



Striving for Gender Equality in Bihar with **BRLPS-JEEViKA** Opportunities, Needs, Strategies

31 KIIs, 2 FGDs and 2 field visits were completed for this Needs Assessment, building upon a detailed review of secondary literature

BACKGROUND

The Bihar Rural Livelihoods Promotion Society (BRLPS) – JEEViKA, since its inception in 2006, has strengthened the financial and economic empowerment of women in rural Bihar. Going forward, it envisions addressing social empowerment issues in the state, to enhance the impact of its mission of improving women's livelihoods. In order to deliver high quality programming on women's empowerment, by building *institutional and community salience around gender*, a rapid needs assessment was conducted in July-August 2021, as an important first step towards understanding where JEEViKA is poised and how it has evolved in terms of gender integration, highlighting what is further required to strengthen the gender agenda conceptualised at the national level, and envisioned at the state level.

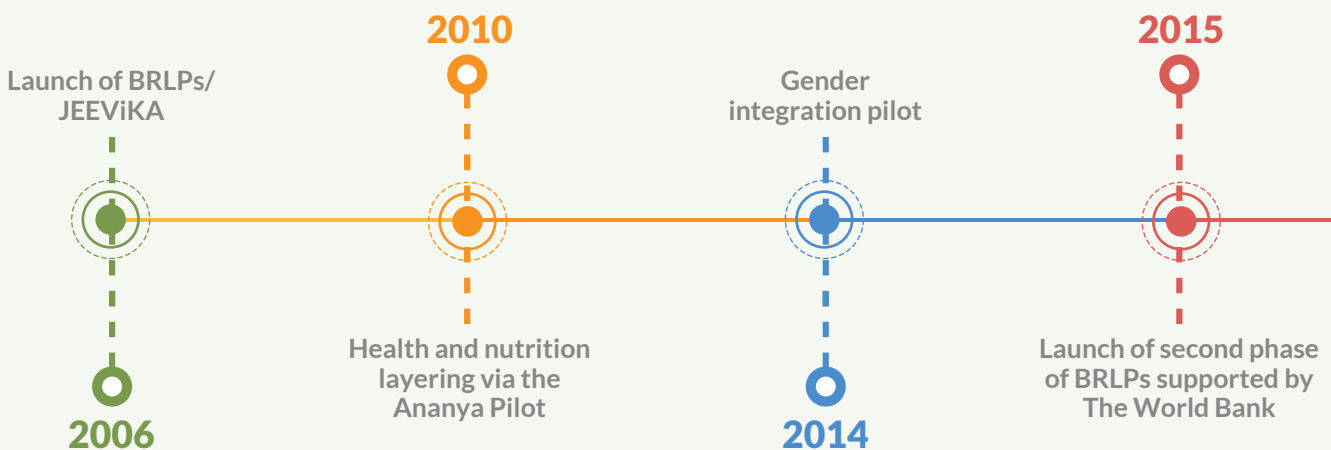
METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach has been used for this needs assessment; 31 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), 2 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and 2 Field Visits were conducted to supplement and build on an initial literature review.

INSIGHTS FROM LITERATURE REVIEW

The core strategy of JEEViKA is to build women's community institutions in the form of Self-Help groups (SHGs), which through member savings, internal loaning and regular repayment, become self-sustaining organizations. Over a period of 10 years, BRLPS's mandate has been to mobilize 15 million rural households into over 1 million SHGs, 65,000 VOs and 1,600 CLFs. The programme has gained widespread recognition from various governments, non-governmental organizations, and other stakeholders for its achievements. JEEViKA has helped women understand and perform digital transactions, access insurance and social/livelihoods security, and enrol themselves into old age pension programmes. Convergence efforts have also extended towards creating and raising awareness on rural sanitation and alcohol prohibition; enabling access to maternal and child health care and nutrition under the

TIMELINE OF SELECTED JEEViKA INITIATIVES





Collective action by JEEViKA's federated structures has contributed to progress on nutrition, health, livelihoods and economic empowerment

Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS); guaranteeing employment through Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Scheme (MGNREGS); strengthening access to the Public Distribution Scheme (PDS); and mobilising women's farmer producer groups.

A review of research undertaken on JEEViKA and associated programmes suggests that the programme has been studied and evaluated to understand its impact on a range of issues that are faced, challenged, and addressed by these groups. Positive outcomes on issues including but not limited to nutrition, health, livelihoods, economic and social empowerment, and challenging existing norms and shifting behaviours have been seen. It is widely acknowledged that these changes in outcomes are a result of collective action taken by JEEViKA's federated structures. As women occupy public spaces and increasingly participate in political, financial, and civic processes, their capacity to challenge patriarchal and normative restrictions imposed on them also surges.

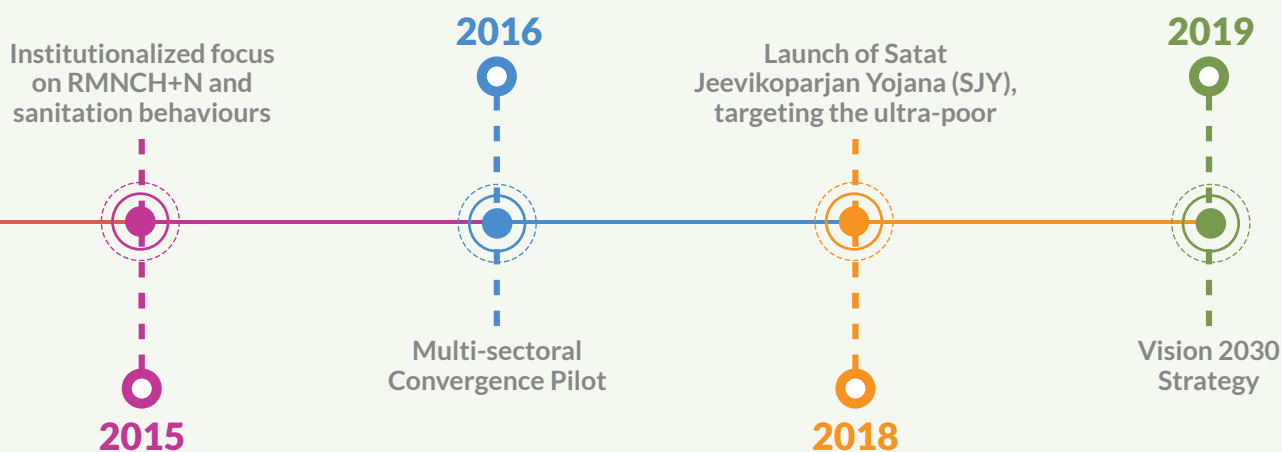


Table 1. Findings from Selected Studies on JEEViKA

STUDY	KEY FINDINGS
Recasting Culture to Undo Gender - A Sociological Analysis of JEEViKA in Rural Bihar, India (Sanyal et al 2015); Qualitative Study ¹	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Jeevika has “cultivated new cultural competencies and capabilities that challenge the traditional conventions of gender.” Women have access to well-defined network cutting across caste and religious identities and knowledge. Latter also enabling them to challenge cultural systems that are more concerned with preserving boundaries rather than disrupting them.
Socio-Economic Impacts of JEEViKA: A Large-Scale Self-Help Group Project in Bihar, India (Dutta, 2015); Quantitative Study ²	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wide reach, but as a livelihoods program, it has been unable to change the number of income-earning members within the household. Limited increase in productive assets. Positive outcomes - Freedom from high interest/cost debt; Reduction in food shortage; Increase in literacy, political participation, self-employment, purchasing capacity among women.
Poverty and Empowerment Impacts of the Bihar Rural Livelihoods Project in India (Hoffman et al 2018); Cluster Randomized Trial ³	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase in group membership and take-up of credit via groups; corresponding decline in use of informal credit, reduction in average informal lending rates. Significant increase in asset ownership among landless HHs. Mixed impact on indicators of women’s empowerment, no clear direction when disaggregated. No impact on consumption value.
Engaging Women’s Groups to Improve Nutrition: Findings from an Evaluation of the JEEViKA Multi-Sectoral Convergence Pilot in Saharsa, Bihar, India (Gupta et al 2019); Randomized Control Trial ⁴	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Small but significant impacts on reported dietary diversity for both women or children. No impact on anthropometric outcomes for women or children.
Impact Evaluation of the National Rural Livelihoods Projects (Kochar et al. 2020); Quantitative, Difference in difference ⁵	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Significant changes in credit sources, HHs borrowing more from SHGs and banks, vs. high-cost loans from the informal sector. Improvement in HH welfare; education expenditures, food shares, ownership of productive assets. No effects on measures of women’s empowerment, and declining effects on female labour force participation rates.

Decrease in informal credit is one of the key achievements of JEEViKA, along with improvements in household welfare, ownership of productive assets

- Sanyal, P., Rao, V., & Majumdar, S. (2015). Recasting culture to undo gender: A sociological analysis of Jeevika in Rural Bihar, India. World Bank Policy Research Working Paper, (7411).
- Datta, U. (2015). Socio-economic impacts of JEEViKA: a large-scale self-help group project in Bihar, India. World Development, 68, 1-18.
- Hoffman et. al (2018). Poverty and empowerment impacts of the Bihar Rural Livelihoods Project in India. 3ie Impact Evaluation Report 71.
- Gupta, S., Kumar, N., Menon, P., Pandey, S., & Raghunathan, K. (2019). Engaging women’s groups to improve nutrition: Findings from an evaluation of the JEEViKA multisectoral convergence pilot in Saharsa, Bihar. Washington, DC International Food Policy Research Institute.
- Kochar et al (2020). Impact Evaluation of the National Rural Livelihoods Projects. 3ie Impact Evaluation Report 128



EXISTING GOOD PRACTICES AND PROMISING EFFORTS

I. Understanding of Gender Equality

- Many women members/leaders, have a strong understanding, consciousness about discrimination, patriarchal norms and violence within their context and are motivated to improve the situation through collective action.
- Women clearly articulate how the programme has empowered them and brought about significant positive changes in their lives – economic transformation, improved confidence, access to entitlements and their increased awareness across several issues of interest and priority.
- All state level officials acknowledged challenges that the state faces including women's education, women's employment and livelihoods opportunities, and deeply entrenched conventional social norms in rural Bihar.

II. State-level Initiatives and Engendering the System

- Gender intervention efforts are understood as cross-cutting and officials acknowledge that integrating gender equity principles across all programming efforts is critical.

Women leaders have a strong understanding of discrimination in their contexts and are motivated to improve the situation



Long standing association with external development partners has been successful, due to JEEViKA's buy-in and convergence

- Selected CLFs have been identified from Muzaffarpur, Sitamarhi and Samastipur for need based trainings and orientations to address arising local needs. The positive impact of this work is visible in the interactions with staff.
- Examples of localized work include addressing property rights, early marriage, dowry, domestic violence, overcoming caste and religion based discrimination, addressing witchcraft related violence, campaigning for imposing bans of alcohol production and consumption.
- The main focus of the Social Development vertical is currently based on 2020-21 Annual Action Plan, including diversified nutritional food security & health risk mitigation, collective actions with non- negotiables, social campaigns & awareness, gender sensitization, entitlements & rights-based approach and social inclusion of elderly, disabled, widow and tribal in SHG fold.
- The state's gender agenda has been evolving more formally since 2017-18 Annual Action plans. In 2019-20's Annual Action Plan the state has actively invested in building a gender agenda, which is in line with national gender operational strategy.
- Efforts at institutional level are reflected in conscious strategies:
 - ◆ Ensuring equity and safety at work place including Special Leave, Roll out of POSH etc. are positive and promising.
 - ◆ Recruiting more women into the organization: Female to male ratio of the staff employed remains lopsided, especially at the state level which only has 20 percent female employees. At the district level there are about 30 percent women employees. The block level shows some promise where nearly 60 percent of staff is women. Of the 1.5 lac Community Professionals, 85 percent are female, all Community Coordinators are women.

- Development partners like PRADAN and PCI have had a long-standing association in the state, with clear state level buy-in and associated convergence, prioritization of activities to succeed – example, livelihoods and high-level capacity building with PRADAN, and health and nutrition in case of PCI.

III. Capacity Building on Gender Equality and Integration

- Gender Training initiatives were introduced before the pandemic. However, they unfortunately came to a standstill due to lockdown restrictions, and will be restarted in due course.
- At the VO and CLF, an orientation training is held with selected SAC members (3 in number) on various themes of social justice through addressing local needs by leveraging the strength of the collective.
- Social Development team members at the state level have been trained on Gender Operational Strategy developed at the National level.
- Social Development Programme managers, and a few select staff members with exposure to past interventions have a better grasp of the gender issues/integration.
- A separate training module is being used borrowing learnings from efforts made by feminist organizations and existing available material.
- The modules focus on the importance of collectivization, the differences between sex and gender, and how to identify and prioritize issues.

IV. Monitoring, Learning and Evaluations

- Pilot interventions such as the adolescent groups (TARA program) and educational initiatives (iSaksham, Turn the Bus), introduced by the Social Development vertical are being monitored and documented both at the level of the partners, as well as the state.
- The team is familiar with the tracking mechanism (MIS) being discussed at the national level, and are keen on adopting monitoring tracking indicators developed at national level.

V. COVID-19 Response by JEEViKA

- JEEViKA displayed a very agile response to the situational demands, and conducted virtual trainings and meetings across verticals. COVID-19 specific virtual trainings were also held.
- JEEViKA members were engaged widely in making masks following hygienic construction protocols.
- VO and CLF members were also actively involved in awareness outreach and knowledge generation activities surrounding following social distancing protocols and COVID-19 safety norms.
- More recently, the SHG members have also participated in vaccination drives and raising awareness, especially to overcome vaccine hesitancy.
- Few local actions on addressing domestic violence issues were reported.

JEEViKA members played a significant role in response efforts throughout the COVID-19 pandemic

RECOMMENDATIONS

JEEViKA has strengthened women's confidence and enabled women to meet, build networks, and negotiate as a group. At the same time there is recognition that this change needs to deepen and accelerate for women to be able to challenge prevalent norms around domestic violence, sexual harassment, or education and mobility of girls.

Building and sustaining a strong gender agenda that addresses and responds to women's social needs at the state level, while incorporating a gender transformative approach is required. The overarching focus should be on strengthening community institutions to develop and implement Gender Action Plans, set up Gender Desks with designated focal points and community cadre, and attempt to converge and coordinate with local supportive infrastructure. Reinforcing the institution/system via gender sensitisation trainings at the state level, building capacities of JEEViKA staff on the importance of understanding and addressing women's social needs, is also vital, to further build upon the successes that JEEViKA has achieved.

01

KEY FINDING

A clear articulated vision, and goals to drive gender equality and integration efforts within the state will add value to the efforts.

RECOMMENDATION

State level buy-in and sign off on an integrated and coordinated gender integration programme endorsed at the highest level.

ROLL-OUT ESSENTIALS

State Level

- Identify key point persons from JEEViKA who are pivotal in articulating and driving the gender vision.
- Liaise with important auxiliary departments to ensure buy-in on the state level gender plans.
- Organise an endorsement event to create awareness among JEEViKA staff and other converging departments/agencies.
- Use consistent and clear language (example, mainstreaming vs. integration; social action vs. social awareness, gender equality vs. gender equity etc.) that can be adopted and scaled by JEEViKA.

02

KEY FINDING

Clear articulation of Gender Action Plans to incorporate focus areas (dowry, child marriage, education, and domestic violence) with goals and planned activities is needed.

RECOMMENDATION

Develop a clear gender integration operational strategy and plan, unique and contextually relevant to the state.

ROLL-OUT ESSENTIALS

State Level

- Develop State level policy document designed by JEEViKA officials with external technical support.
- Policy document should include details of activities to be undertaken and plans to developed at each level – CLF, VO, SAC, role of a Gender Desk/Forum.
- Include gender sensitive emergency/disaster (example, annual floods) response and planning.

District/Block Level

- Inputs on the selection criteria to be adopted for selecting on gender master trainers or gender resource persons.
- Inputs on the operational details to develop annual gender plans –example, systematically collecting baseline information at the local level on cases/issues of interest, setting targets, and creating training calendars.

Community Level

- Community level buy-in on developing gender action plans and clear understanding of the roles and responsibilities of community cadres and gender point persons.



03

KEY FINDING

Resource allocation including budgetary requirement can be made specific and detailed.

RECOMMENDATION

Clear allocation of budgets and resources at each level to actualize gender integration strategy and plans.

ROLL-OUT ESSENTIALS

State Level

- Committed and dedicated budget to roll-out and implement gender integration strategy.
- Committed budget to also support the envisioned pilot/model testing work.

District/Block Level

- Clear understanding and articulation of the budgetary requirements to be communicated to the state, especially during the formation of annual action plans.

04

KEY FINDING

Capacity building plans on gender equality and integration at institutional and community institution level needs focused planning.

RECOMMENDATION

Develop systematic capacity building plans aligned to the mandates of the IBCB and social development verticals.

ROLL-OUT ESSENTIALS

State Level

- State - level training planning on gender sensitization across all staff members.
- Training and capacity building of the social development team on operationalizing the gender integration strategy, and its corresponding goals and vision.
- Communication innovations introduced to raise awareness community level and preparedness of community institutions to intervene/take action.

District/Block Level

- District and block staff members oriented on state level gender vision and plans.
- Training and capacity building of dedicated IBCB and social development staff members at the decentralized levels.
- Training plans designed and developed by social development vertical team members to roll out gender strategy – setting up and strengthening of SAC, identifying and developing training calendars of gender resource persons, training on visioning/institutional level planning for CLF/VOs, orientation meetings with village level gender forums and training/capacity building of gender point persons at SHG level.

05

KEY FINDING

Convergence and coordination efforts across different levels to work on gender/social issues can be strengthened.

RECOMMENDATION

Work on gender integration by enabling greater collaboration and convergence with departments entrusted with core work of women's empowerment like WDC, Department of Education, and support of local government (PRI).

ROLL-OUT ESSENTIALS

State Level

- Ensure high level buy-in from other departments at the visioning stage. Efforts should include stakeholders at the state level who can enable inter-department dialogue and coordination.
- Set up working groups/steering committees at the state level to discuss convergence bi-annually or quarterly.

District/Block Level

- District Magistrate's office to play a key role in building synergy and dialogue across departments.
- Sensitization and orientation drives to be organized with auxiliary departments and agencies – Panchayati Raj, WCD, police, 181, state disaster management authority, and legal and counselling services.

Community Level

- Coordinated and collaborative awareness drives and campaigns organized at the community level for visibility on the efforts made to work across departments.
- Build capacities to work with PRI at the local level to enable access to entitlements and dialogue on addressing gender and social needs.

06

KEY FINDING

Systematic monitoring or learning efforts corresponding to existing gender operational strategies will yield better evidence on impact.

RECOMMENDATION

Develop and design a state level monitoring and learning plan on gender integration.

ROLL-OUT ESSENTIALS

State Level

- Co-design a monitoring, learning and evaluation plan with the state through a one-time MLE workshop. Identify indicators of interest beyond tracking training/capacity building initiatives, which can be disaggregated at the district/block/CLF/VO and SHG levels.
- Develop a clear evaluation plan with buy in from the state from the beginning of the programme.

District/Block Level


- Introduce simple formats/registers for tracking progress and informing mid-course corrections.

Community Level

- Potential indicators of interest to track can include – no. of DV cases identified and addressed, no. of children enrolled in schools, no. of women accessing specific entitlements, targets set and met within gender action plans among others.





A woman wearing a bright pink sari and a matching headscarf is sitting on a concrete step. She is smiling and looking towards the camera. She has several gold bangles on her right wrist. In the foreground, there are several chickens, including a large brown one and several blue ones. The background is a plain wall with a dark doorway.

This Needs Assessment is authored by Divya Hariharan (DAI Consulting), with technical input from Madhu Joshi, Devaki Singh, Gunjan Bihari (Centre for Catalyzing Change, C3) and Dr V. Rukmini Rao (Independent Consultant).

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