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REVIEW ARTICLE

SOCIAL STATUS OF WOMEN IN HARYANA STATE

Social Status of Women in Haryana State

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BARRIERS FOR WOMEN IN HARYANA

There are many barriers for women in Haryana that make it hard for them to get a place in politics and being able to express their rights. What problems – barriers - have the interviewed women expressed? What is it that stops women from being active in panchayats? Custom and norm barriers - politics in Haryana are created mainly for men and even if this thought has started to change, to women in the village, there place is in the house. This is why people in the villages have a hard time accepting women in the Panchayats and the men don't want to work with them. Several of the women I interviewed talk about non-cooperative male Panchayat members. When women stand up against the pressure and patriarchal bargains they are in many cases subjects to physical violence. One of the interviewed women told me that sometimes violence against women is also used during the election campaign to make them withdraw their applications. This had happened to her. Practical barriers - the women's lack of time for study is only a small part of the project's problems. For many it is difficult just to get to the place where the capacity programs are held. Many of the interviewed women also told me that the men in the Panchayats deliberately choose not to tell them when the meetings are held.

INSTITUTIONAL BARRIERS – in some ways caste and democracy are antithetical to each other and just these last years' supportive links between the two has appeared. Psychological barriers – lack of confident barrier. It is not only the society's perception of women but also women don't believe in themselves and on their capacity to be politically active.

MOTIVATIONAL BARRIERS – for many in Haryana there is a belief that society shouldn't or couldn't be transformed.

TRADITIONAL AND CULTURAL BARRIERS - there is a problem of traditions and culture that makes it hard for women to fight for their own benefit. Women in the rural areas are not used to working side by side with men – so Panchayats don't work well in these areas. This is a problem that almost all of the interviewed women expressed.

FAMILY BARRIERS – Power, which is always seen as a part of the political world, is of central meaning even in the family life. The relationship of power exists within the family as genus structures, violence - physical and psychological and the women's economic dependence on males. Balancing the family and political interests is the most common expressed problem by the interviewed women. While I was in Haryana I could see that women's living conditions are being brought down even further as a result of patriarchal attitudes and practices. The burden of women's work doubles when men, by force of habit, do not share household tasks in any way at all. On the other hand many of the female Panchayat members were forced to enter politics by their families and when winning the seat they are not attending any meetings themselves but instead their husband, father-in-law or another male family member take their place.

CASTE BARRIERS - There is also a power-relation between women, based on class, caste and ethnicity. This is a relationship that is not so much mentioned and most of the theoretical and empirical results do not present this perspective. A woman from the lower castes that has been elected since the system of reserved seats was introduced has been discriminated not only from the male-members but also from women-member from the upper caste.

LACK OF KNOWLEDGE/AWARENESS BARRIERS - There are many women that are illiterate and don't know what political participation is all about what. They are not awareness of their role, rights and responsibilities in Panchayat as well as in development and welfare activities. The lack of knowledge and awareness about this makes it even harder to overcome these barriers. I only interviewed two women that were illiterate, but to be honest, they also seemed to be more clueless about their rights.

RECRUITMENT BARRIERS – as said above, many women have a lack of education, several of the women are illiterate, the cultural norms and conservative customs makes it even harder for

women to enter politics and they have to struggle hard to survive in politics .

THE ROLE OF EDUCATION FOR PARTICIPATION – THE POWER OF EDUCATION

Some females send their husbands, sons or father-in-laws to the Panchayats meeting, they don't realize that it is their positions. Some women are proxies for their husbands so that the family doesn't lose the seat in the Panchayat. How can capacity building and NGOs solve these misunderstandings and help women overcome other barriers mentioned in the earlier chapter?

CAPACITY BUILDING PROGRAMMES AND NGOS

One way to overcome the problems of 'proxy' women is, according to Dahlerup and Freidenvall, massive capacity-building and support from women's organizations . The capacity building trainings aim to educate women about their rights and help them to become more equal. The basic approach would be to give women confidence and bring out an awareness of their own potential for development as well as their rights and privileges. Already in 1985 at the World Conference of the UN in Nairobi it was stated that NGOs and the governmental education of women about their civil, political and social rights is one of the most important ways of rising consciousness, but also the need for a quota system. Education is a powerful tool in the way of empowering women . During my time in the field I could see that education enables women to gain more knowledge about the world outside of their heart and home, increase their skills and help them to get status-giving employment – all of which will develop their personalities.

Training over a half million Panchayats members in the state, a majority of whom are poor, uneducated and helpless, is a task that is enormous in its magnitude and complexity. NGOs have a key role in generating awareness and mobilizing the people . Haryana has a large number of NGO and the capacity building training is very different among all of them offering it, but most have the same goal; to help get women become more self confident and to give them more knowledge about their role as Panchayats members . Some NGOs have training for women only and some have a mixed stream for both women and men. This is a direct result of feedback they have had, explaining that some women prefer to be trained in mixed groups. Men also need training in broad gender issues as the women need to be accepted by the male members and the chairmen. Training for both sexes is also the conclusion of many evaluations the NGOs have done themselves. Previous empirical research on the subject also argues that only training for female members will not give any great change in the roles and functions of the female members as one must also change the male members' attitudes. One of the

NGOs told me that this had been a problem and that they now provide training for both male and female members. They said "we hope that by running training programs for both sexes we can maximize the help and support we are giving to women, as well as introduce men to the valuable work which we are doing." Several NGOs describe another problem; the students have very different backgrounds, conditions and levels of ambition. Many of them need to take a big responsibility in their homes. Some students are difficult to motivate while others have high ambitions. It makes it harder to educate when their participants have so different ambitions.

The program offers different parts; i.e. the influential woman candidate that provides the opportunity to share experiences with other women candidates and will cover topics such as communication skills, team-building work, assertiveness for women and campaigning skills. Most of the programs focus on: understanding local self-governance, democratic values, gender issues, leadership development, financial management etc.

For the illiterate women the education has to start on a more basic level – teach them how to read and write. During my time in the field I could see how NGOs help Haryana women to get empowered by helping them in many different fields; i.e. to become more economically independent, better health and work against illiteracy. This has also helped the women to get a higher self-confidence. According to Shirini M. Rai, as said before, there is no use in working to get more women in politics if they have no economical support . Several of the NGOs and capacity building helps women to become more economically independent and also emphasis the need of independents. The NGOs I visited provide education and a few organizations had also focused on job training; if women can earn their own money they will become more equal. Therefore all the sample organizations contribute to the improvement of women's living standards. In other words - they promote the economic, social and cultural rights of one vulnerable minority in the Haryana society. The political context of Haryanan economic, social and cultural rights has a democratic relevance. If these rights are provided and defended it gives the citizens, in this case the women, the possibility to participate in the society. Education and job training are all crucial needs of the disabled and a precondition for integration into the community. Furthermore, it is argued that these so-called positive rights are a precondition for civil and political rights. By adopting replicable and sustainable strategies that could bring about large-scale impact to improve the lives of poor women and their families, these NGOs have offered a realistic vision to other agencies involved in women development.

One NGO has gone even further than educating only women and men and had capacity building for children as well, where they learn how it works. In

these Panchayats 50 % are women and 50 % men. "Because children is the tomorrow and in the future we want to see 50/50 in the Panchayats", said the NGO representative I interviewed. Some of the NGOs actually recruit women to the Panchayats. First they have a capacity building program for all the women that wanted in the village and then later the women themselves choose their representative to the real Panchayat. It is not only NGOs that offer training, some parties are also running training sessions, and they also have the same program focus and goals. The parties in Haryana also started to care about the female candidate because they realized that they needed them not to lose places in the Panchayat.

During my time in the field I noticed that NGOs could also act like a watchdog of the Panchayats to see that women really get a saying in the decision making process. The women's movement and network of NGOs that have strong grassroots presence and deep insight in women's concerns have contributed in inspiring initiatives for the empowerment of women and helped women to get a place in local politics. Women don't need just a couple of days training, they need long-term support and in order to give them that is why it is important that the NGOs offer education, but also, that government and Panchayats cooperate. With 33 % reserved seats for women this gave them the initial trust – the so-called critical mass that was enough to sustain and give momentum for the rest of the movement. Women are no longer an exception in Haryanan local politics; they still are a minority but a minority that counts. Women still have barriers to overcome but with training this traditional power structure can be broken .

THE INTERVIEWED – RAISING VOICES

I wanted to learn more about the participants in the capacity building programs; their thought about the project, change and opportunities that the reserved seats and capacity building programs might have given them - about their reality, to get the answers I did a field study. Out of the women I interviewed some of them had gotten training from several NGOs. One woman had gotten training from three different NGOs . Even so, all of them expressed that they wanted more training. Several of the women also said that they would not have run in the election if there had been no reserved seats for them . Experience of women found high levels of stress and suggested that many women might not stand for election again . Of the women that I interviewed, two had run for re-election more than one time and one of them was re-elected again, because there was no other female candidate . The woman that was not re-elected told me that she was not re-elected because the men knew that she after one term and being in the capacity building program knew her rights and was not going to be a proxy if she got elected again. The other women told me that they had all

kinds of bad experiences and that they felt that women didn't have any say in the Panchayat. To run for election again, the system first needs to be change in many ways. Caste and religion is important in Haryana. Some of the women that were Panchayat members said that because of their political position they have been able to help their families and caste . Many of the women say that because of their gender and the social structure they are often excluded from politics on all levels . One woman said that she is just acting as a stand in for her husband. He knew that he would never have won a seat on local level, so he forced her to be a candidate. Now he has taken over her seat. She says that it is hard to prove because her name is on all the official documents but he is the one that makes all the decisions and goes to the meetings. She also said that the interview I did was the first interview with her, other interviews have been made with her husband; even when she won the election he was the one that had been answering all the interviews. The interview I did with this woman was also the most emotional one; I came to the village and was going to interview a woman by the name Pinkey but instead of a woman coming to meet me a man showed up. After some time I understood that he is the husband. He said that I should do the interview with him because his wife did not know anything about politics and that he always went to the meetings. He told me that if I didn't want to do the interview with him there would be no interview, I said that in that case there would be no interview and after a long and harsh discussion between the husband and my interpreter he let me do the interview with his wife. She was so happy and told me that this was the first time someone asked her something about the capacity training and her time as a politician. She was crying during the whole interview, happy-tears she called them. Another woman said that she has support from her family and that her husband now helps out more with the housework so she has been able by entering politics to transform her family and today her husband and she are more equal partners. Her husband gives her more respect. It all sounded so great that I was wondering if it was true, and she soon looked sad and told me that she is discriminated by the men who are panchayat members. So she might have changed her family but to be equal in the Panchayat and as an equal citizen in Haryana she still has a long way to go and many barriers need to be broken.

One woman that had been involved in politics for many years and had been working for a party said that she never dreamed about being able to be elected during her lifetime. She now hopes that more women will get involved in politics and she said that she had got great self-esteem after the training. Her status has changed both in her own family but also in the village, she said that a woman in Panchayat has a higher status in other In some cases the women's self esteem has grown during the interviews and

since this is the first time they can speak so openly about their experiences in local politics and how important their work is – their ability to help the people in the village. A question that I was interested in was; is there a female political agenda? The answer is yes, in almost all the cases women said that the most important on the political agenda is improvement in education, health, drinking water and employment opportunities for women. Looking at official documents it is possible to see that these questions has been more on the agenda these last years since women have receive more place in the Panchayats than before. Men don't talk about women's problems and the importance of things we bring up on the political agenda said one woman , "so we have to learn to make demands for ourselves and bring these up on the agenda". Most of the women, all except one , said that they had the support of their families. This is not so strange; most of the women are actually proxies that have taken their husbands or father in laws place. Many men have lost their own site since the reserved seats for women. To let women in the family run in the election is one way to keep the post in the family. I asked the women in all categories whom they represented, most of the women told me that they represent the poor people of their ward. Some women were open about the fact that they, apart from representing their ward, they also represented their families. Others said that they used to do so but after getting the training now became more independent. Only one woman told me that she only represented her husband and relatives, she had only attended one meeting during her five years term . One of the villages that I visited was really a fine example of women empowerment. As a result of women becoming active members of Panchayats many problems in the village have been solved, today several problems concerning healthcare and school are solved. Women have started to work. They got material from the NGO and they make clothes from it that they sell and they pay back the NGO for the material but all the rest of the money they make they get to keep and this is a great way for them to become more economically independent. Along with the economic development of the village, the women of the village have also occupied a respectable position in the society.

With capacity building programs all over Haryana this program has succeeded in attracting women in over thousand programs. These women learn to increase their awareness, become active in politics, and acquire the self-esteem needed to dare to demand and influence. Many of the women worked per wishes of their guardians , but after being in the program they learned the importance of their role and one woman told me that she had been voting against her husband's wish several times after getting education.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND OF RESPONDENTS

Knowledge of the socio-economic background of a woman is an indispensable prerequisite for

understanding women's thoughts and behavior. This is even truer in the case of rural communities that are more traditional in their structure. Unexposed to social pressure outside the home, the power of family influences tends to get intensified. Who are the elected women? The study of socio-economic background showed that most of the elected women are from the upper class and caste , owners of big land areas and political influentially members i.e. women from a political engaged family, were the father or the husband was political active. Also women with some education are represented to a greater degree among the sample of women interviewed than their actual proportions in the rural population. The conclusion that women from backgrounds like these have tended to dominate the seats reserved is showed both in my study and in others. Caste background, economic statues and education are of course interrelated variables, but in some cases education seemed to have compensated for the lack of either appropriated castes or economic status. Political awareness and participation of women varies with the levels of education, degree of urbanism, exposure to mass media, quality of local leadership, approach of the political groups functioning in the area etc. Some studies have established this correlation but others have proved it to be more apparent than real. Some may say that the Panchayat structure gives opportunity to the representatives holding traditionally high caste statues and influence. Since landownership has tended to go hand in hand with high caste status the backward classes who don't possess much land may never be able to rise to positions of power and authority in a society dominated by tradition. The Panchayat structure thus gives opportunities for a more democratic participation based to a larger extent on achievement. While participation in the Panchayat structure is open to all, education seems to have become a qualification at the point of entry, helping those who cannot count on traditional sources of statues to still find a place and climb the ladder of political influence. While the forgoing analysis has shown the dominance of traditional symbols of status in the selection of women-representatives in panchayat, it has also highlighted the positive effect of the statue in involving women of varied castes, socioeconomic classes, education and personal abilities to make a definite contribution in the rural setting.

The age for membership in Panchayats was lowered to attract younger members. Still, which is shown among my respondents, only one woman , and in other similar studies only a few women are under the age of 30. One explanation to this could be that unmarried women in Haryana that enter politics are against all social norms of the Haryanan society. That is why most of the women are either married or widows. The educational level among the members is low, many are even illiterate. Several NGOs told me that a majority of the women in Panchayats are educated by name only, which means that they can make their signature, read and write a little, mostly

without understanding what it means. This picture did not reflect most of the women I interviewed, among them over half had been to school for several years and even one was a graduate.

The economic status of the respondents was very different, I don't know if this is because some of the women were afraid to tell me the truth about their landowning because of tax or not. But most of the women came from the upper strata, especially among the women that actually made it to become a chairperson. Most of the women depend on their families and didn't have any income of their own. Most of the women I interviewed were Hindu. A majority of the women had not been politically active nor had they been involved in any other movement or organization before entering politics. But as said before, several of them had families that had been political and still are active. Before, parties did not show any greater interest in the Panchayats elections; this is because Panchayats were not contested on party basis, but in the last election more and more parties started to show interest in Panchayats play. Some parties even have their own capacity building programs offered to women.

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