



Sakshamaa Briefing Paper

Women Political Leaders in Rural Bihar: Striving for Change Amidst Socio- Cultural Restrictions



The COVID-19 pandemic has had a distinct impact on Bihar – in addition to health related concerns and the subsequent economic impact, the state also saw the return of migrants from other parts of India. Importantly, women have been the face of the local response to this emergency in the state - as frontline health workers, Self-Help Group members’ of JEEViKA, and as Elected Women Representatives (EWRs). Women representatives elected to the rural local government system, Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), have played a pivotal role as first responders, emphasizing the importance of this governance level in comprehensive emergency response.

Centre for Catalyzing Change’s (C3) Sakshamaa Initiative conducted a cross-sectional mixed-methods research to ascertain the immediate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the subsequent lockdown and gradual ease of restrictions on the personal, public, and political lives of EWRs in Bihar.

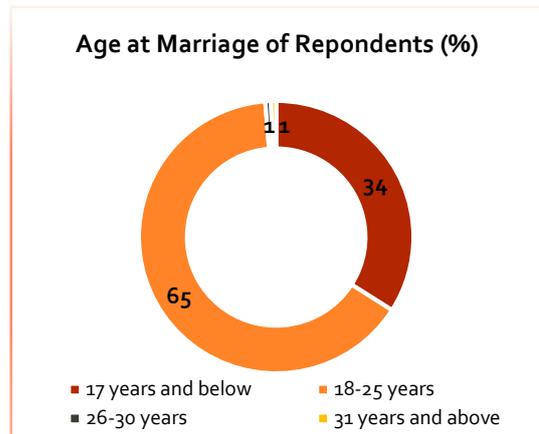
Completed via tele-survey and tele-in-depth interviews, this study also explored how women’s participation and leadership in local governance evolved through this crisis. Bihar was one of the first states to enhance the gender quota in PRIs from 33% to 50%, and C3 has been implementing a mentoring and capacity building program with these women across 10 districts of the state. The sample of 1338 EWRs for the quantitative survey (99% CI with a margin of error equal to 0.02) and 31 EWRs for the IDIs in this study are drawn from those who participated in C3’s programming.

District	No of EWRs Surveyed
Aurangabad	140
Bhagalpur	100
East Champaran	165
Gopalganj	141
Madhubani	139
Nalanda	119
Nawada	135
Patna	112
Rohtas	158
Sheikhpura	129
Total	1,338

The findings of this study indicate that women Panchayat members, representing approximately 500 people, are challenging existing patriarchal constructs in multiple ways. While some EWRs retained their position in traditional class-caste-gender based patriarchal constructs, refraining from active public politics, majority EWRs in this study were perceived as effective and active “people’s leaders” in their constituencies. EWR’s responded to their community’s urgent needs during the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown, signalling a shift in their own priorities. Some of them were also elected from non-quota seats, and had evolved from being “proxy” representatives.

EWR’s efforts to shift the traditional social norms of rural Bihar, especially regarding gender based violence, however, are not necessarily anti-patriarchal. Study findings reflect a complex interplay between conventional notions of leadership and women’s empowerment within the socio-cultural context of rural Bihar. Following the institution of gender quotas, the physical presence of women in local governing bodies has brought significant change in the dynamics of rural local governance in the state. Even so, specific policy intervention is required for the gender sensitization of these local bodies. Moreover, women leaders of rural Bihar require support for improving their access to digital and financial resources, institutions, and information.

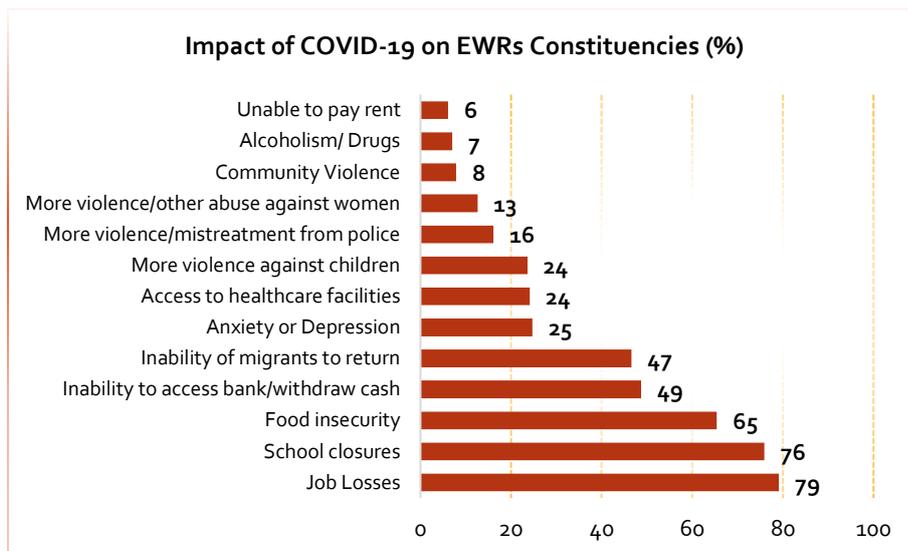
Sample Characteristics: Majority (87%) of the EWRs were first time representatives, 10% had been elected twice. 25% of the sample were between the ages of 19 and 34. 96% were married, with 1 in 3 married before the age of 18. 23% EWRs did not go to school, while 37% completed only Primary schooling; 5% completed Grade 12, and 2% finished undergraduate studies. Overwhelming majority of the sample was Hindu (90%), with Other Backward Castes (63%) and Scheduled Castes (24%) forming the bulk of the caste break-up. Most EWRs (79%) are not engaged in paid work outside of their responsibilities as Elected Representatives. In terms of household expenditure, 53% reported spending between Rs 5000-Rs 10,000 (USD 68 – 136) per month. The sample of the study is neither representative of the state, nor country.



STUDY FINDINGS

The Impact of COVID on Rural Communities

EWRs were asked about how the COVID crisis impacted their constituencies, with economic concerns emerging as the key issues. Job losses, school closures, food insecurity, lack of access to banks/cash, returning migrants, anxiety and depression due to economic stresses were the primary concerns highlighted.



Note: Values are based on multiple responses and so will not add to 100.

More than 20% spoke about the lack of access to healthcare and increase in violence against children and 13% mentioned rise in violence against women. Qualitative interviews revealed that the situation of daily wage labor, returning migrants, poor households of socially marginalized castes, large families with fewer earning members was more critical.

Changes in EWRs Personal Financial Situation and Care Work Responsibilities

While 79% of EWRs are not engaged in any paid work outside of their responsibilities as Panchayat members, most of them did cite significant financial constraints due to the pandemic. Of those who do work, most (61%) were able to continue their paid work during the lockdown. Most of the working

"Why would they [male members] work [at home] while they are earning for the family? Youngest daughter-in-law was here, so there was support."

"No, he is now studying....listen madam, my son is studying. He is highly educated. He will get a job. Why should he learn or do household chores?"

EWR's (81%) could work as usual, but either received partial wages or did not receive any payment. 89% EWRs reported rise in their care work responsibilities, with most saying that they had to spend considerable time in helping children/grandchildren with schoolwork. Some EWRs did receive support from their families in this work - 39% of the women respondents received help from their spouse in managing domestic chores, while 37% replied that majorly female members of

the household helped them in these tasks. Importantly, household size plays a key determinant of receiving support with household work – EWRs belonging to larger families report greater support in care work.

Increase in EWR's Professional Workload

46% of the survey's respondents said that their workload increased significantly since the start of the pandemic and lockdown – signalling the key role EWRs played as first responders. More than half of EWR's were engaged in identifying returning migrants and spreading awareness about the COVID-19 disease and associated precautions. Arranging ration, isolation or hospital beds for the COVID-19 patients, providing urgent medical support for pregnant women also gained their attention.

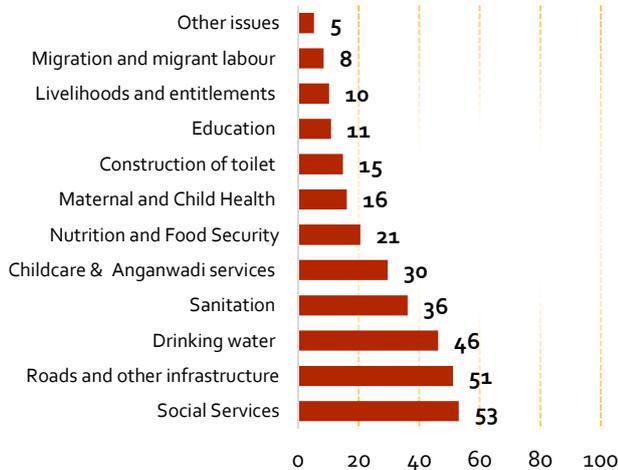
Change in Panchayat Workload Reported by EWRs (%)



Response to Community Priorities

The pandemic also changed the kind of work EWRs were involved in, signalling a shift in their priorities aligning with emerging community needs. Prior to the pandemic, social services (arranging pension, ration cards etc.), roads and other infrastructure, access to drinking water, sanitation, and childcare services (Anganwadi) were prioritized by more than one third of the EWRs.

EWR Priorities Prior to the Pandemic (%)



EWR Priorities During the Pandemic (%)



Note: Values are based on multiple responses and so will not add to 100.

However, during the pandemic, concerns around migrants/migration, and ensuring food security, gained prominence in their work – reflecting their community’s demands given the influx of returning migrants, and rising food insecurity due to income loss and supply chain restrictions. In the future, EWRs see the improvement of local education, health and nutrition services as crucial priorities.

“Transport had become very difficult during the lockdown...it was a really challenging situation...the hospital is far from our locality. So, without car it was impossible to shift the patient to the hospital. In this crisis, I had to take the lead. I called the driver and requested him to help. He cooperated with us...this happened two to three times in our neighbourhood. Two to three women delivered their babies during the lockdown.”

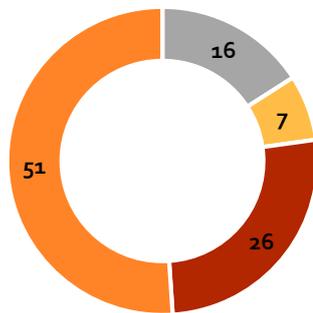
Transformation in EWR’s Leadership Role

EWRs’ active involvement in COVID containment and relief measures revealed the complex nature of Bihar’s prevalent gender norms, especially in relation to EWRs’ leadership positioning. All EWRs agreed that people’s attitude towards them has changed for the better post COVID-19 and they were now perceived as “a people’s leader” who could be approached to address concerns. Many EWRs also mentioned their confidence and eagerness to contest elections again. However, few felt that they had any actual power to affect change easily- 77% of them believed that they cannot change things easily in their constituencies, while just 23% felt that they could. This represents an interesting dichotomy, where women leaders are feeling more valued by their constituents, and more self-confident, but at the same time finding it difficult to navigate existing local governance systems. EWRs are expected to supervise, monitor, and ensure effective implementation of various development initiatives through smartphones. For instance, during COVID, they were expected maintain digital evidence like photographs of mask, sanitiser distribution etc. But only 63% EWR participants owned a phone and among them, only 24% had a smartphone. Thus, the digital divide emerged as a challenge and also an avenue to get support from family, especially sons and husbands, by the EWRs. Husbands and children also supported EWRs in document/file maintenance, financial process, and community outreach, and transport. Two in five (42%) said they receive support in all work matters, they only sign.

Association analysis (chi-square test) revealed some interesting findings on leadership positioning with EWR’s age and age at marriage. Older EWRs believe they have greater potential as leaders/better leadership role (Age of EWR: $\chi^2(1) = 3.79, p=0.052$). Older EWRs also report that they are perceived as better leaders by the community (Age of EWR: $\chi^2(1) = 3.90, p=0.048$). Further, those who married later also report that they are perceived to be better leaders by the community (Age at Marriage: $\chi^2(3) = 7.9666, p=0.047$).

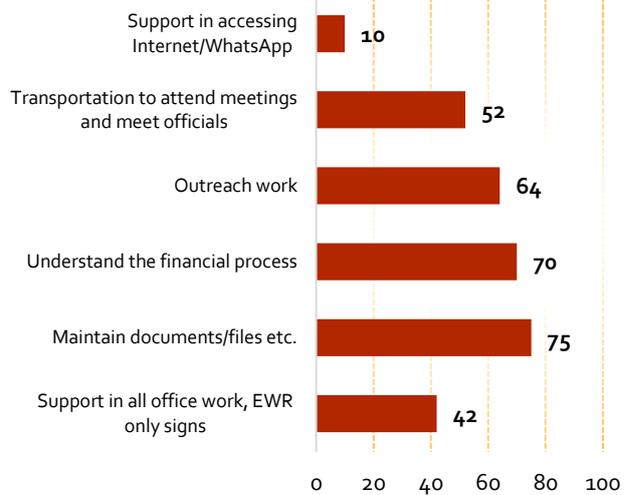
“Earlier there was no one to show women the right path. Even I didn’t go out earlier. But, now [after becoming an EWR] I have to go out... sometimes I have to talk to the DM... I can do that as well!”

EWR's Perceived Ability to Affect Change in their Constituencies (%)



- Fairly easily
- Very easily
- With great difficulty
- With some difficulty

Support Received by EWRs (%)



Note: Values are based on multiple responses and so will not add to 100.

Acceptance of Prevailing Norms around Domestic Violence

This study, especially the qualitative deep-dive, found that the normalization of oppressive norms often hinder elected women representatives' preparedness to recognize and address domestic violence. EWRs are simultaneously saying these issues don't exist in their communities, yet they cite their role in providing redressal support. 77% of participants denied hearing about incidences of physical abuse (i.e. slapping, beating, burns, using a stick or other weapon or threatening to do so) against any women by their husband in the last 12 months in their communities. Yet, 61% reported that they intervened and attempted to stop abuse reported by women in their constituencies. Furthermore, 13% participants even said that they had intervened in such matters more often in the past 3 months. Similarly, 93% participants denied hearing about child

"No...this [domestic violence] doesn't happen...because your daughters-in-law and daughters are intelligent and literate now...this cannot happen...this has not happened as far as I know."

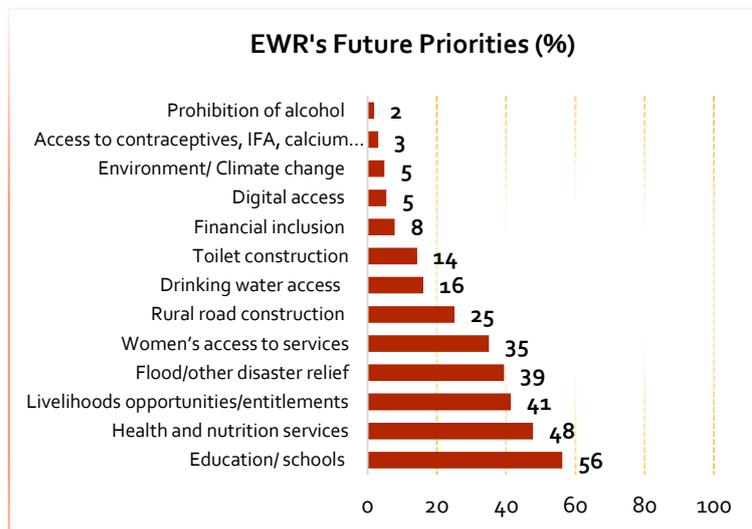
"Being an outsider.... how can I come in between the fight of a husband and wife? I can't intrude in their [couple's] privacy. But if it goes out of hand, then we have to intervene...we call the husband and try to make him understand, on the other hand, we also talk with the female. We tell them that "both you have to be tolerant in this relationship..."

marriage in their constituency, and yet, 82% said they had mediated to stop child marriage in the last 12 months. About 46% of them specified that they had to intervene in such matters more frequently during the last three months.

EWR's approach to dealing with domestic violence reflects their deep internalization of social norms. While 71% of the survey participants believed that domestic violence is not a personal/family matter, most of the interview participants felt discouraging domestic violence survivors from approaching police was a strategy to ensure peace, harmony and retain the 'honour'/ respectability of their community. They also reported a lower level of awareness about support services like Government of Bihar's Women's Helpline.

CONCLUSION

In this study, EWRs offered crucial insight on the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 in Bihar. While COVID prevalence remains low in rural Bihar, the economic impact has been severe and requires substantial policy and fiscal intervention. Prior to the pandemic, more than one third of EWRs prioritized social services (arranging pension, ration cards etc.), roads and other infrastructure, access to drinking water, sanitation, and childcare services (Anganwadi). However, during the pandemic, concerns around migrants/migration (33%), and ensuring food security (29%), gained prominence in their work. Lockdown pushed the EWRs to reflect on the relevance of education in their communities, with 56% naming this as an issue for future action, followed by health and nutrition (48%) and better livelihood opportunities (41%).



This study has also generated valuable evidence on the centrality of local government in crisis situations, as well as the important role women leaders' play in responding to their constituency effectively. The pandemic has revealed the myriad ways in which grassroots women leaders have engaged in relief and rebuilding activities, supporting their community's needs. These women leaders were involved in many activities, starting from spreading awareness about the COVID-19 disease and the precautions to prevent it, helping people to get subsidized ration, arranging isolation or hospital bed for the Covid-19 patients to providing urgent medical support for pregnant women in receiving antenatal care, institutional delivery or safe abortion. These findings unravel the popular perception about women PRI members as "proxy" representatives. Majority of EWRs responses reflect their comprehensive understanding of local issues, and also their preparedness to address those issues, especially in an unprecedented crisis like COVID-19.

However, while women leaders' confidence has increased and their roles have expanded, they do still require support, periodic capacity building, and sustained mentoring. Participants stated that the the initiatives and policies aimed at women's empowerment played an important role in women's evolution as leaders. As such, EWRs need resources, tools and access to information to continue their important work. Prioritizing their education, financial literacy, and digital access are crucial to sustain their confidence and capacities. Further, while 50% reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions has enhanced their physical representation, it has not necessarily influenced patriarchal norms within society, or among the women themselves. As such, perspective building around social institutions like caste and gender, and their interface with development policies specially aimed at bridging the gender gap (like reducing gender based violence, enhancing women's work participation etc.), is also required, in order to achieve meaningful gender transformation.



This Briefing Paper is prepared by Devaki Singh, Anamika Priyadarshini, Shiney Chakraborty and Madhu Joshi. The Principal Investigators for this study are Shiney Chakraborty, PhD (Economist based in New Delhi) and Anamika Priyadarshini, PhD (Lead- Research, Sakshamaa, C3).

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