

# The Changemakers



United Nations Entity for Gender Equality  
and the Empowerment of Women

## Promoting Women's Political Leadership and Governance in India and South Asia

### South Asia

Bangladesh, Bhutan, India,  
Nepal and Pakistan

### India

Andhra Pradesh  
(Mahabubnagar,  
Srikakulam & Vizianagaram)

Karnataka (Dharwad &  
Mysore)

Madhya Pradesh  
(Jhabua & Sehore)

Odisha (Dhenkanal &  
Gajapati)

Rajasthan  
(Alwar, Dungarpur & Tonk)

**VISION:** To enable elected women representatives to realize their rights.

**SCENARIO 2012:** Over half a million elected women representatives in five states of India will be empowered.

**VISION 2030:** To ensure that elected representatives, both men and women, have equal influence over political decision-making.

When women leaders assert themselves, their presence goes from mere political representation to effective political participation. UN Women, along with the Government of India, works to strengthen the leadership skills and confidence of women leaders in *gram panchayats* (village councils) so they can make informed decisions that benefit all.

“Women are not being trained to deliver for the *panchayats*. Instead, the *panchayat* is expected to deliver for women by focusing on issues central to their lives.”

– Anne F. Stenhammer  
Regional Programme Director  
UN Women South Asia

## Strategies

**RESEARCH:** Advocate for policy changes and legal reform

**TRAINING:** Build skills and knowledge of elected women representatives

**CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE:** Ensure and maintain high standards of training and research

## Donor

The Royal Government of Norway

## Budget

USD10 million (2009 - 2012)

## Partners

National Institute of Rural Development; State Institutes of Rural Development; Panchayati Raj Departments; Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration; The Hunger Project; The International Centre for Research on Women; National Commission for Women and Children, Royal Government of Bhutan; UNDP Bhutan; United Nations Resident Coordinator in Bhutan.

## Why Women’s Participation is Important?

In South Asia only 7% of women are members of political parties.

Representation of women leaders is low across South Asia – Bangladesh (18.5% in the 2008 Parliament); Bhutan (8.5% in the National Assembly); Sri Lanka (5.3% in the Parliament).

Women’s representation in parliament stands between 3% to 34% across countries in South Asia.

Nepal’s 2007 Interim Constitution ruled that women must constitute at least 33% of the candidates in parliamentary elections. It is currently the only country in the region that has reached the 30% critical mass threshold for women in parliament.

(Sources: World Development Report 2011, World Bank; Progress of the World’s Women 2011-12, UN Women; Country Review of Women’s Political Participation 2011, UN Women & ICRW)





## India's Elected Leaders: Why They Need Support

India has witnessed the world's largest experiment in grassroots democracy, triggered by the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Amendments to the Indian Constitution in 1993. These amendments established local self-governments or *Panchayati Raj Institutions* (PRIs) as the third tier of governance. With *gram panchayats* or village councils as the foundation, this system has promoted people's participation in planning, decision-making and service delivery. Devolution of powers to *panchayats* has been another advantage.

The Constitution also provided for one-third reservation for women. As a result, more than a million women have been elected to office in each of the three rounds of elections held thus far. Today women occupy more than 42 percent of seats in local bodies exceeding the quota and demonstrating a surge in their desire to participate. In India, 14 states have now passed legislation reserving at least 50 percent seats for women.

Challenges persist that restrict women from running for office and exercising their rights as elected leaders. They now need support to become effective leaders and influence decision-making in *panchayat* meetings. With training, skills development and the confidence to speak up, women leaders will be able to carve their paths and lead the way. In this manner, the UN Women programme will be a catalyst for important changes in the future.

### *Political Support*

The Union and State Governments have provided unconditional support for the programme that is bound to have a long-term impact. India's Honourable Minister of Panchayati Raj and Tribal Affairs, Shri V. Kishore Chandra Deo has commended the joint Government of India-UN Women programme. "Changes can be brought about effectively and equitably at this basic (*gram panchayat*) level," he said at a consultation for the programme. "As far as I know, few projects have put such emphasis. I am happy that the Government of India and UN Women have positioned the issue at the right level." The Minister urged the "need to ensure that women can play an effective role as leaders without facing discrimination or violence".

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Government of India



## Standing Tall & Proud: Rajkala Devi

**Rajkala Devi** is a determined lady. She has made a place in the political arena in her village, one that was largely dominated by men for the last 60 years. Today, she stands tall as the first-ever woman *Sarpanch* (elected head of village council) of Hingwahera *Gram Panchayat* (village council) in Alwar district of Rajasthan. She is admired and respected by one and all.

Rajkala Devi focuses on addressing critical issues such as pensions for old people and widows as well as education for girls. Soon after she came to power, Rajkala ensured that poor families got Below Poverty Line cards. Besides her participation in the village and block level *panchayat* meetings, Rajkala takes education very seriously. She frequently visits the *Anganwadi* Centres (centres to combat child hunger and malnutrition) to ensure that children get proper meals and that there are adequate teachers.

Leadership training workshops held through UN Women's programme have clearly helped her evolve as a leader. She uses her leadership skills and position to encourage other women to voice their problems and take active part in the *gram sabhas* (public village meetings).

Collective action and support from other women has also meant a lot to Rajkala. *Mahila jagruk manches* (women's awareness platforms), formed by UN Women and The Hunger Project, bring together women citizens and other women members of the *panchayat*. Rajkala gets much needed assistance from these *Manches* where women discuss and find solutions to important issues such as alcoholism.

During the meetings, women leaders also regularly update Rajkala with the needs of the villagers and help her prioritize work. With support from her ward members, Rajkala confidently takes issues forward to the district authorities for action. "Though I am learning to articulate our needs to the district level functionaries, I am very sure of my priorities. I want to focus on roads, pensions, benefits for poor families and education," says Rajkala Devi.

“ My focus is on girls' education. I really believe that a village can only be progressive if its girls are educated. ”

– Rajkala Devi  
Sarpanch, Hingwahera Gram Panchayat  
Alwar district, Rajasthan



## *I Stand Committed:* **Badam Devi**

**Badam Devi** has challenged many stereotypes and myths. Earlier, she was a leader in the fields where she was an agricultural labourer and reared cattle. Today, as the *Sarpanch* (elected head of village council) of Lahora *Gram Panchayat* (village council) in Rajasthan's Tonk district, she guides the community with her political acumen. Even though she never went to school herself, she understands the value of education for boys and girls. "If I were educated enough, I would have accomplished a lot more," she explains. Badam Devi, with support from her ward members, now regularly checks that schools in her village have teachers and that children get mid-day meals.

She monitors smooth access to government schemes on health, education, sanitation and nutrition. In a short span of one year as *Sarpanch*, she has learnt to identify and address issues of public importance. It took time, but through the trainings organized by UN Women with the State Government of Rajasthan and The Hunger Project, she has learnt the procedural intricacies of government schemes on health and education.

## Progress

### BETTER PARTICIPATION AND SUPPORT

315 *Mahila Jagruk Manches* (women's awareness platforms) have been formed with elected women representatives from 635 *gram panchayats* in Madhya Pradesh, Odisha and Rajasthan.

Almost 5,000 elected women representatives and over 17,000 women citizens have participated in these *Manches*.

This experience has shown that discussion with other women citizens provides much-needed support and helps women leaders in prioritizing issues and taking important decisions.



## *My New Found Identity:* **Sunita Rajawat**

Through the *Mahila Jagruk Manch*, young and energetic **Sunita Rajawat** transformed her identity from a housewife to a public speaker urging other women to help their community. "Initially I was a woman confined to the household, but I have now stepped out of that threshold. I can now speak out my mind, express my views and do something worthwhile," says Sunita Rajawat.

A *Ward Panch* (member of the village council) from *Vanasthali Gram Panchayat* (village council) in Rajasthan's Tonk district, her innate quality of leadership is manifest in the bold steps she takes in campaigning against domestic violence and for women's financial independence.

## **Progress**

### **FILING NOMINATIONS**

In Bihar, SWEEP\* campaigns helped women candidates file nominations and manage electoral campaigns in *panchayat* elections.

### **MARKED INCREASE IN CANDIDATES**

During the *panchayat* elections in Bihar, there was a marked increase in the number of women canvassing during elections. More women contested from general seats, and not just those reserved for them.

\*SWEEP – Strengthening Women's Empowerment through Electoral Processes



## *I Dream of an Ideal Village:* **Indrani Chaurasia**

A born dreamer and an energetic social worker, 45-year-old **Indrani Chaurasia** dreams of making her village an 'ideal one'. As an Elected Ward Member of *Samaspur Gram Panchayat* (village council) from Muzaffarpur in Bihar, Indrani is

devoting all her energy to fulfilling her dream. Her active association with women Self Help Groups and *Mahila Pratinidhi Sangathan* (organisation of women's representatives), as part of the UN Women Programme, has increased her capacity and skills for the development of her village.

## ***Standing Up to Violence:*** **Manjulata Sahoo**

**Manjulata Sahoo** does not know the word 'governance' or 'political participation'. But her story exemplifies the true meaning of what a woman leader can do.

As an elected women's representative from the Nadhara *Gram Panchayat* (village council) in the Dhenkanal district of Odisha, Manjulata has ensured that more than 100 old and disabled people in her village got pensions. Her efforts have meant that 25 poor people including widows got free housing. Three tube-wells provide drinking water to villagers, school children and young infants in the *anganwadi* centers.

When Manjulata tried to stop corruption in her village, she was severely beaten up. "I noticed that my ward member had wrongly allocated a house to herself. I protested and wrote to district officials. As a result, the house now has been allocated to a young widow," she explains. Despite her injuries, she will stand for the next *panchayat* elections.

People believe that Manjulata is as capable as any male *panchayat* leader. "Earlier women did not come out, but now seeing Manjulata, they come to meetings and express their views. They have become a part of the development process here," says Mayadhar Behera, President, Village Committee, Nadhara.

Manjulata says she got the courage to keep working from the trainings organized by UN Women with The Hunger Project and PIPFAR, a local Non-Governmental Organisation. "At these trainings, I got the confidence to deal with these challenges. I got tremendous support from the team, and they urged me to continue working despite all my problems," says Manjulata.



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**– Manjulata Sahoo**  
**Sarpanch, Nadhara Gram Panchayat**  
**Dhenkanal District, Odisha**



## UN Agencies Come Together to Empower Elected Women Leaders

UN Women, UNDP and UNICEF in India are working together to empower women political leaders. As a first of its kind, the partnership enables the UN agencies to combine resources at all levels. To improve training for elected women representatives across 13 states in India, the United Nations will develop a common capacity development strategy with a training plan, training resources and modules. Common deliverables, partners and locations will make programmes more effective.

A *Gram Panchayat* is the village council that looks after the economic and social development of the village. The members are elected for five years. They draw up village plans, monitor funds allocated to them and resolve disputes. The *Gram Panchayat* forms the foundation of the local self-government in India.

A *Sarpanch* is the elected head of the village council, elected for a period of five years. A *Sarpanch* presides over the meetings of the *Gram Panchayat*, supervises its work and also implements the development schemes of the village.

A *Gram Sabha* is the fundamental unit of local democracy in India. It is a village meeting in which all adult residents of the village take part to discuss important issues.

## Progress

### RESEARCH

Research in Bhutan and India will gauge the status of women's participation in politics.

UN Women and the Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research (NIBR) will develop a Gender Responsive Index, to rate South Asian countries according to the participation of women in politics and governance.

### STATE LEVEL AGREEMENTS

UN Women has signed agreements with State Governments in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha and Rajasthan to ensure that at least 100 *gram sabhas* (public village meetings) are held in each district, with substantive discussions and decisions on gender.



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Send your queries to [suraj.kumar@unwomen.org](mailto:suraj.kumar@unwomen.org). Read more at <http://www.unwomensouthasia.org>

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