The impact of Watershed on decentralised decision making with inclusion of women: Findings from India

Community participation in decision making is a key feature of a well-functioning democracy. In India, several policies and legislations have been introduced over the years to ensure this. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (passed in the year 1992) was a landmark step taken towards democratic decentralisation. With a three-tier [from bottom-up: at the village (Gram Panchayat (GP)], Block (Block Samiti/ Panchayat), and District (Zila Parishad) level] system of self-governance, this legislation provided the scope for local governments to prepare and implement plans for economic development and social justice, including schemes on water management, drinking water and sanitation.[1] (See Figure 1 for three-tier system of devolution in India.)

Gram Panchayats or village councils are constitutionally mandated to prepare local development plans. Since the implementation of the 14th Finance Commission (2015-2020) recommendations all GPs are expected to prepare Gram Panchayat Development Plans (GPDP) for economic development and social justice utilising the resources available to them. GPDPs are stipulated to be based on a participatory planning process involving the community (through Gram Sabhas), on schemes related to 29 subjects enlisted in the Eleventh Schedule of the Indian Constitution. The plans at Gram Sabha level are to be arrived at through identification of priorities with community engagement at the ward level (through Ward Sabha[2]). (See Figure 2 for decentralised planning system below the Gram Panchayat.)

COMPLEXITY OF DEVOLUTION

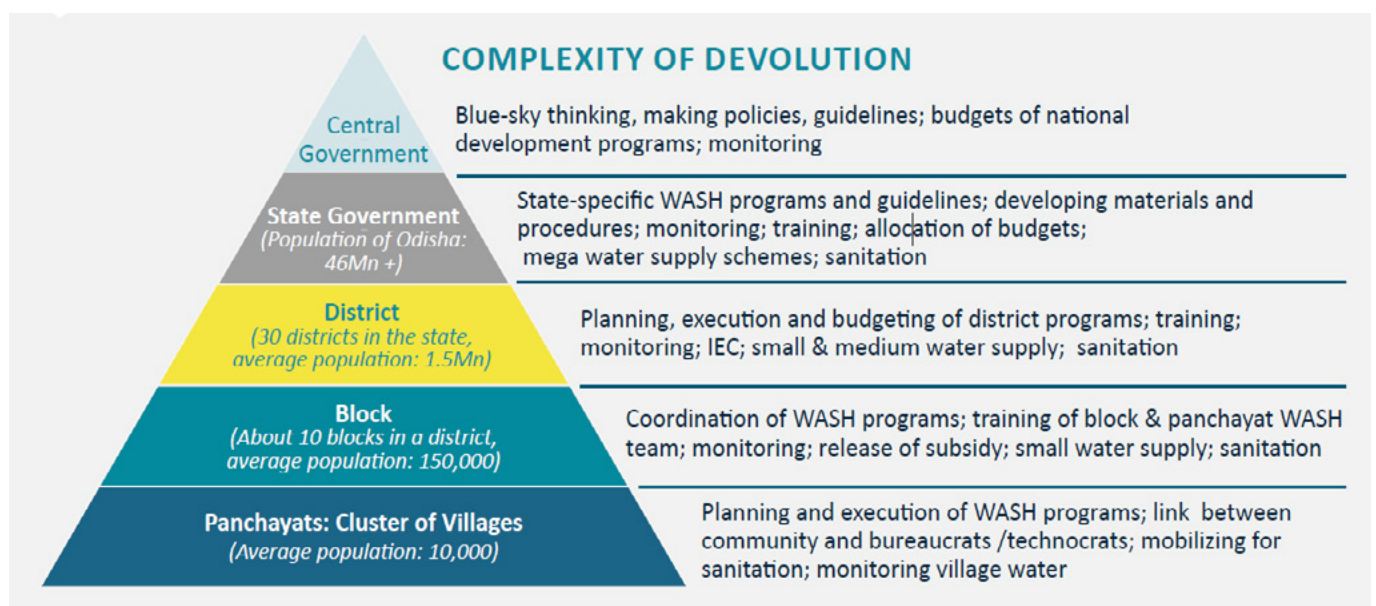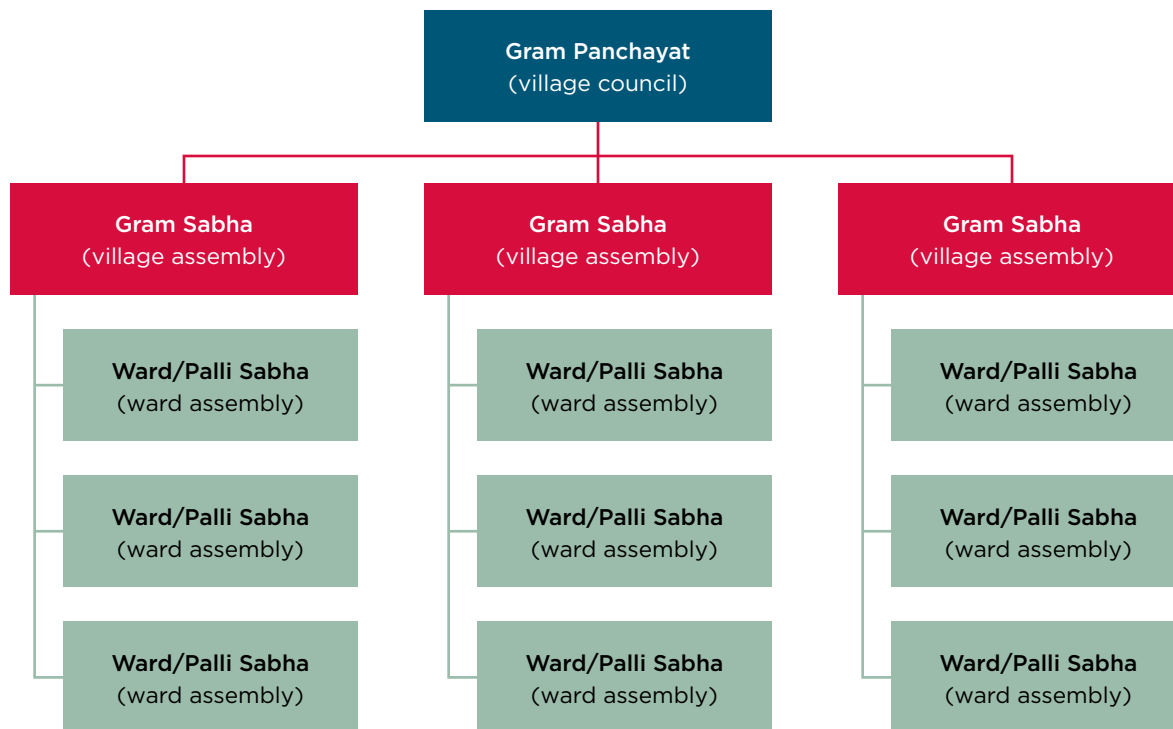|	
Central Government	Blue-sky thinking, making policies, guidelines; budgets of national development programs; monitoring
State Government (Population of Odisha: 46Mn +)	State-specific WASH programs and guidelines; developing materials and procedures; monitoring; training; allocation of budgets; mega water supply schemes; sanitation
District (30 districts in the state, average population: 1.5Mn)	Planning, execution and budgeting of district programs; training; monitoring; IEC; small & medium water supply; sanitation
Block (About 10 blocks in a district, average population: 150,000)	Coordination of WASH programs; training of block & panchayat WASH team; monitoring; release of subsidy; small water supply; sanitation
Panchayats: Cluster of Villages (Average population: 10,000)	Planning and execution of WASH programs; link between community and bureaucrats /technocrats; mobilizing for sanitation; monitoring village water

Figure 1: System of devolution in India

Figure 2: System of decentralising planning below the Gram Panchayat

In terms of water and sanitation management, the Jal Jeevan Mission (and the erstwhile National Rural Drinking Water Programme) guidelines further propose strengthening of community engagement by stipulating the formation of Village Water and Sanitation Committees (VWSCs). The VWSC, a standing committee of the GP, has been made responsible for planning, implementation, operation, maintenance and management of village drinking water security and sanitation interventions.

The existing legislations and policies on decentralised local governance provide citizens the opportunity to participate in community resource management and decision making. They, in fact, go a step further by ensuring that all citizens get the opportunity to participate. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act mandates an inclusive local government set-up by reserving at least one-third of seats for women [in general and in the seats reserved for other marginalised communities (Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes) in proportion to their population in the area]. Twenty states have increased the reservation of seats in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIS) to half, including Bihar and Odisha.[3] Likewise, the guidelines for the formation of VWSCs state that VWSCs must comprise of GP members in addition to women from the village (constituting at least half of the committee) and representatives of other marginalised groups. Affirmative action through reservation of seats in these committees ensures that those historically denied a voice are given a constitutionally backed platform to participate.

What was done?

As part of the Watershed programme, IRC has been working towards improving governance and management of WASH services along with water resources, on which such services depend. IRC's approach is based on the belief that reliable and sustained WASH services must be delivered by strong and competent national and local systems. Systems are the networks of people, organisations, institutions and resources necessary to deliver services. The key to strengthening systems is to enable participation of all stakeholders, including women and other marginalised groups.

Central to the Watershed programme is capacity building of community-based civil society organisations (including GP representatives) to advocate for their water and sanitation needs. The programme recognised the need to capacitate GPs to carry out their constitutionally mandated functions, in the constitutionally mandated way. Thus, the programme has focused on ensuring community-level discussion platforms and decision-making processes are functional and insisted that women and other marginalised communities, are included in the same.

Learnings/Findings

a. Decentralised planning

Gram Sabha - the assembly of all eligible to vote in the village which are held to discuss needs–based plans - is the key institution in the Panchayati Raj system in India. In both our areas of work, prior to the commencement of the Watershed programme, Gram Sabha were being held but as a formality. The meetings were attended by a few and discussions on needs-based plans were not held. Similarly, in the case of Ward/ Palli Sabhas – the assembly of the residents of the ward eligible to vote to discuss the priorities for development programmes – were mostly held irregularly prior to the commencement of the programme. As a consequence, bottom-up planning, as envisioned in the Constitution was severely compromised, with development plans being made without taking into consideration the needs and priorities of all the residents.

The interventions made during the course of the Watershed programme, however, had a positive impact in strengthening decentralised planning through institutionalised community meetings. As reported by our field partners, Gram Sabhas are now held in a systematic manner, attended by a higher number of community members and a record of the same is maintained (particularly stated in the context of Bihar). Similarly, Ward/ Palli Sabhas are now more actively held, with increased frequency.

Further, VWSCs were found to be functional and limited to where piped water supply schemes had been implemented in Odisha. In the case of Bihar, on the other hand, for the implementation of the piped water schemes, Ward Implementation and Management Committees (WIMC) had been formed. It must be stated here that several factors contributed to increasing the functionality of the various community committees and platforms. For instance, in the case of Odisha a government circular in 2018 directed GPs to hold regular Gram Sabha and Palli Sabha meetings, particularly with the aim to carry out the GPDP process as mandated. Additionally, the Watershed programme intervention coincided with the rapid coverage of the GPs with piped water schemes. In the case of Bihar, WIMCs were created in 2017 to implement the Mukhyamantri Saat Nischay Programme (a state programme to enable youths to become self-reliant. The presence of the Watershed team in the filed ensured that these committee meetings were held regularly, and in the manner stipulated.

b. Inclusion

As in many places in India, the culture of Mukhiya Pati or Sarpanch Pati, surrogate representation was found to be true in the case of both. Of the 9 GPs, 5 GPs (1 in Odisha and 4 in Bihar) had reserved seats for female candidates. However, in all the cases the elected female Mukhiya/Sarpanch (decision maker) was represented by her husband. In the case of Ward/ Palli (territorial constituencies) representatives, it was encouraging to see women getting elected without any system of reservation. In both states, more than 40% of the elected ward members were women. In terms of representation, while many elected female ward members functioned as proxies for the male members, almost the same number (in the case of Odisha) or more (in the case of Bihar), were actual representatives.

Over the course of the programme, the participation of the elected representatives in committee meetings increased. Decision making, however, continued to be bastions of men (discussed later). The figure below (Figure 3) provides the details on representation of elected representatives in the institutionalised platforms of community engagement.[4] (For the numbers see Table 1).
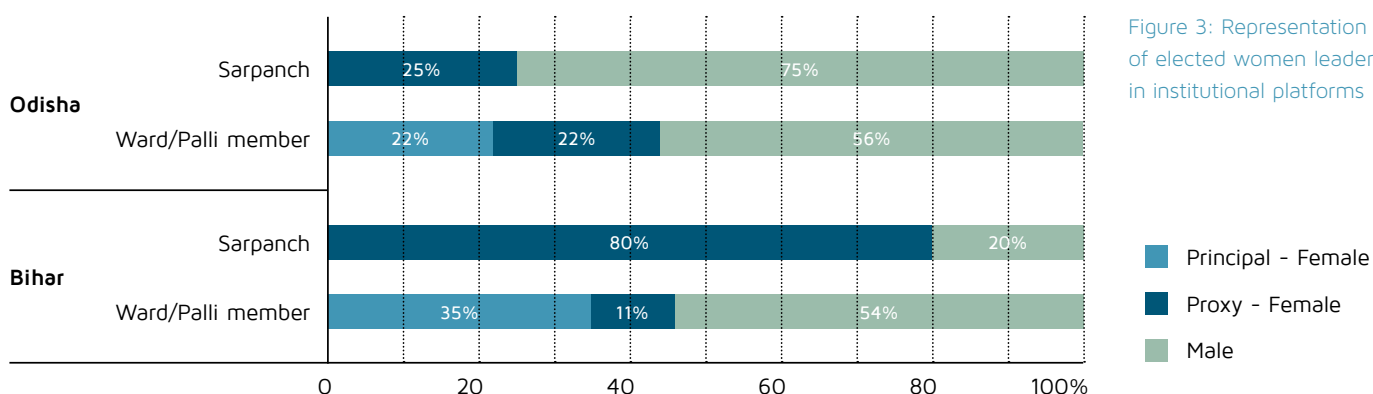

Figure 3: Representation of elected women leaders in institutional platforms

Odisha
- Sarpanch: Proxy - Female 25%, Male 75%
- Ward/Palli member: Principal - Female 22%, Proxy - Female 22%, Male 56%

Bihar
- Sarpanch: Proxy - Female 80%, Male 20%
- Ward/Palli member: Principal - Female 35%, Proxy - Female 11%, Male 54%

Legend:
- Principal - Female
- Proxy - Female
- Male

Table 1: Representation of elected women leaders in Institutional Platforms

| | Gender of Elected Sarpanch/Mukhiya | | | | | Gender of Elected Ward/Palli member | | | | |
| | Female | | | | Grand Total | Female | | | | Grand Total |
State	Principal Representative	Proxy	Total	Male		Principal Representative	Proxy	Total	Male	
Odisha	0	1	1	3	4	11	11	22	29	51
Bihar	0	4	4	1	5	23	7	30	36	66

Reservation of seats is a way to ensure women's participation in governance. However, that alone is not sufficient. Effective participation of women in local governance relies on creation of an environment conducive for their participation and building their capacities. During the course of the Watershed programme significant efforts were made to encourage women, whether elected representatives or residents of the ward or village, to participate in the Ward/Palli Sabha and Gram Sabha meetings. This resulted in an increase in the participation of women in such meetings. The figures below show the difference in participation before and after the commencement of the programme.

As shown in Figure 4, with the Watershed programme, the participation of women in Gram Sabha increased in both Odisha and Bihar. In both states, as reported by our field partners, few women attended the meetings before the commencement of the programme and mostly as passive attendees. During the programme, the number of women attending the Gram Sabha meetings increased in both states, so did the number of women actively participating in the meeting proceedings (Figure 5). Some GPs fared better than others in this respect. The reason for this was presence of an encouraging Sarpanch/ Mukhiya (elected or acting decision maker) and presence of an active Self Help Group network (particularly in the case of Odisha).
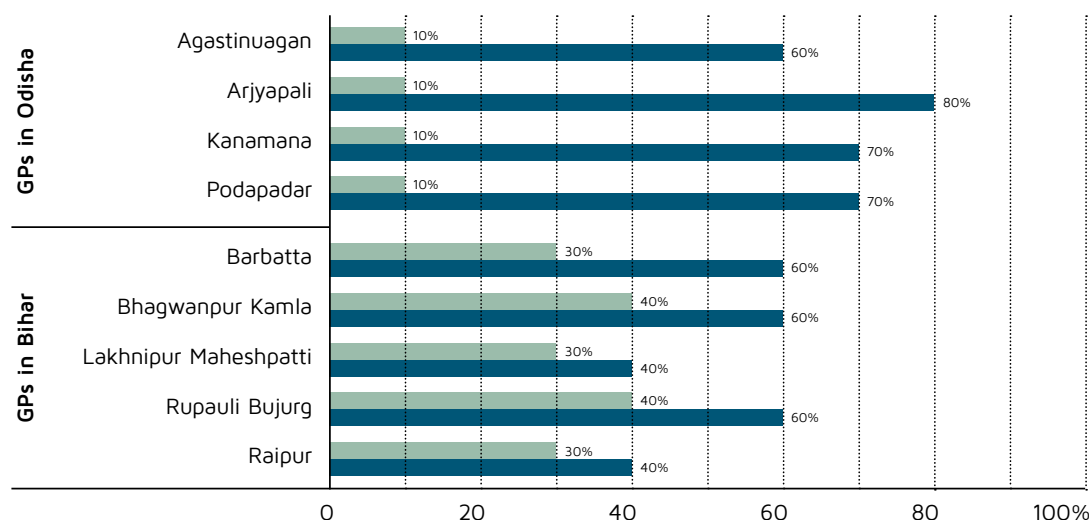

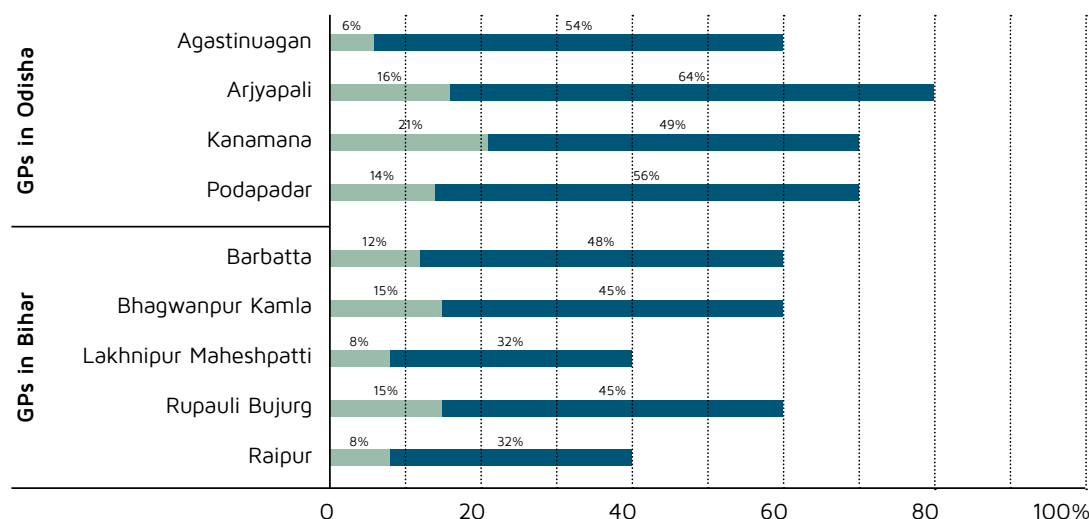Figure 4: Women's participation in Gram Sabha before and since Watershed

Figure 5: Degree of women's participation in Gram Sabha since the Watershed programme
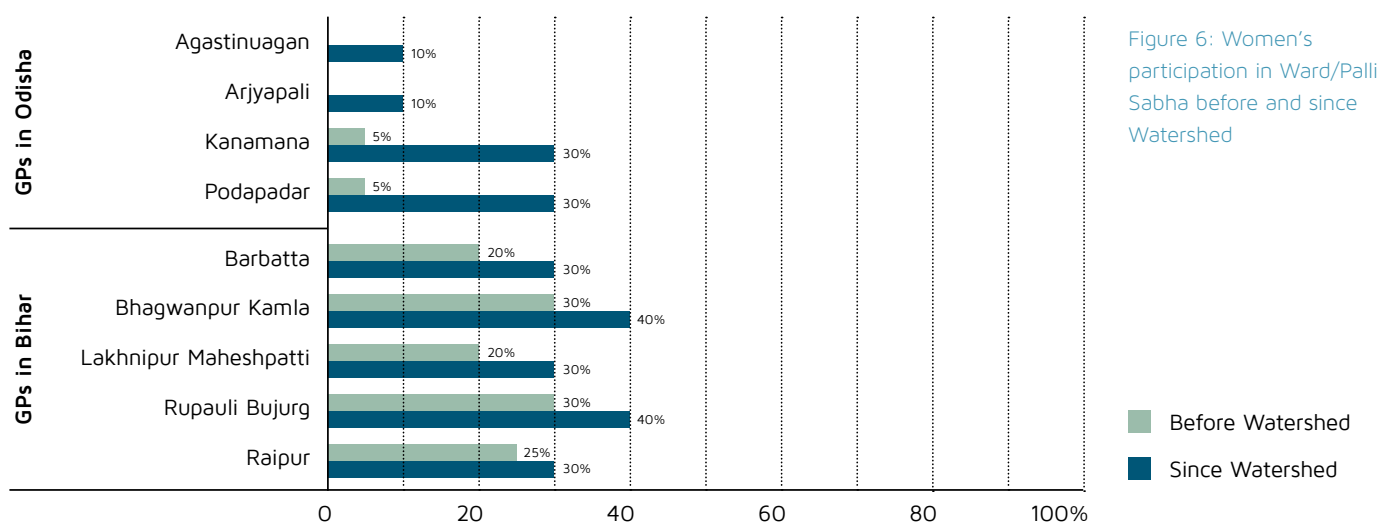
Figure 6: Women's participation in Ward/Palli Sabha before and since Watershed

The programme, similarly, had a positive impact on women's participation in the Ward/ Palli Sabha meetings, in both states (Figure 6). For both states, it was reported that women who participated in these grassroots community meetings engaged actively in the proceedings.

As stated above, the guidelines for formation of VWSCs (as well as for WIMCs) stipulate that 50% of the committee members have to be women. In the case of Odisha, this was more or less achieved across the GPs. In the case of Bihar, 50% of WIMCs across the 5 GPs of intervention were found to comprise of female members. However, in terms of decision making, men – the husband of the elected ward member and the ward secretary (who is supposed to be

at least a secondary school graduate, and due to the lack of education level of women is by default a male member) – were still seen to play a leading role. WIMCs in Bihar are stipulated to perform a primary role in execution of public works (such as piped water supply under Mukhyamantri Saat Nischay initiative). Due to lack of capacities and mobility constraints, women's participation in decision making in spite of comprising 50% of the membership, was found to be low. (See Table 2 for percentage of female members in water and sanitation committees).

According to the Arnstein Ladder of Citizen Participation (see Box 1), in GPs in Odisha women's participation before the Watershed programme could best be categorised as

Box 1: Arnstein Ladder of Citizen Participation

Arnstein Ladder of Citizen Participation		
Citizen control	The citizens are fully in-charge of planning, policy making and management of a programme or an institution.	Citizen Control
Delegated Power	Citizens hold the significant numbers to demand accountability from the power holders.	
Partnership	Power is redistributed through negotiation between citizens and power holders. Planning and decision-making responsibilities are shared.	
Placation	At this level citizens begin to have some degree of influence though tokenism is still apparent. Citizens are allowed to provide advice but power holders retain the right to judge the legitimacy or feasibility of the advice.	Tokenism
Consultation	A legitimate step, where citizen's opinions are invited through neighbourhood meetings and public enquiries. However, there is no assurance that citizen's opinions will be taken into consideration. So participation is restricted to being a window dressing ritual.	
Informing	The first step to legitimate participation. But too frequently the emphasis is on one-way flow of information, without any channel for feedback.	
Therapy	Both are non-participative. Participation is limited to achieving public support by public relations.	Non-Participation
Manipulation		

Source 1: http://lithgow-schmidt.dk/sherry-arnstein/ladder-of-citizen-participation.html#d0e75
Source 2: http://www.partnerships.org.uk/part/arn.htm

Table 2: Membership of women in water and sanitation committees

	GPs in Odisha				GPs in Bihar				
	Agastinuagan	Arjyapali	Kanamana	Podapadar	Barbatta	Bhagwanpur Kamla	Lakhnipur Maheshpatti	Rupauli Bujurg	Raipur
Membership of women in VWSC (Odisha) and WIMC (Bihar)	30%	50%	50%	30%	50%	50%	50%	50%	50%

Table 3: Arnstein Ladder of Citizen Participation in the Watershed GPs

	GPs in Odisha				GPs in Bihar				
	Agastinuagan	Arjyapali	Kanamana	Podapadar	Barbatta	Bhagwanpur Kamla	Lakhnipur Maheshpatti	Rupauli Bujurg	Raipur
Degree of women's participation before Watershed	Manipu-lation	Manipu-lation	Manipu-lation	Manipu-lation	Manipu-lation	Therapy	Manipu-lation	Therapy	Manipu-lation
Degree of women's participation after Watershed	Placation	Partner-ship	Delegated power	Delegated power	Placation	Placation	Placation	Placation	Placation

manipulation, wherein their degree of participation (in numbers as well as in terms of contribution to meeting proceedings) was very low. In Bihar as well, women's participation prior to the programme was extremely low, with two GPs faring a little better than the remaining. After the intervention, in Odisha, in Agastinuagam GP (Placation) women's participation increased, although key decision making was still in control of men. In Arjyapalli GP (Partnership), decision making started to be shared between men and women. In both Kanamana and Podapadar GPs (Delegated Power), a greater role of women in decision making could be seen. In the case of Bihar, on the other hand, across the 5 GPs, women's participation increased but decision making continued to be controlled by men. Table 3 summarises the situation of women's participation in the Watershed programme GPs as per the Arnstein Ladder of Citizen Participation.

It must be added here that in Odisha, the inter-GP differences contributed a lot to the degree of women's participation. GPs with active women Self Help Groups (SHGs) saw greater participation of women in various institutional platforms. Being part of SHG networks encouraged women, it was found, to participate, as well as put forth their demands. In the case of GPs Podapadar and Kanmana, for instance, the proximity to town, and higher education levels of the women ensured active SHGs.

The Watershed programme has provided the much-required entry point for the CSOs at large, and for women, specifically, into the basics of the planning for and management of water and sanitation. It has facilitated women's participation in community proceedings as well as created several opportunities for them to voice their needs and concerns in front of elected representatives and officials of line departments. Being able to engage has made women interested and active and has enabled them to articulate and put forth their demands. Such interventions are essential to ensure vibrant, representative, and accountable local governments.

Conclusion and way forward

Inequalities are a major impediment towards realising the goal of sustainable WASH for all. Community engagement is essential to mitigate the challenges brought forth by inequalities. It is thus important that interventions, especially those on water and sanitation, put special focus on strengthening systems of community participation as well as enable the participation of all citizens.

- **Creation of an enabling environment**
  Strengthening governance and making systems of gover-nance (such as institutional platforms for decision making) functional, require dedicated time and investment of

resources. Legislations, policies and guidelines provide the structure for platforms for community participation. To facilitate the actual practice requires generating the demand– ensuring that members of the community and their representatives understand the need and usefulness. Further, investments should be made to train and provide handholding support in better planning, implementation, and monitoring practices.

- **Community engagement**
  On the generation of demand for participation, engaging community influencers and leaders can serve useful to motivate members of the community to participate and be involved. Including young and upcoming leaders can be helpful to initiate them into the process of decision making. Further, exposure visits to model GPs can aid in furthering the process of decentralised planning.

- **Capacity building of women**
  To facilitate women's participation in decision making processes, investments need to be made to build their capacities - on knowledge of governance systems – as well as on public speaking and in raising demand, use of evidence, etc. Sharing examples of successful role models (see Box 2) may also motivate them to follow suit.

- **Accountability of duty bearers**
  Duty Bearers, on the other hand, need to ensure that the systems of governance are functional as envisioned in the legislations and other policy documents.

Box 2: Insights from a conversation with a female Mukhiya

Ms. Ritu Jaiswal is the Mukhiya (Village Council Chief) of Singhwahini Gram Panchayat in Sitamarhi district of Bihar, since 2016. An economics graduate, Ms Jaiswal grew up in the town of Hajipur in Bihar and then lived in cities as the wife of a bureaucrat. She was largely unaware of the hardships of rural life. During a visit in 2013 to her husband's native village, she came face to face with the perennial challenges. After a brief stint in organising adhoc relief initiatives in collaboration with her friends, she decided to run for the office of the Mukhiya to be able to take consecrated efforts towards village development. "I thought I could do more by being part of the system", she states.

Her first order of business on being elected was addressing the challenges of open defecation, road connectivity and electrification in the seven villages of the Singhawahini Gram Panchayat. After addressing these, she focused on the generation of employment opportunities for the residents. Aided by her education and exposure, Ms. Jaiswal has been able to emerge as true leader, for which she has received several accolades, including the Champions of Change award from the Vice President of India in 2018.

Ms. Jaiswal states that women in villages have been repressed over the years. Lack of education and lack of awareness on rights prove to be major roadblocks in women raising their voice or exercising their rights as elected representatives. There is thus need for regular capacity building initiatives, for elected female representatives and women in the community at large. "When people know (about their rights), they demand (for the same)," she states.

Source: Interview with Ms. Ritu Jaiswal on 22nd May 2019.

NOTES

1   The list of schemes, as provided under the Eleventh Schedule of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1992) is available here - www.mea.gov.in/Images/pdf1/S11.pdf

2   In Odisha, there are Palli Sabhas in place of Ward Sabhas.

3   https://panchayat.gov.in/reservation-of-women-in-pris

4   Data for Figures 3, 4, 5 and 6 and Tables 1 and 2 is based on the observations of the landscape partners in the two field sites.

5   www.citizenshandbook.org/arnsteinsladder.html