




The
Hunger
Project.

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**Engagement with Local
Communities: Elected Women's
Leadership, Voice, Agency**

BMZ ENDLINE ASSESSMENT 2019-2022

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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More importantly, to the elected women representatives who stood resolute during a severe pandemic crisis and pushed their limits to address the communities' needs. Their stories of grit and courage formed the backbone of this evaluation and THP India's strategy.

GLOSSARY

EWRs	Elected Women Representatives
THP	The Hunger Project
ST	Scheduled Tribe (Adivasi)
SC	Scheduled Caste (Dalit)
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
PRI	Panchayati Raj Institution; a three-tiered system of local governance in India
GRAM PANCHAYATS	Local village councils comprising of sarpanch (president), panch (ward member), vice president, secretary
BLOCKS	The second level of the administrative unit under the PRI structure
DISTRICTS	The top level in the administrative unit under PRI structure
GRAM SABHAS	Village council meetings at the panchayat level

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The qualitative assessment concludes that the project outcomes, in the context of the extraordinary circumstances created by the pandemic, were able to meet the project's original objectives. An analysis of the shared experiences of EWRs and other stakeholders revealed that a progressive change in the lives of community members in the intervention areas was possible due to the project activities.

EWRs played a pivotal role as active, empowered, determined leaders who went beyond their defined mandate to address pertinent and urgent community needs arising from the COVID19 crisis in rural areas.

Broadly, THP India's interventions with EWRs have achieved the following:

[1] Mitigated the impact of the COVID19 pandemic in the panchayats by tackling misinformation, enabling vulnerable and marginalised communities to access their rights and entitlements by linking them to special government schemes and provisions for food rations and livelihood generation.

[2] Achieved nutritional sufficiency in vulnerable groups, especially pregnant and lactating women, malnourished children and economically distressed households. This was realised through a diverse range of interventions - from activating mothers' committees to setting up kitchen gardens to educating people on good nutritional and healthy practices, thus insisting on behavioural change practices.

[3] Informed and linked economically weaker community members and migrant households to social security and employment schemes, linked people to job cards under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) and other schemes that could help alleviate vulnerability and increase their incomes. These outcomes have, in one way or another, addressed Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 1, 3, 5, 8, 10 and 12.

The assessment categorically found that the project has empowered elected women to lead and leverage panchayats as the primary vehicle to bring transformative change to support communities in the most distressing times. This was despite the pronounced patriarchal and caste practices within the community and the panchayat governance system creating various social and political hindrances. It is against this backdrop that we witness the making of some significant leadership legacies, especially for EWRs from Dalit and Adivasi communities.

The assessment also found strong evidence of a robust project design which, in a way, is rooted in the larger programme strategy and learnings over the years. Perhaps why THP India figured out ways to explore the needs and particularities of the intervention areas as well as adapt to the rapidly changing reality presented by the pandemic.

The project was a successful endeavour towards bridging the huge information gap, a deepened awareness of rights, entitlements and schemes, and a positive embrace of elected women representatives who emerged fiercer and more determined in their role and response.

CONTEXT

India is ranked 135 out of 146 countries in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap (GGG) Index for 2022, performing worst in the sub-index on women's health and survival [1]. India's SDG Gender Index also dropped due to reduced representation in ministerial seats [2] despite having one of the largest representation of women at local governance levels.

Affirmative action is considered one of the most effective ways to counter gender inequality in politics and bring women within the fold of governance. The 73rd constitutional amendment in 1993 reserved one-third of all seats in panchayats for women, especially those from socially marginalised groups (SCs and STs). There are 1.4 million women in the PRIs in India. The law also made it binding for Indian states to decentralise a significant amount of planning to a three-tier system of local governance, which has not been implemented in spirit and letter by most states, including Madhya Pradesh. Election to bodies does not automatically convert into active participation for women due to multiple barriers of gender discrimination, caste dynamics, inherent capacities and lack of experience.

The problem of gender inequality in India stems from complex and interconnected factors of caste, education, class etc., further perpetuated by entrenched cultural practices and patriarchal institutional systems. The importance of recognising the need for gender mainstreaming supports not only the interests of women in the policy decision-making process, but also emphasises the requisite provision of (informal) support and enforcement mechanisms for gender mainstreaming. [3]

THP India empowers EWRs and rural women in panchayats by building leadership capacities and enhancing their participation in local governance processes. The programme is aligned with the five-year tenure of the EWRs. It intensively engages them in understanding their roles and responsibilities, rules, provisions and guidelines of state and national government schemes on nutrition and food security, health, education, livelihoods, social security, etc., to enable EWRs to identify and address social and gender injustice in their communities.

Ample evidence-based research in the domain proves women in governance and positions of power:

- Promote gender equality in governance, empower women and improve democratic functioning and inclusion;
- Reduce corruption, increase economic growth and enhance efficiency in governance;
- Prioritise spending on infrastructure, such as roads, health, education, drinking water and sanitation; and
- Reduce neonatal mortality. [4]

[1] <https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2022>

[2] <https://www.equalmeasures2030.org/2022-sdg-gender-index/country-profiles/india>

[3] Shekher, M., Raabe, K., & Birner, R. (2008). "The Effects of Political Reservations for Women in Local Governance and Rural Service Provision." Washington D.C.: International Food Policy Research Institute

[4] Bina Agarwal, Gender, (February 2022) "Presence and Representation: Can Presence Alone Make for Effective Representation? Social Change." Sage Publication

THP India has worked in six states across India for over two decades and has developed a robust programme on building capacities of EWRs and critical support structures. A previous assessment in Madhya Pradesh covering the programme from 2010-15 successfully demonstrated that the intervention exhibited significantly higher efficiency and governing capacity than the control group. Furthermore, selected gram panchayats also noted better development and policy footprint [5].

BMZ supported the project “Strengthening the Competencies of Elected Women Representatives in Madhya Pradesh”, initiated in November 2019. Since then, several unanticipated developments have prevented the implementation of the approved project design. This required THP India to review and redesign the project to respond to the existing realities of the day. Accordingly, several revisions were made and approved by BMZ. The changes in the external environment, the impact they had on the interventions and the measures adopted by THP India are summarised below:

Change in External Context

Civil Unrest: Civil unrest in Madhya Pradesh in December 2019 resulted in a ban on gatherings of more than six people.

Covid19 Lockdown: A nationwide lockdown to contain the spread of COVID19 was introduced in March-August 2020 and again in April-July 2021. During this period, all activities were stopped. Between August-November 2020, restrictions prohibited any gathering of over six people at a time.

Subsequently, activities could be conducted but with restrictions on the number of people who could get together at a time.

Since the onset of COVID19, activity implementation was carried out based on the state government protocols.

Impact on Project/ Measures Adopted by THP India

Activity implementation had to be halted for some periods in December 2019.

Virtual engagement with EWRs was intensified. The COVID19 related updates, protocols, circulars regarding schemes circulars, and actions required by EWRs were shared with them over the phone and via WhatsApp.

With the partial lifting of restrictions, activities were broken and were conducted in smaller batches.

- Residential activities were stopped to adhere to government COVID19 protocols.
- Direct engagement with vulnerable community members was initiated to intensify the dissemination of information about important government schemes on food security, livelihood, nutrition and health. EWRs were active members in these meetings.
- Additionally, extensive community outreach based awareness campaigns were designed.

Change in External Context

Delay in Panchayat Elections:

Scheduled to be held in early 2020, panchayat elections were not held because of the COVID19 pandemic.

With the panchayat term ending in March 2020, EWRs were inducted into administrative committees formed by the state government to allow panchayats to continue carrying out their mandated functions.

Panchayat elections were finally held in July 2022. This was after a delay of almost 2.5 years, three months before the project end-date as per the original proposal.

Changes in the Regulatory Laws for NGOs in India

In September 2020, the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act was amended. Among the several regulations introduced, one point affecting THP India directly was that the sub-granting of foreign funds between NGOs was disallowed.

Given that THP India's operational model was entirely built on a 'partnership model', i.e., sub-granting funds to community-based NGOs in the field, it had to overhaul its entire model.

Impact on Project/ Measures Adopted by THP India

The programme was re-designed to allow THP India to continue working with EWRs through regular meetings in small clusters. This, combined with the other activities, ensured that the programme moved forward with the same objective as envisioned in the original proposal, albeit with a modified activity plan.

Once the elections concluded in July 2022, capacity building of the new batch of EWRs was undertaken in the project.

A new operational model for THP India was designed considering the new regulations. Due to this, activities could not be conducted in January and February 2021; programme implementation resumed in March 2021.

In addition, in consultation with BMZ, the project was extended from October 2022 to December 2022. The original agreement was for the period November 2019 – October 2022. This change meant the project's total duration increased from 36 to 38 months to engage 1121 EWRs in 118 Panchayats in four blocks of the four districts. THP India had earlier engaged with elected women (elected in 2015) in the three districts of Rewa, Satna and Balaghat. This was supported by another donor. Under the BMZ project, Raisen district was added to the programme as a new intervention area in 2021.

No changes were made to the overall project goal, and the primary stakeholders were kept central to implementing the programme. New stakeholders and interventions were added based on the changing realities on the ground to address COVID19.

ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK

The endline assessment of the BMZ project was carried out in October 2022, as the project neared completion. The broad aim of the review was to systematically analyse the effectiveness of THP India's interventions in Madhya Pradesh over the period of 2019 – 2022, and assess their impact on EWRs and community members.

Objectives of the Assessment

1. To assess the EWRs' capacities as public office holders and a spotlight on their leadership journey.
2. To ascertain the impact and efficacy of specific interventions on nutrition, food security, and livelihood linkages for communities.
3. Assess whether COVID19 affected the intended outcomes of the project.

Study Methodology and Limitations

A qualitative study was planned to adequately elucidate the impact of the multi-layered programme and capture the nuances of stakeholders' experiences. The focused group discussions and personal interviews articulate challenges and personal stories leading to rich and diverse ground narratives that eloquently encapsulate the programme impact.

The qualitative survey tools developed for different stakeholders were designed to capture enhanced knowledge leading to changed practices and behavioural change, the impact of COVID19 and mitigation strategies. Wherever necessary, the assessment drew from programme reports, case studies and other supporting data. The evaluation also took into account the baseline information collected in 2015 to compare the nature of changes encountered in EWRs.

To substantiate and qualify qualitative narratives and experiences, research studies have been referenced extensively to affirm and corroborate findings from the assessment.

Tools, Data Collection and Secondary data

Tools for the Assessment:

THP India's MEL team developed qualitative tools based on the project's initial design, and after several rounds of internal discussions with the programme team, revisions were made to make sure the tools are structured to showcase the impact of the interventions in a comprehensive and cogent manner that respect the sensitivity of the respondents and the context. The following stakeholders were mapped and interviewed for the assessment.

1. Elected Women Representatives
2. Community Members
3. Mothers Committee Members
4. THP India Field Staff

Data Collection Design:

The data was collected from sampled respondents through focused group discussions and individual interviews. The sampling was representative of the social category and position of EWRs, and was finally based on availability on the day of the interviews. Discussion guides and interview tools covered a range of questions. 177 respondents - 52 EWRs, 121 community members, and four THP India field staff – participated in the assessment.

The interviews and discussion surveys followed standard data collection ethical protocols that ensured the confidentiality of all respondents, taking special care of not naming any respondent at any point in the report. Prior to any interview or discussion, explicit consent was sought from the respondents after mentioning the objective behind the interviews. Permission was also sought to record the interviews and photograph the respondents.

Data Analysis:

All individual interviews and focused group discussions with all stakeholders were first transcribed into English. The transcriptions were coded using Excel based on themes, and major findings were then analysed.

Secondary Data:

The assessment references internal and BMZ project reports, case studies and data from THP India's internal MEL systems.



Photo: EWRs and community women attending a mothers' committee meeting.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The summary of findings has been categorised into four broad sections, with a strong focus on the specific interventions undertaken between 2019-2022, and the impact garnered during the project period:

1. COVID19 and Interventions
2. Leadership Journey of EWRs
3. Ensuring and Sustaining Nutritional Security
4. Engaging the Community

COVID19 Response

The COVID19 pandemic had devastating health and economic repercussions on a vast section of the rural poor. For instance, estimates of incidence of rural poverty in Madhya Pradesh increased from 37% to 56%-62%. [6] Strict lockdowns led to acute food insecurity, income losses, reverse migration, lack of access to credit, and untold stress and anxiety across vulnerable populations. An EWR from Rewa recalls how misinformation and fake news *"affected social harmony and unity and caused animosity for anyone coming from outside the village."*

At the local governance level, panchayats and elected representatives became the focal point to mitigate the ill effects of COVID19. They were the first responders in managing the multiple crises as they unfolded. Raising awareness and building trust was paramount. Accurate communication and coordination at local levels were aimed at building trust and confidence between citizens and local governments, and messaging by local governments is bound to be followed more by citizens. Recent studies show that managing and maintaining efficient information systems by local governance leaders in panchayats positively impacts consumption and vulnerability status as mapped against the public distribution system (PDS), MGNREGS, and management of COVID19 protocols. [7]

The prerogative of THP India and EWRs during the initial months of COVID19 infection spreading to rural areas was to ensure accurate and timely information about the virus and various special government schemes reached the people. An efficient information dissemination system was put in place, which involved multiple means of communication - phone calls, messages, forming WhatsApp groups, door-to-door visits, putting up posters in public spaces, distributing leaflets, and audio and radio programmes. This led to a noticeable increase in information uptake and behavioural change in community members towards COVID19, as elucidated by community members in several discussions.

Evidence from various interviews with community members attested to the fact that a dire situation existed in the form of a lack of adequate rations, lack of facilities in the quarantine

[6] Krishna Ram and Shivani Yadav. (October 31, 2021). "The Impact of COVID-19 on Poverty Estimates in India: A Study Across Caste, Class and Religion." *Contemporary Voice of Dalit*. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/2455328X211051432>

[7] Vivek Pandey, Shyam Singh, Deepak Kumar. (July 2022). "COVID-19, information management by local governments, and food consumption." *Food Policy*, Vol. 110. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foodpol.2022.102278>

centres, and lack of job opportunities resulting in income loss. The interviews evinced crucial insights into how EWRs stood at the forefront of addressing challenges faced by communities. They monitored and made necessary provisions in the quarantine centres, especially for women, raised awareness on COVID-appropriate behaviour and the importance of vaccination, made and distributed masks, informed people about different government relief schemes such as food coupons, helped in making ration cards, job cards, and linked people to MGNREGS.

Many EWRs demonstrated expansive leadership, thus going beyond their mandated role. For instance, an EWR shared that she collected donations from well-off villagers to support marginalised households for fifteen days of rations during the first lockdown. She also enrolled nearly 145 families for new job cards and 200 families for work under MGNREGS. Case studies point to EWRs especially reaching out to pregnant women, the elderly and returning migrants, proactively seeking to ensure their well-being.

Going Beyond Call of Duty: A significant proportion of EWRs went beyond their defined roles during the pandemic to ensure community needs were prioritised, even when they were not officially holding public office. They facilitated entitlements to reach the most marginalised to sustain themselves with dignity in times of crisis by leveraging multiple central and state schemes on livelihood generation and food subsidy. A major challenge EWRs had to overcome initially was resistance from within their families. They would be discouraged to step-outside for fear of infecting family members. This was coupled with backlash from community members during their steady efforts during vaccination drives. Resilient EWRs negotiated a difficult terrain and performed the role of frontline workers.

Misinformation: Community members interviewed described how they feared the vaccine and other misconceptions about COVID. Breaking hesitation and myths associated with COVID19 vaccinations and convincing people was a mammoth task, as mentioned by the EWRs, who led from the front, demonstrating its safety.

Linkages to New Schemes: The programme reports that approximately 543 EWRs were instrumental in raising awareness and ensuring citizens had safe access to rights and entitlements across our working areas in four districts of Rewa, Satna, Balaghat and Raisen.

“People asked me not to get vaccinated, as they heard of cases in the village where people died after receiving the vaccine. I addressed this and explained that the COVID vaccine is for their safety. To assure them I got vaccinated first. Then I would take people in groups of 10 and 12 for vaccination,” shared an EWR.

To enable these EWRs, THP India, through its field staff and partners, held one-on-one meetings with EWRs following all necessary safety protocols and measures. Together they identified what support was needed in the community and prioritised them. A field staff recollected, *“In 2020, we had developed a strong network with different department officials to get daily updates, which we would then pass on to EWRs in real time.”*

Education: COVID19 induced lockdown caused complete school closures, adversely impacting access to learning. Many in rural areas were unable to even access online classes due to poor internet connection or regular access to devices (mobile phone, laptop).

EWRs realised the education emergency the pandemic had caused. They detailed their efforts to make appropriate arrangements to conduct bridge classes in their village for those without access to remote learning. They mobilised children and teachers in small groups. Post 2021, they conducted door-to-door visits encouraging children and parents to send them back to school. Community members interviewed corroborated that classes in small groups aided the children during these difficult times and helped them stay connected in some ways. The programme also reported that during 2020-21, EWRs were able to ensure that 774 children rejoined schools.

Monitoring Quarantine Centres: EWRs had been equally vocal about the poor quarantine arrangements for returning migrant workers. An EWR (from Balaghat) elaborated on her efforts in monitoring quarantine centres and addressing discrimination against migrants during the pandemic's peak. *“I served cooked food to 30-35 people for 14 days as nobody else was willing to help. Four children came from outside our village, and I was asked not to let them stay in the panchayat. I asked where else we keep them. Should we keep them in the forest? This led to an argument between us. I finally managed to keep them in a safe, isolated shelter in the panchayat and served them home-cooked food for 14 days.”*

“A pregnant woman who had returned from the city was abandoned by the family. And she was reluctant to spend time in the quarantine centre among other men. We made a provision for her to stay in a temporary shelter near the house. In less than 15 days, her baby was delivered, and we helped her to get to a hospital and get medical help.” ~ A ward member from Rewa shared.

The evidence on the importance of local government and EWRs' invaluable role during the pandemic due to their proximity reveals critical pre-emptive actions. Apart from bridging crucial information gaps, THP India's strategic interventions and EWRs' resolute leadership enabled relief and support to community members. EWRs leveraged existing government services and schemes, adeptly monitored service delivery, and overcame fear, discrimination and opposition from their families and community members. It is vital to underline here that EWRs were cognizant of their position and the power they still held. They combined this awareness with



We were extremely alert and mindful about the loss of learning. Hence, I ensured that teachers were regularly coming, classes were held per the timetable, and students attended more regularly. If a student were absent for more than a few days, I would visit them to check in.

~ An EWR from the newly added district, Raisen, explained how they monitored schools after reopening

the learnings and knowledge accumulated over a period of time, and channelled them into prioritising the marginalised communities' needs. This strongly signals adaptability and resourcefulness in their leadership qualities in managing crises.

Leadership Journey of EWRs

Any concrete understanding of the project's significant impact is incomplete without situating it in the specific context of EWRs' journeys and lived experiences as public office holders since their election in 2015 and their crucial engagement with THP India since. This section assesses the aspects of grassroots leadership, its dimensions, and its manifestation in various acts of leadership. Hence, some study parameters in the evaluation go beyond the project period. The assessment probed into the following – the idea of leadership, EWRs' agency, awareness, leadership capabilities, the outcome of THP India's interventions and its impact on EWRs' work with the community specifically. The following are key findings shared by the elected women in the interviews and discussions.

Idea of Leadership

"To me, leadership is not about necessarily being the loudest in the room, but instead being the bridge, or the thing that is missing in the discussion and trying to build a consensus from there." ~ Jacinda Arden, Former Prime Minister, New Zealand

These words fittingly describe the tremendous leadership paths taken by the EWRs THP India has engaged with through the project. They were all not necessarily flamboyant in how they appeared, but all undertook an arduous responsibility of including and amplifying often excluded voices. They were loud in action and impact.

91% of EWRs elected in 2015 were first-time elected representatives with no prior exposure to the local governance system. Many had stepped out of the house only partially or often accompanied by another family member. In this assessment, it thus

became imperative to highlight how elected women understood and defined leadership after joining THP India's programme.

My Right: One of the primary manifestations of leadership came up in the form of self-awareness. An EWR spoke about becoming an assertive figure and how getting elected was not the end but the beginning of the empowerment journey. *"We were not allowed to leave our houses (which often felt like a jail). [With THP India], I learned about my rights as a woman and how to be a leader. I can now articulate my thoughts and travel on my own. Don't listen to gents! Step out, learn, and do the work. We need to occupy space and assert our right to be here. We are not committing a crime."* The realisation that power needs to be taken because men will not willingly give it underscores the multi-layered complex patriarchal and social structures that pose an everyday challenge for EWRs. Yet, the structural barriers in the form of gender, caste, class and access to resources have not deterred EWRs from performing their role to their utmost potential.

Role Model: One of the group discussions summarised, *"A good leader is someone who sits with other ward members, sarpanch, the secretary, and the people, and takes them along together. The leader does work based on the needs of the people and community at large and ensures all citizens can access different panchayat services."* This understanding also predominately emerged from their observation and experiences of previous EWRs they had encountered in their area. This, in some ways, speaks to THP India's programme as a whole and leadership skills built over the years that enabled EWRs to respond strategically.

People-Centric: EWRs trained with THP India also spoke about the need to redefine development, which was visible in their people-centred leadership. An EWR from Satna expressed, *“The baton had to pass to women at some point, and this is the time.”* Defining development from a male perspective would only mean the construction of roads. “Men will never raise the need for better school facilities, crèche centres and hospitals.” This leadership approach became more evident during the pandemic and after as more people plunged into dire situations. As EWRs’ role changed from being integrally involved in processes of panchayat governance to being part of panchayat administrative committees that oversaw the management of the pandemic, one also witnessed a strong sense of responsibility to their constituencies giving a resilient face to their leadership journey.

An assertion made by EWRs, across the board, was that their leadership qualities were enhanced enough, and they felt adequately equipped with any issue arising out of their panchayats. Still, unforeseen challenges due to the pandemic were their biggest test as leaders.

Leadership in Action: Voice, Mobility, Agency

Women’s empowerment is defined by the degree of awareness, mobility, desire to be informed, active participation in governance processes, involvement in major household decisions, relative freedom from family control, participation in community activities, and awareness of choices leading to decision-making. Some of these critical parameters were measured through individual interviews and group discussions.

Agency and Mobility: Leadership and empowerment in public life entail EWRs’ increased active participation and engagement in various panchayat activities and aspects of their personal lives, thus demonstrating greater autonomy, decision making and mobility. 100% of EWRs interviewed showcased better confidence

and increased independent mobility outside the house. “Earlier, I used to take permission from in-laws to go out, but after becoming the panchayat president, I started going out independently”. Another EWR added, *“I do not ask them if I can go; I only inform them that I have to go to this place on that day. Even if they say don’t go, I do not listen.”*

EWRs also reported that they were now seen as someone with an important say in household matters. Their position and experience as elected representatives afforded them a certain degree of respect. *“Yes, there is an increase in my participation in decision making within my home. Now they see me as a more aware, responsible and mature person who solves other people’s problems.”*

Redefining norms in the household division of labour directly influences women’s agency [8]. Half the EWRs reported that their husbands and family members stepped in occasionally to share household responsibilities, indicating a major shift in the traditional gender roles.



[8] Sobritchea, Carolyn Israel. (1990). “The ideology of female domesticity: its impact on the status of Filipino women”. Review of Women’s Studies.

Awareness of Roles and Responsibilities: As against 21.7% EWRs aware of their roles in 2015, EWRs in two different settings elaborately articulated the varied responsibilities of ward members, vice-president and president. A clear understanding of their tasks, responsibilities and processes at work was crucial for the smooth functioning of the panchayat. The programme reported that close to 64% of EWRs actively monitored panchayat services, access to and implementation of schemes.

Simultaneously, the EWRs' knowledge of a host of schemes, guidelines, entitlements and provisions across different themes and departments - livelihood (MGNREGS & Path Vikreta), health & nutrition (ICDS, PDS, Janani Suraksha Yojana, Mid-Day meal & Bhaarat PM Garib Kalyaan Yojana, Ayushman), housing (PM Awas Yojana), sanitation and hygiene (Swachh Bharat Abhiyaan), social security and pension (Widow Pension Scheme, Old Age Pension Scheme, Disability Pension Scheme, Single Women's Pension & Kanya Abhibhavak Yojana, Sambal/mazdoor suraksha yojana) and acts to curtail violence, child marriage, schemes focused on women, children, pregnant women (Domestic Violence Act, Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao, Lalldi Laxmi, Matru Vandana Yojana, Prasuti Sahayata Yojna) [9] - was an important marker of their ability to grasp and navigate the complex panchayat administrative edifice. For instance, the outcome of EWRs efforts ensured that 2362 people were linked to various social security benefits, such as receiving their pensions on time, during the project period.

It is crucial to remember that a slew of central and state government schemes is meant for the most vulnerable and marginalised. However, accessing them in areas farther away from the block and district headquarters becomes a challenge,

[9] Listing of state and central government schemes by the EWRs were collated to consolidate this list.

restricting access to schemes mainly due to a lack of awareness. Most trainings and workshops with women before and during the project were geared towards building their capacity and knowledge on these schemes so that practical and actionable information is transferred to the citizens.

Transformation of Self: One of the assessment's most remarkable and visible changes was increased confidence levels in EWRs. Clear evidence of that was how they articulated issues and raised them in formal and informal spaces in the panchayats. Developing communication skills, public-speaking were the two most demanding aspects in the initial years of their tenure. All the EWRs interviewed maintained that their confidence has grown manifold since they first got elected and are now self-assured and poised to speak in any public forum. They claimed that this attitudinal shift had enabled them to be more assertive in their leadership.

An EWR in Rewa explained, *"The biggest change I feel has happened inside me. I can now talk openly and freely with anyone and get the work done. Becoming more confident in dealing with matters both inside my home and in panchayat has allowed people to see me differently. They often appreciate me for my work during my tenure."* Another EWR in Satna shared, "I feel it has brought a complete change in my life. I could not go out and get things done earlier, but now I know I can solve the problems of the citizens. I have also gained the confidence to talk to men in the community."

Transformation at the Household Level: EWRs also spoke about a marked increase in their role in household decision-making and the change in family members' perceptions. An EWR in Raisen, a new working area, shared, *"When I had to go to a panchayat meeting, my husband would step in to prepare food for the family, which was a huge thing for us."* At the same time, there were instances of violence and discrimination faced by EWRs,

but they questioned it and stood up for their rights.

A ward member in Satna recollected an incidence of violence within her extended family – “My uncle physically abused his wife as she supported their daughter’s rights. When I intervened, he threatened me as well. I had no patience for his behaviour or feared others in the family, and complained to the police, and he was detained.”

Petitioning for Redressal: Petitions are one of the most important tools for EWRs to address grievances and demand redressal of issues. This entails working closely with other stakeholders in the panchayat and government officials at the block or district level. The process of filing a petition involves collecting information on the issues faced by individuals/groups of people, drafting and submitting to the relevant authorities to seek resolutions.

100% of the EWRs interviewed in the assessment were aware of this process and knew how to file petitions on various issues such as regularising stopped pensions, payment of wages for employment, new jobs under MGNREGS, demanding repair and construction of panchayat infrastructure like crèche centres, schools, roads, ponds, water supply, sanitation, etc., are some of the examples. The programme reporting indicates that 513 petitions were filed during the intervention period. Of these, approximately 70% were resolved in due course.

EWRs were also aware of the redressal mechanism and navigating the bureaucratic structures for complicated cases of, say, provisioning of social security. One EWR detailed how they dealt with it collectively, “*We resolved an issue of irregular widow pensions as many did not have the death certificate of their respective late husbands. We put a proposal in front of the panchayat, which went to the block and then to the district level for approval, and then pensions were sanctioned after much paperwork.*”

Challenges Faced by EWRs: EWRs work in some of the most hostile regions and face multiple obstacles in the form of gender, caste, class and other discriminations. For instance, elected women from the marginalised castes (Dalits and Adivasis) spoke about receiving threats from the dominant caste men if their hegemony was questioned. The panchayat ecosystem dominated by men is insensitive and unsupportive towards women leaders, especially in their initial years, as shared by one EWR in Satna. “*... but when the panchayat secretary (or other government officials) realise that we know our duties and have enough information to confront them, they slowly started cooperating.*” The trend was also reported in other areas. Some secretaries would behave indifferently towards EWRs because of their inherent bias and prejudice against women and holding power or controlling resources and decision-making. Oscillating between this power feud created between traditional and democratically elected forces is the figure of an empowered elected woman representative asserting her constitutional right to lead.



Focus on Marginalised

THP India's programme strategy is rooted in the fundamental principles of inclusion, equality, justice and human dignity, and its activities with EWRs reflect these values.

Most EWRs (91%) in the intervention areas belong to SC/ST/OBC communities. They are aware of the historical marginalisation their communities have endured and continue to. From the interactions with EWRs, the assessment demonstrates a strong realisation amongst them about the significance of their presence in the office, which enables them to secure a host of rights, entitlements and justice for the most vulnerable groups. *“Working towards the upliftment of marginalised people such as poor, those with a disability, elderly, widow, malnourished children, pregnant and lactating mothers, Dalits and Adivasis, by connecting them with government schemes and entitlements such as pensions, PDS, crèche centres, school and health centre has always been our priority.”*

This is further apparent in how EWRs have made additional efforts to position themselves to seek and resolve instances of discrimination, especially with women, children and girls. A panchayat president, previously a ward member from Balaghat, narrated that she stood for the post in 2022 with the sole aspiration of working on the rights of marginalised women.

A ward member from Satna district spoke about opening a new crèche centre so children could easily access it. *“Children from my village always had a problem accessing the allocated anganwadi (crèche centre), which was far away, leading to neglect and increased cases of malnutrition. I got another centre approved, but there was no land available. So, I offered a portion of my house.”* She understood this was a temporary arrangement, but there was also relief that children's nutritional needs and health check-ups are not compromised. Similarly, in Rewa, an EWR from Rewa recounted an incident where a dominant caste member had encroached upon the land allotted to a poor woman. *“I mobilised other EWRs from the neighbouring panchayats and fought a long battle which included taking help from the police. But we ensured that the woman did not lose her right to the land.”*

Violence against women is another serious concern. During the project, EWRs reported and resolved 38 cases of domestic abuse and violence against women and stopped seven cases of child marriage in their communities.

An EWR from Rewa who focussed on the elderly in her village, *“I prioritised pension for older people, especially elderly women. This was because most older women had no one to look after them. Even their children treat them as a burden and don't treat them well. If they have some money in the form of pension, they can start some small business, or at least be able to meet their basic sustenance”*, another EWR from Satna enrolled people left out of self-help groups for micro-finance.

There are numerous examples of EWRs' who worked with meagre support and resources and never lost sight of who has access and which groups are struggling and vulnerable. For instance, caste discrimination, a complex issue, has often left many excluded from accessing essential public goods like water because of their marginalised caste position. An EWR ensured water pumps were installed much closer to the area inhabited by the members of the SC community in a largely dominant caste village so that the former does not have to face daily discrimination when accessing an essential commodity like water.

At the same time, as EWRs commit to their panchayat duties and secure citizens' rights, they also face tremendous pressure and backlash from the community for doing the right thing.

Another second-time elect and presently a president shared an incident where she stood up against the abuse of an adolescent girl and the subsequent backlash. *"A girl from the ST community, who had lost her parents during the pandemic, was being ill-treated and physically and mentally abused by her guardians (uncle and aunt). When I intervened against that family and called the government helpline to get her safely to a children's home, I was ridiculed and abused in community meetings by my election opponent for standing up for the girl's rights. I had to seek police assistance for my safety."*

An EWR from the SC community articulated, "The battle against so-called powerful groups cannot be won in a term of five years; it's a lifelong struggle for our community." Challenging the social status quo has invited violence and exposed EWRs to many risks. Despite possible repercussions against their own life, evidence strongly suggests that EWRs have shown exceptional courage and mettle in dealing with challenges faced in their struggle to empower the marginalised. With every action and important decision, they move the needle towards redressing the unequal power structures and the injustice they cause.

This was further endorsed in the interactions with community members who unequivocally shared that the elected women representatives were easier to access and ready to listen to their concerns. They immediately started working on them and always checked with them on their well-being from time to time. Research corroborates that in panchayats, women presidents much more than male presidents are found to prioritise public goods such as drinking water, roads, sanitation, irrigation and schools [10], particularly for the marginalised.

Impact of THP India's Interventions

THP India strategically engages with the EWRs in a sustained manner, with a mix of trainings, core leadership workshops, needs-based workshops, formation of collectives, and constant follow-ups. Over the last 22 years, it laid the groundwork and has leveraged its years of experience using participatory and adult training techniques and learnings to pave the way for women's empowerment in local governance that challenges and subverts the socio-political structure that determines the position of women in society.

Confidence, pride, ownership, communication, and negotiation are traits and skills elected women develop over the years. Earlier assessments of THP India's programmes in other states attest to this fact.

This project also began with simplifying and demystifying technical government guidelines and processes of redressal for EWRs at regular intervals. EWRs detailed in the discussions how their engagement with THP India over the period made them more conscious and mindful about their roles and responsibility, built their confidence, communication skills, and a better understanding of the village administrative system, government's schemes and services, but more importantly, how to navigate the intricate government departmental web.

[10] Beaman, L., Duflo, E., Pande, R., & Topalova, P. (2011). Political reservation and substantive representation: Evidence from Indian village councils. India Policy Forum



Now people can see the good work done by EWRs in the community. Earlier, people pointed fingers at the women who stepped out of their houses. Still, our presence in the public domain has motivated other women from our communities to step out and feel more supported. They are becoming more vocal in their opinions everywhere.

A second-term elect EWR stated the importance of the programmes when she started attending them in her second term. "In 2015, for the first time, I fully grasped the scope of my role and responsibilities, the power structures in our society and how they affect the most marginalised, the different government schemes, and how people can access them. In comparison, the first tenure seemed like a haze. I was trying to show up for my ward as best as possible."

Equipped with tools and information, EWRs mentioned, they were better prepared to step out during the pandemic and actively carry out THP India's awareness-raising campaigns. These were critical in disseminating information related to malnutrition, special relief schemes like loans, etc.

Empowering Local Communities, Enhancing Voices

Going beyond the definition of leadership in terms of changes in EWRs' self-perception and their successes in office, the assessment also gauged the responsiveness of the larger community. Acceptance and recognition of women as active leaders in their community signified a changed outlook. As an EWR quipped, "Now people can see the good work done by EWRs in the community. Earlier, people pointed fingers at the women who stepped out of their houses. Still, our presence in the public domain has motivated other women from our communities to step out and feel more supported." Women's presence in decision-making positions has demonstrated to male members that they can function effectively in positions of power. [11]

An indicator of the spillover effect of empowered women in leadership positions is nowhere more pronounced than in other women citizens in the community becoming motivated to take independent decisions and reimagine their behaviour and presence in the public space. For instance, EWRs reported that they saw women's increased participation in village council meetings, and they were more forthright in speaking about their issues and demanding resolution. Research shows that women tend to speak up in village council meetings if the president in a panchayat is a woman, and they continue to attend these meetings even if the president changes to a male. [12]

"We got to learn. We received the information we didn't have; otherwise, why would we participate in these meetings? We are confident and can now intervene if we witness any injustice or wrongdoing in the community. We know where to go, how to mobilise support, everything that can make a big/small difference."

~ At the group discussion in Balaghat.

[11] Bina Agarwal, (February 2022). "Gender, Presence and Representation: Can Presence Alone Make for Effective Representation?". *Social Change*.

[12] Deininger, K., Jin, S., & Nagarajan, H. K. (2015). "Does female reservation affect long-term political outcomes? Evidence from rural India." *Journal of Development Studies*.

Breaking Bureaucratic Barriers and Perceptions

Women's presence in public office also challenges how they are perceived by the government officials with whom they engage on a day-to-day basis. The assessment observed a marked change in how government officials responded to EWRs over their tenure - accepting their credibility as leaders and supporting them in due course. The programme also reports that 44% of EWRs were confident working with local authorities without confrontation and challenge. An EWR from Rewa recollected, *"I can see a change in their behaviour over time. Earlier, they used to keep a distance and did not listen or pay attention to what we had to say, but now they offer us seats while we visit their office. The reason for this change is an increase in their awareness about our right to be here, and they very well see the development work we have done."* The group of EWRs in Balaghat shared their experiences of collectively and confidently engaging with block officials and district heads of administration to resolve a plethora of issues - girls' toilets, non-payment of MGNREGS wages, and request for police patrolling for women and girls' safety.

This is not to say that no challenges remain! EWRs still face hurdles and opposition from local officials. As a president from Balaghat articulated, *"The position has made the officials respect me as a public office holder because I am elected, but not as a woman. I do not see any radical change in how they behave with us. But now that I am a president, they are bound to listen to me. The respect comes from the position I hold."* The negotiations and struggles continue.

In light of these myriad voices, the assessment thus attests to the significance of THP India's presence in the intervention areas and its more extensive theory of change - when elected women are equipped with the right tools and skills, they are enabled to create equitable access to public services by superior utilisation of resources. We find strong evidence of what happens when women lead as public office holders and how legacies are shaped. The short, vivid narratives and examples above shatter social myths about who can lead and redefine grassroots leadership and what it should entail.

What we witness through this assessment is a combination of embodied leadership (where EWRs learned to lead at a deeper level, building their self-awareness and capacity), phenomenal will, and EWRs equipping themselves with technical tools and knowledge (which included information about panchayat governance systems and structures), translating into actions that bridged critical gaps between citizens and their rights and entitlements during an unprecedented crisis. It was democratic and people-centric. It was bold but compassionate. It was fierce yet gentle in how it navigated the hostile terrain of local caste and patriarchal politics. It was confident about its presence and place in local governance because it derived its power from the constitution. It was sentient of its limitations (given the COVID19 context and EWRs' limited powers) but was intentional in its purpose and duty towards its citizens, especially the marginalised.



Ensuring and Sustaining Nutritional Security

Madhya Pradesh has the dubious distinction of the highest proportion of malnourished children in India at 16% and 10% severely malnourished [13]. 53% of women are anaemic in the state, and the anaemia in adolescent girls and children under five years has increased in the last three years and stood at 58% and 73%, respectively [14]. The state has the highest infant mortality rate of 46 per thousand live births across all states in India, compared to the national average of 36, and maternal mortality rate of 163 for 100,000 live births, the third highest across all states. [15] All these statistics urgently point to the dire need to improve nutrition and health services and their efficiency in the state.

Against the backdrop of the COVID19 pandemic, THP India designed specific interventions adapting the programme to exigently address emergencies such as the risk of food insecurity among households, especially women and children. This section focuses on the impact of 205 nutrition awareness meetings and 1119 mothers' committee meetings at crèche centres with EWRs and community members. The latter, formally to be run as a committee and constituted at anganwadi centres, is a Madhya Pradesh government initiative (introduced in 2019) to ensure better monitoring of services delivered at anganwadi across the State. THP India decided to leverage the platform and activated the dormant committees to ensure women were at least able to access the information services under the scheme.

One of the primary purposes of this intervention was also to mobilise and motivate community members to hold

crèche service centres accountable, and working with the EWRs would ensure regular meetings of the official Mothers' Committee [16]. THP India facilitated the space and ensured the active participation of adolescent girls and women, especially pregnant women, lactating and young mothers, and mothers of malnourished children. Participants in one group in Satna mentioned they had only heard about this committee, but no meetings were held. With THP India's initiative, which laid out the benefits of the committee in detail, the interval of interactions and meetings increased in all intervention areas. A THP India field staff observed, "enrolment of pregnant women has increased close to three times post regularisation of these meetings."

Aligned with the outcomes of the interventions, the following analysis and observations emerged from the assessment:

- i. Role of EWRs – EWRs acted as primary connectors to disseminate crucial information about food ration schemes, raise awareness on what entails better nutrition, and monitor crèche centres.
- ii. Identifying Malnourished Children – Participants (pregnant and lactating mothers, other women community members and EWRs) across all four districts were aware of the symptoms of a malnourished child and different categories of malnourishment as per WHO guidelines [17] and the mandated steps needed, such as referral to the Nutritional Rehabilitation Centre (NRCs) [18] or management by mother and the crèche centre worker depending on the severity of the case. A direct outcome reported by the programme was that 103 extremely

[13] Women and Child Development Department, Madhya Pradesh, 2022

[14] National Family and Health Survey – 5, Government of India 2022

[15] Sample Registration System Report 2021, Census of India

[16] A Madhya Pradesh government initiative introduced in 2019 to ensure better monitoring of services delivered at crèche centres/anganwadi/children day-care centres across the State.

[17] Measurement of nutritional status of the child malnutrition by MUAC (mid-upper arm circumference) strip provided by the government. Green, indicating no threat of malnourishment, yellow malnourished and red denoting severely malnourished.

[18] Nutrition Rehabilitation Centres are care units at hospitals meant for treatment and recovery of severely malnourished children below five years.



Photo: One of the participants of the mothers' committee proudly shows her kitchen garden (in the backdrop)

malnourished children were referred to NRCs through the efforts of the mothers' committees and EWRs. A woman spoke about how attending her first meeting in 2021 was a lifesaver for her two-year-old daughter, who was severely malnourished and immediately referred to the NRC by the crèche and the THP-India staff. *"I feared losing my daily wage because admission at the NRC meant 15 days of treatment at a district-level hospital. However, I was sensitised that the government paid compensation for the days one is admitted at the NRC."* This gave her the confidence to make the decision. Her daughter is healthier now. Two such cases were shared in the meeting in Balaghat, where timely information to mothers and support provided led to admitting severely malnourished children to NRCs.

iii. Kitchen Gardens – The interventions also focused on changing individual practices and behaviour towards nutrition, starting with encouraging people to set up kitchen gardens in their homes. This has been a key initiative of THP India in the state even before the project. But given the dire situation, it became vital to accelerate the process of raising awareness about nutritional kitchen gardens, especially in exceptionally economically backward households and those with undernourished children. It allowed diversification of food grown and consumed locally and easily available vegetables and fruits. And in some ways, reduced dependence on the market and unexpected inflation (causing price shocks). All the women present in the assessment group in one district, and 60-70% in other districts had started a kitchen garden in their homes. The project reports that **775 kitchen gardens** were completed and functional in all the project areas. Across groups, members recollected growing the following in their respective kitchen gardens - green leafy vegetables, fenugreek, spinach, tomato, aubergine, bottle gourd, okra, bitter gourd, string beans, chilli, moringa, papaya and banana.

iv. Changed Eating and Cooking Habits: These were extremely important, and any modification in these was a clear indication of a dent in traditional practices both in terms of how food was prepared, who ate first (male members would often be served first), and whose health was prioritised. For instance, EWRs from Raisen, at a focused group discussion, shared, "People are more aware of the nutrition they get from the type of food they consume. They are more aware of how to cook leafy vegetables, for instance. Or the proper food intake required for pregnant women, infants, and malnourished children." Similarly, Rewa's mothers' committee members said, *"Earlier, women used to wait until all the male members in the family had finished the meals. But that was slowly changing. They understood the importance of having food on time, especially for a new mother. Now the pregnant and lactating women eat first after food is cooked."* These shifts also signal women's enhanced voice and influence in decision-making after attending the meetings.

v. Breastfeeding Practices – Socio-economic and cultural practices of family and society have played a significant role in the initiation and persistence of certain breastfeeding practices. For instance, the meetings heavily emphasised the early initiation of breastfeeding for both the mother and the child as it is highly nutritious and has antibodies that protect newborns from diseases. [19] Most mothers in the assessment meetings said, *"We have fed our children the first yellow milk and have exclusively breastfed the infants for six months and slowly starting soft food in addition to breast milk."*

vi. Healthy Practices – The meetings also sensitised the participants on how to maintain good health during pregnancy and post-partum, such as washing hands

[19] National Family Health Survey 4, 2015-16; <http://rchiips.org/nfhs/nfhs4.shtml>

properly, wearing clean clothes, and eating leafy vegetables and healthy meals. Myths around traditional practices such as giving homemade remedies/medicines while the newborn fell sick were busted. Going to a medical centre was important and highly emphasised during these meetings.

vii. Government Schemes for Pregnant and Lactating Women - One of the direct outcomes was women's increased awareness about different government schemes benefitting mothers. Across all four districts where the project was implemented, around 80% of the women in the assessment could recollect names, details and provisions of the three prominent government schemes meant for pregnant and lactating women. Most pregnant women from economically vulnerable groups also reported that they enrolled into a government scheme that provided financial support to compensate for an income loss for mothers unable to work before and after delivery. [20]

viii. Interaction with Adolescent Girls - Adolescent girls have been a small but an important sub-group THP India has reached through the project. The main aim was to enable them to identify and prioritise their nutritional needs. Focus was put on dietary habits, how to maintain cleanliness and hygiene during menstruation, and raising awareness about related good practices. Two adolescent girls in the assessment group in Satna shared, *"Earlier, we were hesitant, but engagement with THP India through these meetings has allowed us to access these centres comfortably. We have received information on good hygiene practices to follow during menstruation, on how nutritious food can alleviate the body pain and cramps experienced during periods."*

[20] Prasuti Sahayata Yojna, a state government scheme, for financial assistance of INR 16,000 will be provided in two instalments to help the pregnant women from financially weaker sections. This provides wage loss compensation for mothers unable to work before and after delivery of the first two births.

They also shared information about anaemia, the importance of regularly taking iron supplements and tetanus injections, and setting up kitchen gardens with other members of their communities. "We are also now linked to a government scheme which monetarily supports us to continue our education till 12th."

To sum up, the assessment provides a robust record of THP India's nutrition-based interventions addressing a considerable information gap and deteriorated access to services and schemes caused by the pandemic. Activating the mothers' committees has provided a safe space for meaningful conversations about women's and girls' health practices. Successful linkages to various government schemes and provisions have ensured some safeguards against the exclusion of the most vulnerable. Retention of information provided in these meetings, as recollected by the participants, is another crucial marker of the project's success. A discussion in Satna succinctly acknowledged the importance of these interventions, *"After attending THP India's meetings, we have made changes in our food consumption patterns, become more conscious and aware about the cooking processes. Our children's and other family members' health have improved. We also feel that our physical strength and stamina have increased, and we no longer feel weak and lightheaded!"*

A THP India field trainer from Satna also commented on the drastic increase in women's access to schemes meant for pregnant women, *"We have observed a positive attitude shift in the women, especially in mothers and pregnant women. Access to basic information through the mothers' committee meetings has empowered many."* In the broader scheme of things, the assessment reiterates that there is knowledge building on all fronts. EWRs are more proactive. Crèche workers are more responsive. Women are more aware about their rights!

A woman wearing a red and blue sari is seated in a small, cluttered shop. The shop's walls are covered with various snack packets, including 'Khanna Khajana' and 'Chips'. The woman has a bindi on her forehead and is wearing multiple bangles and rings. The lighting is warm, and the overall atmosphere is that of a traditional Indian street vendor's stall.

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I applied to the state government's Path Vikreta (street vendors) scheme launched in July 2020, called Path Vikreta, which provided an interest-free loan of INR 10,000 to anybody looking to start a small business. This enabled me to open a small general provision store. This increased my monthly income, which allowed my children to continue their higher education.

Engaging the Community

A second strategic and critical intervention was designed and implemented in the form of community multi-stakeholder meetings in response to the pandemic crisis causing loss of employment and livelihood across rural communities in the state. Unofficial estimates record close to 700,000 people reverse migrated to the state after losing their employment in the unorganised sector post the first COVID-19 lockdown in 2020. A survey of 1500 migrant labourers from Madhya Pradesh in 2020 [21] reports that two-thirds did not have sufficient money to run their household expenditures, and 45.3% of the migrants were unaware of any scheme or relief measure by the government to support their incomes. 80% did not possess job cards that guaranteed employment under MGNREGS. 50% of them could not earn as per their earlier income even after a year.

In the wake of a distressing situation, community-level meetings were a logical and strategic step for the project. In uncertain times of lockdown, when government schemes did not reach the intended people, most of them from vulnerable families, due to lax targeting by government machinery in remote and unreachable areas, THP India intentionally reached out to households in far-flung areas, where the majority marginalised communities resided. 1139 community meetings with 25,869 community women led by 953 EWRs were held during the project.

EWRs holding these meetings in their respective wards and panchayats reiterated how timely and critical these meetings were. Some examples quoted by them and the community members in the assessment show telling signs of the unprecedented impact on the people on the margins, with everything coming to a grinding halt. Access to rights and entitlements was adversely affected. From massive delays in pension transfers to the issue of food availability in ration shops to delayed wage payments. Day-to-day sustenance became difficult and was detrimental to people's general well-being.

In the absence of functional government machinery, the community-level meetings facilitated conversations between community members and EWRs. The latter continued to inform about relevant processes and linkages to government schemes and revised provisions on livelihood, nutrition security and other concerns raised by the community members. The three main issues addressed in these meetings were:

- i. **livelihood schemes** (for instance, MGNREGS [21], the process of enrolling newly migrated families, raising awareness about financial assistance schemes to start small businesses, and other opportunities)
- ii. **food rations under the public distribution scheme** [22] (including the process of obtaining food coupons for households without ration cards, especially the returnee migrants)
- iii. **nutrition-related information** – given the rising levels of food insecurity, conversations around nutrition remained an integral part of the meeting agenda throughout.

[21] The Indian Catastrophe: MP Migrants' Crisis Amidst Covid-19, Madhya Pradesh Migrant Volunteer Team and Zenith Society for Socio-Legal Empowerment, March 2021.

[22] MGNREGS – Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme is a demand driven scheme assuring 100 days of labour work for one household in a year on minimum wage.

[23] Public Distribution System – supports food security by distributing food grains to different economically marginalised tiers for free or nominal rate.

The testimonies collected during the assessment paint a dire but hopeful picture of how community-level meetings became lifelines for numerous families. As many as 3500 families were linked to employment post the first COVID19 wave and subsequent lockdown. Additionally, 1256 households were connected to employment guarantee schemes in 2021 and 2022.

For instance, the small business loans aided them in earning a dignified livelihood and tide through tough times. The programme reported that 448 members applied for various loan schemes after attending the meetings. A respondent from Balaghat shared, *"I applied to the state government's Path Vikreta (street vendors) scheme launched in July 2020, called Path Vikreta, which provided an interest-free loan of INR 10,000 to anybody looking to start a small business. This enabled me to open a small general provision store. This increased my monthly income, which allowed my children to continue their higher education."* Another woman from Satna contentedly recounted how the same loan scheme helped her open a small shop for essential items inside her house. *"I now earn somewhere between INR 4,000 – 6,000 (€45-68) per month."* She also informed that she had repaid the loan amount within eight months.

Women from the Raisen district revealed how information on technical processes could go a long way in showing new pathways to financial independence. A defunct self-help group run by the government was given a new lease of life in their village after THP India field staff helped them with the revival process and related paperwork. Another woman in Satna shared, *"I got to know about a financial assistance scheme, Prasuti Sahayata Yojna, for pregnant women from THP India's meetings and received INR 16,000. This encouraged other women from my village to attend the meetings. I also offered to hold these meetings at my house as it was closer to my village."*

Beyond financial assistance, the meetings also built a strong sense of community amongst the women. Another participant echoed, "The interactions in these meetings have been a great source of support and given me confidence about the future. I don't feel alone, and I am more confident about my needs and rights and can put them forward." She has been advising and mobilising other women in the community to join in.

The meetings, in effect, have created a safe space for learning and accessing knowledge in a desperate context marred by poor infrastructure and a fragmented information system.

CONCLUSION

On the whole, THP India's approach of embedding the programme within a governance framework and leveraging the role of EWRs to identify, prioritise and mobilise the local community, especially the marginalised, bears fruit in Madhya Pradesh, where the project supported by BMZ between November 2019 – December 2022 was implemented in a uniquely extreme environment of the COVID19 pandemic, civil unrest in the state and subsequent delay in panchayat elections.

Despite challenges and multiple changes in the implementation plan, THP India ensured that the programme's overall objectives were met and outcomes did not diverge from what was initially envisioned. The assessment's findings, in fact, showcase the importance of strategic design and purposeful commitment with which the project was implemented.

The project outcomes are directly linked to SDG 5 and SDG 16 as the interventions not only strengthened women's leadership addressing gender equality and social justice in local governance but also bolstered the Panchayati Raj system. In addition, the project put a much-needed spotlight on critical issues of nutrition, food security, and livelihood. Thus touching upon aspects of SDGs 1, 3, 8 and 10, respectively. This became more urgent in the wake of COVID19 and its devastating impact on the intervention areas. As a health and humanitarian crisis unfolded, challenging the local service delivery systems, it laid bare existing fault lines. In this context, THP India's interventions and mediations led to cognisable behavioural changes, starting with disseminating accurate information.

With EWRs decisively positioned in villages to respond, the assessment showcases remarkable vignettes of expansive leadership efforts to mitigate, manage, and monitor government schemes and provisions and ensure people have access to rights and entitlements. They supported returnee migrants and linked the most vulnerable and marginalised groups to rations, food coupons, and jobs.

In light of this, we would also reiterate that the findings bring us impressive accounts of passionate and effective leadership legacies founded on a symbiotic relationship between the traditional traits (which tend to be strong, bold, and assertive) and the soft skills of caregiving, compassion, inclusion and empathy, which manifested lucidly through the pandemic.

The evaluation traces the empowerment journey that starts from EWRs becoming self-aware of their leadership capacities and translates into their effective advocacy for people's rights, democratising public spaces as more women step out to attend meetings and push for inclusive change. Phenomenal feats of leadership demonstrated the harsh reality of engendering development. Navigating a hostile and gender-insensitive social system, they engaged with complex systems of local democracy and governance – ensuring and seeking accountability simultaneously. Speaking to this, the assessment provides significant insights into women leaders' enhanced capacity to participate in local decision-making processes,

awareness about systems of marginalisation, theirs and those they lead, and aspirations regarding their role in governance. EWRs confront the embedded social and power relations that reproduce marginalisation and inequalities. They are not merely delivering development. They are challenging the status quo, within the institutions, at home, and in the community, paving the way for other women and girls to exercise their voice and agency in their communities.

Reclaiming empowerment has consistently called for a radical shift in structural power relations that produce oppression, to paraphrase Andrea Cornwall [24], which is precisely what THP India's strategy and this particular project have endeavoured and succeeded in doing.

Similarly, community engagement, whether through village-level community multi-stakeholder meetings or the mothers' committees, both are cogent examples of how the empowerment process has unfolded in the community. THP India's project strategy, one can argue, and as Srilatha Batliwala so succinctly puts it, "adopted feminist popular education strategies that created new spaces for women to collectivise around shared experiences of poverty, exclusion and discrimination...and raise consciousness...The main inputs in these processes were new ideas and information" [25] around nutrition habits and behaviours, livelihood opportunities, and food security that enabled them to recognise their own agency and power for change. There is a visible multiplier effect in how knowledge has travelled from the enclosed meeting space into the community and impacted individuals. The assessment clearly shows increased awareness levels, which has enabled increased access to government schemes. These are slow but substantive changes and are here to stay.

Finally, it is vital to bear in mind that while women's strong presence in local governance has rightly challenged deep-rooted gender and caste biases, there is a long way to go to achieve systemic changes, and that would require consistent and continued engagement with EWRs (a new batch of women took charge post elections in July 2022) as well as the community. The lessons learned will encourage and inform critical discussions going forward. This need is more deeply and urgently felt in a political landscape that is aggressively pushing against women's and girls' rights.

Perhaps the most vital takeaway is a reflection on THP India's firm grounding in principles of rights, justice and human dignity. Building and sustaining the social capital of women, in this case, led by EWRs, will always be a daunting task in a socio-cultural reality that remains profoundly patriarchal and unequal. But one must not negate the project's successes, primarily how it has engendered participatory democracy at different levels, enhanced knowledge and well-being, and created learning spaces that have and will continue to enable better choices for women leaders and community members.

[24] Andrea Cornwall, (2018), "Beyond 'Empowerment Lite': Women's Empowerment, Neoliberal Development and Global Justice". *Cadernos Pagu*

[25] Srilatha Batliwala (2007), "Taking the Power out of Empowerment - an experiential account". Oxfam GB, Routledge.



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We are confident and can now intervene if we witness any injustice or wrongdoing in the community. We know where to go, how to mobilise support, everything that can make a big/small difference.