

**NEED A COMPLETE CHANGE IN APPROACH TO TRANSFORM THE VILLAGES  
for Ensuring "Community engagement for inclusive rural transformation and  
gender equality"**

Aruna Sharma

Practitioner Development Economist and Retd Secretary Gol

The community engagement cannot be achieved unless powers of decision making for their areas and improving their quality of life are delegated to the villages through the local self government. For the transformation the first entry point is to bring in change in the governance by ensuring formation of local administrative units that are provided with untied funds to bring in the change in infrastructure and involve the community in decision making process for setting priorities, identifying social evils/practices that need to be changed. This brings in not just empowerment but also effective execution. In this system of local governance, successfully reserving the seats to women to extend of 30-50% has been transformative in not just women getting involved with active participation but then the priorities and issues also address to resolve with perspective of women.

Mahatma Gandhi advocated strongly shift to local self governance model in rural areas as the foundation to the political system. The emphasis is on decentralized form of government as the local are best equipped to identify, prioritize, and effectively get stakeholders to resolve the issues. This is 'village governance model' the 'Gram Swaraj'.

In India Lord Ripon, as Viceroy realized the diversity and local issues cannot be resolved with centralized policy making brought in reforms for introduction of local self government in the British India for the counties, municipalities, cities, group of villages. All these directly worked with the districts that also had delegation of powers.

Community engagement can be formalized as has been done in India in the local self government system 'Panchayati Raj' by the constitutional amendment to ensure local governance with minimum 30% of seats of elected members to women. Besides these representatives each of the expenditure and all approvals are taken in village assembly-the community participation called 'Gram Sabha'. On date now that there has been churn of 4 elections on average in each of the state, the women leaders have emerged and contesting in many unreserved seats as well. Local Self Government is the management of local affairs by local bodies who have been elected by the local people. The local self-Government includes both rural and urban government. Rural Local

Governments: Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) is a system of rural local self-government in India.

This formalized arrangement is producing the leadership as they have experienced and participated in financial decision making as well as to understand the nuances and also bring on table the social concerns of their villages in the Panchayat. These transformations are done from a grant that is untied fund, enabling them to plan and execute. The resultant in good governed states has resulted in quality infrastructure bringing down the incidents of malaria and gastro related issues. The enrollment and learning in schools have improved as teachers monitoring is done by the local government and same applies to local health staff etc. The holistic approach to infrastructure along with safe drinking water and sanitation helps more and more involvement of women.

Even technical knowledge of agriculture or any business processing is sought from experts improving their opportunity for sustainable livelihood opportunities and improving their quality of life. All of this is the community participation in terms of formation of self help groups focusing to improve their livelihood opportunities by having dairy, construction material business, home making food items etc. Women are now also trained in digital payments and e commerce. The base of transformation is delegating decision making to the communities themselves for the infrastructure and livelihood opportunities.

The need is to make this as the established practice across the globe adapting the lessons learnt in India experiment for the community engagement through delegation of powers for local governance supplemented by the requisite funding. The barriers for inclusiveness, being vocal of their needs , participation in financial dealings and more so for education of their children and hygiene enables to create concrete small steps of success to absorb the abstract concepts like empowerment and change of mindset of women themselves and the community. That can be further supplemented, with appropriate training and skilling to fill the gaps and thus it is tailored and better targeted to the local relevance than generic interventions. The community and especially women plays vital role in the vulnerable group as she is major deciding factor as to what goes on the plate, not just calories but a nutritious diet using the traditional inputs grown in locality needs the focus and skill them to cook in nutritious manner using the ingredients what they have access and can afford. This to be supplemented by hygienic habitats infrastructure that comes from the state investment, but quality is to be monitored by the community.

The developed economies and developing economies across globe have good practices by embracing two types of “local self-government.” One is the Anglo-Saxon-styled “self-government of the people” or “self-government of the civilians” based on parliamentary sovereignty and popular sovereignty; the other one is the peoples group. Countries like the Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden strongly established the local self government. The Nordic Countries have demonstrated not just better governance but also enabled more and more women leadership even as head of the countries.

Thus, the entry point is the mechanism of community and women participation in the local self government to achieve the objective of Community engagement for the inclusive rural transformation ensuring the gender equality. The holistic approach holds the key. The silo approach in just organizing women for a single activity many a times collapse the moment handholding is stopped. The intension has to be sustainable mechanism to ensure involvement of community and participation of women in decision making and that will be sustainable and more result oriented. The community will witness small successes and women will be elated of their issues taking prominence resulting in better decision making.

The resultant is the more and more participation of women at all levels of governance and more sensitivity towards the concerns of food, nutrition, and education. Thus, the model is not new, it is important for FAO to bring the concept center stage to ensure better participation in decision making at local levels and women fulfilling their long standing needs. More than 88 countries have legislated gender quotas at the local elections to form the decision making administrative body at the village levels. The empirical evidence shows the better inclusive decision making and women taking active roles.

Thus, to ensure improvement in quality of life of households with combined decision making for collective betterment is ensured by delegation of governance equipped with the powers and making the local self government accountable to ensure the same. Now technology has enabled data based decision making with precision and not just blind policy making or investing. The efforts are also for better monitoring of interventions on real time basis than awaiting impact studies, enables quick course correction.

The SDG target of gender parity can be accelerated by focusing on more and more delegation to the local self government and ensuring valid participation by women in the process. The impact assessment of SDG, as on date have also demonstrated that countries that resorted to women’s representation in local government and ensuring participation with embedded authority.FAO need to strategize to hand hold by enabling the lagging countries to have legislation for women participation in local governments and delegating sufficient powers to them if SDG by 2030 is not to become a rhetoric.

The hand holding be focused on these changes to ensure community participation with gender parity.

Community led collective action is also more impactful and also sustainable for social evils and practices. That transformation enables them to flag, eradicate and ensures more and more participation. Women leadership empirical evidence of better community participation- Having female leaders in positions of influence to serve as role models is not only critical to the career advancement of women.