

The PRADAN-Jagori Collaboration for Gender Equality

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Going beyond organizing collectives for savings and credit, and generating livelihoods, two civil society organizations, with different areas of expertise and approaches of engaging with women, have committed, for the first time, to challenge the existing patriarchal structures and devising strategies for women's political, economic and social empowerment

Women's empowerment, as a distinct strategy for growth and development, was recognized by the Planning Commission, Government of India (GoI), for the first time in the Eighth Five Year Plan (1992–97). By the Tenth Five Year Plan (2002–07), targets had been set for a few key indicators of human development, which included reduction in the gender gap in the basic services of education, health and livelihoods. The Plan document called for a three-pronged strategy of social empowerment, economic empowerment and gender justice.

The aim was to create an enabling environment of positive economic and social policies for women and to eliminate discrimination against them. It was an attempt to advance gender equality goals (Annual Report, MWCD, 2008). The Eleventh and Twelfth Five Year Plans have focused on inclusive growth, with a commitment to gender equality. Over the last two decades, the planning process of the state, in reference to the issues of women, has changed from a 'welfare' approach to an 'empowerment' and a 'rights-based' approach.

Ground realities, however, reveal less than satisfactory achievements in almost all the important human development indicators, pointing out that the benefits of development have failed to reach half the population. India is ranked 101 of 136 countries, scoring 0.655 on a scale of 0 to 1 in the Global Gender Gap Index (with 0 denoting inequality and 1 denoting equality). The index tries to measure the 'relative' gaps between women and men across countries in four key areas—health, education, economics and politics (The Global Gender Gap Report, 2013).

Whereas the analyses of trends show some positive improvements, the situation is worrisome when the country-level data is disaggregated and there remain wide regional variations. A report on Gendering Human Development Indices, brought out by the Ministry of Women and Child Development

(MWCD), captures the wide disparity in gender equality across states and emphasizes the need for focused attention in certain parts of the country. Much remains to be done in the endemic poverty regions of central and eastern India (Gol, 2009).

Despite good intentions and vast inputs by civil society organizations (CSOs) and the state at the local level, there was need to rethink the way in which gender gaps in the social, economic and political realms could be addressed and to bring about transformative changes in people's lives. There was also need to understand the complexities involved in concepts such as poverty, empowerment and gender equality, and the overlap of these in working towards the envisioned change.

THE PRADAN-JAGORI PARTNERSHIP

When PRADAN began working in the rural, marginalized and poverty-stricken pockets of the country three decades back, the most immediate challenge it faced was that of providing food security to the people and poverty alleviation through livelihoods generation. This required the intense engagement of professionals at the field level, building on people's capacities and the introduction of appropriate technology to support their efforts. The depth and scale of PRADAN's engagement with communities in the remote and backward districts of the country, all of them diverse and with a

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differential nature of outreach and development, has indeed been a challenging task.

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PRADAN's work focused on analyzing and responding to economic challenges. Through intense engagement at the field level, a large number of women from disadvantaged socio-cultural backgrounds, belonging mostly to the Scheduled Tribes and Castes, have been associated with the collectives mobilized by PRADAN, initially through its Self Help Groups (SHGs).

A significant improvement in the community's economic status and general well-being has become evident over a course of time. Yet, although this engagement provided economic benefits, it did not bring about a change in the women's status or challenge the gender relations within the home or society.

PRADAN, therefore, made a crucial policy level shift in 2010, by undertaking a pilot programme called 'Facilitating Women in Endemic Poverty Regions of India to Access, Actualize and Sustain Provisions on Women Empowerment', with the support of the Fund for Gender Equality, UN Women, whose core values were rooted in the principles of Gender Equality and women's rights.

It was the beginning of a vital phase of transition. PRADAN reflected on its approach of engaging with women at the grass roots, to enhance their capacities and facilitate their access to rights and entitlements on a sustainable basis, and made a shift in its strategy. This shift saw the organization adopting a more conscientious, rights-based

and empowerment approach in strengthening the solidarity and building capacities of their teams and of the rural and tribal women.

A unique partnership with Jagori, a feminist training and resource centre working for and advocating issues of women's rights, was thus shaped, in which the two organizations combined efforts and began a process of transformative capacity building for the empowerment of women belonging to the marginalized sections from eight endemic poverty zones of the country. A noteworthy strength of this partnership was that for the first time two CSOs with different areas of expertise and approaches of engaging with women were committed to challenging the existing patriarchal structures and devising strategies for women's political, economic and social empowerment. Jagori's role as a technical partner in this process was envisioned as providing support to PRADAN in developing a conceptual framework, building staff capacities and tools for training communities on issues of women's rights and gender issues, and supporting women's leadership for policy advocacy.

The partnership rationale was based on building on the 'core competence' of each partner agency, to maximize impact in attaining tangible results at the grass-roots level as well as to influence policy. Jagori had worked with PRADAN earlier, as part of engendering their Human Resources Orientation for new staff. However, this was the first time that the two organizations were partnering at the programme implementation level.

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A THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Based on PRADAN's experience of developing sustainable livelihood for 'empowerment', it was jointly acknowledged that there was need to unpack the various complexities that are associated with understanding 'empowerment' and that there was no uni-dimensional defined

approach to it. Drawing from over 30 years of experience of Jagori in spreading feminist consciousness and also from the vast body of feminist literature available, empowerment was understood to be 'an ongoing and dynamic process, which enhances women's and any other marginalized and alienated group's abilities to change the structures and ideologies that keep them subordinate' (Acharya & Ghimire, 2005).

The focus here was on enhancing women's abilities and bringing about a change in the structures and ideologies of subordination. Empowerment, thus, was not a one-time input entity but a process of progressive change. Women's empowerment, however, needs greater understanding of unequal power relations and the interplay of systems of domination and subordination on women because the 'locus of disempowerment is the household itself' (Mishra & Tripathi, 2011).

In the existing patriarchal power structures, women are denied access to resources and opportunities and do not have the decision-making abilities necessary for their well-being and making strategic life choices, both within and outside the household. Bhasin & Dhar (1998) argue that empowerment is 'a process of making present power structures more inclusive' (Acharya & Ghimire, 2005).

It is important to understand the multi-dimensional nature of exclusion. "Exclusion can take many forms—social, economic, political, geographical, and cultural and the inter-play of these with one another" (Acharya & Ghimire, 2005). Women find themselves at the intersection of all these categories; women's empowerment, thus, has to be understood in terms of women's position in both the household and the society, which is affected by power relations defined by the larger socio-political structures. Srilatha Batliwala (2005) sums this up:

Jagori's engagement with the Mahila Samakhya programme in the 1990s has taught it that women's empowerment is to be understood as a socio-political process of challenging and transforming existing patriarchal structures, unequal power relations and discriminatory ideology to enhance women's abilities to have access and control over material and knowledge resources.

" ... 'women's empowerment' as a more political and transformatory idea for struggles that challenged not only patriarchy, but the mediating structures of class, race, ethnicity—and, in India, caste and religion—which determine the nature of women's position and condition in developing societies..... the term stressed that empowerment was a socio-political process, and that the critical operating concept within empowerment was power, and that empowerment was about shifts in political, social, and economic power between and across both individuals and social groups."

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over material and knowledge resources. It is a process that aims at transforming the social, political and economic power structures, and making them more inclusive.

Jagori's experience of working with women highlights that women are not passive victims of poverty and human rights violations. They are, rather, constantly engaged in a struggle to survive and gain control over the social, political and cultural resources, and lead a life of dignity. Building women's agency and their capacities to transform their realities, hence,

becomes a crucial focal point for sustainability and effectiveness of efforts aiming at women's empowerment.

The aim is to bring about a shift in women's perception so that they themselves are able to define choices and self-interest, and with that knowledge challenge the status quo. Women's agency, thus, is an important component of women's empowerment. Naila Kabeer (2001) has stressed upon the role of women's agency by conceptualizing three inter-related components of women's empowerment—"resources, which form the conditions under which choices are made; agency, which is at the heart of the process through which choices are made, and achievements, which are the outcomes of choices" (Mishra & Tripathi, 2011).

However, enhancing women's capacities for effective agency building is a complex process because women's agency is not delinked from the existing social relations of domination and subordination. 'It is rooted in social structural realities' (Raju, 2009). Hence, women's

agency has to be understood as a result of 'negotiation' between different social actors/structures and their realities. Jagori's work of training and capacity building over the last 30 years shows that there is a limit to which the ground realities can be altered unless the effort is aimed at bringing about a shift in the structures of domination and subordination. Women's empowerment is an on-going process of transforming the patriarchal structures of subordination by enabling women's capacities and building on their agency, having informed knowledge of the influence of various social, political and cultural systems of subordination and domination upon them. The process of empowerment is hence, "iterative, non-linear and perhaps never complete" (Murthy, 2001).

THE PROCESS OF CHANGE (APPROACH)

Rooted in the ideological belief of enabling women to bring about desired transformation in the existing power relations and to become 'change agents' in their own lives by challenging the status quo, PRADAN and Jagori began working together on the project. The project was built on PRADAN's existing strength of mobilizing women from marginalized and disadvantaged communities into SHGs and their secondary and tertiary associations.

However, besides working in the area of economic empowerment, the focus was now also on 'impacting the well-being' of these women and achieving that by following a 'rights-based' approach, by which women can

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make claims to their rights and entitlements. This programme was an important initiative for both PRADAN and Jagori because it was for the first time that an attempt was being made to work intensively on the issues of women's rights without diluting existing livelihood interventions. It was supposed in the concept note of the project that, if successful, this programme would demonstrate how the agenda of women's lives and livelihood security need not be dealt with as an 'either-or' but rather can be approached together. This is where the vast experience and expertise of the two implementing partners was

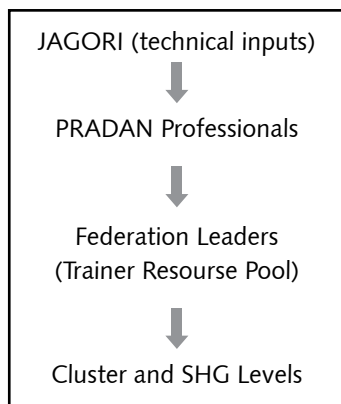
vital. This larger aim of the project was also complemented by the stated programme goal and the strategies adopted.

"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."

Some key outcomes of the programme envisaged in the project document were:

- ♦ Enhanced autonomy of women
- ♦ Enhanced respect and influence of women within the family and neighbourhood and informal/formal local governance bodies
- ♦ Assured access of women to various basic services/programmes run by the government

- ♦ Drawing of critical lessons from the grass-roots experience and bringing these to bear on policy formulation.



The programme was located in eight districts of four states—Balaghat, Dindori and Betul districts in Madhya Pradesh; Mayurbhanj and Rayagada districts in Odisha, Koderma and Hazaribagh districts in Jharkhand, and Purulia district in West Bengal. All the programme sites are areas with poor economic, social and gender indicators. One of the aims of the programme was to reach out to 75,000 women in these areas and help them raise their voice and make significant changes in their lives. Given their background, it was necessary to adopt some crucial strategies, which would mirror the programme's vision of change, without diluting the content in the process of reaching out. A cascade model of learning was adopted, to build a basic and common understanding of the core conceptual issues across tiers, providing a foundation upon which to build. The process of the capacity-building work began with providing training inputs to a cadre of PRADAN professionals, who form the front line in field areas and are directly involved in working with women at the grass roots. For this, a pool of trainers and gender experts with a diverse range of competencies and sectoral expertise that complement the programme requirements were brought together by Jagori. This team of experts, who have been part of

some of the most innovative experiments in the country, along with the Jagori team, was spread over the geographical location of the eight districts, to provide in-depth inputs for strengthening awareness and building understanding of gender issues of different PRADAN teams.

An extensive process of assessing gender needs, at the level of the PRADAN team and the field level, was conducted. Through this exercise, gender-related issues and discriminatory practices in the field areas, along with a general level of understanding of gender relations and power structures of PRADAN professionals, were identified, which informed the design of the programme. The needs to develop conceptual clarity of gender-related issues and to build in-depth understanding of patriarchy at all tiers of the programme were then identified.

The resource persons team of Jagori, along with trained PRADAN professionals, began capacity building exercises with women leaders from the communities in collectives. The application of principles of 'Feminist Training' methodology for capacity building was a conscious political choice made by Jagori, which was rooted in a conceptual framework, with the practice of mutuality, equality and collective action. The two teams of professionals relied upon Jagori's experience of working with Mahila Samakhya. Working with collectives is central to its philosophy because such learning has the potential to initiate formations that can become platforms for action and change.

"These training programmes have helped me understand things from a larger canvas and their inter-relations. It has helped me frame some questions of engagement"

-PRADAN professional during Second Advanced Workshop, New Delhi

Training programmes for capacity building were not merely a series of events but rather “a complex progression of several inter-connected and on-going collective learning processes” (Bhaiya & Menon-Sen, 1996). The capacity building of women took place around a wide variety of issues, ranging from livelihoods, politics and governance, accessing entitlements, patriarchy, gender discrimination and violence against women. These programmes were conducted with the aim of raising women's consciousness, initiating a process of identification and challenging the status quo. The intensive inputs provided at various tiers, especially to the women, resulted in the development of a Trainer Resource Pool that, in turn, takes training programmes to the women in the SHGs. This ensured that the capacity building efforts reach a large number of women.

PRADAN professionals in different field areas were also a part of these capacity building exercises; this triggered a simultaneous process of gender mainstreaming of the organization. Questioning and challenging conventional approaches, adopting a more inclusive and participatory style of working, and exploring new avenues of working started taking place. A shift was slowly unfolding at the level of awareness of the professionals, wherein incorporating a gender perspective in PRADAN's on-going work was gradually becoming a priority. This change was not limited to a change in the organizational mandate. Because of these activities, the

“There has been a shift in the Implementing Partner's approach from ‘working with women’ to ‘working with a gender perspective that informs all its programmes’, which is significant and critical to strengthening and sustaining the work initiated through this programme.”

- Mid-term Review Report,

professionals also went through a phase of self-reflection and personal change.

This was exemplified by the PRADAN teams being able to identify some common issues that have emerged and have been responded to, during the course of this programme. The issues, identified by the Mid Term Review Report included domestic violence, gender-

“It is heartwarming to see women come out of their houses and demand their rights against issues of violence – without any external support! Women are more conscious now.”

Team Leader, Hazaribagh team during a training exercise

based discriminatory practices (dowry, witch hunting and early child marriage), gender gap in education, low awareness about entitlements and participation in schemes, the inability to play decision-making roles within the household, in agriculture and livelihood-related activities and low participation in local governance. Various joint review and planning meetings between Jagori and PRADAN show a progressive change with regard to gender equality; this is becoming more noticeable with time.

These periodic review meetings were one of the main forums to identify the trends and emerging needs. Participatory training, it was very soon realized, is only one strategy for capacity building of women and professionals; it had to be accompanied by other mitigating strategies. Engagement with women, thus, began taking place at different levels by the resource persons of Jagori and PRADAN professionals.

In addition to the training programmes, consistent efforts were made to strengthen the solidarity of the women's collectives by

formulating various strategies of working for them. One such was to develop the capacities of women as para-legal workers, who could then take up issues related to Violence against Women (VAW) and other problems concerning discrimination against women in the community.

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The women were also provided with an interface with the government officials, through which they could advocate for their rights and entitlements. Presenting the women's manifesto to the representatives of the various political parties during the Madhya Pradesh Assembly elections by the members of the Betul-based Narmada Mahila Sangh and Dindori-based Rani Durgawati Mahila Sangh is an example of one such effort.

"The clarity and shift in approach of the PRADAN team can be seen... as a transformation from one of 'livelihood through micro-finance and increase in production for family well-being' to one of seeing 'women as knowledgeable, trained decision makers, establishing their identity as farmers and controlling and contributing to income as individuals and not only as family members'."

- Mid-term Review Report

Alongside, following a two-pronged approach, sensitization programmes and workshops were organized for government officials and PRI representatives, to make structures and institutions more responsive to the requirements of women. Exposure visits were organized for the community leaders, to give them an opportunity to learn from models or organizations, working outside of their areas. Encouragement and support was also provided to them by Jagori, to connect with other local

networks and develop a local support structure in different districts. In conjunction, Jagori continued the orientation of the programme staff and conducted basic and advanced capacity building exercises for them. Material and modules were developed and distributed extensively by Jagori, suiting the project requirement, which could be used by women in the field.

A regular feature of the programme was to conduct periodic meetings and exercises, to discuss and reiterate learning and progress, and to reflect and evolve new and suitable strategies of working. This process of intensive input provision of raising awareness, consciousness and capacity building for enhanced women's agency at various tiers continued over the programme period.

THE BEGINNING OF CHANGE

The results of these efforts are slowly being seen in all the programme areas. Instances of women, who either, individually or collectively, were fighting against various forms of inequality and were progressing towards reclaiming their right to live life with dignity, are being commonly quoted. As noted in the project Mid-term Review Report, this process of strengthening awareness and building consciousness around issues of gender equality has brought about "operational insight of designing and following up an activity in such a way that it leads to a logical end. Once the women understand that this new approach brings with it social and political power which only enhances the steps they have taken to improve their economic status through the agriculture and savings and credit activities carried out before, there shall be no looking back."

In Dindori, SHG members began questioning the Fair Price Shop agent about the quantity and rates of the rations they were entitled to and compelled him to give the right amount of grain at the right price. In Kesla, members of the Narmada

A common feature across all teams is that women are now choosing to speak and raising their voices collectively about both domestic and societal violence.

Mahila Sangh took up cases of VAW, including trafficking of girls in their district and villages. Nyaya Samitis in Hazaribagh and Koderma continue to provide women with formal and regular spaces to engage with cases of VAW through Nari Adalats.

The women in these districts have been trained on legal issues and take cases up to a higher appellate with the support of the PRADAN team. In Purulia and Balaghat, intensive training programmes on new farming technologies are being provided to women. Special efforts have been made in Balaghat to make women take control of all the agricultural operations as trained farmers, including with knowledge of preparing organic pesticides and fertilizers. Purulia attempted to break farming-related gender-based stereotypes and create an identity of women as farmers, as part of a farmer school initiative for women known as *Chasi Sathi* (Farmer Friend).

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PRADAN has undergone an organizational shift and has made significant changes in its approach. This change can be seen in its implementation strategies in field areas. Significant changes on the ground show that the approach has been effective and that women have begun the process of making changes in their lives by questioning the status quo and recognizing the existing unequal

relations. The programme is seen to be moving towards its envisioned goal of rural women's empowerment for reclaiming their rights and entitlements. In the course of this programme, however, some challenges did emerge such as:

- ♦ Reaching out to large numbers at the same pace across multiple sites, with varied contextual realities, programmatic focus and team strengths
- ♦ Ensuring quality in large outreach and the fear of dilution of content in working with the cascade model
- ♦ Sustaining efforts on the ground

Strategies adopted by Jagori over the programme period for development of feminist consciousness, independent thinking, challenging the status quo and broadening of arenas for action have started bearing result; the women in PRADAN's programmatic activities are seen as central to development. Women's empowerment is now seen as an effective way of ensuring women's participation in various processes of development. Significant strides have been made in building a progressive understanding of gender equality at the level of the organization and at the grass roots, through which a cadre of field-based leaders and trainers have emerged as conscious and independent activists, who continue to be rooted in their own milieu, from where their agendas emerge.

The main achievement of the pilot programme has been that PRADAN now views gender equality as one of the important pillars of development in its work and is committed to making policy level changes for the same. The PRADAN-Jagori coalition has been mutually rewarding and has been the great strength of this programme, adding a greater level of dynamism to it.