How to Conduct Mahila Sabhas?
A Guide to Enhancing Women’s Voice in Local Governance

Apna Swasthya, Apni Pehel
Preface

In India's largest state, Rajasthan, health has always been an issue of concern. Rajasthan's overall performance in terms of health indicators is far below the Indian average (its maternal mortality rate is 199 and infant mortality rate is 41)\(^1\). The problem becomes all the more serious in the state's tribal areas. Due to lack of communication and distance of health institutions from the villages, medical aid is not availed of by the tribals except in serious cases. These communities primarily tend to rely on home remedies. There is an urgent need for innovative strategic action to influence the behaviour of tribal communities to demand institutionalised health services if they have not been made available.

PRIA's Apna Swasthya Apni Pehel (ASAP) is a Panchayat level intervention that aims at strengthening the local governance to improve maternal health service delivery. The project covers 104 Gram Panchayats (GP) in three blocks of Rajasthan namely Govindgarh (Jaipur district), Banswara and Talwara (Banswara district).

The aim of the project is to make the Panchayats accountable towards ensuring that pregnant and lactating women are able to exercise their reproductive rights, rights over maternity entitlements and proper medical care. A very crucial part of this process is evaluating not only the availability but also the demands for these services, and in turn, making women aware of their entitlements so that they can voice their demands.

PRIA found that Mahila Sabhas are one of the ways to initiate discussion and generate interest among women, regarding women's issues. Finding their voices in an environment such as theirs, is challenging but an important step in making them confident to voice their issues, not just amongst themselves but in public settings (such as a Gram Sabha meeting) as well. With this in mind, PRIA is releasing this booklet on how to conduct Mahila Sabhas, so as to channel the voices of women, not just in Rajasthan but in other parts of the country as well.

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In 2017, when PRIA began its “Apna Swasthya Apni Pehel” initiative in 104 Gram Panchayats in Govindgarh block (Jaipur district) and Banswara and Talwara blocks (Banswara district) in Rajasthan, we found that 85% of women were not aware of the role and functions of their panchayats to ensure maternal health (PRIA’s Baseline Report: 2018). A similar percentage had also never attended a Gram Sabha. Alarmingly, their aspiration to get involved in local governance processes was low.

The challenge was to increase women’s participation and voice in local governance processes in a context like Rajasthan where women are held back from exercising their political and social rights due to a rigidly patriarchal society. The burden of household chores and the “ghoonghat system” (veil) deeply affects the political attitudes and behaviour of women in the state. Women would receive infrequent and incomplete information regarding dates and time of Gram Sabhas and Ward Sabhas, which further restricted their participation. They generally did not feel comfortable in raising their demands or speaking “out of turn” in front of male members, thus preventing themselves from expressing and raising their concerns in village and panchayat meetings related to the social and economic development of their panchayat.

**Increasing participation of women in local governance processes needed action related to:**

- Giving women **confidence** to voice their issues
- Improving **participation** of women in the Gram Sabha
- **Sensitising** government officials to the needs of women

The platform of the **Mahila Sabha** was used to promote women’s participation and leadership.

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2 Visit [https://pria.org/projectsdetails-apna-swasthya-apni-pehel-reforming-local-health-governance-in-rajasthan-30-572](https://pria.org/projectsdetails-apna-swasthya-apni-pehel-reforming-local-health-governance-in-rajasthan-30-572) to know more about the initiative. The program focused on building response and capacities of panchayats to include maternal health issues in local level planning.
Mahila Sabha

Mahila Sabha is a village level meeting of women of Gram Sabha *(Maharashtra Village Panchayati Raj Amendment Act, 2012)*.

The concept of a ‘Mahila Sabha’ first emerged in Maharashtra when SHG and women members of the community came together and called for a Mahila Sabha for their fight against alcoholism. Acknowledging the importance of such a platform, in 2003, the state government issued a circular for conducting Mahila Sabhas before Gram Sabha meetings.

In India, 49% of the population comprises of women but at the same time, their political participation is very low. Such low participation of women in political space is an area of serious concern. To counter this tendency, in 2009, UN Women started a pilot program: “Promoting Women’s Political Leadership and Gender Responsive Governance” in Karnataka, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Maharashtra and Himachal Pradesh to strengthen women’s participation. The program aimed to strengthen the women’s political leadership and participation. Post this pilot programme, in 2012, the state governments of Maharashtra and Himachal Pradesh made an amendment in their Panchayat Raj Acts and made a constitutional provision to organise Mahila Gram Sabhas. Later in 2013, the state governments of Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Karnataka and Gujarat also issued similar circulars for organising Mahila Sabhas.

Taking the learnings of a Mahila Sabha forward and to promote participation and leadership of women, PRIA facilitated Mahila Sabhas in 104 Gram Panchayats (GP) of Banswara, Talwara and Govindgarh, before the regular Gram Sabhas.

**Over a two-year period, with technical support from PRIA, Mahila Sabhas were organised in all 104 Gram Panchayats. A total of 1,119 women participated for the first time in such Sabhas across all the three intervention blocks.**

This learning brief outlines the process and steps PRIA undertook to achieve this.

**Organising Mahila Sabhas**

In 2012, the decision of holding a Mahila Sabha was announced by the Department of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj in Rajasthan through a circular. The circular recommended organising Mahila Sabha on 19th November, on the birth anniversary of former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. However, on the field, it was observed that there was no fixed date for Mahila Sabhas and they were organised as and when the women required.

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3 Gram Sabha is a statutory unit. GS is defined as a body consisting of persons recognized in the electoral rolls, relating to a village comprised with in the area of Panchayat Raj (PR) at the village level

4 There is a difference between amending the Panchayati Raj Act and issuing a circular to conduct Mahila Sabhas. An amendment to the Act makes it mandatory on local governance officials such as the Sarpanch, Panchayat Secretary or the Mahila Pradhan to conduct the Mahila Sabha. A circular is in the nature of an advisory. PRIA’s efforts have been to ensure the circular on Mahila Sabhas issued by the Rajasthan government is widely available and mandatorily followed in the project intervention Gram Panchayats.
In our intervention blocks, Mahila Sabhas were usually held before the four mandatory Gram Sabhas on 26th January, 1st May, 15th August and 2nd October every year. However, there are numerous other Gram Sabhas organised throughout the year, and community participation is sought for all Gram Sabhas. PRIA focused its efforts on ensuring Mahila Sabhas were held before the four mandatory Gram Sabhas and institutionalised it in the regular process which gram panchayat officials followed when organising a Gram Sabha. The aim was to include the decisions taken by the women in the Mahila Sabha for discussion in the Gram Sabha and after discussion, get them included in the annual Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP).

Organising a Mahila Sabha requires intensive engagement with the community, panchayat elected representatives, block level and panchayat officials, and health workers like ASHA and anganwadi workers. Certain actions need to be undertaken before the date on which the Mahila Sabha is to be held, on the day of the Mahila Sabha and after the meeting is held.

**Before the Mahila Sabha is held**

A successful Mahila Sabha depends to a great extent on the mobilisation of women. This needs to be undertaken well before the date of the scheduled Mahila Sabha.

**Step 1: Mobilising women**

Mobilising women is crucial to the success of a Mahila Sabha. During mobilisation efforts, women are made aware of the relevance of Mahila Sabha, the date and timings of the meeting, the kinds of issues that can be raised, and the importance of their participation in the meeting.

PRIA mobilised community women through:

a) **Home visits and informal meetings**

Community volunteers in each Gram Panchayat (who were involved in project activities from the beginning of the project) took the initiative to meet and interact with women to motivate them to attend the Mahila Sabha. Creating community volunteers was an important capacity building initiative of the project which has helped the local community take ownership for their own development and ensure the sustainability of project goals.

The mobilisation process began at least a month before the Mahila Sabha was due to be held. Regular home visits, door-to-door calls and informal dialogue with women at social events like marriages, baby showers, and local festivals were organised. In the interactions, community volunteers and project staff shared information like date and time of the Mahila Sabha and the importance of women’s participation in the sabha. During home visits, it is recommended the volunteer/staff speak to all family members, especially male members who generally treat such meetings with suspicion and may be hesitant to send the women of the household to “frivolous” meetings. Speaking with women in common public areas such as the anganwadi and health centres were also very helpful in reaching out to more women.
b) **Front line health workers spread the word:**

The second approach used was engaging local health workers to spread the word. ASHA and Anganwadi workers are great influences in a woman’s life in rural India. Considering their social recognition and acceptance, they were requested to share information about Mahila Sabhas during home health check-ups and with women who visited the primary health centre. The project has spent considerable time building trust with the frontline health workers and crafting convergence of health workers with the panchayat. This trust created the circumstance of engaging them to spread the word about Mahila Sabhas.

**Step 2: Mobilising community**

Along with women, men should also be targeted to sensitize and orient them so that they can encourage other male members to support the idea, as well as support their wives, mothers, daughters, daughters-in-law, sisters, and other female relatives in exercising their political rights by attending Mahila Sabhas. Cluster level meetings help mobilize community representatives and community leaders to encourage women to attend the Mahila Sabha. Such meetings were held in accessible, common spaces like the Panchayat Bhawan. Participatory activities such as role-play, screenings of learning videos, etc., were used to share information on what is a Mahila Sabha, its relevance for the Gram Panchayat Development Plan and why it was important that women’s voices were also heard in the Gram Sabha.

**When mobilising the community, remember to:**

1. Include the Ward-Panch in the community mobilization process
2. Make regular follow up visits
3. Set the time for the cluster level meeting after considering the availability of community members

**Step 3: Mass dissemination of information**

1. Announcementsthrough loudspeakers about the dates of the Mahila Sabha
2. Utilising alternative mediums such as singing and dancing about the importance of Mahila Sabhas
3. Visiting schools and informing students about the Mahila Sabha dates, asking them to share the information with their mothers and sisters
4. Distributing posters
PRIA’s INNOVATION: RATRI CHAUPAL

Cluster level meeting for women

Since women are busy during the day with household chores and working in farms, PRIA organised smaller meetings at night with women from one village/cluster/hamlet. These meetings were called “Ratri Chaups” (or night meetings). They started at 7 pm, and often went on till 10 p.m. In some villages, the meetings continued well past midnight.

In a Ratri Chaupal, videos related to gram sabhas and maternal health issues were screened to sensitise the women. After the screening, women were divided in groups and participated in a social mapping exercise of their village. This helped them identify problems in their village and discuss solutions.

These smaller meetings gave the women a space to voice their opinions with familiar others, and the confidence to attend the Mahila Sabha to speak in front of unfamiliar others from the wider gram panchayat.
**Step 4: Networking and advocacy with government officials**

Conducting Mahila Sabhas is not mandatory in Rajasthan. Therefore, to facilitate Mahila Sabhas, it was necessary to conduct advocacy meetings and dialogues with state and district administration officials. Requests for meetings were made regularly and in the meetings, the relevance and importance of Mahila Sabhas was emphasised. Concerns regarding low participation of women in governance processes and political forums were also shared.

The main aim was to get a circular/notification issued directing panchayat officials to organise Mahila Sabhas. District and state level officials were invited to attend the sabha.

The presence of government officials and elected representatives in a Mahila Sabha serves two purposes:

- The functional requirement of taking minutes by a panchayat official.

- The symbolic value of assigning importance and legitimacy to the Mahila Sabha. This sends out a message to the women attending the Mahila Sabha that the government wants to hear what they have to say (and by extension that their demands will be taken seriously).

**Conducting the Mahila Sabha**

The preparations and mobilisation done before bear fruit on the day of the Mahila Sabha. Regular, intensive mobilisation reaching out to as many women as possible will result in high attendance at the sabha meeting.

The topics for discussion in the sabha generally depend on the context. It can draw on the issues women had discussed in the smaller meetings and identified in the Ratri Chaupals. In Govindgarh and Banswara, the discussions centred around poor access to maternal health services – lack of medicines and non-availability of doctors, inability to access special government schemes for pregnant women, the problems faced by women in availing their entitlements/benefits because of imposition of conditions like lack of proper identity cards, and even the fact that many women did not have bank accounts in their own names to get their entitled benefits.

While the specifics may differ from location to location, common issues and concerns faced by all women in the gram panchayat need to be discussed in the Mahila Sabha. The discussion must be facilitated. A community volunteer, a woman panchayat member/elected representative, or a frontline health worker can be given this task. In the initial Mahila Sabhas a project staff can play this role. However, over time it is important to hand over facilitation to a member from the community, be it an official, a frontline worker or a community leader. This requires building capacities of women to take leadership and learn facilitation skills.

The facilitator should make efforts to ensure the comfort of all participants and create a safe space for women to speak without fear. Make sure every woman, especially those from poor and marginalised communities, is given the opportunity to speak. The meeting can be held in short sessions with breaks between sessions and ice-breaker activities to keep the energy levels from flagging.
Seating arrangements should reflect equality among all participants. Seating can ideally be in a circle, with participants able to see each other's faces when talking. In patriarchal, conservative societies men tend to sit on chairs, while women sit on the ground. Facilitators need to learn to be observant of this.

The presence of the Sarpanch, panchayat secretary, mahila panch or any other official authorised by the department is necessary to take minutes of the meeting. The minutes must reflect the collective decisions taken by the women. This collective decision/opinion must be shared in the Gram Sabha.

Lastly, following Participatory Research principles, PRIA ensured the discussions and decisions taken by the women in the Mahila Sabha were shared in community-level meetings held before the main Gram Sabha.

**Mahila Sabha in Kushalpura, Banswara**

Kushalpura Gram Panchayat held its first ever Mahila Sabha on 26 January 2019. As per the convenience of the women, the meeting started at 12:30 pm. It was held at the Atal Sewa Kendra, which was easily accessible to the 25 women who attended.

The women sat in a circle, facing each other. Since it was the first Mahila Sabha, PRIA's animator acted as facilitator. The meeting began with introductions and the singing of a folk song by the women. The objective was to break the ice and build a friendly space for the women to speak. Reading out the agenda of the meeting and a briefing of the objectives of the sabha followed.

The discussions centred around maternal health issues. Case studies and situational analysis method was used to get the women to think about their problems, the challenges they face in accessing quality maternal health care and identify possible solutions to resolve the problems they face. The meeting continued for 3 hours, with active participation of all women.

The panchayat secretary who was present kept a note of the discussions and recorded the collective decision taken by the women. Through the efforts of the women themselves, these issues were later included in the local gram panchayat plan.
This was my first Mahila Sabha. I had never attended a Gram Sabha and always wondered: what do the men discuss there?

When I understood that a Mahila Sabha is only for women, where we can put forward our concerns, our issues, I wanted to attend. I wanted to put forward my problems. Now I am confident, secure that I can raise my voice and will be heard. I will encourage every woman in my panchayat to attend Mahila Sabhas.

– Babli Bua, Kushalpura Village, Banswara block

“For the full story, please go to https://pria.org/featurestory-mahila-sabhas-and-the-power-of-mobilisation-44-203”

“When I first heard about Mahila Sabhas, I thought it was just another women’s meeting and I was not interested. But I was persuaded to attend by my neighbour. I am so glad I went – hearing other women talk about problems that we face every day (female infanticide, domestic violence and child marriage) gave me courage to learn that I too can speak out and question the social, economic and political issues of our village without covering my face. I think I have a beautiful face and I don’t want to cover it. I tell other women the same thing.”

– Asha Sharma, Khejroli GP, Govindgarh

“For the full story, please go to https://pria.org/featurestory-mahila-sabhas-and-the-power-of-questioning-44-204”

Participatory Mahila Sabhas are an important mechanism to ensure that women do not need to think twice before speaking up on an issue close to their heart.

These stories underline the impact Mahila Sabhas can have on women’s participation in local governance processes. There will be challenges encountered in achieving this. The process of engagement, mobilisation and organising must be conducted regularly, involving community members from all walks of life.
Frequently Asked Questions

1. Is organising Mahila Sabha a mandatory process?

Constitutional amendments were made in the Maharashtra and Himachal Pradesh state Panchayati Raj Acts. After the amendment, organising Mahila Sabha before Gram Sabha in Himachal and Maharashtra became a mandatory process.

Apart from these two states, organising Mahila Sabhas is not a constitutional mandate. However, in states like Rajasthan, Odisha, Karnataka, etc, panchayats are organising such Sabhas based on circulars issued by the state/district departments.

2. How to organise Mahila Sabha?

There are no set provisions to organise Mahila Sabhas. In states like Himachal Pradesh and Maharashtra, where Mahila Gram Sabhas are constitutional mandates, the Act laid down the following provisions for organising Mahila Gram Sabhas:

Under Section 5 (B) of Himachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj, Amendment Act, 2015:

There shall be a Mahila Gram Sabha in every Gram Sabha. The Mahila Gram Sabha shall hold two meetings, first on 8th March and second on first Sunday of September in each year which shall be convened by the Mahila Pradhan or in her absence by the Mahila Up-Pradhan and in the absence of both, by the senior Mahila Member of the Gram Panchayat.

The meeting of Mahila Gram Sabha shall be presided over by the Mahila Pradhan or in her absence by the Mahila Up-Pradhan and in the absence of both, by the senior Mahila Member of the Gram Panchayat. In the meeting, the issues relating to women and children and issues pertaining to the overall development of Gram Panchayat shall be discussed and the decision taken in the meeting shall be placed in the meeting of the Gram Sabha for further appropriate action.

Under Maharashtra Village Panchayat Amendment Act (2012):

1. Mahila Gram Sabhas are organised before Gram Sabha.

2. The Sarpanch of the village presides over the Mahila Gram Sabha

In our intervention blocks (Talwara, Banswara and Govindgarh) Mahila Gram Sabhas are organised before Gram Sabhas. The meetings were presided over by the Sarpanch. Along with the Sarpanch, other PRI members like Ward Panch, secretary, and representatives from other line departments like ASHA/Anganwadi, SHG groups, etc were represented in the meetings.

3. How to spread information about the date/time/agenda of Mahila Sabha?

The notice of holding Gram Sabha/Mahila Sabha should be issued in advance, ideally 15 days prior to the date of the meeting. The information regarding the time/date/agenda can be spread by involving Ward Panch, frontline workers, SHGs, CBOs, etc. Such information can also be shared by announcing in loudspeakers or by singing local songs.
4. Generally, the notice of holding Mahila Sabha reached the Panchayat level one day before the date of organising Mahila Sabha. How can we get such notice in advance?

In our intervention block, we regularly met the Block Development Officer (BDO), for issuing such government notices in advance. Any member of the Panchayat, women, SHG member, etc can put pressure on the concerned officer for issuing such notices in advance.

5. What is the best time to hold the meeting?

The time of the meeting is important so that the maximum number of women can attend. Women are burdened with household responsibilities, childcare, livelihood and other activities. Hence, a time during the day that is convenient for most women should be considered. A Ratri Chaupal (night meeting) can also be organised.

6. Who can attend a Mahila Sabha?

Any woman, above 18 years of age, who is a member of the Gram Sabha of the respective Gram Panchayat, can attend a Mahila Sabha. The Sarpanch or panchayat official authorised to take minutes should also attend. Presence of district government officials and elected representatives is also recommended.

7. What is the required quorum for a Mahila Gram Sabha?

The quorum for a Mahila Gram Sabha is 10 percent of the total women voters of the respective Gram Panchayat.

8. What happens if the quorum is not met?

If the quorum is not met, the Mahila Sabha must be cancelled and a new date for the Mahila Sabha must be decided.

9. What issues can be discussed in a Mahila Gram Sabha?

Any issue specific to the area and context, that concerns women and which they want the panchayat to act on can be discussed. Apart from maternal health, women-centric issues like domestic violence, sexual and reproductive health, child marriage, livelihood opportunities were discussed in the Mahila Sabhas held in Rajasthan.

10. Who is responsible to record the proceedings of the meetings?

The minutes of the meetings are recorded by the Panchayat secretary along with Sathin, ASHA and Anganwadi workers. It is necessary to take signature/thumb impressions of women who have attended the meeting.

11. How are the resolutions/decisions taken in Mahila Sabhas processed?

The resolutions/decisions taken collectively, in the meetings are further presented in Gram Sabha. With members of the Gram Sabha and other community members, the issues are included in the village level planning process i.e. Gram Panchayat Development Plans.
Further readings

1. Indira Gandhi Panchayati Raj and Gramin Vikas Sansthan, UN Women, Rajasthan, 2017: महिला सभा गठन कैसे करें?

2. Institute of Rural Management, March 2016: Making the Mahila Sabha work: A study in the Kutch district of Gujarat


7. PRIA. November 1999, Women Leadership in Panchayati Raj Institutions: An Analysis of Six States

8. PRIA, March 2009, Women’s Political Empowerment and Leadership: Learnings


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