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Picture a new road opening up, leading to exciting possibilities. For many women, this road symbolizes their ongoing quest for equality. The progress is real, yet the journey remains challenging.



In Fiji, the Fiji Roads Authority (FRA) is advancing inclusivity by involving women, vulnerable groups, and people with disabilities in road planning, aiming to create a more equitable environment for all.

When road projects overlook the needs of women, their daily lives can become significantly harder. In Fiji, men often travel more frequently and farther from their villages for work, while women face a range of challenges linked to inadequate infrastructure. Women in rural areas, for instance, often bear the brunt of household responsibilities and unpaid care work. They spend considerable time walking long distances for work, food, or firewood, which limits their opportunities for economic activities. In some villages, women carry goods on their backs due to a lack of transport options, and cultural norms may restrict their use of available transport modes, such as bicycles or even horseback.

Urban women also encounter obstacles, such as services being inconveniently located or concerns for their safety. By including women in the planning of road projects, the FRA addresses these issues directly. Women's involvement is crucial not only for their empowerment but also for effective planning. Improved infrastructure can enhance their access to healthcare, education, and markets, easing their transport burdens and allowing more time for economic and personal pursuits.

During a recent series of community consultations, I witnessed firsthand the challenges and progress of this inclusive approach. Our first visit took two hours to reach the venue. As I entered the village community hall, an announcement echoed: everyone was invited to share their feedback and discuss our new road project.

Despite notifying the village headman in advance and encouraging him to invite more women, the attendance was predominantly male. Only a few women attended, and many still felt hesitant to participate. During the consultation, only one woman spoke up, while others sat quietly or managed their children. In focused group discussions, the women gradually felt more comfortable and began to share their thoughts. We distributed project flyers in the local language to better resonate with women's interests and needs.



Project details are provided in local languages to ensure women understand.

The following day, we tried to make the consultation more convenient and inclusive for women by offering an accessible venue and scheduling the meeting at a time when they could be free from household duties. The turnout improved, but we still did not achieve the balanced representation we hoped for.

On the third day, we made further adjustments by offering tea and snacks to ease the burden of meal preparation at home. This approach led to better attendance, though we still did not reach full gender parity.



Empowering voices, women leading the conversation through focused group discussions.

By the fourth day, we collaborated with the village women's group to host a dedicated meeting, which proved very productive. The established women acted as intermediaries, encouraging broader participation. Addressing barriers such as lack of time, information, or confidence is crucial for ensuring women's voices are heard and valued during consultations.



Local women gather to discuss the road project's impact, ensuring their concerns are heard and addressed.

On the final day, we also sent out questionnaires to those unable to attend the consultation in person. It is imperative to regularly gather feedback from women about their experiences with community consultations and use this information to make continuous improvements.

This experience taught me that inclusivity requires flexibility and creativity. It's not a one-size-fits-all approach but rather a continuous process of adaptation and thoughtful adjustments to achieve gender equality in decision-making.

The journey toward inclusive infrastructure planning is ongoing, but each step taken toward incorporating women's voices is a step closer to a road that truly benefits everyone.

[Profile]



-Zafiya Shamim

Zafiya Shamim is a communications and gender coordinator at the Fiji Roads Authority, specializing in strategic communication, media relations, and digital content management.

How Day Care Centres are Giving Wings to Women

-Swapna Majumdar, India

After her daughter was born three years ago, 32-year-old Sarafna Begum, a seamstress in Bharuch district's Gumanpura village in the western state of Gujarat, was unable to work full time as she had to spend most of her time caring for her daughter. Her income plummeted and the family was reduced to a hand-to-mouth existence. Her neighbour, Anitaben, 25, a daily wage worker had no option to stop working after her son was born. She was forced to take her son Divyesh to work with her since there was no one at home to look after him. But here she always fretted about the safety of Divyesh and was not able to concentrate fully on her work. On days when her child was ill, Anitaben had to skip work and stay at home. Being a daily wage worker, she had to forego her wages on the days she missed work. Already living below the poverty line, she could ill afford this financial loss.

However, things started looking up not just for Sarafna and Anitaben but all the women in Jhagadia block of Bharuch district after day care centres (DCCs) were started in July 2023 by CHETNA, a civil society organization working to empower women. By providing day care facilities for their young ones, these DCCs are increasing women's agency by improving the earning capacity of young mothers. Women working in agricultural fields, self-employed or doing daily wage labour work, can now concentrate on their work without worrying about their children. It is an opportunity to make their dreams of becoming financially independent come true by seeking employment in factories and business units coming up close to their villages, something which they had never thought would be possible.

The 10 DCCs, open from 8 am to 5 pm, are enabling women to look for jobs with better pay and ensuring their children have a safe environment where their health, nutrition and early learning capacities are developed. Monthly meetings with the parents are held to share their child's progress. Local women trusted by the community have been trained by CHETNA to run these DCCs, thus giving them also a good source of income. The success of these DCCs can be gauged by the fact that from just a handful of children aged three to six years in July 2023 when the first DCC was opened, the number has risen to 159 children.

CHETNA opened two DCCs in Dadheda, a village comprising a large population of migrant workers from the eastern states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal. It realized that the chemical, plastic and glass industries that had come up around Dadheda would give young mothers the opportunity to earn more than they would as daily wage labour or working as seamstress from home. In Gujarat, the daily rate for agriculture labour is Indian Rupees (INR) 350. But women are unable to take full advantage as they miss work due to childcare. One of the biggest reasons for Indian women leaving the workforce is inadequate childcare services, a fact reiterated by a recent International Labour Organisation (ILO) global study. Published in November 2024, it found that in India, about 50% of women remained outside the labour force due to caregiving responsibilities.

However, winds of change are blowing in many villages of Gujarat, where CHETNA's day care centres are empowering women to return to the workforce and also boosting their self-confidence. With their

children secure and cared for in the DCCs, women are now able to go to work more regularly and are bringing home bigger pay packets. Anitaben, who increased her monthly earnings from an average of INR 5,000 to INR 15,000 by working in the factory, has become a source of inspiration for mothers who never worked before. (84 INR=1 USD)

The good news is that India's Economic Survey for 2023-2024 released in July this year, indicated an increase in female labour force participation rate in the country to 37% in 2022-2023 from 23.3% in 2017-18. This augurs well not just for India's economy but also for women's empowerment.



children at day care centre



monthly meeting with parents at daycare centre

[Profile]



-Swapna Majumdar

Swapna Majumdar is an award-winning journalist who focuses on research-based articles on development and gender.

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