says a beaming Ramdulari Devi. She has been Mukhiya of BhairwaGram Panchayat, BisfiBlock of Madhubani District in Bihar just over two years, having stood for elections in 2011.

For centuries women have had a low status in India. Social norms and customs were built to take away women’s mobility and control their sexuality. Ramdulari narrated an incident that took place in her Panchayat in which a man beat his wife very often under the influence of alcohol. Then one day he sold his wife to a local money lender. Apparently he owed the money lender Rs.18,000/- which he had borrowed to buy alcohol. When the wife refused to go to the money lender, she was severely beaten and had to be hospitalized. Thereafter, to escape the social stigma, the woman had tried to commit suicide several times.

Ramdulari Devi explains how this incident was extremely shameful for her Panchayat. After failed attempts at gender sensitization for the villagers and especially for the husband, Ramdulari Devi raised awareness on the existing laws and legislations on violence against women. She used this knowledge as a tool to lobby against domestic violence in her Panchayat. Her new strategy to deal with violence against women instilled a certain fear in both the husband and the money lender. Fear of punishment for committing a crime and disrespect amongst the community proved to be a good pressure tactic. “I told the money lender that lending money on high interest and human trade was illegal and he could be punished for that”, says Ramdulari Devi. By challenging the status quo of patriarchy and applying the law to issues traditionally deemed social, Ram Dulari demonstrates the use of her own agency to improve the status of other women which includes the poor, single women, differentially abled, elderly and the girl child, thereby enhancing their dignity and self-respect.

While she expresses her sorrow on the existing socio-cultural ethos of a woman’s position in society, she tacitly throws light on her journey of establishing herself as the “Mukhiya” despite belonging to the Dalit minority community of the Panchayat. “I was afraid for a while; but I am

happy that I have established my identity as a Mukhiya. My training with The Hunger Project has increased my awareness of patriarchy and low status of women.

Trained elected women like Ram Dulari emphasize on development from a rights and gender perspective. In doing so, issues related to gender based violence such as dowry, sex selective abortion and child marriage are being addressed in the public domain. Land rights for women, class and caste based discrimination, violence in the private and public sphere, intimidation and workplace harassment, challenging specific clauses in PRI Acts are now similarly being addressed through the governance framework suggesting that women's concerns are as much political in nature as men's but have been missing from the governance rhetoric for the last 60 years.

10.9 CASE5– CHANGING THE WAY WE LOOK AT WOMEN TODAY

Sunita Rajawat's entry into Panchayat politics was not a planned decision. But she did take the call to contest for the 2010 elections and became a Ward Member of Vanasthali Gram Panchayat of Niwai Block in Tonk District of Rajasthan.

After attending the Women's Leadership Workshop (WLW) organized by THP, Sunita announced that her priority was to work on women's rights issues. She feels that women's lack of awareness about their rights is an impediment in their development. Thus, she makes every effort to bring women out of their homes and inform them about their rights and entitlements. In the three Gram Sabhas that were held soon after the elections, she worked hard to ensure that women attend them in large numbers. A positive outcome of this effort she feels is that men have started accepting women's participation in public meetings. This is a change from the previous term where women found little space to voice their concerns in these forums. Sunita has been raising her voice at having equal and fair representation of women in the various committees. The Village Health and Sanitation Committee were initially constituted without women, but with Sunita's efforts inclusion of women was guaranteed. Similarly, when the time came to appoint a head of the 'JalSanrakshan Committee' (water conservation committee) at the Panchayat Samiti, she raised her objection at the fact that the option of having a women head the committee was not even discussed. Sunita's act of leadership asserts women's social and political right and thus becomes transformative.

Sunita feels that unless she voices her opinions strongly, nothing will change. 'If everyone spoke out against injustice, then the situation would surely change. I refused to wear the veil at Panchayat meetings. Initially my family strongly objected. But now they have come to accept it'. This departure from traditional gendered role stems from THP's trainings which emphasizes reflection of their own prejudices and practices. Being a member of their block level federations

has helped women like Sunita to collaborate together and raise awareness and consciousness amongst each other. Women argue that collectivizing in federations on developmental issues of the Panchayat has helped them to question patriarchal norms and rally around common issues that nurture gendered exclusion.

Like Sunita, Rakhi Paliwal Up Sarpanch of Upali Odan Gram Panchayat, Khamnore Block of Rajsamand District in Rajasthan actively encourages Backward and Scheduled Caste citizens, especially women to participate in Gram Sabha meetings. Being young does not stop her from understanding the need for inclusive governance. As a member and office bearer of the federation of elected women in her administrative Block, Rakhi chairs meetings and steers the federation to proactively address social and gender justice issues in their Panchayats. In the last Gram Sabha, more than 400 women participated in the Gram Sabha, the number having gone up at least ten times during her tenure.

Most recently, Rakhi has put her individual skills and interests to provide a source of livelihood for women. She learnt to make idols of gods and goddesses with especially designed plastic threads. She transferred this knowledge to 13 girls in her village, who in turn taught the craft to other women. Rakhi plans to export some of these idols to non-resident Indians abroad. She has approached banks to provide loan for this initiative. Rakhi has ensured monthly revenue of Rs. 30,000/- for her Panchayat by levying a fee for installation of mobile towers.

Rakhi was only 23 when she won the elections in 2010 but she dreams big and is happy to be a role model for other women. While many elected women still find it difficult to speak in front of men, Rakhi says, “I ride a motor cycle and wear trousers in the village. The way I dress should not be dictated by patriarchy”. Standing up to social pressures and alienation, Rakhi has changed the power equations which hitherto dictated her gendered imagery in public. In this empowered act, Rakhi uses her power within to establish her identity. Of course it helps that Rakhi comes from a political family. But rather than confirm to it, Rakhi steps up to challenge the status quo. Slowly one can see the change in the way other women are dressing in the Panchayat. Elderly citizens accept her as a symbol of the winds of change that she is bringing to the Panchayat.

Across the country, 1.3 million elected women representatives are altering the way we look at women in rural India. It is evident that Panchayati Raj has provided women a platform to examine the existing societal structures and institutions like family, religion, and governments. As they claim their rightful place in local democracy, women realize the need to engage as equals if they were to challenge the stereotypes of a lackluster female leadership.

10.10 SUMMING UP

The actions reported in the above case studies and many more in THP’s field experience which are documented in its archives suggest that THP’s gender training is an effective tool for women’s political participation. In the absence of training, the tyranny of their context makes

them politically invisible and most of us never take them seriously. Elected women report that continuous flow of information, networking and negotiating skills, and working as a collective alongside other women are invaluable tools for overcoming oppression and ensuring participation. THP's training model encourages use of women's agency to recreate and negotiate the conditions within the structure of Panchayati Raj to make their participation not only possible but also effective.

Self-confidence and self-worth emerge as women assert their identity as capable, empowered, and motivated and problem solving leaders. Taking timely, strategic and bold decisions, elected women demonstrate the image of a dynamic leader who is inclusive, participatory and accountable to the people. They navigate the vast labyrinth of caste, class, power, patriarchy, violence, discrimination and dominance of male colleagues to engage in the democratic processes to not only find a voice for themselves but also to improve the status of women in society by helping them to demand their rights, claim their entitlements and take small transformative acts.

Alternatively, many women reveal that they continue to face difficulty in voicing their opinion in various meetings. 'Men never want to listen to us. They take away the space for dialogue and collaboration, by turning it into a strange and fearful space. Suddenly my Panchayat turns into a battle ground and I feel threatened'. Elected women say that maybe, 50 % of time should be reserved for women to speak during meetings.

The cases reveal that THP's strategy of building federations is being used by women as a powerful platform to learn and unlearn. As they organize themselves into collectives around issues of water, education for the girl child, nutrition, MNREGS, sanitation, health care and government sponsored social security schemes they rise collectively to challenge patriarchy, breaking the silence surrounding violence against women in both private and public sphere as well as around other discriminatory practices. They unlearn their own prejudices and beliefs and take small steps to exercise transformative leadership. While the 73rd Amendment has ensured a critical mass of women, the presence of federations has given rise to a critical mass of 'aware' women. This suggests that continuous training and formation of federations are two prerequisites for elected women's sustained participation in Panchayati Raj.

Elected women become agents of change. Significant number of non-literate women takes decisions to educate their children, especially girls. Several enroll themselves in adult literacy classes. Inter-caste marriages are looked upon as individual choices and elected women use their agency to intervene to resolve the matter without conflict. As they break the gender barriers in the hitherto male bastion, they become role models for the next generation by their sheer presence in local self-governments.

THP's work with the elected women has been commendable. It builds on the inherent leadership qualities of women, their ability to adapt to new surroundings and their willingness to take on

challenging responsibilities and mobilizes them into a powerful visible force. The ground has been prepared and it now remains to be seen how society nurtures women's leadership further.

10.11 GLOSSARY

Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme: The **Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act** (MGNREGA) aims to guarantee the 'right to work' and ensure livelihood security in rural areas by providing at least 100 days of guaranteed wage employment in a financial year to every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work. The statute is hailed by the government as "the largest and most ambitious social security and public works programme in the world".

10.12 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check your progress exercise 1

1. The 73rd CAA has been radical in subverting years of subjugation by giving women the Constitutional right to participate in political decision making. According to Yamin (2009), the rights based approach aims to make those impacted by problems to be active participants in finding solutions to those problems. They become agents who have a say in defining policies and programs which affect them. Participation therefore becomes critical within a rights framework – it is the right of rights as it allows us to claim our other rights (Participation: The Right of Rights by Jeremy Waldron).

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10.14 QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND PRACTICE

1. Describe the any three case study of elected women representatives
2. Political Participation brings women empowerment. Discuss