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Women's Political Empowerment and Leadership

Module - 4

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Modules of Women's Political Empowerment and Leadership

Module 1: Engendering Governance

- Looking at Governance through the Gender Lens
- Engendering Governance
- Women's Empowerment

Module 2: Creating an Enabling Environment for Women's Political Leadership

- Creating an Enabling Environment for Women's Political Leadership
- Conscious and Unconscious Processes of a Group
- Making Groups Stronger

Module 3: Concept of Decentralisation and Democratic Decentralisation

- Types of Decentralisation
- Limitations to Decentralisation
- Gender Mainstreaming in Decentralisation
-

Module 4: Role of Panchayats in Implementing Government Schemes and Programmes

- Five Year Plans and Women's Component Plan
- Analysis of the Schemes and Programmes through the Gender Lens

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Introduction

In India, the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts (CAA) passed in 1992 led to the strengthening of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). These grassroots administrative and political units enable the devolution of power and make it accessible to every citizen. The gram sabha and gram panchayat in rural areas and municipalities in urban areas provide for better involvement of citizens at the local level to address concerns specific to them.

Grassroots level administration is crucial in understanding gender mainstreaming in a decentralised political structure. As we have already seen in Module 3, decentralisation is essential in the process of overturning traditional power structures. For decentralisation to be effective, there needs to be devolution of power to local self-governance bodies. One of the main tasks they then need to take upon themselves is that of gender mainstreaming in order to enable social transformation through engendering governance.

Learning Objectives

- Understand measures taken by the Indian government to improve the social, economic and political status of women in India
- Understand the role of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in implementing government schemes for female empowerment
- Critically examine these schemes through a gender lens

Unit 1: Five Year Plans and Women's Component Plan

In order to increase the well being of women, the Indian government has made significant shifts from 'welfare' during the 1950s to 'development' in the 1970, and to 'empowerment' since the 1990s. The Indian government, at all levels, regularly announces welfare schemes for different sections of society. These schemes could be central, or state specific, or a joint collaboration between the centre and a state. The schemes and programmes are designed for the vulnerable sections of the population. The development of rural India is imperative for the equitable growth of the Indian nation. Developmental policies and welfare programmes put into action through successive Five Year Plans,¹ both in women specific and women related sectors, have resulted in significant improvement in the socio-economic status of women.

Women's increased political participation has yielded positive results. If we look at issues central to development, including health, nutrition, family income and education, they have increasingly taken centre stage as the participation of women in PRIs/municipalities, village development boards and other governance structures grows. Women have shown that they have critical information about community resources. But these positive results have not translated into larger achievements as women still face discrimination, remaining largely excluded from core decision-making in local governance institutions.

The Ninth Five Year Plan (1997-2002) adopted the 'Women's Component Plan' as one of the major strategies of planning and budgeting, and directed both the central and state

¹ It refers to a document drawn by a central committee (Planning Commission of India) for the economic planning of India for a period of five years. The 12th Five Year Plan (2012-17) is being implemented.

governments to ensure that not less than 30 per cent of the funds/benefits are kept aside in all women related sectors (SAKHI, 2006). The Women's Component Plan aims to ensure gender equity in society. The overarching objective of the Women's Component Plan is the empowerment of women. It aims at overcoming the gender discrimination present in Indian society. Women's empowerment is a process through which women take charge of their lives. They acquire the knowledge and confidence to make informed choices while being aware of their rights.

A review of the plan in Kerala has shown that projects have been introduced to improve women's income and to enhance the status of women through adoption of non-traditional projects, some of which are transport cooperatives for women, training of women as masons, paramedical training, cycling training, and self-defence training. The Women's Component Plan has paved the way for women to enter the small-scale industry sector (SAKHI, 2006).

However, there have been some constraints and limitations:

- Most of the activities attempted to improve women's economic status with no focus on enhancing the social status of women.
- Although the primary emphasis was on promoting women's group entrepreneurship and leadership, most of the projects promoted individual women entrepreneurs.
- Most of the projects in the agricultural sector have been home-based adding to their burden without providing them with adequate income.
- Basic amenities like housing, water and sanitation were to be included in the general projects. Yet, in many areas they were included in the Women's Component Plan.
- Specific problems faced by women, such as domestic violence, lack of mobility and lack of control over their income, has not permeated mainstream development discussions.

Unit 2: Role of Panchayats in Implementing Government Schemes and Programmes

Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), the grassroots units of self-government in rural India, have been proclaimed as vehicles of socio-economic transformation. They are regularly empowered with progressive amendments made by the central and state governments. PRIs have been devolved the three powers of finance, functions and functionaries. They also have all powers related to planning and implementation as well as evaluation and social audit of programmes.

The 73rd amendment of the Indian constitution endorsed the power of governance in the hands of the gram sabha. The gram sabha is comprised of all the voters in a gram panchayat. It is virtually the 'house of villagers'. It is meant to develop a system of internal checks and balances of the elected representatives and the officials of different departments working at the village level. In other words, it is the ultimate repository of power over development decision-making, the local bureaucracy and the management of natural resources.

Effective and meaningful functioning of these bodies would depend on active involvement, contribution and participation of citizens, both male and female. The aim of every village becoming a republic with panchayats having powers has been translated into reality with the introduction of the three-tier panchayati raj system.

Local activists and concerned groups can team up with the members of the gram panchayats/gram sabhas to look into particular issues. For example, teachers, parents and local representatives can come together to monitoring the functioning of the mid-day meal system in primary schools. Such hands-on collaboration between people and their representatives would not have been possible if not for decentralisation of governance.

PRIs have the power of planning and implementing different government programmes. The power of identification and execution of the programme is the solitary authority of the PRI. The identification of beneficiaries and stakeholders also lies solely in their hands.

Some of the major functions of PRIs are:

- I. To plan for the implementation of programmes
- II. Identification of beneficiaries
- III. Formation of various committees for monitoring programmes
- IV. Conducting social audits
- V. Evaluating programmes and presenting it in the gram sabha

Unit 3: Analysis of Schemes and Programmes through a Gender Lens

In this unit, we will focus on various schemes and programmes by looking at them through a gender lens. By analysing these programmes, we will be able to see whether or not the schemes have a component for women. Do the schemes help in improving the socio-economic status of women and empowering them in the process? Do the schemes adequately represent a woman's perspective?

Despite the fact that the principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution in its Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties and Directive Principles, women are still denied their rights. The constitution grants equality to women, even in terms of education, employment and equal pay, yet these provisions simply have not been translated into practice.

Some of the positive measures taken by the Indian government include (Government of India, 2001):

- Empower the state to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women.
- From the Fifth Five-Year Plan (1974-78) onwards, there has been a marked shift in the approach to women's issues from welfare to development.
- An Act of Parliament set up the National Commission for Women in 1990 to safeguard the rights and legal entitlements of women.
- The 73rd and 74th CAA have provided for the reservation of seats in the local bodies of panchayats and municipalities.

- India has also ratified various international conventions committing to securing equal rights of women like CEDAW (Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discriminations against Women) in 1993.

The main objectives of the National Policy for the Empowerment of Women 2001, is (Government of India, 2001):

- To create an environment through positive social and economic policies for full development of women;
- Equal access to participation and decision-making;
- Equal access to health care, quality education, career and vocational guidance, employment, equal remuneration, safety and security;
- Strengthening the legal system – for prevention of discrimination against women;
- Changing societal attitude and community practices – by active participation and involvement of both men and women;
- Elimination of violence against girl child and women; and
- Strengthening partnership with civil societies.

Have these policies and programmes, promises and assurances been met? After all, democratic structures become legitimate and meaningful only when women participate in all spheres of democracy.

While analysing these schemes, one cannot ignore the constant clubbing of women and children together in programmes. This is sheer injustice to the needs of children and women as individuals. By clubbing children with women, we are denying them their needs as an independent group. Further, it is assumed that children are only women's concern and that, as a consequence, the expenditure on children directly benefits women. Nor does it account for the fact that there may be more boys than girl children, or acknowledge that men should be held responsible for their share of responsibility. Several mistakes are sometimes corrected in the budget statement presented by the central government. For instance, the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) has been shifted from Part A of the statement (which is women specific with 100 per cent allocation for women) to Part B of the statement. This reflects the acceptance that ICDS is a scheme primarily for children, not women (Das & Mishra, 2006).

The understanding of women specific schemes is equally and similarly flawed. More often than not, these schemes are analysed from a patriarchal perspective. For example, the inclusion of the cost of condoms and social marketing of contraceptives within the gender budget suggests that such things are purely a concern for women. Additionally, 100 per cent of allocations under the Department of Health and Family Welfare have been treated as exclusively for women, reinforcing the stereotype that anything to do with contraception and family planning is exclusively for the benefit of women. What's more, these initiatives seem to be out of touch with the priorities of women. Statistics from numerous budgets have shown that condoms form clearly the largest quantity of contraception supplied by the Ministry, far outnumbering the supplies of contraceptives that women use like oral pills, IUDs, tubal rings, etc.

Medical needs of girls and women go largely unnoticed as compared to those of men, and this is largely due to the fact that women are accorded low status in society.

Commendably, the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) and the Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana (Health Insurance Scheme) have been launched (Planning Commission, GoI, 2008). However, the reality on the ground has hardly changed, whether one looks at output indicators (like the huge shortfall in primary healthcare infrastructure or shortage of personnel) or outcome indicators (like the unacceptably high levels of maternal mortality or the increasing levels of anaemia). Some observers have commented that significant portions of NRHM are still rooted in the family planning mould – something that is regressive and coercive in nature and has been opposed by the women’s movement for years.

It is essential that water and sanitation schemes have a component for women, as they are the ones directly affected by their outcomes. This approach is not in the spirit of relegating women into private spaces but in recognition of gendered expectations and its effects on women. Indeed, the collection of water falls into women’s traditional household chores, along with all the work which must be done outdoors. Fetching water, particularly after sunset, is often not safe as women run the risk of sexual harassment. Similarly, for healthy living, sanitation is of prime importance for women given that the risk of them contracting disease is high.

Access to and ownership of housing and shelter is another aspect where we see gender based discrimination. According to the data collated by the Centre for Housing Rights and Eviction, an international housing rights NGO, women perform two-thirds of the world’s total working hours and yet own less than 1 per cent of the world’s property. Statistics for India do not show a different picture either – 70 per cent of the female workforce is still engaged in agriculture, and yet only 10 per cent of female farmers are landowners (Mishra & Jhamb, 2007). The entire allocation for Indira Awas Yojana (IAY)

has also been included as women specific because the houses built are registered in the name of women members (Das & Mishra, 2006). However, the houses built benefit men and women equally and cannot be seen solely for the benefit of women. IAY provides guidelines for the allocation of houses in the name of both husband and wife and, for the lack of any suitable female member, it can be allocated to male members. Beyond the registration clause, there is nothing else in the scheme to assume that the beneficiaries are primarily women. The Performance Budget 2006-07 of the Department of Rural Development says that in 2004-05, of the 15.16 lakh houses constructed, 7.38 lakh were allotted to women, 4.32 lakh were allotted jointly to husband and wife, and 2.72 lakh were allotted to men (Das & Mishra, 2006). Similarly, for the following year (figures available until December 2005), 4.95 lakh houses have been allotted to women and 2.55 lakh in joint names. Therefore, it cannot be claimed that entire allocations for IAY scheme are women specific (SAKHI, 2006).

Another crucial point that gets largely ignored is that while looking at schemes, the focus is primarily on the differences between men and women. However, one must also bear in mind the differences amongst different sections of women. Women are not a homogeneous group. We have to acknowledge the fact that women face intersectional discrimination. For instance, even in 2001, about two-thirds of adivasi women and 60 per cent of dalit women were illiterate (Planning Commission, GoI, 2001). Budgetary provisions for promoting the creation of small-scale enterprises, and other schemes for the upliftment and overall economic development of SCs and STs, show a slight increase. Promotion of such schemes significantly affects the economic empowerment of women, for until women become financially independent, their decision-making power cannot improve. By and large, the allocations can be accounted by Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY) and Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana (SGRY) schemes

of the earlier Department of Rural Development. The SGSY focuses on vulnerable groups among the poor. Accordingly, SC/STs will account for a minimum of 50 per cent, women for 40 per cent and disabled for 3 per cent of the total *swarozgaris* (self-employed) assisted during the year.

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is a major scheme for women's employment, as more than 48 per cent of the total days of work generated have been by women, and the increase in allocation of NREGA from 2008-09 reflects the potential of this programme. However, probing further, many concerns of women's participation in MGNREGA still remain unaddressed. Ironically, since the wages are lower, women are sent for such work while men look for work that pays better. Studies have revealed some other challenges that exist such as absence of childcare facilities. Given the fact that there is an overall significant participation by women in MGNREGA, efforts should be made to address women's concerns.

With large-scale focus on SHGs, the critical issues of women's empowerment and equity get overshadowed, and there is evidence to suggest the exclusion of Muslim, dalit and tribal women from many such groups. While forming SHGs, one has to make sure to look at group dynamics in order to ensure complete participation of people from all backgrounds.

Many flagship programmes continue to capitalise on and exploit women's underpaid work. The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) hires para-teachers who are largely women who have passed class VIII and are paid monthly wages as low as Rs.1000 to Rs.3000. These women account for approximately 16 per cent of all schoolteachers in the country.

Similarly, under the ICDS, anganwadi workers and helpers who are essentially doing the maximum work are paid between Rs.1000 and Rs.5000 per month. The amount paid to them is less than the minimum wage in most states. The argument for not paying them the minimum wage is that these are 'social workers' or 'volunteers' and, therefore, they should not be paid wages but an honorarium, given that anganwadis are open for only a few hours in the day and hence the work is not fulltime. But if one looks at the ground reality, the work expected by an anganwadi worker is more than full-time. The NRHM also relies on women's unpaid work. The Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA), who is the most important component of the programme, is expected to perform a formidable list of tasks and is also supposed to be an honorary volunteer. Although some states are making an effort to pay them, what they are paid is grossly inadequate. It is important and just that the state pays women at the very least for the work it gets out of them.

A SWOT analysis can be used to review projects. SWOT means analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats or challenges. Every scheme can be listed and a SWOT analysis conducted. SWOT will help in understanding if the programme/scheme has succeeded in helping to raise women's status, reasons for any failure, and to formulate alternative schemes which are better able to prioritise women's concerns.

Summary

At the end of Module 4, you have become familiar with some interventions made by the Indian government regarding women's empowerment. You have also examined the role of panchayats in implementing these programmes and schemes. Finally, the module analyses some flagship schemes and programmes through a gender lens to enable us to understand and review some common loopholes and gaps when it comes to mainstreaming gender in governance and development in India.

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