

Swapping the stick for a broom: Men supporting women in local politics in India

Key messages

- > Women in India's rural communities face multiple barriers around participation in public and political life, many of which emanate from a pervasive patriarchal public and private gender divide that is embedded in attitudes, practices and institutions.
- > The Samajhdar Jodidar project engages with men in communities who are open to challenging patriarchal norms. It supports them to make personal changes and to drive community action for gender equality.
- > The project's men's groups provide a platform for mobilising men to work with women to challenge gender inequalities and create opportunities for more democratic and effective decision making, which benefits the whole community.
- > The work has led to a number of positive changes, including an increase in women taking up public leadership roles and more equitable roles and relationships within households.



Samajhdar Jodidar animators during a group discussion to explore strategies for supporting women's participation in politics and public life.

Image by Jerker Edstrom

Introduction

The Samajhdar Jodidar project in rural Maharashtra, India, works with men to catalyse change at personal and political levels in order to address women's subordinate status in society. The project's work includes specific strategies to support women's participation in public life and decision making. Women in India's rural communities face multiple, deeply rooted barriers around participation in public and political life, including physical violence and intimidation, oppressive patriarchal and caste structures, lack of education and lack of respect for women in political positions. Behind such barriers lies a pervasive public and private gendered divide, with strictly gendered roles in both social and economic realms.

The Indian constitution enacted in 1992 mandated that one third of seats and chairpersonships in India's locally elected governance bodies – Panchayats – should

be reserved for women and marginalised groups, and in 2009, a constitutional amendment increased this reservation to 50 percent. But these measures have not been enough to ensure women's leadership, participation and influence in local government. In some areas, including rural Maharashtra, women may be registered as holding seats in the Panchayat, but they are prevented from taking part in decision making; this is done by male relatives or elite men in the community. Further systems and mechanisms are needed to help break down the persistent social barriers and backlash that women experience when they try to participate in public life.

The Samajhdar Jodidar project is attempting to do this by engaging with the men in communities who are open to challenging patriarchal norms, and supporting these men to make personal change and drive community based action to transform discriminatory

social norms and gender inequality. In Solapur district, Maharashtra, where Samajhdar Jodidar is implemented by the Halo Medical Foundation, the following positive changes have been observed by community members.

- Many men appear to have moved towards more gender equitable beliefs and practices and are involved with supporting women in public life.
- More women are claiming their space in politics and are more able to be effective.
- There appears to be more effective implementation of the affirmative action systems to reserve seats for women and marginalised groups in national and state level politics.
- The quality and outcomes of political processes are more sensitive to community needs, including those of women and children.
- More women are taking on public leadership roles.
- Greater gender equality within the household is supporting women's leadership in public.

How were men and boys engaged in the intervention?

Samajhdar Jodidar supports men so that they can become change agents in their communities, and positive role models for other men and boys. The men meet in small groups, supported by 'animators' who act as group leaders and use consciousness raising techniques to explore issues of gender in the men's own lives. This is seen as the beginning of an incremental process of change, in which men work with women to take action for gender equality in both the private and public spheres.

Participating men have gone on to support female election candidates, challenge community members discriminating against women, and play a role in resolving conflicts, as well as supporting women in broader public roles such as at cultural festivals and in economic activities. They have also changed their practices within the home, contributing more to domestic tasks, so that their partners are more able to be active in the community and in economic activities outside of the home

What processes and strategies were used?

Consciousness raising

Samajhdar Jodidar works with men in small groups to challenge their beliefs and notions of masculinity, from the personal to the political level. The men are



Panchayat members Mrs Sangeeta Basavraj Banne, Sarpanch (Head of the Gram Panchayat) and Mrs Jagdevi Revansidh Ankalge, with Samajhdar Jodidar project facilitator and animator, Gourishankar and Shivanand Dodydale, Chapalgaonwadi. The text on the wall reads: 'This Panchayat is free from discrimination on the basis of caste, gender or religion'.

Image taken by Jerker Edstrom

supported in a safe space, where they can explore issues of gender injustice and reflect upon their own investments in the current patriarchal context. .

Working on relationships

The men are encouraged to engage in a step-by-step process of change, beginning with their relationships at home, and moving from this to publicly supporting women, especially their partners and family members, to take on leadership roles. Samajhdar Jodidar animators estimate that, over time, 75 percent of men's group members have changed their domestic roles to contribute more, and 25 percent of other men in the communities have changed their home practices too.

“ There is not a drastic change [in our relationship with partners], but they promote and support us – the relationship is opened and free. They will do some housework like bringing water, helping with the kids, cutting vegetables. ”

MRS AMBIKA UMAKANT GADVE,
HEAD OF BOREGAON VILLAGE GRAM PANCHAYAT

Supporting women privately and publicly

Male participants are encouraged to support women in a range of areas, including property ownership, employment, shared care work and economic independence. They also advocate for children’s equal education and reducing girls’ dropout rates at school. When supporting women to become active in public life, the men work with women to understand the process of the Gram Panchayat (India’s local governance bodies), and they work with literate women to help them come forward and contest elections. They also engage with women’s self-help groups, educating them on their rights. This has led to the women raising important issues at the Gram Sabha (village general assembly), such as sanitation, government welfare schemes and violence against women.

Using the law to claim women’s rights to representation

Participating men encourage and support female candidates for Gram Panchayat elections, holding local and block level government accountable for the government reservation on 50 percent female representation. They mobilise communities to ensure that, in advance of the village Gram Sabha, state constituted women’s Gram Sabha are held. They then encourage women to attend the Gram Sabha, and to raise the issues brought up at the preparatory meeting.

Awareness raising and campaigning

Samajhdar Jodidar undertakes a range of awareness raising activities to build support for women’s public roles and for women’s rights; from canvassing for female candidates in local elections to broader campaigns on domestic violence or sex selective abortion. It has also run community education initiatives around men’s roles in gender equality

Engaging with the powerful to increase support for women in politics

As female representatives have faced violent threats, intimidation and exclusion from men, both in the political arena and at home, Samajhdar Jodidar group members sometimes intervene in conflict resolution. They join, and in some cases, chair village conflict

resolution committees in order to bring a gender equality perspective to proceedings. Other members challenge abusive opposition from men within the community and at the Gram Sabha, meeting with them to convince them that aggressive behaviour is wrong.

Lessons learnt

Samajhdar Jodidar is an example of an intervention with an unusual degree of deliberate engagement by men in the struggle for women’s greater public participation and representation in politics. The project’s men’s groups have provided a platform for mobilising men to work with women to demand accountability on gender specific affirmative action policies, and a space for men to change at the personal level, so that both men and women can take up progressive public roles with a gender equality agenda.

The work faces some ongoing challenges, especially from a broader patriarchal culture that disapproves of women’s public leadership. Consciousness raising

“After the election, the group comes to support us and support the women. Yes, group members sensitised male Gram Panchayat members on women’s rights, in terms of the work, as well as about gender based discrimination and equality.”
MR SHIVANAND VITTAL PATIL, PANCHAYAT MEMBER

with men can be blocked by men’s own conflicted investment in male privilege; some fear the ways their lives will change if women learn about laws and policies on gender equality. Limitations around caste, status and class come into play when men’s group members from lower middle and poor families have difficulties in working with, or being accepted by, established leaders or higher caste and wealthy elites. Samajhdar Jodidar offers the following lessons for work with men to overcome these

challenges and promote gender equality.

- In order to challenge traditional notions of masculinity and divest from male privilege, personal change in individual men is required.
- Challenging gender norms means shifting gendered relationships and roles, for example around unpaid domestic work and household decision making, so that men can improve their relationships with women and work with them toward equality and justice.
- Be the change you seek – creating role models that others can learn from is key.

- Collective action is needed for political change. Peer support and collaboration between likeminded men is important, as is collaboration between women and men working toward the same goals.
- When women and men come together to undertake shared analysis of issues of inequality within their community, they can build shared commitment to a political struggle for social and gender justice.
- Change is gradual, incremental and works in interconnected cycles. Sustained pressure is needed for women's participation to fully take root.
- Claims for gender justice and accountability should be anchored, where possible, in existing laws and policies.
- Men's groups can work with women to monitor and prevent the misuse of laws, showing solidarity and collectively taking political action in ensuring accountability for gender equality.
- Involving men who oppose gender equality, considering their perspective and challenging it is important.
- Open and supportive meetings are important to sustain energy and momentum. Generating interaction that extends outside of meetings, as well as ownership of activities and agenda among participants, is also key.

Further reading

Edstrom, E., Shahrokh, T., Singh, S. with Jamdade, S. (2015) 'Swapping the stick for a broom: Men supporting women in local politics in India', *EMERGE Case Study 4*, Promundo-US, Sonke Gender Justice and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), Brighton: IDS

Hamaus, J. and Edström, J. with Shahrokh, T. (2015) 'Public and Political Participation', in J. Edström, A. Hassink, T. Shahrokh, and E. Stern (eds), *Engendering Men: A Collaborative Review of Evidence on Men and Boys in Social Change and Gender Equality*, EMERGE Evidence Review, Promundo-US, Sonke Gender Justice and the Institute of Development Studies, Brighton: IDS

Methodology

This Story of Change is based on the EMERGE case study:

Edstrom, E., Shahrokh, T., Singh, S. with Jamdade, S. (2015) 'Swapping the stick for a broom: Men supporting women in local politics in India', *EMERGE Case Study 4*

The study used a qualitative research approach to explore the impact of work with men on women's participation in public and political life. An in depth review of evidence was conducted, where little evidence on effective programming was found. Research questions were developed through participatory mapping with staff and community activists connected to the Samajhdar Jodidar project. The research was undertaken in Solapur district, Maharashtra. Methods included in depth group analysis with men's group leaders (animators) and facilitators, focus group discussions with men's group members and interviews with Panchayat members and other stakeholders. A validation workshop of preliminary project findings was then held with animators and facilitators.

This story of change is part of a series of eight, developed collaboratively by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), Promundo-US and Sonke Gender Justice as part of the Engendering Men: Evidence on Routes to Gender Equality (EMERGE) project. The project is made possible through support from DFID under the Leadership for Change programme. Learn more about EMERGE – our work, our findings and free resources, here: <http://menandboys.ids.ac.uk/>

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