

# Engaging with elected women panchayat representatives to ensure transformative participation in decision making processes in Odisha



NATIONAL ALLIANCE OF WOMEN (NAWO) - ORISSA CHAPTER

## Background

Trócaire has worked with its partner organisation the National Alliance of Women (NAWO) and its member organisations<sup>1</sup> in Khorda, Kalahandi, Deogarh, Rayagada and Keonjhar districts in Odisha. Since 2009 the project supports good governance through increased women's participation in decision making processes and the promotion of gender justice through engaging with elected women Panchayat<sup>2</sup> representatives. This work is contributing to an important need in the state, as there are only a small number of women currently active in the political arena. The 6-year programme sought to build the capacity of elected women Panchayat representatives and bring them under a common umbrella to raise and address their issues and concerns at state level.

The 73rd Amendment of the Indian constitution relates to reserved seats for women in the local governance system. Odisha was the first state in India to adopt a 33% reservation for women at the Panchayat level, which was increased to 50% in 2012. Although women won 53% of the seats in the 2012 Panchayat election, the issues of elected female Panchayat representatives have not been clearly addressed to date. Women political leaders, especially those from

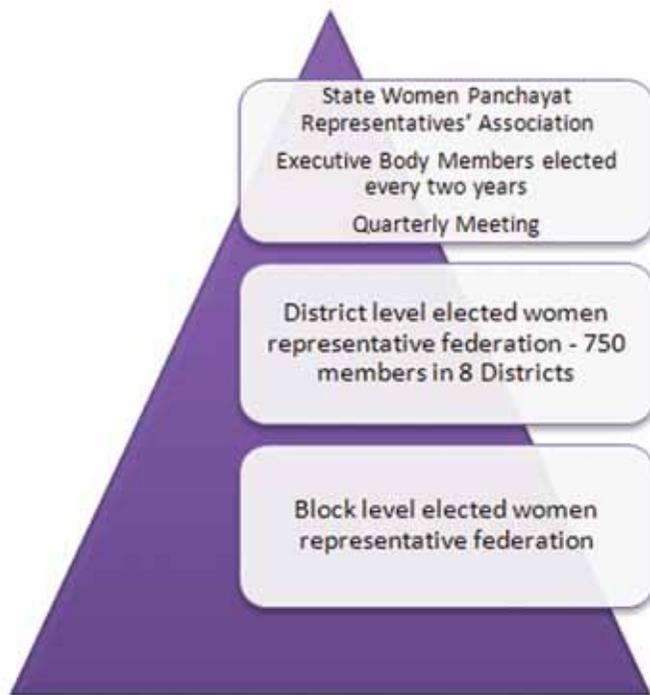
### BOX 1:

State Women Panchayat Representatives' Association (SWORA), the first elected women Panchayat representatives' association in Odisha, initiated in 2012, continues to grow and develop through the support of the Odisha Chapter of NAWO. It is a new beginning for elected women's political participation, as prior to SWORA there was no state level Panchayat representatives' federation specifically for women. NAWO recognised the need for this, as a forum where women's needs could be discussed. This association addresses issues such as increasing critical participation, addressing violence faced by women Panchayat representatives at Panchayat level and family and societal pressure. Over the past two years, SWORA has been working on issues such as repealing the Two Child Norm, addressing election conditionality at Panchayat level and building rest room facilities for the women representatives in Panchayat buildings.

marginalised backgrounds, operate in a hostile environment and find it difficult to work alone.

<sup>1</sup> CARD, Khorda; JEETA, Deogarh; FARR, Kalahandi and Rayagada; WORD, Keonjhar.

<sup>2</sup> Village-level statutory institution of local self-government called the Panchayat (village government) in India and it is democratic bodies at the below district level and have been given Constitutional status under 73rd and 74th Amendments of the Indian Constitution. A sarpanch is an elected head of the Panchayat (village government) in India.



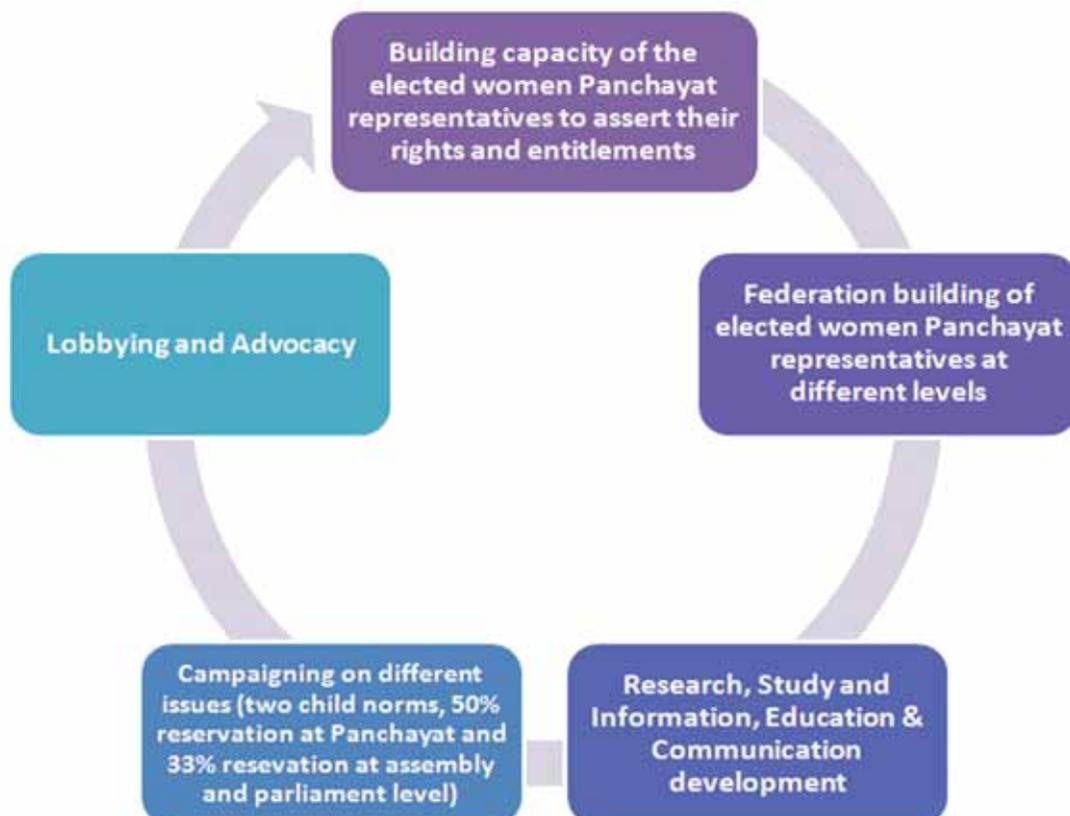
▲ Structure of SWORA



▲ SWORA executive Committte members meeting

## Strategies to facilitate the process of empowering elected women panchayat representatives:

The diagram below shows the five core strategies used within the programme



## Impact

### 1. Transformative participation of elected women Panchayat representatives in decision making bodies

Before the intervention of NAWO, elected women representatives were not confident enough to preside over the pallisabha<sup>3</sup> and gramsabha<sup>4</sup> meetings. They sat in the back row at even general Panchayat level meeting and were never asked for their suggestions. After the meetings, they unquestioningly signed the resolutions that had been decided. Through a training programme, SWORA members have become confident to preside over pallisabha and gramsabha meetings in their region. At the beginning of the intervention, several elected women representatives echoed the following sentiment *“we are daughter-in-laws in our village and it is offensive to speak against or in front of our father-in-law or brothers-in-law in the villages. What they decide we have to accept”* But after the training programme they realised that their opinions are not directed against anyone, rather they speak for the benefit of their region, on behalf of the people who elected them as representatives. *“If we do not raise our voices and demand action for the*

*people, it will be disrespectful to the people who voted for us on the promise to do something for them”*, one woman representative said. Now they are more actively involved in the decision making processes of village development, for example: through the implementation of job schemes for eligible people, housing schemes and other government social security schemes.

*Kamala Oram lives in Harekrushnapur village, Deogarh districts. She is currently the Sarpanch<sup>5</sup> of Singal Gram Panchayat, elected for the first time. She attended the capacity building programme organised by JEETA for women Panchayat representatives. After attending the capacity building programme, she became aware of the role and responsibility of the Sarpanch and helped to foster synergy between women Self Help group members and Women Panchayat representatives. She shared “I realised that as a woman Sarpanch, I should be involved in solving issues faced by women. I was involved in solving some domestic violence cases in my village. I found that most of the violence cases happened because of liquor. I decided to stop*

#### Box 2: Methods and techniques used for strengthening elected women panchayat representatives

Methods	Techniques
<p><b>That involve the direct participation of women and men:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Workshops</li> <li>• Capacity Building Programme</li> <li>• Exchange of experience (through exposure)</li> <li>• Celebrating special Days such as International Women’s Day</li> <li>• Training on role and responsibility of the Sarpanch, Naib Sarpanch and Ward members</li> <li>• Regional level convention on different issues such as violence against women, rules and regulation of Palli Sabha/Gram Sabha and different laws</li> <li>• Supporting linkages with media</li> </ul> <p><b>That involve the community at large:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community exchange</li> <li>• Visit to local neighbouring districts (training sessions, field exposure, experience sharing)</li> <li>• Visit government offices at block level and local government offices, women commissioner</li> </ul>	<p>Used in educational activities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Group work</li> <li>• Regular discussion</li> <li>• Plenary sessions</li> <li>• Case studies</li> <li>• Street plays</li> <li>• Inviting different government officers as resource persons in the training sessions.</li> <li>• Ensuring training sessions are easy for women to attend by taking into account: time and place of the meeting so that it is suitable for women; conducting the training in the local language, pictorial and field demonstration, ensuring staff are gender sensitive.</li> <li>• Participate in different campaigns on different issues</li> <li>• Participate in marches</li> <li>• Presenting Awards to particularly proactive elected Women Panchayat Representatives in block and state level.</li> </ul>

<sup>3</sup> Village and hamlet level meetings for all villagers to attend as part of India’s system of local governance.

<sup>4</sup> A body consisting of persons registered in the electoral rolls relating to a village comprised within the area of a Panchayat.

<sup>5</sup> Elected head of the Panchayat (village-level statutory institution of local self-government in India).

*liquor in my Gram Panchayat and I motivated other SWORA members to close down the source from where liquor was supplied to the whole Gram Panchayat. I organized meetings, informed the women ward members<sup>6</sup> to organise the women Self Help groups (SHGs) of their ward to stop liquor. All the women SHGs organised a meeting and decided to protest against the liquor shop. They informed the police and the District Collector about the protest. All the women SHG members and the women representatives participated in the protest and made their demand that it be closed down very clear. We hope that it will be closed soon and if not, we will take further action”.*



▲ Capacity building training at MRampur block, Kalahandi

## 2. Regular operating of Panchayat offices

In many Panchayats where men are in the role of Sarpanch, Panchayat offices are opened during hours to suit their needs, such as early morning or late afternoon, which is very inconvenient for many members of the community, especially women. Often, Panchayat offices do not open for two or three consecutive days. There are no set times when people can come and meet the Sarpanch and ward members. However, it was found that in Panchayat offices where there are more elected women Panchayat representatives, the offices tend to remain open 5 days a week and with more convenient opening hours.

## 3. More responsiveness towards elected women Panchayat representatives

Elected women panchayat representatives are neglected and disrespected by the panchayat secretary and other government officials. For this reason some women representatives have developed an inferiority complex that they are uneducated and cannot properly understand the government letters. They have less knowledge about the

government schemes and programs. But after continuous training and follow up programs on leadership building and government schemes, women representatives' have shown a deeper understanding on the government schemes, willingness to work without corruption and proven themselves to be worthy representatives. Now all letters and information coming to the panchayat are shared with all concerned representatives. The panchayat secretary has become more responsive towards members.

*Ranjita Behera, Naib Sarpanch<sup>7</sup> of Tangi Panchayat was elected to a ward member position in the 2012 election from an unreserved seats. She was in the running with two men and won the election with huge support from her village. In the Panchayat office she ran for the Naib Sarpanch post and won. During her welcome ceremony, she sat next to the Sarpanch in front of all other ward members. But the next day she was told by the Sarpanch that she could not sit next to him because she was a woman and didn't know anything about the work of the Panchayat office, and that it was better for her to sit with the other ward members. As per the Panchayat rule, if the Sarpanch is absent, the Naib Sarpanch will act in his/her place, presiding over meetings and taking all the decisions. But she was deliberately excluded from this role and from all decision making processes, which offended her deeply. Ranjita felt very bad but was not confident in the initial stages to raise her voice against the Sarpanch. But after attending regular training sessions by CARD, she learnt the rights and responsibilities of her role. She became more confident and the other women ward members supported her and encouraged her to sit in her own seat. After one year, she had the courage to do it and became involved in all the functions of her role. Now Ranjita goes to the Panchayat office every day, attending all meetings, giving suggestions and is respected and accepted by all.*



▲ Capacity building training program of SWORA members

<sup>6</sup> Lowest elected person of the Panchayat (village-level statutory institution of local self-government in India).

<sup>7</sup> Deputy to the Sarpanch

#### 4. No more proxy leadership

When NAWO started working with women panchayat representatives, proxy leadership was a big challenge. There were situations where women elected representatives were genuinely interested in taking the lead, but their male family members would not permit them. NAWO had regular

▼ Gandu Sikaka, Ward Member, Sakata Village, Munikhola Panchayat



interaction with male family members while at the same time building the capacity of the women leaders. This strategy helped to ensure that women representatives became aware of their roles and responsibilities and helped to increase the family support for their roles. While male members have not always been 100% cooperative, they are no longer interfering the panchayat decision making process to and are no longer representing their wives at government forums.

#### 5. Increased participation in Palli Sabha/ Gram Sabha:

It is observed that women’s participation in the pallisabha and gramsabha increases when the panchayat elected representative is a woman. The dates and locations of these meetings are often clearly communicated and key decisions relating to government schemes are finalised at these meetings. Tribal women attending these meetings have highlighted issues of misuse of tribal development funds, and gaps in government schemes such as delayed or insufficient payments within job schemes, inadequate land settlement for women under Forest Right Act 2006<sup>8</sup> and ensuring the provision of housing schemes under the women’s names. SWORA members have also taken up issues of safe drinking water in the villages. They have regularized the Gaon Kalyan Samiti (village development committee) meetings and extended support for high risk pregnant mothers and malaria affected persons.

#### 6. 100% positions held by women in the Panchayat:

During the 2012 panchayat election, three Panchayats where NAWO works (Kalakaleswar, Jaripada and Kankadahada)

became areas where all the elected members in the panchayat are women. Strategically women contested for every position in the panchayat – for both reserved and unreserved seats. This strategy was part of an advocacy initiative to address some inaccuracies in the government circular about reserved seats for women. During the election there was a provision that 50% of panchayat seats would be reserved for women, but the other 50% of seats could be openly contested by women or men. However, the government circular stated that 50% of seats would be reserved for women, but that the other 50% would be for men. Through state level advocacy with the Chief Election Commission of Odisha, NAWO encouraged the government to resend the circular explaining that the unreserved seats should be open to both women and men. NAWO subsequently encouraged women to contest open seats and supported them to gaining all of the documentation required to run in the election.

▼ Felicitation to newly elected PRI members on 2012



### Challenges faced by the programme

#### Organising training program:

It is very difficult to get 30 to 40 elected women panchayat representative to attend a full two days training programme. Their husbands and other male family members often did not give them permission to attend. While some women are able to participate in the Panchayat and Block level training programs, they are not permitted to attend District and State level programs. Therefore when NAWO arranges state level programs, it is very difficult to mobilise women to attend. To address this, NAWO started interacting with both men and women, specifically involving the husbands or men members in the training program strategically. Gradually male members better understand the reasons why women should attend, and some have started to take on household responsibilities.

#### Difficulty in tracking performance:

During the trainings and meetings organised by NAWO, elected women representatives participate actively and seem

<sup>8</sup> The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 popularly known as the Forest Rights Act 2006 is considered a ground-breaking legislation that intends to recognise the rights of millions of tribals and other forest dwellers in different parts of India as it provides for the restitution of deprived forest rights across the country, including both individual rights to cultivated land in forestland and community rights over common property resources.

to internalise what they are learning. However, NAWO has found it challenging to track the actual performance of all elected representatives following their trainings. Not all representatives are able to return for follow up trainings. NAWO has developed monitoring tools for use in five of the districts where it works intensively, but these have not been used in the other 15 districts where NAWO has less of a presence. This is an ongoing challenge.

**Gaps between the training program and actual implementation work:**

In some cases NAWO has found that representatives become quickly disillusioned when they are unable to put in practice what they have learnt during the trainings. While the representatives leave the trainings with a good understanding of their roles and responsibilities, party politics, and local cultural traditions can often impede the fulfilment of their duties. Furthermore, while the Panchayat elected representatives are responsible for implementing government schemes, decisions about these schemes are often made at higher levels, which representatives find disempowering. This is an ongoing challenge.

**Unfavourable requirements for women in election nomination process:**

During the 2012 panchayat election, NAWO has faced lots of challenges relating to the nomination process. The inaccurate government circular about the unreserved seats being only for men (as described above) was one challenge, but other challenges included inequitable attitudes of some government officials, inadequate fixed time periods for women to gather their required documentation from their natal homes, and the length of time it then took to process key documents. To overcome these challenges NAWO engaged with the Chief Election Commission of Odisha to change the government circular and to extend the time period for document collection. At the same time, NAWO motivated women to contest unreserved seats and collect their required documentation from their natal homes. After the election, NAWO used the Right to Information Act to highlight flaws in the electoral process where some women candidates had been rejected.



**Lesson Learnt:**

**Building women power:**

Women Panchayat representatives are facing challenges not only in the domestic sphere but also in the Panchayat level. NAWO has found that mobilising women to come together has helped them to support each other, share their common problems and find common solutions. By supporting women to come together in federations, they are able to raise their voice and challenge inequitable attitudes. SWORA has given women an alternative forum to address the discrimination and violence faced by them.

**Invest in quality, participatory training:**

NAWO invested seriously in developing very specific trainings on analysing gender roles, understanding local governance system and rights of women panchayat representatives and women’s rights and this was delivered by their gender specialist. The training involved a reflective and participatory approach where women took time to explore the relevance of gender roles in their life.

*Chandrama Karji is a Saura tribal woman from Ramgiri in Gajapati district and presently she is the Sarpanch of Ramgiri Panchayat. Her parents passed away when she was very young but she managed to study up to class 7 and married at an early age of 16. Chandrama Karji attended several trainings organised by partner organisation of NAWO, Institute of Women Development (IWD) on the role and responsibilities as a Sarpanch. Chandrama, is now the Sarpanch of Ramgiri Panchayat and Secretary of SWORA at state level federation of elected women representatives formed by NAWO. She shared her experience that SWORA is about upholding our rights and providing emotional support to our elected women*

▼ Chandrama Karji, Sarpanch, Ramgiri Panchayat



representatives, SWORA have addressed issues like proxy leadership and facilities for women at the Panchayat offices like toilet and restrooms etc. We have also campaigned for the repeal of the two child norm as election conditionality. NAWO has given me a lot of exposure not only at the state level but also at the National Level. This gave me the confidence to run for election, people in my village also wanted me to contest as they knew that I would be sincere in addressing all their problems. As a Sarpanch, I have been able to mobilise a residential school for girls as it was a felt need of the area and also mobilised several social security schemes which earlier did not reach to our people. All these training and exposure has made me a true leader. Chandrama was the Zilla Parishad member in the last election.

**There are no short-cut methods to increased women's transformative participation in decision making processes and achieving gender justice:**

Incorporating women's inclusion in decision making processes as a real key to driving change across a political structure is at the administrative level. However, to achieve this it is necessary to not only work with elected representatives, but it is also just as important to work with local communities. NAWO has discussed issues of gender discrimination, violence and power with elected representatives but also with the

broader community. They have found that this can be effective if it is complemented by skills training which helps people to take charge of their own situation.

*Shanti Behera is a dalit<sup>9</sup> woman from Jaripada Panchayat of Khorda district and presently she is the ward member of Jaripada Panchayat. She was quite popular and liked by many because of her honesty and attitude of helping others. She became leader of the SHG group in her village and as an SHG leader and ward member, she was able to organise other women against domestic violence which is common in the villages, support the anti-liquor campaign, campaigned against early marriage of girls and decreasing girl sex ratio. Her SHG has been able to solve many cases of domestic violence. Supporting the campaign on declining sex ratio of girl children, she has adopted a girl child.*



▲ Shanti Behera, Ward Member, Jaripada panchayat

**Sustainability is key:**

In order to ensure the future sustainability of the changes brought about by the programme, in 2015 NAWO supported the creation of district wide resource centres which included training local women elected panchayat representatives and government officials. Trócaire also supported NAWO to strengthen their internal and organisational capacity so that it could continue these activities beyond the lifetime of the programme.

<sup>9</sup> A Dalit is the term used for a section of Indian society traditionally considered 'Untouchable'. The Constitution of India recognises them as 'Scheduled Caste'.

## Conclusion:

*'Real change in India will come when women begin to affect the political deliberations of the nation', Mahatma Gandhi.*

NAWO through its program has helped to build solidarity amongst women. Men have also joined in their work and this has helped in the struggle for a more gender just world. The wide coverage of the program and the scale of its operations help to strengthen the reach and impact of its work. Individuals and groups are now talking and debating and are spurred into action in addressing issues of violence against women, an important step in a democratic polity promising equality as a constitutional right. At the grassroots, there is now an emergence of extremely powerful orators, with understanding on government entitlements, their roles and responsibilities. Women's entry in the Panchayati system has refreshingly made a difference to the situation of women in villages and communities. By and large, women are standing up to the challenges and establishing their positions

### BOX 3: Role of NAWO as a facilitator

NAWO, as a facilitating organisation, selected district level partner organisations who had a direct presence in the project locations and had a rich experience of gender mainstreaming work. NAWO helped partner organisations through providing training, exposure visits, IEC materials and supported partner organisations through regular (monthly but more if necessary) monitoring and field visits. Financial support from the donor organisation was also a contributory factor in achieving results.

as leaders. They have proved to be very effective in mobilising community support and raising important issues in Panchayat meetings, Palli sabha and Gram sabhas.

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