



INDIA REPORT

PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES:

Understanding Women's Participation and Empowerment

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November 2015

trōcaire

Acknowledgements

Trócaire envisages a just and peaceful world where people's dignity is ensured and rights are respected; where basic needs are met and resources are shared equitably; where people have control over their own lives and those in power act for the common good.

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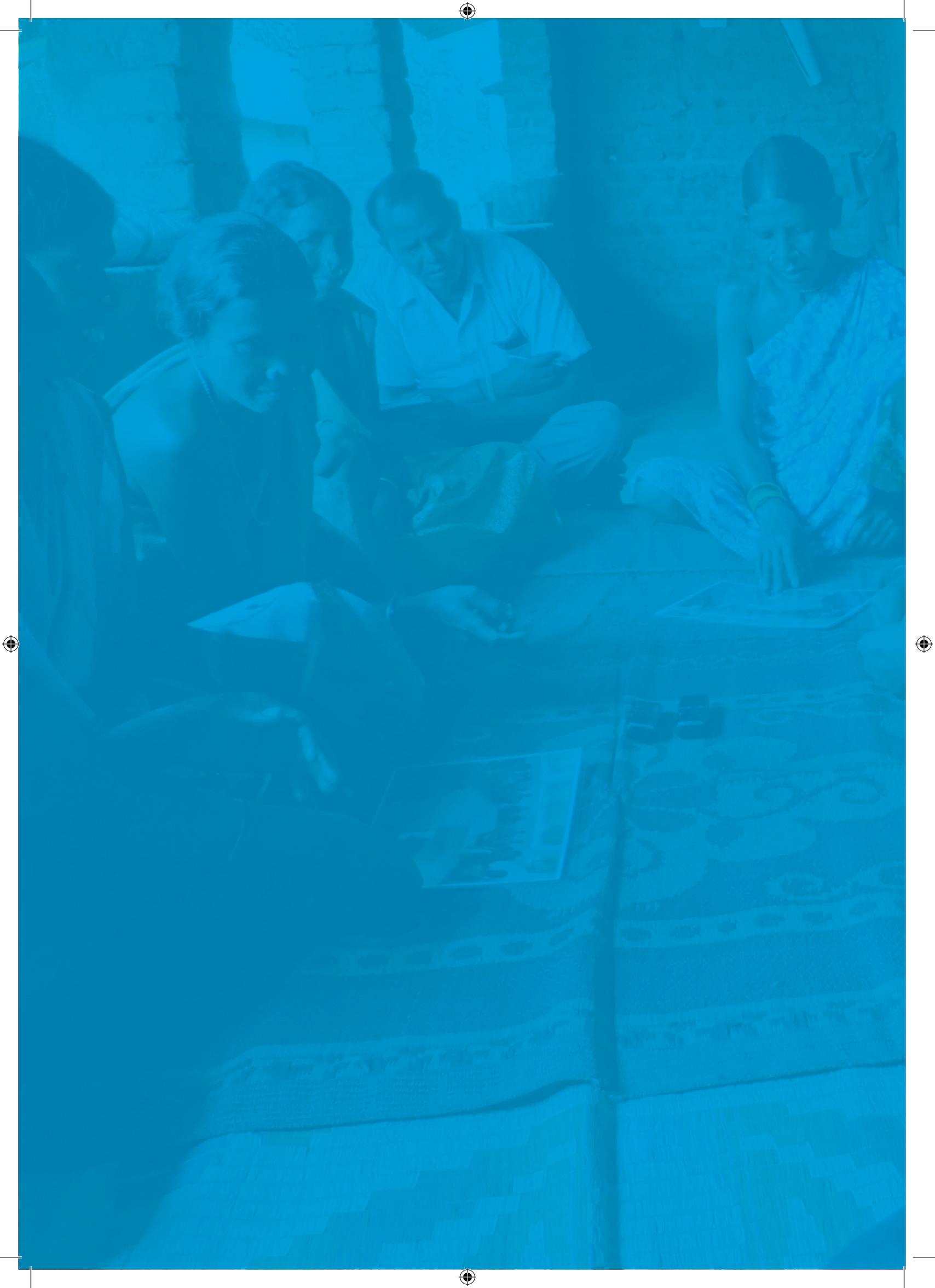
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Acknowledgements: Sincere thanks to all the research participants for their time and for sharing their views and experiences with us. Particular thanks are due to all of the staff at Trócaire's partner organisations SEARCH and BKS, Pramodini Pradhan and the staff in Trócaire's India office who supported the fieldwork and analysis.

A special thanks to Gitanjali Jena, Carol Ballantine, Carol Wrenn, Deirdre Ni Cheallaigh, Finola Finnan, Hilary Daly, Kim Wallis, Niall O Keeffe, Noreen Gumbo and Karen Murphy for your feedback and editorial work on the many draft reports. This research report forms part of the research project on Women's Participation which was conducted by Trócaire in DRC, India, Nicaragua. The research was carried out for Trócaire by Emma Newbury with support and guidance from Tina Wallace.

Contents

Abbreviations	2
Executive Summary	3
1. Introduction to the research	8
1.1 Background to the research	8
1.2 Analytical framework: Participation, Space, Power & Empowerment	10
1.3 Methodology	13
1.4 Socio-political context: India	19
2. Findings: Where & how women participate	23
2.1 Introduction to the spaces	24
2.2 Participation and Empowerment: women's journeys	26
3: Research Findings: Barriers & Enabling Factors	38
3.2 Enabling Factors	41
3.3 Women's collective experiences within the spaces	43
4. Analysis of the power dynamics of the spaces	50
4.1 Who decides?	50
4.2 What is the purpose of the space?	51
4.3 Who participates in the space?	53
4.4 Pushing the boundaries	54



Abbreviations

BKS	Boipariguda Khetra Samiti
CBOs	Community-based organisations
NREGA	National Rural Employment Guarantee
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
PRI	Panchayati raj System (of local government)
SEARCH	Society for Education, Animation and Rural Care of Health
SHG	Self-help group
VDC	Village development committee

Executive Summary

A mapping of Trócaire's international programmes in 2012 indicated that the majority of Trócaire's work supporting women's participation happened at the grassroots level and focused on supporting community mobilisation through organising and training. This reflected the common perception amongst staff that the barriers for women to participate resulted from women's lack of confidence and their low skill-set and knowledge. However, these presumptions were not grounded in evidence, and academic literature on the subject was found to inadequately address women's own experiences, or the impact of participation programmes at community level. In response, Trócaire designed and implemented a 3-year multi-country research project to deepen understanding of participation and empowerment at the community level in order to improve policy and practice, especially related to women's participation in decision-making spaces, and in particular around decision-making that affected their own lives.

India was selected as a case study country for the research. India's country programme was of interest because it was perceived to be an example of a programme that was strong in gender mainstreaming. A mapping of community level structures within the research parameters revealed that all of those spaces were 'invited spaces', which reflects the formal decentralisation of power from government to citizens. A key question in the research was whether this formal decentralisation corresponded to increased empowerment for women at community level.

The report defines participation as the creation of new opportunities for citizens to gain the power to influence decisions that affect their lives, at community and national levels. This typically involves the inclusion of excluded individuals and groups in decision-making forums to influence issues that affect their lives, and giving access to power for those who are so often marginalised. The process, experience and nature of citizen participation varies widely between different communities and within a variety of spaces. Empowerment is understood as a process of pushing against the boundaries of power to shape new fields of possible action; it is also the outcome of this process which sees shifts from oppressive power relations to more fluid power relations where changes can occur and power can be negotiated through the increase in power within individuals, and their collective power when they work together. While the research was conducted using a relatively small sample size in a selected number of geographical areas, and the results are therefore not intended to be representative, they are nevertheless indicative of trends in regions that are similar contextually,

and lessons learned can be extracted for use across the country and beyond.

The journey towards women's empowerment in India

The research looked at women's progress along an 'empowerment journey'. Women might begin their empowerment journey in their home, and the first step in that journey might simply be to leave their home. Over time, they gain new skills and knowledge and may participate within community structures; they may lobby government bodies for services and support, and may even become leaders within community structures. The different parts of the journey are not steps in a linear model, each stage interacts with the others in the journey; some women may skip steps others may have additional steps; others may only reach the first. However, across the three contexts, an overall model of the process of empowerment as a result of participating can be ascertained. The overall model helps to provide specificity by understanding women's experiences and highlighting the barriers and enablers to women's participation and empowerment.

The first step for all women participants within India was to leave the home, and most women had no decision-making role outside of the domestic sphere prior to participation in the projects reviewed. Their mobility was generally controlled by men. While most of the women in this study participated in local decision-making fora during the course of the programmes, most remained within the initial informal spaces of women-only spaces, because of barriers preventing them from entering other formal spaces. For the women that were group leaders, their only experience of participating is as a leader as they were selected when the spaces were initially established. These women had a different experience of participating, gaining greater knowledge, confidence and skills. Participation in advocacy and lobbying was generally limited to a few women who gain greater experience, which can entrench the idea further that they are the natural leaders of the groups. Only a small minority of women mobilised others or lobbied for change outside of the women-only safe spaces.

Barriers encountered

The majority of barriers documented in the India case study stem from the unequal power relations between men and women that exist within the society, the social and political norms that perpetuate those dynamics, and the internalisation of those norms.

1. Men's control over women's mobility: All participants, but one, were required to seek permission from their husbands to participate in local fora. Some husbands granted this permission unconditionally; others did on condition that household work was completed in advance, some did not grant it at all. This permission is not irreversible and can be taken away at any point. A number of women specifically referred to incidents of violence and the situation of physical control, indicating that there are high levels of violence in the community affecting women's participation.

2. Taboo of women in decision making spaces: Resistance from men to women's participation within the meetings continues at the societal level, despite legislation requiring active inclusion of women, and despite efforts by the partner organisations at local level. In a related barrier, women were and remain less mobile than men who travel to work. Thus, their attendance at higher level fora than village only meetings would break the social norms in a way it does not for men, even if the individual has support from her own family.

3. Unequal division of labour: The most frequently mentioned barrier, which emerged throughout the journeys, was the women's workload. This affects them at every stage of their journey. It is such a powerful barrier that one of the main reasons women were chosen as leaders was because they had someone to help them at home with the domestic duties. Gender norms maintain an unequal division of labour which disproportionately affects women's participation. Even where women's participation is accepted by men within the community and government fora, their burden of domestic and care duties can still prevent their participation, as this acceptance does not equate to a change in the distribution of labour within the household. The women have therefore added participation to the triple burden they already carry (along with domestic and care duties). There was no expectation, from women, that men would support them with domestic duties, to give them time to participate in meetings. Women with young children were almost entirely absent from the

spaces, and repeatedly cited as the most marginalised group. These women were absolutely unable to attend meetings outside of the community and most were unable to attend community meetings.

4. Internalisation of social norms: Women internalised the social norms about women's role being limited to the household. They therefore lacked the experience of participating and were nervous to speak in public, as this had traditionally been left to men. The women continue to accept the unequal power divide as natural. Women's movements are controlled by men. Denial of permission to attend meetings is a reality that goes unquestioned. Even women who have advanced in their empowerment journeys accept their husband's power to limit their participation. In the mixed spaces the women report still deferring to men because of their actual or perceived greater knowledge.

Enabling factors encountered

1. Confidence: Most of the women were unable to articulate changes that have occurred within themselves as a result of their participation. However, those that could articulate change talked about having the confidence to speak in public.

2. External actors pushing social norms: The programme partners (local NGOs) have insisted that the mixed male/female groups comprise 40% representation of women which has created a big change in the community group representation, and has transferred some power into the hands of women. It is important to note that because this acceptance did not come from internal reflection or change within, women's participation is often only accepted by men because they believe that women are needed to access benefits rather than because they now believe women have a right to participate.

3. Supportive husbands: Given the level of control that women experience around their mobility, having a supporting partner enables them to participate more effectively or at all. Given the high workload of women, support in lightening this burden has a dramatic effect on their ability to grow in their empowerment journeys. However, only one participant reported that this had happened within her household. This woman also had greater confidence and ability to participate in lobbying activities. This led to trust from her community

members, which reinforced her confidence even further.

4. Women only space: The women-only spaces were the most empowering spaces for women. They provided a safe space where women could discuss issues that they cannot raise in others spaces and can speak publicly as a united voice, giving them more leverage to influence.

Impact of participation

To be effective in contributing to transforming power dynamics, spaces for participation must enable women to participate actively, challenge dominant gender norms and address the barriers that underpin their unequal power. In India, this process was challenged by rigid hierarchies that limit women's influence over decisions and an inability of the citizens to effectively use their devolved power. The barriers to women's participation are still very high and the government structures provide a very limited space for discussing issues beyond basic needs.

Above the local village level, community fora are perfunctory and hierarchical in nature. A mid-level official assumes responsibility for speaking on behalf of the group, leaving almost no opportunity for female and male citizens to speak, let alone meaningfully engage with their elected representatives and decisions affecting their lives. Even at community/village level, hierarchical power structures prevail: the President is the most important member in the committee and the training that partners have conducted has primarily been given to the president reinforcing his power and control. This appears to limit the ownership over decisions for others.

At community/village level, there is now acceptance that women can be part of community discussions and hold leadership positions. However, this has largely happened because the communities have been instructed that women are needed to receive state benefits. There has been no change in the beliefs and attitudes which underpinned the exclusion of women from decision making spaces, which is apparent from the continuing unequal share in domestic workloads and the control of women's mobility by men. Consequently, many of the women have come to see the local fora as primarily a mechanism to raise financial capital rather than the space for citizen organisation.

The structure of village level fora also prevented inclusion. A person only becomes a member of the VDC when they are married, therefore the younger and unmarried voices of the community are not necessarily included. Additionally, women with young children struggle to attend meetings, let alone participate. There is also evidence that only one member of the household will attend meetings. This raises issues of representation.

The women's interpretation of their own success was

limited primarily to material benefits that they have received as a result of participating within the spaces. There have been clear material improvements within the women's lives as a result of their participation within the decision-making fora. This introduction of individual financial rewards and responsibilities runs the risk of introducing new power dynamics into the groups and communities, which can affect women's participation within the spaces.

In summary, the act of participating within any public space has altered the power dynamics in the communities; previously it was culturally unacceptable for women to participate in any decisions regarding community life. Despite these changes many communities are still resistant to women's participation and the women in the research report being verbally harassed as a result of participating in different spaces; and despite some individual successes the underlying social norm regarding women's position within the home is still prevalent. Until women's participation is truly accepted by men as a woman's right, men's acceptance will always be conditional, often based on the women's ability to bring material benefits to the family. Given the lack of control that women have to ensure that the state acts on their requests, projects are potentially setting women up to fail. Male acceptance of their participation needs to be much more actively tackled. Additionally the women have been instrumentalised by men in many cases to secure access to state benefits. Thus, it is unclear if the issue that women are advocating for are actually what they as women prioritise. This is an important point for programming because indicators such as 'the number of women's proposals accepted by local governments' will fail to measure change accurately, as they could really be the men's proposals.

Key recommendations

- Precede empowerment programmes with an analysis of the political landscape, social norms and gender equality/power relations to select spaces that meet women's needs on a personal, legal and social level.
- Design programmes that respond to women's needs and that resonate with the community, to avoid tokenistic inclusion. Programmes should tackle the underlying gender inequality that facilitates exclusion of women from decision making.
- Challenge spaces/decision-making bodies that are disempowering, or avoid engaging with them and de-facto legitimising their position.
- Consistently and repeatedly challenge harmful attitudes and beliefs.
- Design programmes that consider women's logistical as well as social realities, and consider what tangible

supports might enable women to participate regularly, effectively and without negative consequence in community decision-making.

- Create and support safe-spaces within which women can take the first steps towards empowerment, including leaving the home and building their self-confidence and public speaking abilities.
- Support training and awareness raising programmes for all women, to build women's confidence and empower them with the tools they need to resist disempowerment in the private and public spheres.
- Promote a culture/structure where the women meet collectively on a regular basis.
- Acknowledge that success looks different for everyone, but be uncompromising in challenging the barriers to women's full participation and empowerment.

- Consider providing some material support to women to allow them to attend decision-making fora, either to support them with transport costs or to alleviate the pressure associated with childcare.
- Actively engage men and the wider community before and during participation programmes.

This report is supplemented by two additional country case study reports, one on Democratic Republic of Congo and one on Nicaragua. The findings emerging from these three studies were further analysed and the overall findings are presented in an overview report, "Pushing the Boundaries: Understanding Women's Participation and Empowerment."

1. Introduction to the research



Women working in their rice paddy fields in Odisha, India.
Photo: Justin Kernoghan

1. Introduction to the research

From 2012 to 2015, Trócaire conducted a multi-country research project to deepen understanding of participation and empowerment at the community levels. The research project aimed to improve policy and practice around participation and empowerment, especially related to women's participation in decision-making spaces and on decision-making that affected their own lives. It did this by interrogating assumptions regarding women's empowerment, including the perception that the barriers for women to participate resulted from women's lack of confidence and their low skill-set and knowledge.

1.1 Background to the research

Gender Equality and Governance and Human Rights represent two of the five strategic programme areas under Trócaire's 2012-2016 Strategic Plan. Both programmes address issues of citizen participation as key to empowerment, but they conceive the relationship between participation and empowerment in different ways. For the Gender Programme, empowerment is the end goal, while for the Governance programme empowerment is the mechanism to achieve participation. Against this background, in 2012, Trócaire initiated a three year research project in order to better understand programming on women's participation in decision making structures at community level and how it interacts with empowerment and political engagement across the two programme areas.¹ The project focused on women's participation in decision making spaces in three selected countries: India, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Nicaragua, with a view to informing future programming and policies with evidence based research findings and robust analysis.

An initial literature review of available secondary research on women's participation was conducted to identify the gaps in existing research and this review provided the basis for building the analytical framework for the research. The review explored the key concepts of participation, empowerment and the spaces where individuals participate

at community level, and it identified two overriding issues around participation. First, women's voices were largely absent from the literature, and their perspectives and views not adequately captured; and second, existing research looks predominantly at participation in formal political structures, particularly at the national level.

Far less evidence or research was available regarding the promotion of women's participation within their communities.² A 2015 review of literature and learning on these topics from the Overseas Development Institute concluded that the process through which women's participation becomes meaningfully able to influence decisions is still a 'black box' with limited understanding of what happens in informal spaces and how this is of value to women and gender equality agendas (Domingo, 2015).

A mapping of Trócaire's international programmes revealed that the majority of Trócaire's work supporting women's participation happened at the grassroots level and focused on supporting community mobilisation through organising and training. Staff surveyed reported a perception that the barriers for women to participate resulted from women's lack of confidence and their low skill-set and knowledge. Correspondingly, a core assumption prevailed that working to address these issues would enable women to participate and exercise influence over decisions affecting their lives or that of their community. Broadly, the causes of women's marginalisation in political processes at all levels were perceived by staff to be rooted within the women themselves.

Against this contextual background, the research focused on what enables women to participate and exert influence in informal community decision-making spaces. A participatory methodology was designed to prioritise women's views and experiences, to understand how participation happened, how this supported women's empowerment, and, how empowerment enabled more effective participation.

1 This research did not look at other gender mainstreaming strategies or gender as a cross cutting issue. Instead, it looked at three programmes – two of them dedicated Governance and Human Rights Programmes and one of them a dedicated Gender Based Violence Programme, as the main focus was on ensuring a better understanding of participation in decision making structures and how Trócaire and its partners understand and support 'empowerment'.

2 Notably, in the time that has lapsed since the research started, new materials have been published by Oxfam and the Institute of Development Studies regarding the importance of working with and listening to women at community level, to understand the complexity of their lives. See Overseas Development Institute (Pilar Domingo et al), "Women's voice and leadership in decision-making Assessing the evidence," March 2015, available at <http://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/9627.pdf>; Duncan Green/Oxfam, "The Raising her Voice Global Programme," January 2015, available at <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/the-raising-her-voice-global-programme-338444>

The following section (1.2) provides an overview of the analytical framework within which the research was conducted, by explaining the understandings of participation and empowerment employed. Section 1.3 provides an overview of the research methodology and background information regarding Trócaire's work in India. Section 1.4 describes the context in which this work takes place. Sections 2 & 3 present the key research findings, and consider the relationship between participation and empowerment by looking at the women's individual journeys and the barriers and enablers they encountered. Finally, the findings consider the collective experiences of the women within the spaces. Section 4 analyses these findings to draw conclusions regarding how power is manifested and changed within participatory programmes, and the extent to which it can be transformed. The findings of this report, along with those of two other country reports, contributed to an overview report entitled "Pushing the Boundaries: Understanding Women's Participation and Empowerment."

1.1.1 Objectives of the research

The purpose of the research was to bring women's voices and experiences to the fore to inform in a usable and practical way the issues to be addressed in programming for women's participation and empowerment. The research aimed to deepen understanding of participation and empowerment at the community levels in order to improve the policy and practice, especially related to women's participation in decision-making spaces, and in particular around decision-making that affected their own lives.

Specifically this research aimed to:

- Map and understand the spaces where women were able to participate and their purpose for the women and the wider community;
- Explore the barriers and enabling factors for women's participation in public decision making spaces at the community and local/district arenas;
- Investigate Trócaire's strategies to enable women to participate in decision-making spaces, to capture learning and identify good practice and the challenges in Trócaire's programmes;
- Explore the effects of participation in these spaces on individual women's lives and the communities they live in, including understanding better how empowering it is and what changes it enables for women.

1.2 Analytical framework: Participation, Space, Power & Empowerment

The research was specifically interested in how participation contributes to processes of empowerment and the reduction of oppressive power relations between men and women, and between citizens and the state. The initial literature review on women's participation identified multiple, and sometimes vague, definitions and understandings of participation and empowerment. Thus, an analytical framework was developed to guide this research, which defined three core concepts: participation, space and power.

Drawing on the work of Gaventa (2004) and the concept of 'citizenship participation', an approach that reflects Trócaire's rights based approach, participation is understood as the desire to create new opportunities for citizens to gain the power to influence community decisions. The goal is "the collective and participatory engagement of citizens in the determination of the affairs of their community" (Dietz, 1987). Citizen participation creates opportunities for participation to support empowerment by involving typically excluded individuals and groups in decision-making forums to influence issues that affect their lives, and giving access to power for those who are so often marginalised. The process, experience and nature of citizen participation varies widely between communities and is determined by the women and men in each different context.

To situate participation within lived experiences the research draws on Cornwall's (2002) seminal work on 'spaces'. This theory regards participation as a spatial practice that occurs in bounded yet permeable arenas. Cornwall's taxonomy of spaces provides a framework for the research to explore what concrete opportunities there are for participation: where the space is and who created it, what rules govern each space and how these rules affect access to the space, who can participate, and who makes the decisions within each space.

The taxonomy divides spaces into three types, which provides a tool to map the different spaces in each context and understand where participation can take place, and who has the power to control the space and set the rules for who may or may not join, speak and be heard.

- **Closed spaces:** these spaces are difficult to enter. The rules ensure that only specific actors can enter the spaces, often because they hold a specific role or have a particular type of experience. Within these spaces decisions are taken only by the actors allowed access to these spaces and are made behind closed doors (for example, the law courts, cabinet, boards of trustees). They are established within Government machineries or by specific professions or organisations.



- **Invited spaces:** these are spaces created by agencies external to the community (such as local or district government or Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)) in which people are invited to participate; the rules are set by the agencies that create them. They are often constructed to be open and to include people usually excluded from more formal closed spaces; they are designed to give new opportunities, often to women, to participate in decision-making (for example village planning committees, parent teacher associations, water user groups, women's groups). 
- **Claimed/organic spaces:** these are spaces created by the people themselves, often to build unity and to challenge power holders; they are united around a common cause. These are collective and popular spaces run by people themselves, where the rules of entry and behaviour are set by them. They can be open to all or focused on specific groups such as refugees, the elderly, women or youth groups. They can be ad hoc or established, long or short term (for example lobbying groups, protest groups, self-help groups addressing urgent service gaps). 

Some spaces are fluid: they may begin as organic and later be transformed into invited spaces, especially when outside agencies begin to support the work. They may start as invited spaces and later become more organic, such as when projects come to an end. Closed spaces are usually much more fixed in nature.

Recognising that participation does not occur in a vacuum but as part of the social world where power dynamics shape the boundaries of action, the analytical framework drew on debates about the ubiquitous and complex nature of power and domination. These debates facilitate an understanding of the potential that spaces, and women's participation in these spaces, provide for influencing decision-making and supporting the transformation of power relations. Four types of power were identified:

- **'Power over'** is the most commonly discussed form of power and refers to domination, control and repression to varying degrees. This form of power is regarded as a negative force that controls the oppressed person's ability to take action.
- **'Power within'** is the internal capacity that all humans possess; without this all other types of power are not possible. Self-confidence and self-worth are regarded as measures of 'power within.'
- **'Power to'** refers to the unique potential of every person to be able to take action to influence their world and can be considered as the visible manifestation of 'power within.'

- **'Power with'** refers to the power created through collective action, where the whole is greater than the sum of the individuals.

Power is understood as complex, negotiable and responsive to peoples' actions, although the pervasive nature of 'power over' in relation to both male and female relations and relations between the citizen and the state is recognised as real and often resistant to change.

The research defined **empowerment** as a process rather than a state of being: "a political and material process which increases individual and group power, self-reliance and strength" (Ferguson, 2004, 1). Empowerment is understood as a process of pushing against the boundaries of power to shape new fields of possible action; it is also the outcome of this process which sees shifts from oppressive 'power over' relations to more fluid power relations where changes can occur and power can be negotiated through the increase in the three forms of transformational power (power within, power with and power to).

One might envision a continuum of power relations on which domination forms one end-point. At the opposite end would be the fluid power relation defined by social boundaries that are understood by all participants and that allow the maximum possible space, not only for action within, but also effective action upon the boundaries themselves. (Hayward, 1998, 21)

This analytical framework allows for an exploration of how far participation promotes women's empowerment and contributes to a decrease in exclusive male and state domination (power over) to a situation where power can be negotiated by and with women to address their immediate and long term needs.

There are different purposes and objectives associated with promoting changes in women's power and it is important to clarify where the current approaches to women's empowerment within Trócaire and the NGO sector sit. At one end of the spectrum proponents of empowerment argue that if women can be brought in to participate in existing structures, through making changes to both external and internal constraints, then they will have the power to influence decisions that directly affect their lives and interests. This approach aims to improve women's lives by integrating them into existing decision-making and other structures from which they have previously been excluded. The purpose is to increase their access to services, resources and decisions by building their confidence, self-esteem and understanding. At the other end of an empowerment spectrum it is argued that to achieve transformational change women need to do more than work within existing structures, they need to be aware of, understand and challenge the causes - not only the symptoms - of their inequality and exclusion. Transformational change requires challenging existing social norms and the structures of inequality that disempower them, at every level from the

household to the national. It requires confidence and self-esteem but also an understanding of the structural causes of their exclusion and working to address these through collective action. Women's inequality is understood to rest as much in structural barriers as in women's lack of confidence and self-belief.

These concepts provide the conceptual structure for the report and enable the analysis of the very different experiences of the women in the three diverse research contexts. While the aims of different empowerment programmes may differ and sit in different places along a continuum - from working within the status quo to pushing the boundaries - in practice the work shares many methods and approaches. While each end of the spectrum is rooted in very different understandings of empowerment and each has different overall goals and often uses different methodologies, there are nevertheless commonalities between them in practical programming.

1.3 Methodology

A qualitative methodology, that places emphasis on listening to women's voices through participatory tools, was developed for this research to ensure that women, communities, local organisations, Trócaire and the wider development sector would learn from the research process as well as the overall findings.

A researcher and external adviser were appointed in May 2012 to ensure that the research was carried out with the necessary analytical rigour. The research process was a collaborative effort between Trócaire country staff, chosen local organisations and Trócaire technical programme teams in head office. Data collection and analysis was conducted in each of the three case-study countries by local partner organisations with the support of the Trócaire country office and the Research Officer. This approach aimed to ensure that the research encouraged reflection and change within programmes and also provided local partner organisations with an opportunity to build their capacity in conducting participatory research, which would in turn strengthen their organisations and increase their understanding of the communities and women they work with.

1.3.1 Sample selection

Sample selection began with the selection of the three case study countries. Within each case study country, partner organisations that were part of Trócaire's 'Governance and Human Rights' or 'Gender Equality' programmes were chosen, and within these programmes, a sample of

communities and women programme participants were selected for inclusion in the research.

Country selection

Trócaire country offices interested in participating in the research submitted expressions of interest and a short list of 6 countries was selected based on the following criteria:

- Representation of Trócaire's geographical spread;
- Diversity of strategies on increasing women's participation;
- Representation of Governance and Human Rights and Gender Equality programmes ;
- Commitment to undertaking research.

While the original research plan intended to research four case study countries, financial constraints meant that, ultimately, researching only three countries was feasible. In addition to the criteria outlined above, the research team considered practical barriers/enablers associated with potential case study counties, including commitments within the country, resources available to undertake the research and availability of programme staff.

India was interesting because it was perceived by Trócaire staff to be an example of a programme that was strong in gender mainstreaming.

The Governance and Human Rights programme

Trócaire's Governance and Human Rights programme in India was initiated in 2009, but built on existing work started in 2006 which focused on building the capacities of communities to advocate for the realisation of their rights, to access government schemes and provisions, to actively participate in local decision-making processes and to hold the government accountable to the development interests of tribal groups, Dalits,³ women and other marginalised people. The programme aims to address the causes and consequences of citizens not claiming access to pro-poor policies which enshrine rights of work, pensions and housing for eligible members of the Gram Sabha.⁴ It also aims to address ongoing marginalisation of women and tribal populations through specifically targeting them in the programme.

Local organisations

Trócaire works in partnership with organisations indigenous to the countries and communities in which it works. In India,

3 Dalit is a designation for a group of people traditionally regarded as 'untouchable' in the Indian caste system.

4 A description of the local power structures. Including the Gram Sabha, is given in section 1.4, below.

two local organisations were selected for study on the basis of the following criteria:

- Ongoing implementation of strategies to encourage women's participation in decision making spaces at the community level;
- Commitment to participatory principles;
- Demonstrable belief that programme strategies will provide learning for other programmes;
- Willingness to dedicate time to conducting the research;
- Regular engagement with target communities.

Final selection of partners that met the above criteria was also guided by logistical and financial constraints and opportunities.

The two micro-level partner organisations that were selected, Society for Education, Animation and Rural Care of Health (SEARCH) and Boipariguda Khetra Samiti (BKS), were chosen because they both worked in the Koraput region within the state of Odisha and were working at the community level. Koraput is one of the poorest regions in Odisha and is home to a high number of indigenous communities. In keeping with the cultural system in Koraput, women actively participate in the economic activities and are relatively mobile but do not have access to community decision-making processes, which made it an interesting region to review. Both organisations started working as direct partners with Trócaire in 2009 but had previously been indirect partners in a programme that began in 2006. During this earlier programme, they were part of a network of organisations that had established village development committees (VDC) for the community and self-help groups (SHG) for women. The VDC aims to mobilise communities to assert their rights and participate in the local governance processes (including the Gram Sabha and the Palli Sabha, described in section 1.4). The SHG is intended to provide women with an increased and independent income source. The groups are described in greater details in the section that follows.

BKS

BKS was formed in 1959. Since 2003, when BKS undertook an organisational review, the organization has been working for the promotion of tribal artisans, village industries development, civil society development, food security, sanitation and environment, and HIV.

In the programme that BKS has worked on with Trócaire since 2009, its objective has been to strengthen the capacity of the local communities, civil society organisations and Panchayat Raj Institutions to enhance the effectiveness of Governing Institutions to promote democratic processes and livelihood securities to poor women, Tribal people and Dalits. BKS has implemented a number of strategies to achieve this including:

- Creating spaces at village, block and district levels for citizen participation.
- Building the capacity of leaders of these spaces by training on their right to access various government schemes with a particular focus on the work scheme (NREGA).⁵
- Encouraging women's participation in Palli Sabha and Gram Sabha (local governance structures).
- Implementing measures for equal participation of women in the VDC committees and female only self-help group to encourage savings and loans.

SEARCH

SEARCH was established in 2002 by a Catholic priest. Due to this religious link, SEARCH was affected by the 2008 violence between Hindus and Christians in Odisha⁶ and SEARCH was restructured as a secular organisation. SEARCH has 11 staff members and works in 73 villages in the Boipariguda block of Koraput district. The overall objective of the programme is: to strengthen the village and block level civil society organisations so that these organisations can implement long term programmes by availing of existing local resources within the villages and Panchayat Raj Institutions for food security and the safeguarding of the right to good governance.

SEARCH uses over 25 different strategies to achieve these objectives including:

- Creating community based organisations (CBO) in the form of village development committees that support citizens to claim their rights and participate in the local governance processes, and women only self-help groups to encourage savings and loans. Panchayat and block level networks of these CBOs have also been created.

5 The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 2005 (NREGA) - later renamed as the "Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act" (MGNREGA) - is an Indian labour law and social security measure that aims to guarantee the 'right to work'. It aims to ensure livelihood security in rural areas by providing at least 100 days of wage employment in a financial year to every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work.

6 Fighting took place between Christian and Hindu communities within the area, during which SEARCH's offices were attacked.

- Supporting these civil society groups through leadership training and accompaniment.
- Engaging with authorities through social audits, use of the Right to Information Act, rallies, training and advocacy.
- Supporting women's participation through building the capacity of the SHG members by training them on human rights, providing support for the development of business plans, and training on enterprise development.

Both projects assume that supporting women's economic empowerment will lead to increased and more effective participation of women in different public decision making spaces and that the Panchayat Raj Institutions will include women's needs and priorities in development plans.

The issues that the organisations are trying to address through this programme are very diverse, ranging from ineffective community based organisations to lack of sufficient medical care and education. The only specific barrier to women's participation that is mentioned in their project documentation is male manipulation of income sources. There is no recognition of structural gender inequality and the affect it has on women's participation or specific strategies to address this beyond training on human rights. The programme has chosen to measure the impact of its work on women's participation through quantitative targets around the number of women participating.

Working with local partner organisations had both strengths and weaknesses. Some of the key strengths observed during this research included the following:

- Data was interpreted by teams that had expert knowledge of the local situation;
- Local organisations learned from the process and were able to refine their methodologies and internalise the data ensuring that the research had practical applications at local level;
- The research process itself built staff capacity in research that supports better programming;
- Trust between the staff and the women that participated in the research was conducive to honest and open dialogue;
- Ongoing data collection was possible because it was integrated into the project intervention;
- Data collection was less costly.

Some of the key weaknesses included the following:

- Staff members were not trained researchers and thus required support and accompaniment to build these skills;
- Inherent bias, however minor, regarding project interventions is assumed to exist;
- Some staff members had limited knowledge and experience of working on gender equality;
- Some of the staff members were men, which can compromise the willingness of female participants to fully disclose their feelings and experiences.

Communities

Two geographical communities in which each partner organisations and Trócaire Governance and/or Gender programmes were operational were selected for detailed observations. These communities were selected based on a stratification exercise of the six rural communities in locations that SEARCH and BKS work in, based on a ranking on socio-economic factors and regional contexts, including: access to infrastructure, levels of violence, unemployment rates, migration and quality of schooling. BKS selected the communities of Kharaguda and Khandiguda and SEARCH selected the communities of Kirsal and Kathapada.⁷ A key strength of working with communities selected by partner organisations was their robust knowledge of the local context and how it compares to other locations within their target area, which is important given the dearth of statistical data at the community level.

Participants

Both of the partner organisations (SEARCH and BKS) have established groups within the communities in which they work, including village development committee (VDC) for the community and a self-help group (SHG) for women. Following a mapping of these spaces, two partner created mapping of these spaces (VDC & SHG) and one Palli Sabha were selected for detailed observation, and women members of each of these groups were selected as participants for this research.

Within each community the VDC is run by an executive committee. The women that participated on that committee were selected as one research group. This ranged between 4-6 women per community.

All the women in the SHGs were approached and a voluntary sample of 7 women per community formed the second research group.

⁷ One village that was initially selected was subsequently removed from the project, due to limitations with translation of the many languages spoken there. It was replaced with another community which was comparative in its ranking.

Each of these research spaces/groups comprised six to eight women, and the total number of project participants was 42. Consent was obtained from participants at the outset.

As explained in more detail below, the research took place over two phases. The second phase of data collection focused on individual experiences of women and a smaller sample was selected to facilitate this approach. Two women from each of the research groups in the four geographical communities volunteered for this second phase. Due to time limitations, data was collected from these women through interviews. Furthermore, focus groups were conducted with male members of the VDC executive committee; interviews were conducted with the male presidents of the VDCs; and interviews with local elected representatives were also conducted during this second phase of data collection in an effort to triangulate and validate the findings from the first phase of data collection.

1.3.2 Data Collection

Data collection was conducted using a variety of research methods appropriate to the specific needs and contexts of the local communities. This was guided by an overall research methodology framework, which comprised six focus areas (Spaces, Barriers, Performance, Success, Changes and the Significance of Participation), designed to respond to the three key research objectives outlined in section 1.1.

The first phase reviewed four focus areas (spaces, barriers,

performance, and successes) and was conducted with all of the selected groups of women using participatory tools.

The second phase, which engaged with two women from each of the research groups, dealt with two focus areas (changes and what participation means) from the perspective of individual women's lives.

This data was collected between February 2014 and January 2015, over four research visits to minimise the strain on the partners existing workload and facilitate accompaniment by a local consultant. Data collection was conducted by the staff of BKS and SEARCH with supervision from either Trócaire's programme staff in India or the Lead Researcher. Each round was preceded by a period of training and piloting, in pilot communities, followed by an intensive period of data collection.

Data collection training included a suite of tools and the principles of participatory rural appraisal (PRA). SEARCH and BKS then selected suitable tools to explore each focus area for their local context. See table below.

The tools used during phase one were run with the research groups in all four of the communities. The staff members explained the purpose of the activity, asked the women for their permission to take photographs, notes and an audio recording of the session and provided a brief demonstration of the tool. In the second phase interviews were conducted by the local consultant with the women.

Thematic area	Question	Tools applied
Phase One		
Spaces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Who created the space? What is the interface between different types of spaces? What are the rules governing entry into each space? Who can access each different space? 	Venn diagrams
Barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are the barriers for women entering each space, and for different groups of women? What is the most limiting barrier? How do these barriers change in relation to the context of the space? 	Problem trees
Performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How well prepared are the women for participation? How well can women perform in each space? What do the rules allow? What enables or constrains women? 	Photo prompted discussions
Success	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What is being achieved by work on the different spaces: what is being influenced, what is changing, and what encounters with decision-makers have happened? What enables success? Are there essential components for success? How do women themselves define success? 	Focus groups
Phase Two		
Changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What changes have taken place in women's lives as a result of participation in these spaces? 	Interviews
What participation means to women	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What does participation mean for women? 	Interviews

1.3.3 Data Analysis

Each of the activities was recorded using voice recorders, with the permission of participants. These were transcribed and translated into English by the local consultant responsible for supervising data collection in India. The data was then analysed by the lead researcher using the qualitative analysis software, “Nvivo,” through a coding and categorisation process. The findings were shared with the partner organisations and local consultant, and through a collective reflection process these findings were validated to ensure local knowledge was incorporated.

1.3.4 Challenges & Limitations

There were a number of challenges in India that affected the data collection:

- **Language:** Indigenous communities speak different languages. The research was conducted in Oriya and while this language is generally understood, the research participants were not fluent in it. In fact one of the research communities initially selected was replaced with another after the initial piloting, as Oriya language comprehension was not sufficient to provide accurate data.
- **Translation of data:** The data was translated from Oriya to English by the local consultant, who was not

a professional translator. This may have affected the quality of the transcription.

- **Access:** It was very difficult to access the communities in the monsoon season. Consequently, the planned data collection for the barriers step was delayed.
- **Limitations in data sets:** The second phase of the research was not conducted over the same period or using the same tools as was done in the other two case study countries (DRC and Nicaragua) due to programme and research time constraints. Therefore less data was collected about women’s individual changes.
- **Sample size:** The sample size surveyed was small (42 women), and it covered only four rural communities in one region of India. Thus, the results are not representative of the wider Indian population. They are nevertheless indicative of trends in regions that are similar contextually, and lessons learned can be extracted for use across the country and beyond.

1.4 Socio-political context: India

The particular political and economic context is important to understand to contextualise the research findings. The research was carried out in the state of Odisha, in the



Women at Gramsabha, Koraput.

Koraput district. Given the size and diversity of India the following section, where possible, focuses on the state of Odisha and where possible the Koraput district.

Odisha is a state in eastern India, on the Bay of Bengal. It has a population of approximately 40 million making it the 11th largest state in India. It is a very geographically diverse state, featuring coastal plains, mountains and central plateaus. There are two principle factors which shape the opportunities for women's participation within the research context: ethnicity and political structure.

Odisha has one of the highest percentages of tribal population with 26% of the total population from schedules tribes, the official designation for ethnic groups that were historically marginalised and discriminated against (Census of India, 2011). There are 62 different tribal groups in Odisha, each with their own unique identity, customs and rituals. The district of Koraput (the research site) is home to a very high concentration of tribal people, constituting more than 51% of the total population. Traditionally tribal and Dalit communities have been excluded from mainstream politics and political participation.

India has one of the most advanced systems for local democracy with decentralisation existing down to the village level. This political structure provides, at least in theory, opportunities for women and men to influence decisions affecting their lives from the grassroots to the national level.

1.4.1 Decentralised political structure

In India grassroots level democracy is established through the constitution. The Panchayat Raj Institutions are intended to be units of self-government that extend to the village level. This system of self-governance has existed in some form for at least 3,000 years. After Independence the government attempted to reform the system but until 1992 the reforms had repeatedly failed to effectively incorporate people's participation in these institutions. The 73rd and 74th Amendments aimed to rectify this by strengthening people's participation through regulating and standardising the Panchayat Raj system. Under these amendments:

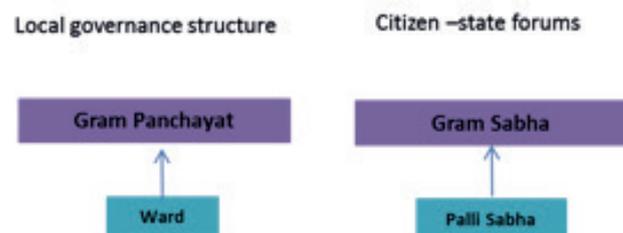
- A three tiered structure of the Panchayat was implemented with the Gram Panchayat at the lowest level of administration, functioning at the village level; the Panchayat Samiti operating at the block level; and the Zilla Parishad operates at the district level, the highest of these three levels.
- All of these bodies comprise elected representatives from the respective territorial constituencies, through elections held every 5 years.

The research focuses on participation at the community level and therefore concentrates on the Gram Panchayat. State law dictates the specifics of the functioning of the Panchayat Raj institutions. Originally the 73rd Amendment

Act did not extend to the Scheduled Areas (areas in which schedule tribal groups live) but the provisions were extended to the Scheduled Areas in the Provisions of Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996. States were obliged to implement the law into their existing legislation, which was done through the 1997 Orissa Gram Panchayat Amendment Act.

A Gram Panchayat is set up in a 'Grama' (village) of no less than 2,000 and no more than 10,000 inhabitants. In reality many Grama comprise a number of distinct communities or hamlets rather than a singular village, and each Grama is then divided into wards. Members of the Gram Panchayat are elected directly by the village people for a term of five years. These members are called ward members and are elected by each ward, with one-third of seats reserved for female candidates. There are usually between 7-17 wards in any Gram Panchayat. The Sarpanch is the elected head of the Gram Panchayat. Ward members are to represent the needs of the community at monthly meetings of the Gram Panchayat, preside over ward level consultations and represent their community's plans at Panchayat level consultations.

The Panchayati Raj system (PRI) is based on the principles of citizen participation. The Gram Panchayat is supposed to be monitored by the Gram Sasam (adult population of the 'village') through the Gram Sabha, a twice yearly meeting of the population where all plans for the work of the Gram Panchayat are placed before the people. Within Odisha there are also Palli Sabha meetings (explained below in section 2.1.1), constituting all eligible voters within their constituent wards and these are mandated to happen once a year and are to feed into the Gram Sabha.



1.4.2 Economics

In Odisha, the proportion of people living in poverty fell from 57.2% in 2004-05 to 32.6% in 2011-12, a decline of 24.6 percentage points. However, it is still well above the national average of 21.9% (Singh, 2013). Within the research study district of Koraput more than 80% of the people live below the poverty line. The majority of people (circa 85% of the population) depend on multiple sources of income for their livelihoods, such as agricultural work, daily wage labour and migration (SEARCH, 2010). Poverty has been consistently more prevalent amongst scheduled castes and tribes (Kumar, 2004).

1.4.3 Conflict

The rise of Maoist groups within Odisha has seen outbreaks of violence as the state moves to counteract the movement. The state officially branded Maoists as 'terrorists' in 2009 and banned their activities. Despite this, many are attracted to the movement. The Communist Party of India-Maoist aims to overthrow what it calls "the semi-colonial, semi-feudal system under the neo-colonial form of indirect rule, exploitation and control...through armed agrarian revolutionary war" (as cited in South Asian Terrorism Portal, 2015). Within Odisha, tribal groups have been actively recruited by Maoists groups while others have sided with the state, leading to inter-tribal conflict. These groups were not active in the communities in which this research took place.

There have been numerous outbreaks of conflict between the police and Maoist groups over the last decade, with Maoists raiding ammunition supplies and police rooting out hideouts used by the groups. The Maoists have worked to undermine the PRI by asking people to boycott elections and not attend Gram Sabhas. In the most recent Panchayat elections in 2012, the Maoists chose to contest unopposed seats. Some reports claim they forcibly prevented other potential candidates from contesting the seats. They won in 30 blocks and 32 Maoist Sarpanches were elected unopposed in those blocks (Mohanty, 2012).

1.4.4 Women's rights

Health

The Indian constitution prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex. However, in practice, social norms restrict the realisation of the right to non-discrimination. India ranks 135th out of 187 on the 2014 Gender Inequality Index. Gender inequality is most visible from sex selection of children, and the 2011 census found that there were only 914 girls for every 1000 boys in the 0-6 age category. This issue however, is less apparent in tribal communities the region of Koraput had a child sex ratio of 979 girls per 1000 boys.

Gender Based Violence is prevalent in India. Since 2005, domestic violence has been criminalised by law, when perpetrated by males in the same residence, regardless of marital status or the application of different communal family laws. The death of a 23 year-old woman following a gang rape in New Delhi, led to public outcry and the Government of India passed specific 'anti-rape' provisions into the criminal law, via the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act 2013. Rape within marriage is, however, not deemed a criminal offence and the issue of enforcing the laws continues to be problematic. Violence against women is underreported in tribal areas, with one researcher concluding that the police data was so low in contrast with the observed field situation

it was "irrelevant for use in analysing the situation" (Hans, 2014). Alcohol, poverty and low levels of literacy are thought to contribute to women's risk of being subjective to gender based violence.

Access to health care is limited for many women in India and this is especially true within the state of Odisha and the Koraput region. This lack of access is reflected in a high maternal mortality rate in India, and in Odisha an alarming figure of 258 per 100,000 live births compares to a national average of 178 (Sample Registration System, 2013). Access to maternity services is particularly poor within the region of Koraput and especially for Tribal or Dalit women. A study found that only 32 percent of deliveries were conducted by a skilled health professional in this region in comparison to 61 percent in the coastal region of Odisha (Kumar Pustury et al, 2015).

Education

The literacy rate in Odisha is 72.9%. However, this figure is dramatically different for tribal women; the literacy rate for the Schedule Tribes in Odisha significantly increased in the first decade of the 21st century from 23.3% in 2001 to 52.2 % in 2011; therefore adult women and men are now more than likely to be illiterate, which is reflected in the research sample. Despite these positive changes there is still a disparity between female and male literacy rates with 63.7% men and only 41.2% women being literate. In the Koraput district, the literacy rate is lower than the state average at 36% for men and 24.8% among women (Census of India, 2011).

Politics

50% of seats in all of the Panchayat Raj Institutions are reserved for women (rising from a quota of 33% in 2011). The reserved seats are randomly allocated to different wards and rotated with each election. Odisha established reservations prior to the 73rd amendment and as early as 1992 had 28,069 women elected to positions within these institutions (Gochhayat, 2013). The quota system for women in local elections does not exist at the national level and only 12% of seats in parliament are held by women (IPU, 2015).

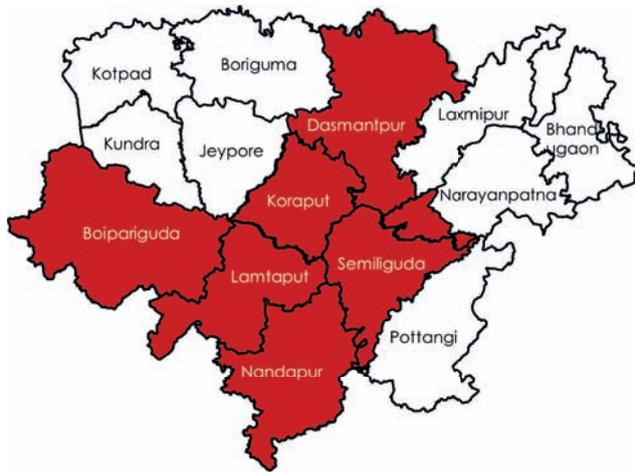
Laws

Equal access to land and property is guaranteed by law but requires that assets are registered. In practice discriminatory attitudes towards women's ownership and control of land in the family and community and discrimination in the allocation of land through state transfer programmes prevent women from realising these rights (Hans, 2014).

Gender norms in tribal societies

Within schedule tribes the gender norms differ to those of the mainstream population; women and men are more likely to take household decisions jointly, with women having a high level of autonomy over small purchases (Mohapatra, 2014). However, just like in the mainstream population,

women are unlikely to be involved in community decisions and have low levels of participation within political structures and systems, including voting.



Map of Koraput District by Blocks.

1.4.5 Communities

All of the four communities that were part of this research are located in rural areas which are difficult to access by road. The main economic activity for all sites is agriculture, with some people owning their own land and others engaging in daily wage labour. The communities are located within one Block - Boipariguda - and in the four different Gram Panchayat's - Chandrapada, Mahuli, Kathapada and Chipakur.

Kathapada is the main village for the Panchayat and therefore is the site for the Gram sabha. It has a population of approximately 400. It has a preschool, a primary and secondary school. It is 18km from the Block Office but is difficult to access and is inaccessible by motorised vehicle during the rainy season.

Kirsal is a hamlet within the Gram Panchyat of Chipakur and home to 31 households. It is 5km from the main village where the nearest schools and other amenities are located. It is difficult to access by road at all times of the year, especially during the rainy season. It is 24km from the Block Office.

Kharaguda is a hamlet. It is 6km from the nearest main road. It has a pre-school and an upper primary school. It is accessible all year round by motor vehicle although the community themselves would walk or cycle when leaving the village.

Khandiguda is a hamlet. It has poor access all year round, with a poor road. It is 23km from the Block office. There is no school in the hamlet and children must go to the nearest village which is 1km away. However, due to the poor quality of the road during the rainy season children do not always attend because flooding make the journey too dangerous.

The average age of women in the sample was 36. The youngest woman was 20 and the oldest was 62. All 42 women were married. 90% of the women had children; on average women had 3 children each. All of the women reported working outside of the home, 81% worked in their family fields and 19% were engaged in small businesses such as selling tea and snacks, although those that worked in agriculture were not necessarily remunerated for doing so. The majority of women were illiterate with only 10% having received some level of primary education and only 4% having attended one or two grades of secondary school. In three of the villages over 90% of the women who participated in the research were illiterate whereas in Kharaguda 40% of the women had either primary or secondary education.

The research findings present the overview of the various opportunities for women to participate in the research sites, and consider the relationship between participation and empowerment by looking at the women's individual journeys and the barriers and enablers they encountered. Finally, the findings consider the collective experiences of the women within the spaces.

These findings refer only to the individuals, groups and communities that participated in the project, and are not intended to be a representation of the wider Indian context. Nevertheless, important lessons can be drawn from the findings to inform planning and programming within this wider context.

2. Findings: Where & how women participate

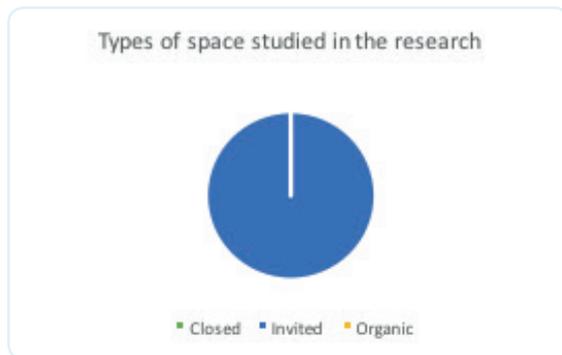


Female participants of the SHG drawing a social map, Kirsal

2. Findings: Where & how women participate

2.1 Introduction to the spaces

In the research sites in India, all the spaces selected from the initial mapping and ranking exercise were invited spaces. Given that decentralisation has been fully rolled out providing citizens with a mechanism to access government at the village level, it is unsurprising that there were a large number of invited spaces.



2.1.1 Invited spaces

The two types of invited spaces that emerged were those created by the partner organisations in the communities and those created by the government as part of the Panchayat Raj institutions.

Government invited spaces

Palli Sabha

The Palli Sabha is a village level space, based on geographical division, designed for the electorates of a ward or multiple wards to influence decisions related to their ward area. (Wards are based on the number of the electorate; one Palli Sabha might correspond to one ward, or it may correspond to more than one ward.) The Palli Sabha is scheduled to take place in February and the discussion results in recommendations for the Gram Panchayat annual plan, which will then be debated by the whole Grama population at the Gram Sabha meeting. The Ward member representing the ward is to preside over the Palli Sabha meeting. The Palli Sabha is designed to make recommendations regarding:

- Selection of beneficiaries to be assisted under different poverty alleviation programmes;
- Development works and programmes to be undertaken in the year;

- The annual budget estimate submitted by the gram-panchayat on estimated expenditure for the year.

Gram Sabha

The Gram Sabha is the next level up in the hierarchy of meetings from the Palli Sabha. It is an inter village meeting of all adults who live in the area covered by a Gram Panchayat, where all plans for the work of the Gram Panchayat are placed before the people. It is mandated to happen at a minimum twice a year. The quorum for Gram Sabha meetings is 10% of the electorate out of which 10% are required to be women. If the quorum is not met the meeting is to be postponed. It is run by the elected Sarpanch, the head of the Gram Panchayat.

The Gram Sabha is designed to allow the population to:

- Approve the plans, programmes and projects for social and economic development before they are taken up by the Gram Panchayat;
- Identify or select persons as beneficiaries under the poverty alleviation or other schemes;
- Consider and approve the annual budget (in fact, the Gram Panchayat has to obtain a certificate of utilization of funds at the Gram Sabha).

There is a considerable degree of power devolved to citizens through the Panchayat Raj Institutions. Citizens have the power to approve the Panchayat's plans and budgets, which provides great opportunity for citizen-led participatory development. However, there are no clear accountability mechanisms to ensure that these powers are exercised by citizens.

Local Partner Organisation invited spaces

Village development committee

In every village that BKS and SEARCH operate in, they have established VDCs. They are intended to mobilise communities to claim their rights and participate in the local governance processes including the Gram Sabha and the Palli Sabha. The VDC is for the whole community and all adults are members; however, the practice is that only one member per household will attend meetings, unless they are part of the committee. Therefore only the male or female head of the household attend, and consequently most people do not attend until they are married.

It is run by an elected committee, of between six and eight members, which meets monthly. The monthly meetings can be attended by all members of the community but in practice most people do not attend. The monthly meetings are intended for the committee to discuss updates on ongoing issues, report back on external meetings and discuss new issues. The partners have insisted that there is at least a 40% representation of women on the committee. The whole community is meant to convene a VDC meeting before Palli Sabha to develop their village plans, which will be submitted in the Palli Sabha.

Self-help group

Self Help Groups (SHG) have also been set up by the partner organisations in all of the village sites. They are for women only and provide women with an opportunity to save money. This group is intended as a support mechanism to improve income security and to overcome the issue of insufficient incomes within families and the manipulation of income by men. The SHG is intended to encourage and support women's participation: "they aim to bring unity among women, to provide a separate space for women where they can express their views without fear of men being around" (SEARCH staff member, Focus Group Discussion).

The SHGs have approximately 10 members each, and there is often more than one SHG in a village. They are run by a secretary and a president, both of whom are elected by the other members. The women decide on the amount of money that they want to save and these savings are deposited into the bank. A woman can then request a loan from the group and an agreed loan repayment plan is created. In Kathapada, Kharaguda and Kirsal, the SHGs are well established, some are between 5-9 years old, while in Khandiguda, the SHG was only established in 2012.



Social map drawn by female participants of the SHG, Kharaguda. Photo: SEARCH

2.1.2 Organic spaces

No organic spaces were mentioned and the partner organisations confirmed that there are no community initiated spaces within the villages that are for women and men. The lack of organic spaces means that the women can only participate in spaces created by others with rules and objectives already established.

2.1.3 Closed spaces

The only closed space that was mentioned by participants is the Parab which is a religious space that only men are



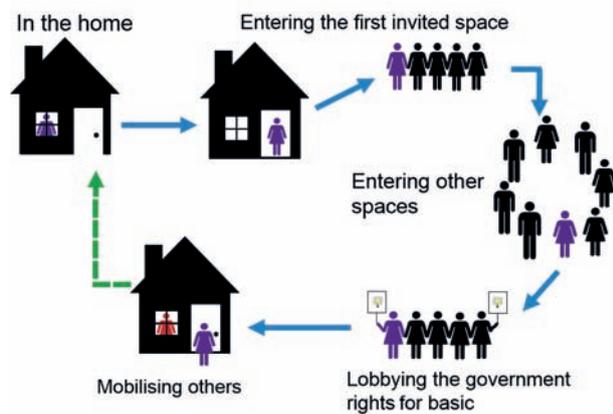
VDC meeting conducted by BKS, Koraput

allowed to enter. Its main duties are organising festivals throughout the year and supervising rituals such as marriages and deaths. As the women did not select this space it was not the focus of this research, and thus there are no specific findings about this space.

With all space types, it is important to note that those individuals/groups responsible for establishing and managing a space are not the only actors that influence how the space operates in practice. Outside actors might also influence outcomes. For that reason, the intended purpose tells us little about the experience that women had when participating in these spaces, and the existence of the spaces does not guarantee participation at all. For that reason, an exploration of women's experiences within these spaces is required so we learn how, in practice, women are able to perform, the success they are able to achieve and the constraints that exist hindering their participation.

2.2 Participation and Empowerment: women's journeys

This section explores the women's experiences within these spaces by specifically looking at their individual journeys of empowerment as a result of participation. All the women surveyed reported some type of empowerment as a result of their participation.



2.2.1 Overview of the journey

Empowerment journeys are not linear; each stage interacts with the others in the journey, some women may skip steps others may have additional steps, others may only reach the first. However, the consolidated data provides an overall model of the process of empowerment as a result of participating. The model helps to provide an understanding of women's experiences and highlights the barriers and enablers to women's participation and empowerment.

Leaving the home

The first step for all women within India is to leave the home. The women repeatedly mentioned that before they participated their interactions were limited to the domestic sphere. At this stage women are active only in the home and have no or little involvement in public decision making spaces. They are engaged primarily in domestic work. While they may work outside the home, they are not part of the community decisions. The majority of women have equal control over decisions within the home. However, their mobility is generally controlled by men and they must ask permission to leave the community and many must ask permission to enter community spaces.

Sanstha [the NGO] told us to form the SHG. Women were not able to go out earlier. We had not seen the Block. We had not seen the Bank. Now we could go to the Block and the Bank without fear.

Participant, Kathapda, Barriers exercise

Additionally it was socially taboo for women to be involved in decision making spaces, which were reserved for men only. At village level, the only community space was the Parab, which was for men only and women did not attend the Palli Sabha or Gram Sabha, unless they had been elected through the quota system.

Participant #1: We wouldn't go. They used to say women would upset men if they came to the meeting.

Participant #2: They used to discuss about buying goats, sheep and collecting money for the annual events.

Participants, Kirsal, Barriers exercise

The women have to take the decision to change this situation and choose to participate. The women can only make this step themselves and they must have sufficient 'power within' and 'power to' be able to make this move. The decision to do so was generally prompted through a request to join an invited space by an NGO. Most of the participants in India started their journeys after the invitation to join one of the partners' projects. This step is not a fixed point in time; rather, it is an ongoing negotiation, supported by the power gained in the other steps, it may be very fraught and continue throughout their journeys.

Entering the first invited space

The women generally joined the VDC and the SHG at the same time, when they were created by the partner organisations. When the VDCs were established, SEARCH and BKS imposed a requirement that women be included on the committee and they worked on gaining acceptance of women's participation from the men. This strategy has supported women to feel that they had the right to attend and participate in community meetings and to take the first step of leaving the house.

Facilitator (F). Now tell us what happened so that now the men understand and allow you to attend meetings?

Woman Participant (W). Now they understand.
How did it happen?

W It was the organisation – BKS- they came and taught people.

F Did they talk to men as well?

W Yes they talked to them also and we women also we learnt, we talked to our men.

Participants, Khandiguda, Barriers exercise

This change did not happen overnight and was the result primarily of requests from Trócaire's partners. This step is very important on their journey as the women are challenging gender norms by entering the public realm. All of the participants reported feeling very nervous and shy initially, often not actually participating but rather attending meetings only.

W For any meeting women will be called. 'Now women's words are given more importance' – they would say.

F Ok. They say this now but were men saying this in the beginning when you formed the VDC?

W No. We would just listen to men then. We would sit on the side.

F Why was it like that in those days?

W They were not allowing us to talk in those days.

Participants, Kirsal, Barriers exercise

The 'safe space' of the women only SHG played a vital role in supporting the women to help overcome barriers that prevent them from entering more formal public spaces such as low confidence and a lack of knowledge.

The group is like mother's house and the VDC is like mother-in-law's house. We can talk about our sorrows and happiness in the SHG meeting.

Participant, Kathapada

As well as a feeling of ownership over the SHG, the women reported feeling comfortable and able to express their opinions in ways that they cannot do in mixed spaces.

W As a group we can talk to others. When we need money we get it from the group.

W We wouldn't have known anything if there was no group.

W We can sit with others. We can talk to others.

Participants, Kharaguda, Performance exercise

Through gaining knowledge, experience and with the security of a safe place to reflect on their lives, the women slowly gained the confidence to express themselves within the VDC.

Coming to the monthly meetings regularly and interacting with the didis [Staff from SEARCH] helped us. We slowly got confidence.

Participant, Kathapada, Barriers exercise

Some women may never go beyond the initial safe spaces; it may provide what they personally need and they may have no interest in greater levels of participation. Others might be prevented from moving beyond this stage as a result of barriers, which will be discussed later in this section. Most participants of this study had remained within the initial informal spaces of the SHG, and to a lesser extent the VDC, because of barriers preventing women from entering the other formal spaces.

Entering other public decision making spaces

Within each community, there are female presidents and secretaries of the SHGs and generally female secretaries of the VDCs. These women were selected to lead by the community, or by other women in the case of the SHG. They were partly chosen because they have fewer domestic burdens and are perceived to be more confident.

F Now tell us about how you select these presidents and secretaries?

W We selected them on the basis of who could speak, who could go to different places.

F Did you ever want to be the president?

(The participants laughed and there was no response)

F Now tell us, your groups are functioning for so many years. But have you ever changed the presidents and secretaries after some years or have you thought about changing them?

W No we haven't done.

F Why?

W Because one has to be able to speak. So we haven't changed them.

Participants, Kharaguda, Performance exercise

Notably then, availability and mobility were given greater weight than leadership abilities. This demonstrates the lack of time that women have due to their heavy burden of domestic work and their limited ability to participate in meetings. For the group leaders, their only experience of participating is as a leader as they were selected when the spaces were initially established. These women have a different experience of participating; having led the groups they have gained greater knowledge, confidence and skills.

Using the confidence they acquired in the initial informal spaces some women then move to actively participate within another space, including formal government created spaces. Only 20-30% of women from each community sample went on to participate in other spaces, those set up by government for the citizens to influence local planning, and this participation is largely confined to physical attendance due to fears of expressing themselves in such a large public gathering.

F Do women feel confident to speak in the group or have fear of speaking?

W No we have no fears of speaking (in the SHG)?

F But in the Palli Sabha you have said you are afraid. Why are you afraid to speak there and not in the group?

W Because there it is a big meeting with lot of people. In the group we are just ourselves. There people from other villages also come to the meeting. There are also big people and we feel shy.

Participants, Khandiguda, Barriers exercise

The women reported the importance of collectively attending these spaces - that they felt stronger together, even if they did not speak at the meetings. Very few women attended the Gram Sabha and, without the collective power with others, the women were reluctant to participate.

F Do you attend the Gramsabha?

W I have never attended.

W I attended once.

W Hardly anybody goes to the Gramsabha.

F Are you interested to attend the Gramsabha?

W I am interested, but you can't go if only two women are prepared to go. There are so many people who will be attending - the Sarpanch, the ward-member and many other people. So a woman will not feel comfortable going there alone. Unless five/six women join we will not feel comfortable.

Participants, Kathapada

Only the women that hold posts within the SHG or VDC had spoken at these meetings the others just attended.

F These are your individual things you spoke about in the Palli Sabha. Did you say anything for the village?

W Yes. We 'got written' about the road and the bridge.

W Also about the Anganwadi worker. There is no health worker to help the pregnant women in the village. We got these things written.

F Who raised issues - road, Anganwadi etc - in the Palli Sabha?

W The men raised them.

F Did women say anything?

W Only Bati spoke. We just sat and listened.

Participant, Khandiguda, Performance exercise

For the leaders the act of presenting their communities needs in these spaces has been empowering but for the rest of the women the act of attending did not lead to any personal changes in their lives.

Lobbying authorities on basic needs

The leaders of the SHG, who are sometimes accompanied by other members of the SHG, have also lobbied the local authorities outside of the official spaces of the Palli Sabha and Gram Sabha by directly targeting key local authorities who have the power to make decisions.

W We have demanded NREGA work through the group. Because there is no work available in the village we have gone to the Block office to demand work.

F How did you decide to take up this issue? Who raised the issue in the group?

W First the President and the secretary suggested and we all agreed. The didis and sirs also gave us the ideas. They showed the way how to go about.

F Who showed you the way?

W Sirs and didis. They visit us regularly and teach us how to go about. So we follow their advice.

Participant, Khtapada, Success exercise

The direct advocacy is led by the president and secretary of the SHG as other women are prevented by their work load.

W We also have work to do. She is the main person.

F Why don't other women go with Laxmi Khara to various offices?

W Sometimes we do go. If we don't have work at the time of going then we go.

Participants, Kirsal, Barriers exercise

The experience of participating in this lobbying is then generally limited to a few women who gain greater experience entrenching the idea further that they are the natural leaders of the groups.

Mobilising other women

Over the last 10 years there has been a steady increase in each of the villages in the number of women attending meetings. In each village, new SHGs have formed and more women have been selected to serve on the executive committee of the VDCs. The women, as part of their SHGs, have mobilised to address issues within their communities. One of the issues that mobilised other women was the issue of alcohol production and consumption: the partners raised awareness about the issues associated with drinking in the SHGs. This resonated with the women and they collectively decided to address the issue. After a meeting of 5 different SHGs, the women took coordinated action to prevent men from drinking in the village.

W We have taken action to stop alcohol in this village. We broke all the alcohol pots.

W All five SHGs of this village came together and sirs also helped and we asked men not to drink and not to prepare alcohol in the village.

Participants, Kathapada, Performance exercise

Beyond the SHGs, many women remain marginalised from any form of decision making space. The Trócaire programmes have not focused on supporting women to mobilise others and those that have tried note the immense difficulties associated with helping women to take the first step on the empowerment journey. The programme has worked to create wider social movements by linking different communities in inter-village structures but membership of

these structures is limited to the Presidents of the VDC and SHG.

2.2.2 Case Studies

The overall steps provide a model but each woman's experience is unique and particular to her life experience and affected by those around her. The individual case studies

that follow illustrate how, just as the spaces are varied and fluid, so too is a woman's journey. This can be best understood by an analysis of the journeys of three individual women involved in the research. These individual case studies provide a deeper understanding of the generalised experienced and present a more holistic understanding of women's participation in the space.

Case study 1

Bati Dhandga Majhi

Bati Dhandga Majhi lives in Khandiguda. She is 40 years old and married with three children aged between 12 and 25. Approximately 15 years ago, she was a ward member. She is now on the VDC committee and a member in a SHG.

Leaving the home

Bati skipped one of the stages in the empowerment journey as she went straight from not participating to being a ward member. She was elected under the India women's reservation system. As a ward member she was obliged to attend Palli Sabha meetings as they could not have taken place without her.

F *Can you remember since when you have been going to the Palli Sabha?*

Bati *Since the time I became the ward member.*

F *How many years that would be?*

Bati *It would be about 15 years.*

Although Bati was elected to be a ward member, when she was in post she had little interaction with the Panchayat office and reported fearing speaking in front of large groups.

When I was the ward member I hadn't seen the Block office in Baipariguda [the location of the block headquarters]. I didn't know where the Block Development Office sat and where the Chairman was. Entering the first invited space

Bati reports that it was only when she joined the VDC and the SHG that she learnt about the Panchayat. Within these spaces she gained knowledge about how the governance system functioned, which she lacked when she was a ward member.

By joining the organisation (BKS) I got to know all this. I got knowledge. We formed the groups and attended meetings, went to different places. Now I can speak which I was not able to do earlier.



Bati Dhandga Majhi, Khandiguda

Through participating in the SHG and the VDC, not only has she gained knowledge but the confidence to speak

to the authorities and in front of different groups of people.

The other day I could talk to the Member of the Legislative Authority. We have the courage now. If we hadn't got this knowledge our body would be shaking while talking to anybody. We are not educated, we haven't learnt the printed letters but we have got knowledge.

Her work with the SHG and the VDC means that she is more mobile than other women because she attends cluster level SHG meetings organised by the government.

F *How many times a month would you estimate you leave the village?*

Bati *Three times.*

F *Where do you go to?*

Bati *Meshaguda, Lenja and Bapaniguda villages to attend SHG meetings.*

Bati does not hold the position of President, Secretary or Treasurer but she is on the VDC committee and is the most active member from the research group. She is known in the community for her participation.

Yes, now they send me to different meetings. They say that I can speak and understand what is being discussed.

Bati must find time to participate on top of her heavy work load.

I get up at 3 o'clock in the morning. I start the day by cleaning the oven (pasting it with cow dung mixed in water) and light the fire to heat the water for bathing. Then I clean the outer courtyard, then the rooms. Then I go to fetch water and take a bath. Then again I go to fetch water for cooking and start cooking. I cook rice, ragi and some vegetable dish. After I finish cooking I clean the cowshed. Then we eat. After eating I go to the field to work. The work varies depending on the season. During agricultural season it is weeding, transplanting, harvesting etc. Or else I go to the hills to collect fuel wood. If I go to the hills to collect fuel wood I return by 3 o'clock. Or if I go to work in the field I return by 5 o'clock. After returning, I go again to fetch water. Then I start cooking again. Once cooking is done I serve food to my children and husband. Then I eat. Then I make the bed for everyone and we go to bed. Again I get up the next morning at 3 o'clock.

Although her workload is very demanding she accepts it as women's burden and responsibility that cannot be changed.

One has to do everything. You cannot change any work. For women all these tasks are important and one has to do it.

She must ask permission from her husband to attend meetings, who allows her to attend only if her domestic duties are attended to. Her participation has been causing tensions recently and her husband has asked her to stop participating.

In the last one year or so my husband is scolding me saying, 'you have been going to meetings for all these years. What have you got? Not even a house?' So I have stopped going to meetings now. Earlier I used to go to every meeting in Baipariguda whenever sirs (staff from BKS) called me.

Entering other spaces and Lobbying the government

Given that Bati was a ward member she had previous experience of attending Palli Sabha and Gram Sabha meetings. However, she still lacked the confidence to express herself openly. Through the knowledge and ongoing participation within the invited spaces, Bati is now confident to speak to any authority. She is the only woman in her village from the research group that has spoken in the official government spaces. Since she joined the VDC and the SHG she has also lobbied the Panchayat through other forums.

We have no fear now. We can go to the Block Development Officer and the collector to demand things. We have got knowledge.

However, her ongoing work commitments and husband's control over her mobility means she is now struggling to attend Palli Sabha meetings.

Bati *The other day Palli Sabha meeting was held but I couldn't go because I had to take the buffaloes for grazing. Both my husband and my son went to the Palli Sabha so I had to take the buffaloes for grazing. A young man met me on the way and seeing me grazing the buffaloes he said that I should have gone to the Palli Sabha as I can speak.*

F *Why didn't tell your husband that you wanted to attend the Palli Sabha?*

Bati *But who would have taken the buffaloes out?*

F *One of them could have taken them out.*

Bati *Yes but they would have scolded me if buffaloes were not taken out and if I had gone to the meeting.*

Mobilising others

Her domestic situation has resulted in her not participating in meetings and therefore unable to mobilise any other women.

Now I know things but I have stopped going to meetings. I go only to some big meetings sometimes.

Case study 2

Laxmi Khara

Laxmi Khara lives in Kirsal. She is 35 years old, is married and has three children ranging from 7 to 15 years. She is the secretary of the VDC and president of the SHG.

Leaving the home

Laxmi, like the majority of the women, had not been to the Palli Sabha or Gram Sabha before the VDC was established, although she had attended a number of ad-hoc meetings convened by the community. In the first meeting Laxmi naturally had the confidence to express her opinion, even though it was contrary to the groups view.

The villagers had a meeting to discuss about the widow's relationship with a man. The meeting was to chastise the woman. But I spoke in the meeting supporting the woman... Yes. That time I was afraid initially. For five minutes I was nervous. Then I spoke.

Entering the first invited space

The VDC was formed seven/eight years ago and Laxmi Khara was elected to join her husband as joint secretary five years ago. She was elected to be the President of the SHG group when it was initiated four years ago. Laxmi is known in the community for being an active participant.

F *You have Laxmi Khara and Laxmi Gadaba as your secretary and president. Tell us, why did you select them?*

W *We selected them because they can speak and go to different places.*

Participant, Kirsal, Performance exercise

Laxmi is one of the most active members of the VDC. In the VDC meetings, she typically organises the women to attend, while the president organises the men to attend.

It is my responsibility to hold monthly meetings of the VDC. If I am not there Laxmi Khara calls people to the meeting. I call the men and she calls the women... Among women it is the Laxmi Khara who is more active. Among men it is me and Mukund Khara. Others are not that active.

President of the VDC, Kirsal, Interview

For Laxmi it has been the repeated experience of participating that has supported her to have the confidence to express herself in any situation.

Now I have attended so many meetings. So I am not afraid.



Laxmi Khara, Kirsal

Laxmi has a supportive relationship with her husband. He is happy with her participation in different spaces and even sends her to represent him when he cannot attend meetings. They also share decision making in the household

I have the final say. Once he was interested to buy a piece of agricultural land. But it was in a faraway village. So I was not happy. I suggested that he look for land nearby and he agreed. We bought the land which was nearby. Whatever I decide to buy like a cooking pot or something like that he agrees. I also agree if he wants to buy something useful like a bicycle.

Entering other spaces and lobbying the authorities on basic needs

Through her role as secretary in the VDC and President in the SHG Laxmi has engaged with the government spaces of the Palli Sabha and Gram Sabha more than any other woman in Kirsal.

I have gone two or three times (to the Palli Sabha) with Malati in the last two/three years.

Laxmi is now able to talk in these meetings and able to lobby the authorities on behalf of her community. For Laxmi, this aspect of her journey has been the most important change as a result of her participation.

Earlier we didn't know about any meetings like Palli Sabha and Gram Sabha and now I can attend all these meetings. Now I can take proposals for roads, tube wells, houses and other things to the Palli Sabha and Gram Sabha.

Laxmi has not only attended the Palli Sabha; she has also presented the demands of the community.

However, she feels that the Gram Panchayat have not listened to their needs and is disappointed with the lack of benefits that they have gained from attending the Palli Sabha.

F *Tell us about the meetings you attended. What did you discuss there?*

Laxmi *We gave an application for a road and a tube-well in the village. We gave it to the Sarpanch.*

F *What did they say?*

Laxmi *He said yes but then he suppressed it.*

Laxmi and the community were so frustrated with the lack of progress in obtaining a tube well that they decided to raise some of the funds themselves and go directly to the local authorities with the money.

As Laxmi is known in the community, she is often elected to be the communities' envoy at the block office.

We had meetings in the village and had given an application in writing for the tube well to the authorities several times but it was not done. Then we decided to go to the Collector. All the villagers asked me to go to the Collector. The villagers collected money. All 24 families gave ten rupees each and gave it to me. I went to the Collector. The Collector said in eight days the tube well will be done. And it was done in eight days.

Laxmi also feels respected in the community for her participation and the trust that people place in her reinforces the confidence she feels to take action.

I have good relationship with the community. They think well of me. People listen to what I say.

Laxmi is the only woman that reported speaking at the Gram Sabha but she, like the other women of Kirsal, finds it hard to attend because to get there they must travel through the forest and there are thieves, who target women.

Laxmi *The Sonu (village male youth) go everywhere. Other men also go.*

F *But why aren't you going?*

W *Because of road problem. There are thieves on the way who snatch away jewelleries from women.*

F *But men are also going and you can go along with them?*

W *They go in their bicycles.*

W *There is a ghat road and there thieves they have snatched earrings and other jewellery*

from women.

W *from women of two villages thieves have snatched away jewellery. So we are scared and don't go.*

Participants, Kirsal, Barriers exercise

Laxmi is still limited by the barriers that exist for all the women despite her confidence and willingness to participate.

For Chipakur meetings we ask men to attend because the road is through the forest. Sometimes we go accompanied by men.

Laxmi is recognised as a leader in the community and is respected and trusted as a result. She was one of the few women who reported that her husband not only supports her participation but also helps with her domestic work load so she can attend meetings.

Yes, he respects me and helps in cooking when I go out to attend meetings. Other people also respect me. Sometimes when I go out they collect money and give it to me because I go out on village work.

Mobilising other women

Laxmi is the exception in her village, she is the person that the other women rely on to lobby the authorities and attend meetings outside the village. She has tried to motivate more women to join her in lobbying the government but struggles

W *They will not go no matter how much you tell them. They would say what would they get by going to the Palli Sabha.*

F *How many of you have attended the Gramsabha?*

W *Just Laxmi Khara from this group.*

F *Why aren't others attending the Gramsabha?*

Laxmi *I ask them but they don't come.*

W *I feel if more women from our village could attend how nice it would be. Now just two of us attend.*

Case study 3

Panmati Khilo, Kathapada

Panmati Khilo is 55. She has 6 children aged between 4 and 18 years, and she has been a member of the SHG for five years.

Leaving the home

The first community event that she attended was a VDC meeting. Prior to that, she had never been involved in any community meetings of any kind.

We were not sitting together, not able to go out. By forming the SHG we could get some work for the village.

Entering the first invited space

Panmati does not require her husband's permission in order to attend village meetings and she attends SHG meetings regularly. She only attends VDC meetings when the whole village is called, which may only be twice a year.

Panmati feels that her confidence has improved as a result of the things that she has learnt from participating in the SHG meetings

F *How did you feel when you first participated in meetings?*

Panmati *I had anxieties about what the sirs and didis (staff from SEARCH) would feel about us, what they would say.*

F *Do you have same anxieties now?*

Panmati *No, no. Now we have no fear. Now we have learnt many things from the sirs and didis. Now women have come forward. Even if a big officer comes we have no fear now... Earlier we didn't know anything. When sirs and didis came to us they gave us knowledge. Now we maintain ourselves clean, take proper bath. Now we don't have many diseases in our bodies.*

She also sees that there has been a change in men in the community in regards to women's participation

Now both men and women have learnt a lot after we joined the (self-help) group. When women learnt many things in the group they shared it with their men and men also understood. Now my husband says, 'oh, now it is women's rule' Now men also say that women are going forward after joining the (self-help) group.
Entering other public decision making spaces

Panmati does not go to meetings outside of the village as she sees this as the responsibility of the leaders of the SHG, and, as a member, she does not need to

concern herself with such things.

I attend only village meetings. Our SHG group meetings are held in the village. I am only member. If one is a president or secretary then one has to go to meetings in Baipariguda and other places.

If she did want to attend a meeting outside the village, she would have to obtain permission from her husband, which can be problematic.

I attend all meetings of the village without asking him. Outside meetings I have to ask him. He generally says yes but sometimes if he is not in a good mood he says no.

Lobbying authorities on basic needs

Panmati has not been involved in any advocacy campaigns regarding the government, but she joined with the other women in the SHGs to address the issue of alcohol abuse.



Panmati Khilo, Khatapada

I was involved with the anti-alcohol campaign, most of us were involved. We campaigned against it, in the whole area, and stopped it.

This issue was particularly important to Panmati because her husband became violent when drunk and used physical violence against her. This has ceased since he has stopped drinking alcohol.

He is in the right track now. He used to drink alcohol. He used to take rice from the house and sell it to drink alcohol. But now he has stopped.

Mobilising other women

Other than the action around alcohol Panmati has not been part of any community movements to address local or national issues. Her aspirations for the future revolve around changes to her family situation.

2.2.3 Summary of the cases

These three case studies provide examples of different women's experiences and how their different experiences direct their journey. Each of the case studies presents a specific type of experience:

Both Bati and Laxmi are leaders. They represent the minority of the women involved in the research. Both of these women reported a natural confidence to take on leadership. However, through participating, mainly in the spaces created by SEARCH and BKS, they have gained confidence and knowledge which supported increases in their 'power within.' They also increased their 'power to' take action to claim their rights. They have both participated and spoken in the government spaces and lobbied the local authorities directly. Of course, within these stories there are differences, as women are limited by various barriers. Laxmi is an exceptional case, with only one or two women per village expressing themselves in the government spaces, and fewer women still interested in mobilising others.

The stories of the majority of women in the research reflect Panmati's story: having left their houses, they are now actively participating in the SHG and attending VDC meetings, sometimes speaking, but not leading.

3. Research Findings: Barriers & enabling factors



Women of the SHG in Khandiguda undertaking a barriers exercise

3. Research Findings: Barriers & enabling factors

This section analyses the barriers the women face along the journey and the enabling factors which support the women to have greater power within their individual lives, drawing on the case studies and wider research data. The majority of barriers stem from the unequal power relations between men and women that exist within the society, the social and political norms that perpetuate those dynamics; and the internalisation of the norms.

3.1 Barriers

3.1.1 Men's control over women's mobility

All participants are required to seek permission from their husbands to participate in local fora. Some husbands grant this permission unconditionally; others do on the condition that domestic duties are completed in advance, and some do not grant it at all. As shown in the case study of Bati, this permission is not irreversible and can be taken away at any point. The issue of control over women's mobility was not specifically tackled in either of the projects. The women themselves did not generally raise the issue as a barrier; rather it was generally accepted by most women and rarely questioned.

If there is work at home and he says no, then one has to understand the situation and not insist on going... Besides, where I would have to go alone and other women are not going, he would ask me not to attend.

Participant, Kharaguda

Domestic physical violence was not an issue that was raised by the participants, potentially because it is an issue that the partners have not raised awareness about and potentially because the research did not specifically focus on the issue, as sufficient protection measures were not in place. However, a number of women specifically referred to incidents of violence and the situation of physical control, indicating that there are high levels of violence in the community affecting women's participation.

3.1.2 Taboo of women in decision making spaces

At the societal level there continues to be resistance from men to women's participation within the meetings, either in the VDC or the government spaces. In the communities reviewed, there were no mixed (female and male)

community meetings before Trócaire's partners established the VDCs. Traditionally men were the sole decision makers on community issues. There has been a quota system in Odisha since 1992, including women within all the tiers of the Gram Panchayat, but this did not change the political norms within the society. Although the partners have worked to change these norms some men are still resistant to women's inclusion within political decisions as such entrenched beliefs are clearly hard to shift.

In the VDC meeting, men suppress women by saying, 'you keep quiet; you women don't know anything'. After this one would forget to say anything and even leave the place without saying a word.

Participant, Kharaguda

Additionally, women were and remain less mobile than men, who travel with work. Many women remain in the confines of the village, therefore women's attendance at a Gram Sabha meeting breaks the social norms in a way it does not for men.



Tulasa Khara, Kharaguda

3.1.3 Unequal division of labour

The most frequently mentioned barrier, which emerged throughout the journeys, was women's workload. This affects them at every stage of the journey. Women repeatedly reported not attending meetings because of their workload.

F *Why didn't you attend the last VDC meeting?*
W *I have a lot of house work to do. There is nobody to help me. So I always have work to do at home.*

Participant, Kathapada, Barriers exercise

It is such a powerful barrier that one of the main reasons women were chosen as leaders was because they had someone to help them at home with the domestic duties.

We select them in a group meeting. For the selection we consider who can go out and who can talk. Then we suggest the names. We also consider if somebody has a helping hand at home to cook when she goes out. If somebody has a daughter or a daughter-in-law at home to do the housework she can go to attend meetings.

Participant, Kharaguda, Performance exercise

The issue affects all the women, and places a heavy burden on the leaders of the groups.

I am running around for others leaving aside my own work. It is very hard for me. When others are going out to work and earning some money I am going to the meetings. I am losing my wage and neglecting the house work. This is the difficult part, otherwise it is alright.

Participant, Khandiguda, Performance exercise

Gender norms maintain an unequal division of labour which disproportionately affects women's participation. Even where women's participation is accepted by men within the community and government fora, their burden of domestic and care duties can still prevent their participation, as this acceptance does not equate to a change in the distribution of labour within the household.

Those days men used to say, 'how can you come to the meeting leaving the cooking and other house work'. They used to say, 'our stomachs are not going to be filled by going to meetings.' We are doing the house work now also. But men have understood now. They have understood that women would prepare food for them after coming from the meeting.

Participant, Khandiguda

The women have therefore added participation to the triple burden they already carry (along with domestic and care duties). There was no expectation, from women, that men would support them with domestic duties, to facilitate their participation in meetings. The acceptance of these norms is so prevalent that when asked what they would like to change about their day most women either could not think

of anything that could change or responded "what can be changed? We have to do everything." (Participant, Kharaguda, Interview).

Women with young children were almost entirely absent from the spaces, and repeatedly cited as the most marginalised group. These women were absolutely unable to attend meetings outside of the community and were likely to be able to attend community meetings.

We have small children and that is also a problem. Who is going to look after your small children, even if one wants to leave them with somebody in the village? So we won't go.

Participant, Kirsal, Barriers exercise

It is almost impossible for women with small children to become leaders because of the restriction on their time and mobility, resulting in almost total absence of their voices in community decision making.

Interestingly, despite women's heavy workloads, the women all reported being able to attend their monthly SHG meetings. One potential factor is that the material benefits that they get in the SHG motivate the women to attend meetings, and, in one group, the women reported that there were financial implications if they did not attend the meeting.

F *Are you all going to the group meetings?*
W *Yes we sit every month.*
W *If somebody doesn't come she has to give a fine of Rs.5/-*

Participants, Kharaguda, Barriers exercise

3.1.4 Internalisation of social norms

Women report being fearful and lacking the confidence to speak in meetings. They had internalised the social norms which present women's role as limited to the household. They therefore lacked the experience of participating and were nervous to speak in public, as this had traditionally been left to men.

W *No, we speak in the meeting. These women don't speak because they are afraid of their men.*
W *But now men have also understood.*
W *Yes, men in our family don't object to our going to the meetings. But other men haven't changed.*

Participants, Khandiguda, Barriers exercise

The women continue to accept the unequal power divide as natural. Women's movements are controlled by men. Denial of permission to attend meetings is a reality that goes unquestioned. Even women who have advanced in their empowerment journeys accept their husband's power to limit their participation. In the mixed spaces, the women report that they still defer to men because of their actual or

perceived greater knowledge.

If men explain something to us we understand. They get to know more about things since they go out.

Participant, Kharaguda, Barriers exercise

The power dynamics between men and women are so entrenched that without changes to the gender norms participating will always be a challenge for women.

3.2 Enabling Factors

Given the ‘power over’ women that is present in the communities, to progress in their empowerment journeys the women need to be able to counter this oppressive power with transformative power that can change the power differentials between men and women. For each woman the specific enabling factors differ depending on their personal circumstances, but, in general, the following are important factors in support of women in their journeys.

3.2.1 Confidence

Most of the women were unable to articulate changes that have occurred within themselves as a result of their participation within the VDC, which might be due to cultural conceptions of change or a lack of change in women. However, those that could articulate change spoke about having the confidence to speak in public. There has been a shift in women’s participation within the communities and for at least some women this has allowed them to gain the confidence to speak in any public forum in the community. The main enabler that has supported women’s confidence is gaining knowledge about governance processes and entitlements.

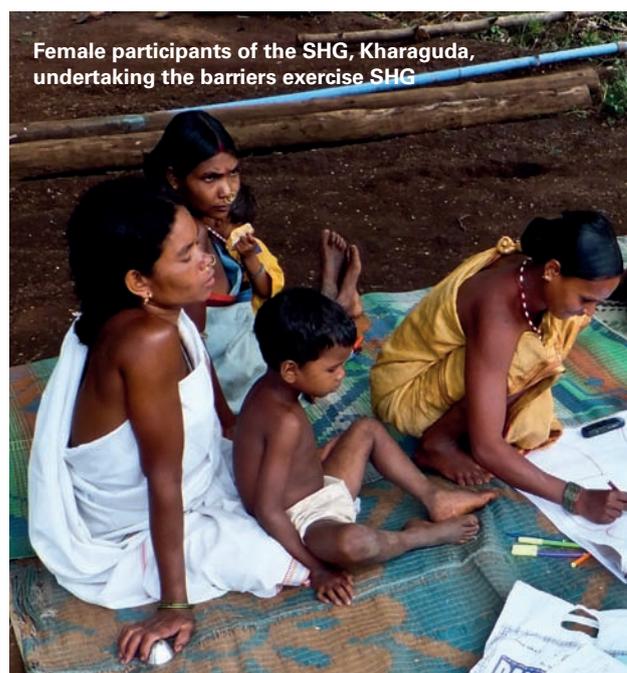
3.2.2 External actors pushing social norms

The partners have insisted that the VDC and the executive committee have 40% representation of women which has created a big change in the community and has transferred some power into the hands of women. The women are no longer confined to the private sphere, but are part of the community decisions and have been able to learn about, and claim, a number of rights. The women report that most men have accepted their participation within meetings and even see it as necessary to have women involved.

Now men also think that these days women’s views are important. So they listen to us and we also listen to them.

Participant, Khandiguda

This view has been triangulated through the interviews with male members of the community and the leaders



Female participants of the SHG, Kharaguda, undertaking the barriers exercise SHG

of the VDCs; all of the male members that participated in the study said they accepted women’s participation in meetings. It is apparent that this change did not come from the men’s or women’s initiative but through the insistence of the partner organisation staff. It is important to note that because this acceptance did not come from internal reflection or change within, women’s participation is often only accepted by men because they believe that women are needed to access benefits rather than because they now believe women have a right to participate. They have been told by the partners that things can only be achieved with women’s participation, and that the state will only give benefits to women.

We were told by our brothers from the SEARCH organisation that these days no matter how knowledgeable you are the government will not listen to men. The government listens to women first. So when we go to the offices we ask women to talk to the officials and we men step aside.

Male group Leader, Kirsal, Interview

3.2.3 Supportive husbands

Given the level of control that women experience around their mobility, having a supporting partner enables them to participate more effectively or at all. As her case study illustrated, Laxmi and her husband are both active members of the VDC and are able to support each other in their endeavours. Given the high workload of women, support in lightening this burden has a dramatic effect on their ability to grow in their empowerment journeys. However, Laxmi was the only woman that specifically mentioned that her husband helped her with her domestic tasks, and this was not specifically tackled within the partner’s projects.

3.2.4 Women only space

The SHG has been the most empowering space for women. It is a safe space where they can discuss issues that they cannot raise in others spaces.

The group (SHG) is like mother's house and the VDC is like mother-in-law's house. We can talk about our sorrows and happiness in the SHG meeting.

Participant, Kathapada, Success exercise

It is from participating within the SHG that the women have been able to enter other spaces, because the SHG has led them to feel more secure in these (often male dominated) spaces, and has provided them with an opportunity to speak as a united voice, giving them more leverage to influence. As a group they have been able to take action within the community and lobby the government authorities on various basic needs issues. Although not all the women have been involved in these activities they see themselves and are seen by the men as a collective.

Now that we are going to different meetings, they recognise that women have learnt. When we took action against alcohol, they recognised our work.

Participant, Kharaguda, Success exercise

The women believe that their power is strengthened when they speak with a collective voice rather than as individuals on issues that they have prioritised as women.

W *We, all women, went. The school teacher was not attending and we took action.*

W *We had hired two auto-rickshaws and went to the Block office. We had taken the children with us. The officer was surprised to see so many women and children.*

Participants, Kirsal

3.3 Women's collective experiences within the spaces

The women's experiences of participating in the spaces were very similar in each village, and the overarching findings from their collective experiences are presented below. The similarities across spaces is noteworthy, given the clear differences in ethnic makeup, accessibility to services and local authorities. One possible explanation is that the spaces (and by extension the opportunity to participate) are uniform across communities. Another possibility is that the strategies used by the different partner organisations are identical and there has been a high degree of collaboration between the partners.

3.3.1 Low levels of participation and ownership of the VDC

Across the four villages there was a low level of participation of women from the research sample within the VDC. This is partly explained by its structure; the VDC is run by a committee, who in theory meet monthly, and the whole community take part in meetings only once or twice a year. This structure means that women who are not on the committee have very little interaction with the VDC. Many have only attended once a year and therefore have very little experience of participating within the VDC. A number of women from the SHG research groups reported attending some of the monthly meetings but they have not contributed their voice to those meetings.

F *Did you discuss anything else?*

W *We just listened to others.*

Participant, Khandiguda, Barriers exercise

However, the women in the VDC research groups, who are on the committee, also reported low levels of participation. Only in Khandiguda and Kirsal did the women from the VDC group report that they attend meetings regularly. In Kathapada only one of the women reported attending the VDC monthly meetings regularly, while the others attended but not regularly and report that meetings do not happen all throughout the year.

Now it is agriculture time so meetings are not held.

Participant, Kathapada, Performance exercise

The committee was established with a formal structure and hierarchy. Thus, in theory the women should be able to articulate their roles and the work of the committee; however in every group there was some confusion between women about their roles and even whether they were on the executive committee or not.

F *Why were women not taken in the committee at that time?*

W *Only men were members. Now also women are not taken.*

F *But aren't you all members in the committee?*

W *We are just members.*

Participant, Kirsal, Barriers exercise

The confusion around membership demonstrates a lack of ownership with regard to the intended idea of a committee structure. This could partly be a result of the selection process. Most women were nominated for roles rather than actively running for and being elected for them; it was therefore not of their own agency that they became leaders.

W *They have asked us to be secretary and president. But since we do not know how to read or write and are not always available to attend meetings whenever called for, we have said no.*

F Do you know how to read and write now that you are the secretary?

W I don't know how to read and write but I can speak. I have learnt a few things. I was reluctant to be the secretary. But some people insisted so I became the secretary.

Participant, Kharaguda

A very small number of women have nominated themselves for election and are very active. Others have not and have merely assumed the title.

F What is the secretary's role then?

Secretary: He (the president) keeps everything, all the accounts.

Ward Member: She only sits and listens

Participants, Khandiguda

Additionally in every village the women participants were unable to articulate the current issues that were being discussed in the committee meetings or the main issues that were currently being pursued through the VDC.

F What did you discuss in the last month's meeting?

W I wasn't there in last month's meeting.

F The previous month?

W I don't remember.

F Do you remember anything you have said in any of these committee meetings?

W No.

Participant, Kathapada

The fact that the women struggled to articulate their positions and duties could suggest that the partner organisation imposed rule about including women onto the committee has led to tokenistic appointments which have not altered power dynamics. However, this confusion was also apparent with the men on the committee.

F Do you have a committee with a president, secretary, treasurer etc.?

Male Participant (M): Yes. We have Sonu as president. I am secretary or something like that.

Male Participant, VDC focus group, Kirsal

F But do you meet on a fixed date?

M [No clear answer].

F You remember when you had the last meeting? (They try to recollect for a long while)

Mthe 18th.

F You remember what did you discuss in the last meeting?

M We discussed about the affairs of the village.

F What affairs?

M I can't tell you. We have forgotten.

Male Participants, VCD focus group, Kirsal

This suggests that there are wider issues associated with functioning and ownership of the VDC. In fact, only the

president of the VDC was able to clearly articulate issues discussed in the meetings

Now we are discussing about the road, tube well, a concrete road for Kumiguda (an attached hamlet) and a sadar mandap (a meeting centre in the village). We have been meeting the BDO and the Junior Engineer on these issues, VDC leader, Khandiguda, interview

3.3.2 Hierarchical power in the partner created invited spaces

The President is the most important member in the committee. In every village the women reported the importance of the President as the leader of the group, the president sets the agenda and his views are the most important.

F Ok; Tell us now, when you have the VDC meetings, whose views are given most importance?

W It is Chatan Kirsani's views (he is the president).

F Why his words are given most importance and not yours?

W Because he knows. Those who are uneducated they keep quiet.

Participant Khandiguda

F If the president says something and you don't agree will you say so?

W Yes.

F Has there been any occasion when the president proposed something and you disagreed?

W No. The president won't propose anything which others wouldn't agree. We all agree to what the president says.

Participants, Kharaguda, Performance exercise

Although in theory they believe they would disagree, there is no evidence of this in practice. In fact, only one group of women could ever recall having disagreed with anything said by the president.

There was a proposal for construction of Fulkhaman road. But we women asked for the construction of another road. And Sonu agreed to our proposal.

Participant, Kirsal, Performance exercise

The training that partners have conducted has primarily been given to the president reinforcing his power and control. This appears to limit the ownership over decisions for others. The quota system has given women a place on the committee but their roles and responsibilities are unclear to them. Given that the President clearly controls the group it may not be necessary for them to understand their roles.

The SHGs have also been set up with a hierarchical structure. Within each group, there is a president and a secretary. It

is these women that are the most active in the groups, and they generally take responsibility for travelling to the bank and attend meetings outside the village

- F** *How do you decide which women would go to the bank?*
- W** *Laxmi Khara and Laxmi Gadaba go (president and secretary)*
- F** *Why aren't others going to the bank?*
- W** *They are young. We say, 'we can't walk. You go since you are young'.*
- W** *We say, 'we have work to do, so you go to the Bank' and Laxmi Khara goes. And when we don't have work we also go with her.*

Participants, Kirsal, Performance exercise

As these women have acquired more experience and knowledge through their participation, other women defer to them regarding decisions.

- F** *How do you decide about who would get the loan or how much loan amount would be given? Suppose two/three women apply for loans. How would you decide whom to give the money?*
- W** *Whoever is in difficulties she would be given the loan.*
- F** *OK, but who decides it?*
- W** *We have the Secretary and the President. We all decide but whatever the secretary and the president say others agree.*
- F** *Has there been any occasion when the secretary and the president have said one thing and the other members had a different opinion?*
- W** *No. Even if some members disagree the secretary and president will try to make them understand why somebody needs the loan.*

Only one woman, in all the four communities, expressed a desire to become the leader of any space; for the rest of the women it represented too much responsibility. The women who are not leaders have only experienced participating in group meetings. Many have not participated in activities outside of the village, even going to deposit money in the bank. The act of participating has been shown to be empowering but by concentrating this experience in the hands of leaders there is little room for new leaders to emerge.

3.3.3 Women's role in advocacy

The VDC brings community plans to the Palli Sabha as shown in the women's journeys. The members also engage in direct advocacy with the officials in the block office. There is a belief by both men and women that women are more likely to be heard by the authorities and therefore issues discussed in the VDC are referred to women for follow up action at the block office. As a result of this, women leaders feel that now it is women who are able to bring benefits to

their community and engage with the authorities.

We brought electricity, drinking water because of the efforts of the SHG women. If it were only men they couldn't have done it. We have no fear now. We can go to the BDO and the collector to demand things. We have got knowledge.
Participants, Kathapada, Success exercise

This demonstrates that the act of participating itself is empowering for the women. However, the male president remains the instigator, instructing and coaching the women.

In the Palli Sabha if we men explain it doesn't work. So we train our women telling them what to say in the Palli Sabha. We tell them to talk about: the bridge for Kirsal village; ghat cutting road; a second tube well; a cement concrete road inside the village; pensions for people who haven't got yet; some people haven't got the forest land records – all these issues we ask women to present in the Palli Sabha . I tell these things to the women who are in the committee plus some other women also. Unless we prepare them beforehand they will not be able to say anything in the meeting.

Male Participant, Kirsal, Interview

Additionally the action is not taken because of women's agency; rather, they are merely told to go because it is thought that they will have a better reception and a stronger chance of a positive outcome.

3.3.4 Limited participation and influence in government spaces

In general, as discussed above, few women attend the Palli Sabha and even fewer attend the Gram Sabha. In Gram Sabhas it is the ward member that speaks on behalf of the community, reducing the opportunity for others to influence the meeting. The space for others to speak is very limited; the meeting mainly consists of the recommendations from the Palli Sabhas in each village being read out by the ward members, there is no debate or discussion. There is also limited room for debate in the Palli Sabha as members from the VDC, generally the President, present the village plan, already discussed at the VDC meeting. The majority of women who attend these meetings want to ensure whether they have personally been included in the beneficiaries lists for government schemes, they do not see them as spaces to hold the Gram Panchayat to account over decisions.

We get to know whether whatever issues we had 'got written at the Palli Sabha' have been included or not, when they read it out. If our names are not read out we ask them to include our names.

Participant, Khandiguda, Performance exercise

As a result of this many women are content to hear a

report about the meetings from others and see no need to physically attend themselves.

- F** *Why don't you attend?*
W *We think we will get to hear from others.*
 Participant, Kathapada, Performance exercise

Those that do attend rarely stay for the whole meeting.

- F** *Does somebody read out the resolutions passed in the meeting at the end?*
W *Men would hear it. We leave the meeting before it is concluded. But men would stay till the end.*
F *Why do you leave before the meeting is over?*
W *We have to do the cooking and other house work after we return. Our men say, "We will stay, you go home."*

Participant, Kirsal

The Gram Sabha is intended to be a forum where citizens hold their representatives to account. The intention is to debate the proposed budget and plans, ensuring that their village needs are reflected and the budget is properly allocated. The women's accounts do not suggest that the Gram Sabha is being used as an accountability mechanism, as the citizen's role is so marginal and their role is essentially note taking. Additionally, the women's low level of ownership over this space allows local officials to break the protocols intended to guarantee meaningful citizen participation. In the Gram Sabha, it is a requirement that the attendees sign the minutes at the end of the meeting as acquiescence that they understand and agree with the meeting proceedings. However, despite the fact the women left the meeting half way through they still reported signing the minutes, implying they must have signed this at the beginning.

- F** *Did you put your signatures?*
W *Yes.*
F *Where did you put your signature?*
W *We don't know. They asked us to sign and we did. Some people left in the middle of the meeting to receive their pension money as someone said that it was being distributed.*
W *I haven't heard properly whatever was read out.*

Participants, Khandiguda, performance exercise

The partner organisations have observed that some of the women and men refuse to sign the form until the end but the officials argue that it will take a long time if they wait to the end and that it is more efficient to sign at the beginning. Given women's high workloads it is unsurprising they are often happy not to waste unnecessary time and agree to sign at the beginning.

Despite the low level of participation the women saw the benefits that they have received from the Gram Sabha as a success which has materially improved their lives. However, many of the women who are female leaders, and who spoke in these meetings, reported feeling dissatisfied with

the Gram Sabha. In Khandiguda, Kathapada and Kirsal the women leaders noted that their requests have often not been sanctioned.

I asked why we are not receiving the money for the housing assistance even though we have built the house. Now our house is going to fall apart as the roofing is not done since the money hasn't been given...the two babus (government officials) said when the money would be given. But we haven't got it yet.

Participant, Khandiguda, Performance exercise

In Kathapada and Kirsal those leaders believe that their requests were deliberately ignored by the head of the Panchayat.

- F** *Tell us about the meetings you have attended. What did you discuss there?*
W *We gave an application for a road and a tube-well in the village. We gave it to the Sarpanch.*
F *What did they say?*
W *He said yes but then he suppressed it.*
F *Did they listen to you? Did they give you anything in writing?*
W *No.*
F *Did you get what you had applied for?*
W *No.*

Participant, Kirsal, Performance, exercise

The community is meant to hold the power, but in reality they can merely use this forum to request material benefits, and hope that they will be granted a particular scheme or project in the Gram Sabha. The women believe that their requests have been actively suppressed, suggesting that there is no discussion in the Gram Sabha as to which programmes from each village will be granted. Instead they appear to get no information and must wait to see if they will receive projects.



3.3.5 Material benefits

The women's interpretation of success was limited to benefits and mainly material benefits that they have received as a result of participating within the spaces. There have been clear material improvements within the women's lives as a result of their participation within the VDC and SHG. Each of the groups mentioned that they have improved lives with access to different schemes and better infrastructure through roads, electricity, tube wells and roads.

We had a bad road now we have a good one. People who didn't have houses now got houses; we have got electricity; we have got drinking water. We have got a little of everything. Whatever we had given in the Pallisabha we have got it. Now many people have tin roof and some have got white house.

Participant, Kathapada

Confusion over the purpose of participating within the spaces has emerged in some of the communities surveyed. The partners encouraged the communities to set up rice funds to support the activities of the VDC; however, in some communities the VDC has become dominated by this fund and its performance is adversely affected because of it. In Kharaguda, in September 2014, the women testified that the VDC was now defunct because people had borrowed money and not returned it.

Actually, our VDC is defunct now. There are no funds in the VDC. We have to start the VDC again.

Participant, Kharaguda, Success exercise

Many of the community members in Kharaguda expected to receive material assets through their participation because in the past BKS had given individuals material inputs. This expectation has hindered the stability of the VDC.

Now if a meeting is called, people are asking, 'what help the VDC has given?' Yes. They are saying, 'wherever we get benefits, we will go there only.' Now people are asking 'the VDC helped only a few families in the village, what is it giving to us so that we will come to this meeting?' In the beginning BKS formed the VDC and gave bullocks to three or four people. Now these people are not coming to the VDC and others are also not coming. Now people are saying things" like 'new organisations that have come recently to the village have given so many things to us, but BKS is working for seven or eight years and have not given us anything.'

Participant, Kharaguda, Performance exercise

In the SHG where access to loans has been very beneficial to women, saving and receiving loans was the aspect that women preferred about participating. In dialogue, the women always returned to talking about the SHG and what they had achieved through saving. However, the group also runs the risk of creating tensions in Kharaguda: one of the SHGs was dissolved because the leader stole all the money.

W We had groups before also. But it broke up.

F Why did it break up?

W Women used to give their savings money to one person to deposit in the bank. And this person cheated the women and then the group broke up.

Participants, Kharaguda, Barriers exercise

Many of the women and men chose to participate in the invited spaces because they individually wanted to access material benefits and they have secured those assets. This introduction of individual financial rewards and responsibilities runs the risk of introducing new power dynamics into the groups and communities, which can affect women's participation within the spaces.

4. Analysis of the power dynamics of the spaces



Women at the Gramsabha Koraput

4. Analysis of the power dynamics of the spaces



Creating new spaces might not be enough to empower citizens or bring about greater participation in decision making unless action is taken to ensure support for the transformation of power dynamics. Spaces must enable women to participate, challenge dominant gender norms and address the barriers that underpin their unequal power. The characteristics of the space can support or constrain empowerment. However, spaces are not bounded entities and there is always scope for the rules to be shaped by the actors within the space. By extension, there is potential for transformation within any type of space. There are many spaces for citizen participation within India. The following section uses the women's experiences of participation detailed above to address whether these spaces can be transformative and not simply reinforce the status quo.

4.1 Who decides?

4.1.1 Rigid hierarchies limit women's influence over decisions

Trócaire's partner NGOs only provided leadership training to the presidents of the groups and sometimes the secretaries, hoping that these people would be able to pass on the knowledge to the other committee members. This has meant that only these people, often men, have received accompaniment and support in this area. As is evidenced

in the case studies this has ensured a concentration of power within these two roles and entrenched a hierarchical structure where the president holds the majority of the power. This reality has been internalised by the community, and as a result, the president sets the meeting agendas, makes the main suggestions and is generally unchallenged. This structure has not allowed new voices to emerge or permitted any social mobility for women who may exhibit leadership skills. As all of the VDC leaders are male, this effectively safeguards power to remain in male hands whilst simultaneously creating the perception of equality between men and women. Decisions can be taken collectively by men and women in the VDC but this does not correspond automatically to equal agency in those decisions. The women's participation often amounts to merely rubber stamping the ideas of the powerful presidents. Therefore, the ideas taken to the local authorities may not represent the needs of the whole community, and especially the women.

In the SHG the president and secretary of the group undertake almost all of the external activities. Through this structure, power is concentrated in the hands of these two women, hindering the opportunity for participation to lead to changes in the women's empowerment. Therefore although the women regard the SHG as one of the most important spaces the majority of women have little influence over the decisions taken within it, beyond savings and loans.

4.1.2 Citizens are not able to effectively use their devolved power

The Panchayat is intended to be a space for the citizen; the ward members are intended to merely be the elected representation of the villages, there to carry out the administrative functioning. However, in reality the women have no power to ensure that their requests are granted. The Palli Sabha has no power in itself; the recommendations go to the Gram Sabha and it is there that issues are decided, and the Palli Sabha is just a link in this chain. There is no discussion in the Gram Sabha as to which programmes from each village will be granted and decisions about resource allocation are taken by the ward members and the Sarpanch after the Gram Sabha. Consequently, the women can merely request material benefits and hope that scheme or project will be approved. When projects are implemented, it often feels more like an act of good will of the government rather than compliance with rights and entitlements.

4.2 What is the purpose of the space?

The purpose of the space has an impact on the participation within that space as it defines the opportunities for participation and in turn shapes the opportunity for that participation to support empowerment. For example, if the space has a very limited mandate then participation within the space is not necessarily going to support women to gain power. Additionally as invited spaces are created by external actors they may be set up to achieve a purpose that runs contrary to the goals of empowerment. However, spaces are not fixed entities. They are shaped by experiences and their membership. Therefore it is important to understand both the purpose of the space and whether in the women's experience it is achieving that purpose.

In the research the spaces can be divided into three different categories:

- 1 Challenging the state to deliver rights- these spaces are designed to allow citizens to demand that local authorities fulfil their duty to uphold citizens' rights.
- 2 Questioning gender norms – these spaces are trying to change the power dynamics between men and women by challenging the existing norms.
- 3 Improving access to material resources – these spaces are generally filling gaps in the social system because the state has failed to respect, protect and fulfil human rights, but they might also be supporting women and men to improve their financial situations.

4.2.1 Challenging government to deliver rights



Intended purpose of the spaces in this category

Three out of the four spaces studied were set up to provide male and female citizens with the opportunity to challenge government to deliver on rights. Each of these spaces is an invited space, set up by external agents who imbued their own power dynamics by setting the rules of the space which shapes the scope for participation to support empowerment within the space. To understand how these spaces have been affected by these power dynamics requires an analysis of the extent to which the women have been able to exercise their power over duty bearers, and whether this has created opportunities for inclusion and accountability allowing them to challenge the state to deliver their rights.

Is it achieving this purpose?

The VDC has successfully supported women and men to present their demands in the Palli Sabha and Gram Sabha. Through various lobbying efforts outside these official spaces the communities have successfully obtained a number of development programmes. However, the entire process of the Gram Sabha is perfunctory and hierarchical; the ward member represents the issues raised in the Palli Sabha, leaving almost no chance for female and male citizens to speak, let alone meaningfully engage with their elected representatives and decisions affecting their lives. It is therefore unsurprising that many women do not see the benefit of attending, just to verify that the list has been submitted given their enormous workload. Although these spaces provide mechanisms for women and men's voices to be heard by the state, those voices are filtered through a hierarchy of community appointed or elected representatives. These many layers and emphasis on schemes squeeze the voices of community women into boxes and forms, and almost entirely removes any opportunity for meaningful debate about rights beyond narrowly defined entitlements.

4.2.2 Questioning gender norms



Intended purpose of the spaces in this category

The VDC was designed as a space which challenged the norm that women were not part of community decisions. The partners specifically included a 40% quota for women in all the executive committees. The SHG intended to challenge male control of money and support women to participate within the other invited spaces.

Is it achieving this purpose?

There have been changes to norms associated with women's participation. There is now acceptance that women can be part of community discussions and hold leadership positions. However, this has largely happened because the communities have been instructed that women are needed to receive state benefits. There has been no change in the beliefs and attitudes which underpinned the exclusion of women from decision making spaces, which is apparent from the continuing unequal share in domestic workloads and the control of women's mobility by men.

The women have used the SHG as a space to confront existing social norms, such as the consumption of alcohol. However, in both the SHG and the VDC, the women have not been exposed to broad ideas about women's rights and these concepts are not apparent in their actions. The action against alcohol consumption shows women's agency but without the underlying analysis of women's right to live free from violence this action treats the symptoms and not the root cause of oppression.

4.2.3 Improving access to material resources



Intended purpose of the spaces in this category

The women's SHG have as their primary purpose supported women to access credit and savings to ensure they are able to respond better in times of crisis. The partner organisations wanted to ensure the VDCs were sustainable and therefore they encouraged the communities to set up rice funds,

which would provide liquidity that the group could use for community mobilisation.

Is it achieving this purpose?

The loans in the SHG have provided women with support in emergencies. The safety net only applies to members of the group providing an incentive to participate regularly in meetings. It has also been the gateway space for many women, and the confidence they have gained in the SHG has allowed them to attend other meetings.

Many of the women have come to see the VDC as primarily a rice fund rather than the space for citizen organisation. In Kharaguda the fund was drained and this has now caused the breakdown of the VDC; its sustainability has been challenged by the very strategy that was meant to enable it. Ensuring that the VDC can still function beyond the life cycle of the programme is important but the intended purpose of the space has been partially lost.

4.3 Who participates in the space?

Although in theory the VDC serves the whole community, a number of factors prohibit people from attending. A person only becomes a member of the VDC when they are married, and therefore the younger and unmarried voices of the community are not necessarily included. Additionally, women with young children struggle to attend meetings, let alone participate. There is also evidence that only one member of the household will attend meetings. This raises issues of representation. If a woman is supposed to represent her household, she may prioritise different issues to those she would raise if she was representing herself. This is especially true as many households are made up of extended families and daughter in laws, for example, may never be chosen to represent the family in this space.

The VDC was established using a representative structure. The committees are intended to run the VDC for the community by taking charge of meetings and leading in negotiations with government. The committee members then become the elected representatives of the people and it is assumed that they will represent the needs of the community. However, the community only influences the committee at the twice yearly meetings, thereby limiting the opportunity to ensure their views are represented. The committee is the vanguard of the community but there is no guarantee that the committee members will represent the needs of the whole population. Moreover, as has been demonstrated above, the president holds the real power in the committee. Therefore the representation is left in the hands of one person, generally a man. There is already an elected village representative, the ward member, whose job it is to represent the village in the Gram Panchayat. This new role filters the community's interaction with the ward member by providing one focal point, therefore increasing

the risk that all the voices are not represented.

4.4 Pushing the boundaries

The boundaries of action are defined by the existing power dynamics within societies. Therefore, within societies in which the boundaries are narrowly defined, pushing them will not result in a total shift in power dynamics to more fluid and equal relations. In the research communities in India the gender norms which dictate women and men's roles are very entrenched. Therefore small changes in these, such as acceptance of women in decision making spaces, does not mean that men and women are now equal.

4.4.1 Between the citizens and the state

In India, the barriers to women's participation are still very high and the government structures provide a very limited space for discussing issues beyond basic needs. This means that there are limited examples where the women have been able to push the boundaries between citizen and state interactions. There are many opportunities to influence decisions India. Therefore the boundaries are much wider, as there are formal spaces for this very purpose, but the spaces are very formulaic and participation within them is about accessing existing entitlements rather than challenging power relations.

4.4.2 Between men and women

In India, the act of participating within any public space has altered the power dynamics in the communities; previously it was culturally unacceptable for women to participate in any decisions regarding community life. Despite these changes many communities are still resistant to women's participation and the women in the research report being verbally harassed as a result of participating in different spaces; and despite some individual successes the underlying social norm regarding women's position within the home is still prevalent. Until women's participation is truly accepted by men as a woman's right, men's acceptance will always be conditional, often based on the women's ability to secure material benefits for the family. Given the lack of control that women have to ensure that the state acts on their requests, projects are potentially setting women up to fail. Male acceptance of their participation needs to be much more actively tackled. Additionally the women have been instrumentalised by men in many cases to secure access to state benefits. Thus, it is unclear if the issue that women are advocating for are actually what they as women prioritise. This is an important point for programming because indicators such as 'the number of women's proposals accepted by local governments' will fail to measure change accurately, as they could really be the men's proposals.

In India, the SHGs have provided women with a safe space where they can discuss issues affecting their lives. They have not gained a critical consciousness of the unequal gender norms that perpetuate their inequality but they have come together to address issues affecting them as women. The issue of reducing alcohol consumption to prevent violence against women is the closest example of challenging social norms that women have undertaken in the research sites in India. The women, through this action, are challenging accepted male behaviour and pushing to gain greater power, although they were addressing the symptoms rather than the cause of violence. Violence against women was not presented as an unacceptable practice, but as an undesired one, and the fundamental belief that women should live free from violence was not part of their analysis in this action. Until there is an acceptance of this the underlying norms and practices which perpetuate violence will continue, with or without alcohol.

4.5 Conclusions & Recommendations

This section includes a summary of the key learning outcomes of the research process and suggests recommendations to address these issues.

- 1 Conduct a thorough context analysis to understand the starting point: The first step for all women within India is to leave the home. At this outset, women were active only in the home and had no or little involvement in public decision making spaces. Even those that worked outside the home did not participate in community decisions. While most had equal control over decisions within the home, their mobility was generally controlled by men and they must ask permission to leave the community and many must ask permission to enter community spaces. Their experience of power is unique to them and should be recognised at the outset of the programming. Understanding these complexities is only possible through the use of a thorough context analysis.
- Precede empowerment programmes with an analysis of the political landscape, social norms and gender equality/power relations to select spaces that meet women's needs on a personal, legal and social level.
- 2 Select appropriate spaces & processes: In India, most women initially choose to participate following an invitation by an NGO, designed for that purpose. Indeed, most women report that while most men have accepted their participation within meetings and even see it as necessary, this is due to the external action of the NGOs that established the groups, who insisted on women's participation and insisted on their inclusion. At the same time,

the fact that the women struggled to articulate their positions and duties within these spaces suggests that the externally-imposed rule has led to tokenistic appointments which have not altered power dynamics. The quota system is a blunt instrument that has not changed the underlying beliefs held by people. The programme needs to address the underlying attitudes and beliefs which perpetuate violence and inequality between men and women. In some cases, an interventionist approach to inclusion might be warranted, while in others it may be less appropriate.

- Design programmes that respond to women's needs and that resonate with the community, to avoid tokenistic inclusion. Programmes should tackle the underlying gender inequality that facilitates exclusion of women from decision making.

3 Challenge unaccountable spaces: Women's experience within the formal decision-making body of the Gram Sabha was negative, as the citizen's role is so marginal and their role is essentially note taking. Additionally, the women's low level of ownership over this space allows local officials to break the protocols intended to guarantee meaningful citizen participation. Inclusion in unaccountable structures can be disempowering and should be avoided. If these structures cannot provide space for more meaningful participation then an emphasis on attendance at them should be reduced to avoid over-burdening women.

- Challenge spaces/decision-making bodies that are disempowering, or avoid engaging with them and de-facto legitimising their position.

4 Challenge harmful attitudes: Violence against women was not presented as an unacceptable practice, but as an undesired one, and the fundamental belief that women should live free from violence was not part of their analysis in this action. Until there is an acceptance of this the underlying norms and practices which perpetuate violence will continue.

- Consistently and repeatedly challenge harmful attitudes and beliefs.

5 Be inclusive: Women with young children were almost entirely absent from the spaces, and repeatedly cited as marginalised. These women were absolutely unable to attend meetings outside of the community and were unlikely to be able to attend community meetings. It was almost impossible for women with small children to

become leaders because of the restriction on their time and mobility, resulting in almost total absence of their voices in community decision making.

- Design programmes that consider women's logistical as well as social realities, and consider what tangible supports might enable women to participate regularly, effectively and without negative consequence in community decision-making.

6 Create/support safe spaces that facilitate gradual transition to participation: Safe spaces played a vital role in supporting the women to help overcome barriers that prevent them from entering more formal public spaces such as low confidence and a lack of knowledge. As well as a feeling of ownership, the women reported feeling comfortable and able to express their opinions in ways that they cannot do in mixed spaces. Through gaining knowledge, experience and with the security of a safe place to reflect on their lives, the women slowly gained the confidence to express themselves within mixed male/female spaces.

- Create and support safe-spaces within which women can take the first steps towards empowerment, including leaving the home and building their self-confidence and public speaking abilities.

7 Provide training across the hierarchy: Leadership training was provided to the presidents of the groups and sometimes the secretaries, but not to the remaining members. This meant that only these people, often men, have received accompaniment and support, and this facilitated a concentration of power within these two roles and entrenched a hierarchical structure where the president holds the majority of the power. Programmes should consider these risks in planning and programme design and build in mechanisms to ensure (i) power is shared by all members and (ii) groups leaders are held to account by members.

- Support training and awareness raising programmes for all women, to build women's confidence and empower them with the tools they need to resist disempowerment in the private and public spheres.

8 Support collective action & ongoing engagement: The women reported the importance of collectively attending informal spaces - that they felt stronger together, even if they did not speak at the meetings. Very few women attended the Gram Sabha and, without the collective power with others, the women were reluctant to participate. Low levels of participation in some structures were explained

by the infrequency of meetings. Empowerment can take a long time and requires continued investment: for some women, it was the repeated attendance at meetings that led them to eventually feel empowered to actively participate.

- Promote a culture/structure where the women meet collectively on a regular basis.

9 Acknowledge that not all women will progress to full participation in community life: Most participants of this study had remained within the initial informal women-only spaces because of barriers preventing women from entering the other formal spaces. Only 20-30% of women from each community sample went on to participate in formal spaces, and this participation is largely confined to physical attendance due to fears of expressing themselves in such a large public gathering.

- Acknowledge that success looks different for everyone, but be uncompromising in challenging the barriers to women's full participation and empowerment.

10 Address the practical barriers to participation: The most frequently mentioned barrier was women's workload. This affects them at every stage of the journey. Women repeatedly reported not attending meetings because of their workload. It is such a powerful barrier that one of the main reasons women were chosen as leaders was because they had someone to help them at home with the domestic duties.

- Consider providing some material support to women to allow them to attend decision-making fora, either to support them with transport costs or to alleviate the pressure associated with childcare.

11 Work with supportive men & families: Women whose husbands supported their participation had far greater opportunities to participate in community-level decision making and in public advocacy. All participants are required to seek permission from their husbands to participate in local fora. Some husbands grant this permission unconditionally; others do so on the condition that domestic duties are completed in advance, and some do not grant it at all. This permission is not irreversible and can be taken away at any point.

- Actively engage men and the wider community before and during participation programmes.

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