



Mahila Panchayat

Frequently Asked Questions



1. What do we understand by the name 'Panchayat', when and how the concept of Mahila panchayats were formed?

Traditionally, the Panchayats have cultural acceptance as arbitration bodies for e.g- Gram/Biradari and these Panchayats are predominantly constituted and governed by men. The patriarchal structure of traditional Panchayats denied access to women, restricted women's participation in Panchayats proceedings and imposed gender biased decisions.

In the early 80s the Women's Movement broke the culture of silence on domestic violence, a large number of women had been killed which came to be known as "dowry killings and bride burning". During all this period, the efforts of challenging stereotypes and creating space for women, it was increasingly realized that the deeply entrenched negative gender norms and the patriarchal structure of the families subjugate women and controls their body, mobility and overall well-being. In this context, Action India visualized a 'women, law and social change' program for collectivising and empowering women so that they collectively negotiate women's rightful space in the homes. Later, in 1994 the women collectives were structured into Mahila Panchayats which signifies a counsel '**by the women, for the women and with the women**' in the urban resettlement colonies in Delhi.

2. What was the need create Mahila Panchayats in Delhi?

Faced with decades of discrimination and subjugation caused by power inequity and unconducive social environment, the women survivors of domestic violence remained confused, worried and torn between conflicting thoughts. Her most important need was to have someone who believes in her narrative. Gradually, in late 90s when the momentum got intensified, more and more women spoke out and stepped out of the so called "security and protection of the family". However, as the formal support structures were largely patriarchal and not responsive to the needs of the women, the survivors required alternate safe spaces for dispute resolution. Over the period of more than two decades they have been recognized and accepted as gender just spaces for mediation and resolution of domestic violence issues.

3. How are the Mahila Panchayats structured?

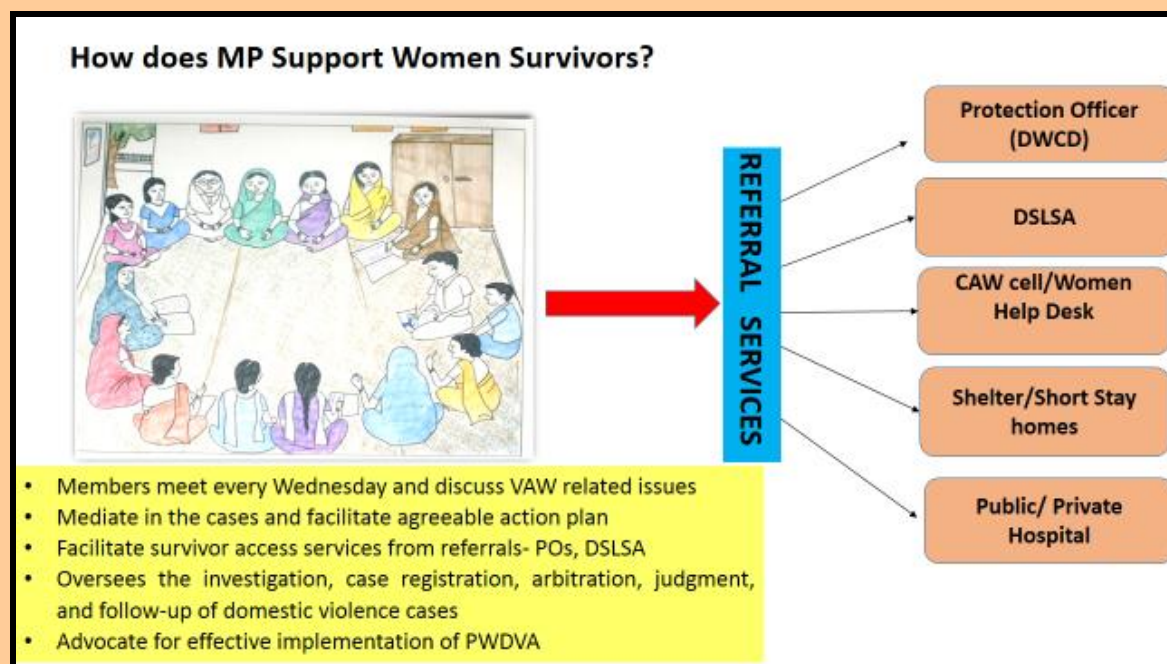
Each Mahila Panchayat has 20-25 women members, a typical case like other women collectives across India. The members usually have had association with gender based violence; as a survivor or as a relative of a survivor and in many cases women with leadership skills who openly speaks against injustice even in the face of risks for doing so. The members give their time voluntarily and abide by the feminist ideology of respecting women's diversity, dignity and individuality. Besides, recently each Mahila Panchayat has added members, thus moving on from 25 to 125. Each Mahila Panchayat is supported by a para-legal worker, who is trained into women's rights, laws pertaining to women, more specifically PWDVA 2005 and also the feminist principles of counselling.

4. How often does the Mahila Panchayats meet?

The Mahila Panchayat meetings/case hearings are held every Wednesday between 2:00 to 5:00 pm. At least 500 women from 20 Mahila panchayats come together for mediation and arbitration of cases of domestic violence against women. However, the Mahila Panchayat centers are open 6 days (Monday to Friday) a week and a para legal worker is placed in each center. The woman survivors therefore approach the center anytime during 10:00am to 5:00 pm. Besides, as the

members are based in the community, they respond to emergent situations (if any) as and when required (day and night).

5. How does the Mahila Panchayat support Women?



Women survivors approach Mahila Panchayat centre with a complaint of violence and abuse in her marital or natal home. Listening and counselling her without being judgemental is the principle. The mediation and local arbitration between the complainant and the respondent take place in a structured manner.

Process: The complainant files an application, on the bases of which Mahila panchayat members write letters summoning the respondents. When both sides are present the arbitration is initiated through formal registration of cases, facts/data collection and once both the parties reach to a mutual agreement, the resolution which is acceptable to both parties and witnesses in the presence of Mahila Panchayat members is formalized with a written and signed agreement. A copy of agreement is given to both and record maintained in the Panchayats office. If needed, the collectives also intervene proactively to stop violence in the neighbourhood and reach out to support the survivors.

6. Why do men come to Mahila Panchayat?

Mahila Panchayat maintains a gender just lens and believes in right to life with dignity for all. Thus it creates a space where both women and men are equally heard, and a non-discriminatory mediation leads to open sharing and reaching to a mutually agreeable resolution. Therefore, these local redressal mechanisms have a high acceptance even amongst the respondents as it tones down the fear factor usually associated with formal enforcement mechanisms.

7. Does Mahila Panchayat provide referral support? If Yes, how?

Yes, Mahila Panchayat facilitate referral linkages and provide hand holding support in accessing the services. Shattered by the episodes of violence, women are hardly in a state of mind to

initiate legal action. The Mahila Panchayats not only help them know about the legal recourse, they also explain the legal parlance. They facilitate the informed decision making process. Once the woman decides to file a legal complaint she is informed about the procedure, the documents required for filing the case and if needed support is provided in the collection of documents. The file is prepared with case history and she is introduced to the free legal aid. If required, the para legal worker and members accompany the woman to the court/hospital/shelter home/police station.

8. Is ensuring safety of woman survivors integral to the services provided by Mahila Panchayat? How is safety ensured?

Safety of a woman is subject to the experience of violence and the support system available to the survivors. Hence, certain safety parameters are drawn on case to case basis and regular follow-up is essentially taken up against case to case basis. The follow up happens either through physical visits, interaction with the neighbours or on phone (in case the woman herself prefers a phone call or she has moved out of Delhi). In cases where, repeated episodes of violence has occurred, the process of follow up continues at least up to 90 days (3 months) of initiation of service at Mahila Panchayat. In case, the survivor reports recurrence of violence the Mahila Panchayat members proactively intervene at family level to stop violence and also suggest legal recourse.

**Ending Violence against women and girls begins at home.
We want violence free homes**

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