

1. Project Proposal Summary : 'Making Women's Voices and Votes Count'

Background:

The Constitutional (73rd Amendment) Act 1992 in India was passed for devolution of powers to *Panchayat Raj* Institutions (PRIs, local government bodies) at the village level to strengthen local level participation in development processes. The Act provided for a one-third reservation of seats for women in the *panchayat* system. Today, more than two million rural women have sat at the rural governance table across the country. New generations of women leaders, supported by progressive women's groups, are willing to address governance deficits that undermine social justice and women's rights. A tipping point in local power relations may well be imminent. Yet, structures of patriarchy and bureaucratic obstacles pose barriers to women's effective leadership. Economic liberalisation has also witnessed the rise of new interest group formations in local governance that often co-opt women. Top-down processes of 'capacity building' have imparted some 'functional literacy' to Elected Women Representatives (henceforth, EWRs) about their roles, but not really served the objective of empowering them to participate in substantive ways. NGO efforts to collectivise marginalised women through political consciousness-raising pedagogies have also met with some dead ends given limitations of resources and scale and the overwhelming growth of opportunistic micro-finance agencies. Meanwhile, increasing challenges to everyday survival prevents women from meaningfully engaging in the public sphere.

The institutionalisation of the gender equality agenda therefore seems inadequate against these complexities, even though, technically speaking, marginalised women are ready to engage with local governance processes. Local democracy seems to be caught in a double bind; women in local governance are not necessarily pushing for women's rights, and collectivisation efforts of progressive groups for women's constituency building has been swamped by dominant strategies that instrumentalise women. Even where organisations support EWRs, women leaders cannot come together face-to-face; they do not have easy and timely access to information, they lack the space for peer exchange and support, and do not have the historic advantage of networks that men have had.

Unless spaces of overlap and engagement between women in formal and informal local politics are encouraged, constructed, and capacitated, real political empowerment of rural women – in a manner that enables them to engage with, and articulate their perspective of, development and society – is not possible. Legislation is just one step in affirming the potential of this connection. What is needed additionally is support in the form of social process innovations that can tackle the isolation women leaders experience and connect them with local women's groups. A breakthrough strategy in this direction would require a) the building of a critical mass of EWRs who can stay connected to each other and to the concerns of marginalised women in the local context, b) a vibrant local democratic fabric where local women's organizations are able to engage with the governance deficit and push women's rights as a political issue and c) an organic connection between EWRs and women

in the community, supported by feminist perspective-building on governance. This proposal posits that this tipping point can be reached if ICTs are brought as an equalizer to support women leaders through a clear focus on all these three areas.

The three partnering organisations in this project – IT for Change, *Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan* (KMVS), and Area Networking and Development Initiatives (ANANDI) – propose to use ICTs to catalyze a critical mass of women in local governance, construct a horizontal platform for peer-based support, and help develop a discourse of governance and politics that is informed by women's rights perspectives. Specifically, they seek to harness the propensities of ICTs in their local organizing efforts with Elected Women's Representatives (EWRs) and marginalised women's collectives in Karnataka and Gujarat, respectively.

Project Objectives

1. Network building among women in local *panchayats*: This will entail creation of a support group focusing on a horizontal, peer to peer pedagogy that can offer a completely new point of departure for capacity building of women in local governance. Specifically, it will explore the use of SMS-based networking, and community radio and video to complement face to face meetings and as a space for dialogue.
2. Creating new information and communication capabilities of EWRs and women's collectives: Through information centres, the project will explore how data bases, GIS tools, voice-based SMSes etc. can be used for women's access to entitlements and voice in local governance.
3. Creating local media and techno-social processes that not only meet informational needs of EWRs and women's collectives but also allow gender debates to be taken to the community at large.
4. Actively engaging with policy processes and capacity building institutions at national and state levels to share insights from the project on how ICTs can be deployed for structural change towards women's empowerment.

Highlights of the project's intervention strategy

1. Network building among women in local *panchayats* focusing on a horizontal peer to peer pedagogy:

The project will specifically address the limits of traditional top-down capacity building models for EWRs, in India. It proposes a paradigmatic shift towards a peer-to-peer system of capacity building. By building on the work of KMVS, ANANDI and IT for Change, the proposed project will seek to negotiate the challenges of isolation and distance between EWRs and lack of safe space for them to connect with one another and with marginalised women and their Community Based Organisations(CBOs), through technology. The first set of strategies will aim to build linkages between EWRs. A platform to network, discuss and articulate how governance can be made to work for women, and a space to seek and get

information about the *panchayat*, and about schemes and functions of government departments that marginalised women in their constituencies can access, will be created. Physical, face to face meetings as well as technological means for deliberation and information exchange will be employed. Capacity building - with respect to accountable governance and women's citizenship as well as in the use of mobile phones, help-line, and local data bases generated by the project's information centre - will be central to the effort.

Another set of strategies will concern the linking up of women leaders from local collectives with their EWRs. This also will involve physical platforms like a women-only *gram sabha*, and also ICT-mediated means like voice / text SMS, video conferencing etc. Women leaders in local collectives will also take part in capacity building effort to articulate an agenda for accountable governance that upholds women's rights. Here, they will be familiarised with the use of local data bases and the information centre for seeking entitlements and to lobby the *panchayat* for accountable governance. The third set of strategies will be to engage local male elite. Adequate tact will be exercised to ensure that the introduction of technology is seen as acceptable and also by and large useful for the entire community.

2. Fostering new informational processes and practices that disrupt traditional power structures to create new pathways for women to access entitlements and for EWRs to feel greater confidence not only in executing their duties as representatives of their electorate but also as women's rights champions:

Information empowerment will be an important objective for the project, with a set of strategies anchored around information centres. Based on the past work of the partnering NGOs, the project will enable EWRs and marginalised women from the project area, with support from young women infomediaries to build institutional linkages. The project will maximise the deployment of ICTs by using a convergent approach, where claims will be channelled for a variety of entitlements based on government programmes and schemes, using data generated locally on who is eligible for what. The focus will be on basic rights that also dovetail with central and state government policy interventions. The project will work towards both individual and collective entitlements of women from marginalised groups, covering the right to information, right to health, right to work /livelihoods, right to housing and to ancestral land (especially in the areas where the project will work with tribal groups).

3. Carving out women-owned media spaces

The idea that media can be local has been obliterated by the highly homogenising mainstream media, which, even if it features marginalised voices, tends to romanticise or commoditise local cultures. Gender debates in the mainstream also follow entertainment value, focussing on hyper-sensationalism that silences perspectives on social justice and equity. The project will attempt to encourage a local media culture that enables the use of radio and video as pedagogic as well as discursive tools. Women's collectives and EWRs will be continually consulted and will lead the ideational processes for generating content; the discussions and deliberation following the broadcast/ narrow cast; and the action based on new learning. Through these processes, the project expects to galvanise communicative power for women, whereby the concerns and visions of marginalised women are part of the

ongoing agenda setting in local governance.

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4. Engaging with policy processes

An important goal and strategy of the project will be to demonstrate how ICTs can support governance reform, and how they can address the imperatives for women's empowerment in governance agenda. Typically, like in most developing countries, first generation e-governance efforts have ended up reinforcing a technocratic view of governance through ICTs. Both in Gujarat and Karnataka, the roadblocks in e-governance efforts of the state government have been in the failure of acceptance and engagement at the community level. Because of a techno-managerial orientation, there is an apathy among rural populations in taking to technology. Further, the operators of e-service centres tend to be private entrepreneurs who are not familiar with a citizen oriented, public service ethos. This project will present a different model, especially about village kiosks, to state governments, which will show how e-governance can serve the cause of greater democratisation of information, and bring voice and visibility to the marginalised in everyday functions of governance. The project will also engage senior officials in the Rural Development department and the Knowledge Commission at state and national levels, sharing evidence from the initiative for policy and programmatic directions. It will draw from the explicit support of the National Mission on the Empowerment of Women of the Ministry of Women and Child Development - GOI, and strategically use the Mission for advocacy and policy change.

The specific outcomes and outputs that are expected to be achieved through the intervention strategy, are detailed in the diagram on the following page.