

## Increasing Women's Leadership and Rights in Governance Processes in Jharkhand and Uttarakhand

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**O**xfam India, a fully independent Indian organisation is a member of a global confederation of 17 Oxfams. The Oxfams are rights-based organisations that fight poverty and injustice by linking grassroots programming to local, national and global advocacy and policy-making. Oxfam India works in six states with a vision to create a more equal, just, and sustainable world<sup>1</sup>. Advancing gender justice is a core 'Change Goal' in Oxfam's Strategic Plan 2016-2020 and promoting transformative leadership is one of the objectives. This is crucial in addressing gender inequality. Oxfam India focuses on transformative leadership for women's rights (TLWR) as key to the effective representation of women in decision-making forums. This work is implemented in two of the focus states<sup>2</sup>. Oxfam India is supporting a network of rights-based organisations called Jumav Manch in Jharkhand, and an NGO, VIMARSH, in Uttarakhand to increase representation, participation, and leadership of women in different forums of local governance. Through this, Oxfam also strives to create awareness regarding violence against women (VAW), enhance reporting of incidents of violence and advocate for better implementation of laws governing VAW.

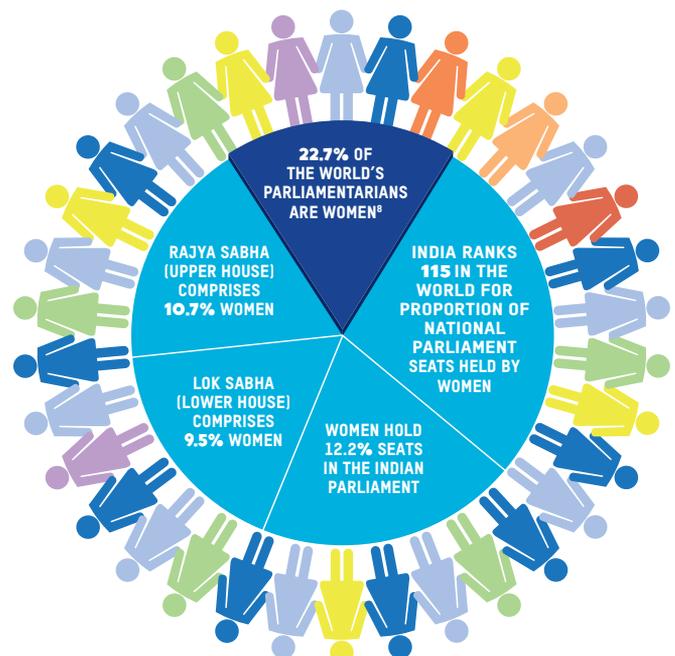
Oxfam has traditionally believed that increasing women's partnership in decision making is akin to advancement of women's leadership. This is an important strategy as evidence suggests that increasing the participation of women in governance and public life makes a significant difference to women in particular and society in general. It strengthens peoples' legal rights and access to justice. It ensures public services benefit women and men equitably and helps improve capacities to reduce gender-based violence.

However, statistics reveal that the participation of women in governance remains dismal. Currently, only 22.7 per cent of the world's parliamentarians are women<sup>3</sup>. India ranks 115 in the world for proportion of national parliament seats held by women as per Inter Parliamentary Union (IPU) data; women hold 12.2 per cent seats (10.7 per cent in the Rajya Sabha, the Upper House and 9.5 per cent in the Lok Sabha, the Lower House) in Parliament<sup>4</sup>. The 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment (in 1992) to the Constitution was a landmark initiative where it provided for equal participation of women in the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs)<sup>5</sup> and guaranteed at least one-third seats to them. In fact, 16 states, including Jharkhand and Uttarakhand, increased their share for women representatives to 50 per cent.

Despite significant progress in women's participation in local governance, women's leadership is hampered by their proxy-presence (through their male kin), non-participation at panchayat level and other meetings, and their inability to raise issues that closely concern them, especially gender-based violence in general and domestic violence in particular. A study conducted with elected members in Rajasthan, Odisha and Karnataka showed that less than 10 per cent of *Gram Panchayats* (GP), the village council, considered domestic violence as an important issue. The study further found that, across the three states, only 8 per cent to 27 per cent of GP members actually raised the issue of domestic violence in the meetings<sup>6</sup>.

The lack of participation can be attributed to the absence of a favourable environment for women. Oxfam India's partnerships with the Jumav Manch (since 2000) in Jharkhand and Vimarsh<sup>7</sup> (since 2001) in Uttarakhand, have built an alliance to advocate for changing policies, strengthening support services, and implementing laws that guarantee and promote gender equality at the state level. Oxfam India has been instrumental in nurturing the alliances with strategic guidance, trainings, and resources. Over the years, it has helped in strengthening of the partners understanding, on gender equality, gender laws, campaign building, and governance.

### WOMEN IN GOVERNANCE



[Source: Inter Parliamentary Union Database]

# JAGRUK SAMITI IN JHARKHAND



Mahila Sabha, organised by SPARK, in progress at Sahebganj in Bihar

In Jharkhand, Oxfam was instrumental in creation of Jumav Manch, a network of 19 like-minded organisations committed to work for gender justice. It has been nurturing the Manch since 2000<sup>9</sup>. Between 2000 and 2004, Jumav Manch focused on building women's collectives called *Jagruk Samiti* or Vigilance Groups as advocates against VAW. The *Jagruk Samiti* is a rich platform to nurture individual and collective leadership at the local level. A series of trainings and exposure visits were organised to develop their understanding on gender inequality in the society and need for a rights based approach. The period from 2005 to 2010 helped Jumav Manch scale up its initiatives at the district and state level. By this time, the women's collectives had become strong voices for women's rights. Jumav Manch continues to provide technical knowhow and leadership skills to the *Samitis*. At present, a block and district level federation is being established to train grassroots leaders on redressal mechanisms of VAW, establish linkages with the police stations and act as a support base for women in leadership positions.

In Jharkhand, panchayat elections were held in 2011, after a gap of thirty years. These elections were significant for Jumav Manch. Since it had been working for over a decade on building capacities to enhance grassroots leadership on issues related to VAW, this was a great opportunity for the *Manch* to actively participate in the election process. Massive awareness drives were conducted to orient women's collectives on Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI), its structure, roles, its application procedures, and other aspects.

The 2011 Panchayat elections was a major boost to the grassroots leadership of *Jagruk Samiti* as 112 of its

members won the elections. "The local women's collectives were quite mature and this was a good opportunity for them to be placed in the governance sphere," says H I Fatmi, Secretary, Society for Participatory Action Research and Knowledge (SPARK), a member organisation of Jumav Manch.

Jumav Manch has strategically positioned its key grassroots leaders in the governance process. The presence of women in decision making forums has ensured gender sensitive and gender inclusive decisions at the *Gram Sabha* (village assembly) meetings.

Currently, Jumav Manch supports over 2500 strong network of grassroots leaders and change agents on women's rights. These grassroots advocates are *Jagruk Samiti* members spread across 190 villages in 19 blocks in 15 districts

of Jharkhand. These *Samitis* have brought women, usually relegated to their homes, to the Gram Sabha. In 2014, apart from the 1840 *Samiti* members, 2471 women participated in the *Gram Sabhas* across the state. The Elected Women Representatives (EWRs), with the support of the *Samiti*, ensure smooth functioning of government delivery systems like *Anganwadi* centers, Mid- Day Meal, and Public Distribution System.

"In the initial years we were not taken seriously even by the other women in the villages," said Benchen Minz, Benchen is a member of the *Jagruk Samiti* and the *Up-Mukhiya*<sup>10</sup> of Jingi *Gram Panchayat* in Kuru Tehsil of Lohardaga district in Jharkhand. The anti-alcohol and de-addiction drives have helped the *Samiti* to convince the community of the seriousness of their intentions and helped to convert detractors into supporters. "The *Samiti* in Hanhat Panchayat in Lohardaga district launched a month long anti-alcohol drive where women destroyed breweries and alcohol stocked in homes. This anti-alcohol drive was difficult as it affected the livelihood of some women. There were threats but we did not care. We had the support of the police. This helped us build credibility among the community members," Benchen shared.

The *Samiti* is a mixed group of both men and women committed to gender justice and empowerment. Each village has its own *Samiti*. At present, there are 2604 members (2037 women and 567 men) in the 190 *Samitis*. The members meet collectively twice a month to discuss strategies to end violence against women and girls, support VAW survivors, and strategies to enhance women leadership. While resolving VAW cases, members meet with

survivors to counsel, educate and mentor them. They also work as an interface with police and other institutions to resolve the cases. Between 2000 and 2015, *Jagruk Samiti* has solved more than 2000 such cases.

Regular sessions on the different forms of gender-based violence, rights, legal awareness and trainings to deal with the perpetrators have made these collectives robust advocates for gender justice. Over the years, the *Samitis* have given rise to strong and sensitive community leaders; some of the *Samiti* members, like Benchen have moved to leadership roles of Auxiliary Nurse Midwife (ANM) and PRI representatives.

Earlier, elected women members faced challenges of recognition and acceptance, and were often replaced by a male relative — a husband, son, brother or father. For example, Sushila Devi had to fight her family to assert her position, after her election as *Mukhiya* in 2011, when her husband took decisions on her behalf. She was elected *Mukhiya* of Chapti village in Bokaro district's Gomia block.

Sushila was an active member of the *Jagruk Samiti*. Backed by the *Samiti* members, who insisted that she be present for all meetings, Sushila began attending all meetings. She was proactive not just in *Gram Sabha* meetings but also in other department meetings. She motivated her *Samiti* members to submit a proposal for road construction; the *Samiti* won the Rs 40,000 contract. Under her guidance, the *Samiti* members took up the construction work while the local educated youth were mobilised for record keeping and management of financial reporting. Inspired

with the work, the local Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA) funded a temple, which is also used as a venue for village meetings. Sushila is also a counselor to survivors of domestic violence and trains women on their rights and the laws related to domestic violence.

Like Sushila, Fatmi says, other elected members too have retained their power and position. "Women in leadership are breaking new grounds for themselves. They are successfully asserting their role as elected leaders and are also generating new resources for their community," he says.

Other elected women representatives, like Sushila, have worked towards the betterment of women in their constituencies. *Jumav Manch* has successfully made advocacy efforts that have led to positive results – between 2000 and 2015, nearly 3,000 women have benefitted from different schemes like Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS), and *Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana* (RSBY).

In the year 2014-15, issues related to women were raised and discussed in 172 Gram Sabha meetings of 190 villages. During the 16 Days of Activism in 2015, *Jagruk Samiti* organised *Gaon Jodo Abhiyan* (Connect the Villages Campaign) to build a gender responsive community. They were able to mobilise around 6445 women, men, young girls, and boys to participate in the campaign. In 2014, the Jharkhand government approached *Jumav Manch* to review its policy on women.

## MAHILA SANGATHAN IN UTTARAKHAND

In Uttarakhand's Kumaon region, Oxfam India supported Vimarsh, a rights-based organisation in Nainital, to form *Mahila Sangathan* or women's collectives to work on women's rights and empowerment. In the beginning, Oxfam had collaborated with Vimarsh to form *Sangathans* in 64 villages in 20 panchayats in two blocks of Nainital district. This work was picked up again in 2014<sup>11</sup> and, at present, there are more than 700 *Mahila Sangathan* supported by Vimarsh.

Over time, these collectives have become effective mechanisms to deal with VAW. They are able to provide immediate help due to their presence within the village. They work as role models for the community and are well placed for attitudinal change and village level advocacy.

During 2012-13, Vimarsh encouraged members of *Mahila Sangathan* to contest in Panchayat elections. Trainings and campaigns were organised to orient women on the PRI system and role of elected women representatives. The *Sangathans* canvassed for their candidates and held *padayatras*<sup>12</sup> to create awareness among the villagers to exercise their voting rights.

They doubled up as vigilance groups, on the day of the elections, to ensure that there were no malpractices at the voting booth. Of the 105 *Sangathan* members who contested the elections, 102 won.

Once elected, the challenge before the women was to first assert their position within the family. Kamla Arya recalls how her peers had to fight to assert their presence, sometimes even boycotting meetings if "*Pradhan Pati*"<sup>13</sup>



Women attend the *Mahila Sangathan* meeting, organised by Vimarsh

participated on behalf of their wives. Kamla is the *Pradhan*<sup>14</sup> of Khumari Kulethi village in Nainital district and the treasurer of the local *Mahila Sangathan*.

Vimarsh further trained elected women to effectively participate in *Gram Sabhas* to access government schemes and to ensure the inclusion of women's issues in its agenda. "The women negotiated for the allocation of an approach road under MGNREGA. The approach road drastically reduced the distance that women had to cover to fetch water," says Kanchan Bhandari, Secretary, Vimarsh.

The elected women representatives held a series of meetings with government and other PRI officials. These meetings helped to establish them as key decision makers in an otherwise male dominated forum. Women recall that, initially, there was a general disapproval for elected women representatives at the block offices. *Mahila Sangathan* has transformed the power equations in favour of women in the community and elected representatives in the PRIs.

"I want to contest state elections," says Kamla. She further explains, "Winning state elections will give me the power to

influence women's rights and issues more strongly." Kamla came to Vimarsh in 2002. "She was shy and docile when we first met her. The awareness sessions and exposure visits have helped hone her leadership skills," says Kanchan. She raised her voice against unequal wages being given to women under MGNREGA. In 2009, she was elected as the ward member and later, in 2014, with the assistance and rigorous campaigning of the *Mahila Sangathan*, Kamla was elected as *Pradhan*.

Kamla believes that the strength of the elected women representatives lie in their ability to influence Panchayat members and other government officials in favour of women's rights, influence village development work to be gender inclusive, and to improve one's leadership abilities. The elected leaders have heavy workload and get little support from their family members. Moreover, illiteracy and ignorance further accentuates their problems as elected leaders. Kamla is encouraging other women leaders to enroll for literacy classes. Looking ahead, Vimarsh is now promoting a district level federation known as *Sabla Nanda Sangathan*. This federation aims to nurture new leaders and act as a resource group to build their capacities.

## NOTES

- 1 Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh, and Assam. Uttarakhand was one of the states in the last strategy period
- 2 Jharkhand and Uttarakhand
- 3 Inter Parliamentary Union Database; available at: <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm>
- 4 Millennium Development Goals-India Country Report 2015; available at [http://mospi.nic.in/Mospi\\_New/upload/mdg\\_26feb15.pdf](http://mospi.nic.in/Mospi_New/upload/mdg_26feb15.pdf)
- 5 Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) are the smallest unit of governance in rural areas.
- 6 India Governance Report, ICRW; available at: <http://www.icrw.org/sites/default/files/publications/India%20governance%20report%20synthesis%202013.pdf>
- 7 Vimarsh, a rights based organisation, is part of network on Violence

- 8 Against Women but it works on transformative leadership of women's rights
- 9 Inter Parliamentary Union Database; available at: <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm>
- 10 Oxfam India came into existence in 2008, after which the activities in the two states were supported under the Oxfam India's Gender Justice programme.
- 11 *Up-Mukhiya* is a designated position of a Gram Panchayat under the Panchayati Raj Act.
- 12 This continued till March 2016
- 13 *Padyatra* is a foot march undertaken by groups to interact closely with the different parts of society, educate about issues concerning them, and galvanize their supporters.
- 14 Husband of a woman *Pradhan*
- 15 Chief of Panchayat

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