

# Role of Women Councillors in Improving Water & Sanitation Infrastructure in Poor Communities

**Abstract:** *Urban local bodies are considered to be the most effective decentralized institutions since the execution and monitoring is direct at local level. This local set up provide ample opportunities to residents of city to take part and influence the local decision making process, especially through councillors who represent ward at city level. These ward councillors play an important role in development at local level. They possess power and position to impact the kind of developmental works to be conducted. The paper discusses the success story of women councillors across three different cities in improving the water and sanitation infrastructure. The women members are capable to recognize the needs of the households/society and act towards it, especially for the poor communities.*

## Local Governance: India

India being the largest democracy with a population of 121 crores (Census Department of India, 2011), thrives on a multi-tier administrative and governance setup. Indian governmental setup comprises of three tiers: centre, state and local. Local bodies are municipal authorities and *panchayats*. The state government have the power to legislate this third tier. The Constitution of India was almost silent on the third tier of government till the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> constitutional amendment act. These amendments tried to strengthen and dissipate power to the local government. The 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act was passed in 1992 however the states enacted it by April 1994. It gave the Panchayati Raj institutions<sup>1</sup> a legal and constitutional status, which otherwise was a part of Directive Principles of State Policy before the amendment. 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment mentions reservation of not less than 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the total seats for women members. This reservation ensured seats for women members in elections for local bodies. 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act, enacted in 1992 was an effort to empower the third tier of government structure. The urban local bodies at the state level divide the city area into zones and further into wards for administrative purpose. These wards are represented by an elected councillor. Councillors play an important role of conducting and monitoring local level infrastructure improvements and directly engage with the residents.

## Women Representation in Local Government

The Indian Constitution incorporates the principle of gender equality in its Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties and Directive Principles. Under the umbrella of democracy and equality, supported by the Constitution of India, the laws, policies, programmes and plans aim at women advancement and empowerment in different spectrums. Looking back to the first mark towards women empowerment, the National Commission for Women was set up under an Act of Parliament in 1990. The intent was to safeguard the rights and legal entitlements of women. The 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> constitutional amendments have ensured reservation for women and their representation in local government; this affirmative action has laid a strong foundation of women participation at local level

<sup>1</sup> "Panchayati Raj, a synonym of democratic decentralization, was introduced in India in the late 1950s and early 1960s to restore to the erstwhile institution of Panchayat the pristine glory that it enjoyed in ancient India. It represents a political ideal and is reflected in the rural local-self-government in its institutional form". (Mishra, 2016)

in decision making. However, the fact that reservation is required to ensure women participation highlights existence of low level of women participation in policy making at some point of time.

The third mark bolster the agenda of women empowerment was National Policy for women empowerment 2001. The policy talks about the women empowerment and equal access into politics, social development and decision in local self-government. Such constitutional amendments and policies had a very positive and strong impact on women representation in local government. In urban centers, the women representation at local level is ensured through reservation of seats for councillors. Of the total number of councillors elected in a city, minimum 33% of seats are represented by women. Cities like Ahmedabad have almost 50% of women representation at local level<sup>2</sup>.

“Having women in these leadership positions is an important step in changing the male-dominated political agenda. At least they have the opportunity to attend the meetings, interact with officials and take part in important discussions. It also ensures their mobility across the social hierarchy” (Chinchkar, 2013).

### **Councillors: Roles and Powers**

In Indian context, the local government representation are of two types; Panchayat for rural area and Municipality for urban area. The city is divided into various zones for administrative which are further subdivided into wards. Each of these wards are represented by an elected councillor. These councillors form a legislative body at local level which is headed by a Mayor.

A councillor’s primary role is to monitor the activities of urban local body in the provision of all municipal services and ensure their effectiveness in their respective wards. Typically, the role of an elected representative includes i) policy making, ii) executive oversight and iii) constituency improvement. Simply put, councillors make laws, approve budgets and raise questions of public importance (Shekhar, 2012). They oversee the responsibility to ensure coverage and functioning of public works like water, sewer, sanitation, lighting, solid waste management, roads, government schools, hospitals, public parks etc. In absence of any of public service in the ward, a councillor is required to submit the intent, in form of written proposal and estimated budget to urban local body, under its discretion, sanctions the intent and upon approval of budget the work is commenced.

Every year the Municipal Corporation of the city allocates councillor budget and capital budget towards ward development activities. Each city has different allocation mechanism and percentage share and respectively, the responsibility of public works under their purview. The councillor representation also varies across the city. In Ahmedabad, four councillors represent a ward whereas in Jaipur and Ranchi one councillor represents a ward. In Ahmedabad city, the ward councillor have been allocated budget of INR 22 lakhs for the financial year 2017-2018. Since each ward is represented by 4 Councillors, the total councillor budget for the ward is INR 88 lakhs. To promote sanitation and cleanliness related activities under *Swaccha Bharat Mission (SBM)*, an additional allocation of INR 9.60 crores to ward councillors at city level has been provisioned. This highlights the fact that sanitation is a priority agenda at ward level under SBM. Apart from councillors ward development funds, each ward is allocated a capital budget.

<sup>2</sup> The city has 192 ward councillors for 48 wards of which 97 are women Councillors (Corporation, 2017).

## Lessons and Experiences from Ground: Case Studies

To decipher the role of councillors in improving sanitation infrastructure at local (ward) level and especially in poor communities women councillors from three cities: Jaipur, Ahmedabad and Ranchi were interviewed<sup>3</sup>. These case studies have enabled us to comprehend the efficacy of women leaders at local level and the challenges faced by them.

### Jaipur

Jaipur, the capital city of Indian State Rajasthan is tenth largest metropolitan city in India. According to Census 2011 the city population is 30.7 lakhs with 4.5 lakhs households. The city is spread across 467 square kilometres. The local governing body is *Jaipur Nagar Nigam* (JNN). The city area is divided into 8 geographical zones and further subdivided into 91 wards. Unlike Ahmedabad, where 4 ward councillors represent a ward in Jaipur, ward is represented by single councillor, also called as *Parshad* in local language. The city has 91 councillors representing one ward each out of which 33 are female councillors (Nigam 2017). To understand role of ward councillors in improving water and sanitation infrastructure, Snehlata Sharma, who served as councillor from year 2004-2009, was interviewed.

Snehlata Sharma was born and brought up in Jaipur. She got married in 1997 and resides in a joint family with her husband, mother-in-law, father-in-law, three brothers-in-law, their respective wives and six children. She has Masters of Arts as her educational qualification. With her interest she also pursued Bachelor of Law (LLB). Since her days in Law College she was always interested in social work and leadership. She was elected as general secretary, representing the college at various platforms. After 1997, she shifted to her in-laws place; gradually she started taking interest in developmental activities of the ward. The residents recognized her efforts and she was elected as *Parshad* (Councillor) in the year 2004 for Hawa Mahal East zone, ward number 83. During her tenure she mobilized the allocated resources from Nagar Nigam and ensured that the residents of the ward benefit from water and sewer connection. She also carried out a tree plantation drive, constructed ayurveda hospital, school and organized system of solid waste collection.

Mahila Housing Trust (MHT) began working in Gaitor Ki Chhatri, a slum in ward 83 in 2008. The slum is near forests surrounding hilly neighbourhood. Everything was far away and the only way to travel was by foot, a mode of travel made particularly difficult by the lack of paved roads and street lights. There was no water connectivity so getting drinking water meant trekking to a well. Garbage was also thrown on the street haphazardly, with no thought to cleanliness, and people had little knowledge of proper hygiene. Upon assessment of demand, Snehlataji supported MHT in getting the funds mobilized such that residents of the slum get access to water and sewer network. More than 500 households were benefitted from this intervention. With her efforts she pushed Nagar Nigam to sanction budget for slums in the ward. In the



Figure 1 Snehlataji inaugurating the work of sewer line in Gaitor ki Chhatri, Jaipur

<sup>3</sup> Semi-structured interview was conducted

interview conducted she estimated the cost of development activities during her tenure in the ward to be around INR 5 crore. Currently she is a *Pradesh Karyakarta*, a member of executive committee of a leading political party.

To propose ward development activities councillor in Jaipur is required to submit the intent/proposal to Jaipur Nagar Nigam (urban local body). Nagar Nigam estimates the amount required for proposed activity and floats tender regarding the same. Upon commencement of work in the ward the councillor is informed. Jaipur Nagar Nigam allocates the budget of INR 50 lakhs for financial year 2017-18 per councillor to be utilized for ward development activities. If the development activities in the ward exceed the allocated budget the ward councillors can approach Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA) for additional budget allocation.

Snehlata Sharma worked extensively during her tenure to improve water and sanitation infrastructure in the ward. Living right near to the slum and having gender sensitive approach Snehlataji ensured that the residents get access to water and sanitation in Gatore ki Chatri; slum where MHT intervened in 2008.

*“Being a woman I understand how difficult is your day when we need to travel and spend hours to fetch water. Not only this, the day starts early in the morning if we do not have access to toilet. Hence my efforts as a Parshad were to work towards improving access to water and sanitation, especially in slums.”- Snehlataji*

## Ahmedabad

Ahmedabad city of Gujarat state is home to 55 lakhs<sup>4</sup> residents spread across 466 square kilometres. The local self-government of the city is called Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation (AMC). The city is divided into 6 zones and these zones are further divided into 48 wards. Each ward is represented by 4 ward councillors. Of these 4 seats 2 seats are reserved for women members. To elect these ward councillors election is held every 5 years. Currently<sup>5</sup> the city has 192 ward councillors for 48 wards of which 97 are women councillors (Corporation, 2017).

In Ahmedabad, to propose ward development activities councillor is required to submit the intent/proposal to Municipal Corporation. Municipal Corporation estimates the amount required for proposed activity and floats tender regarding the same. Upon commencement of work in the ward the councillor is informed. However within an area of ward, councillor cannot spend more than 3 lakhs INR.

Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation allocates the budget of INR 17 lakh per year to each councillor, to be utilized for ward development. This sums up to be INR 68 lakhs as part of councillor budget and remaining is the capital budget. However the councillor budget for the financial year 2017-18 has been increased to INR 22 lakhs (Corporation, 2017). The capital budget allocated for Sarkhej ward for financial year 2016-17 is INR 3.5 crores. This higher capital budget allocated was to initiate work in sanitation under SBM. The Corporation also allocates special budget for the ward if required. Also if the development activities in the ward exceed the allocated budget the ward councillors can approach *Member of Legislative Assembly* (MLA) for budget allocation. To understand the process of

<sup>4</sup> According to Census 2011

<sup>5</sup> September 2017

ward development through Councillors in the city Nafisabanu Islamuddin Ansari, a ward councillor from Sarkhej ward was interviewed.

Nafisaben has lived in Sarkhej area all her life. Born in a poor family of 10 with a single earning member, she had to give up her education at the age of 13 years. She got married in 1995, and moved to Nehrunagar in Sarkhej, close to where she was born and raised. When she moved to Nehrunagar, the living conditions in the community were abysmal. There were wide open drains overflowing with filthy water, many a times this water used to flow inside the houses. The quality of water that was supplied was very bad, most women travelled up to half a kilometre to a public tap to get portable water. Electricity wasn't regular either, households used to remain in darkness for up to two days straight. The community was in interiors and was disconnected from city wide social and infrastructure networks. The poor condition of access roads prevented outside interaction and intervention. As a result, the community slowly became home to several illegal activities. In 2007, MHT started work in the Nehrunagar area. As a first step, MHT conducted several meetings and area sabhas and facilitated the formation of a Community Based Organization that coalesced women from 250 households into a collective. The women were then trained by MHT on local governance, institutional arrangements, and to effectively interface with govt. bodies and elected officials to access improved infrastructure. Nafisaben attended all the trainings. She showed the confidence and interest to bring about a change in her community. MHT and other community members recognized this. They nominated her among 10 women leaders who would work with the government to bring water and sanitation services into the area and lead the process of community transformation. Nafisaben then organized the community and applied for getting legal drainage and water lines into her area. She faced many challenges on the way, but her determination kept her going. She was threatened by the local goons several times over. They wanted her to quit and left no stone unturned to make all her efforts futile. They spread false rumours with the intention of tarnishing her reputation. However with the support from her family, MHT, and most importantly other women from her area, she continued her work.



Figure 2 Nafisaben, Ward Councillor, Sarkhej, Ahmedabad

Finally her efforts paid off in 2012 when the work for laying underground drainage and water line was commenced. At the end of 2014, all 945 households in her community had individual water & underground drainage connections. Her untiring efforts were noticed and acknowledged by then ward councillor of Sarkhej ward, and Nafisaben was appointed as Female Ward Pramukh of the area in 2012. She began working with the ward councillor to bring about these changes in other poor communities in the Sarkhej ward. MHT continued to provide capacity building and technical support to women in these communities. By 2015, Nafisaben was known and trusted by all families in the Sarkhej area. She was offered a ticket for 2015 elections by a leading political party. She won her seat by a huge margin. From then she is working actively in the ward towards improvement and development of basic infrastructure.

She has pulled the budget of around INR 2 crores; INR 17 lakhs yearly from her personal councillor budget and remaining from capital budget of the ward till now for ward development. The major ward development activities initiated by her includes laying of sewer lines, water lines, road paving,

installing street lights, benches and dustbins. With these interventions 17 slum communities with approximately 2,855 households have been able to avail legal sewer connections and around 1000 households have access to water. Apart from these development works she had submitted application for construction of water tank in Sarkhej area so that residents can have access to water from Narmada. This intent has been considered by Municipal Corporation and water tank of 36 lakh gallon litres will be constructed at the cost of INR 29 crores, benefitting residents of the ward. She had also proposed construction of affordable housing units for families living below poverty line in the vacant plot of the area upon requests by residents. This request is also considered by Municipal Corporation and 1522 affordable housing units will be constructed. Approval of the proposals initiated by her highlights the fact that living in the community and being a woman she was quick to detect the issue and respond towards the needs of the community.

Today Nafisaben continues to work towards improving the lives of the poor in her ward in the capacity of an elected councillor. Nafisaben with the support from other women in her community has led the transformation of her area.

*“I am really thankful for MHT’s support throughout the whole transformation process. They organized the community and brought us all together to work collectively. They instilled the confidence in me to keep going. I still look up to them whenever I need guidance.”- Nafisaben*

## Ranchi

Ranchi city, capital of Jharkhand is governed by Ranchi Municipal Corporation. According to Census 2011 the population of the city is 10.7 lakhs. The city is divided into 55 wards. Each ward is represented by a councillor. To understand role of ward councillors in improving water and sanitation infrastructure Kavita Sanghavi, who served as councillor for two consecutive tenure 2008-12 and 2013-17 was interviewed.

Kavitaji was born in Bisanpur village of Chattishgarh. She was married in 1988, at the age of 14. She lives in Ranchi with her husband and four children. She was able to pursue her studies till tenth grade. Her husband actively worked with residents of the ward and towards development of it. In the year 1987 her husband was elected as ward councillor. Even after the completion of the tenure she, along with her husband continued working for the residents. Her leadership skills were recognized when the land parcel, which was used for market



Figure 3 Kavitaji, Ward Councillor, Ranchi

place was acquired by government and she took the initiative to help the women vendors. During this she mobilized 200 women members. This instilled the faith in residents and she won the councillor elections by considerable number of votes. Her dedication and efforts ensured her win for second consecutive year as well. One of the notable work which she revived for slums in her ward was under Rajiv Awas Yojana. After doing considerable paper work for residents of two slums, such that they can avail beneficiary amount under *Rajiv Awas Yojana* (RAY) the applications were not considered by Ranchi Nagar Nigam. The reason being, advent of *Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana* (PMAY). The local government asked Kavitaji to redo the application

process under PMAY, which according to her would have accentuated the issues of residents. With her prodigious efforts she revived the files of applications which belonged to residents of five slums, of which two slums were in her ward. After this she also commenced facilitating application process for residents to avail benefits under PMAY. Approximately 300 houses are under construction under RAY. Of 600 applications for individual toilet construction under Swaccha Bharat Mission, facilitated by her, 300 have been sanctioned. With the development works carried out during her tenure of past nine and half years she claims to have benefitted ~80% residents of the ward.

The challenge faced while working was, often people do not recognize that their participation and support to councillors would catalyse the developmental works. In absence of such support the implementation becomes difficult. However this case translates to the understanding that vigorous role of councillor is vital in improving sanitation infrastructure in poor communities.

*“I have not won; the residents of the ward who have faith in me have won along with me. I have and will continue to work with same rigour such that all residents especially the women members of my ward have access to water and sanitation facility”- Kavitaji*

### **Conclusion**

Councillors are the key link between communities and government. Women councillors, most of who have come from the poor communities, are more sensitive to sanitation and community related issues. Women's participation in local governance can result in more positive outcomes for poor, especially women. The experience from the case studies indicates that women representatives are more sensitive towards the issues affecting women and are successful in working towards it. They have used their authority to address the critical issues of access to drinking water, provision of toilets, education and cleanliness in their ward.

There are challenges like some women councillors are still in the shadows of their husband, but are gradually learning how to navigate in the political sphere and become more confident. These women leaders act as catalyst, inducing improvement at the grassroots level.

**Bibliography**

Census Department of India. (2011). *District Census Handbook 2011*.

Chinchkar, S. (2013). Women participation in local self-government: An Exploration. *Women Reservation and Local Selg Government*. Anand: NS Patel Arts College.

Corporation, A. M. (2017). Retrieved September 14, 2017, from Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation: [http://ahmedabadcity.gov.in/portal/jsp/Static\\_pages/corp\\_corp.jsp](http://ahmedabadcity.gov.in/portal/jsp/Static_pages/corp_corp.jsp)

Kumar, A. P. (2017). Rethinking India's Federalism. *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 52, Issue No. 29.

Mishra, G. &. (2016, March). Panchayati Raj Institution in India: Prospects And Retrospections. *IOSR Journal of Humanities & Social Science*, 21(3), pp. 63-70.

Nigam 2017, J. N. (n.d.). Retrieved September 14, 2017, from Jaipur Nagar Nigam: <http://www.jaipurmc.org/Presentation/AboutMcjaipur/MstPdfViewer.aspx?Pageid=3&PdfName=JmcParshadListwthPhoto.pdf&Header=Our%20Corporators>

Rajbir Singh, D. V. (2013). Panchayati Raj and the 73rd Amendment- An Evaluation. *Shabd Brahma*, ISSN 2320-0871.

Shekhar, S. (2012, January). Roles and Powers of Municipal Councillors. Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India.