

Good governance involves more than the efficient provision of goods and services. According to the Global Plan of Action adopted during the second United Nations Conference on Human Settlement, governance involves three main strategies: (i) decentralization of responsibilities and resources to local authorities; (ii) encouraging the participation of civil society; and (iii) using partnerships to achieve common objectives. There is a growing recognition that women's participation in local government is necessary because their needs are different from those of men. Their roles in government and their perceptions of government priorities likewise differ.

STRENGTHENING WOMEN'S ROLES IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

elected representatives

politics

participation

good governance

Women's NGOs are assisting elected women in local governments to enhance their participation and contribute to more effective government.

activity building





In much of Asia, women's participation in local government has been low due to entrenched gender inequalities and discriminatory practices of government bodies. Furthermore, limited legal knowledge and skills may deter women from participating in local government and may hamper their involvement even if elected. In an effort to overcome such barriers, several South Asian governments have reserved quotas for women in ward and village governments. Quotas do not necessarily guarantee effective participation. Women need training in political skills and structures and the self-confidence to effectively fulfill their duties. In many situations, the negative attitudes and perceptions of male councilors also need to be addressed. As the following examples demonstrate, investing in the education and training of local government representatives not only enhances the participation of elected women, it also produces more effective local government.

Training Elected Female Representatives—*Society for Research and Initiatives for Sustainable Technologies (SRISTI), Nepal*
An Associate of the Center for Development and Population Activities (CEDPA)

As a result of amendments to Nepal's local government ordinance of 1997, more than 39,000 women assumed local elective office that year. The ordinance stipulates that women must account for 20% of elected ward committee representatives, 1 of 13 office holders in village development committees (VDCs), and 1 of 6 nominated members on village development councils. Despite these significant increases, women's participation in the operations and decision making of local governments remains low. Many elected women are not involved in their village development councils and are unaware of the operational procedures of their VDCs. Many either do not understand their responsibilities as elected officials or face gender discrimination and other barriers when trying to undertake them. Their lack of information and their low socioeconomic status undermine their abilities to voice and defend the interests and concerns of women. This is compounded by a general lack of respect for female representatives in male-dominated village development committees.

PRIOR to training, many women had been unaware that ward committees and VDCs were required to meet once a month; others knew of the rule but were never informed when the meetings were held so had never attended. After training, female officers said they were more committed to scheduling and attending the meetings. Similarly, many female representatives were unaware that each VDC had its own development fund of 500,000 rupees. Once informed, they began to discuss how the money could be spent on projects to support women in their villages.

Ward workshops also provided women not elected to office with the chance to voice their concerns and needs to their ward committees and VDCs. Discussion was facilitated by the information they received on gender equity, women's rights, the role and duties of ward office holders, the structure and function of the VDC, and women's leadership and empowerment. Overall, participants identified three topics as the most valuable covered: legal rights of women; developing leadership skills for women; and the working procedures of wards, VDCs, and local governance.

SRISTI designed and implemented a training program to strengthen the capacities of female representatives and potential female community leaders in four VDCs to enable them to play a meaningful and more effective role in decision making in local government. It was designed to strengthen the links between local government and the community to build a stable foundation for a more integrated and sustainable approach to village development.

During introductory meetings for this project, several male council chairs commented that elected female representatives lacked education and capacity and were there only because of the government mandate. This was manifest in one meeting in which the male chair took the opportunity of SRISTI's visit to discuss a proposal to implement an income-generating project for women. A loan from the VDC would be given to village women to establish a small fertilizer enterprise; however, none of the elected women officers present knew about the proposal. The village development council had, in fact, not consulted any female representatives despite the fact that the proposal was allegedly designed to benefit women.



AN important component was the development of training materials including a manual and comic book for literate and illiterate women respectively. The materials covered the following topics: (i) legal constitution, role, and duties of village councils, VDCs, and ward committees; (ii) roles, duties, and rights of female office holders; (iii) human and legal rights of women; (iv) gender equity, women, and culture; (v) communication, organization, and social transformation; and (vi) developing leadership skills. Cartoons and diagrams were used whenever possible. The materials were also designed to enable female participants to train other women in their wards.

SRISTI has been working hard to combat such discriminatory attitudes and practices. With funding from RETA 5889, SRISTI designed and implemented a training program in the districts of Morang, Lalitpur, Rupandehi, and Dang targeting elected women, the predominantly male ward and VDC chairs, and selected ward women not elected to office. The training module developed by SRISTI was also designed to be flexible so that it could eventually be extended to other VDCs.

The three-tiered program maximized the number of women trained. In the first instance, a 3-day training workshop for elected female representatives, ward chairs, VDC chairs and vice chairs, and 12 other women active in their wards or villages was held in each district. This was followed by 2 days of intensive training of trainers for active and respected women selected during the initial workshops. Following their training, these women then conducted workshops for women in their wards utilizing SRISTI's materials. As a result of this approach, 4860 women were trained during this project.

stakeholder



The project highlights the value of bringing women together to discuss common experiences and concerns. Despite the fact that female office holders were affiliated with different political parties, they were closely united in their views and aspirations and were keen to develop their respective VDCs in common. Some women acknowledged that before their election they had little interest in or awareness of local government. Many stressed, however, that since their election they had developed an active interest in the affairs of their wards and aspired to a larger role there and in the VDC. As one elected representative noted, prior to the project, women officials in her VDC had never met as a group. After meeting with SRISTI, she and other participants suggested that elected women gather before village development council meetings to discuss their shared concerns and to develop their own project proposals.

Strengthening Government-Citizen Connections—*Center for Social Research, India*

The Indian government's 74th constitutional amendment act (CAA) made two important changes in the nature of local government. First, it initiated the devolution of power to urban local bodies (ULBs) and second, it reserved a quota of one third of seats in all ULBs for elected female representatives. The objective was to promote responsive, effective, accountable local government. The Centre for Social Research (CSR) conducted a study of the effectiveness of the CAA in Jaipur and Jodhpur in Rajasthan as the state had been through two ULB elections since its introduction.

Councilors, administrative staff, corporate houses, NGOs, and citizens' groups were identified as key stakeholders in local governance. Representatives of the various groups were interviewed on their socioeconomic profiles and electoral backgrounds. They were then asked about their knowledge of legislation, especially the provisions of the CAA, and to assess the extent of the devolution of power in their municipalities and the impact of quotas for female representatives. In addition, they were asked to comment on what they saw as important governance skills and the value of collaborating to achieve governance goals.

collaborate



Two training modules for male and female elected representatives were developed based on these interviews. One addressed the training needs of councillors, and the second addressed the training needs of other key stakeholders. The modules used a participatory approach and were designed to enhance the knowledge and skills of participants.

Following the training program, a 2-day workshop was organized in each district for government representatives, corporate houses, and NGOs. The purpose of the workshops was to report on the outcome of the research and training and for participants to share strategies and to collaborate in order to improve the functioning of their municipalities.

As mentioned in the SRISTI case study, reserving quotas for women does not necessarily guarantee their full participation in local government bodies. Women need confidence building and training in leadership skills and political structures to effectively fulfill their roles. At the same time, negative attitudes and perceptions among male councilors need to be addressed.

DEVOLVING power to urban local government bodies (ULBs) and reserving a quota for women in them as stipulated in the 74th constitutional amendment could in theory profoundly change local governance in India and could have repercussions nationally. The Centre for Social Research conducted a study to find out what changes had actually taken place since its enactment. They found that the devolution of power had not been as effective as the expanded role for women provided by the quota. Devolution had in fact caused significant problems for municipalities as many parallel institutions had been created to which various municipal functions and funds were transferred. This reduced the capacity of the municipalities as they were left with only core functions (sanitation, garbage collection, etc.) and little opportunity for raising revenue. Rather than achieving independence, the municipalities became dependent on the state government for grants or on local taxes for income.

In contrast, the increased participation of women in ULBs was seen to be very successful. They found that women had performed well in elections and had delivered on their election promises at a higher rate than men had. Overall, the provision of reserved seats for women viewed positively; it increased the visibility of women in public life and had a beneficial effect on community attitudes toward their work. The electorate perceived women as serious, honest, committed, and more development-oriented. There was, in fact, a perception among the electorate that female councilors would revitalize Indian politics. Furthermore, their presence on ULBs improved the efficiency of their municipalities. Some women did, however, experience difficulties. Attending to business at night or seeking permission from family members to leave the home made council involvement difficult. In addition, most had to juggle their civic responsibilities with their family responsibilities. Such difficulties demonstrate yet again the need for leadership training for female councilors and other elected representatives.

