

Kesla Women Enter the Political Sphere: Grow as Citizens

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Representing themselves in panchayats, where they had faced humiliation and disrespect earlier, women have fought unitedly against the system and gradually gaining the respect and recognition of men who are beginning to acknowledge that women have equal rights of citizenship.

“When we speak, we are afraid that our words will not be heard or welcomed. But when we are silent, we are still afraid. So it is better to speak.” This was the realization of the women in Kesla, Madhya Pradesh, based on their experience of getting actively engaged in the wider social and political spheres. Earlier, women were only engaged in domestic chores and were least concerned with what happened in the world outside. There has been a drastic shift, however, in their mindsets; and its impact is heartening to see.

This is the third year of the Gender Equality Programme (GEP) in Kesla. This programme was designed to empower women on the socio-economic as well as political fronts. When the programme was first introduced and before outlining the engagement methodology, a baseline study was conducted to get an idea of the actual situation. The baseline survey provided us with statistics that have helped us devise strategies relevant to the context of Kesla.

During the survey, it was clearly visible that the community was knowledgeable about the significance of savings and credit, and the various livelihood interventions (namely, agriculture, poultry, and sericulture) that have helped families strengthen their financial stability and meet the demand of food sufficiency. However, in terms of strengthening the position of women in the family, these interventions had not had the impact expected even though the delivery apparatus used had placed the women at centre-stage.

Decision-making, the control over assets, and the buying and selling patterns of produce remained with the men of the family, who were, by and large, authoritative and dominating. There was a resigned acceptance within the community about gender-based discrimination. The women were not concerned about inequalities; they accepted the societal law and did not question its practice or its origins. They just continued to live subjugated lives.

There were some women, who recognized the discrimination but were reluctant to violate practices they considered the 'law of nature'. Even though it seemed unpleasant to us outsiders, it was part of their daily routine. Interestingly, the community was very conscious about its rights and entitlements, and also understood how the governance structure operates in the region. Whereas the women were knowledgeable and aware about the operating structures, their presence and influence was significantly low.

The women believed they should limit themselves to the affairs of the home and that matters outside the home would be taken care of for them, even though, it was clear, there was nobody to look after them on that front—neither the elected representatives, the duty bearers nor the family spearhead, the male, looked after the interests of the women.

On various fronts, for example, the right to vote, the right to demand participation in local governance structures and the access to PDS, they were either driven by force or subdued because of social milieus. The women believed they should limit themselves to the affairs of the home and that matters outside the home would be taken care of for them, even though, it was clear, there was nobody to look after them on that front—neither the elected representatives, the duty bearers nor the family spearhead, the man, looked after the interests of the women. The situation of the men was that they were responsible for fulfilling the needs of the family but they also faced constraints such as the lack of knowledge, skills, confidence and the lack of recognition outside the family.

Women, it was evident, had unity and, thanks to their long association with SHGs, were in the habit of deliberation and consensus making. This existing scenario helped us to come to the conclusion that it was important for women to learn about their rights of citizenship and to project themselves as active agents on the political map. Otherwise, governance was

monopolized by a few influential people within the society and it was left to them to decide the fate of the whole community.

These reflections helped us underline the problem statement and, accordingly, we envisaged the engagement methodology—to work on uplifting the social and political identity of women in society. We realized that the women would have to prove their mettle at the family level as well as in societal affairs. We would need to help them develop an identity as agents of

change in the socio-political sphere.

We went with the belief that if women were capable of thinking for the betterment of their family, they could also think the same for the village and society. It was decided to conduct a Family-based Well-being Planning (FBWP) exercise with each of the SHG members covered under the GEP. In the FBWP process, the facilitator asked each of the participants within an SHG to share their issues, difficulties and challenges that they want to bring to immediate attention and want action to be taken upon. The process was facilitated in an environment in which women were given an assurance that what they shared would be strictly confidential. The women could share anything with the process facilitator, without involving the rest of the group.

It wasn't easy. Would the women feel safe expressing themselves? As soon as the process was initiated within the SHGs, however, these concerns were cast aside. When doing FBWP in the first year, it was found that a majority of demands put forth by women could be actualized through the village *panchayat*. The demands were for ration cards, housing, a

common sitting place (*chaupal*), road connectivity, pension, drinking water facility, etc., which were directly/indirectly associated with the *panchayat*. The demands needed to be placed before the *gram sabha*. The issues affecting the lives and livelihoods of the women at the family level and also the issues related to women's identity, self-respect and recognition were very few in the first year.

Evidently, we needed to engage in capacitating women on their rights and entitlements by helping them place their demands before the *panchayat* in an assertive manner. This was challenging not only because women were less aware about the operating procedure of the *gram sabha* and the *gram panchayat* but also because the women's presence at the *gram sabha* was defying the social construct.

But we knew that some tough stand would need to be taken to promote women's participation in the *gram sabha*. We decided to work on three fronts, that is, generating awareness, enhancing participation and providing the necessary support to actualize the demands. Together, these would be the motivating factors that would lead the way forward.

For awareness creation, we decided to carry out specific training programmes for women on the functioning of the *gram sabha* and inform them about the schemes under which their demands could be accessed. These demands were identified through the FBWP. Initially, the trainings concentrated on building an understanding about the *gram sabha*, its utility and its significance to deal with village-level issues and to meet the demands that were floated such as the requirements of roads, a *chaupal*, a hand pump and the follow-

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up on the Indira Awaas Yojana. The next step was to ensure maximum participation in the *gram sabha* and to uphold the spirit of unity when floating the demands.

The biggest challenge was when the women attended a *gram sabha* for the first time. They

tried to understand its procedure. They realized that earlier they used to blindly sign the *gram sabha* register when it was circulated within the villages, to complete the quorum. They also realized that there were crucial decisions that were taken, which they had assented to by signing. The women, therefore, began to ask the *panchayat* to share with them the agenda before asking them to sign. This was not taken well by the 'ever-so-knowledgeable' *panchayat* and the influential personalities. In many *panchayats*, the demands of the women were rejected on the grounds that if the women wanted to participate in the *gram sabha*, they would have to attend it as per the liking of the *panchayat* and that no demands would be tolerated.

Many women stopped confronting the men and accepted the situation. There were some villages, however, where the women started walking out of the meetings without signing the meeting register by saying that they would not accept the decision because it has not taken into account their views or that the *panchayat* had not incorporated their agenda.

The men thought that this was a temporary whim and that the women would again start following the norms as they had done earlier. But this time their assumption was wrong. The women began to discuss the challenges in their Clusters and Federations and were constantly guided by the knowledgeable Community Service Providers (CSPs) from the Narmada Mahila Sangh (NMS).

They also called upon women from other villages to join hands with them, especially those, who after an initial show of courage, had given in, calling it their fate. The CSPs continued to engage with the village women, to guide them in a meaningful manner. In many a *panchayat*, the CSPs accompanied the women to the meetings, to give them confidence when interacting with *panchayat* officials.

The sharing of struggles, attempts and small successes at different forums such as SHGs, Clusters and Federations was encouraged regularly. Initially, there were mixed stories. There were some women who came back victorious saying that they had heard the entire proceedings and had also submitted their individual demands whereas there were others who said that they had been treated badly, abused and that they felt ashamed when they went to the *gram sabha*.

There were also many *panchayats* where women were asked to sit behind the male members, who sat in a circle around the entire floor. Such *panchayats* were identified; and it was decided that CSPs, along with the community women, would meet the *panchayat* officials and register the women's discomfort. Once the women received the backing of the CSPs, they gathered enough courage to protest strongly and also warned the *panchayat* that if they didn't change their attitude towards women, they would have to pay price for it.

The CSPs confronted the *panchayat* members on the basis of laws and Acts. The *panchayats* were given a strong message that the women are aware of the guidelines and norms. This had a great impact. The members of the *panchayat*

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now know very well that the Federation women are well-versed with the proceedings of the *gram sabha* and their rights.

The SHG women were then made aware of the various schemes available to them, their eligibility criteria and how to track the progress of their demands made to the *gram sabha*. The training of SHG representatives

and CSPs on local governance and the various schemes has helped in this direction. Earlier, when the women and the CSPs tried to place their demands in the *gram sabha*, they felt inadequate because of their lack of knowledge of the different Acts and policies. PRADAN as well as other external resource organizations have regularly informed and trained the CSPs on issues of local governance, the various schemes available and the processes to help women access their rights and entitlements.

Gradually, there has been a turnaround, in terms of confidence and the level of knowledge and competency within the CSPs. Literature and resource material have been collected from various sources and provided to the CSPs, to help enhance their knowledge and skills. A Leadership Camp was also organized, in which the women representatives were taught about the *Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas (PESA) Act*, various schemes and the processes, to be able to make effective presentations at different forums. These SHG representatives have acted as a catalyst at the village level, with the CSPs facilitating their action.

In the first year, a large-scale promotion activity was carried out about the *gram sabha*, through pre- and post-*gram sabha* training programmes. The women were trained in application-writing, made aware of various schemes and the importance of collecting

a written receipt against the submitted application. Training programmes were carried out at the SHG level, and then for the village as a unit, in order to reach more people. Along with this, one member from each of the SHGs was trained on local governance. This person was called the 'SHG representative'.

SHG representatives were selected by the group from the SHG, during the FBWP sessions. The aim was to have a knowledgeable person at each of the SHGs to catalyze the action within the group. The representatives were trained on various issues that would be dealt with in the *gram sabha*, for example, the application filing process and its follow-up process. SHG representatives were also groomed on leadership skills because they were supposed to anchor the processes at the SHG level.

Initially, when approaching the *gram sabha* or when taking the grievances to the district and block officials, the women were hesitant. The trained SHG and village representatives then acted as leaders, giving confidence to the women. This helped in registering voices which were not heard earlier. Also, these representatives acted as a bridge between the SHG/Village and the Federation, passing on information at appropriate times, and tracking the action over issues raised during the FBWP and in the *gram sabha*, block and district administration. Many motivational meetings were organized in villages, to raise the awareness that raising one's voice was an action in itself. This is better than meekly watching the happenings and cursing the poor pace of development and action.

Each and every attempt and all small/big milestones have been shared in Federation and Cluster meetings, the CSP experience-sharing

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meetings and in the Leadership Camp, and the response has been great. All these factors helped in speeding up the results of the efforts. People from other villages want to be included in the fold of NMS so that they can also make their presence felt in the socio-political space in their

respective villages. This is a clear indication that the women of the Kesla region are setting an example for others to follow.

Through constant engagement, the women in Kesla have gradually started representing themselves in the *panchayats*, in which they had faced humiliation and disrespect to begin with, and which had hampered their momentum in the initial year. There were other villages where the women upheld the spirit of unity and fought against the system and have gradually begun to get respect and recognition. Men are becoming aware that women have equal rights of citizenship. In many of the villages, the demands made by the women have begun to get actualized, and this information spread across the territory through Federations and Clusters. Once the women gained confidence, they have not looked back; instead, they are asserting themselves and their rights more and more.

In many villages, after seeing the women as a threat to the system at first, the *panchayat* representatives have begun to look at women's participation as a promising change. They have managed to establish an environment of trust, which has resulted in increased participation, with the active involvement of women in the *gram sabha*. They also witnessed growth in the number of demands getting actualized over the year. The demands were of two kinds—individual-centric (pension, BPL card, farm bund, well) as well as community-centric (*chaupal*, roads, *anganwadi*, hand pump,

an effective PDS). These demands look very ordinary; however, each of these demands, though seemingly small, impacted the lives of women significantly.

After three years, there are more than 4,000 women attending *gram sabha* meetings quite regularly and another 2,000 women attending at least one of the *gram sabha* meetings in a year. The result is that their demands are getting actualized through the *panchayats*. In some *panchayats*, all the demands raised by the women in the last three years have been registered, and action has been taken on them. In other villages, almost all the demands generated through the FBWP, which were related to the *gram sabha*, have been addressed and acted upon. This is the reason why the momentum has been rising; and as the news spreads, it is breaking women's shackles in adjoining villages as well.

The women now increasingly participate in and influence the local governance structure. They visit the block and district offices regularly and do not hesitate to voice their concerns before the officials and duty bearers. In the past two years, more than 2,000 women have attended block-and district-level hearings, called *Jan Sunvai*, and have voiced their grievances that have remained unsettled at the village and the *panchayat* levels.

Motivated by the healthy relationship established between the village women and the *panchayats* over the years, PRADAN began participating in the planning process in 2012 in a number of villages where the community wanted to create infrastructure, build assets, and undertake land- and water-related works under MGNREGA. A meeting was conducted with a few *panchayat* representatives and village women, in which it was agreed that the planning of works in the village should be done by the villagers themselves because they are

the best judges to decide what they require. The villagers would work with the *panchayat* in getting the plans sanctioned.

Once this was decided, the planning took place in two of the villages of a development block, and the plan (after being sanctioned by the *gram sabha*) was submitted to the block and district administration for approval. During the interaction, the women also realized the challenges that the *panchayats* face in their operational area because of which many times the *panchayat* finds it difficult to move on with the plan that the villagers want to carry out. There were pressures from the administration, lack of trust between the community and the *panchayat*, issues with the rural banking system, insufficient human resources, etc. Many *panchayat* representatives now seek the support of the women, inviting them to accompany them to put pressure on the administrative officials, to ensure that the demands of the community get actualized.

In the meantime, new MGNREGA guidelines were introduced, in which it was emphasized that to mitigate the issues related to delayed payment, the payment for labour would be deposited in the bank accounts of the beneficiaries directly through the Electronic Fund Management System (EFMS). Under these new guidelines, labour groups will be formed of the landholding and landless families in the villages. A batch size will be about 50 job card holders per group.

The groups have the power to select a 'mate', who will be responsible for all the correspondence and field work. The groups will be able to demand work from him/her. Also, he/she will act as the interface between the group and the *panchayat*. The groups also decided to plan the SoP (Shelf of Project) for the next two years through community participation. Information has been passed to the villagers

about these happenings, and in many villages, women have decided to form groups of their own and select a mate for their groups.

There were some hurdles because the *panchayats* were not aware of the new guidelines and norms. They hesitated to come with the people. In many *panchayats*, when women went to submit the application to form their own MGNREGA group and to appoint a woman as a mate, many people tried to frighten them by saying that a mate has to transact with people at the village and block levels several times in a month and it would not be an easy job for women. The women leaders present had been trained in the new guidelines; they confronted the *panchayat* by saying that they would support the mate and that the guidelines do not ask women to transact away from the *panchayat*. They also confronted the *panchayat* telling them not to misguide the women or they would complain to the block and district officials.

Groups have since been formed in almost all the villages. There are all-women groups and they have a mate of their liking. SoP preparations have begun and the Madhya Pradesh MGNREGA cell has decided to train their *Rojgar Sahayak* on 'effective community based planning' and SoP preparation methods. In Kesla and Sohagpur blocks of Hoshangabad district, and partially in the blocks of Betul district, PRADAN has aligned with the MGNREGA cell and the district officials in demonstrating the planning exercise with community participation.

The planning under MGNREGA and the SoP-creation activity are golden opportunities for villagers to collaborate with the government and help in the village-level planning process

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and for building the capacities of the *Rojgar Sahayaks*, directly responsible for carrying out the decentralized planning process in the villages. However, so far, they do not have the required skills and knowledge.

In August 2013, a training programme was conducted by PRADAN for the *Rojgar Sahayaks* of Hoshangabad block on the effective ways of decentralizing the planning process, whereby individual demands and needs will be articulated by the village community and the *Rojgar Sahayaks* will explain the MGNREGA guidelines and the nature of works undertaken under this scheme so that the community can relate to them easily. The aim was to develop an SoP, based on the demands of the community and with their participation. Similar training programmes were then carried out by the government in the other blocks of Betul district.

The decentralized planning process was carried out effectively in 14 villages in Hoshangabad and Betul districts this year, in which the village women and their family members, along with the *panchayat* representatives, detailed the list of activities to be carried out on individual lands as well as on common land. The SoP has been prepared, and after the *gram sabha* consent, it has been sent for approval and budgeting at the district level.

When carrying out this exercise, what was most appealing was the fact that the village community (especially women), participated in this process effectively and willingly. They were reasonably good with options-generation and evaluation. They generated the options best suited for the family and the village-level infrastructure creation under MGNREGA, even though they needed more knowledge about

MGNREGA and further training on the nature of work under MGNREGA, the demand-driven nature of MGNREGA, and the provisions related to payments and work prioritization. Through the planning until the *gram sabha* approval, the village women stood firm about their plans and put it forward with ownership. This has given the *panchayats* the confidence to place their demands before the block and district officials.

The members understood that voting is their individual right and that women, this time around, need not cast their vote under pressure or influence. They need to make their own decisions based on their own discrimination, after evaluating the promises that the different parties make

As the Assembly elections were approaching, the NMS women were prepared to incorporate the agendas related to women's equity, village development as well as steps to reduce the instances of Violence against Women (VAW) within the society in the election manifesto of different political parties. After the all-Federation meeting held in Bhopal on 24 September 2013, in which women from various PRADAN-promoted Federations got together to prepare a list of their agenda. The NMS members then visited the party offices of two major parties (the Congress and the BJP) in Betul district. Both the parties welcomed such a move from the women and have promised to incorporate the demands in their manifesto.

A simultaneous process was adopted by the NMS, to orient its members about the demands that they raised before the parties. The members understood that voting is their individual right and that women, this time around, need not cast their vote under pressure or influence. They need to make their own

decisions based on their own discrimination, after evaluating the promises that the different parties make and giving it some conscious thought.

It is not only the effort that the women have put in over the years or their success which are acting as a source of energy, but the realization, wisdom and knowledge that the women have gained in this period that is an indication of their empowered state. The confidence with

which the women engage with the *panchayats* and the local administration is a welcome sign. They are treated with respect by the *panchayat* representatives.

Women now recognize that it will not serve their cause if they behave as mere spectators. They also realize that they have to continue to convert challenges into opportunities. These women have disproved the myth that women are only good caretakers of the home and lack the competency to participate in the social decision-making. With this, they are beginning to feel like citizens.

The emerging leadership pool (of village representatives, Cluster representatives, the CSPs/CRPs) are now aggressively engaged in their roles. Many of them have a visionary approach. This is an opportunity for NMS to build upon their skills and knowledge so that there can be a considerable number of Service Providers within the community, with the competency to tackle persisting challenges.