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## **UNIT 7 CHANGEMAKERS AT GRASSROOTS AND PROBLEMS FACED BY WOMEN IN GRASSROOTS GOVERNANCE**

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### **7.1 INTRODUCTION**

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Can women who often been considered as homemakers become Changemakers of the nation? This question has been enquired time and again by various experts and stakeholders. Our nation has witnessed women's leadership and collective action at multiple levels of governance. Especially, at the grassroots level, we have been witnessing umpteen number of Changemakers who were able to mobilise community action for various programmes, such as, health and nutrition, education, water, energy, afforestation, menstrual hygiene, etc. In grassroots context, Changemakers are leaders who are able to build the capacities of the grassroots organisation in terms of human resources, tangible and intangible resources. In addition, they build the morale of their members, devise plan of action, and enable community leadership. To illustrate, Sunita Rajawat, an erstwhile Ward Panch (member of the Village Council) from Vanasthali Gram Panchayat in Rajasthan had motivated the village women to take part actively in local politics and share their views spontaneously. In fact, there are many Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) like Sunita who have been promoting and excelling women's leadership at the grassroots governance. In this Unit, we shall be discussing such Changemakers along with the challenges that they have faced in carving a niche for themselves.

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### **7.2 LEARNING OUTCOMES**

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After reading this Unit, you should be able to:

- Appreciate the role of women Changemakers in grassroots governance;

- Infer the realities of women in grassroots governance; and
- Identify the challenges faced by women in grassroots governance.

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### 7.3 ROLE OF CHANGE MAKERS

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Margaret Mead, the American Cultural Anthropologist had once insisted “*Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world*” (Mead,n.d).Indeed, we have come across citizens’ role in rebuilding communities and impacting lives throughout the world. Let us discuss about two women Changemakers in the ensuing paragraphs.

First, Dhapu Devi from Rajasthan did not receive any formal school education but she has been passionate to eradicate malnourishment and anaemia among women and children through production of Amritchuran (a nutritious mixture that is also known as Super 5). With the aim to cater to the healthcare requirements of women and children, she has established a production unit to manufacture Amritchuran. Through a network of women entrepreneurs, she could supply the nutritious mixture to nearly 40 villages of Ajmer district covering 24,000 beneficiaries (CII, 2019). Second, Ritu Pandram, a Sarpanch (2006-2011) from Chhattisgarh tackled various social issues of her village in Bilaspur district vis-à-vis water scarcity, education, sanitation etc. Despite her higher education in Biotechnology, she pursued to develop her village. In fact, during her tenure she had organised social campaigns to improve village sanitation and motivate girls to pursue higher studies. For example, with one of her social campaigns on Open-defecation free village, nearly 600 households were enabled to construct indoor toilets. With a population of about 9,000, Ritu intended to transform her village and village community (Deccan Chronicle, 2016).

It could be inferred from the above examples that Changemakers have the capacity to unite human efforts, time, and power to influence people for a social cause. In fact, Changemakers are people who have a drive to tackle social, economic, and ecological challenges. They are highly effective people who strive to achieve social well-being. Significantly, they can be found in all sectors vis-à-vis public, private, and third sector and are familiar with the local problems. In the process, they try to focus on aligning their passion with social well-being.

Did you know that after several months of hardships posed by the pandemic, the governments and communities across the world look for a dynamic ecosystem driven by vibrant Changemakers to make the world a better place? Indeed, we are evolving to a new age work where every single cog in the wheel needs to be valued. Especially, at the grassroots level, each person needs to evolve into a Changemaker and even a consistent tiny contribution can be impactful in the long-run. From the above examples, you are able to understand the role of Changemakers in co-creating a better world. In the ensuing Section you will understand the context behind women’s participation in grassroots governance.

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## 7.4 SETTING THE CONTEXT

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A major breakthrough to ensure women's entry into grassroots governance was the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act of the Indian Constitution. With its mandate to provide one third of representation to women to serve as a prominent voice in local political process, it had not only opened doors for equal opportunities but it had managed to break stereotypical images of women in social space. When we include women in political decision making it means that we are enabling her to share responsibility and development goals at least at the grassroots level. Development goals refers to ensuring freedom, rights, equality, equity, fairness and justice. Owing to the constitutional framework, the ratio of women's participation at grassroots have witnessed a sharp rise. For perspective, the proportion of women's representation at the village panchayat level had gone up to 30-50 percent (Shanker, 2014). Interestingly, this increasing trend of women's political space can be witnessed across the world. In fact, based on data available from 133 countries women's representation ratio at the grassroots level is higher than the parliament (UN Women, 2021).

The UN Women Report (2021) indicates that as on January 2020, there are 1,375,914 EWRs in India which constitutes 44.37 percent of elected seats held by women while men's participation comes around 55.63 percent. Although yet to equal men in terms of representation, the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act has indeed initiated and promoted an effective strategy for women's political inclusion and provide them opportunities to develop their leadership capabilities. In fact, the presence of women political leaders at the local level encourages women in the community to share their problems and concerns without any inhibitions. To illustrate, Meena Behen, a woman Sarpanch in Gujarat opines that ever since the panchayat has had evolved into an all-woman Panchayat board, women from the community open up to the women panchayat members with much ease (JaagoRe, n.d). Indeed, Meena comes from a patriarchal family where women were not allowed to step out of their residences. However, with grit and self-confidence she rose to head the all-woman Panchayat Board and able to build networks with other women in providing roads, hospitals, and schools to her village. Didn't Meena break the stereotypes that was constructed by the society and serve as a Changemaker of her village?

### ***Check Your Progress 1***

- 1) *What did you learn from the examples of Women Changemakers vis-à-vis Dhapu and Ritu*

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## 7.5 WOMEN CHANGEMAKERS AT THE GRASSROOTS

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Although many unsung women Changemakers are present across the country, five women Changemakers have been selected to make you understand their meaningful role at the grassroots governance level.

### 7.5.1 Nauroti Devi

In 2010, Nauroti Devi was elected as a Sarpanch of her village Harmada, Ajmer district, Rajasthan. She belonged to a poor Dalit family and never had the opportunities for formal schooling. During 1980s, her livelihood depended on cutting stones at a road construction site. It was during then she herself realised as the champion of the labourers. Nauroti raised voice against wage discrepancy between men and women and was supported by a non-government organisation to take the case to the Supreme Court. As it turned out to be successful, Nauroti felt the need to learn basics of legal entitlements, ability to read government documents etc. from learned people. It was then she committed to overcome her illiteracy problem and joined Barefoot College, Tilonia for a six-month literacy training programme. Being a quick learner, she was adept in computer training. During the 2000s, she had created awareness about girl education and exhibited her leadership ability to fight against any form of injustices. Soon, she became the champion of local people's rights that some people of her village wished her to make an entry into panchayat elections. As anticipated, she won the panchayat elections in 2010. During her five-year stint she committed herself to construct water bodies, toilets, houses, installation of hand pumps. Above all, she took bold steps against alcohol mafia. Her computer literacy enabled her not just for village administration but also to explore women empowerment issues and concerns, helpline information, health issues, agriculture, rights of daily wagers etc. (Singh, 2016). In fact, she trained the panchayat secretary on how to use computer for routine administration. As a Sarpanch she had to face all odds. For instance, a burial ground which was occupied as a dumping yard for decades was cleared and she succeeded to erect a compound wall around it. Likewise, she succeeded in erecting a fence around the land allocated for a government health centre. She left her office with a surplus amount of Rs. 13 lakhs in the panchayat account (The Hindu, 2016).

### 7.5.2 Parveen Kaur

At the age of 21, Parveen Kaur became the youngest woman sarpanch of Kakrala Kuchiyan village, Haryana in 2016. During her tenure she was able to install CCTV cameras for security of women, water coolers, solar lights, etc. As soon as she assumed office, she interacted with the villagers to understand their problems and narrowed down on addressing water scarcity. As people walk for miles to fetch water, Parveen managed to install water coolers in several areas of the village. Subsequently, she mobilised resources for erecting Panchayat Ghar so as to interact regularly with the community members. Parveen was assertive about bringing change in the youth perception towards education, hence, established a library within the

Panchayat Ghar (Agrawal, 2020).

With the objective to achieve clean neighbourhood, she could arrange for dustbins and get the sewer lines cleaned. By interacting with the villagers and solving their problems, Parveen wanted to renew community faith on panchayat members. For being a Changemaker, Parveen had been honoured both by the state and central governments. Her tenure ended in January 2021, however, she was able to inspire many women and girls to step out of their residences and contribute meaningfully to the society.

### 7.5.3 Sumathi Chidambaranathan

Sumathi became the Sarpanch of Adigathur Panchayat in 2006. Her husband Chidambaranathan also served as Sarpanch in 2001-06. During her tenure, Sumathi was able to tackle social and environmental challenges of the Panchayat. In 2017, when the entire state of Tamil Nadu faced water crises, people of this panchayat did not face the brunt, rather they were self-sufficient, thanks to the community mobilisation efforts of Sumathi. To illustrate in her own words, *“Ten years ago, we faced severe drought and water scarcity. Fetching water every day was a struggle. As a result, our villagers were forced to abandon farming and they started going to other states as daily-wage labourers (Think Change India, 2017)”*.

With farming community abandoning agriculture, Sumathi being inconsolable found the sarpanch position as a gamechanger. However, there were numerous challenges in tackling the water crisis. One of the challenges was despite erecting borewells thousands of feet deep, there was no traces of water. Eventually, she managed to dig ponds to conserve water. Her water conservation efforts had been credited to Rajasthan's waterman Rajendra Singh. Indeed, Sumathi accompanied by few farmers travelled to Rajasthan to learn about the best practice. The team was in Rajasthan for 10 days to learn about the techniques of water management. Nevertheless, the next challenge for Sumathi was to implement the model in her village as its landscape was entirely different from Rajasthan. She consulted the community and renewed the traditional methods of water conservation that was in vogue generations before. As a resultant effect, the village community could revive a total of nine ponds and interestingly, there was a gradual rise in the ground water level. The villagers also collectively involved in (i) waste segregation and (ii) plantation drive through which they were able to plant nearly 2000 trees. Adigathur was also honoured with one of the cleanest villages in India during Sumathi's tenure.

### 7.5.4 Chhavi Rajawat

*“If it wasn't for the reservation policy, I don't know if I would be here and whether the development we've achieved would have happened.”*

- Chhavi Rajawat (Former Sarpanch) (Rajawat, 2012)

Chhavi Rajawat became the Sarpanch of her village Soda (Rajasthan) in the 2010 panchayat elections. An erstwhile corporate professional,

Chhavi didn't want to disappoint her villagers when they approached her for contesting elections. Having hailed from the same village she felt that it was her responsibility to develop her ancestral village and build a strong interface with the government, multi-national corporations, individuals, non-government organisations etc.

During her tenure as a Sarpanch, Chhavi managed to revive part of a reservoir with the help of the village community. Besides, she succeeded in constructing roads, toilets, installing power and piped water supply. She managed to mobilise young volunteers who were roped in registering the village's most needy people for food subsidies. One of her primary duties was to persuade State Bank of India (SBI) to set up a branch at Soda with an Automated Teller Machine (ATM). As on 2017, the Bank branch had opened nearly 20,000 savings accounts to cater to the financial needs of Soda as well as the adjoining villages (Thomas Reuters Foundation, 2017).

Yet another significant issue of Soda was to contain youth migration to cities in search of jobs. To address this unemployment problem, she managed to organise various career counselling and soft skills training programmes. Additionally, she organised youth clubs for plantation drive and encouraged them to volunteer for cleaning the streets of the village every Sunday. To illustrate, Chhavi in association with a NGO organised an initiative called as Soda's Youth Empowerment Programme (Goswami, 2013). The purpose of the programme was to hold daily sessions about self-discipline, positive attitude, social interactions and cooperation.

With reference to women economic empowerment, she managed to mobilise 70 Self-Help Groups (SHGs) with 500 women having trained in tailoring, handicrafts, paper mache products, grinding spices, and candle making etc. Through her networking skills, she could arrange for tables and benches for middle school girls (Goswami, 2013).

To raise funds for community development, Chhavi in collaboration with Levi started a hashtag campaign called #IShapeMyWorld. Through this campaign she invited not just funds but people's time and expertise to develop Soda. Chhavi who relied on youth power had invited student community to intern in the village so as to give them a perspective about problems faced by rural populace. Through such village exposure, she believed to harness their potential in providing creative solutions. For example, she invited people to train her village youth and women about simple skill sets so that they could have a regular income (Elle, n.d).

Among her other achievements, to name a few, Chhavi succeeded in promoting transparency in the village council office, inculcated the habit of saving among women and girls, extended support to the agrarian community to get out of the trap of money-lenders, and motivated parents to send their children to schools. For perspective, Chhavi mobilised resources to provide non-contaminated drinking water to Soda and built toilets in more than 800 houses.

Nevertheless, Chhavi got re-elected as Sarpanch in 2015.

### 7.5.5 Jabna Chauhan

For Jabna Chauhan age is just a number and has already won people's hearts as a Sarpanch. She had been honoured by the state government of Himachal Pradesh as the Best Pradhan of Mandi district at a young age of 23. In terms of clean village, her Panchayat stood first in the district in 2017. Before becoming a Sarpanch, Jabna worked as a journalist to support her family. As a journalist, Jabna brought the challenges of marginalised community to the limelight and managed to take it to the notice of government authorities. She focused her attention towards gender bias and other social injustices that within a year she became a popular personality of the district. Apparently, when the 2016 panchayat elections happened, Jabna was requested by her villagers to contest in elections. After initial inhibitions, she found that as an opportunity to contribute to her village. To illustrate in her own words, "You need to jump into the sea to clean it, it is impossible to just sit at the shore and wait for the change to happen" (Katoch, 2017). One of the serious issues of Thajun village was alcoholism and majority of men were addicted to it. It was observed that when women used to work for long hours in the farms as well as in Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) projects, the men would grab all their hard-earned money to satisfy their addiction.

With a mission to solve the problems faced by women, Jabna spearheaded to mobilise Mahila Mandal groups of the panchayat as well as the local youth volunteers. The volunteers along with Jabna and Mahila Mandals were well connected through WhatsApp group. For perspective, in less than a year of her assuming office, she led a delegation from her panchayat to the District Deputy Commissioner's office and submitted a memorandum to close all liquor vendors in her locality. Following this, she convinced the residents and other panchayat members of her village to ban the sale of alcohol. Finally, on March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017, a Gram Sabha resolution was passed to ban the sale and consumption of alcohol and tobacco products in public places. Jabna didn't stop here, rather, she built rapport with the panchayat members of the neighbouring villages and persuaded them to initiate similar campaigns against alcoholism and tobacco. For example, the Panchayats of Cheuni, Lambathatch, Baga Chinogi and Sharan have also passed a resolution to ban the sale and consumption of alcohol and tobacco. Interestingly, the Gram Sabhas also passed a resolution to ban serving liquor in marriages and those who evade this rule would have to pay penalty. Besides developmental activities, her efforts could also be seen visible in solid waste management as well as in elimination of plastic. Jabna envisions to institute a degree college in her village and establish an NGO that focuses on women's economic empowerment.

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## 7.6 CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN IN GRASSROOTS GOVERNANCE

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### 7.6.1 Patriarchy

When it comes to grassroots governance in general, patriarchy can be

considered as the foremost challenge. With exceptions like the Changemakers we have discussed in previous section, you must have come across in news that EWRs runs the panchayat office only as a rubber stamp or proxies to their family members or the elite class of the village. One of the women Mukhiyas in Bihar stated that ever since she assumed office, she attended only a couple of meetings with the Block Development Officer (BDO), District Magistrate and District Development Commissioner etc. and majority of the official meetings would be attended by her husband (Malhotra, 2014). It is said that when women get elected as Mukhiya, her husband gets tagged as ‘Mukhiyaji’ and the official name of the husband of woman Mukhiya is Mukhiya Pati (MP). And it is to the Mukhiya Pati that the villager’s approach with their problems. One of the EWR in Bihar stated that *“My husband does all the work and has all the information”* (Malhotra, 2014).

In another Indian village, the villagers opines that the EWR can neither meet visitors nor hold discussions without accompanied by their housemen. Such patriarchal situations can be found across the Indian villages. A woman sarpanch from Odisha had authorised her husband to discharge her official duties owing to household chores. One of the social workers of a village asserts that since women are mere rubber stamps and all activities have been done by the husbands or sons or fathers, there has been a rise in corruption and bribery. It is unfortunate that despite getting elected in a democratic way, due to inadequate training and education, and powered by patriarchy, EWR continue to get restricted to their household chores (Malhotra, 2014).

Another dimension of this challenge is, Chhavi (Changemaker) had to confront patriarchal attitude of low-ranking officials who never wanted to pay heed to women in high positions. She also had to face her political opponents who often tried to pit residents against her developmental works, such as, plantation drive, computer literacy training centre etc. (Thomas Reuters Foundation, 2017).

### 7.6.2 Caste System

Another major challenge is the caste system wherein women from Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities are not allowed to function rationally and independently. Their leadership are yet to attain open acceptance from the powerful class of the village. Even today in certain villages, SCs and STs have been discriminated in using public places vis-à-vis water bodies, taps, temples, tea stalls, community bath, roads, etc. The inability to acknowledge them in social space also gets reflected in political space. And that too when it comes to SC/ST women grassroots leaders, discrimination is on heights. As a result, women’s inclusion, representation, and participation in grassroots governance still remains a big challenge. The prolonged exclusion of SC/ST from political decision making at grassroots level had been resolved through the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act. Although, SC/STs constituencies have been constituted by the Act, in reality, they are yet to achieve social inclusivity. In villages where atrocities are high, EWRs have been assaulted, attacked, thus threatening their



Fundamental Right to Life (Article 21).

### **Caste Atrocities on Women Changemakers**

#### **Krishnaveni, Former Sarpanch**

Krishnaveni, a Dalit and a former Sarpanch (Thalaiyuthu Panchayat) fought against caste prejudices, patriarchy, and even a company that eyed on a village land. She actively mobilised resources for removal of encroachments by higher castes and had constructed toilets for village women. Nevertheless, all was not hassle free for Krishnaveni. Krishnaveni stated (Rao, 2017) that she had to bear the casteist slurs used by other castes people. To state in her own words, *“They would call me ‘you Sakkiliar woman’ and never by my name.”* Sakkiliar is a Dalit caste in Tamil Nadu. Since she never compromised on her social ideals, Krishnaveni, was brutally attacked in 2011 by upper castes. However, she was saved by her husband and daughter.

#### **7.6.3 Inadequate Training**

The training requirement of EWRs are complex in nature and majority of women lack awareness in the following areas, such as, leadership, communication skills, computer knowledge, gender and law, women empowerment, monitoring development projects, participatory planning, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) etc. As of 2018, nearly 18,578 EWRs across 14 states were provided training by the National Institute of Public Cooperation and Child Development (NIPCCD). As the number of EWRs in the country is more than 14 lakh, it has been planned to expand (PIB, 2018). It is to be noted that many EWRs owing to lack of such skills and expertise, stumble while executing their official duties. Even Nauroti Devi was able to shine as a Changemaker only after receiving due training from various agencies.

#### **7.6.4 Other Challenges**

When Jabna (Sarpanch from Mandi District) went ahead to ban liquor and tobacco, men who were addicted used to verbally abuse her and also threatened her of consequences. Likewise, while discharging her panchayat duties, Chhavi, faced resistance from bureaucrats at the district and block levels and also from local politicians. Since she was found to be educated and competent, she had to face the brunt of such men. Chhavi lamented that the panchayat is completely at the discretion of these government authorities (Rajawat, 2012).

It is to be noted that many studies have been conducted to devolve 3Fs – Funds, Functions, and Functionaries to the local bodies not just in letter but also in spirit. Apart from these challenges there are other challenges that includes lack of cooperation from the community, lack of adequate staff in the panchayat office, lack of security to women sarpanch, and lack of adequate administrative and financial powers to women sarpanch etc.

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## 7.7 LET US SUM UP

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In this Unit, you were able to understand how women as Changemakers in grassroots governance have contributed meaningfully for the welfare of various development activities. You were also able to infer the role of Changemakers in mobilising people's efforts, community resources etc. However, the challenges being faced by women in grassroots governance are due to the existing patriarchal system, caste system, lack of adequate training and skills etc. In order to bridge the gaps, various stakeholders have joined hands to enable the homemakers into Changemakers of the nation.

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## 7.8 UNIT END QUESTIONS

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- 1) What were the efforts taken by Jabna in banning the sale and consumption of alcohol in public place?
- 2) Write down any two challenges faced by women in grassroots governance.
- 3) Write an essay on women changemakers in grassroots governance.

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