

Facilitating Women in Endemic Poverty Regions to Access, Actualize and Sustain Provisions on Empowerment: A Baseline Study

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Mapping Women's current levels of awareness of their rights, their participation in decision-making processes and their attitude to patriarchy, the study provides quantitative and qualitative data of the situation on the ground.

BACKGROUND

PRADAN, in coalition with Jagori (a national-level NGO working for women's rights and empowerment), intends to mobilize women from 75,000 families from over 5,000 SHGs with support from the UN Women Fund for Gender Equality. The overall goal of the project is that 'by 2020, rural women from marginalized communities and their collectives, in nine districts in four States of Central India, will be able to raise their voice against violations and access their political and economic rights as mandated under the Central and State Government policies'. The programme seeks to work with a large number of poor rural women, including over two-thirds belonging to the Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Scheduled Castes (SCs), organized into Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and solidarity associations. The programme will focus on four states of India beset with endemic poverty to a) enhance and institutionalize the effective economic and political participation of women and b) impact the status of women in the family and the community, including their engagement in local government bodies. These are also the goals enshrined in the National Policy for the Empowerment of Women (NPEW) 2001, as also in the 11th Five Year Plan of the Government of India.

With 'empowerment' as the long-term goal, PRADAN proposes to use several strategies. The key among these are: mobilizing women, forming Self-Help Groups, training and building awareness, and providing technical assistance to support livelihood strategies. In the pilot districts, each woman will be supported to develop livelihood options thus enhancing her control over the economic resources; to participate in local governance systems effectively and build gender-sensitive accountability processes; to negotiate intra-family issues that hinder equal access to rights for women and girls, including addressing domestic violence, access rights and entitlements enshrined in various statutes (such as NPEW) and the Constitution.

Intensive engagement will happen with the primary SHGs and their secondary and tertiary associations, to help women enhance their efficacy, develop sustainable livelihoods and increase their well-being and participation. The key outcomes will include enhanced autonomy; respect and influence for women within the family; assured access of women to various neighbourhood, informal/formal local governance, and basic services/programmes run by the government—primary health, education, food security, employment guarantee, etc. The project will distill critical lessons from this grass-roots experience and bring these to bear on policy formulation at the state and national levels. The government partners, including the National Institute for Rural Development, will ensure support to this effort and engage to simplify and strengthen pro-women and pro-poor policies.

BASELINE STUDY: OBJECTIVES AND SCOPE

A baseline study was conducted to understand the current levels of awareness and participation by women. This study will be used in tracking the progress of the project, noting the challenges that may arise, and providing both quantitative and qualitative data through which to understand the situation at the start of the project.

The survey was conducted in all nine project districts—Betul, Hoshangabad, Dindori and Balaghat in Madhya Pradesh; Hazaribagh and Koderma in Jharkhand; Karanjia and

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Rayagada in Odisha; and Purulia in West Bengal. The sample was distributed so as to be spread over the area being covered, that is, remote and accessible locations, in proportion to the number of SHGs (and not the total population of the village).

Data was collected along following dimensions, as intended in the project:

- ♦ Women's political empowerment
- ♦ Women's economic empowerment
- ♦ Women's enhanced understanding of patriarchy and gender discrimination

METHODOLOGY

A stratified, random sample of villages was selected from each of the nine districts. All the women in one SHG in each selected village, or approximately 30–40 SHGs in each district (2–3 per cent of the 75,000 women to be covered by the project, making a total of 1,237 respondents in all), were given a questionnaire to answer. The sample included locations that are both remote and accessible; where PRADAN's presence has been for less than and more than five years, where there are single or multiple activities, where there was varied caste composition, etc. The baseline study was a collaborative effort, with the Institute of Social Studies Trust (ISST) being responsible for the design and analysis, and the PRADAN teams collecting data, which included, in addition to the survey, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), with a smaller sample of women, and interviews with a few duty bearers.

ANALYSIS

Socio-Demographic Profile of the Sample

Information on the socio-demographic characteristics of the sample (expected to be representative of the population that PRADAN works with, or the most marginalized groups in the most backward districts), establishes that 89 per cent of the respondents are married and six per cent are widowed; 83 per cent are under 45 years of age; 66 per cent are illiterate; 61 per cent of all the respondents live in nuclear households; and in terms of caste composition, 19 per cent of the sample belong to the Scheduled Caste (SC) category, 37 per cent to Scheduled Tribes (STs), 26 per cent to Other Backward Castes (OBC), one per cent to the Primitive Tribal Group (PTG) and 17 per cent to the General category. Of the households, 78 per cent have *kuccha* walls. Just a little less than 58 per cent of the households depend on hand pumps for potable water and 43 per cent use wells. Barely three per cent use

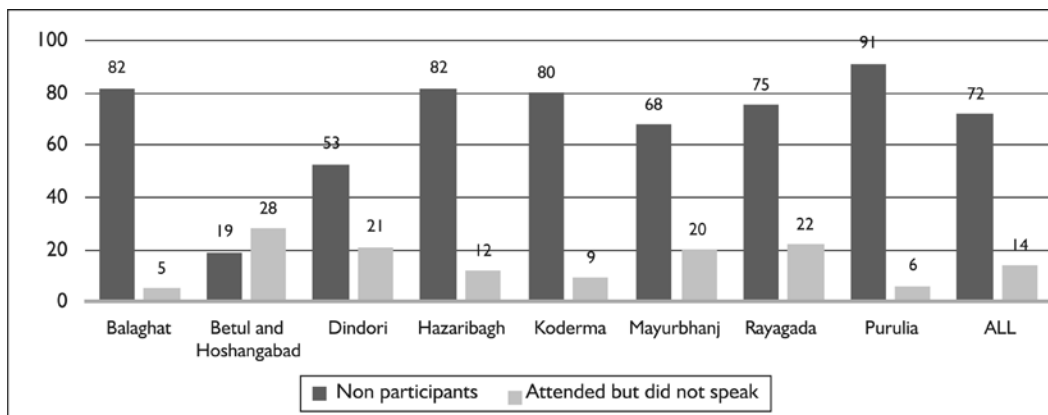
Intensive engagement will happen with the primary SHGs and their secondary and tertiary associations, to help women enhance their efficacy, develop sustainable livelihoods and increase their well-being and participation

taps. As a corollary, over 70 per cent of the households spend more than one hour in fetching water every day.

AWARENESS AND EXERCISE OF POLITICAL RIGHTS

Of the respondents, 86 per cent said that they had voted in the last election and over half said that they had voted for the candidate of their choice. However, 53 per cent of the women were not aware whether any meetings had been held, and 19 per cent of those who were aware, did not attend the *gram sabha*. Of the women surveyed, 72 per cent, thus, did not participate in the *gram sabha* whereas 14 per cent said that they attended the meetings but did not speak during the *sabha*. More worryingly, only 45 per cent of the respondents were of the opinion that women should attend the *gram sabha*. Women were largely unaware of the Constitutional provision for women to be members of *Panchayati Raj* Institutions (PRIs).

Figure 1: Percentage of Women Not Attending *Gram Sabhas* and of Women Attending but Not Speaking in *Gram Sabhas*



A one-third reservation for women in the *gram panchayats* has been in place since the early 1990s; Jharkhand, Odisha and Madhya Pradesh have enhanced the reservation to 50 per cent and West Bengal has taken the decision to do so after the next elections. However, 58 per cent of the women sampled were unaware that there are reservations for women. Only 9 per cent of the women reported being members of village committees; one-quarter of these said that they attend committee meetings whereas over 70 per cent of the respondents did not know if committees have been formed in their village.

Women were asked if they had experienced/witnessed injustice or were in any way dissatisfied with the government provisions. What were their reactions to these? Of the whole sample, well over 80 per cent did not take any action; less than 10 per cent tried to take some action but did not follow this through.

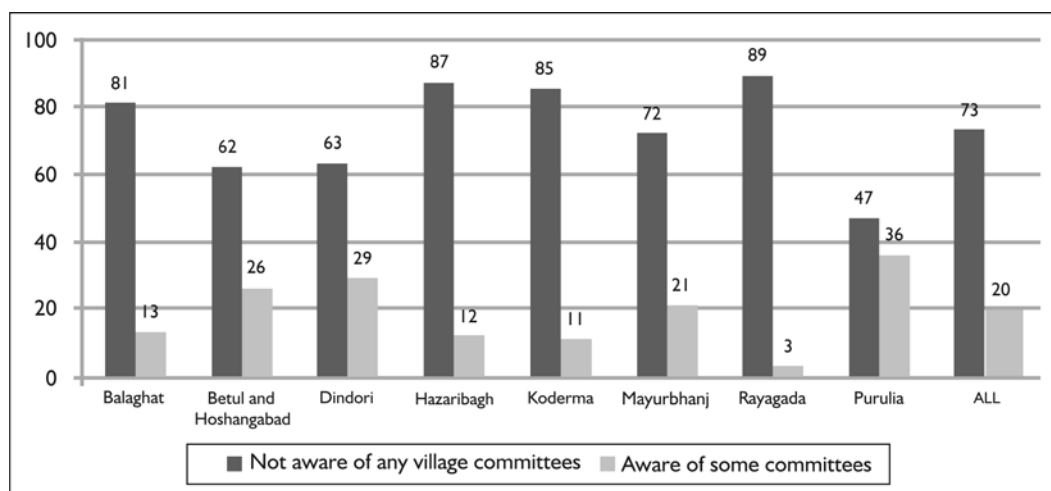
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These responses suggest that women are largely unaware of their political rights and, therefore, do not actively participate in village-level governance structures. Given the requirement that women be members of village committees, it is more than likely that many women may be shown as members without being aware of it themselves.

According to the women, some of the reasons for their absence in *gram sabha* meetings are that the meetings are male dominated, that their fathers-in-law are present, that such work does not concern them, that they do not know about it and that they are unable to find time from work.

Poor participation in village-level governance institutions is partly due to social norms limiting the women's mobility into public spaces. Perhaps, encouraging the SHGs to enter the arena, as groups, will address this issue. The one exception to this lack of participation

Figure 2: Percentage of Women Aware about Village Committees



is when it comes to voting. Because it is in the interest of all political parties to maximize support, knowledge of voting rights and its exercise amongst the villagers, including women, is high and stands in contrast to other forms of political participation.

The Focus Group Discussions with women SHG members indicate that today most boys and girls complete primary or middle school, after which many children drop out.

As many as 80 per cent of the households reported having children under the age of 14 years. However, only 61 per cent of the households reported children in school. There is no active assessment by the women of the school activities, quality of education, etc. (Under Right to

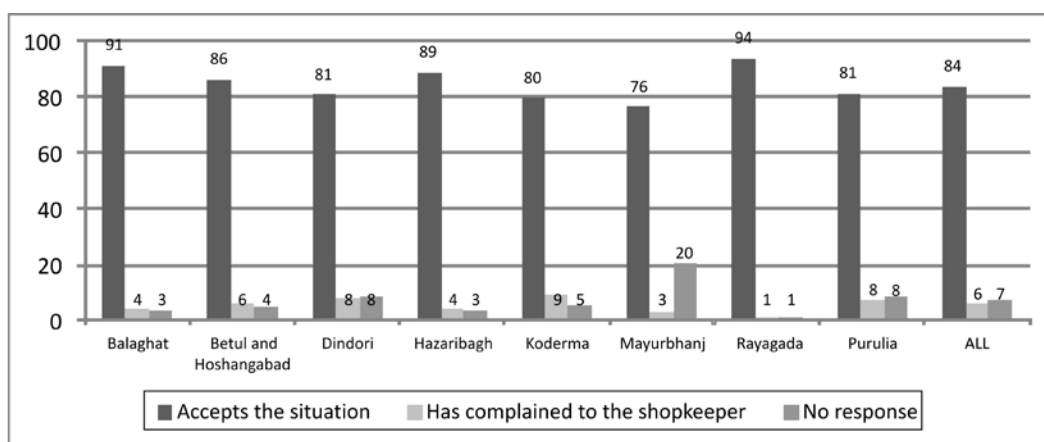
ACCESSING GOVERNMENT SCHEMES

Information was canvassed about the Public Distribution System (PDS), other social security schemes and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Programmes (NREGP). As many as 76 per cent of the households reported that they had a ration card. Although there was a high level of dissatisfaction with the PDS, less than 10 per cent voiced this dissatisfaction. Of all the respondents, 52 per cent said that they were unaware of or were not accessing any scheme (including pensions, scholarships) to which any member of the household may be entitled (Figure 3). In the sample districts of Madhya Pradesh and Odisha, one or more of these schemes seem to be reaching less than half of the households; this was even fewer in Jharkhand and West Bengal districts.

Education, an active involvement of parents/ mothers/community is sought, to ensure that all children enroll and fully participate). Among the women who did take action for the improvement of the quality of schooling, a third stated that nothing had changed despite their efforts, and eight per cent said that they did not even get a response. Only seven per cent shared having noticed an improvement in the quality of schooling because of their efforts.

The FGDs with women SHG members indicate that today most boys and girls complete primary or middle school, after which many children drop out. Women said they encourage their children to attend school, unlike their own parents who did not encourage them. However, they do not force their children to attend school.

Figure 3: Responses to Deficiencies in the PDS System (%)



Only 29 per cent people said that they use the *anganwadi* services although 66 per cent of the households reported that they had a pregnant woman or a child under six, who was eligible to use the *anganwadi*. More than half the women (mainly in Odisha) did not respond when asked about why they did not go to the *anganwadi*. The reasons given by those who did respond included lack of awareness about the services provided, poor functioning of *anganwadi* and the long distance from their homes. A little more than a third of the women said that they consult the *anganwadi* in case of an emergency. Of the women, who had tried to draw attention to the problems faced, 11 per cent said that nothing changed despite their efforts, and 5 per cent said that they did not get any response. However 2 per cent thought that *anganwadi* services had improved as a result.

Women contribute directly (as paid and unpaid workers) and indirectly (through their management of children and home maintenance work) to supporting the needs of the household.

all the areas covered by the programme, engaging both men and women. Animal husbandry, mainly goats, is primarily the responsibility of the women, as is the gathering of minor forest produce (mohline/mullein leaves, *mahua* fruit and flowers, and *tendu* leaves. Bamboo is important in Balaghat).

Both men and women engage in wage labour of various kinds, depending on availability—for example, in brick-making. Spinning tasar is another common activity. Migration, mainly of men, between Diwali and Holi, is prevalent.

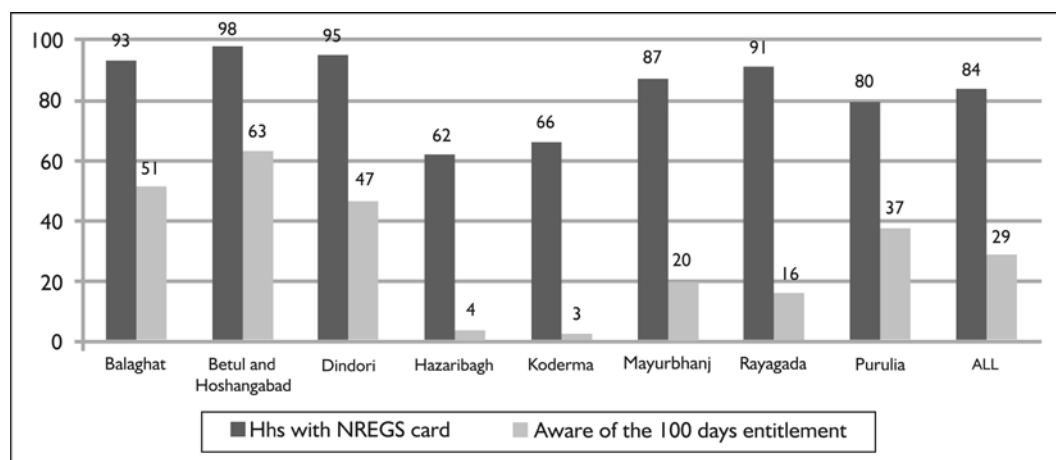
Women contribute directly (as paid and unpaid workers) and indirectly (through their management of children and home maintenance work) to supporting the needs of the household. The questions on economic empowerment have tried to assess how well women understand the importance of their work and the level of control they have over household expenditure.

ECONOMIC RIGHTS

Respondents derive their income from a variety of sources that further varies by season. Rain-fed agriculture is practised in

As many as 84 per cent of the households have an NREGS card but only 29 per cent are aware that there is an entitlement to 100

Figure 4: Households (HHs) with awareness of basic facts about NREGS (%)



days of work in the year. Among the districts sampled, the highest level of awareness is seen in the district of Madhya Pradesh, whereas the women in Odisha and Jharkhand were the least aware about the access to NREGA. Answers to a follow-up question suggest that only a small percentage (less than 15 per cent) are aware of some details of the programme and the gaps in implementation; again, this is higher in Madhya Pradesh. Women from the ST and SC groups seem to be more aware about their entitlement under the NREGS than women from the OBC groups. These higher levels of awareness about the NREGS entitlement among the women belonging to the ST and SC could also be because of a greater need for such employment.

The mobilization of women into SHGs is a first step in PRADAN's efforts to empower women; all the respondents are linked to SHGs. The data confirm that only a few women, less than a fifth, are not active members of SHGs. However, 35 per cent of the women from all areas see SHGs as a mechanism for meeting credit needs only.

Women were asked about the work they did, the time they spent on these activities, how important they thought their work was to the household economy, and so on. Based on the responses, just over half the respondents recognized the value of their paid/income earning work to the household. A significant percentage of the women are engaged in farming, which is followed by NREGS work, horticulture and the collection of forest produce. Next, the women were asked about their reproductive/home maintenance work, including fuel and water collection, care of the sick, of children and the elderly, and maintenance and repair of the house. More women (53 per cent) recognize the value of their care/reproductive work. It seems that the challenge is not the lack of awareness about its

value, but not knowing how to negotiate the sharing of the work burdens more equitably within the household. One should keep in mind here that these are subsistence economies and there may be an overlap between what is understood as 'productive' and 'reproductive' work. For example, looking after livestock is considered by some women as productive work and by others as reproductive work.

Most reported spending eight hours a day in economic activities, and almost 50 per cent reported 10–15 hours on reproductive/care work.

According to the survey data, almost 50 per cent of the women across districts spend 10–15 hours on reproductive work. In Madhya Pradesh, this percentage is much greater, with most women spending 10–15 hours doing reproductive work in the districts of Betul and Hoshangabad. Another significant proportion of women reported that they spend more than 15 hours on reproductive activities. When asked for their thoughts on how they thought the well-being of their family could change, only a few women suggested setting up a new economic activity and sharing the work between all members of the household. Less than half of the women think that reproductive responsibilities can be shared by men; however, this percentage is greater in Madhya Pradesh. The women, who think that men can share reproductive work, said that men could help with water collection, fuel collection, cleaning, cooking, etc.

The survey sought to find out about the assets owned by the household and whether the woman had any in her name. Did she take decisions about the sale or purchase of assets? Overall, 31 per cent of the women said that they had some assets (like livestock, jewellery) in their own name. However, 40 per cent said they had no control over this. As many as 35

per cent claimed that they had no assets in their own name and had no control over the household assets. Less than 10 per cent of the women said that they had no assets in their name, but did have some control. The extent to which women have a ownership of assets and control over it is shown in Figure 5.

Overall, 28 per cent of the women respondents said that they had no control over household expenditure. Only 7 per cent take all the decisions on their own (whereas one might expect that the latter group comprises possibly widows or women without any adult males in the household, crosstabs show that all these women are married). Widowed women or women whose husbands are mostly away, according to the survey data, are most able to take expenditure decisions on their own.

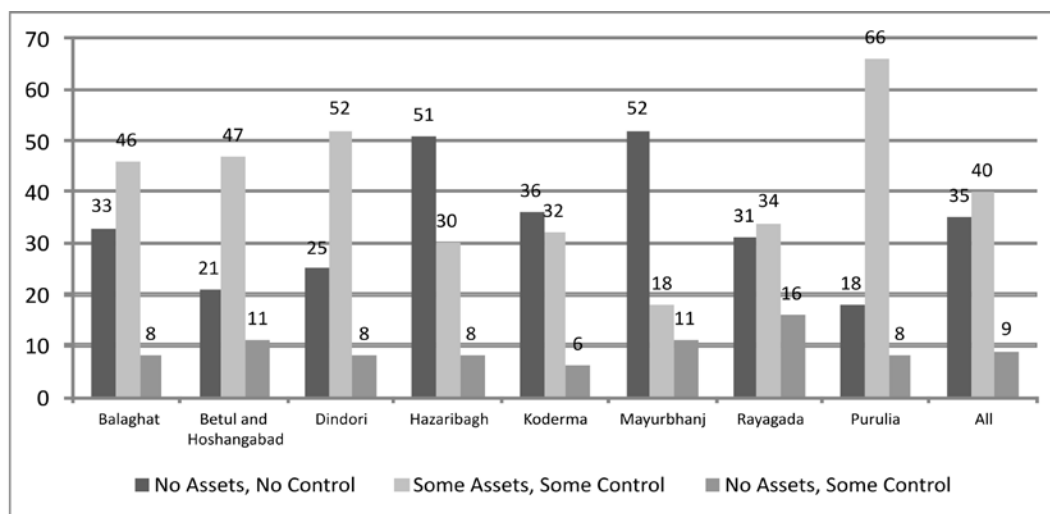
Over half the women expressed awareness of the importance of their productive and reproductive work to the household; however, this was not accompanied by an ability to question the gender division of and gender discrimination in labour, to influence expenditure decisions or have control over

household assets. However, some women do have certain concrete ideas on how their economic situation can change. A discussion with the women around these ideas could be a good action point when planning livelihood interventions.

SOCIAL AND LEGAL EMPOWERMENT

Social norms constraining women's mobility are found to be strongly present, with around 10 per cent of the women reporting that they cannot leave the house or farm; 40 per cent can move about within the village with permission; and 20 per cent can move about within the village without needing to take permission to do so. In the FGDs, women reported that their mobility in a group has gone up. Women were asked about their health over the last year, whether they had taken any treatment and who decided the nature of the treatment. As many as 70 per cent of the women reported that they had health problems in the last year and 61 per cent of them had sought treatment. Of these, 32 per cent of the respondents reported that the treatment was discontinued before full recovery. This could be for various

Figure 5: Women's Ownership and control of assets (%)



reasons—poverty, cost of treatment, difficulty in accessing medical care, inconvenient for self or family, social views on that particular problem, etc. Few women ignored ill-health completely, although there were some in this category and their constraints need to be identified. Half the women that did not seek any treatment during illness, when asked why not, did not respond. Women who did respond shared that this was because of their discomfort in talking about their illness,

the financial constraints and the poor health infrastructure and treatment quality.

Fifteen questions (as seen in Table 1) were posed to the women to assess their attitude to patriarchy. The answers suggest that women are willing to acknowledge that girls as well as boys should go to school and study, that the household chores be shared by men and women, that women have the right of control over their own earnings—

Table 1: Attitude to Patriarchy Questionnaire

No.	Questions	Percentage Saying Yes
1	Do you believe that women should not go for outside employment, as far as possible?	64
2	Do you think that it is shameful for a man to do work such as sweeping the floor or washing vessels?	61
3	Even under conditions of severe financial stress, do you think that there are some jobs that a woman may take up, but a man should not?	59
4	Do you believe that girls should be brought up to be submissive and modest (not answering back, obedient) but boys need not?	58
5	Do you think that women should always obey men in the family?	82
6	If you were to have only one child, would you rather have a son?	72
7	Do you think that a man loses respect in the community if his wife or daughter moves about freely outside the home?	69
8	Do you think that a woman or girl, who goes out alone after dark, is herself to be blamed if she gets molested?	67
9	Do you think that a girl or woman, who moves about freely outside the house, is most likely to be a characterless woman?	61
10	Do you think a man has the right to beat his wife, but a woman does not?	72
11	Do you think that a woman should hand over her earnings to her husband?	55
12	Do you think men should be paid more than women for the same type of work?	50
13	Do you think that a woman should eat only after her husband has eaten, if he has not gone out of the village?	77
14	Do you think that it is more important for boys to go to school than girls?	45
15	Do you think a menstruating woman should not be allowed to go into the kitchen?	73

even though meekness is seen as a virtue for girls. However, on more fundamental issues around power and sexuality, the respondents were reluctant to change the existing balance of power. Thus, a dominant majority agree that menstruating women are 'impure', men must eat first, have the right to demand obedience and the right to beat their wives. A significant proportion of women do think that a man doing household chores is shameful and this proportion is greater than that of women who do not consider it shameful in Dindori, Hazaribagh, Mayurbhanj, Rayagada and Purulia. In the opinion of more than half the women (excluding in Koderma and Mayurbhanj), even under conditions of financial stress, there are some jobs that men should not take up but women should. This percentage is exceptionally large in Hazaribagh and Rayagada.

A considerable number of women believe that girls need to be brought up to be submissive and modest, but the boys need not; and their proportion is even greater in the districts of Hazaribagh, Purulia, Mayurbhanj and Rayagada.

Whereas the above responses suggest that women's understanding of patriarchy and gender discrimination is low, it is also possible to see that, on some aspects, they are more resistant to change than on others.

The FGDs offer a mixed picture, in that, despite evidence of persisting gender biases, there is also an indication of change, including that which has been encouraged by SHG-level discussions.

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girl gets involved with a boy and this does not immediately lead to marriage, or would mean an 'undesirable' liaison. The vicious cycle of low age at marriage (reportedly 15–16 years on an average for girls), low social and economic status of women within marriage, habits of alcoholism, high incidence of violence but low reporting are reported from

all areas. For example, a police officer from the Koderma district said, "The incidence of crimes against women has increased in both blocks—from 15 to 29 cases—but complaints filed by women themselves have not increased. Most such cases are brought to the police not by the women, but by their male relatives." The latter point suggests that only where 'family honour' is involved is information given to the police.

The following responses suggest that little has changed in terms of standing up to violence—as was also observed in the survey responses above. "Yes, one can hear the quarrels and violence. People hesitate to intervene because when it is a quarrel between husband and wife, they may fight today and make up tomorrow, and both will turn against those who tried to intervene."; "Even if I am beaten badly, I would always prefer my husband's house"; "If I make a mistake, why should my husband not beat me?" Many women also said that they do not act against the violence they face for the benefit of their children. Women accept violence against themselves as a social norm/tradition instead of questioning it as an act of injustice or a violation of their rights.

There is some hope that the interventions started through the SHGs will help to change these views. One respondent suggests, "With the formation of SHGs, the *didis* are more aware of their rights and are more empowered...so a woman has started

retaliating when her husband beats her." But there is still a reluctance to intervene usually: "We cannot say anything to those who are not in the *mahila mandal*. They will scream at us and ask us not to interfere in their personal matters. But if a woman is in the *mahila mandal*, we can try to help her by raising our voice against the violence." Interestingly, when there is violence against some women, their sons started to protest.

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Violence against women may result in rape and other forms of sexual harassment, physical abuse and other atrocities by family members particularly drunk husbands, dowry demands, body and property offences, violence during pregnancy or in case of the birth of a girl child, violence in case there is a second wife and desertion by the spouse. This information was given by the Station Head Officers (SHOs) in the police department. Violence against women is a regular and common phenomenon. According to the police, the reasons for harassment are poverty, dissatisfaction with the woman's cooking, bigamy among tribals and the absence of elders in nuclear households, who could intervene. According to women, alcohol consumption is the main reason behind domestic violence against women. However, women only approach the police, and the *anganwadis* in some cases, when matters get out of hand and the atrocities become brutal. Most of the women think that smaller issues are not worth hurting the prestige of the family. There has been no rise or decline in the number of such complaints of injustice against women over the last two to three years. An SHO talked about the *janta darbars* that are organized, in which women and villagers can raise such issues of violence and receive

counselling. In such cases, the police, after registering the FIR, try to address smaller offences through mediation or a mutual compromise. The more serious cases are taken to court. The difficulties that the police face in dealing with these cases are that women file complaints only in extreme situations. Also, women constables or doctors do not agree to work in remote areas, which is a huge setback when working on cases of violence against women. A suggestion

from the police in dealing with such cases is that women should take these up such issues with the Paramarsh Kendra of the Gram Raksha Samiti. However, according to the women, taking such cases to the police or the *panchayat* does not help and is not worth the (high) risk of being sent back to their parents by the in-laws. The police warn the offender, take a bribe and let him go, which does not change the man's ways for more than a few months.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the baseline study, the following conclusions and recommendations may be noted:

1. On the profile of the respondents:
 - Make a greater effort to include older and single women, during the formation of the SHGs.
 - Rely less on the written media and more on the audio visual aids for the information campaigns, given the low literacy rates.

- Explore the need for child care, keeping in mind the caring responsibilities of nuclear households vs. extended family households.
 - Explore whether the quality of water is impacting the health of the people, since only three per cent of the respondents receive treated water through the pipeline.
 - Factor in the time spent on fetching water into any development planning.
 - Strengthen the availability and access to clean drinking water before any other livelihood intervention.
2. On political empowerment:
- Encourage women to see themselves as potential candidates for election because as voters, they appear to be active and aware.
 - Facilitate increased participation of women in village-level governance. Because poor participation is partly due to social norms limiting women's mobility in public spaces, encouraging SHGs to enter this arena as groups may be a way of addressing this.
 - Give women information about village committees and motivate them not to let their names be used without their active participation. PRADAN's SHGs could be used as a forum to educate the women about their rights.
 - Provide women with basic information on PRIs and motivate them to participate actively.
3. On accessing entitlements:
- Simple and practical steps can be taken by PRADAN and its partners, to ensure that women have the information about government schemes and programmes, and then motivate them to claim their rights. Overall, there appears to be very low outreach of these for many reasons. The baseline data analyzed at the district level will help to identify whether it is lack of required documentation, lack of knowledge, or lack of response from the authorities that is behind the weak utilization.
 - Make an effort to increase the usage of and improve the quality of health services. Given the high malnutrition, infant mortality rate (IMR) and maternal mortality rate (MMR), and that the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) is the single point access to health and nutrition services and information in most rural areas, it is important to focus on this aspect.
4. On economic empowerment:
- Focus on ensuring that women are aware of their entitlements under the NREGS, as well as covering the 'last mile' in access to the scheme as 84 per cent of the households do have a job card.
 - Expand the understanding of an SHG from being just a savings and credit organization to a women's group, dealing with a range of practical and strategic concerns.
 - Arrange for gender training/awareness building among women, to strengthen their ability to attempt a more equitable distribution of work burdens within the household.

- Help reduce some work burdens through sharing with others or creating new forms of support such as group-based childcare to give the women some relief from the long hours of work they are already engaged in, so that they can focus on the livelihood diversification efforts.
 - Understand whether prevalent social norms give women control over the assets they own or whether actual practice is different because almost a third of the women do own assets in their name.
 - Generate a discussion around how the women's economic situation can change their social standing. Over half the women expressed awareness of the importance of their productive and reproductive work to the household but this was not accompanied by an ability to question the gender division and gender discrimination in labour, and to influence the expenditure decisions or control over household assets. However, some women do have certain concrete ideas on how to bring about this change. This could be a good action point for the livelihood interventions planned.
5. On social empowerment:
- Encourage mobility in a group; this may be good strategy, given the constraints on individual mobility.
 - Make an effort to understand which health concerns are most likely to be overlooked, to encourage the prevention of illness and encourage groups to assist individual women in seeking help as needed
 - The FGDs offer a mixed picture, in that, despite evidence of persisting gender biases, there is also indication of change, including that which has been encouraged by SHG level discussions.
 - Enable the women to challenge patriarchy. Over a short period of three years, it may be more realistic to support role models, women leaders and group efforts, as part of a process, the end result of which is indeed a change away from patriarchal norms.

The article is an excerpt of the Baseline Study conducted by Institute of Social Studies Trust, New Delhi in 2011-12, which is part of the Gender and Equality project supported by UN Women