Women Elected Representatives in Panchayats and Municipalities
PRIA began its work on local self-governance with the passing of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments creating spaces for women and SCs/STs/OBCs to participate more fully in political spaces and processes.

In the initial years, PRIA’s intervention work was centered around motivating, supporting and giving information to backward groups, especially the women from these groups to contest elections, and as elected representatives be a part of planning, promoting and ensuring implementation of development processes for their village and community. They were given to understand that only if they were a part of the political process as representatives of their people, would they be able to influence the agenda of development in their favour.

This process was long drawn out, fraught with challenges especially the sensitive tackling of culture, tradition and other social taboos related to the inclusion and participation of women. For most women this was the first time in their lives and in the history of their families that they were being even asked to participate in this male dominated bastion of politics. It was unheard of that women from villages and small towns should even think of a political seat, of contesting elections, of having her poster displayed in the village, of being given the recognition of a political candidate.

Yet, while some women came forward with a clear objective and understanding of being a potential political candidate, most contest elections at the behest of the male members of their families, including their husbands, sons, fathers and even fathers-in-law. Very few, if at all expected to win; they were at the time mere participants.

But as luck was to have it, many of them were elected to office and that was when their struggle began. Nothing was easy – for the first time in their lives they were stepping out of the confines of their homes to take up office, some of them still in “purdah”, as it was too alien to them to be otherwise. The attitudes of their male colleagues, government officials, the bureaucracy and the community at large shocked many of them. Whatever they had expected, it was definitely not contempt of their being women, scorn for being illiterate, ridicule for being unexposed and inexperienced in conducting the affairs of their office, and being at the helm of village meetings.

It was a struggle and a bitter one at that for the women. They were trapped between the attitude against them as well as the culture and traditions they were a part and parcel of. Many of them found that they were dummy candidates for the men in their families or the ex-politician who had nominated them for these elections. They were without power; the men took decisions and represented them at meetings without so much as sharing information of what has happened. Several women found that their culture
forced them to remain in *purdah*, they could not speak up in front of older men from their families, including their fathers and brothers-in-law. They were often asked to sit on the floor as women did not sit on chairs as equal to men; making and serving tea in the meetings was their responsibility and a part of the socialization as shared by the entire Panchayat or Municipality.

Worse was yet to come. Very often meetings were held without their knowledge and/or consent, decisions taken without their consent, though they had signed the relevant paper, they were not confident to contest these practices and speak up, the sheer presence of large numbers of men intimidated them.

When some women made an effort to assert themselves, local government functionaries (like panchayat secretary) who preferred to deal with the men-folk, refused to talk with them, they were asked to send their male relatives for discussion. The patriarchal nature of local administration reinforced a sense of worthlessness among these women. The culture of politics, the masculinity of political processes, the adversarial proceedings, subtle forms of coercion to conform to the central interests of male elected representatives, the timing of meetings and sessions, the pervasiveness of patronage etc. were factors used to curb and control women leaders’ self-determining behaviour.

But the situation slowly started changing for many of these women elected representatives (WERs). For some, their families gave them support in understanding political proceedings and processes and for those who came from families with political backgrounds, the transition was easier. For others the factors influencing change were varied but for many it was their determination, their personal characteristics and most importantly their affiliations or associations (from the past as well as in their role as WERs) that made a positive difference.

One of the studies PRIA conducted with the women elected representatives and other stakeholders revealed that some civil society organizations as well as NGOs and women’s groups were responsible for grooming women and helping them take on their public roles and office. They included:

- Traditional groups such as caste associations
- Wider social membership in various socio-cultural groups
- Community based groups such as women collectives
- Political parties
All of these helped in enabling WERs to work confidently, articulate their concerns and constraints and understand issues of women’s empowerment, corruption and generating unity amongst people. Women’s groups had been particularly valuable in assuring that panchayats and their elected leadership function as democratic, self-governing institutions.

Initially, our work with WERs focused on awareness of their roles as public servants, their responsibilities, conducting of meetings, setting of agendas, promoting women’s development issues, awareness of development schemes enabling these for education, employment, pension plans etc.

Today, after more than a decade of work at the grassroots, action oriented research training and other capacity building efforts, it is clear that we now need to focus on the development of leadership skills amongst women. While a programme on governance would continue to motivate and enthuse women into political processes, women’s political empowerment and leadership focuses on women who are proving their leadership abilities in a series of structured events, as well as opportunities to demonstrate their grasp of specific development issues undertaken in training programmes and create a positive impact in their communities through small programmes that they launch.

Our experiences and learnings pointed to the fact that women’s leadership suffers not only from the lack of cooperation within the family, society or the institutions of governance but also due to the lack of individual capacity, skills and knowledge for decision making. Through the two terms in governance and despite some positive and admirable achievements, elected women representatives continue to grapple over their new roles and responsibilities. Their voices are still silent, as they are unable to articulate the priorities of their constituency and influence the decision making. Many citizen leaders or other women would like to join politics and if already a part of the system would want to move on from the local level and attain higher elections.

Under the circumstances, it is required that trainings and capacity buildings for women leaders not only be limited to information dissemination on the provisions of the local governance. There is need for a holistic learning, not only of acquiring specific skills, but also of developing a perspective of the unequal gendered power relations that generally constrain women’s participation politically. Trainings must address behaviour, attitudes and personal empowerment issues.
So we now move forward!!!

PRIA’s work has demonstrated that leadership can be acquired and learnt. Capacity building strategies particularly through innovative and intensive structured trainings help women leaders in playing their designated role more effectively. Only through a comprehensive understanding of the power dynamics within the society and within the institutions and of learning the effective ways to deal with them can women exercise their leadership. As representatives, women leaders need to articulate the needs and priorities related to rights, entitlements and basic services provision of their constituency; participate in social planning and policy development and act upon them.

Training can no longer be limited to elected representatives after they take their seats in the constituency, but we are now focusing on those potential women leaders from the community so that they are prepared to handle the public offices prior to the elections. A clear understanding of the governance structures and up-gradation of personal skills will also motivate them to contest in the elections and take active part in politics. This will lead to qualitative political empowerment of women in the long run.

The process of selection of WERs and other citizen leaders are based on several criteria. Those who meet most of the criteria are selected for more intensive training. The criteria are related to those

- who are active in community processes
- belong to a network or village collective
- are able to devote time to development processes
- have mobility
- basic literacy skills

These women would finally be selected for a process of comprehensive and holistic capacity building and planning throughout the period of a year. Selection and training begin at local level and continues systematically through the year. The women, who are more talented, are selected for training at the district, State and finally at the National level.

Those not selected for higher level training will continue to be a part of a local level process of handholding, support and other capacity building efforts.
The comprehensive curriculum for the training includes:

- A thorough knowledge of the Indian Constitution
- Understanding of Government structures right from local-district-State to national levels.
- Gender awareness and sensitization
- Public speaking Skills
- Personal grooming and confidence building
- In-depth understanding of 1-2 development issues, depending on the needs of their village, town, community
- Planning a campaign for citizen awareness on select issues
- Processes of joining politics, contesting elections, devising campaign for voter awareness
- Developing their mandate and USP as a contestant.

The objective of this strategy is to build up a methodology which can be scaled up to identify individuals, build their capacities in general and with specific needs to strengthen and intensify women’s leadership skills in the area of political participation.

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About PRIA

Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) is a global participatory research and training centre. PRIA’s professional expertise and practical insights are utilised by other civil society groups, NGOs, governments, donors, trade unions, private business and academic institutions around the world.

Since its inception in 1982, PRIA has embarked on a set of initiatives focusing on empowerment of the poor and excluded. PRIA has consistently worked on issues of citizens’ access to rights and entitlements, such as basic services in health, education and water in rural and urban areas; women’s literacy and livelihood; forest rights of tribals; prevention of land alienation and displacement; and workers’ occupational health and safety. In all its interventions, PRIA emphasises gender mainstreaming institutionally and programmatically. Its perspectives on participatory research generate innovative participatory methodologies.

The intensive field programmes of PRIA are currently located in the states of Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Rajasthan. In addition, through its network of partners, these interventions extend throughout India. PRIA is also involved in programmes in countries like Afghanistan, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Laos, Nepal, Philippines and Sri Lanka.