

RESEARCH DOCUMENT



# Making Space

Women's Participation  
in Local Politics  
in Rajasthan

Publisher

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First Edition 2009

No. of copies: 500

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**Design by:** Ramesh Patel

**Printed at:** Bansidhar Offset, Ahmedabad

**Acknowledgements:**

We acknowledge the support provided by the five grassroot organisations - Jai Bheem Vikas Shikshan Sansthan, Prakruti Foundation, Gramin Vikas Shodh Evam Takniki Kendra, Shikshit Rojgar Kendra Prabandhak Samiti, Urmul Marudhar Bunkar Vikas Samiti - working in Rajasthan in conducting the study. A word of appreciation for the support from the people we met including government officials, political party functionaries, civil society leaders and media. Most of all, we thank the women, who took the time out to share their lives and their stories and from whom we learnt the lessons in resilience and speaking up. This research study was supported by International Development Research Centre (IDRC) as part of the 'Decentralisation and Women's Rights in South Asia' competition.

## Making Space: Women's Participation in Local Politics in Rajasthan

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Women have for long remained an underdeveloped group. According to the Human Development Report (1995), of the total number of poor in the world, more than two-thirds are women. They do more than half the world's work and earn only three-fourths of what men earn for equal work. Only one third of women's total work is in paid market, as compared to more than three-fourths for the men. They have poorer access to formal credit and formal employment. The root of women's underdevelopment has been traced to long denial of civil and political rights and suppressive cultural norms and practices (Woolstonecraft, 1975 and Mill 1970).

Women are poorly represented in political institutions. Despite being half of the world's population, they occupy only one-tenth of the world's parliamentary seats and only six per cent of the cabinet positions. The reasons for this are lower resource endowments including education, spare time, income, employment and links to the external world for public life, as against those for men (Goetz, 1998 and Burns *et al.* 2001); limited role perception which dictates the norm and expects compliance (Sapiro, 1982 and Orum *et al.*, 1974); political system where politics in itself is deemed masculine (Andersen, 1975 and Randall, 1982) and women are frequently denied leadership and management roles (UNRISD, 2005 and Norris and Inglehart, 2001); domestic inequality (Burns *et al.* 2001); democratic structures which affect women's participation and their access to positions of authority (Goetz, 1998).

Women's entry into politics in India can be subsumed into five typologies - dynasty, spousal, higher education, celebrity and activism (Pavri, 2005). The first group includes women who enter politics as their families were in politics and could influence the decision-making process. It is well accepted that women from families who have linkage with politics stand a better chance of entering formal politics. This also helps them to legitimise their power and perform effectively. In the second group belong the women who gain entry through marriage to a politician. They are exposed to public arena through their husbands and this ensures that when they get elected they

are well exposed to the public sphere. The third group includes women who have attained higher education and are professionally qualified. They do not have any historical or familial ties in politics. They make it to politics through their own interest and qualification. Celebrity status is yet another entry point for women. Well known actresses have sought seats from different party platforms and won elections. Finally, activist women have also entered politics through gaining popularity by embracing a specific cause.

At the grass roots, women's political interest and behaviour is linked to the extent they can participate in formal, constitutionally mandated institutions. The mechanisms and procedures that support their participation are also very important to understand women's participation. The representation of women in local politics has increased through quotas and reserved seats. It is not enough to increase women's participation and representation in number. There is a need to build in the dimension of effectiveness and influence. Women's political effectiveness is seen as the ability to use 'voice' to politicise issues that concern women and build accountability towards them (Goetz 2003). Women's political engagement can be examined at three levels - Access, Presence and Influence. Access involves opening arenas to women for dialogue and information sharing. It promotes consultations and participatory efforts for monitoring government services through various methods. Presence is understood as numeric presence of women, institutionalising women's participation in decision making, and how effectively they can translate this number to impact on decisions. Influence is a step that brings women's engagement in civil society, political system and state to a point where they can convert access and presence into tangible impact on policy making which is more accountable to women (Goetz 2003).



In 2006, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Canada launched a global research programme on 'Decentralization and Gender Rights.' UNNATI and its partners in Rajasthan conducted an action research as part of this, covering four districts viz. Jodhpur, Jhunjhunu, Tonk and Banswara.

The purpose of the study was to examine the relevance of decentralisation for women and its potential for empowering women. The study was an attempt to find out what factors have helped or hindered women to participate in politics at the local level and influence decision making in local institutions. Women's political engagement has been examined at two levels – presence and influence. Access was not considered since the constitution guarantees the right

to access decision making forums. The index of Presence has been constructed using the attendance of elected representatives in local

mandated decision making forums. The index of Influence has looked at two levels of intervention in these forums - self initiated and proposal driven. The process has been followed to take into account the outcome at each step of intervention.

The study has tried to capture how women reclaim spaces and reassert their power. The influence of culture of politics, caste and the family on their leadership was also examined. Based on the findings, a set of recommendations have been made.

The key questions were:

- 1) Do decentralised spaces and norms governing them carry a gendered identity?
- 2) Is decentralisation capable of creating spaces for restoration of power to those living without it, particularly women?
- 3) Can decentralisation, with its roots in 'modern' democracy ensure that power will not be further entrenched?
- 4) Do 'modern' institutions run the risk of being usurped by the local interests?

## Background

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Decentralisation has provided women and socially disadvantaged groups space to participate in decision making. It has provided opportunity for women to exercise their political rights and a chance to wield greater power. It was believed that women's representation through democratic process will enable them to collectively raise their voice, provide them the opportunity to step into the public world to find common ground with other women, and create a platform for furthering their 'interest' and provide 'voice' in local planning, budgeting and implementation. It was believed that their presence in politics would transform the state (Norris, 1997) by redefining political priorities with emphasis on poverty, inequality and justice; change the 'culture of politics' and improve transparency and accountability. The presence of women in local governing institutions could bring decision making closer to the local community, particularly women and disadvantaged groups and help focus on issues that affect their lives.

In 1993, the Government of India passed the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act creating local governments across India. It created a uniform three tier system of governance at district, block and village level in rural areas. It provided for mandatory elections every 5 years. The amendment transferred power to the panchayats on twenty-nine subjects. It also reserved seats for women and other marginal groups. Decentralisation was expected to promote local decision making based on participation, transparency and accountability.

**In 2005:**  
36,705 ward panches,  
3339 Sarpanches,  
2014 Panchayat Samiti  
members,  
94 Pradhans,  
377 Zilla Parishad  
members and  
14 Pramukhs were women  
as against 35525,  
3074,1737, 81, 337  
and 11 reserved seats. for  
women respectively.

Rajasthan, the focus of our enquiry remains one of the poorest states in India. Despite large scale social development programmes it has poor social, economic and political indices. It has an unfavourable sex ratio and even poorer child sex ratio of 909 females per 1000 males as per the 2001 census. Female literacy rate is 44 as compared to 76 among men. It has a poor health record with high infant, child and maternal mortality. 57 percent of women are married before they complete 18 years. The practice of sati and its celebration still continues in many parts of the state. Fewer women hold political power, which is manifest in the six percent women's membership in the Rajasthan state legislature, and two women parliamentarians. Fewer women vote compared to men, and their choices are often dictated by men. Inadequate information affects their choice; and criminalisation of politics has worked to deter women from participating actively in politics. As against

this, Rajasthan was the first state to implement the Right to Information Act. The state has passed progressive legislations to ensure greater representation of women, to create spaces for enabling women's participation and to protect the offices held by women and marginal groups.

Decentralisation created space for women to participate in local politics. Reservation and quorums have ensured their representation and provided voice to women. In her budget speech of 2008, the then Chief Minister of Rajasthan increased the reservation for women leaders in local governments from one-third to half. In 2000, the state government announced quorums for all local government meetings. It made provision for organising women's gram sabhas with priority for all proposals passed in it. A notification was issued in 1999 that barred husbands and male relatives from representing women. A no-confidence motion cannot be passed against an elected leader, before he/she has completed two years in office, and a reserved seat can only be filled by a leader from the same category. Enabling legislative provisions have led to a large number of women leaders to occupy political office.

However, there is debate on whether there should be reservation or not. Men find it difficult to accept entry of women leaders through reservation. The elected women leaders are labelled as 'quota women.' Women, they say *"...remain puppets and have little interest in politics. They are elected because it is a woman's seat."* Men often ask sarcastically *"how can women who are used to doing only household chores, govern us?"* They feel stripped off their power and advise the women to *"remain as Lakshmi in their homes."* Women were of the opinion that *"these seats were in the hands of the upper caste and elite groups for 20-25 years. Even though men in the family may be exercising power, the position and the seat now belong to the women"*. They shared that reservation has given the *"women who are uneducated and illiterate, an opportunity to come into politics. I could not complete my schooling, which means I had limited opportunities to make a mark anywhere. The reservation has provided an avenue for women like me to enter politics, improve their status and gain instant power."*

Very often, the men take control and make decisions on their behalf. These include men, not just from their families and communities, but also political leaders and local officials. This has limited the potential of decentralised governance in promoting gender equality and social justice. There is, therefore, the need to understand the status and nature of women's participation in local governments. There have been prior assessments of the quality of women's participation in local governance. However, most studies have been anecdotal in nature. There is a need for a comprehensive enquiry of both the public and private factors influencing women's leadership based on multiple perspectives. There is a need to understand the potential of decentralisation for addressing gender based injustices. This is essential to chart future strategies, both for strengthening women's participation and for utilising decentralisation for gender justice.

## About the Study

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*1354 elected  
representatives –  
681 men and 673  
women and 196 officials*

*65 focus group  
discussions*

*observation of 14 gram  
sabhas and 52  
panchayat meetings*

*15 cases of no  
confidence motions*

*4 training need  
assessments, workshop  
with the media and  
stakeholder consultations*

*Narrative accounts  
of 21 women*

The study used both quantitative and qualitative methods. Multiple perspectives on women's participation and their leadership were collected from 1354 elected representatives – 681 men and 673 women and 196 officials using a structured format. Apart from the survey 65 focus group discussions, observation of 14 gram sabhas and 52 panchayat meetings, 15 cases of no confidence motions, 4 training need assessments, workshop with the media and stakeholder consultations at local and state level were used to collect information on constraints faced by women in the decentralised system and in understanding their level of participation. Narrative accounts of 21 women were recorded to explore the links between political parties, caste and family and women as elected representatives and get their perceptions on factors affecting or bringing about changes in their lives. The focus was also to understand the barriers that affect women's entry into politics. Interviews with functionaries of key political parties helped to understand their views on women's leadership and their role in promoting women leaders in local politics.

The study process led to a sharing of the diverse viewpoints and in evolving ideas on emerging action areas. Beginning with elected representatives, the experiences and views of the community, state officials, political party functionaries, family members and NGOs were collated and analysed. The study has focused only on political decentralisation through the institutions of the panchayati raj in Rajasthan within the arena of the State.

The enquiry was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, we focussed on the first research question: "1) Do decentralised spaces and norms governing it carry a gendered identity?" The first step was to ascertain the status of women's participation in institutions of decentralised governance and to identify the affective factors. In the second phase the affective factors were dealt with in greater detail to try to find answers to key questions 2-4.

## Who are the Women Elects?

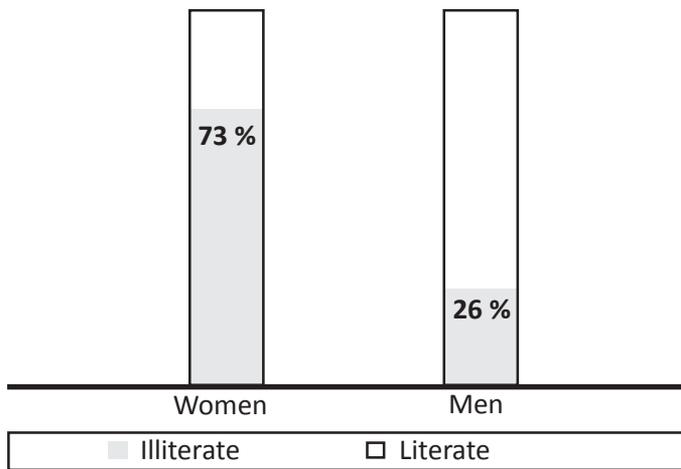
The social characteristics of the elected representatives are basic indicators to understand their political participation. The classical participation analysis was more concerned about understanding what type of men and women are more likely to get elected into political spaces (Hust, 2004). In India, given the provision of reservation of seats for women and social groups, just looking at the socio economic indicators of the elected representatives may give only part of the picture. Economic, social and political profile of the elects will provide an understanding on who is present in local politics. It is also important to understand whether their presence in numbers has an impact on how women and socially disadvantaged groups influence decision making in local governance.

Age, education, caste, economic status, social status of family, political background of family are factors that are known to have a bearing on political presence. It is generally believed that older women who have passed the child bearing and child rearing age enter formal politics since they have spare time. However among the women interviewed in the study 19 percent were below 35 years and 33 percent were between 35-45 years as against the

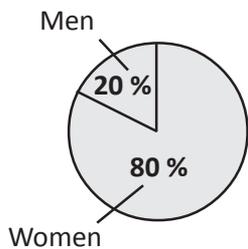
**Age Profile of Elected Representatives**

Age in years	Male (per cent)	Female (per cent)
21-25	4.8	7.7
26-35	11.4	11.7
36-45	23.5	33.3
46-55	33.0	26.9
56-65	17.0	14.5
66 plus	10.3	5.9
TOTAL	100.0	100.0

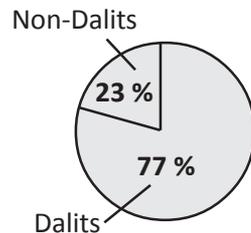
### Literacy among Elected Representatives



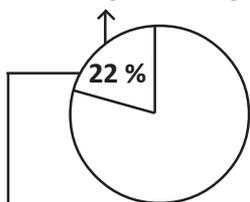
### Illiteracy among the Elected Representatives



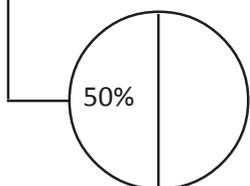
### Illiteracy among the Dalits



### Elected Representative among BPL category



Out of which 50% were women



family/spouse for their work. While 2/3rd women rely on their spouse/family, men are likely to consult the gram sevak. This support is required to access and utilise information on rules and regulations of the panchayat, development schemes, budgets and day-to-day functioning. 68 percent of the women respondents consult their spouse, 19 percent the gram sevak or elected members and 7 percent the community. Men consult the gram sevak and male members of the panchayat and community. Only 24 percent consult their spouse in matters relating to the panchayat.

22 percent of the elected representatives belong to the BPL category, of which 50 percent were women. 55 percent of the elects who belong to the BPL category were from Banswara and 20 percent from Jodhpur.

Women are to a large extent dependent on their family for resources. The current election and campaigning practices make it important to spend money to get support of local electorate. Money is required to win votes through throwing parties, distributing liquor and giving bribes to voters. Women are dependent on family income to support their campaign. The

figures of 16 and 23 percent among men. 10 percent of the men elects were above 65 years as against 6 percent for women. This could mean that younger women are willing to enter politics.

The male elected representatives have a higher level of education as compared to their female counterparts. 51 percent of the women could only sign and 22 percent could not even do that as against 21 percent and 5 percent among men. Out of the total illiterates 80 percent were women. 77 percent of the women who belong to the 'below the poverty line' (BPL) category were illiterate or could only sign and for men this figure was 58 percent. Of the illiterates 77 percent were scheduled caste and 64 percent belonged to OBC. Among the literate women 17 percent had attended middle school as against 34 percent men. While 18 percent men had studied beyond class 10 the similar figure for women was 3.5 percent. This clearly indicates that women and scheduled castes are disadvantaged due to low levels of literacy. Low levels of literacy among women have led to dependency on family members or administrative staff and community members. Women elected representatives are thrice as likely to consult

social and cultural practices restrict women's mobility. Women moved out of the village only to attend social functions or to seek health care or purchase goods for the house. Women are usually accompanied by male family members when they go to attend meetings and for other work. Around 7-9 percent of the representatives went out of the village for panchayat related work. 97 percent of men and women elected representatives had visited the panchayat office. These included the panchayat samiti office, zilla parishad office, water and sanitation board at the block level and district level and panchayati raj department at the state level.

Most of the elected representatives were new to politics being elected for the first time. This was more so in case of women where only 4.5 percent had contested a previous election as against 16.5 percent for men. The men who were re-elected were scheduled tribes from Banswara since seats are reserved in proportion to their population and in case of women it was mostly OBC women from Jhunjhunu. The seats are reserved for women only for one term, so it is difficult for women to re-contest from this seat and be re-elected. 34 percent of the elected representatives provided information on whether they were linked to a party or not.

In Rajasthan at the local level there are three distinct typologies of women's path to politics that can be identified – family/dynasty, spouse and education. The first group includes women who could enter politics through dynasty. Having the family in politics they are able to influence the decision making process. They are also able to decide on the development agenda and on the issues to be taken up for discussion. More women elected representatives had family members who were associated with politics. 28 percent men and 34 percent women elects belonged to families that were associated with politics. Banswara had the largest proportion of men and women elected representatives who had families with political linkage. This association has encouraged women to contest the local level elections. 10 percent of the women had father, father-in-law or brother in politics. These family members were active at the panchayat level as ward panches or sarpanches.

In the second group belong the women who have entered local politics through spouse's linkage with politics. In many cases they contested the election from the seat which was previously held by the spouse. When the seat got classified as a women's seat, the wife was asked to contest the election. This is about retaining control over politics within the family and can be seen as extension of patriarchy to the political arena. In 5 percent cases the women interviewed had husbands who were in politics for a long time.

At the local level there are very few women who had entered politics through higher education and been accepted as an effective local leader.

## Women's Participation and Democratic Spaces

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Forums are necessary to enable various groups to come together and discuss issues of their concern. Forums help to improve the quality and effectiveness of such discussions. Decentralisation in India created a number of deliberative spaces like gram sabha, panchayat meetings, ward sabhas, mahila gram sabhas and village committees. Gram sabhas have been recognised as the foundation stone of 'direct democracy' (Jai Prakash Narayan quoted in M. Pal, 2000). The gram sabha is a constitutionally guaranteed space provided by the State to the citizens to ask questions, seek clarifications, 'voice' their demand, and find local solutions to their issues (Acharya and Kumar, 2008). In addition to this, the Rajasthan Panchayati Raj Act, 1994 also makes provisions for ward sabhas, mahila gram sabhas, panchayat meetings and village level standing committees. There is a prescribed quorum for both ward sabha and gram sabha. If the quorum is not complete then the meeting is adjourned for a later time and date. However in the meeting called thereafter, the requirement does not hold.

Gram sabhas, panchayat meetings and ward sabhas were observed to understand how effectively women and dalits have been able to use these spaces to address their concerns. Focus group discussion with the community provided their perspective on how democracy at the grass root functions.

Experience shows that only to a limited extent have women been able to use these spaces to influence development priorities and address issues that concern them at the local level. Although decentralisation has created scope for representation of hitherto excluded groups, reality indicates that it does not necessarily lead to their active participation. Several factors operate at different levels - individual, community and governance structures - which constrain the participation of women and other socially disadvantaged groups. Much of the discussion in the gram sabha focused on infrastructure issues, particularly on drinking water, construction of tanks and water pipelines. Drought relief work also figured frequently in the list. However, issues of public discrimination, domestic violence and atrocities were never discussed. Even though, women sarpanches made efforts to discuss the lists of beneficiaries under the Indira Awas Yojana and the BPL, the budgets and the income and expenditure details; the male sarpanches did not make any

such attempt. The quorum requirement is rarely fulfilled, which means that marginal groups either remain silent or are absent.

### **Women's Participation in Gram Sabha**

Gram sabhas are generally held in January and August of each year. A typical gram sabha is facilitated by a gram sevak, mostly men. It is usually organised in front of the Panchayat office or the village community hall. The officials and the gram sevak usually sit on a raised platform or on chairs facing the community. The only woman seated with the officials is the sarpanch. Women are not comfortable sitting with the gram sevaks and officials from the various departments. Women from the community usually sit at the back while men sit in the front rows. The dalits sit together usually on the side, with the women. Government officials do not respond to queries raised by them. Questions are raised on their behalf and answers given through the influential men sitting in the front.

*(Source: 14 Gramsabhas)*

Issues discussed in the panchayat meeting were generally related to village development, mostly construction, provision of infrastructure and specific government schemes. All proposals made by women were discussed but women do not take part in decision making. "Even if women attend the meeting they feel hesitant and sometimes fear to express their views. Our concerns and views are not given importance. Very often we are asked to sit outside the panchayat office while the meeting is going on."

### **Participation in Panchayat Meetings**

Panchayat meetings were observed of which 25 were presided over by women sarpanches. A typical panchayat meeting held at the panchayat office, would start around 11 am and go on till 4pm. The gram sevak and the sarpanch, if attending the meeting, would be present throughout the meeting. The ward panches generally attend the meeting for some time, put their proposals and leave. Members from the community also attend the meeting and submit their concerns and preferences in writing or orally. These are recorded by the gram sevak. Very often the signatures of the participants are taken after leaving a couple of pages blank to write the proceedings and even points that are not discussed in the meeting. In panchayats headed by men, although the sarpanches chaired the meetings and expressed their views, the gram sevak was 'in-charge' of the proceedings and they jointly facilitated the meeting. In majority of the cases where the sarpanch is a woman she was not able to play an active role in facilitating and conducting the meeting, which was done instead by male representatives or the gram sevak. Several cases were observed where the gram sevak, sarpanch's husband/son officiated on her behalf in her absence and even when she was present.

*(Source: 52 Panchayat meetings and FGDs with women in Banswara, Tonk, Jhunjhunu and Jodhpur)*



Other deliberative spaces specially, smaller spaces like the ward sabhas; women-only spaces of the mahila gram sabha; and executive bodies like the standing committees have remained largely dysfunctional (fgd/j/women)<sup>1</sup>. Ward sabhas and mahila gram sabhas are not convened although provision has been made in the panchayat act. The standing committee members are often not aware of their membership, or the schedule of the meeting; women and dalits are often the last ones to know

about them (fgd/jhu/women); and the government officials have rarely, if ever shown an inclination to participate.

“Most village committees exist on paper and function on paper. Because the panchayat is pressurised from above these committees are constituted without informing the women who are appointed as members. Even men do not know which committees they belong to. Meetings are not held and the community is not aware as to how many committees have been formed. The committees are not effective and do not influence or contribute to the development of the village.” (fgd/tonk/women)

## What Affects Women’s Participation?

Responses from the survey were used to construct indices for measuring women’s participation, through their Presence<sup>2</sup> and Influence<sup>3</sup>. The scores were then analysed to determine the factors affecting participation with gendered differences to ascertain the differential effect on men and women elected representatives. Further the presence and influence indices were used against various independent variables to examine the factors that affect the presence and influence of men and women elected representatives in decision making forums. One way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used for testing the difference in the means of dependent variable Influence and Presence scores across independent variables - region, caste, religion, age, number of children, type of family, political affiliation of family, party linkage, past political experience and capacity building for both men and women elects. The criteria for statistical significance used were 1 and 5 percent. The significantly affecting independent variables have been included in the tables below.

**What affects women’s participation: results of analysis of variance**

Dependent Variable	Men	Women
Presence	Caste (F=2.697, Sig .045) Age (F=2.079), Sig. 000) Education (F= 6.675, Sig .000) Political Experience (F=67.106, Sig .000) Attended Training (F=15.751, Sig .000)	Region (F=7.040, Sig .000) Caste (F=8.622, Sig .000) Age (F=1.500, Sig .023) Religion (F=2.366, Sig .052) Number of Children (F=1.814, Sig .049) Political Experience (F=8.434, Sig .004) Attended Training (F=24.525, Sig .000)
Influence	Region (F =11.696, Sig .000) Education (F=2.833, Sig .004) Type of Family (F= 4.735, Sig .030) Party Membership (F=4.770, Sig .009) Political Experience (F=5.230, Sig .023) Attended training (F= 28.435, Sig .000)	Region (F= 5.971, Sig .001) Age (F= 1.440, Sig .035) Religion (F=3.240, Sig .012) Education (F= 4.915, Sig .000) Type of Family (F= 8.509, Sig .004) Political Experience (F=6.096, Sig .014) Attended Training (F=20.518, Sig .000)

For men elected representatives education, political experience and participation in training had a bearing on presence and influence. Caste and age had a bearing on presence and party membership had a bearing on their influence. For women, whether they will be present in decision making forums and will be able to influence, depends on the region they belong to, age, caste, religion, political experience and whether they have attended training. Number of children has a bearing on women's presence in decision making forums.

The affecting factors were clustered into the following institutions: caste, family, political party system, access to training and regional variations. Regional variations were not taken up for detailed study because they considerably widened the scope for data collection, demanding enquiry into regional economy and local cultural differences. The remaining affecting factors were then investigated in detail through qualitative research tools. The process of redistribution/entrenchment of power was explored through investigation into the role of political parties, caste, tribe and family. Narrative accounts of 21 women elected representatives were recorded to explore the links between the above mentioned institutions (caste, tribe, family and political parties). Interviews with office bearers of the district and state offices of the key political parties -Bhartiya Janata Party, Congress (I), Janata Dal and the Bahujan Samaj Party were conducted to understand the party's role in promoting women's candidature and in providing opportunities to women in politics; positions they hold and roles they perform in the party, women's wing and youth wings of the parties and whether this helps them in upward mobility within the party structure and in building a political career.

## Barriers to Women's Effective Leadership

Agencies within the civil society and local associations, especially women's groups, have been working to create and secure space within the decentralised governance system for women's participation, especially those from the disadvantaged sections. However, once women enter the spaces provided by decentralisation, various factors hinder participation ranging from fundamental inequalities, male-dominated governance structures, family, caste, personal background and the local governance system and institutions. Alongside the barriers, there have also been efforts to enable women's participation. The support has come from civil society groups, local associations, and self-help groups. The capacity building initiatives of the civil society have focused on enabling women to contest and once in, to provide specific support and build their skills as per their needs (Duflo et al. 2005). Mobilisation and networking have helped them to collectively demand enabling environments through advocating in appropriate forums.

### Limitations of Decentralisation

Decentralisation continues to carry structural and administrative limitations despite follow up legislations that are progressive.

- The degree of devolution including the transfer of funds and related administrative powers has not been as envisaged. This has prevented the local governments from realising their full potential.
- The two child norm<sup>4</sup> in Rajasthan resulted in the disqualification of a large number of young women.
- Adjourned meetings do not have a quorum requirement and can be convened immediately afterwards. Therefore, most decisions at the panchayat level are made without the active participation of women and dalits.
- Elected leaders depend on the gram sevaks in convening meetings, setting the agenda and for guidance in overall functioning. Women leaders find it difficult to work closely with the gram sevaks, most of whom are men.

### Women's dependence on their families

The decision to contest an election for a woman is mostly made by her family,

*"I had no intention of contesting the elections. My husband wanted to be the Sarpanch of the village but he lost the election thrice. Since this time this was a woman's seat, he persuaded me to contest. He spent money for the campaign and worked very hard. On the polling day, he brought the supporters to the booth to vote which ensured my victory. On winning the election both of us were garlanded and now my husband is known as 'Sarpanch Sahib'. I consult him for all my work and sign only where he tells me to."*

- Sarpanch, District Jodhpur



largely by her husband or father. Families provide critical support for campaigning, in carrying out public work, day-to-day functioning in the Panchayat and in times of crises, such as the no-confidence motion; especially for women leaders. Men operate autonomously, or consult the village elders and the gram sevaks.

Around 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the women attributed their motivation to contest to their families, while only less than 5 percent of men tended to do so. Only 25 percent men 'consult' their wives in decision making, while more than 35 percent women 'depend' on their husbands for all decisions.

Being economically disadvantaged the dalit women leaders cannot find adequate support from their families or communities. They are frequently forced to depend on the upper caste men for financial support for campaigning and functioning.

*"In 1995 I contested from a woman's seat but this time I decided to contest from a general seat. My family is active in politics. My husband and his father are active members of a political party. Because of their links, the party requested my in-laws to allow me to contest the election. I get support from the party for development work at the local level."*

*- Sarpanch,  
District Banswara*

### **Women's political inexperience**

Women tend to be politically inexperienced as compared to men. While one out of every six men has contested an election, only one out of twenty five women has done so. Women's political inexperience tends to affect negatively, their presence in government meetings and their ability to influence decision making.

Even though the elections are not contested on the basis of party membership, they continue to play a key role in the elected leaders' capacity to participate in decision making. Links with political parties are crucial for support for campaigning, dealing with the local administration, resource support through access to MLA and MP Area Development Funds and for political 'promotion'. While fewer women have party membership, almost two in three men were active members of some political party or the other. However, more women than men came from families that had prior association with a political party. This, in effect, means that while men tend to be active members of political parties, women relied on the links of their husbands, fathers or in-laws. Women were mostly 'secondary members' of a political party.

### **The Culture of Politics**

Politics is widely considered as male domain. Men regulate the entry of women into politics. It is spoken of "not being a straight game," and therefore one where women, who have no experience, should stay away from. The community discussed the culture of politics marked by bribe, sleaze, lure, slander and escapade, which is perceived as "unfit for women from good homes." When men practice this, it is applauded, but frowned upon when women do the same things. On the other hand, the men privately acknowledge that the presence of women has lent a sense of order and respect towards each other, with changes in language and conduct. However, this does not mean that the presence of women changes the issues and nature of discussion.



### Women's private costs of public action

Women's decision to contest is frequently made by the men in the family. Even if the family does not make the decision for her, she still needs the approval of her family to contest. The approval comes with conditions. Women are expected to fulfil their domestic chores before they participate in any public activity. The narratives of women leaders had accounts of how they are forced to neglect their families and the guilt attached to this. Either their daughters bore the domestic burden or their husbands unhappily shared it. As a result, women are dependent on their families for critical resources for fighting elections, functioning as local government leaders and for fulfilling their domestic chores.



In rare cases, the women fought elections against the wishes of their families. In extreme cases, this led to the collapse of their marriages. Such women were turned away from their homes, with 'their' children. For such women, life in politics presents a two-fold challenge. One of building a political support base for themselves, for life without power has little meaning for them. Second, they also struggle to 'survive' without masculine support and care.

*"I grew up in a politically active family and have been interested in contesting elections. But my husband's family did not like this. I contested against their wishes and won the elections for a second term. My husband's family started pressuring me to quit politics. But I resisted and went ahead. This created a rift between my husband and me and I was asked to leave with my three sons. Now I live with my sons at my father's house. I have again been elected for a third time."*

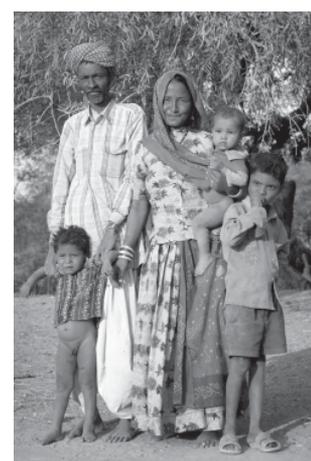
- Ward Panch, District Banswara

The family was also a source of support in many cases. There were different ways by which it provided the requisite grounding and support to boost the women leaders' political career. Early exposure to politics in their families inspired women to participate in public life. Family's support in her primary education helped her develop verbal, organisational and negotiation skills that are useful for her political activity. Participation in extra-curricular activities, travelling daily for higher education, living in hostels and active interaction with friends and relatives created confident, independent and fearless women. In their marital homes, women leaders received support from their in-laws, or sometimes, even their husbands. They shared the domestic chores while the women travelled to work.

### Using dalit women as 'dummies'

Elections at the local level are more an outcome of the family's standing within the community, and less a reflection of the individual leader's performance or capacity. As a result, there are frequent clashes between the powerful families in the community. Given the prevalent perception of political culture, powerful families prefer to 'protect' women from their own community. Instead, as a compromise, the powerful upper-caste families choose to field dalit women from women reserved seats.

Because of lack of resources the dalit women depend on the upper caste/class families for running their campaigns. As a result, the dalit women are frequently locked into 'dependency' to the upper caste/class village male elders. They are reduced to rubber-stamps, while the upper caste men exercise power.



### Women's assertion leads to exit

Women struggle to assert power. Very often, women leaders are removed or forced to exit, if they wield power. No-confidence motions are more common against dalit women. While the upper caste/class village elders

*"I have no help for my household chores. My new role has altered my daily routine. I am unable to finish my work on time so my daughters have to pitch in. There is no one who will ensure that my children reach school on time or take care of their studies. This adversely affects them..."*

*- Sarpanch,  
District Jhunjhunu*

*"Rajputs prefer to field non-deserving candidates so that they can control power. In our village there were young deserving dalit women but the Rajputs fielded an ailing, aged and illiterate dalit woman. She won because of the Rajput support. She now depends on her son. While the Rajputs make all the decisions, her son implements them."*

*- FGD, District Jodhpur*

support her election, they remove her at the slightest sign of resistance. Upper caste/class men also rely on sexual slander; labelling women's mobility and resistance as her sexual 'availability.' This tends to a forced withdrawal on the part of the women. This problem is more common among dalit women, who frequently witness stray remarks and in rare cases, bodily violence, if they resist the masculine attempts to rubber-stamp their power.

### **Caste-based differences in sources of oppression**

The narratives of the dalit women were distinctly different from those of the upper castes, even those from the backward castes. The upper caste women described their struggle to stay in power through the burden of domestic labour. They discussed the sexual division of labour at home, the lack of physical mobility and its effect on women's participation in the public meetings. As a result, such women leaders struggled for support at meetings. They had to deal with a large number of men. They also discussed the invisibility of change in their own homes, and their desire to withdraw or at least, not contest again. The discussion around caste was limited to unfavourable caste blocs for elections or during the no-confidence motion. The dalit woman on the other hand, focussed entirely on caste-based oppression. For her, this was the biggest challenge in the exercise of her power.

*"In 2000, I contested the election from a reserved seat and won. My family had spent money for the campaign. Being a dalit and a woman brought with it many challenges for me as a Sarpanch. Even though I am illiterate and work with my family's support, I have been able to take up development work. I try to ensure that poor families benefit from government schemes. I fought to reduce violence against women and women from all communities support me now. The Rajputs wanted to benefit from influencing decisions in the Panchayat but I never gave in. They even moved a no-confidence motion against me, charging me with incompetence and misappropriation. They went to the extent of buying votes against me but the motion was defeated, which infuriated them. They started harassing, abusing, threatening and insulting me in public and despite my filing a complaint in the police station, no action was taken. I will not contest elections again. There is very little space for dalit women like me."*

*Ex-Sarpanch, District Jodhpur*

## Women's Creative Responses to Resistance to their Leadership

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Despite the considerable challenge to their leadership, women have responded creatively in resisting men's domination. Not only have their families emerged as sources of support, but women leaders have also mobilised other women. They have relied on political support for functioning and creatively used alternate spaces to challenge traditional power.

### **Learning the language of politics by speaking it**

Women narrate inspiring tales of taking the challenge of political inexperience and its culture head on. They were kept out of it for not knowing the 'language of politics.' Women eagerly participate in training and exchange programmes to learn about politics, development, governing and leadership. They know that the best way of learning the language is by 'speaking it.' They no longer assume illiteracy to be a deterrent.

### **Mobilising women's power**

Women leaders rally the support of other women to build feminist power. They encourage women across caste lines to participate in public meetings. Women leaders have stepped out of their ghunghat to set an example. They convene women only spaces for discussion and raise issues that affect women more acutely - domestic violence, alcohol abuse, drinking water and sanitation.

"I fought elections from a general seat to become the first dalit woman sarpanch of our gram panchayat. I stopped practising purdah and have learnt to address public meetings. I am not afraid of travelling alone and make it a point to sit in the front seat. I encourage other women to travel with me to attend meetings and ask questions. The names of poor were included in the revised BPL list. Women and dalits support me actively now. Even the women from the majority communities of the Patels and Chaudhary stand by me."

*- Sarpanch, District Jodhpur*

### **Connecting with the political parties**

Women have begun to recognise the importance of associating with political parties. They seek support from them, not just in contesting elections, but are eager to maintain regular contact. This helps them access Local Area Development Funds (MLA and MP Funds) and utilise sanctioned money, put up proposals for development work, mobilise community participation and organise meetings. They have used the resources for constructing village ponds, schools' boundary walls and water supply pipelines.

### **Using alternate sites for challenging domination**

Decentralisation has created multiple sites outside of local governments. Vigilance committees, citizens groups, monitoring groups and resource groups have been used creatively by women leaders to challenge masculine domination. They have sought information, promoted transparency, exposed nepotism and built all-round accountability. This may not have been possible for women individually. The strength of such collectives has created space for women to protest, challenge, resist and even overthrow traditional masculine power.

“I was the sarpanch of my village but did not win a second term. The current sarpanch is a Rajput man who makes decisions unilaterally without any public debate. The sarpanch elected the president of the Annapurna Mahila Samiti which is responsible for the Mid-day Meal scheme. I contested the process of the election saying that only women members of the Samiti should elect the president and not the sarpanch. He started threatening me but I did not give up. As a result the officials reconvened the election of the President.”

*Ex-sarpanch, District Jodhpur*

## Building a Collective Agenda for NGOs

Despite the challenges to their leadership, women have begun to develop creative ways of resistance. Such forms of resistance must be scaled with the necessary support structures to help other women leaders lead effectively. At the same time, the barriers to their participation must also be overcome through institutionalised support mechanisms.

### Building women's capacities

Recognising that women elected representatives (WERs) are marginalised on the basis of social, caste and gender affiliations, providing them capacity building support has been a key focus. The support is initiated in the pre-election phase, through identifying women with prior experience of leadership and decision making and supporting them through the elections. Post elections, the support function has focussed on a) building human capital b) creating accessible support structures and (c) building social capital.

NGOs and the state government have been engaged in capacity building through structured training and sharing of information. The NGOs have evolved different models so as to fulfil diverse training needs of WERs; utilised state resources for helping them access information and provided support to the state training institutes to train the master trainers, develop modules, and facilitate training sessions. The survey data indicates that 69.8 per cent of women and 70.6 per cent of men have received training at least once after being elected. In case of women, 69 percent received NGO organised trainings. One set of trainings have focussed on providing an overall understanding on the panchayat structure, provisions of the act and development schemes and funds available to the panchayat to help them function. Another set of trainings have worked around



building self esteem, confidence and building leadership skill which would enable elected women to be present in deliberative forums and voice their concerns. Responses to the perceived benefits of the training point to a very prominent emphasis on information gained (acts, schemes and programmes) that has helped them in their administrative function, whereas the development of skills, personal development and support in addressing social issues have been mentioned as secondary gains by both men and women.

However, it has been seen that the panchayats encounter a wide range of issues on a daily basis. Some of the key issues that have been highlighted during the training needs assessments and discussions are land encroachment, land title, violence against women, child marriage, caste-based discrimination and atrocities against women and dalits. The trainings do not equip the WERs and men elected representatives (MERs) to face these practical issues they come across. The survey and the training needs assessment identified several areas and themes that need to be included in the training curriculum. These included overall understanding on development, land policy, legal aspects related to land title, violence against women, social audits, planning and budgeting and understanding of politics. In terms of timing and frequency it was clearly stated by the elected representatives that the basic training should be given within six months of their coming to power. There should be regular updates at least once in six months. However the duration of these trainings needs to be short. Women preferred more frequent one day trainings closer to their home as they found it difficult to stay overnight at the training venue. The training materials provided during the trainings were not being used by the elected representatives particularly the women as they were not friendly given their low level of literacy.

Capacity building initiatives therefore need to be reviewed and redefined to:

- a. widen the scope by including relevant themes that women leaders encounter on a day-to-day basis. For example - violence against women, social audits, planning and budgeting, land encroachment, child marriage, legal provisions for fighting caste-based discrimination etc. must also be covered.
- b. make the methodology and learning material more friendly. Audio visuals, large prints, exposure to successful women leaders through participatory trainings and exposure visits should be used.
- c. re-examine the time duration and training schedule. The initial training should happen within six months of their coming to power. There should be more frequent, shorter duration trainings that span the entire term of the newly elected leaders. Women prefer trainings closer to their home.

### **Building associations of women**

Realising the isolation of WERs from learning opportunities that could help increase their exposure to the political arena, NGOs have begun to promote avenues for peer learning, building solidarity and promoting collective articulation of issues. The concept of networks and federations has drawn a

positive response from some WERs who have begun to see the value of these support structures created for them. Members of such federations have developed collective resolutions and advocated for their issues which has resulted in favourable modifications in existing rules and regulations. Associations of elected women, women from the community, dalits and tribals can help address specific issues of these groups. There are examples of NGOs in Rajasthan facilitating the formation of such collectives for peer learning and support. Support should also be extended to build associations of elected women to enable them to exercise their individual and collective power more effectively. It is important that these associations are not just formed but sustained through the active and regular engagement of the members around issues that concern them, with the overall aim of building their political constituency.

### **Multiply support to women**

NGOs are supporting elected women through the Panchayat Resource Centre (PRC), local resource groups, information sharing, sammelans, exposure visits, issue based campaigns for environment building, voter awareness campaigns etc. Support to the elected women comes mainly in the form of information and access. However, women also need support to deal with resistance and retaliation from their families, in their marriages and from the community. Such structures must engage with the institutions of daily life, like family, marriage, caste and workplace. There is a need for creating and multiplying accessible support mechanisms at the individual and local level for the elected women.



Panchayat Resource Centre (PRC) is a block level capacity building instrument for strengthening PRIs through upgrading the information and skills of ERs especially women and marginalized groups who lack such avenues of support. These were introduced by independent institutions that had no political affiliations. The PRCs were set up in close collaboration with the State Government, Zila Panchayat and Panchayat Samiti. The centers engaged in information sharing, supporting capacity building, mobilising community; promoting a local resource group drawing from active leaders and hand holding support to select Gram Panchayats.

## Recommendations for Policy Change

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Decentralisation has opened considerable space for women at the local level. However it has only to a limited extent been able to redistribute power in favour of women. Decentralised spaces are not gender neutral and it has fostered dependency on men to be present and influence decision making forums like gram sabha and panchayat meetings. The capacity of women to function and effect change in political spaces is linked to what happens within the family and community. Caste and community deploy women to serve their own ends at the local level and use local politics as a means of entrenchment of power. Women are instruments for wielding power at the local level by men. Given the limited space within political parties particularly in local politics, women find it difficult to build a political constituency for themselves. Once the seat is unreserved it makes it difficult for her to stay in politics and seek re-election.

Civic agencies and government are working to make decentralised spaces more enabling for women to participate effectively. Civil society organisations have taken up evidence based advocacy to influence policy and to modify certain provisions of the act. The governments have also taken note of the limitations of the decentralised system and are willing to bring about administrative and legislative reforms. Even while the study was in progress, Rajasthan and other states announced 50 percent reservation for women in local elected bodies. There is a strong move to implement reservation at the national level. Many states have repealed the 2 child norms and others are working towards it. There is also a dialogue on reservation of seats for two terms for women. The recommendations made here will strengthen the efforts in creating an enabling environment for women to participate in decision making forums.

### **1. Reserve the women's seat for two successive terms**

Women have traditionally struggled to build a political support base for themselves. Reserving the woman's seat for two terms will help them consolidate their political base, and fight the stigma of 'quota women.'

## **2. Repeal the two-child norm**

The norm works to disqualify a large number of young women most women in rural areas have little control over their own reproduction.

## **3. Elections should be funded by the state**

Contesting elections means ensuring availability of resources for filing nominations, canvassing and public meetings. Women depend heavily on their families directly, and on political parties indirectly, for this. Women from marginal caste groups, from poorer families, single and widowed women find it difficult to contest elections because of the lack of resource support. Funding for elections from the state will help these women to contest, and reduce their dependence on men.

## **4. Adjourned Meetings must have a quorum**

Mobilising public participation in gram sabhas and ward sabhas is resource intensive. Meetings can be adjourned because of lack of sufficient quorum, and reconvened immediately, without prior notice. This means, that in most cases, decisions are made without inclusive public participation. Quorum for adjourned meetings will put pressure on elected leaders and gram sevaks to ensure that this happens.

## **5. Enlisting more women gram sevaks**

Women frequently shared that they feel uncomfortable working with men gram sevaks. Given the supportive nature of their role, enlisting more women gram sevaks will facilitate the effective functioning of women leaders.

## **6. Making women friendly deliberative forums mandatory**

The state has made provisions for women only gram sabhas and ward sabhas to encourage women and marginal groups to participate in decision making and promote quick decisions for proposals suggested by them. However, these have not been used as conceived. The decision to convene them also lies with the gram sevak, mostly male. Making these forums mandatory may provide opportunities to women and marginal groups who may not be in a position to take the initiative to organise them. This is necessary until they begin to understand and value the rationale for such special collective meetings.

## Notes

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- 1 To avoid identification, the focus group discussions and women's narratives have been coded by geography and serially numbered.
- 2 The index for Presence was based on the presence of women in four key deliberative spaces, including those of Panchayat office, Gram Sabha, Panchayat Meeting and the Standing Committee. The scores were scaled to 100. The actual scores ranged from 0 - 70 for men and 1 - 67 for women. The mean score for men is 44.44 which are higher than that for women, 39.18.
- 3 The index for Influence was based on the presence of the elected representative, self-initiative, nature of issue raised and the decision outcome. Gram Sabhas and Panchayat Meetings were considered for this. The nature of issues raised was weighted, with the lowest to those pertaining to ongoing functions of the Panchayats and the highest weight attached to issues of social justice; with issues related to basic services and infrastructure, information on development schemes and accessibility of services by vulnerable groups in between. Three levels of outcome have been considered- no decision taken, proposal accepted in principle and forwarded to higher levels for further action; and accepted and work initiated. For each level of outcome a score, located progressively further apart, has been given. Given the fact that Panchayat meetings and Gram Sabhas are equally important forums for deliberation and decision making, equal weightage has been given to both. The range of influence score was 1-56. The range of influence score for women was 1-53.89 and for men, it was 1-56.67. The mean score for men was 15.22 and for women 10.32. Women have lower presence and influence scores. Apart from gender based differences in scores there are considerable regional variations. For both male and female representatives Jhunjhunu has the lowest mean presence score and Banswara has the highest mean scores.
- 4 The two child norm disqualifies all persons from contesting elections, in case they have more than two living children, as on a specified date. It was introduced after the 1991 Census when the Chairperson of the National Development Council recommended moving legislation in Parliament prohibiting persons with more than two children from holding any post in the panchayat. Rajasthan introduced the 2 child norm in 1992 even before the NDC could make the recommendation. In Rajasthan, during 1995-97, 412 cases of disqualification were documented. Prior studies indicate that the two-child norm adversely affects women's autonomy, their position in the family, their reproductive rights and their participation in politics and community decision-making structures. In addition, it is often used to settle personal or political scores.

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## ABOUT US

UNNATI is a voluntary non-profit organisation registered under the Societies Registration Act (1860) in 1990. It is our aim to promote social inclusion and democratic governance so that the vulnerable sections – dalits and women, of our society, are empowered to effectively and decisively participate in mainstream development and decision making process.

It is an issue based, strategic educational support organisation, working in Western India with people's collectives, NGOs, elected representatives in local governance and the government. Collaborative research, public education, advocacy, direct field level mobilisation and implementation with multiple stakeholders are the key instruments of our work. The interventions span from the grassroot level to policy level environment in ensuring basic rights of citizens. In this, inspiration is drawn from the struggles of the vulnerable and strength from our partners. Presently, all the activities of UNNATI are organised around the following programme centres/themes:

### **Social Inclusion and Empowerment**

The initiatives include:

- Dalit mobilisation and organising in Western Rajasthan in collaboration with local NGOs and people's organisations to fight discrimination.
- Educational support for mainstreaming gender at all levels internally and for our partners.
- Promoting civic response in mainstreaming disability through educational support to agencies working with persons with disabilities and other civil society organizations.
- Facilitating formation of craft based producers' group of women affected by the Gujarat earthquake for livelihood promotion.

### **Civic Leadership and Governance**

We work in the rural and urban areas. The activities include:

- Community mobilisation for participation in decision making forums and monitoring of basic services to ensure social justice.
- Support elected representatives especially women and dalits to promote accountability through reform in local governance institutions. The support includes capacity building for equitable implementation of development programmes, participatory planning and facilitating social audits.
- Promotion and strengthening of forums like association of women elected representatives, Social Justice Committees and Village Development Committees for facilitating collaborative action.

### **Social Determinants of Disaster Risk Reduction**

We facilitate adoption of sustainable and affordable Innovations in the field and research to promote community Based practices for disaster risk reduction. The activities include action research on current community practices, documentation of best practices and research and advocacy on disaster response policies and Packages.

The learning derived from our field experiences are consolidated and disseminated in print and electronic forms for wider sharing through a Knowledge Resource Centre. It is our endeavour to build an academy for community leaders, especially dalits and women, so that they can effectively address local issues.



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