



**SOUTH ASIA PARTNERSHIP  
SOCIETE ASIATIQUE DES PARTENAIRES  
CANADA**

**Good news:  
Indian women have an increasing role  
governing at the grassroots!**

Sixty people converged at the “Women’s Empowerment in the Context of Local Government in India” workshop in New Delhi on October 20-21, 2003. South Asia Partnership Canada and the Delhi-based Institute of Social Sciences organized the workshop with the sponsorship of the Ottawa-based International Development Research Centre.

Participants came from non-government and community based organizations, funding agencies, research institutes and universities from across India. Several delegates from Canada, Germany, Nepal, and United States, also attended.

The aim of the workshop was to assess women’s participation in local government and their “empowerment” in the context of the Amendments as well as explore obstacles to their success, and discuss innovative strategies that could help advance them. The 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment Acts, 1992-93, reserved 33 per cent of seats at the local government level for women. As a result, an estimated five million women have entered local politics, directly or indirectly, in the last ten years.

The four panels, featuring sixteen speakers over two days, yielded a rich harvest of theory, research and practice in the field, and provocative discussion after the panel presentations in specially arranged smaller groups. The first evening featured an exchange with three vocal, elected, local women leaders from the state of Rajasthan speaking in Hindi. On the second evening, the ISS screened its award-winning feature film, *Swaraj* (The Little Republic), which tells the story of a spunky elected woman leader.

Dr. George Mathew, Director of ISS, inaugurated the workshop and said that there was a notable shift in the thinking on women’s empowerment from the welfare approach to the rights-based approach over the last 25 years. He based his presentation on the workshop’s background paper by Dr. Bidyut Mohanty, Head of Women’s Studies at ISS.

The concept of “proxy women” was discussed in particular by two panelists – Dr. Mary John from the Jawaharlal University, New Delhi and Stefanie Strulik, Lecturer and Research Fellow at the University of Bielefeld, Germany. Proxy women are defined as figurehead elected women representatives who are supposed to do the bidding of male members of the family rather than take their own decisions. They are seen as one of the key reasons for the less than satisfactory empowerment of women within the context of the Amendments.

Dr. John said that elected male representatives are also influenced by certain groups or individuals and are not as autonomous as they are made out to be. “Successful male politicians require connections and are indebted to leaders... One might say that ‘proxy’ women have rather too few such connections and those they have are overwhelmingly mediated by male family members.” She did not see “proxy” as a static or simple state of being but rather a condition subject to change as the woman gained political experience. This opinion was shared by Strulik who said that women had difficulties becoming actively involved in local government because of the way gender was constructed in society and also because politics itself was a highly gendered construct. She was critical of the “deficiency approach” that some NGOs and the government took towards elected women. This approach focuses on women’s shortcomings rather than their strengths. As an alternative to “proxy”, she suggested the use of gendered support systems.

The NGO and civil society panelists – Benita Sharma from UNIFEM, Medha Kotwal Lele from Alochana, a Pune-based women’s group and Dr. V.S. Badri from the Singamma Sreenivasan Foundation, Bangalore, discussed such support systems. Sharma talked about a successful UNIFEM project in Southern India which had trained women to do gender-based budgeting. Lele spoke about two networks which had been developed as support structures for elected women in the state of Maharashtra concluding that networks could play an important role in mobilizing, training, and capacity-building women. Dr. Badri also spoke about the benefits of women’s networks, gender budgeting and engaging women representatives in public policy making based on his NGO’s work experience in Southern India.

Dr. Thomas Isaac, a former MLA from the South Indian state of Kerala, who was intimately involved with the “People’s Plan Campaign,” a unique example of democratic planning in that state, spoke about the gender justice component of the process. Other valuable contributions were micro-studies on women’s participation in *panchayats* (the lowest tier of local government unit in India) in tribal areas, and in specific districts and states in India.

The Delhi-based NGO Ektra presented a study conducted in Northern India on how women understood governance, politics, government and the state. Professor John Dreze of the Delhi School of Economics spoke on the Right to Information legislation in India and its potential for empowering women in *panchayats*. Dr. Joy Deshmukh Ranadive spoke about the complex and at times contentious relationship between women’s economic and political empowerment through an exploration of the concept and practice of women’s micro-credit groups.

The workshop will add value to the rich discourse that has evolved on the issue of women’s empowerment. Once complete, the workshop report will be disseminated in South Asia, Canada, and globally, primarily through SAP Canada’s web site and by email. The workshop’s results will be presented in follow-up events that will be held by SAP Canada, in several Canadian cities in 2004. They will also feed into a South Asian conference on women and local government that will be held by SAP International in Colombo in July 2004. For more information contact project manager Veena Gokhale at South Asia Partnership Canada at [vgokhale@sapcanada.org](mailto:vgokhale@sapcanada.org) .