

**Report**

## **Women Centric Convergence: An Approach towards Good Governance**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The challenge faced by women in being fully included in the development process can be understood through an acknowledgement of the interplay of various factors like caste, economic status, regional barriers, social norms perpetuating certain gender stereotypes etc. At the same time, exclusionary barriers can be addressed through concrete measures for empowering women and making them equal partners in the development process. One of the key instruments is to bring women from the community at the core of governance through a women centric convergence approach. Some well-crafted programs already tested and tried on ground such as Kudumbshree in Kerala, Stree-Shakti and Mission Convergence in Delhi have valuable lessons which can inform such practices. As part of my doctoral research study, some select programs were analyzed. Amongst these, salient features and impact of some innovative

practices under the National Mission of Empowerment of Women ( NMEW), Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD) were also drawn, as seen implemented on ground in the ‘Poorna Shakti Kendras’ set up in Pali, Rajasthan, the initiative for social inclusion of marginalized women as a thematic convergence model implemented by the organization Centre For Advocacy and Research ( CFAR), a digital convergence project implemented by the organization IT for Change in the state of Karnataka and the ‘Umang Kendra’ Model implemented in Bihar by Nidaan and PWSCR in collaboration with Panchayati Raj Institutions ( PRIs). This paper is based on insights drawn from such practices. At the outset it can be stated that the learnings from these practices bring out the imperative for adopting a comprehensive approach towards women’s empowerment and inclusion rather than perpetuating segmented and piecemeal efforts.

## CONTEXT

Since independence, numbers of programs have been launched at the national and state levels to counter poverty and exclusion, yet most are implemented in isolation and are not effective in achieving the larger goals. Many women centric schemes have been initiated over the different plan periods by different Ministries and other state bodies with the objective of transforming women’s lives for the better. These span various dimensions related to women’s lives like economic development, education and health. Different institutions have been built for facilitating implementation of interventions. However, as highlighted by the High-Level Committee on the Status of Women in India in its report submitted to the Government of India in 2015,<sup>1</sup> challenge lies in the design and implementation of schemes including areas such as resource allocations, the capacity of delivery mechanisms and institutions, outreach mechanisms, monitoring and evaluation systems etc. Despite the existence of many social protection measures, schemes, programs and laws, women from the poor and vulnerable section largely remain at the periphery.

The Human Development Report, 2013 brings out number of disparities faced by women in access to and control over resources. These disparities get reflected in important social and economic development indicators such as health, nutrition, literacy, educational attainments, skill levels, occupational status etc. Educational attainment levels amongst Dalits, Muslim, Adivasi, Elderly and differently abled women are very low. These groups also have high poverty levels and low nutrition status as

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<sup>1</sup>MWCD/ Govt. of India out of India appointed a 14-member High Level Committee, headed by Professor Pam Rajput, in Feb 2012 to make a comprehensive study on the status of women since 1989 and give recommendations on necessary policy actions based on the present needs of women. The report of this committee was submitted in 2015 to Government of India.

their access to healthcare services is low. They also experience high levels of violence both inside and outside their homes. They are also adversely affected by customary practices and personal laws (Govt. of India, 2015).

There is substantial evidence in existing literature that piece-meal approach as exhibited by many schemes does not help in 'real' empowerment. Women's participation and empowerment is obstructed due to lack of a comprehensive approach. Focus on loan component of women Self-help Groups without addressing other issues related to their quality of lives does not lead to effective participation of women in the development process. While focusing on economic aspects, the other structural constraints and barriers which women face in the society have to be addressed simultaneously. All interventions hence need a convergence approach for addressing the core gender concerns and the exclusionary barriers.

One of the critiques of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) has been that instead of putting women's empowerment and other goals related with eradication of extreme poverty, hunger, disease and progress in education, health, water and sanitation in separate compartments, gender inequalities can be addressed better by putting gender concerns across all other development goals.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Data from several sources have been analyzed as part of my doctoral study before arriving at conclusions. These sources include archival research, published and unpublished reports; individual interviews with leaders and practitioners involved in Mission Convergence from the inception stage and its subsequent development; group interviews with key NGO managers and field level implementers involved with the program implementation, and participant observation in the build up to, and subsequent stages of both Mission Convergence and the National Mission for Empowerment of Women. Methodology also included conduct of Focused Group Discussions (FGDs) in 11 Districts of Delhi with questionnaire related to ground level conditions affecting quality of life of people staying in slums, resettlement colonies of Delhi and their interface with the Convergence program mainly through impact of GRCs<sup>2</sup> in their lives. A comparative study of areas covered by GRCs and left out

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<sup>2</sup>Gender Resource Centres-Suvidha Kendras were set up under the Mission Convergence Programme in partnership with the civil society organizations (CSOs) to reach out to people and take government programmes to communities. GRC-SKs have been setup in areas having vulnerable families based on poverty mapping exercise with a mandate to cater to 15000-20000 households (approx. population of 100000). Besides assisting in availing entitlements, these centres work towards Social, Economic and Legal empowerment of women by interventions in the area of Legal Rights, Economic initiatives-skill building, microenterprises and entrepreneurship development and health.

areas of Delhi was commissioned in the wake of a national level conference supported by Ministry of ARPG and the UNDP Governance Unit in the year 2015-2016 through the National Forum for Action on Convergence. Face to face as also web-based interviews were administered to 27 respondents including key officials, and civil society organizations associated with the Mission Convergence program in the years 2017-2018. An analysis of the resultant data brings valuable insights on the subject of this article too.

### **Insights and Lessons Learnt**

Mission Convergence program of Delhi Government implemented through a Special Purpose Vehicle called *Samajik Suvidha Sangam* played a pioneering role in introducing many innovative solutions for women empowerment using a convergence approach. The real contribution of the program could be seen in its impact on inclusion of most vulnerable and marginalized women to social security entitlements, welfare schemes and other services of the government. Data indicates that the program gave women from the community a designated physical space/platform (in the name of Gender Resource Centre) where they could gather, share information, and seek information related to various aspects of their lives e.g. health and nutrition care, skills, non-formal education, and access to other government entitlements. From the FGDs and interviews it clearly emerges that this greatly enhanced the sense of confidence and self-expression amongst the disadvantaged women living in slums, JJ colonies, unauthorized colonies of Delhi. Women who participated in the program got positioned as positive instruments of change in the community, most of whom belonged to the socio and economically disadvantaged groups.

The program made a positive difference in the lives of a large cross-section of vulnerable women across Delhi with reference to the various indicators of women's empowerment. The beneficiary communities, especially women looked at this program as an instrument which gave them easy access to welfare oriented and capacity enhancement schemes, services and programs of the government. At the same time as pointed out by some of the respondents, given the range of issues involved in the process of women's empowerment, such programs needed to be sustained and nurtured for longer time with continuity of program managers and its field level partners for seeing a deeper impact.

Apart from the impact of Delhi Convergence program on inclusion of vulnerable women in development process the study also brought out some other key findings as under:

***Convergence as a defining element:*** This translated in seeing policy level convergence on critical themes such as that related to criteria and methodology of identification of target group, integration of some schemes, an integrated approach in service delivery with District Resource Centres and gender Resource Centres- Suvidha Kendras (DRC-GRC-SK) serving as single windows with focus on bringing women from the community at the centre of convergence efforts. The focus was on improving the status of poor and vulnerable groups of women through building cross-linkages between schemes, sectors, and departments and ensure better utilization of resources. The process entailed setting up definite mechanisms for convergence across departments, and programs; establishing contact points at different levels; aligning overlapping functions and functionaries; reconciliation of different guidelines; improving coordination between stakeholders; and adopting a targeted approach for improving efficiency in delivery of existing schemes and services meant for the vulnerable groups. Moreover, these measures combined a sustained effort towards bringing change in mindsets of governance whereby women could be seen at centre of convergence efforts vis a vis the traditional schematic approach.

One of the primary tools adopted was setting up platforms to facilitate integrated service deliveries and access to multiple services. These mechanisms manifest in different forms in the initiatives analyzed, such as Poorna Shakti Kendra at Pali, Rajasthan, the Single Window Centres managed by CBOs in the CFAR model, and women selected from local area as 'Naari ki Sakhi' in the 'Umang Kendra' model of Bihar. These mechanisms were found very effective in facilitating access of vulnerable women to various schemes and services they were entitled for.

Some of the other salient elements were to develop local capacity for regular assessment of needs and demands of targeted women. Starting point of this was identification of target group using multi-dimensional socio-economic indices. One of early starters in this was Kudumbashree program of Kerala. Use of information technology is also seen to be one of key elements of convergence efforts for improved governance of data systems. This led to better accountability of governance at different levels while keeping vulnerable women at the centre of response.

***Determining essential components for women empowerment:*** From the literature review and empirical findings it strongly emerges that women empowerment measures from government's perspective must dovetail activities engaging women directly as participants in development on one hand, and include other activities which relate to their larger ecosystem on the other hand. These measures entail introducing specific schemes for taking care of elderly, especially abled, support system for children's education, women friendly health care system, micro credit based economic support

system through nurturing women's collectives such as self-help groups, strengthening productivity and managerial capabilities amongst women through trainings, entrepreneurship development. Other vital elements include measures for awareness generation regarding all relevant government programs/schemes/services, and capacity building of women functionaries and members of women's collectives on issues like leadership, crisis management, stress management, life skills development, legal rights and entitlements. Once these aspects are stitched together recognizing their interconnectedness, it is reasonable to expect that women hitherto at the periphery develop the capacity to be at the core and exhibit an active participation in decision making process which affects their own lives.

It is seen that once women get actively involved in governance and management at the local level, the bottlenecks in access start getting addressed organically. As a case in point, it can be seen that women who have been part of community groups facilitated through the Kudumbashree were in a better position to access knowledge, skills and resources. In CFAR model, the Community Based Organisations (CBOs) representing sex workers and transgender also started getting access to such services which were hitherto out of their bounds. During the active phase of Mission Convergence, Delhi in 2008-2012, a significant jump in child enrolment to regular school was seen as GRCs provided support to out of school children or drop outs through tutorials, bridge courses, facilitation for completing document formalities etc. More women could avail medical services provided by the government. Women participation improved the utilization of Public Distribution System (PDS) besides ensuring access to the financial assistance schemes like monthly pensions for widows, elderly, handicapped etc. to those who were very vulnerable but failed to get included in the system. Under Mission Convergence program which drew several elements from another women-oriented program of Delhi Government called "Stree-Shakti", the community viewed the Gender Resource Centre as women's own spaces where they could gather, share information related to various aspects of their lives. This included a wide gamut of activities covering skill development, health and nutrition care, access to social protection and social safety nets through financial assistance schemes like widow pension, old age pension, legal aid and legal assistance through specialized counsellors etc. The basket of activities which could be easily availed by vulnerable women close to their doorsteps resulted in enhancing confidence and self-expression amongst the disadvantaged women living in slums, JJ colonies, unauthorized colonies of Delhi. The functionaries attached to the GRC reached out to weaker sections of women in the community. Through an elaborate network and spatial spread across Delhi GRC- Suvridha Kendras could serve as a critical convergence space with positioning of women as the positive agents of change in the community.

At the same time one of the critiques of the program is that over time from the direct women empowerment activities like creating awareness about the rights and entitlements and empowering them to access the same, a shift took place in the responsibility of these community structures for taking the onus of delivery for many schemes- which probably diluted the women empowerment component. According to this view the gender dimension could have been carried forward with greater strength, had the GRCs not been saddled with too many community-based programs and expectations from the government to take on every emerging need with numerical targets. However, in my analysis the gender focus is still seen to be strong since nearly all the direct interventions provided at the centre were meant for women. Status of women in the family also increases when she is seen to be a catalyst to link the family with schemes and services meant for others too.

Even though the program needed to focus more on nurturing institutions of poor women, yet given the challenges of urban space in building social capital, Mission Convergence demonstrated a good model of encompassing multiple services for economic, political and social empowerment of women from disadvantaged communities.

The Delhi convergence model also inspired the creation of State Resource Centre for Women (SRCW) in other states and Union territories as dedicated structures for facilitating convergence for women-oriented schemes and programs. For enhancing access & utilization of schemes/programs meant for women, Village Convergence and Facilitation Service (VCFS) scheme and the 'Mahila Shakti Kendra'<sup>3</sup> were also informed by this model through the National Mission for Empowerment of Women (NMEW), and later the 'Beti Bachao Beti Padhao Scheme', Ministry of WCD. One of very visible footprints of convergence focusing on vulnerable women is the chain of 'One Stop Centre for Women' which are nurtured by the SRCWs functionaries in the different states and UTs.

There are other concrete illustrations of positive impact of the women centric convergence approach towards improving socially marginalized women's access to their basic rights and entitlements. For instance, an analysis of initiative taken by CFAR in Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra reflects that the project created some important milestones in both policy and programmatic side for

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<sup>3</sup>The Mahila Shakti Kendras announced by the Ministry of WCD carries forward many features of the women centric convergence models and is envisaged to be embedded with the existing structures of Anganwadi centres.

inclusion of the most socially disadvantaged groups in the development process, namely sex workers and transgender community. As a pilot project, processes were designed sensitively to enable access to basic entitlements and services to such marginalized communities. The Single Window Centres set up under the project looked into issues being faced by the community and ushered a novel framework for sectoral and programmatic inclusion of sex workers and transgender. The project involved the marginalized groups in face to face dialogue with government machinery through consultations and other stakeholders' sessions. Its impact could be seen in 28 schemes across 4 states getting reformed, or restructured to include sex workers and transgender persons. Single Window also facilitated sex workers to get documents such as income and caste certificate, death certificate, age certificate, etc. The impact of Single Window for Sex Workers and Transgender in the seven districts of Anantapur, East Godavari, Belgaum, Bangalore, Salem, Madurai and Solapur set up by CFAR ranged from scheme education to aggregation of demand to submission of their application for schemes, as also follow up till it was sanctioned. Through this process, most marginal communities who are otherwise difficult to reach out became active participants in the process. This has emerged from the findings of an evaluation study undertaken by a third-party agency, the Amaltas (Amaltas, 2017).

In Pali, Rajasthan the PSK-Coordinators are seen to have brought awareness amongst rural women on various government schemes and its legal provisions besides helping them to fight against domestic violence and assert their other rights. A good field level inter-sectoral convergence is seen here in common messaging as observed by an evaluation study done by Hindustan Latex Family Planning Promotion Trust in 2013. This included a wide range of service providers at the village level such as medical doctors, ANM, ASHA, AWW, PRI representatives and schools' teachers.

In Delhi, one of the most vulnerable segments amongst the disadvantaged women were the homeless women. Under the Mission Convergence program, homeless women could also get linked with various services like state shelter, and avail health and counseling services. The program for providing safety net to the homeless became a model for other states as the Courts pronounced judgments for replication of the Delhi model of care and standards set after lot of deliberations between government and civil society groups on the subject. One of the most socially excluded groups could thus start getting connected to various government schemes and entitlements meant for the poor such as ration cards in the Below Poverty Line (BPL) which seemed to be impossible for the homeless community earlier. With this approach, women who would remain otherwise excluded and hidden were brought under the radar of governance where their claim to services was recognized and addressed.

What comes forth in the study of these select cases is a fundamental belief that women cannot be not be treated as a homogenous category. Across all these practices, targeting was designed in a manner in which the more vulnerable and socially marginalized would not get overlooked.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the various convergence models it strongly emerges that Citizens' participation in government schemes and programs and more specifically women's participation is a must to ensure that the expected outcomes are realized. Women centrality in the process emerges as underlying element in the mechanisms embedding convergence. Women's collectives need to be strengthened and embedded formally in the governance process. The architecture and institutional mechanism provided by the National Rural and Urban Livelihood Missions could be very useful for consolidating and leveraging on the potential of women's collectives.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, for any sustained effort towards ensuring inclusion of vulnerable women in development process a holistic framework must be adopted by policy makers and implementers at different levels. I also recommend the adoption of PPCP approach i.e. Public Private Community Partnership in letter and spirit where respective strengths can be pooled in.

Digital opportunity for convergence needs to be leveraged fully including opportunities from Adhaar and DBT. Simultaneously a system of dynamic flow of data and information at village and district level has to be built into the system. A digital record carrying information about the socio-economic status of women and schemes they are entitled for can be factored in this database. The MIS should include a simple dashboard which gives real time information on the status of implementation of all social sector schemes vis-à-vis women mapped in the database. There is also no denying the significance of effective communication about the government schemes/ programmes/ services meant for the vulnerable groups which must be factored through use of innovative ICT plan.

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<sup>4</sup>National Urban Livelihoods Mission (NULM) was launched by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation (MHUPA), Government of India in 24th September, 2013 by replacing the existing Swarna Jayanti Shahari Rozgar Yojana (SJSRY). The NULM focuses on organizing urban poor in their strong grassroots level institutions, creating opportunities for skill development leading to market-based employment and helping them to set up self-employment venture by ensuring easy access to credit. NRLM was launched by GOI in 2010. On **June 2011**, the NLRM was renamed as Aajeevika. National Rural Livelihoods Mission (Aajeevika) which aims to empower women's self-help groups across the country.

Another element recommend as a policy measure is adopting a Vulnerability scores/ grades for women which has a uniform acceptance in the manner akin to the poverty grades. These grades could then serve as barometers for measuring the impact of measures meant to reduce vulnerability through convergence of various schemes and programs on the women at the centre of such efforts. It would be very useful to embed a very active collaboration of academic and research institutions with policy and programmatic measures to address women's vulnerability and exclusion so that impact of various schemes and programs on ground can be assessed in a real time manner, allowing concurrent course corrections.

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