

1st Consultative Forum on
*Women's Political Participation and its Effectiveness
at Commune/ Sangkat level in Cambodia*

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*Lessons learnt –The success story of female councillors
in local government in India (Panchayat Raj)*

BY

Ros,Sopheap

Executive Director

Gender and Development for Cambodia (GAD/C)



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Introduction

The success story I bring to you, is from India. It is a story about **330,000 women** who have entered the arena of formal politics and this number will soon rise to more than 1 million women.

The story begins with a law passed in 1983 in the southern state of Karnataka. This law included a clause that 25 percent of the seats in local councils would be reserved for women. The elections to these councils were held in 1987. On 1 May 1987, the Janata Dal (the party that won the elections) called a convention of all the 56,000 elected representatives, of whom 25 percent were women. It was a wonderful sight to see 14,000 women in the audience, shining bright, 80 percent of whom were participating in politics for the first time, thrilled with their victory.

By 1995, the presence of women in local government had increased by many multiples, as the whole nation had introduced this political/ administrative change to reserve seats in local councils for women through the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Constitution. *In India, they call this new system the Panchayat Raj Institutions system (PRI)*. As elected members of local government, the power of these women includes the power to decide both the direction and pace of local development and also to administer and monitor the implementation of those decisions.

Positive discrimination works

The positive discrimination of PRI has initiated a momentum of change. Women's entry into local government in such large numbers, often more than the required 33.3 percent, and their success in campaigning, including the defeat of male candidates, has shattered the myth that women are not interested in politics, and have no time to go to meetings or to undertake all the other work that is required in political party processes. There is evidence to suggest that women would not have entered these councils in these numbers were it not for this constitutional mandate. It was the pressure of national law, combined with the political imperative of winning elections, which changed political parties' perception of women's limited capacity for public office.

Thus the story I am telling is a complex one. The legislative action, which enacted the reservation of seats for women, did not result from any significant campaign by the women's movement, nor from an unusually gender-sensitive leadership of a political party. There may have been some pressure from the women's wing of the Janata Dal party, in which there was a history of demanding more places for women in the allocation of constituencies for the central parliament. PRI has also highlighted the intersection between gender interests and social class, for its reservation of seats has enabled poor and marginalized women to demonstrate their deep political consciousness and interest in obtaining power. For them, politics and elections are very practical routes out of poverty and instruments of social change.

Who are these women councillors?

- *Most of the women elected were illiterate.* (20 percent of men being professionally-educated compared to 5 percent of women)
- The majority of women declared themselves as homemakers. However, we know that this is a broad category, which includes heavy work, including income-generating activity.
- Only 20 percent of the women, compared to 80 percent of the men, had previous political experience.

The success story of Indian women councillors in Panchayat

Women's experience of PRI has transformed many of them. The elements of this transformation include empowerment, self-confidence, political awareness and affirmation of identity. Women have gained a sense of empowerment by asserting control over resources, officials and, most of all, by challenging men (Jain 1980; Anveshi 1993). Men and their habits, long outside the realm of female influence, seem to be a major concern of elected women.

A Quote By a women Councillor (1995):

“If we are outspoken, they - the men - call us brazen and dub us shameless. But now we don't care because we know we have access to people who will have to hear us. The day we have our Gram Panchayat meeting, the men and the people at home mock us - that's when we bring out books and show them what we know”

Women's empowerment also challenged traditional ideas of male authority and supremacy and self-confidence gained through local organisations enabled them to step out of unequal relationships.

“It is not the education that matters so much here. It is the grit and determination, which a woman has in plenty”

On the other hand, some women's involvement in PRI has helped them affirm their identity as women with particular and shared experiences. A woman at a Panchayat meeting in Karnataka stated:

“When we meet we work together as women, for our lobby. We don't take much notice of our party identities”

The men see these new political actors as women not as party colleagues. Party politics, a necessary condition for classical democracy, is competitive, but the women bring a non-competitive or cooperative ethic as they are drawn to work together across party lines and seem to have similar interests. Gender can supersede class and party lines. Women have opened up the possibility for politics to have not only new faces but also a new quality.

Some of the ways in which women, through PRI, are changing governance are evident in the issues they choose to tackle; water, alcohol abuse, education, health and domestic violence. For example, forty teams of women in Sonbhadra (**Uttar**

Pradesh) area had carried out systematic yatra, or processions, covering ten villages each, or 400 villages in all, to explain the salient features of the 73rd Amendment and the place given in it to women. In the discussions that took place during these yatras, women voiced clear priorities. For nearly 90 percent of the women, the top priority was water. They expressed a need for clean water for fields, for their cattle and for their families. They said life was unbearable and cultivation impossible without developing the water resources of the area. Even as they were determined to prevent the outflow of water from their areas, they were equally determined to prevent the inflow of liquor into their area. They have put an end to gambling and have come down heavily on liquor dens." The policy they adopted was to "*shut the door on every drunken husband.*"

"We will not bear it. Once we acquire some position and power, we will fight it out. We know that it is not going to be easy because this battle will be carried out in each home. But the fact that the Panchayats will have a minimum number of women we will use that strength for mobilising women at large and keep liquor out, as a priority".

Women are getting closer to their constituencies. "Poor women have to walk to access these facilities, which is exhausting and consumes valuable time. Moreover, when there is an attack, a rape, a burning or other violence against a woman, seeking redress from Councils, which are located far away, may not be feasible. But if these Councils and the people in them are near, the chances of redress and effective action are greater".

The common Obstacles

Many obstacles to the realisation of PRI's transformative potential remain. Scepticism about decentralisation persists in many quarters. There continues to be a resistance to really devolving power and funds from centres of power to the periphery. Women still face considerable handicaps to their involvement in politics; for example, inadequate education, the burden of reproductive and productive roles, a lack of self-confidence and the opposition of entrenched cultural and religious views.

There are also administrative obstacles to be overcome. The current administration framework has a departmentally administered sectoral funding pattern which conflicts with the women-led, area-derived programmes arising from PRI.

Women-to-Women support

Women councillors in Panchayat requested for specific kinds of support, which go beyond technical training. We need support to build solidarity amongst women, through strengthening links between women's organisations and elected bodies. We need information about innovative organisations, which enhance women's lives such as health providers, credit institutions and so on. Many women's NGOs are already providing these kinds of support to women representatives.

There is, however, still a major gap in this woman-to-woman support, which needs attention by the Indian women's movement, and local women's groups. Many sections of the movement were initially sceptical about the real value of this

“Panchayat and PRI” However, as they have become more familiar with these elected women, they have been overwhelmed by the vitality and the enthusiasm of the women and are now offering both moral and material support. This process is of central importance, and must be continued and reinforced.

Examples of Women’s Movement supports

- Facilitating their meetings across districts
- Ensuring that the women are not marginalized in the revenue and expenditure committee structures that will emerge to manage the development in these bodies
- Ensuring the devolution of project design and monitoring powers from central government to the elected bodies
- Strengthening the identity and feminist consciousness of women representatives, for example, by leadership training
- Bringing women into political structures and supporting the backward and forward linkages of women's presence in politics, linking household and family priorities with macro-planning processes

Last but not least important

The quest for equity cannot come about without wider representation of all groups; especially those currently denied access to power, and the presentation of all points of view in the process of decision-making.

The story of India reminds us of a central truth; power is not something people give away. It has to be negotiated. The lesson of Panchayt Raj Institution is clear: If the wisdom of grassroots organizations, especially the courage and clarity of women, is to become policy at local government, we need to be united and have a clear demand for our voice to have power.

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Note: All the quotes in this paper have been borrowed from paper on “Women Changing Good Governance”

This is presentation is the summary of the paper which has been written by Jain, Devaki who is a renowned writer and women activist from India.