
UNIT 9 COMPARATIVE BEST PRACTICES

Structure

- 9.1 Introduction
- 9.2 Learning Outcomes
- 9.3 Moldova
- 9.4 Germany
- 9.5 France
- 9.6 India
- 9.7 United States of America
- 9.8 Australian Local Government Women's Association
- 9.9 Let us Sum Up
- 9.10 Unit End Questions
- 9.11 References
- 9.12 Suggested Readings

9.1 INTRODUCTION

Women's participation in local government is a gateway for a just, fair, and equal world. Women should be acknowledged of their potential role in political and civic life without getting discriminated based on gender. Despite their increased role in economic and civic participation in international and national arena, there is inadequate political representation when it comes to local governments. According to the Working Paper on 'Women's Representation in Local Government: A Global Analysis' (UN Women, 2021), out of 6.02 million elected representatives at the local government only 2.18 million (Global average - 36 percent) are women. Region-wise statistics reveal that percentage of Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) range from 41 percent in Central Asia, 35 percent in Northern America and Europe, 32 percent in Oceania, 29 percent in Sub-Saharan Africa, 25 percent in Eastern and South-eastern Asia, 25 percent in Latin America and the Caribbean, and as low as 18 percent in Western Asia and Northern Africa. In this Unit, we are going to discuss some of the best practices adopted by EWRs across the world vis-à-vis Moldova, Germany, France, India, United States of America, and Australia.

9.2 LEARNING OUTCOMES

After studying this Unit, you should be able to:

- Explain the pivotal role of Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) at the local level;
- Infer the governance challenges at the local government level; and
- Spell out the relevance of EWRs in ensuring citizen well-being.

9.3 MOLDOVA

- **Barrier Free Public Spaces**

In Moldova, women are underrepresented when it comes to subnational level politics (local level), say for example, only 22 percent of women are Mayors and 27 percent women serve as district councillors. Among women with disabilities, the representation is abysmally low. Primary reason that has been cited for inadequate or poor participation is the discrimination that they encounter or barriers to participate in public life, such as, increased violence, lack of finance for political campaigning, patriarchy system etc.

It was amidst these challenges in Moldova (Europe), Elena Crasmari contested in her first local council election at Dolna village. To contest in the local council elections, Crasmari's first task was to mobilise at least five percent registered voters in the community. Being a woman with disability, Crasmari with an undeterred spirit was seen as a potential changemaker by her community that while campaigning she received warm welcome from the people. As their demands related to healthcare were unmet by previous councillors, the grieved community requested her to provide healthcare facilities once she gets elected. Out of eight men, Elena Crasmari is the only women local councillor in Moldova. All was not that easy for Crasmari as she had to face a lot of challenges that she even thought of resigning from the role. She asserts that: "I know I can't give up. I promised my community that I would help them. I have to do my best" (UN Women, 2021). Crasmari received a small grant that was utilised to repair a sidewalk in her village (Dolna). By executing her decision, she was able to make the public space accessible to all. As people with disabilities face a lot of challenges in navigating public spaces, Crasmari took cognizance of it and executed the installation of two more ramps in her village. She felt that ramps enable not just disabled population but even the elderly, sick, mothers and children can access public places with ease. Besides, she contributed for the renovation of the local health centre. During the pandemic since many villagers with disabilities have been isolated, Crasmari had raised funds to support them. She also wants to reach out to those women with disabilities who have been victims of domestic violence. While speaking on the significance of local level leadership, Crasmari says, "Change starts with us, and everyone can make significant changes in their communities by doing small things." (UN Women, 2021)

- **From a Filthy Landfill to a Small Forest**

Residents of Taraclia village (Moldova) suffered from physical illness due to an illegal landfill located in their neighbourhood. It created health hazards, bad odour and filthy atmosphere. Although, this place is an important tourist destination, the local council was inadequate to tackle this challenge until Pelaghia Traci took charge of this issue. Mentored by UN Women support programme, and leadership executed by Pelaghia Traci, the filthy landfill has been replaced with a small forest filled with fresh air. Being a first-time local councillor, Pelaghia could mobilise community and engage them in decision

making. Through community consultations, Pelaghia could seek involvement of people from all age groups and eventually the people agreed to eliminate the piled-up garbage to another legal landfill. The name of the Project was Eco-Taraclia and people from all walks of life cleared and levelled the two hectares of land within two months of time. They prepared the ground for tree plantation and sooner 2000 healthy trees were planted. The male Mayor appreciated Pelaghia that she could solve a serious and deep-rooted problem of the village (UN Women, 2016). During one of her community consultations, Pelaghia motivated the villagers that lack of financial resources should not deter them from solving the problem. The inhabitants of the community are proud of their activity and believe that people would become healthier.

9.4 GERMANY

Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz served as a Mayor of Warsaw (Germany) more than twice. She became the first female Mayor in 2006. While in office she could establish the Warsaw Climate Protection Committee that took significant decisions connected to climate change. During her term, she was able to introduce few important initiatives: sustainable and efficient public transport system, European public bike scheme, energy efficiency revitalisation programme, and protection of River Vistula. In Warsaw, to encourage pro-environment behaviour at the individual level, bike sharing and bicycles have been encouraged among people. For example, 500 kilometres of bicycle lanes have been specially dedicated to this purpose.

For perspective, Hanna and the Committee focused on public transport, such as, new buses, new trams, and a second Metro line, that runs on natural gas and renewables. In the process, they also replaced diesel buses with electric and natural gas models. As on 2018, around 70 percent of Warsaw people use public transport. Similarly, 80 percent of the city's residents use the district heating network. The district heating network is a centralised source that distributes residential and commercial heating requirements, such as, space heating and water heating. According to Hanna (Flint, 2018), in the past ten years nearly ten thousand additional homes have been connected to the centralised source. Another significant contribution made by Hanna was the 'Extension and Modernisation of the Wastewater Treatment Plant' through which the local government could treat 100 percent of wastewater released in River Vistula. It was completed in 2012 with investments from different sources. With a total value of 800 million Euro, it has been hailed as the largest environmental project in Europe (C40 Cities). Another pro-environmental practice that has been welcomed by the citizens is the provision of subsidies to install photovoltaics, solar panels, and heat pumps that could effectively replace the old-fashioned stoves.

Check your progress 1

1. What was the significant contributions made by Elena in her village?

9.5 FRANCE

Anne Hidalgo was selected as the Mayor of Paris in 2014. One of her foremost ambitions was to include citizens in local democracy so that they can share their ideas and co-create sustained development along with local elected representatives. In effect, participatory budgeting was introduced with an annual allocation of 100,000 Euros wherein people get to propose, create, and vote for development projects. In 2014, nearly 40,000 people voted for various development projects that was put forth by the Paris City Council. Based on people's preferences, projects such as, vertical garden, urban sports, renovation of outdoor 'kiosks' for music and arts in public spaces etc. were finalised by the City Council. In the following year, a separate website was launched for sharing people's ideas wherein residents enthusiastically shared over 5,000 ideas. In 2016, the project titled 'Shelters for the Homeless' had received the highest number of votes of about 21,000. This sent a message to the City Council that people are ready to take a call against poverty. Not just the ideas, the participatory budgeting process also puts the ideas into action, say for example, one fourth of the total 416 winning projects have been delivered. The projects delivered include establishment of new public gardens, co-working spaces, renovated schools, pedestrian areas, sports facilities etc. (Paris Participatory Project).

Anne is also known for her stand when it comes to climate change. By 2050, she vowed to make Paris as one of the greenest cities in the world. To give effect to the Paris Climate Agreement (2015), she decided to close the banks of River Seine that was earlier allotted for car parking and instead made this space open for pedestrians and cyclists. Besides, she opened new green spaces. On refugee front, when the entire Europe was against accommodating refugees, Anne Hidalgo took a stand to accommodate them. Some of her other initiatives include: development of one of Europe's largest business incubators for developing the social economy, extending bicycle paths, enabling elders to travel for free in public transport (C40 Cities).

9.6 INDIA

- **Arati Devi**

When Arati Devi got elected in the local body elections, 2012, she became one of the country's youngest sarpanch. She contested in the Dhunkapada gram panchayat (Ganjam District, Odisha). Having worked for a corporate, Arati Devi wanted to contribute on social front. During her tenure, she was able to bring forth public infrastructure like 'pucca' roads, electricity connections to the villages of Dhunkapada gram panchayat. She also contributed for efficient delivery of Public Distribution System, planting of

over 1.5 lakh trees, and revived folk art troupes. Due to her continuous efforts all teaching vacancies have been filled. Another feather to her cap was the literacy campaign 'Tipa Nuhen Dastakhat' (no thumb impression, only signature) which was launched to overcome illiteracy among women. As on 2017, nearly 700 women learned to put signatures along with basic reading and learning skills.

One of her notable achievements has been convening of the 'Palli Sabhas' (social forum) wherein over 1000 women take part to discuss their issues. Earlier, only few men used to attend but after she assumed office, she could mobilise women to take active participation in such forums. Arati Devi has been recognised for her contribution that she got selected to be part of 'International Visitors Leadership Program' wherein she was invited to talk about the importance of transparency and accountability in government (Odia news, 2017).

- **Mohini Devi**

Mohini Devi was in her twenties when she became the Sarpanch of Sonasar Gram Panchayat, Rajasthan. The first glass ceiling that she had to break was the stereotypical image of married women whose role is to get restricted within the four walls of the house. A significant achievement of Mohini Devi was her capacity to mobilise women's self-help group wherein women get to discuss their problems without any hassles. Several community level competitions were held where women participated shedding off their inhibitions. At the village level, she banned the use of liquor. To get it done, she along with other women made a peaceful protest outside the District Collector's office and thus demanded for liquor ban. She stood assertive against those male villagers who were trying to block her development projects (PRIA, 2003).

- **Mamta Devi**

Mamta Devi became the Pradhan of Soukni da Kot Panchayat, Himachal Pradesh in 2011. She represented the Scheduled Caste community reserved for women and went ahead to become the President for the second term. Mamta Devi wanted to empower her panchayat. In the process, she attended various capacity building programmes organised by non-government organisation as well as the government. Before becoming the Pradhan, her active participation in Mahila Mandals had improved her networking skills that she immediately swung into action by integrating rural development projects through these Mandals. She met the ward representatives and community-based organisations on a regular basis to collect community feedbacks about the several needs and what could be the possible state interventions.

Her synergy with state and non-state actors enabled her to involve local community in development in the long run. Her best practice was recognised by the Panchayat President's Association of Dharamshala that she was elected as its Vice-President. This forum served as a learning curve for its members to learn from each other. Her ability to negotiate with higher ups enabled her to lobby with the government to revoke fines on slate miners and thus paved way for employment of hundreds of labourers in her panchayat.

On the higher education front, she negotiated to open a law college in her panchayat where students can access with ease.

Mamta Devi's thoughtful leadership gesture won the villager's hearts when she constructed pedestrian paths, rain shelter at bus stops, and installation of solar street lamps. For perspective, under the Swachh Bharat Mission, she could utilise funds for the construction of community and household toilets and thus improved the health and sanitation status of the Panchayat. Another noteworthy achievement includes the provision of concrete structure to the health and veterinary department of the panchayat and erection of a huge community centre where 300 to 500 people could be accommodated for social and family functions. Indeed, the user fee of the community centre became a source of revenue for the panchayat (NIRD and CORD).

- **Shivkumari Devi**

Shivkumari Devi, a Ward member was associated with the capacity building training programme – 'Pahel' (a civil society initiative to train elected women representatives). Having received training about her roles and responsibilities, she along with Mahila Sabhas periodically visited health centres and inspected schools. Through women groups, she was able to mobilise local women to discuss issues about women's health, significance of girl child education, immunization etc. While paying regular visits to the Anganwadi centre and the health sub-centre, she would check the availability of needs and monitor the quality of services delivered. On one such visits she found the quality of food served by the Anganwadi workers was poor and warned that it would be complained to the higher authorities if same situation existed. During the Village Health Sanitation and Nutrition Day (VHSND) there was poor participation among women and children and she mobilised the pregnant and lactating mothers from the community and explained them the need to attend such community events. Gradually, the participation of women increased and also the quality of services improved (Centre for Catalysing Change, 2015).

9.7 UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Muriel Bowser is the Mayor of Washington D.C. She became the first woman to get re-elected to the position in the year 2018. She has been known for her policies regarding affordable housing, citizen satisfaction in city services, and diversification of D.C.'s economy. During her first term, she was instrumental in creation of over 57,000 jobs and thus reduced unemployment rate up to 28 percent. As chronic homelessness in the city is one of the major issues, she played a crucial role in building small, serviced shelters. Indeed, the problem came down to a 15-year low. Under the affordable housing project, she has envisioned to construct 36,000 new homes by 2025. She has been a champion of family-oriented policies, such as, raising the minimum wage to \$15/hour, establishing over 1,000 new child care seats, and boosting maternal health outcomes. She indeed deployed the first major city body-worn camera programme, wherein the police personnel get to record enforcement, investigate and public interface. It has facilitated police management to enforce public accountability and transparency. She

also has her official twitter handle through which latest updates about D.C. are shared with the netizens.

On Climate Change front, she has collaborated with the leaders representing the C40 cities in achieving the Paris Climate Agreement. Also, she took lead in the diplomatic and economic development missions to countries, such as, China, Cuba, Israel, Canada, El Salvador, and Ethiopia (Washington D.C. Mayor, 2022).

Check Your Progress 2

1) *Name at least three significant achievements contributed by Mamta Devi.*

9.8 AUSTRALIAN LOCAL GOVERNMENT WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION

In 1951, the Australian Local Government Women's Association (ALGWA) was instituted to support women's participation and involvement in local government as political and administrative executives. Although it is a network of women local government councillors and officials, it aims to resolve local governance issues in a non-partisan way. The membership of this association is open not only for the women leaders and administrators at the local government but also for all those who aspire to mentor and support women in local government. It also includes former Mayors, councillors etc. The association is headed by a President and four Vice-Presidents. The foremost aims of the association are to:

- a) Assist in improving women's knowledge and understanding of the functions of local government;
- b) Enable women's participation in local government;
- c) Inspire women to pursue local government as a career;
- d) Ensure women's rights and aspirations in local government; and
- e) Advise women candidates during local government elections.

The association ensures women local government stakeholders to take an assertive stand when their rights get violated. One of the pledges that they affirm include: "Where I observe disrespectful behaviour, I will call out". This segment of the pledge empowers women to stand up for their rights and take necessary action against the perpetrators. Ever since its inception the association has been mentoring and guiding potential women leaders that in 2018 more than one third of Australian councillors represented women. Indeed, this was for the first time in the history of Australia that number of women elected to councils significantly increased. To substantiate, when compared to the previous local government elections, year 2018 local government elections witnessed an increase in women councillors from 32.8 percent to 34.94 percent (ALGWA, 2018).

Following the brainstorming session to discuss the issues affecting women's participation in Australian local government, the National Framework for Women in Local Government was launched in 2001. To promote gender equity in local government, the Framework sought to bring forth a long-term vision for this cause. One of the broad commitments is to remove barriers to women's participation and engender safe, supportive workplace where diverse views are valued. By removing the barriers, it is expected to increase women's representation, both as elected representatives as well as administrative officials. Another objective is to engender inclusive Councils where diverse opinions about local governance issues would be ideated and considered for making decisions.

9.9 LET US SUM UP

From this Unit, you are able to understand that women's participation and representation is low across the world, irrespective of developing and developed countries. Despite the challenging context, these women leaders we have discussed in the Unit continue to create a just, fair, and equal world. Wherever they have been discriminated they tried to break the glass ceiling and has shown the pathway for co-creating a better world. To enable them to come out of their glass ceiling, we need more and more networks to boost women's representation at the local government level.

9.10 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Write your understanding on the aims of the Australian Local Government Women's Association.
- 2) Write an essay on comparative best practices that you have read in any article.

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