



Readers' Forum



Need Enabling Environment

I collected information from 30 *sarpanches* regarding the participation of women *sarpanches* in the political and developmental process of *gram panchayats*. These women were elected in the Nurpooor Bedi and Khamano block situated in the districts Roopnagar and Fatehgarh Sahib in Punjab during the 1998 to 2003 term. As far as the educational status of women *sarpanches* is concerned, 33.34 per cent are illiterate and 43.32 per cent are matriculate. A colossal 96.67 per cent of women *sarpanches* contested and were elected to the post for the first time after the reservation of seats for women. It is interesting to note that 83.34 per cent of women *sarpanches* contested at the request and with the support of the community. This implies that creating awareness in the community regarding the importance of *Panchayat Raj* institutions can be of great help.

In the traditionally orthodox Jat Sikh dominated villages of Punjab, women *sarpanches* are acting under the shadow of their husbands and in-laws. Their husbands and, in their absence, in-laws perform all functions of the *panchayat* on women's behalf. Many female *panchayats* act just like a rubber stamp and are totally ignorant about the *gram panchayat* system. One of the women *sarpanches* told me, "My husband is doing all work

on my behalf. I have heard about the *gram sabha* but do not know what are its functions, how many times it is called in a year, who are its members. You better ask these questions to him."

With all sadness, another woman *sarpanch* said, "Family and community beliefs and values are the greatest hurdles in front of us. They do not allow us to move alone and sit



with the community. Moreover, we are also not aware about our roles and responsibilities; change in attitude of the family and community towards women ... is essential."

For instance, only special circumstances enabled a woman *sarpanch*, Harjit Kaur, a widow and daughter of *panchayat* Ajneer, to get a lot done during her tenure, such as constructing a high school, installing hand pumps, constructing sewerage and community houses, sanctioning widow pensions and old age

pensions, etc. One of the *sarpanchinis* in the village belonging to a traditional Jat family who married into the village said about her: "Oh! *Bua* (aunt), she is a daughter of the village and not subject to restrictions in her village. She has no family responsibilities and she is more mobile. Therefore, do not compare her with us."

During my fieldwork for the Panchayati Reproductive and Child Health Committees, I knocked at the gate of a *sarpanch*; a woman came to the door. I asked her whether the *sarpanch* is in the house. She told me, "No." When I told her the purpose of my visit, she revealed that actually she was the *sarpanch*. I asked her why she had not told the truth when I first came to the door. She frankly admitted, "I was not confident enough to project myself as the *sarpanch*. I think of my husband as the real *sarpanch*."

Gram Sabha, the village assembly, is one of the important constituents of Panchayat Raj system and a vital decision-making body for the formulation and implementation of village developmental plans and activities that usually functions by trying to build a consensus. However, because of fractional politics, communal feelings, ignorance about its roles and responsibilities, and so on, this vital institution is often non-functional in *gram panchayats* headed by women *sarpanches*.

I found that 33 percent of women *sarpanches* had not called any *Gram Sabha* in its true sense during their five-year tenure. Many of them have not even presided over *panchayat* meetings. In traditional Jat Sikh families the husbands of the women *sarpanches* call meetings on their behalf. Sometimes, when asked, the women are not even aware a meeting is being held.

It is important to create an enabling environment for women *sarpanches*, so that they can act freely and independently, without the pressure and obstructions of their family members and society. For that we need capacity-building programmes, along with strong co-operation from *panchayat* functionaries and other grass root level workers, block administration and higher-level political representatives. A major change in the attitudes of husbands, family members and the community at large also needs to be brought about for the effective political empowerment of women in local governments in villages. Specific emphasis must also be placed on the participation of women belonging to the Scheduled Castes and Backward Castes.

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Working Women's Plight

A young middle class girl starts searching for a job soon after completing her education. Being employed adds to her value in the marriage market. After getting married, the initial period is spent in adjusting to her new home, together with carrying out her occupational life. Once the first child is born, she has to become a superwoman, balancing the multiple roles of wife, mother, employee, and, in some cases, daughter-in-law (if she lives with her in-laws.) While managing

all this, she forgets or has to give up her personal likes and dislikes, her hobbies and interests. She has two tasks, to see that her home and job go along smoothly. She makes Herculean efforts. While doing so her identity vanishes, her desires, her wishes disappear into the desires of her husband and her children's preferences. She no longer remains a person with her own priorities.

When her children are young, she thinks, 'Let this period be over. My children will grow up and then I will have ample time for myself.' But with every one of their developmental stages she has to face new problems with the children, new challenges. The last few years of the job she just manages to pull on by telling herself, 'OK, a few more years and I will be in charge of my own schedule.' She does not know that this rosy picture of her future will prove to be a mirage. Her dream bungalow will collapse.

Her world gradually narrows, ultimately giving her time and space only for her job and home. Unfortunately, she is not even aware of this process. After retirement she decides to pursue her so far neglected hobbies and interests. But either she finds she is no longer interested in cultivating these hobbies or she feels her physical stamina has given out. Her eye-taxing activities such as knitting and embroidery cannot be carried out without excessive strain. Her body is not in the condition to tolerate the strain of trekking or adventurous travelling.

Another activity she looks forward to is plenty of time to chat and gossip. But now the problem that emerges is - with whom can she talk this way? She is no longer in touch with her old friends nor has she nurtured new bonds. It needs

time, energy and determination to establish strong bonds of affection between two persons, especially when they are older. A working woman is not able to spend these scarce resources lavishly. Hence, by the time she retires, the already formed groups of neighbourhood women are not ready to accept her. She is too often seen as proud and arrogant.

Her husband, obviously not bothered by any of the constraints felt by a working wife, feels free to entertain his friends within a social world of his own. The children are mature. The only option she has is to watch television. Other family members encourage her TV watching so that she will be there to supervise the maid, the laundry, the garbage collector, postman, and couriers. Before she retired, time used to be a scarce and valuable commodity for her. At that time she always wished for a day of more than twenty-four hours. Now the long hours go by at the speed of a snail.

Sometimes she even loses her financial security due to her blind affection for her children and family. In this situation her position is even more pitiable. Her savings are spent for purchasing a house, educating the children, for their marriages, to help them in their business, etc. The result is loss of financial independence. The family almost forgets her sacrifice for them. The situation forces her to live as a dependent in a dark world of depression.

Is there a way out? Can we provide retired women with more emotional support to help her in maintaining her identity? If we wish to try, how are we going to accomplish this? We, the women of the nation, have to join hands to help these women.

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