

# Women in Villages: Stories from the Field



Creating awareness, through collectivization, about prevailing patriarchal-hierarchical structures and about women normalizing beliefs that define their existence as 'inferior' and confine them to being mother, daughter, wife, or domestic labourer is a slow albeit rewarding journey

*"One is not born a woman but rather becomes a woman."* ~ Simone de Beauvoir

## INTRODUCTION

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**T**HE ABOVE QUOTE SUGGESTS that what we are today is not a result of our birth but what we become as we interact with the world around us. Social customs, beliefs and traditions, however, create a distinction between a boy and a girl, resulting in inequality and leading to the victimization of women.

Over time, women have come to be considered the 'inferior' gender, and social norms have led to their oppression. The patriarchal-hierarchical structures

that have emerged define a woman's existence only as a mother, a daughter, a wife, and a domestic labourer.

When working in one of the villages of Boarijore in Jharkhand, I observed the day-to-day lives of the people and noticed how oppressed women are in our society. For example, despite a woman being the head of her household after the demise of her husband, she struggles to have the same hold in the community that her husband had. Even if the woman is literate, society will still see her as a caretaker only. The multitude of tasks she performs through the day go unrecognized.

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A woman's work is never-ending. She cleans, cooks, takes care of the children, looks after the cows and the goats, collects firewood, works in the fields, sells vegetables in the *hatiya* (local market), collects dry leaves to cover the roof, builds a *chulha* (stove) with mud, mops the whole house with cow-dung during festivals and is responsible for keeping intact her social relations in the village!

Here are a few of the stories of some women of Boarijore, their experience of gender discrimination and how this discrimination manifests in their day-to-day lives.

In Rani Dih village of Boarijore block, Mai Bitti is one of the youngest wives of Ramlal Murmu, the carpenter. She met him three years ago in her village and says that she was attracted to him and eventually started loving the man. According to her, Ramlal approached her and asked for her hand in marriage. In the Santhali culture, women often join their husband's household before marriage; in today's parlance, we call this a live-in relationship. Although the Santhali culture prides itself in giving enough freedom for women to choose and decide who they wish to marry, in reality women are still oppressed.

Mai Bitti moved into her husband's house; upon arriving there, she met the two other wives of Ramlal. Although she had been unaware of their existence, she says she wasn't really shocked because she had grown up seeing men bring home more than one wife in her own village as well. She continued to live with her husband and his two other wives, her husband's two brothers and their wives and their children. Her husband had three children from his other wives. It was a family with 22 members, including her.

When narrating her story, Mai Bitti accepts that initially she was in love with her husband and, therefore, ignored the feeling of insecurity, which has now become stronger. She gave birth to a son last year; nevertheless, the feeling of insecurity persists. She has a sense of being betrayed; being the youngest, she is sometimes ignored by the other wives and left out of decision-making. She says that she has accepted the other wives of her husband and believes that they have also accepted her and they all try their very best to live in harmony. She says that she has accepted the fact that it is the duty of the woman to serve her husband and, like her, the other women

have accepted this reality and the inequalities in society.

She says philosophically, "My mother taught me to always be loyal to my husband; she never told me, however, that my husband, too, will be loyal to me."

For all its openness, this culture is still a part of the bigger patriarchal world.

Another story from the same village is that of Mary Kisku, who stayed with her parents and was a single mother. She was married to a man 18 years ago. Four years after their marriage, her husband was caught by the police on a murder charge and has been spending time in prison for the last 13 years. Her husband had gone out to drink with his friends; a fight ensued, resulting in him accidentally killing a man and being sentenced to life imprisonment. Her life, since then, has been a constant struggle; her in-laws stopped supporting her. Although her husband owns quite a large piece of land, she has no right over it at present. Her two sons have grown up now, but cannot find jobs and she finds it hard to make money every day. Moreover, even though she has a right over 25 per cent of the land in her maternal household, she is being denied it.

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She lives with her three brothers and their wives and they do not treat her well. She does most of the household chores, yet she is the last to eat at the end of the day. Initially, her brothers helped her sons to study; after a few years, however, they stopped providing money. Since then, she has been doing some agricultural labour every year to save some money. She waits for the day when her husband will be released from prison because she believes that a woman is nothing without her husband.

She says, “A husband is a woman’s prized jewel. If you lose him, you have no status in the society.”

The next story is Dhunia Murmu’s (name changed) from Dhankunda village. Her husband is from her own village, one that she grew up in. When she was in Standard IX, she was approached by a boy with a proposal of marriage. She says that, at first, she was very confused whether she should say yes or no because she was aware that her brothers would never agree to her marrying a man who belonged to an economically weaker background and had a lower title.

Although the Santhals claim there is no caste differentiation as in among the Hindus, they

do differentiate on the basis of the title or the clan to which one belongs. Because the boy persisted in wooing her, she eventually agreed to be with him and slowly fell in love with him. Initially, she hid this fact from her family and met her lover in secret. However, it wasn’t long before her brothers found out the truth.

She was beaten for making this mistake and they tried to arrange her marriage elsewhere in some far away village. She told her brothers that she did not want to revolt against them and would agree to whatever they dictated and would marry whoever they found fit for her. But her lover pursued her once again and threatened to kill himself if she did not marry him. This created a very difficult situation for her: No one was asking her what she wanted. Everybody was trying to make her do what they thought was good for her.

Her lover contacted her brothers and threatened that he would create a bad name for their sister if they didn’t marry her to him. In fear of loss of their reputation, they agreed to the marriage. She went home with her lover but her struggles weren’t over. She was not accepted by her mother-in-law and thus her story goes

on, even after seven years now. She lives in the same house as her mother-in-law whereas her husband works in the city and visits once a month. She has two children; she says her days go by in taking care of them and in doing household chores.

She says, “All seems normal now. They seem to have got used to my presence; my mother-in-law has built herself a different kitchen long back, saying she doesn’t what to eat with us. It is as it is. It works.”

The everyday life of women in the village is not very different from what I have seen in the cities. The context differs, the realities are the same. Women are expected to be the caretakers of their homes and they are the nurturers of the children. Even though mainstream education has taken over our minds, we haven’t learned to appreciate the existence of women as workers of hard labour.

At the mention of the word ‘farmer’, everybody imagines a man carrying a hoe or someone with a big moustache. If you mention a Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of a company, everybody imagines a man with a serious expression and sophisticated clothing. It is difficult for us to

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think of rural women as farmers or, in fact, any woman as a lead player or a worker of hard labour.

These patriarchal thoughts are now manifested in our habits and we unknowingly behave in a discriminatory manner. The worst part is that the women themselves have normalized such oppression and have accepted it as a part of their day-to-day life.

It has been about a year since I heard these women narrate their stories and very little has changed. Mai Bitti, the woman whose husband has multiple wives, has accepted her fate and is trying to settle down with her everyday life. She cooks food along with her husband's other wives, goes and works in the fields and also takes care of her son. She says she doesn't feel lonely when her husband leaves home for the city for work because there are other women in the house to give her company. So it seems to me that she is seeing the bright side of her life.

Mary Kisku, whose husband went to jail, is waiting for his release; in the meantime, she is trying to work as agricultural labourer in the fields in order to earn money for her son's education after matriculation. She walks 5 km from her village to the nearby coal

mine and carries back coal on her head. She uses some of it at home for cooking and sells as much as she can in the village to earn some more money.

Dhunia Murmu, however, seems to have turned her life around for the better. She has joined the collective in her village and also leads it. Because she is educated, she is able to help the other women in her collective with their personal issues. She is now the President of the village organization and her brothers have started respecting her. She visits her mother with her head held high today.

My experiences and my journey with these women have also strengthened my own fight against the discrimination of women in our society. My engagement in the field in the past year of my apprenticeship has strengthened my belief that women are the most oppressed section in our society and we need to work towards triggering a change in this patriarchal system.

In Boarjore block, I have seen the harsh reality of the oppression of women. I have also got, however, an exposure and insight into ways to fight this oppression. I was introduced to the idea of collectives and have begun

to understand what motivates women to form collectives and the factors that bind them.

I understand that the reasons for women coming together are varied although primarily to save money and for economic security, for the greater good or development of their village and for leisure. I also noticed that very few women would ever say that this space was for them. Their main thought was that the money would help their household and that, in turn, would help them. These selfless answers made me aware of the extent to which the oppression has been normalized by women.

My next step, therefore, was to help these women recognise that they are being oppressed and to motivate them to slowly start questioning these discriminatory factors. I started engaging with some of the newly-formed SHGs by initially trying to build mutual support through games and activities, and then holding discussions on the various problems they faced in their village. It was becoming clear that the women did not even question some of the oppression such as not being allowed to leave their houses, not being allowed to ask how their husbands spend money, working and toiling all

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day thinking this is what they exist for, not being allowed to study and being groomed since childhood only for the ultimate purpose of getting married.

Soon, by showing thought-provoking photographs or documentaries and conducting discussions on gender issues, the women have been stimulated to start questioning some of the discriminatory norms they have followed blindly thus far. They have begun to question why they cannot move out of their households or why they are not free to spend money. When the women began to notice the restrictions placed upon them by patriarchy, I too was motivated to keep working on gender issues and engaging with these women further.

Once, in order to help a group realize its collective strength I

conducted a visioning exercise called *Sapno ka Ped* (The Tree of Dreams). We discussed what was the most important ingredient, or the root, we needed to have a strong and productive tree. One of the women said, “It is first important that I, as a woman, should feel strong. It is I who should learn to speak for myself and then only can my strength become a root for my collective.”

I felt overwhelmed that day. Working with these women has been a learning journey about the importance of both—the lives of individual women and their coming together as a collective. I have been a part of many interesting conversations such as the issue of early marriage, how women have felt forced at many junctures of their lives, domestic violence, why only women should be the nurturers or caretakers of children and households, and

why women are oppressed. These discussions will stay with me always.

The stories shared in this article reiterate the fact that women are silenced and discriminated against in many ways. Gender discrimination stops women from asking for their rights; for years, women have been made to believe that the oppression against them is because they are weaker. As women, we have to realize our collective strength. Hence it seems important that, we, who are discriminated against, start realizing our strength, refuse to remain silent and question the oppression and discrimination so that we help minimize it and work towards creating an equal world.

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