

Woman Service Providers to the Fore

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From being mere implementers and wage labourers in a traditionally patriarchal society, the women of Koderma have created an identity and space for themselves as farmers and service providers, capable of guiding and hand-holding other women farmers, leading to greater utilization of the land and other resources, and proving that together they can achieve self-sufficiency

BACK TO KODERMA

I joined PRADAN in 2007 as a Development Apprentice at its Koderma project. Six months later I was transferred to the Bokaro project where I worked for five years. My major engagement at Bokaro was to work with SHGs and help promote livelihoods through the Integrated Natural Resource Management (INRM) approach.

I moved back to Koderma in June 2013. I was surprised by the vibrancy of the SHG members and wondered what had brought about the change in the last five years. I remember that livelihoods had not been the foremost need of the community, especially in Chandwara and Jainagar blocks, and how as a team we had struggled to make it so.

I worked on planning the crop with the women for the *kharif* season; I found that, unlike earlier, they set themselves a huge target and the crop portfolio was very high. I was struck by the fact that all the Service Providers working in the Clusters were women. And because many of them were not educated, I wondered whether they would be able to deliver the kind of critical interventions that were needed to promote crops. As I began to engage with them, however, I found that they were not only competent to promote crops but had in many ways changed the way we looked at agriculture.

MOVING OUT OF AGRICULTURE

Koderma is situated in the northern part of Jharkhand and shares its border with Bihar. Unlike PRADAN's other locations in Jharkhand, Koderma has a non-tribal population, dominated by Bhumihars and Yadavs. The economy in Koderma is largely dependent upon agriculture. However, because of the skewed land distribution, the Scheduled Castes, SCs, (Rabidas and Bhuyia) come under the category of low marginal farmers or the landless. High indebtedness to the local *mahajans* is quite common because people borrow money for health, consumption and other exigencies. Owing to low productivity of the land, the villagers are mostly dependent upon wages; a large number of youth, therefore, migrates to other parts of the country to work as contractual labour. Access to the major growth centres of the country is easy because the region is well connected to Kolkata, Delhi and Mumbai by rail and road. Migration is especially common amongst the landless SC communities, who migrate en masse, due to the lack of employment opportunities in the local areas.

The prolonged absence of men from the village impacts households adversely. The land remains poorly cultivated and the family is deprived of food that could have been produced through farming. Often, the remittances from towns become irregular and this forces the family to take loans from the local moneylenders. The lack of food and indebtedness affect women both physically and emotionally.

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They bear the additional burden of supplementing the family income or borrowing from moneylenders to run the households. Because of the patriarchal norms of the society, women do not usually indulge in farming as an activity. Working as a daily wage labourer during the agriculture season is the only source of income for the women.

Women as Farm Labourers

PRADAN began its engagement in Koderma by promoting women SHGs. The area was so highly dependent upon moneylenders that the savings and credit activity within the

SHG picked up; the women discovered that the SHG is a source from which they could take loans for their consumption needs. They found that, in their SHGs, they could share their problems with other women as well as seek support for themselves, when required.

Although the women actively took part in SHG meetings, as well as Cluster and Federation programmes, their lack of involvement in livelihoods was an issue of concern for the team. The SHGs took loans from banks mainly for consumption needs, debt redemption, renovation of houses, health needs and for the marriages of their children. The women remained heavily dependent on their men folk to repay loans.

Loans for livelihood purposes were very few compared to other loans. SHG members believed that thinking about running the household economy was a man's domain whereas their role was to look after household chores. They did not feel confident taking decisions regarding agriculture interventions,

even when the men were not present. They worked as agricultural labourers in others' as well as their own fields whereas the men took all the decisions. The women thought that they had no technical understanding of farming; even those women, who were engaged in agricultural promotion through PRADAN's intervention, were completely dependent upon the Service Provider (SP) whose instructions they followed without understanding. Engaging in livelihoods, especially agriculture, did not appear to be the primary need of the community because its economy was mostly dependent on labour wages.

Identity of Women as Farmers

With the team's engagement in the Gender Equality Programme, (GEP) its stance towards livelihoods changed. Livelihoods are now seen from a gender perspective. The PRADAN team had been working with the women and had kept its focus on promoting livelihoods. Now, however, there has been a change in perspective and women are no longer viewed merely as implementers but as farmers and owners. The focus has shifted towards creating an identity and space for women. Before initiating any intervention with the women, the questions being asked were: Are women able to take decisions? Are they able to negotiate their position? Who has control over the income? Is the intervention reducing the drudgery of women? Is it giving dignity to the women? Do women have appropriate knowledge and skills? Are women feeling confident? What sort of issues would they face while engaged in this activity?

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the issues the women face in promoting livelihoods, especially farm-based livelihoods. The team also realized that the SPs who supported the team in the livelihood intervention were all men, and the women did not feel comfortable discussing their issues with them, also considering that it was socially inappropriate; their interactions, therefore, remained transactional rather than for seeking guidance and developing confidence.

The team developed a new strategy, in view of these problems, for intervening in livelihoods promotion, which would lead to women taking the initiative and becoming the decision-makers. The team's role would be more as a catalyst. The members of the team would not go into the village with a basket of livelihood options but would rather focus on the women members in the SHGs.

Women in Farm Extension

To reach out to them and to encourage a large number of SHG members to participate, a pool of skilled women Community Service Providers (CSPs) was created. These women CSPs were to act as trainers as well as mentors to other women in the village. The idea was well accepted in the Federation and the Clusters and some of the women leaders volunteered to tread into this hitherto male-dominated 'more technical field'.

The women CSPs were SHG members, who had already initiated agriculture in their own fields and were now willing to extend themselves. The team groomed the women CSPs, providing them not only with the necessary skills and knowledge but also the confidence that they could bring about change. The women were

largely uneducated/less educated; therefore, the training programmes were designed to be more experiential and the classroom lessons were designed using pictorial tools.

The PRADAN team ensured regular support and hand-holding to the women CSPs during their discourse in the field. The women CSPs also underwent gender training so that they would be able to look at the issues in a broader perspective and work towards a scenario, where women would be in control and in charge of their family, society and the larger environment affecting them and their livelihoods. This made a tremendous impact on women SHG members because they did not feel inhibited in asking for the support of women CSPs. They recognized the CSP as one among themselves and someone who would understand them. The CSPs became confident enough to deal with the farmers and support them to execute critical interventions in the field.

During the training programmes, the team impressed upon the CSPs that they should encourage SHG members to initiate action and to become an economic agent of their families so that their status within their family rises and they also feel more confident.

Sanju Devi as Agriculture CSP

Thirty-one year old, Sanju Devi became a widow when she was only 19 and a mother of two little girls. She prefers not to use the prefix *masomat* (which is a common nomenclature used for widows) with her name. She believes that she has an identity beyond that of a widow. Today, she works as an agriculture SP for her Cluster, is the accountant for five SHGs and is a resourceful trainer on gender issues.

Sanju Devi got married at the tender age of 13 to Manoj Ram, who worked as a contractor in Delhi. Her in-laws stay about 20 km from her own house in Charadih village. At the age of 17, when she was still an adolescent, Sanju Devi had her first girl child. Two years later, she had another girl child. Her in-laws were not happy and used to curse her all the time and would ill-treat her often. One day, she got the terrible news from some of the villagers that her husband had been murdered. She was left alone with her two children. Her miseries increased manifold.

It became difficult for her to stay at her in-laws' house. In fact, they wanted her to leave the house. Her brothers told her to come back home but she realized that if she were to leave her in-laws' house, she would not be able to claim the piece of land that had belonged to her husband and that now belonged to her daughters and would be useful in their upbringing. In spite of all the difficulties, she stayed back at her in-laws' house and fought for her share.

However, she was finally forced to leave the house and she returned to her parental village in Bhadki Damrai in 2002, where she joined the Durga Mahila Mandal, a PRADAN-promoted SHG. In the SHG, she began to regain her confidence and became an active member. After one year she was selected as a Cluster leader from her SHG and then as a Federation representative. She built a poultry shed under the Rashtriya Sam Vikas Yojna (RSVY) project and proved to be an efficient poultry producer. With her own income in hand, she began to hope and believe that she would be able to provide her daughters with a good life. With the Damodar Mahila Mandal Sangh at her side, she found the strength to fight against her in-laws and managed to get two rooms of her share in their house.

Setting an Example

This was the time that the team decided to groom women SPs for agriculture. Sanju Devi was unanimously selected by the Badki Dhamrai Cluster as their SP. She had proved herself to be a good farmer and used to readily extend her support to other members of her SHG.

She was trained by PRADAN professionals on the Package of Practices (POP) on various crops. She began motivating other SHG members to practise improved ways of agriculture. Initially, it was very difficult because nobody was interested in what she had to say; yet she never gave up hope. She started reading material provided to her in training programme before she went to SHG meetings or before providing trainings. The result of her hard work and interest can easily be seen. Initially, she started with just five farmers from her own SHG. She supported them in cultivating the kharif tomato and ensured that all the critical interventions in their fields were followed.

She took support from PRADAN professionals whenever she felt nervous and displayed an eagerness to learn at every step. The five farmers of the Durga Mahila Mandal reaped a huge produce for the first time and earned up to Rs 18,000 each. Her performance gave the team members hope and also strengthened the belief that women SPs could ensure critical interventions efficiently and could provide such services to a group of farmers competently.

Growing in confidence, Sanju Devi was always the first SP to try new crops for demonstration. That very year in the *rabi* season, Sanju Devi helped 16 farmers cultivate mustard using the SRI technique and the results were

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outstanding. Sanju Devi shared with the team that her belief is that the foremost thing is to build trust among the farmers and to win their hearts—and with time she has won the hearts of many farmers. Today, Sanju Devi supports the farmers of 18 SHGs and women increasingly look up to her for guidance. She is confident that farmers will begin to pay for her services in the future, and that she will be supporting all the farmers of Badki Dhamrai village. She hopes to make Badki Dhamrai an agriculturally affluent village.

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At present, 81 women SPs are based in various Clusters, to support the agriculture programme of the team. The CSPs are based at the Cluster so that they are easily accessible. Collectively, they now support approximately 6,000 women farmers in improved agriculture practices. The women CSPs help SHG members in their agriculture planning, deliberating on various topics such as why women should come forward to participate in agriculture, how women can act as economic agents for their family, what crop to choose, which crop would be suitable for the type of land a

member has, which variety of seeds to choose, how to treat the seeds, how the nurseries need to be prepared, how to transplant and what

inter-culture operations to use to get a good produce. The CSPs then regularly help the women in following the POPs.

MALTI DIDI'S JOURNEY AS A FARMER

Malti Didi is 45 years old. She lives in Puto village of Chandwara block. She has been a member of the Shiv Mahila Mandal SHG for the last 13 years. Her husband is a rajmistri and earns about Rs 150 to 300 on a per day basis. The work he does is not available regularly, especially not in the rainy season. They have some land where they grow paddy, maize, potato and some vegetables.

She has been living in Puto for 33 years, ever since her marriage. Earlier, when she was not in the SHG, her family did not have money to provide treatment for her newborn baby because of which the baby died. Her husband Jhari Pandit was an unskilled labourer at that time and his income was not enough to run a family. With time, the family started increasing. She now has four children and providing for their upbringing is challenging.

At one point, the family faced such a scarcity of cash that they had to sell a share of their land. But the scenario began to change after she joined the SHG. For the last two to three years, they have adopted some new techniques of agriculture, in addition to the traditional, with the help of the CSP, who visits her regularly in the field and supports her by giving her information about the good varieties of seeds, the amount of fertilizer to be used and the medicine required to prevent diseases. She also receives guidance on sowing paddy in a row, maintaining some space in between two seedlings, sowing hybrid seeds of potato, brinjal, the timely application of fertilizers and medicines, etc.

In addition to this, last year she adopted another new technique of growing creepers on trellis. She adopted three different crops namely bottle gourd, bitter gourd and boda (lentil) in the same trellis. She took her variety of crops to the daily market in Telaiya. Each month she went to the market about 10 times, with a gap of two to three days each. She cultivated a patch of five decimals and earned about Rs 8000.

She also shared that earlier she was dependent on her husband for money even for the household consumption. But for the last three months, she has not asked her husband for a single rupee for any reason—whether to buy the groceries needed to run the household, a sari for herself, for her married daughter, for the educational expenses of her children, repairing of the roof of their house, etc. Most importantly, the family eats different vegetables at every meal. Their food habits have, therefore, become better. Seeing the quality of the produce, her husband has begun helping her in the fields rather than doing his own work. Today, Malti Didi is confident about the technology she has adopted with the help of the CSP and has decided to increase the area under trellis next year.

To reduce the drudgery faced by women, new technologies are now being used such as creeper and indeterminate tomato cultivation through trellis and the use of the Cono-weeder.

Women Taking Charge of Agriculture

The CSPs attend all the SHG meetings that come under their working Cluster. They are present to help in the agriculture planning by each woman member. They discuss with the women the economics of the crops, the inputs required and then help them schedule the intervention. PRADAN professionals help the CSPs in a few SHGs so that they gain the confidence to carry on discussions in other SHGs. When a member expresses interest in trying out improved agriculture practices, the CSPs go to the fields of the members to demonstrate the treatment of the seeds and the raising of the nurseries. After that they conduct several follow-up visits and ensure that the members understand the technicalities behind the POPs and follow them properly. Every month, the CSPs meet thrice with the PRADAN professionals and share their experiences and problems. The aim is that the women understand the mechanics and the why and how of each step involved in promoting a crop.

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has also increased manifold and now the women feel confident in venturing into newer crops. They produce maize, paddy, pigeon pea, wheat, mustard and vegetables such as tomato, potato and cabbage. The women now say that they do not look to the men in their family to do farming, and their lands are producing better crops and yields. Initially, many women found it difficult to make the family agree to experiment with

new crops but their zeal as SHG members and as economic agents of their families has helped them to cross all the hurdles. After the success of the crop, their families feel confident about the technology they had adopted, and they are planning to increase the area of cultivation through trellis.

CHALLENGES

There are, of course, challenges. CSPs need to be more technically sound and the systems of their work need to be strengthened. However, this is not expected to take place in one day and needs the continuous engagement of the CSPs with the community. With the belief that women CSPs can be very resourceful, the team's efforts to train and groom such resources is continuing. There is hope that this will become a prototype in the coming years and the understanding will be that 'Women are proficient agents of Development'.

IMPACT

The impact of the CSP's work is now being recognized in the district as well. In 2011-12, the Deputy Commissioner of Koderma, Mr. Rajesh Sharma, after visiting PRADAN's operational area and after meeting the SHG members and the CSPs, insisted that the

PRADAN team design an agriculture project that would be relevant for the area and would cater to a large number of SHG members. The team, after discussions with the Federation members, proposed creeper cultivation in trellis with 2,453 SHG members. The project was sanctioned under the Integrated Action Plan (IAP), in which each member received a subsidy of Rs 1,500 for purchasing yarn, GI wire and fishing net for preparing the trellis. The cost of cultivation of the creepers in 10

decimals of land in trellis was Rs 12,150, of which Rs 1,500 was subsidy and Rs 10,650 was the contribution of the farmer.

The project was implemented successfully by the Federation with the help of the women CSPs. PRADAN provided training to the CSPs on the construction of trellis and on the POP of the creepers. The CSPs were called machhan wali didis, as the crops started appearing. The project was a huge success and members earned from Rs 6,000–18,000.