Every Woman Counts
Transforming women’s lives in India
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A woman works in the fields in Madhusudanpur in West Bengal, India.

In India, although 79 per cent of rural women are agricultural workers, only 9.3 per cent own land1.

1 Employment and Unemployment situation in India, National Sample Survey, 66th Round, 2009-10

Photos © UN Women / Anindit Roy-Chowdhury
Her Story

One half of the world’s population is female. Yet in some areas of the world, there is so little that belongs to them. They have limited access to literacy, sanitation and health and to opportunities be this at the level of the individual or the nation. The need, more than ever, is to develop a lasting vision that incorporates the well-being and empowerment of women. Supporting women to reach their true potential is important. To fulfill its universal goals on gender equality and empowerment of women worldwide, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women was established by UN Member States in July 2010. With strong advocacy by women’s rights activists, UN Women was created with the intention of improved support to Member States in achieving their goal of equal socio-economic participation of women.

UN Women works in India, Bhutan, Maldives and Sri Lanka supporting these UN Member States to achieve global standards for gender equality. By working with governments and civil society partners, UN Women helps design laws, policies, programmes and services needed to implement and achieve these standards.

UN Women advocates equal participation of women in all aspects of life, and focuses on five priority areas:

• Increasing women’s leadership and participation;
• Ending violence against women and girls;
• Engaging women in all aspects of peace and security processes;
• Enhancing women’s economic empowerment; and
• Making gender equality central to national development planning and budgeting.

The creation of UN Women came about as a part of the UN reform agenda, bringing together resources and mandates for a greater impact on the inclusion of women. It merges and builds on the important work of four previously distinct parts of the UN system, which focused exclusively on gender equality and women’s empowerment. This included UNIFEM that was active in South Asia from 1994 to 2010. The other three organisations were:

• Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW)
For the last 20 years, UN Women has strived in collaboration with local bodies to ensure the political participation of women in their societies. Whether it is advocating women’s reservation in Nepal’s Constituent Assembly or in Afghanistan’s Loya Jirga, UN Women supports important political changes in the region, by working on key international agreements such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

*From garnering political will to changing social attitudes, it is a combination of policy intervention and social restructuring that will help make societies more gender just.*

**Why women count in South Asia**

South Asia is home to around one fifth of the world’s population, making it both the most populous and densely populated geographical region in the world. In South Asia as a whole, women now live longer and are better educated. Equally important is the fact that some discriminatory laws have been discarded and national policies adapted to systematically pursue gender equality.

Despite these achievements, progress in South Asia has stalled on important issues. South Asia’s rankings for many gender gap indicators—health, adult literacy, economic participation—are often close to or lower than those in sub-Saharan Africa. In every country across South Asia, gender inequality remains a barrier to progress, justice and social stability, and deprives the region of a significant source of human potential. Inequality persists despite robust growth and progress, and cuts even deeper for poor or otherwise excluded groups.

**Widest Gender Gaps**

Whether it is access to health care and literacy, or holding positions of power and policy-making, South Asian women lag in vital areas of public life. According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2011, Sri Lanka ranked 31st, is the best place in South Asia for a woman. Other countries lag far behind: Bangladesh (69), India (113), Maldives (101), Nepal (126) and Pakistan (133).
Poor Access To Education And Health Care

Almost half the women in South Asia are illiterate which is more than any other region in the world.  

Unequal Economic Rights

85.1 per cent of women in South Asia are employed in vulnerable jobs in work that lacks ‘decent work’ conditions. Majority of women are farm workers, and they do more unpaid work...
than men in all countries of the region. Women’s work force participation is 35.7 per cent in South Asia\(^4\).

**Violence Without Recourse To Justice**

According to a survey conducted in three countries of South Asia (Bangladesh, India and Maldives), 49 per cent of respondents in Bangladesh and 35 per cent of respondents in India have reported to be victims of physical violence perpetrated by their intimate partners. 18 per cent of respondents in Bangladesh and 10 per cent of respondents in India have also been victims of sexual violence committed by their intimate partners.

Only two countries (Nepal and Sri Lanka) in South Asia criminalise marital rape, leaving millions of women in the rest of the region exposed to abuse at the hands of their partners\(^5\).

**Under-Participation In Politics, Justice And Government**

South Asia, however, lags far behind in terms of participation of women in governance. On an average, till mid 2008, there were only 15 per cent women parliamentarians in South Asia. The region also accounted for less than 5 per cent women police personnel and less than 10 per cent women judges\(^6\).

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\(^4\) *Power, Voices and Rights, A Turning Point for Gender Equality in Asia and the Pacific, Asia Pacific Human Development Report, UNDP, 2010*

\(^5\) *Progress of World’s Women: Access to Justice, UN Women, 2011-12*

\(^6\) *Progress of World’s Women: Access to Justice, UN Women, 2011-12*
The world’s largest democracy and the fourth largest economy is also home to high levels of poverty - approximately 32 per cent of the population lives below the poverty line\(^7\). Women are most affected due to patriarchal values that restrict their mobility and choices. 26.1 per cent of Indian women are employed\(^8\) and 65.46 per cent are literate\(^9\). Most women work in agriculture and the informal sector and have limited employment opportunities. In addition, girls and women in India face gender discrimination at every stage of their life, at times, starting even before they are born. Despite the success of women’s movements that have effectively advocated for legislative changes; laws, policies and programmes are not adequately gender-sensitive.

UN Women has geared its efforts to ensure that almost half of India’s population – its women – are able to lead a life free of violence and participate meaningfully in politics and the economy. Given a country as vast and diverse as India, UN Women effects change by working with the Government and strong women’s rights bodies at the level of policy-making.

UN Women’s Office based in New Delhi also provides technical expertise to Bhutan, Maldives and Sri Lanka.

\(^7\) India – New Global Poverty Estimates, World Bank, 2011  
\(^8\) Employment and Unemployment situation in India, National Sample Survey, 66\(^{th}\) Round, 2009-10  
\(^9\) Indian Census 2011
**Change Makers:** Women attending a Mahila Jagruk Manch or awareness network meeting in Tonk district, Rajasthan, India. Mahila Jagruk Manches (women’s awareness platforms) have involved elected women representatives from 675 gram panchayats in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka and Odisha so far. With almost 13,000 elected women representatives and over 47,000 women citizens, these Manches are proving to be a formidable resource.
Increasing Women’s Leadership And Participation

Remarkably in India, there are now more than a million women who have been elected to office at the grassroots level. They occupy more than 42 per cent of seats in local bodies, exceeding the 33 per cent reservation mark. While the numbers are encouraging, challenges persist because many are held back from performing their duties as several communities are yet to accept women in authoritative positions.

Research by UN Women and the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) in panchayats or village councils in Alwar (Rajasthan) and Mysore (Karnataka) indicates that while women have the desire to participate, they are handicapped by constraints like illiteracy and lack of support from family members. In Alwar, 35 per cent women said that they were interested in working for development while 50 per cent said that their family wanted them to contest. About 55 per cent women and 32 per cent men admitted that family members helped in panchayat work.

Despite the handicaps, women representatives have raised issues like domestic violence, alcoholism and school attendance to a greater extent in the panchayats.

**Fighting the odds:** The victory of Bharati Behera from Dhenkanal district of Odisha represents a triumph for all tribal women in the area. She was elected as a woman Sarpanch (village head) in February 2012. Despite stark opposition from the community and its men, she stood her ground with a 500 vote margin in the elections, due to the unanimous support of women from all castes and tribes.
Women sign on the attendance sheet for the special Gram Sabha or public meeting organised by UN Women and the district administration in Bagor village of Jhabua district of Madhya Pradesh. The gram sabha was attended by women who were outspoken in their demands for better water facilities, health services, bridges, as well as high schools in the village. During the two-hour meeting, most women demanded that hand pumps and ponds be constructed due to extreme water shortage in the area.
UN Women’s flagship programme with the Ministry of Panchayati Raj and the Royal Norwegian Embassy increases the participation of women in local governance. It is being implemented by State governments in 16 districts of five states: Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha and Rajasthan. Besides India, the other focus countries are Bhutan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan.

**Step-by-step: Three key strategies**

1. Train 67,000 elected women representatives about their roles and duties and demand public services. At the same time, UN Women helps to improve the quality of training provided to them by government officials.
2. Conduct research to better understand the needs and challenges faced by elected women representatives, and

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**Vandana dreams for her village:** Vandana Bahadur Maida is a 32-year-old Sarpanch from Khankhandvi Gram Panchayat in Jhabua district of Madhya Pradesh. Before she became a sarpanch, she had never come to a Gram Sabha.

“In the beginning, I was very reluctant to speak but slowly after training, I started to learn,” she says.

“Earlier, in the Gram Sabha meetings, only men came and questioned women’s role. Now women attend and ask for roads to be built in grazing areas.”

What did she learn at a training organized by UN Women and the district administration? “I learnt that women have equal status and power as men,” she says.

Any dreams for her village? “I want a big pond and hand-pumps to be built so people can benefit. I want a school that teaches till 12th standard – right now it is only till the 10th.” quips Vandana.
3. Develop a Centre for Excellence to ensure that trainers, officials and representatives have high quality resources at their disposal, and help build a peer network for elected women representatives in South Asia.

_Gram Sabhas_ (public village meetings) are meant for ordinary citizens to raise concerns and shape development work. They can help women participate in local planning and thereby make decisions that affect their lives. 1600 _Gram Sabha_ meetings are being held with the participation of relevant government departments to discuss critical local issues related to health, education, sanitation and water supply. 420 _Mahila Sabhas_ have been held since 2011 specially for women where they spoke freely about water shortages, employment opportunities for women, alcoholism and lack of health services. In the same period, 247 _gram sabhas_ and more than 1200 _ward sabhas_ helped people to raise critical issues. 800 women motivators were trained to support the government to hold these special _sabhas_.

During _Mahila Jagruk Manches_ or meetings of women networks, they are free to interact and discuss issues of importance with their elected women representatives.

_Three women – Three stories_

Whether it is Rajkala Devi from the Hingwahera _Gram Panchayat_ in Alwar, Rajasthan, who became the first woman _sarpanch_ of her village in 60 years, or the young and energetic Sunita Rajawat, _ward panch_ from Vanasthali _Gram Panchayat_ in Rajasthan’s Tonk District,
who went from being confined to the household to becoming a prolific public speaker, or Bharati Behera, the newly elected sarpanch from Odisha’s Dhenkanal district, these women, who are a part of UN Women’s programme, stand not merely for change but for development.

Rajkala Devi values her Mahila Jagruk Manch. During meetings, she is regularly updated about the needs of women in the community. Together they look for solutions to counter problems like alcoholism. With the support of her ward members, she addresses issues like women’s pension and education for the girl child.

Sunita Rajawat’s leadership is manifest in the bold steps she took to save women from domestic violence. Bina Kumari works with a community-based organisation Nirdesh and has acquired the confidence and expertise to manage as many as 22 self help groups, including helping them manage their finances. Manjulata Sahoo, the first woman sarpanch of Nadhara Gram Panchayat in Dhenkanal district of Odisha, stays committed to her work despite several hardships. She has endured brutal physical assault and blackmail but has courageously stood her ground, advocating and representing change in leadership. Manjulata has ensured pensions for the old and disabled in her village and free housing for the poor and widows.

Ending Violence Against Women And Girls

According to the latest data, crime against women is increasing. UN Women works to advocate for better policies for women and implements innovative projects to reduce violence against women. At the policy level, five Staying Alive reports, supported by UN Women and the UN Trust Fund on Ending Violence Against Women, provide information on the implementation of The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA) in India. Used by advocates across the country, these reports have helped to lobby for an
increase in budgetary allocations for the law. This is the only monitoring of an Act to end violence against women in India.

Another initiative is UN Women’s work with widows. An estimated 15,000 widows live on the streets of Vrindavan in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. A survey by the Guild of Service and UN Women revealed that widows are extremely poor. Although 70 per cent of them had heard of the destitute widow’s pension scheme, only a quarter of all widows had received pension. A three-year initiative aims at reducing stigma against widows in India, Nepal and Sri Lanka and support them to claim their rights and entitlements and be accounted for in the national data and research systems.

UN Women’s Safe Cities Global Programme aims to develop, test and disseminate models to prevent and reduce sexual violence against women and girls in public spaces. Launched in 2009, the New Delhi strategy is based on a survey which found that 66 per cent of women experienced sexual harassment between 2 to 5 times in the past year. In the absence of a support structure, women find it difficult to confront those who harass them. Poor infrastructure, unusable pavements, lack of public toilets, open usage of drugs and alcohol were major reasons for lack of safety. The key partners include Government of Delhi, Jagori and ICRW.

“I am not alone, I am not an object of pity either. I am an inspiration to many others who have been through rough weather.”

Not alone: Mannkunwar from Gulab Ji ka Guda in Rajasthan’s Chittorgarh district was widowed at ten years of age. Today she has a sense of purpose working with the Ekal Nari Shakti Sangathan, a UN Women partner, to help single women find strength and identity.
Taking cognizance of a similar survey conducted by Sakhi, Anweshi, Jagori and UN Women in Thiruvananthapuram and Kozhikode in 2011, a new provision punishing sexual crimes in public places has been incorporated in the Kerala Police Act, 2011. UN Women’s collaboration with the Positive Women’s Network (PWN+) from 2006 to 2011 was instrumental in helping women living with HIV to meet and support each other. This project also enabled PWN+ to provide outreach, counselling, health and income generating services to its members.

Decade long work on anti-trafficking since 2000 has helped to implement the national action plan on the elimination of trafficking in India. UN Women’s efforts also focused on prevention, protection and reintegration of trafficked victims.

**Enhancing Women’s Economic Empowerment**

Women represent 48.3 per cent of India’s population\(^\text{10}\) but only 26.1 per cent of employed persons\(^\text{11}\). 79 per cent of rural women work in agriculture but only 9 per cent own land\(^\text{12}\). They also do not earn equal wages as men.

Research helps to advocate for women’s rights to land and property. UN Women studies show that land ownership provides stability to women, enhances their decision-making and protects them from violence. Despite a fairly progressive Hindu Succession Act, women are forced to relinquish their share in inheritance of property to maintain family ties, and in fear of violence and abandonment.

UN Women organizes rural women farmers so that they can have better livelihoods and improved access to markets. By training NGOs, UN Women ensures that the implementation of the *Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana* (MKSP), a government programme, addresses the rights of women farmers.

**Making Gender Equality Central To National Development Planning And Budgeting**

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\(^{10}\) *Indian Census 2011*  
\(^{11}\) *Employment and Unemployment situation in India, National Sample Survey, 66th Round, 2009-10*  
\(^{12}\) *Employment and Unemployment situation in India, National Sample Survey, 66th Round, 2009-10*
**Equal pay for equal work:** The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is the world’s biggest employment programme that guarantees 100 days of paid employment per year to rural households. Due to lack of awareness, Dalit women are unaware of the Act. To remedy this, UN Women, with support from the Fund for Gender Equality, increased women’s right to employment under the Act in eight districts of Uttar Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh between 2009 and 2011. A recent evaluation showed a five-fold increase in the number of Dalit women who had access to work under MGNREGA in 102 villages. Innovative strategies like all women worksites and trained women supervisors have enhanced the participation and leadership of 14,000 women under this scheme. The programme has also increased women’s control over earnings and decision-making – 3,500 bank accounts have been created in the names of Dalit women.
Women as energy conservators: Sabinaben Sabirbhai Mansuri, a 42-year-old widow, explains the benefits of energy conservation. She was one of the 20 women energy conservators trained by SEWA and UN Women. These women visited over 1,700 households in Ahmedabad and Gandhinagar and convinced 200 families to replace their old electrical equipment with new energy-efficient Compact Fluorescent Lamps (CFLs). This helped poor families save energy and Rs. 200 per month.

The conservators now have the technical skill to use watt meters, calculators and mobile phones. This, and greater mobility, have enhanced their confidence levels.

Plans and budgets must become more amenable to women. This is especially true for India, where as per the Gender Budget Statement, produced by the Government of India (GoI), only 5.9 per cent (2012-12 BE) of the total union budget is specifically targeted at women.

UN Women has built partnerships with the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD), Planning Commission and women’s rights advocates to work on national planning and budgeting. Since the 9th Five Year Plan, UN Women has supported efforts of the Planning Commission to ensure that the Five Year Plans reflect women’s needs and priorities.

UN Women supported the Working Group of Feminist Economists (WGFE) to critique the approach paper to the 12th Five Year Plan. The WGFE questioned the current macroeconomic policy which advocates for an increase in GDP rate and the liberalisation of domestic markets to encourage private players, with the belief that benefits will trickle down. Leading economists argued that “inclusion” was an add-on to “growth” rather than an intrinsic part of the growth process. UN Women also supported some members of the WGFE to review flagship programmes and schemes of the Government of India from a gender lens. This body of work will be extremely critical in drawing attention to the fact that no sector or scheme is gender neutral and that all sectors and schemes stand to benefit from a gender scrutiny.
Making Budgets Count For Women

UN Women prioritizes initiatives that seek to create enabling policy frameworks, build skills and strengthen monitoring resulting in an increased attention to women. An independent evaluation shows that UN Women’s support to the MWCD has resulted in better skills within various line ministries as well as state governments. UN Women’s support has also helped to increase the participation of civil society organisations and women’s rights advocates in the national and state planning processes. Research and advocacy with relevant stakeholders has significantly improved the understanding of how budgets can be used to enhance the situation of women.

Recently, UN Women collaborated with the College of Agricultural Banking of the Reserve Bank of India to train around 100 bankers on how credit could be made more gender responsive. Sex disaggregated data allows for better planning to address gaps. UN Women, along with other UN agencies and the Registrar General of India, helps capture women’s work and other statistics in a more efficient manner. With UN Women’s technical support, 2.5 million enumerators of the 2011 Indian Census were trained to keep gender perspectives in mind during data collection.

Engaging Women In All Aspects Of Peace Processes

UN Women recognizes the role that women play in building peace, and sustaining the community. They need to be equal participants in establishing peace in society. UN Women trains UN peacekeepers to be gender sensitive. For South Asia, UN Women has formed an Expert Group to strengthen women’s leadership and create a global roster of women peace mediators.

Since 1996, UN Women has organized seven South Asia Regional Ministerial Conferences with governments to track progress made on the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA). In 2010, ministers, government officials and civil society representatives from eight countries adopted the Dhaka resolution on gender-based violence, economic security and women’s rights. Each country agreed to identify one national government programme to integrate gender issues.
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