

The background of the entire image shows three young women sitting on the floor in front of a blackboard. The woman on the left has long dark hair and is wearing a bright pink top. The woman in the middle has her hair in a ponytail and is wearing a red and white floral patterned top. The woman on the right is wearing a red top with gold embroidery. They are all smiling and looking towards each other, appearing to be in a friendly conversation.

LOCALIZING GENDER EQUALITY GOALS AT THE GRASSROOTS

Sawai Madhopur, Rajasthan

MAHILA SARPANCHES - ESTABLISHING A GENDER DEMOCRACY



Nestled in the heart of Northern India, Sawai Madhopur is a city brimming with history and teeming with natural beauty. Surrounded by the majestic Vindhya and Aravali Mountain ranges, the city's landscape is nothing short of breathtaking. Its crown jewel, the historic Ranthambore Fort, overlooks a lush forest reserve, making it not only a testament to a fascinating past but also a harbinger of a transformative present.

A unique initiative by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), its implementing partner CECOEDECON and the Directorate of Women Empowerment, Government of Rajasthan has been underway since 2018. The 'Girl Friendly Gram Panchayat' is a community-based intervention initiated by UNFPA as a pilot project in Sawai Madhopur district and is now being scaled up by Government of Rajasthan in all the districts of Rajasthan. The objective is the localization of SDG-5 i.e., gender equality from the grassroots upwards.

A Girl Friendly Gram Panchayat is grassroots governance that ensures the survival, health, protection, education, and dignity of girls while providing an enabling and supportive environment for their socio-economic development and their participation in decision-making.

An important facet under its overarching vision is instituting 'Mahila Sarpanches' (Women Heads of Villages) as the leaders and torchbearers of the community, with not just a seat at the table, but a voice at the table.



PURSUING WHAT SHE WANTED, NO MATTER THE ODDS!

At the age of thirty-two, Seema Devi serves as the Mahila Sarpanch of Baleria Gram Panchayat while also fulfilling her role as a mother to two young daughters, aged three and eight months. She secured her fourth consecutive year as Sarpanch, successfully running for office while expecting her first child. Under her leadership, the Gram Panchayat oversees nine villages and a total population of 3,000 residents.

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Every morning, when I come to work, I recognize that I am not just a role model for my daughters and the girls in our community but also a source of inspiration for my own personal journey – acknowledging where I began, what I've accomplished, and the untapped potential within me.

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Seema Devi was married at the age of just 20. She aspired to complete her education and make a meaningful contribution towards her community. Her husband, employed in daily agriculture, and her in-laws were highly supportive of her dreams and encouraged her to complete her college education. It was with this push and encouragement that Seema Devi was able to get her degree in Home Sciences.

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I am lucky that I had my family supporting me, without which none of this would be possible.

- said a grateful Seema about her family

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“ Being a wife, daughter-in-law and mother was not enough for me. There was a whole world of opportunities, and I wanted to explore what I could do with it. ”

- said Seema -

As a Mahila Sarpanch in the office every weekday from 11 am -3 pm, and as a mother to two small daughters, her parents-in-law has been extremely supportive, taking over the responsibility of childcare, while Seema Devi tends to her constituency.

The changes under her leadership are nothing short of inspiring.

Her proactiveness and ability to go above and beyond the call of duty have led to tangible changes within the Gram Panchayat. She has been instrumental in setting up playgrounds in two schools, planting trees along roads so that there is shade in the dry and arid weather, constructing bathrooms for women and girls in Anganwadi centers, and strengthening linkages of schemes with pension seekers, persons with disabilities and widows.

Since she herself was married young, she understands the social evil of child marriage and its negative after-effects. She is a strong voice in her community against this harmful practice and has even stopped two child marriages in her gram panchayat.

Her long-term goal is to contest the upcoming Gram Panchayat elections and build on her work.

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Even if I lose, it will not deter me. I would like to start a school for girls in my village and dedicate my life to being an educator.

- said Seema emphatically.

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SAFEGUARDING WOMEN: THE RESOLUTE MAHILA SARPANCH PREM DEVI MEENA

Forty-eight-year-old Prem Devi Meena, the Mahila Sarpanch of the Kodai Gram Panchayat was elected formally in pre-pandemic 2020 but has dedicated her life to social causes and service to women.

She was an Anganwadi worker before she started campaigning to be elected as a Mahila Sarpanch. Her first challenge was during the pandemic and lockdowns. She wasted no time...as the head of her gram panchayat, she mobilized all efforts to ensure that the migrants returning had food to eat, medicines for recovery and were well looked after.

Before she took on the charge of her gram panchayat, domestic violence especially fueled by alcoholism was a pressing issue in the community, with some cases reported and many not. Through her strong ties with the police forces, she has brought about significant change and tried to nip this social evil right at its root. Her approach is two-pronged – one- the immediate mobilization of police forces, and two - awareness generation drives. She also ensured the closure of the liquor shop situated right in the center of the village.

Very recently, she tackled a serious domestic issue wherein a father wanted to take his daughter out of school and sell her as forced labor to the highest bidder...a serious and unacceptable act of violence and commodification towards the girl child. The mother and brother terrified of the fathers' actions, restrained him, and immediately alerted Prem Devi.



“ I lost my husband about twenty years ago, but the social taboos surrounding widowhood never stopped me from my life's real mission. I have been continuously working and advocating for the rights of women and girls. ”

- said Prem Devi Meena -

They were so petrified of the father and what he would do to them once he was unrestrained that the family even considered consuming poison to end their lives, said Prem Devi who immediately intervened. Through intensive counseling and alerting the father about the long-term legal consequences, she was able to resolve the crisis.

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It was one of my toughest cases to date and took many days and hours of counselling to settle. I am happy to report that peace has been restored. I am proud of the mother and son who took it upon themselves to alert me and ensure that their daughter and sister did not meet the cruel fate of being sold. I would not stand for it.

- said Prem Devi Meena determinedly

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Since Prem Devi Meena has been elected, she has also developed and improved the infrastructure of her Gram Panchayat. The installation of school gates at the girls' school for increased security, roadworks, clean and functional public bathrooms for women, motor pumps, planting shady trees, and linking women with NREGA for employment are just some of her achievements.

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I can say with utmost certainty and confidence that any woman and girl at any point of the day, evening or night can walk safely through any of the villages of my Gram Panchayat. I have a sole purpose and mission to ensure a safe and thriving environment for and have been working to ensure it since the very first day of becoming a Mahila Sarpanch.

- said Prem Devi Meena triumphantly

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These days Prem Devi Meena is working towards her newfound goal of securing an MLA ticket to formally join the political landscape in the State.

**WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP INSPIRES, EDUCATES, AND TRANSFORMS.
CAN NO LONGER BE THE EXCEPTION, BUT THE NORM.**