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PRIA

policy brief

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Enhancing women's participation in Gram Panchayat Development Plans in Rajasthan

After the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments passed in 1993, Panchayat as institutions of local self-governance with powers and responsibilities for the socio-economic development of villages became an integral part of grassroots level democracy in India. Twenty-five years later, based on the recommendations of the 13th and 14th Finance Commissions, Panchayats now have full autonomy of administrative and financial powers. Such devolution of powers empowers Panchayats to prepare village level developmental plans, known as Gram Panchayat Development Plans (GPDP) with a participatory approach and to plan and implement their own programmes for economic development and social justice. Effective strengthening of decentralized participatory planning by PRIs (Panchayat Raj Institutions) needs optimum utilization of available resources to address social, political, economic, and women and child-related issues (Sadhu and Sharma: 2014). An essential component of participatory planning is to promote women's participation in planning, especially on issues that are most relevant to women such as maternal health, child health, education, etc.

Women's participation in planning is dominated by two interrelated themes: representation of women in PRIs, and effectiveness and outcome of their participation. The effectiveness of women's participation in political processes strengthens democracy and creates attention towards marginalisation, trivialisation and oppression of women. Considering the importance of women's participation there is a need for policy interventions to provide a safe space for women for their active participation in village-level planning.

Panchayat Raj department issued an office order for organising Mahila Sabhas (women-led Gram Sabha) – thus creating spaces for women's participation in Panchayat level planning. This policy brief makes recommendations that can push forward the implementation and regularization of Mahila Sabhas in all villages of Rajasthan through necessary amendments in the Rajasthan Panchayat Raj Act to achieve higher participation of women in preparation and monitoring of GPDP.



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What is a Mahila Sabha?

A Mahila Sabha is a women-only village level meeting designed to enable them to share their views and opinions related to women's issues, to be included in the local Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP) after approval in a Gram Sabha. The Mahila Sabha is attended by women from across the socio-economic spectrum. It provides a space for all women to contribute their experiences and knowledge related to women-centric issues and discuss solutions that will benefit the entire community.

Factors affecting participation of women in Rajasthan

Gender equality and equity remain a concern for Rajasthan. Deeply embedded patriarchal norms continue the marginalization of women. A vicious circle of poverty, patriarchy and low access to opportunities has resulted in the exclusion of women from social, political, and economic spheres. In addition, the economic regime of neo-liberal globalization has presented new challenges for the realization of the goal of gender equality as highlighted in the draft state policy¹ on women prepared by the Rajasthan government.

There exist many government programs that propagate women's participation but it continues to be very low in Rajasthan. Sadhu and Sharma in their study *Factors Influencing Participation of Women in Panchayat Raj Institution: A Case Study of Rajasthan* (2014) argue that factors like low educational status of women elected representatives (WER) and marriage do not allow women to choose politics as a career. Manuka Khanna, in her study *Political Participation of Women in India* (2009) argues that socio-economic variables, including age, education, occupation, income, religion, race, family background, residence, etc., greatly condition political participation. In general, persons with higher education and higher socio-economic status have easier access to politics than the uneducated and persons of lower status.

She also observed that issues discussed in the panchayat meeting were generally related to village development, mostly construction, provision of infrastructure and specific government schemes. All proposals made by women were discussed but women do not take part in decision making. Even if women did attend the meeting they felt hesitant and sometimes feared expressing their views. Their concerns and views were not given importance. Very often they were asked to sit outside the panchayat office while the meeting was on.

¹ Rajasthan state policy for women - Draft (2018) <http://wcd.rajasthan.gov.in/docs/Rajasthan%20State%20Policy%20for%20Women%202018.pdf>

The authors also found women have very limited roles within the family. The decision-making process within and outside family and any subsequent decisions are mostly influenced by males. Very often, the men take control and make decisions on their behalf. These include men, not just from their families and communities, but also from political leaders and local officials. This has limited the potential of decentralized governance in promoting gender equality and social justice.

The participation of women in the village planning process is low. Palanithuri (1997) in his evaluation case study of Panchayati Raj in Tamil Nadu reported that in male-headed Gram Panchayat meetings, women are not invited.

Improving women's participation through Mahila Sabhas

Political participation of women at Panchayat level and in forums like Gram Sabha provides them with a constitutional platform for equal representation and voice in issues related to the socio-economic development of their village. "Equal representation of women in the country's politics and local governance will eventually lead to amplified empowerment. Further, when there is equal distribution and balance of power between male and female, with no particular dominance, there remains scope of empowerment of women in every sense" (Das and Dhar, 2017). Such representation/participation also helps in making government gender-responsive towards development issues.

With support from APPI-DASRA, PRIA's program *Apna Swasthya, Apni Peהל: Reforming Local Health Governance in Rajasthan*² made substantive efforts to enhance women's participation and voice through energizing Mahila Sabhas. The project covered 104 Gram Panchayats in three blocks of Rajasthan namely Govindgarh (Jaipur district), Banswara and Talwara (Banswara district).

In 2017, when PRIA began its "Apna Swasthya Apni Peהל" initiative, we found that 85% of women were not aware of the roles and functions of their panchayats to ensure maternal health. A similar percentage had also never attended a Gram Sabha. They received infrequent and incomplete information regarding dates and times of Gram Sabhas and Ward Sabhas, Held back from exercising their political and social rights due to a rigid patriarchal society, burdened with household chores and the ghoonghat (veil), they generally felt uncomfortable 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. Alarming, their aspiration to get involved in local governance processes was low.

² Visit <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.

IRMA's working paper on *Making The Mahila Sabha Work: A Study In The Kutch District Of Gujarat* highlights that "because of Mahila Sabha, issues like women and childcare, health, sanitation, drinking water, PDS, education, mid-day meal, etc., which rarely get discussed in Gram Sabha meetings are now discussed in Mahila Sabha." It has been observed that women exhibit great enthusiasm towards attending Mahila Gram Sabha meetings in some parts of the country where their participation has been negligible. The study also found that "Mahila Sabha builds awareness among women, it provides a platform for freedom of expression without the fear of reprisal, it builds a sense of empowerment among women, and it provides opportunities to women for highlighting specific women-related issues in the public sphere."

The following recommendations are made based on the field-level interventions to organize and promote women's participation through Mahila Sabha over 3 years in 104 panchayats in Rajasthan.

Ensure separate Gram Sabhas as Mahila Sabhas to involve women in processes of decision making

The Panchayat guidelines in Rajasthan for preparation of GPDP mention the need to take initiatives for proper environment creation to ensure wider participation of women in Gram Sabha. The draft Rajasthan State Policy for women also makes provision for "*promoting of gender sensitive institution and operational frameworks to place gender interest at the core of governance and create an enabling for women participation and leadership in decision making of the State.*" **Designating some Gram Sabhas as Mahila Sabhas** at the gram panchayat level for discussions on issues related to girls and women will empower women. This can be taken up with the assistance of women ward members and SHG groups.

Regularization of Mahila Sabha

Although many programs and guidelines push for conducting Mahila Sabha, it has still not become a regular process. Many states only organise Mahila Sabhas after the government issues circulars. In many panchayats, the Mahila Sabha meetings are not given due publicity because of ignorance or lack of concern on the part of the Panchayat and local-level authorities. States like Himachal and Maharashtra have gone a step further and made constitutional amendments for conducting Mahila Sabha. A similar amendment is required in Rajasthan State Panchayat Raj Act.

Focus on building participation in Mahila Sabha

PRIA's assessment of the Mahila Sabhas it facilitated shows that women are more comfortable and feel safe in discussing women related issues in these meetings. As a woman-majority space, the Mahila Sabha also provides an opportunity for women and young girls to discuss issues like early marriage, teenage pregnancies, marital rape, domestic violence, etc. Such issues are never taken up in Gram Sabhas. Most women who attended the Mahila Sabhas admitted that the Sabha provided a unique opportunity for expressing their views, something that is not otherwise available to them. Biswas and Mishra's 2016 study shows that the forum not only provides space for self-expression but also boosts the equality and participation of women from different communities (inclusiveness) in developmental activities.

Providing and regularizing the space for participation is not sufficient to ensure women's voices are heard. There is an equal need to focus on building participation and developing capacities within the women to demand inclusion of their issues in village-level plans.³ Such demands put pressure on the Panchayat to be responsive and sensitive to address women-related issues. Empowered women across the 104 intervention Panchayats have been able to get issues like raising awareness on child marriages, menstrual health, maternal health, etc. in their local plans for GPDP 2019-2020. Women in Banswara and Talwara have formed a volunteer group and are mobilizing and giving information about Gram Sabha and Mahila Sabha to women in other villages.

A few small steps and successes builds confidence among some women to motivate all women and young girls to participate in Mahila Sabha and go to the Panchayat office and get their official work done on a timely basis.

³ See PRIA (2019), How to Conduct Mahila Sabhas: A Guide to Enhancing Women's Voice in Local Governance. https://www.pria.org/knowledge_resource/1564115720_How%20to%20conduct%20Mahila%20Sabhas_English.pdf

Conclusion

PRIs play a crucial role in strengthening the processes for participation in development planning. PRIA's experience in Rajasthan shows that regular Mahila Sabhas as part of the Gram Sabha process when preparing GPDPs provides a space through which the voice of women of different castes, classes and ages is heard by Panchayat officials and local authorities, and their concerns are included in GPDP. Enhancing women's participation will also help in achieving gender equality (SDG-5) for social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status, and reducing inequalities (SDG-10).



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/featuredstory-mahila-sabhas-and-the-power-of-mobilisation-44-203>>

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