



COMPILATION OF STRATEGIES:
**Advancing women's leadership
in agrifood systems in India**

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CGIAR
GENDER EQUALITY AND
INCLUSION



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Contents

Introduction

p. 4



1. Training women tea workers in Assam through 'Women Rising' (ETP)

p. 6



2. Promoting women's representation and leadership in field staff (Better Cotton Initiative)

p. 10



3. Building the capacity and agency of Kushi Mitra in Odisha (Foundation for Ecological Security)

p. 14



4. Creating a supportive ecosystem for women leaders (Friends of Women's World Banking - India)

p. 18



5. Equipping Elected Women Representatives to be active decision-makers (Centre for Catalyzing Change)

p. 22



6. Strengthening women's leadership in climate-responsive agrifood systems (UN Women)

p. 25



7. Supporting women to lead commercial seed enterprises (International Rice Research Institute)

p. 28



8. Assessing ways to improve women's claims-making in community-driven development (International Food Policy Research Institute)

p. 32



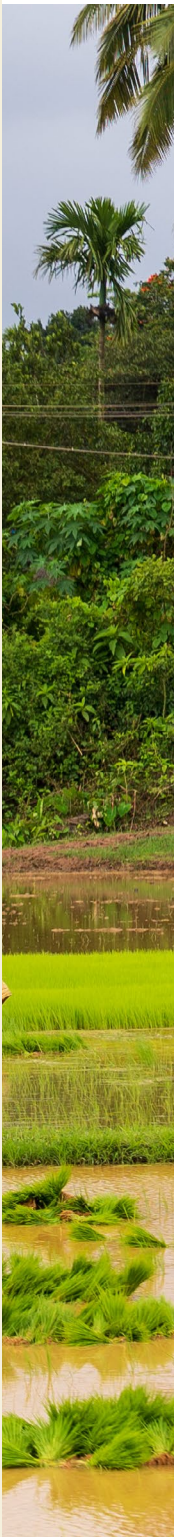
Introduction

Rural women's full and effective leadership is key to achieving just and resilient agrifood systems.

Globally, women are acknowledged as key actors in agrifood systems, participating on and off farm, at different scales and across the public sector, private sector and civil society.¹ Women in all their diversity occupy leadership roles across agrifood systems, in agricultural cooperatives and producers' organizations, large agribusinesses, and agrifood-related governmental and non-governmental institutions and decision-making processes.

However, there is a **“dramatic imbalance”** between women's enormous and essential contributions to agrifood systems, and their leadership and decision-making power.² Deep-seated and structural barriers, such as discriminatory legal and policy frameworks, social and cultural norms, perceptions of women's leadership, as well as unequal access to resources and capitals, constrain (and sometimes reverse progress on) women's voice, agency, and leadership.

1. Morgan, M., Bryan, E., & Elias, M. (2024). Women's leadership in climate-resilient agrifood systems: defining a future research agenda. *Environ. Res.: Climate*. <https://doi.org/10.1088/2752-5295/ad3fdd>.
2. Gerli, B. (2015). Promoting the leadership of women in producers' organizations: Lessons from the experiences of FAO and IFAD. <https://www.fao.org/family-farming/detail/en/c/472901/>



In India, stakeholders from across different sectors have been working to develop and scale interventions that enhance women's leadership in agrifood systems. But significant challenges persist. More coordinated action and learning on 'what works' would help to improve practice.

To catalyze joint thinking, reflection and action, the Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT hosted a Roundtable on "Advancing Women's Leadership in Agrifood Systems" in September 2024 in Bangalore, India. Experts from across different sectors came together to share their respective work, experiences and insights on women's leadership in India.

During this process, participants contributed to:

- A collective vision and a shared learning agenda
- A reflective tool on women's leadership for practitioners

Participants also shared a range of programmatic strategies being used to advance women's leadership in agrifood systems and about their key challenges and learning.

This compilation delves into 8 case studies on women's leadership, each contributed by a different organization. Each case study provides details on a women's leadership initiative in India, the strategies used to advance women's leadership, the key challenges and learning during implementation, and relevant takeaways for interested stakeholders.

Taken together, **these case studies provide a window into the range of actions being taken to advance women's leadership in agrifood systems.** They show that while initiatives emphasize different approaches, there is a lot of overlap and coherence

across initiatives. For example, most case studies share similarities in training content and approaches, in their support for women's collective action and platforms, and in going beyond strengthening individual women leaders to addressing the social context and enabling environment for women's leadership.

Overall, these case studies highlight the inspiring multitude of actors, working in different sectors and across different scales, who are finding ways and adapting approaches to strengthen women's agency and leadership against the odds.



1 Training women tea workers in Assam through the 'Women Rising' project

(ETP)

Contribution by Ranjana Das



Background

Assam produces approximately 52% of total tea in India with women traditionally making up the majority of the workforce in Assam's tea plantations. **Women dominate Assam's tea sector**, with over one million employed in labor-intensive and low-paying roles like tea plucking. They face significant challenges³, including:

- **low economic independence** (only 29% have access to money),
- **limited workforce participation** (21% vs. 83% for men),
- **poor education** (22% literacy in tea estates), and
- **severe health issues**, with 97% of women on tea estates anaemic due to poor nutrition.

Assam's maternal mortality rate is the highest in India (125 deaths per 100,000 live births), especially in tea-growing areas. Gender-based violence affects over 34% of women, while child marriage remains prevalent (one-third of women aged 20-24 were married before 18). Despite the Plantation Labour Act mandating welfare provisions, housing, healthcare, and maternity benefits are often inadequate.

3. <https://etp-global.org/resources/women-assam-factsheet/>



Although 60% of women participate in household decisions, their financial autonomy is limited. Women in the tea sector face harsh living conditions and restricted access to education, healthcare, and sanitation.

The tea plantations are both workplace and home for many workers. The lines between the two are often blurred. Women workers often experience domestic violence and harassment in public places inside and outside the tea gardens. Household responsibilities limit women workers' participation in community activities and training, making leadership development a challenge.

Various organizations already play a crucial role in addressing various thematic challenges with women in Assam tea sector like health, education, WASH, economic empowerment and so on.

About the Initiative

ETP is a global membership organisation with a mission to **catalyse long-term, systemic change to benefit everybody who works in tea** – especially people in tea-producing regions.

Recognizing the challenges faced by women and girls in Assam's tea plantations, ETP recently implemented a transformative project entitled **“Udayini – Women in Leadership”** (2024-2025). “Udayini”, meaning “women rising,” is dedicated to **building women's leadership through a structured, cascading model of training**. The project was implemented in both India and Sri Lanka, with the focus in Assam on empowering women tea workers and their communities.

The initiative was launched to strengthen women's confidence, communication, and negotiation skills—critical for leadership and self-advocacy. ETP strategically focused on **leadership development** rather than specific gender issues, empowering women to be able to advocate for their rights.

This initiative was supported by a member buyer and implemented in two tea estates of a specific producer company. ETP leveraged its unique position as a buyer-member organization with access to tea estates and partnerships with producer companies, which enabled direct interventions in fostering women's leadership.

The *Udayini* project unfolded in three strategic phases:

PHASE 1: Training the primary cohort



Intensive training for a core group of 50 women selected through a structured process from two tea estates.

- The primary cohort included permanent and temporary tea workers, members of Self-Help Groups (SHGs), and Line Sardars (workplace leaders in plucking sites).
- Modules covered gender, leadership, financial inclusion, social protection, and digital skills.
- The training emphasized building confidence, decision-making, and negotiation skills at household and community levels.

PHASE 2: Building the secondary cohort



Each of the 50 primary cohort members went on to train 20 women, forming a secondary cohort of 1,000 women.

- The primary cohort developed and used a comprehensive module for this training, further honing their leadership abilities.

The project emphasized:

- enhancing communication skills,
- self-confidence, and
- decision-making abilities

to empower women in households, workplaces, and communities. Participatory methods were used to build confidence, and practical scenarios were employed to teach negotiation and leadership skills.

PHASE 3: Community awareness campaigns



The secondary cohort members lead awareness sessions on gender issues, reaching 20,000 women across the tea community.

The cascading leadership model

encouraged sustainability by developing a self-replicating system of empowerment. The **primary cohort** gained hands-on experience by training others, while the **secondary cohort** amplified the impact by leading awareness programs to an even wider range of women. This strategic approach aimed to foster a community-wide shift in attitudes toward gender equality and women's leadership.

Challenges and Learning

The project faced several noteworthy challenges to effective implementation. It was vital to address these with thoughtful strategies and partnerships in order to create a meaningful and lasting impact on women in the tea gardens.

- **Tea is a seasonal industry and intensive activities cannot be conducted during the harvest season**, which spans from April to November. This leaves a limited window from November to March for conducting focused training sessions and other critical activities. During the harvest months, the emphasis had to shift to rapport-building, identifying leaders, scoping, developing training modules, and planning.
- Another key learning was **the importance of training modules incorporating participatory tools, since traditional lecture-based methods are not effective** for women in tea gardens. Instead, using contextual case stories, interactive games, group discussions, and activities that foster leadership skills ensured greater engagement and learning outcomes. Going forward, it is vital that these sessions be conducted in safe, inclusive spaces where women feel comfortable and confident to express themselves.
- One significant logistical challenge was the preference of Producer Companies to conduct training within the tea garden premises rather than external locations. This required careful planning to **balance the need for a safe and conducive learning environment with the operational constraints of the tea gardens**.
- Finally, **collaboration with buyers and producer companies** was crucial to building mutual trust and ensuring smooth delivery of intensive training programs. These partnerships enhance the project's credibility and facilitate long-term success.



Key Takeaways on Women's Leadership



A **cascading leadership model** develops a self-replicating system of empowerment that enables sustainability.



Training approaches that use **participatory methods and tools** result in higher engagement and learning, especially when training is conducted in safe spaces where women feel comfortable to express themselves.



It is important to work on **fostering a community-wide shift** in attitudes toward gender equality and women's leadership.



Good collaboration and partnerships with buyers and companies are crucial to delivering training programs and facilitate long-term success.

2 Promoting women's representation and leadership in field roles

(BETTER COTTON INITIATIVE)

Contribution by Nini Mehrotra and
Yrene Coli Rivera (Better Cotton Initiative)



Background

In India, women account for up to approximately 90% of the cotton workforce⁴. Despite their critical role, women's contributions to cotton production are consistently undervalued and their needs ignored.

Women farmers face structural barriers including restrictive gender norms, discrimination, and limited access and control to resources that limit their decision-making power at the household, farm, and community levels. As a result, women smallholders are significantly underrepresented in decision-making spaces, leading to policies and practices don't meet their interest.

4. BCI (2024). India Impact Report 2014-2023. https://bettercotton.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Better-Cotton-India-Impact-Report_-5.pdf

About the Initiative

The Better Cotton Initiative (BCI) is the largest cotton sustainability programme in the world. It works with close to 70 different field-level partners in 15 countries to reach the world's cotton-farming communities. In total, BCI programmes have reached almost 4 million people whose working lives are connected to cotton production and 1.39 million farmers now have a license to sell their cotton as BCI cotton.

For BCI, promoting women's field-level leadership is essential to supporting women's knowledge and practice and helping to overcome gender-based barriers with practical solutions. The organization is committed to advancing women's representation among field staff and the Better Cotton 2030 Strategy includes a commitment to ensuring that at least 25% of field staff are women by 2030. They believe that promoting women in field roles within organisations increases visibility, strengthens representation, and encourages more women smallholders to step into leadership roles. The commitment aims to **shift power dynamics and create a more inclusive cotton sector**, where women cotton farmers are empowered and can benefit from sustainable practices. It enables women's voices and needs to be considered in shaping the future of cotton farming.

BCI does this by supporting its network of partner organisations to **promote women's leadership to promote women's leadership at the community level and women in partner-level field roles**. It provides grants to partners through the BCI Growth and Innovation Fund to hire women staff in programme roles, as well as offers technical guidance and practical resources.

In the 2024-25 cotton season in India, 28% of Field Facilitators and 26% of Producer Unit Managers were women, surpassing the global target. A recent BCI study, supported by ISEAL, of two partners showed promising strategies to recruit and retain women field staff for Producer Unit Manager and Field Facilitator roles. These included:

- local hiring through community referrals,
- digital outreach via popular cross-platform messaging applications, and
- proactive methods like door-to-door campaigns and public announcements.
- One partner aligned job criteria with local agricultural training programmes, while another leveraged existing NGO and government initiatives to engage women leaders from farming organisations.
- Flexible work arrangements and access to training.



- Peer support systems such as six-month buddy programmes and structured promotion pathways helped strengthen retention.
- In Maharashtra, internal promotion systems resulted in more women advancing to senior leadership roles.

Early findings from the study indicate that women leaders have amplified the voices of women cotton smallholders by ensuring their perspectives are reflected in programme design and implementation. Women farmers reported feeling more comfortable discussing sensitive issues, such as the need for sanitation facilities, with women Field Facilitators.

Importantly, **these leadership roles also contributed to shifting gender norms.** Visible women leaders challenged traditional expectations, served as role models, and encouraged other women to pursue leadership opportunities.

These changes were observed through qualitative feedback gathered from farmers and field staff. Data collection on the number of women field staff is collected through regular data collection processes.

Challenges and Learning

While increasing the number of women and their leadership potential was a core strategy, early efforts often focused too narrowly on meeting recruitment targets, and not enough on addressing the deeper systemic and cultural barriers that limit women's leadership. To begin bridging this gap, BCI organised **tailored leadership training for women field staff** to help build their confidence, technical skills, and decision-making influence⁵.

Shifting gender norms requires actively engaging men as allies, as lasting change cannot rest on women alone. Ongoing engagement has led to a deeper recognition that many partners, particularly those new to gender programming, need structured support to deepen their approach. BCI remains committed to providing this support.

The organization continues to build on key lessons learned, including:

- Partner organisations vary in their vision for women's leadership, with some more advanced than others. **Targeted support is essential to go beyond recruitment to retention as well.** Women need visibility, mentorship, structured career pathways, and strong organisational and community support. A clear organisational commitment, backed by resources and action, is key.
- Partners primarily focus on hiring women as Field Facilitators. The next step is to further strengthen the agronomic expertise and confidence of women in these field roles, enabling them to effectively influence and support sustainable cotton production. **Clearly defined roles, targeted training in both technical and soft skills, and regular tracking of gender balance** are critical to sustaining and improving this approach.

5. BCI (2024, February 6) Leadership Workshop in India Brings Together Female Field Staff to Promote Gender Inclusion. <https://bettercotton.org/leadership-workshop-in-india-brings-together-female-field-staff-to-promote-gender-inclusion/>

Key Takeaways on Women's Leadership



Enhancing women's leadership potential requires going beyond recruitment targets to address the deeper systemic and cultural barriers that limit the leadership potential of women field staff. Tailored training can build confidence, technical skills and decision-making influence for these emerging leaders.



Partners need structured support to deepen their approach and build genuine organizational commitment, backed by resources and action. This is vital for going beyond recruitment to be able to support and retain women leaders.



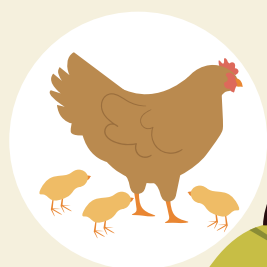
Regular data collection and monitoring helps to inform and improve strategies on women's leadership.



3 Building the capacity and agency of Kushi Mitra in Odisha

(FOUNDATION FOR ECOLOGICAL SECURITY)

Contribution by Apurwa Sailja
(Foundation for Ecological Security)



Background

Approximately 60% of Odisha's total population is engaged in agriculture and its allied activities, serving as a primary source of livelihood. Women's contributions to agriculture and farming activities are immense and crucial. **Although women contribute significantly to the agricultural workforce, they are often overlooked and lack decision-making power** due to a lack of land ownership and not being recognised as farmers, but as farm labourers.

In general, government institutional systems and various line departments responsible for providing agricultural support in the form of resources, tools, and capacity building mostly cater to farmers (by default, male), leaving women out. Additionally, due to the prevailing gender norms, the mostly male department officials find it easier to approach men rather than women. This results in **male beneficiaries being the only ones supported with resources and information** and an environment where **women's knowledge in agriculture is undervalued**. Leadership opportunities for women are constrained by their lack of equal access to knowledge and capacity building.

About the Initiative

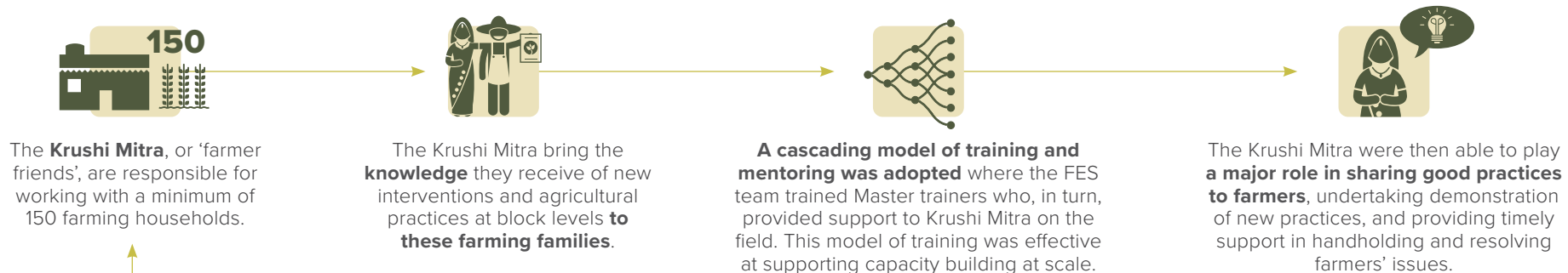
The Foundation for Ecological Security (FES) is committed to strengthening, reviving, or restoring the process of ecological succession and the conservation of land, forest and water resources in India. Over several years, FES has evolved from direct engagement with rural communities to working with state governments and like-minded NGO partners across 14 states to pursue community-led restoration and governance of diverse Commons.

In Odisha, FES identified the need for systems changes at the policy and societal level to support a more equitable and resilient agrifood system. They narrowed

this to **several key areas of work, including supporting women's decision-making in agriculture through capacity building, training and making linkages with institutions.** To do this, they mapped community-based institutions rooted within the communities and gram panchayats that were also connected with government departments. There was an initiative by the Odisha Livelihood Mission (OLM), in partnership with the Department of Agriculture and Farmers Empowerment, to improve the livelihood portfolios of the rural poor through village-level planning processes.

The OLM, under its "Mission Shakti" programme, had created a series of **women Self Help Groups**, clusters of which are federated at the panchayat level into the Gram Panchayat level federation (GPLF). These women's groups are supported through livelihood interventions, capacity building, and linking to other institutional support.

In its attempt to support women in agriculture, the OLM established a **front-line cadre of predominantly women called the Krushi Mitra** (see below).



FES embarked on providing capacity building for the Krushi Mitra to enable them to act as agents of change.

The FES team developed a capacity building system of low-dose and high-intensity, an alternative to traditional training approaches (consisting of multi-day residential training programs) which are known to be particularly difficult for women to participate in effectively. The approach instead entailed sharing small packages of modules with the women through virtual meetings. Online meetings enabled more continuous participation and deeper engagement without forcing women to have to leave their household responsibilities.



Continuous guidance and support were provided to the Kushi Mitra by master trainers and through digital guided mentoring sessions.

- The guided mentoring sessions operated through a hub and spoke model, with the central hub anchored by the project team and the spokes being thematic experts, government officials, master trainers and the Kushi Mitra.
- The mentoring sessions were used to discuss issues and challenges, share possible solutions and facilitate continuous training.
- These sessions also helped to give the Kushi Mitra a platform to share their

own experiences and good practices, increasing their strengths in facilitation and mobilisation.

Nearly 1000 Krushi Mitras have been trained so far, of which over 100 have been officially certified as Agriculture Extension Service Providers by the Agriculture Skill Council of India.

Kushi Mitras are being actively approached by farmers (men and women) and community members to discuss issues and to get support in learning about new practices. **They are now perceived as change makers by government institutions and in their communities.**

Because information is shared during women self-help group and federation meetings, women are also the ones bringing information about new agricultural practices to their households, influencing their agency in household decisions.

Kushi Mitra have also been instrumental in working together to set up a Community Bio Resource Center. Additionally they have helped to set up selling points for produce cultivated using sustainable agriculture and natural farming practices. Currently more than 110 such sale centers have been established.

Challenges and Learning

Influencing and shifting systems, especially in government bureaucracies, takes time. Though FES had a Memorandum of Understanding with the Agriculture department, there was hesitation in the department and it took time for onboarding to occur, especially down to the block and district levels. Several rounds of meetings were required to build relationships. The efficacy of women front-line cadre in supporting the adoption of sustainable agricultural practices can motivate the line department, but a larger shift is still required. Yet, **collaboration with government departments are key to reaching scale.**

There were some initial challenges with the Krushi Mitra's being able to access and use the technology to participate in meeting virtually (via Zoom). Some participants did face challenges in navigating the virtual meetings and with their mobile networks. There were also challenges for some women to manage their household chores along with the meeting schedule. For this, **it helped to have master trainers to provide more individual support and arrange smaller meetings with their cadres.**



©Nitish Nikam/FES

Key Takeaways on Women's Leadership



A **cascading training model** is effective at supporting capacity building at scale. Having master trainers provide ongoing guidance and mentoring helps to reinforce training.



Regular meetings can provide a platform for women to openly share their challenges, as well as their experiences and good practices. Using online meeting technologies helped to provide low-dose and high-frequency training sessions, allowing for individual sessions to be short and prevent information overload. This helped in supporting participants to understand and retain information, and also maintain consistent communication.



Working with and through collective (like self help groups) helps to reach more households and support a shift in narratives among the larger community.



A **deep understanding of societal and community attitudes, norms and structures** helps to identify leverage points for change and strategies that can be sustained.

4 Creating a supportive ecosystem for women leaders

(FRIENDS OF WOMEN'S WORLD BANKING - INDIA)

Contribution by SS Bhat
(Friends of Women's World Banking – India)



Background

Women face unique and multifaceted challenges in agrifood systems in India, including limited access to knowledge, technology, markets and finances. They also lack decision-making power in their households and communities. Women farmers in certain locations are particularly impacted by climate challenges and agronomic concerns.

About the Initiative

Friends of Women's World Banking – India (FWWB India) was founded with the mission of creating an equitable society through women's empowerment. It has been at the forefront of advancing women's leadership and economic resilience in agrifood systems, particularly in marginalized communities.

FWWB India identified that supporting women's participation and leadership in various agrifood value chain roles could not only bolster productivity and resilience but also enhance recognition of their contributions. To address these gaps, FWWB India developed a comprehensive approach to build women's capacity in agricultural technology, leadership, and business management, allowing them to make informed decisions and develop economic independence.

To empower women farmers and support their leadership journey, FWWB India implemented a range of strategies aimed at both individual capacity building and community engagement:



Leadership and governance training:

FWWB India implemented governance training to foster women's leadership within their Self Help Groups. The training empowered women to actively participate in decision-making processes and to hold leadership roles within their groups. This empowerment helped women navigate traditionally male-dominated spaces in agriculture.



Value addition & technological capacity:

Women in Self Help Groups from the water-scarce and high-salinity district of Ramanathapuram in Tamil Nadu, who primarily grow chili crops, were trained in value addition. This included the provision of solar dryers for drying crops, which not only helped preserve the nutritional quality of their produce but also added value, allowing them to increase income through assured buy-back agreements. These solar dryers provided a sustainable income source and addressed the nutritional leaching phenomenon common in high-salinity soils.



Community engagement and peer learning:

To address social barriers, FWWB conducted training in common community spaces, where women could network, exchange knowledge, and support each other. This peer learning environment reinforced their decision-making skills and fostered a sense of ownership and leadership among the participants.



Capacity building in agriculture and climate resilience:

FWWB's capacity-building initiatives covered digital literacy, financial management, business development, marketing, and climate-resilient agricultural practices. Women also received training on soil testing and bio-input preparation, which reduced their dependence on chemical fertilizers, subsequently lowering input costs. By synchronizing training with the agricultural cycle, women's recall of information improved, and they could apply the knowledge immediately to their practices. Master trainers conducted routine visits and discussions with various producer groups to disseminate information, need, and assess the behavioural aspects of the beneficiaries.



Linkages with government schemes:

The organization facilitated linkages with government programs, such as UDAYAM and FSSAI registration, to increase women's access to resources and legitimacy. These connections enabled the women to navigate bureaucratic processes and secure support for their agribusinesses.

Taking a holistic approach that combined business training, education and exposure to best practices made it easier for women to see the tangible value of adopting technologies.

FWWB India has observed several positive outcomes from these initiatives, including:

- 1 **Increased economic resilience:** The introduction of renewable energy and clean energy technologies enabled women to engage in value-added processing, providing a reliable income source and strengthening their economic stability. With the buy-back linkage, women were assured of a consistent market for their products.
- 2 **Enhanced leadership and decision-making:** Governance training and the community-centered approach fostered women's leadership and encouraged active participation in agricultural decision-making. Women became knowledgeable about the purpose of agricultural inputs, improving their ability to make informed choices.
- 3 **Greater social and community engagement:** With training sessions conducted in shared spaces, women had opportunities to connect and collaborate, building networks that supported both peer learning and emotional support. This community engagement helped break down gender-based barriers and promoted a culture of mutual growth.
- 4 **Reduction in input costs:** Training on soil testing and bio-input preparation allowed women to reduce their use of chemical fertilizers, which not only cut down costs but also preserved soil health. This resource efficiency enabled them to reinvest their savings into further agribusiness initiatives.

Challenges and Learning

Implementing these strategies also presented challenges that offered valuable lessons:

- **Overcoming gender norms:** Initially, some male family members resisted women's involvement in decision-making. By emphasizing the economic benefits and holding community-based sessions, FWWB gradually shifted perspectives, helping families see the value in women's contributions.
- **Resource access and credit limitations:** Although women gained new skills and knowledge, their access to credit and financial resources was still limited. FWWB addressed this by working with local financial institutions to improve women's credit access, thereby enabling them to expand their agribusinesses.
- **Balancing traditional and new agricultural practices:** Some women were hesitant to move away from traditional methods. FWWB's gradual introduction of modern practices, combined with community demonstrations, allowed women to see the advantages first-hand, fostering broader acceptance.

FWWB India is committed to building on this learning and expanding the strategies to other areas with similar socio-economic conditions. Moving forward, the organization aims to:

- **Strengthen partnerships** with local NGOs, government departments, financial institutions to enhance the sustainability of the interventions and credit access for women farmers.
- **Develop monitoring systems** to capture long-term impacts on women's leadership, economic resilience, and social inclusion.
- **Collaborate with a wider range of stakeholders** to create a supportive ecosystem for women in agrifood systems.

Key Takeaways on Women's Leadership



A **holistic approach** that combines a range of strategies (such as leadership training, peer learning and piloting new technologies) is **more effective at cementing new skills and can demonstrate the tangible value of interventions.** That includes families seeing the value of women's leadership and contributions, as well as women themselves seeing the advantages of learning and adopting new practices.



Training and skills development is not enough; women also need access to credit and financial resources. Partnerships and collaboration across a wider range of stakeholders (including financial institutions) is required to create a supportive ecosystem for women leaders to flourish in agrifood systems.



Monitoring systems need to be developed to capture the long-term impacts of this type of programming on women's leadership and economic resilience.

5 Equipping Elected Women Representatives to be active decision-makers

(CENTRE FOR CATALYZING CHANGE)

Contribution by Madhu Joshi
(Centre for Catalyzing Change)



Background

Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) play a crucial role in implementing public welfare and health programs. Despite the constitutional mandate for women's representation in these, Elected Women Representatives (EWR) often face significant challenges in exercising leadership and advocating for community needs. This is due to male-dominated governance structures and other patriarchal barriers, bureaucratic complexities and women's limited financial literacy and understanding of budgeting and planning processes. Women's lack of networks and institutional support, for example, restrict their access to political alliances and decision-making spaces, limiting their ability to push for policy changes effectively. Further, they often face significant challenges due to their lack of financial autonomy. Without the ability to influence budgetary decisions, their role in governance remains largely symbolic.

While gender quotas have increased women's representation, many Elected Women Representatives initially serve as proxies for male family members, restricting their ability to influence governance effectively. They are often recognized only as the wives or daughters-in-law of male politicians, with little confidence or experience in public decision-making.

About the Initiative

The Centre for Catalyzing Change (C3) has been working to enhance women's leadership within Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) by empowering Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to actively participate in governance. Since C3 launched this intervention in 2007, the initiative has sought to **equip women leaders with technical, financial, and accountability skills**, ensuring that they are not merely symbolic representatives but active decision-makers influencing local policies, with a focus on improving reproductive and maternal health (RH/MH) services.

C3's intervention integrates structured leadership training, accountability tools, financial literacy, and institutional linkages to strengthen **gender-responsive governance**. The initiative aligns with India's National Health Mission Community Action for Health framework, which mandates that Panchayati Raj Institutions play a key role in monitoring and improving public service delivery. Through capacity building and participatory monitoring, the goal of the intervention is to support EWRs in transitioning their leadership identities from proxy representatives to proactive governance actors.

C3's leadership training model consists of several components, including:

- **Capacity building:** Use of a structured participatory module, that is reinforced through quarterly meetings and digital nudges
- **Leadership training:** Integration of a strong gender lens and a focus on communication.
- **Local accountability:** Provision of pictorial checklists and other tools to track health service delivery systematically and hold officials accountable.
- **Platforms and opportunities:** Encouragement of EWRs to organize Mahila Sabhas/Ward Sabhas, to address Panchayat and Gram Sabha Meetings and to speak at other forums.
- **Mentorship:** Schedule of regular in-person /digital touch points to support EWR to prioritize, strategize and collaborate locally to find solutions
- **Convergence:** Building an evolving collective of women grassroots leaders



Overall, the program provided women leaders with **a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities in PRIs** and equipped them with **technical skills and digital tracking tools to monitor service delivery** in health and nutrition. This enabled them to identify service gaps and use this knowledge to demand action from local officials. To further reinforce accountability, community feedback mechanisms were established.

In terms of training, there was a dedicated focus on **strengthening women's financial literacy and budget-tracking skills**, equipping EWRs with the knowledge and tools to navigate fiscal governance effectively.

- Through this initiative, **women leaders gained the capacity to allocate public resources for reproductive and maternal health services**, ensuring that critical funds were directed toward community well-being.
- They also learned to **monitor government spending in health and nutrition programs**, preventing misallocation and ensuring that resources reached marginalized communities.

This enabled women leaders to **negotiate budget allocations**, track expenditures, and advocate for resource distribution that prioritized women's health and broader community needs.

C3 also facilitated initiatives to strengthen peer networks and institutional alliances, enabling women leaders to **navigate governance structures more effectively**.

- Regular Mahila Sabhas (women's forums) were organized, providing a space for EWRs to collectively discuss governance challenges and identify solutions.
- Collaborations with frontline workers and Self-Help Groups further integrated women leaders into local health and nutrition service delivery, enhancing their role in community governance.
- Additionally, opportunities were created for EWRs to engage with district and state officials, expanding their influence beyond the village level.

Over time, as women participated more actively in Gram Sabha meetings and exercised leadership and advocacy, societal perceptions of their capabilities as representatives changed. **Elected Women Representatives moved beyond token participation and started acting and being recognized as legitimate decision-makers** shaping policies and resource allocation decisions.

Key Takeaways on Women's Leadership



The **multifaceted leadership training model** enabled elected women representatives to develop new skills and confidence, gain exposure and be recognized as legitimate decision-makers. Long-term and regular mentoring support reinforced the training material.



Financial and digital literacy training and tools supported EWRs to actively participate in budget discussions and advocate for resource allocation that prioritized community needs.



Exposure opportunities, peer networks and institutional alliances enabled women leaders to practice their speaking and negotiation skills and to navigate governance structures more effectively.



Speaking at community meetings helped to establish a woman leader's identity as an informed and pro-active people's representatives.

6 Strengthening women's leadership in climate-responsive agrifood systems

(UN WOMEN)

Contribution by Shaguna Gahlote and Suhela Khan (UN Women), with inputs from Sharanya (PRADAN)



Background

Women farmers lack equal representation, leadership and economic opportunities in the rice value chain. Discriminatory formal and informal institutions (such as social norms) limit women's use, access, control and ownership of productive resources and access to entitlements, impact women's labour and time use and restrict their mobility and participation in markets and institutions. Their limited access to market information and buyer networks prevents them from leading at different nodes of the value chain.

Due to traditional norms and practices women are not typically perceived as farmers or leaders, even by themselves. Lack of formal recognition and collective platforms means women's voices and leadership are too often excluded from governance structures and institutions.

About the Initiative

UN Women is the United Nations organization dedicated to Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. It is the UN organization delivering programmes, policies and standards that uphold women's human rights and ensure that every woman and girl lives up to her full potential.

UN Women is implementing the CORE (Carbon Offsetting Rice Emissions) project funded by GIZ with the following consortium partners: the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI), Olam Agri, PRADAN, Project Concern India (PCI) and the Centre for Sustainable Agriculture (CSA).

The program targets **marginalized and smallholder women farmers in rice value chains in Haryana, Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh**. The project promotes low-emission rice cultivation practices while empowering 2,500 women smallholder farmers to lead and build enterprises that transform climate-sensitive agriculture into improved livelihoods.

The program strengthened existing women-led Farmer Producer Companies (FPCs) to **provide platforms where women could actively participate in decision-making and take on leadership roles**. A Gender Action Plan, along with a set of adaptable training manuals comprising gender-responsive training modules, was introduced to guide these processes and institutionalize gender accountability within FPC structures. These modules focused on unequal distribution of roles, gendered division of labour and decision-making, gender socialisation and discrimination and women's rights and entitlements. Business and negotiation training enabled women-led FPCs to negotiate directly with international buyers like OLAM Agri, secure large-scale contracts, and strengthen their economic leadership.

The initiative provided different types of training to build women's capacities, including:

1 Governance training within FPCs: to strengthen women's capacities to understand company operations, engage with public schemes and lead interactions with external stakeholders.

2 Gender sensitisation training: to enable women and institutions (such as SRLM, KVKs, OLAM and GIZ) to reflect on their roles, practices, and contributions to agriculture and household economies, including women's unpaid and under-recognized labour. The trainings encouraged women to claim their identity as farmers, while also creating safe spaces for dialogue, confidence-building, and leadership development.



4 Business and negotiation training: to enable women to understand cost structures, plan market strategies and negotiate directly with buyers. This contributed to women-led FPCs securing large-scale procurement deals facilitated by OLAM, giving women first-hand experience in agribusiness leadership and revenue generation. These successes improved the economic credibility of women-led enterprises.

3 Technical trainings around climate-resilient practices like Alternate Wetting and Drying (AWD) and organic and natural farming rice cultivation (facilitated by IRRI): to ensure women could adopt and lead sustainable practices. As women gained knowledge and control over climate-smart agricultural practices, they also began leading conversations on environmental issues.

Farmer Producer Companies (FPCs) encouraged women to take collective action, enabling them to coordinate market activities and participate meaningfully in decision-making. Women farmers initially faced several challenges, including poor price realisation—where vendors and institutions offered rates lower than local markets—as well as constraints related to transportation and storage. While these issues persist, being part of an FPC has helped women build skills in representing their collectives in buyer meetings and peer forums, strengthening their negotiating power and securing their presence in key discussions. Linkages with other producer groups have further expanded their reach and credibility. **As women began participating in community dialogues and publicly representing their FPCs, their confidence and social status grew,** and community perceptions gradually shifted to recognise women farmers as entrepreneurs.

The experience of Haribati Maravi from Sakri village in Mandla district, Madhya Pradesh, illustrates this transformation. Once dependent on local traders and engaged in farming only for subsistence, with little awareness of costs or markets, she joined the FPC as a shareholder and later became a Board Director. This role enabled her to engage in planning, budgeting, processing, and collective marketing of crops such as pulses, millets, and onions, including a 25-tonne onion sale that demonstrated the benefits of scale and value addition. Today, Haribati earns diversified income through organic produce, processing, and a polyhouse nursery, confidently explains the benefits of shareholding to other women, and is recognised as a leader and decision-maker in her village, reflecting a **shift from subsistence farming to informed, market-linked leadership.**



Key Takeaways on Women's Leadership



Farmer Producer Companies provide a platform for women to take collective action, allowing them to coordinate market actions and increase their negotiating power.



FPCs also provide women with **first-hand experience with negotiation, public representation and leadership experience,** which can increase their confidence, visibility and social status.



Adopting a comprehensive capacity building approach (from leadership to business to agricultural practices) helps to build women's authority and credibility as a leader in agrifood value chains.

7 Supporting women to lead commercial seed enterprises

(INTERNATIONAL RICE RESEARCH INSTITUTE)

Contribution by Benu Verma
and Mohammad Sultan



Background

Traditionally, women have held pivotal roles as seed custodians and managers, drawing upon their extensive knowledge of seed preservation, storage and selection which are crucial for agricultural sustainability. They have excelled in identifying, preserving, and conserving seeds of varieties suited to different climatic conditions. Women are also actively involved in the various intercultural operations involved in seed production. Evidence shows that seed systems not only tend to reach women but have the potential to benefit and empower them as seed producers.

But **women have often not been formally recognized for their critical role in seed systems**. Lack of access to quality early generation seeds, agri inputs, financial capital, and structured markets was a major barrier for women in Odisha's formal seed sector. Many women previously relied on local shops, seeds from informal sources or saved seeds from previous harvests, which often resulted in lower yields. The **lack of structured market linkages and financial independence** prevented women from scaling their agricultural activities.

About the Initiative

The International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) is the world's premier research organization dedicated to reducing poverty and hunger through rice science. IRRI is a Research Center of CGIAR, the world's largest agricultural innovation network, and its work spans 17 countries across Asia and Africa. Over the last several years, IRRI collaborated with the Government of Odisha to strengthen the state's seed sector. Recognizing the challenges specifically faced by women farmers, there was a concentrated focus on enhancing the agency of women farmers and empowering them to collectively manage the production, processing and marketing of seeds in Odisha.

To enable women farmers to engage in paddy seed production and access formal agricultural markets, **IRRI incubated two women-led Farmer Producer Companies:** the Loisingha Women Farmer Services Producer Company Limited (LWFSPCL) and the Bhuvikash Krish-E Farmers Producer Company Limited (BVKFPCL). These organisations have provided women with a structured platform to:

- participate in seed production,
- receive formal training, and
- access seed certification programs through the Odisha State Seed & Organic Products Certification Agency (OSSOPCA).

The institutional support enabled them to transition from small-scale farming to commercial seed production, a capital-intensive business traditionally dominated by men and previously considered beyond women's reach.

Through the Farmer Producer Companies, IRRI facilitated the establishment of **Farmer Service Centers** at the panchayat level.



Another key intervention was onboarding women farmers on a digital platform (Doordrishti), in partnership with Dvara E-Registry to issue individual farmer identity cards to women farmers. Possession of a farmer identity card was instrumental in providing women with official recognition despite ongoing challenges around land ownership; this enabled women to access resources, government schemes and support. The digital platform served as an alternative pathway for women to gain institutional knowledge and services and facilitated their inclusion in agribusiness activities, empowering them to leverage access to better markets, inputs, and financial services and expand their agricultural activities.

Another critical component of the initiative was **targeted training programs designed to build women's leadership capacities**.

Women received training in areas such as:

- quality seed production adhering to seed certification standards
- quality control, knowledge about newer varieties
- community engagement to economise on inputs
- bargaining power for their valued outputs.

The training sessions were led by experienced professionals, including CEOs of Farmer Producer Companies, who helped

women to understand business models, pricing structures, and market demands.

Women's leadership was promoted, but not through ascribing formal leadership titles to women. Rather, the initiative adopted a **flexible or adaptive leadership approach**, allowing women to engage in specialised roles based on their skills and interests. Some women took on marketing roles, connecting the FPCs with buyers, while others focused on quality control and production oversight. These roles enabled them to build leadership experience and enabled a more gradual and sustainable integration of women into leadership spaces.

Women have reported tangible economic benefits, as well as more self-reliance and autonomy, due to their involvement with the Farmer Producer Companies. Shifting from traditional paddy farming to seed production increased the local availability of quality seeds while helping the women seed producers with **improved income**. As women have earned more stable incomes, their families and communities have gradually recognized the value of their contributions, and **there is a greater acceptance of women's role as business leaders in seed production**.

Challenges and Learning

Despite many achievements, it was not always easy. Some groups of women continue to face more complex challenges than others, particularly women of marginalized castes and tribes in certain parts of Odisha.

Women's **lack of land ownership** continues to be a challenge, though facilitating farmer identity cards to provide official recognition to women farmers has helped women to access resources and support.

Restrictive gender norms continue to limit women's mobility outside the household and discourage their participation in leadership roles. There was often resistance from male family members and the broader community, and women feared disapproval over taking on increased responsibility outside their households. The initiative implemented a community engagement strategy, took approaches to minimize friction with traditional power structures and worked on demonstrating tangible economic benefits of participation to help shift attitudes.



Key Takeaways on Women's Leadership



Women-led Farmer Producer Companies can be an effective platform for women to engage with formal agricultural markets, enabling them to develop capital-intensive business opportunities previously beyond their reach.



Panchayat-level Farmer Service Centers can provide a local resource hub making agricultural inputs and support more accessible to women, resolving common barriers around mobility, household responsibilities and drudgery.



Facilitating women's access to farmer identity cards can enable women to access resources and assistance, in spite of challenges with women's land ownership.



Women's leadership can be promoted without ascribing formal leadership titles to women. Women can take on various roles suited to their skills and preferences that allow them to build their leadership experience gradually.



Initiatives that deliver tangible economic benefits for women can change household and community-level perceptions of women's agricultural contributions and lead to greater acceptance of women's leadership roles in agriculture.

8 Assessing ways to improve women's claims-making in community-driven development

(INTERNATIONAL FOOD POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE)

Contribution by Kalyani Raghunathan
(IFPRI)



Background

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), which provides 100 days of work on demand at a stipulated minimum wage and aims to build durable assets through that work, envisions a democratic bottom-up approach to planning the assets to be built under the program. It has a calendar outlining when the village level planning process should commence and conclude. Deliberations are to be held in village level meetings, or gram sabhas, where technically anyone is allowed to attend and speak.

Bottom-up, participatory planning like this should yield assets that are relevant and valued by the community, contributing to local well-being and livelihoods. Yet, whether MGNREGA can do so depends on who participates within the planning process⁶. Often when meetings are held, women typically struggle to make themselves be heard – either through lack of confidence and skills or because of unresponsive officials.

6. under MGNREGA How can Women Make Their Demands? Blog. Accessed at: <https://www.theindiaforum.in/public-policy/staking-claim-entitlements-under-mgnrega>

About the Initiative

The International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) provides research-based policy solutions to sustainably reduce poverty and end hunger and malnutrition in developing countries. IFPRI is a Research Center of CGIAR, the world's largest agricultural innovation network, and the only CGIAR center solely dedicated to food policy research. The Institute currently works in over 80 countries, including in India.

To support its mandate of informing effective policies, programs and investments that contribute to productive livelihoods and sustainable, resilient, and equitable agriculture and food systems, IFPRI researchers in India were interested in understanding ways to **improve women's agency in community-driven development**. The MGNREGA provided an interesting opportunity to study how to improve women's claim-making in meetings where deliberations around MGNREGA asset planning are undertaken each year.

The **mixed methods study** was conducted in Odisha across 230 gram panchayats (GPs) in five districts (Ganjam, Kalahandi, Mayurbhanj, Bolangir, and Rayagada). It included a large-scale quantitative survey of 3,426 women and an in-depth qualitative study including both men and women from six GPs in three districts.

All women in the quantitative survey were MGNREGA job card holders and thus part of the key population that the programme intends to include within the participatory asset selection process. The research did not specifically target women of any particular ethnicity or class, but because the initial sample for the baseline survey was from among women who had used the MGNREGA program in the previous five years, the women tended to be smallholder farmers and relatively poor. Also, since this was in the tribal belt of Odisha, many of the women were tribal as well.

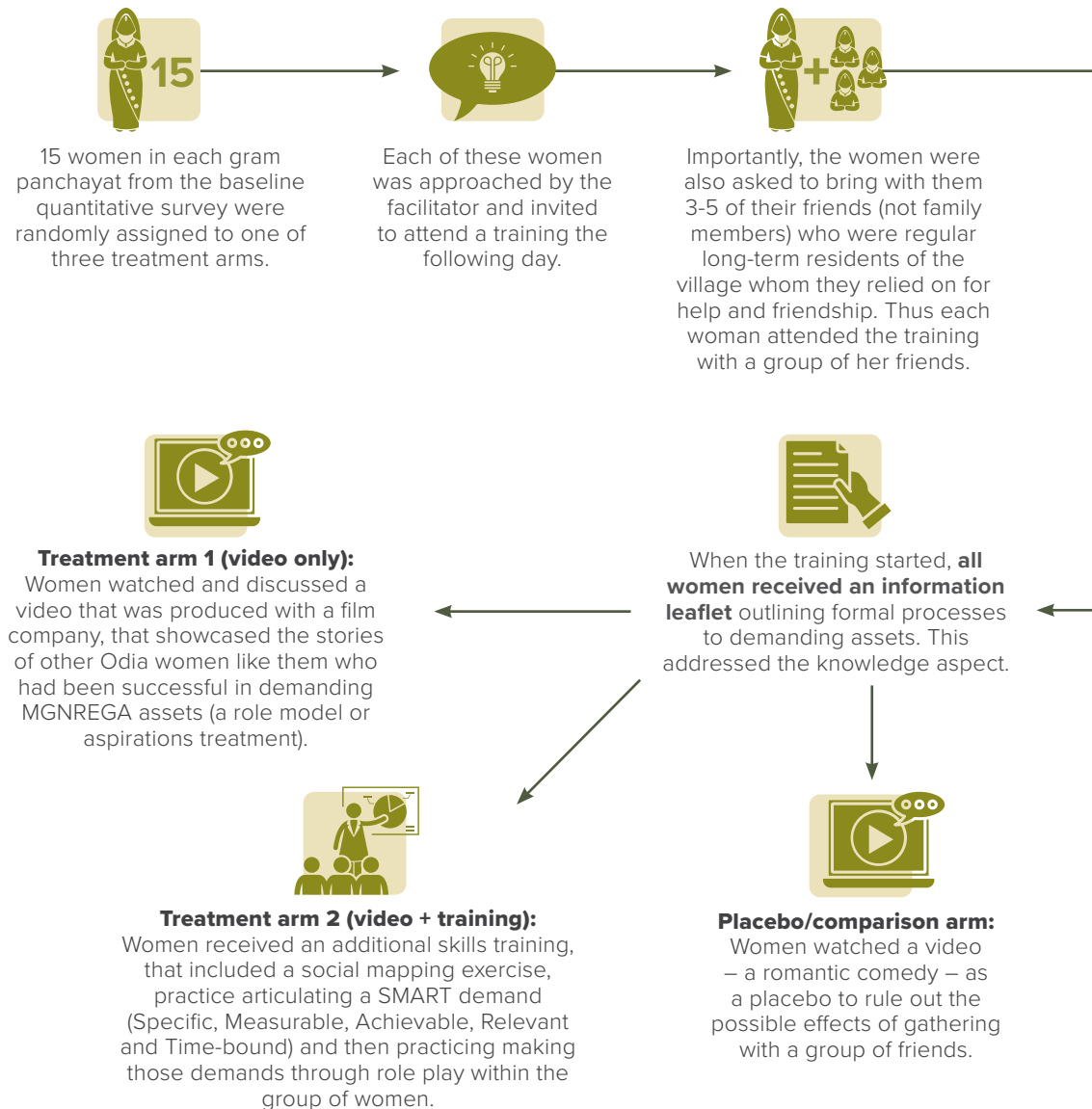
The formative qualitative and quantitative research showed three broad challenges women faced:

- knowledge of processes;
- aspirations or desires around assets; and
- practical skills and confidence.

Based on these three challenges, **researchers designed an intervention with three treatment arms** to be rolled out in the selected gram panchayats.



Intervention structure:



Following the interventions, **outcomes were then measured along five broad buckets:** aspirations, plans and behaviors, pathways (like knowledge of assets, public speaking skills etc), potential backfire effects and spillovers (into demanding entitlements from other programs, for example).

The study found that the group of women that only watched the video (the role model or aspirations treatment) did not see any impacts on these 5 outcome areas, relative to the set of women who simply watched the romantic comedy with their friends (the placebo). Thus, **simply raising aspirations or providing role models is not enough to change real outcomes.**

However, **when combined with the training on practical skills, there were significant and sometimes quite large improvements** on several outcomes. This included impacts on:

- Women's aspirations to have an asset
- Women's feelings of self-efficacy
- Whether women identify with a woman who displays voice and agency in the MGNREGA asset planning process (through a hypothetical vignette)
- Whether the enumerator and their friend's report improvements in a woman's ability to demand assets since the training
- Whether they proactively requested an asset in the months since the intervention.

The research study disseminated results to the Government of Odisha in hopes that the training materials could be adopted widely by training institutes. All training materials are also available online and free to use and repurpose.

Challenges and Learning

One of the challenges was finding women who were able to commit to the training for a couple of hours. However, once the women were there they seemed to enjoy themselves, especially for the role play part of the skills training. Overall, the training was very well-received.

This study should be thought of as a **proof of concept**, as it was a one-time light-touch intervention and did only address the demand-side. A more sustained intervention would do well to also look at sensitizing the MGNREGA officials.

Further studies would do well to look more closely at the larger structural and contextual issues contributing to women's claims-making. Our research found that effects were much stronger in villages where respondents said village affairs were decided on democratically, so looking at these larger structural issues could shed light on how to amplify and sustain impacts.



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Key Takeaways on Women's Leadership



Raising awareness and aspirations appears to be insufficient to change women's agency. But combining these activities with practical skills training can significantly impact women's aspirations, feelings of self-efficacy, improvements in ability to demand assets, and actually requesting assets.



The effects of interventions are stronger in more democratic villages, highlighting the importance of understanding contextual and structural factors that also contribute to women's voice, agency and claims-making.



Skills training sessions that involve **role play** are more engaging and enjoyable for women participants.

