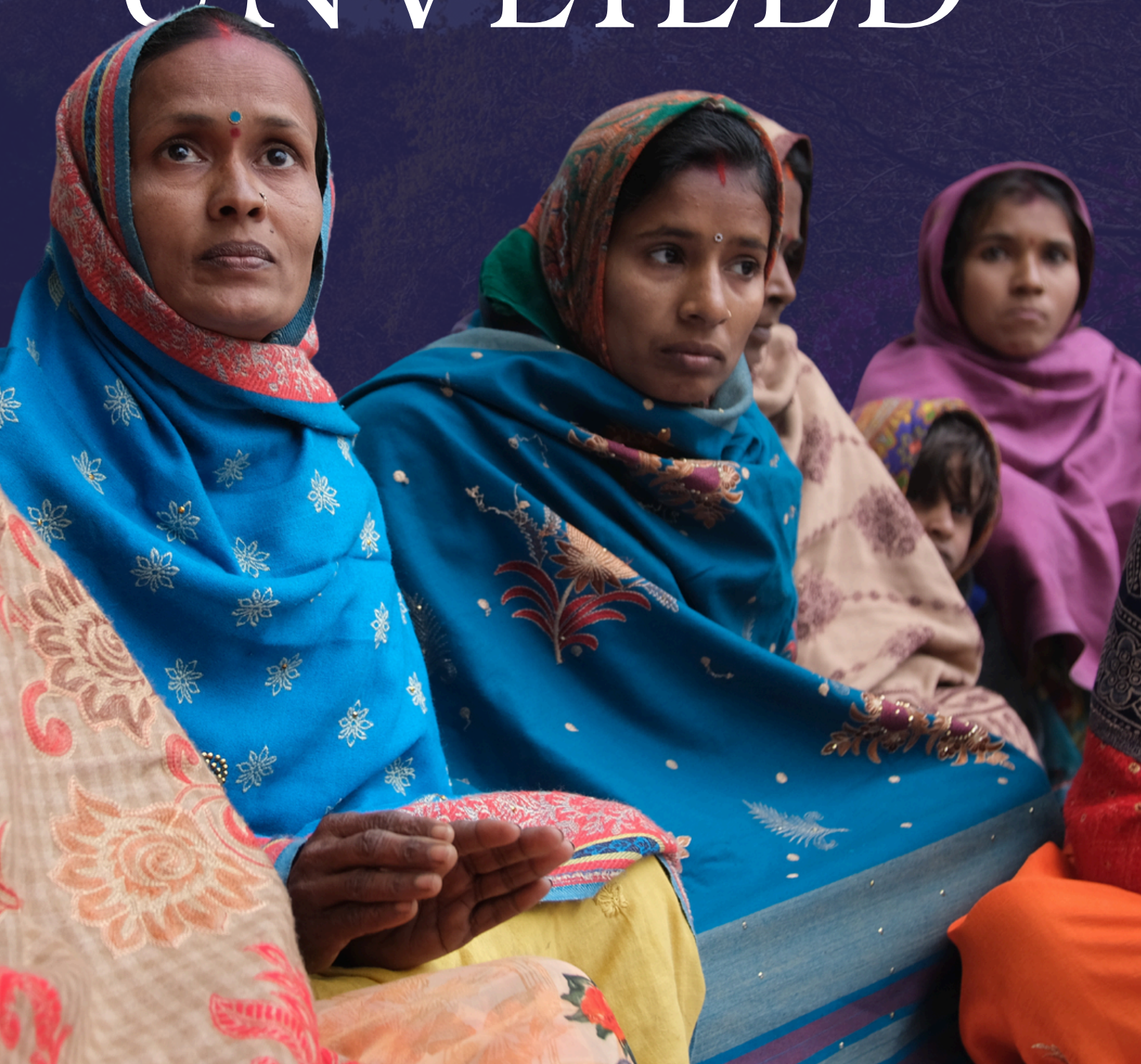


LEADERS UNVEILED





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Leaders Unveiled: Women Empowerment in Local Development

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THE FOREWORD

Crossing Borders is a civil society organization dedicated to educating and empowering young people to become active global citizens, engage in meaningful dialogue, and contribute to building the inclusive and just societies they aspire to live in. In line with this mission, Crossing Borders' global program focuses on building local capacity, raising awareness, and advocating for gender equality. With a particular focus on fostering gender equality, as aligned with SDG 5—Gender Equality and SDG 10—Reduced Inequalities, we have been active across Africa, Eastern Europe and the Caucasus, the MENA region, and India.

The Women Empowerment in Local Development project demonstrates the impact of grassroots engagement and the importance of creating spaces for dialogue, education, and advocacy. By fostering leadership among women and promoting gender equality, Crossing Borders and the Sehgal Foundation are not only transforming individual lives but also contributing to the broader goal of building inclusive, peaceful, and equitable societies. As we continue to collaborate, we remain focused on strengthening capacities, fostering leadership, and addressing the pressing challenges that women face today.

We would like to take a moment to express our gratitude to our local partner, the Sehgal Foundation, and the project team for their unwavering dedication and commitment to enhancing gender equality and fostering sustainable development within communities. Together, we are empowering women and build the way for a more inclusive and sustainable world. We look forward to strengthening our collaboration, learning from one another, and amplifying the voices of those who need it most.

I also want to extend my deepest thanks to the remarkable women at the heart of this project. Your courage, resilience, and determination have not only transformed your own lives but have also inspired those around you. You have inspired me personally, as well as many others around the world who had the chance to hear your story. Thank you for stepping up and showing the world what true empowerment looks like.

With sincere appreciation,

Tatjana Stefanovic
Global Program Coordinator, Crossing Borders Denmark



PROJECT INTRODUCTION

Women's journey toward empowerment can be categorized into two distinct stages—self and collective. Self-empowerment happens by enhancing individual capacities and agency to enable women to exercise strategic life choices, while collective empowerment is realized through collective behavior directed at a specific outcome or cause. Ensuring access to opportunities for women and girls can help them reach their full potential, empowering them both individually and collectively, thereby creating a gender-just society that contributes to the achievement of international development goals.

Globally, it is established, both in theory and practice, that women's move from being 'unpowered' to 'empowered' benefits them as individuals, while also creating ripple effects in the family, society, and community as a whole. In India, where almost two-thirds of the population resides in rural areas, women's empowerment initiatives are critical for intensifying local development. Women in Indian villages are often regarded as 'doubly disadvantaged' due to their lack of access to resources and opportunities, alongside the stringent socioeconomic and patriarchal ties with which they coexist.

With the concept of 'Sarpanch Pati' (the husband of a democratically elected woman representative who takes an informal lead role) being widely popular, women's priorities in the local development agenda remain unattended to a considerable extent. However, empowered women leaders have the potential to be particularly successful in reaching out and strategizing development needs for vulnerable and weaker sections of society, including women, children, and the adolescent population.

The 'Women Empowerment in Local Development' initiative, supported by CISU and Crossing Borders and implemented by the Sehgal Foundation in twenty villages of Muzaffarpur, Bihar, since its inception in 2021, has created remarkable experiences. The initiative has prepared a shining cadre of women leaders at the grassroots level who have embarked on individual journeys of empowerment and camaraderie. Some women from the group have also emerged as role models and motivate hundreds of other women to be effective participants in village development. The initiative has also generated ripple effects through its efforts toward gender sensitization in the community, leading to the creation of a robust ecosystem for women leaders to operate in and leave a lasting mark.

I am grateful to our partners, CISU and Crossing Borders, for supporting this initiative and being a constant source of encouragement. Special thanks to our on-field team for their consistent efforts and continuous engagement in bringing about positive outcomes. I acknowledge the contribution and participation of numerous women in the project villages, whose enthusiasm has been the lynchpin in taking the initiative forward.

***Debika Goswami,
Senior Program Lead, Local Participation and Sustainability, S M Sehgal Foundation***





PERSPECTIVE:

WHERE DO RURAL WOMEN OF BIHAR STAND?

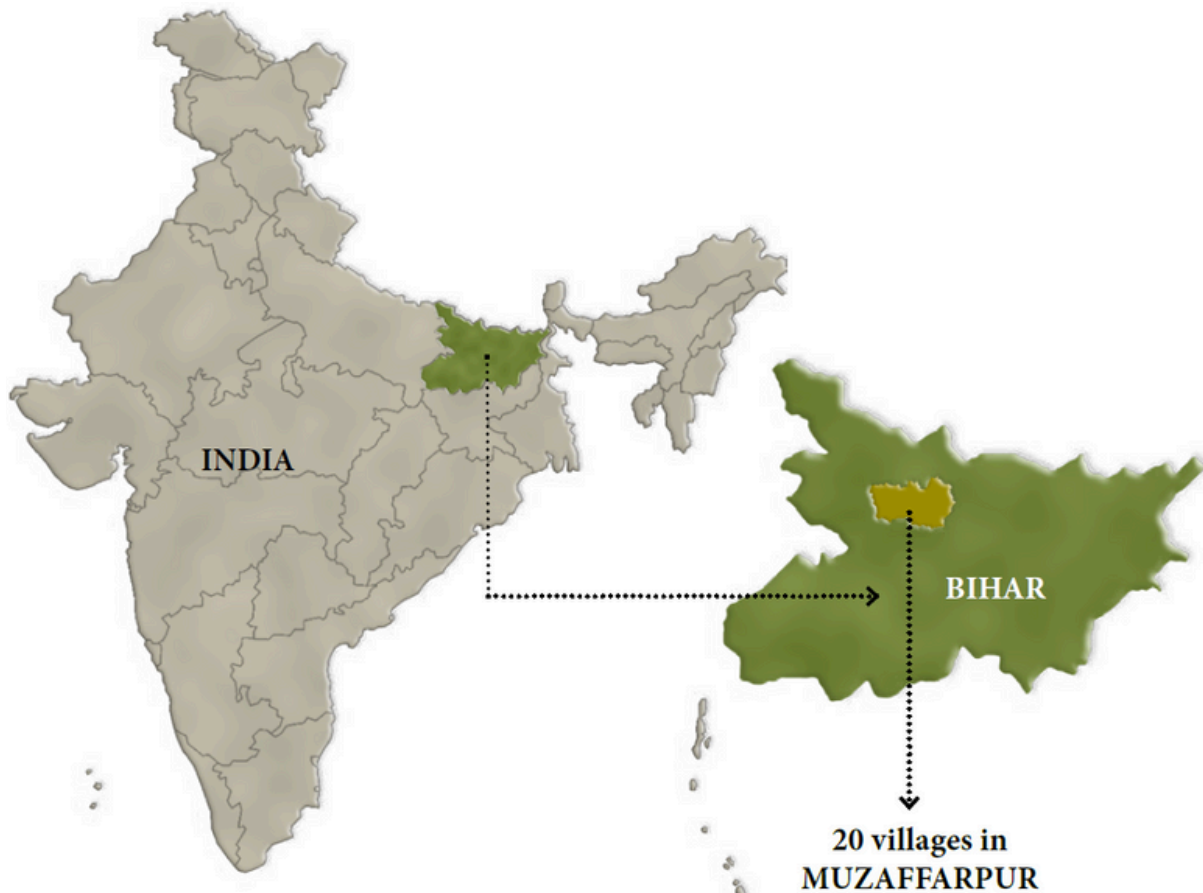
Women in rural villages are often excluded from decision-making and public representation, despite being at the center of managing their households, especially when men migrate to other areas for work. The women of Bihar fare poorly on gender indices across multiple fronts.

With low literacy, longstanding sociocultural norms, gender inequalities, and a lack of opportunities and skills, they lack platforms to effectively participate in village development. Transforming their lack of voice and presence is the core intention of the Empowering Women in Local Development initiative.

WOMEN DO MOST OF
THE HARD WORK,



BUT HAVE LITTLE SAY IN
DECISION MAKING.

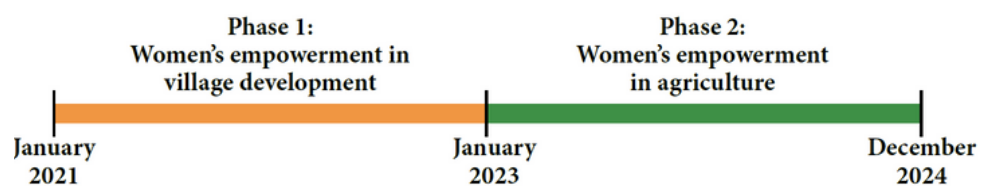


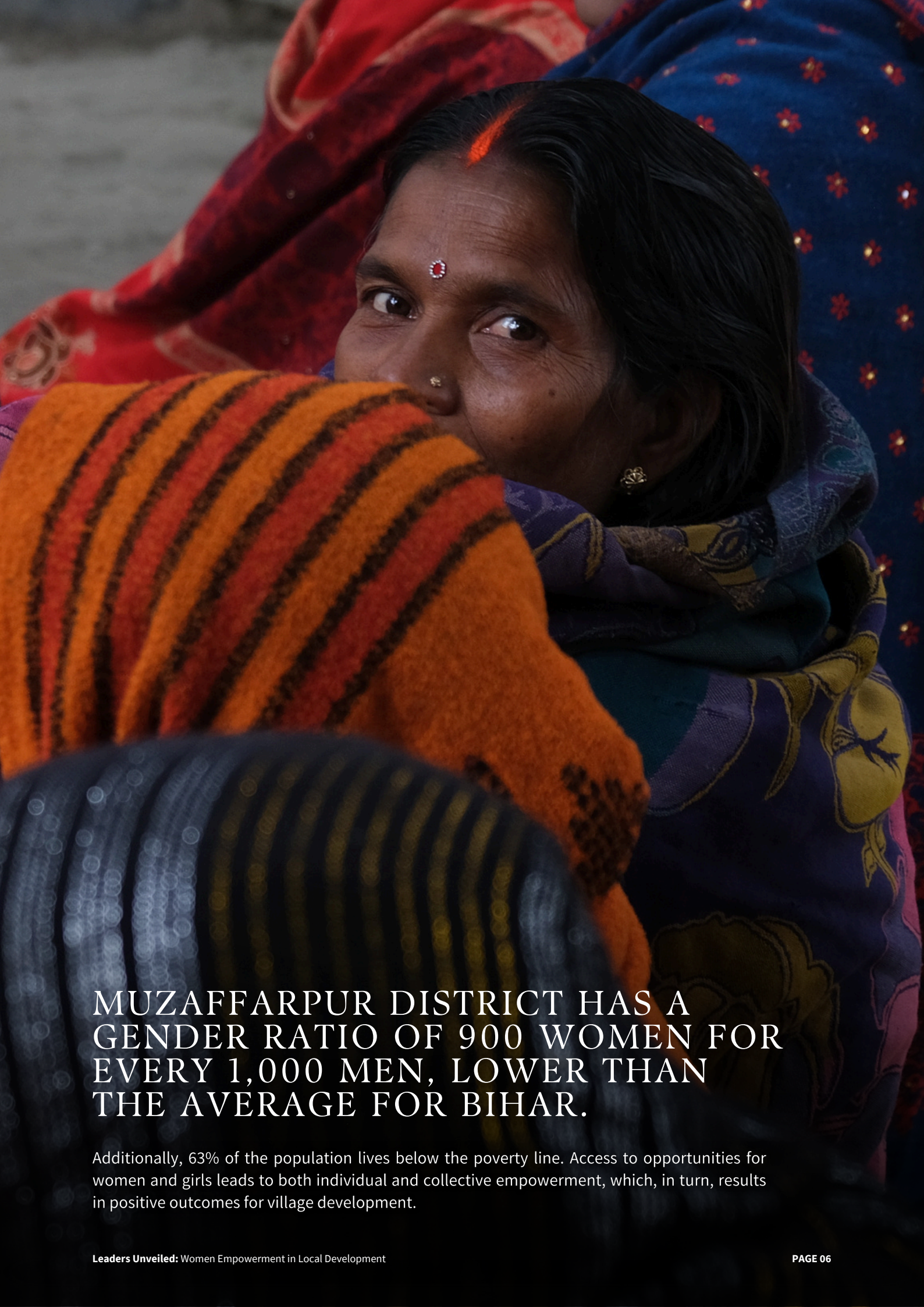
Prasad | Repura | Ramtobahan | Morsand Ratan | Pakhanaha Shiuram |
 Kharika | Bishunpur kesho | Pipraha Asali | Panapur | Nariar | Boaria |
 Kalyanpur Haruna | Ratanpura | Madhopur | Kusahi (Jagadish pur Chaman) |
 Narayan Pur Kusahi | Mahaul | Bariarpur (Bajidpur) - Dakshin | Barji |
 Panchrukhi

Women’s empowerment has been integral to the two-phased rural development initiative launched in 2021 by the S M Sehgal Foundation in partnership with Crossing Borders.

The first phase focused on bridging the information deficits faced by women, promoting women’s leadership, and improving their access to government programs.

The second phase engaged women leaders as change agents within their communities, providing them with training in sustainable agricultural practices and inspiring the self-confidence needed for effective participation in village development.





MUZAFFARPUR DISTRICT HAS A GENDER RATIO OF 900 WOMEN FOR EVERY 1,000 MEN, LOWER THAN THE AVERAGE FOR BIHAR.

Additionally, 63% of the population lives below the poverty line. Access to opportunities for women and girls leads to both individual and collective empowerment, which, in turn, results in positive outcomes for village development.

EMPOWERING WOMEN IN VILLAGE DEVELOPMENT

Women play defining roles in accelerating village development once they are empowered and capacitated to participate and articulate issues that affect them. The first step in this empowerment was the creation of **Women Leadership Schools (WLS)** to develop the self-confidence of women as individuals and enhance their agency in decision-making in their homes and communities. The WLS platform brought women together to play proactive roles in community development with newfound confidence and the power of collectivism. Women's representation and participation in village institutions—gram sabhas (village assemblies), ward sabhas, and gram panchayats (village councils)—increased, as did women's access to government programs. Change agents naturally emerged to lead the empowerment journey and further motivate and train new women leaders.

Gender sensitization meetings helped men rethink their ideas and perceptions of gender and women's roles in family and community, becoming allies in women's empowerment. The impact of these meetings was evident in the changed mindsets of many men, who began encouraging their daughters' education and seeing their wives as equal collaborators.

Women leaders came forward to address sanitation issues in the community, promoting **behavior changes in hygiene and sanitation** and taking steps to check environmental degradation and reduce waste in their villages.



EMPOWERING WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE

To strengthen women's roles in agriculture, the mainstay of livelihood in rural villages, and build their capacities in good agricultural practices, **Women Farmer Schools (WFS)** were developed. The focus expanded in this second phase to include enhancing women's participation in **livelihood generation**, nurturing equality among men and women farmers, and creating positive role models for other women farmers.

The WFS training focuses on accessing government programs on agriculture and promoting awareness and adoption of new practices that include soil health management, climate-smart interventions, crop production management, and small farm mechanization, such as zero tillage techniques, among others.

A good mix of **participatory training tools and on-field training** enhances the capacities of women farmers and builds climate resilience. Nutri Kitchen Gardens established by women have improved nutritional diversity and security, adding to the basket of food choices and helping households save money. Women farmers were trained to **prepare compost** from the animal dung collected at the household level and use it in their Nutri Kitchen Gardens and fields, which led to increased yields.



Growing their own food ensures nutritional diversity and enhances the confidence of women farmers.



Women were provided with kitchen garden kits, compost bags, and zero tillage machines.



CONVERGENCE AND SUSTAINABILITY

Convergence and sustainability at the heart of the initiative ensure the continuation of positive outcomes even after completion. Cross-learning meetings with women farmers, agricultural extension departments, and civil society organizations build direct linkages between women and government institutions, such as the local Krishi Vigyan Kendra (KVK), equipping women with information and access to **government schemes on agriculture**. KVKs also provide training and support to women farmers on good agricultural practices.

Regular workshops on the **value addition of farm products** and linkages with the market help women farmers diversify their livelihood options.





COMMUNICATING CHANGE

Street theater has been effectively used to drive sustained progress on gender equality. Youth are engaged as allies and ambassadors of change by sensitizing them to gender issues. They perform street plays in neighborhoods and schools, addressing challenges faced by women and girls.

Participatory games, such as Ludo and Snakes & Ladders, are adapted to raise awareness and focus on women's empowerment. **Wall paintings** showcase key messages of gender equality and women's empowerment, informing villagers about the initiative and encouraging their active participation in ward-level and gender equality meetings.



POPULAR GAMES SUCH AS LUDO AND SNAKES & LADDERS ARE ADAPTED AS INNOVATIVE TRAINING TOOLS.



WALL PAINTINGS EMBEDDED THROUGHOUT THE VILLAGES EFFECTIVELY DELIVER KEY MESSAGES.



Stories OF CHANGE

ABHA KUMARI, 40

NARAYANPUR KUSHAHI
VILLAGE

Abha was among the earliest participants in the Women's Leadership School. The confidence she gained is evident in the joy she exudes when talking about creating hundreds more women leaders and her flourishing kitchen garden, which provides good nutrition to her family.

Since joining the Women's Leadership School, Abha's private life has improved as well. To further supplement the family income, she has opened a small shop in her village that her husband runs alongside her.

She is a respected member of her family and village. An innate leader, she has become a mentor for other women and a voice for her community. Since July 2023, she has been recognized as a Change Maker.



Stories OF CHANGE

CHANCHAL KUMARI, 24

RAMTOBAHAN
VILLAGE

Chanchal is one of the few women in her region who rides a motorbike. This level of mobility is rarely seen among women. The third of six siblings, she lives with her parents, four sisters, and two brothers. The main source of livelihood for her family is farming.

Chanchal joined the initiative early on and was instrumental in organizing and mobilizing women across five villages. She was introduced to the initiative through a convergence meeting that brought multiple stakeholders together on one platform. Learning about government programs at this meeting and continued participation in subsequent meetings motivated her to stay involved with the initiative.

An earnest, confident young college graduate, she became a Change Agent in 2023.



Stories OF CHANGE

RUBY DEVI, 36

PANAPUR
VILLAGE

Ruby Devi lives with her three small children—a son and two daughters—and her ninety-year-old father-in-law. She manages the family's farms alone, as her husband works in Mumbai.

She learned about the zero tillage technique as a participant in the Women Farmers School and successfully grew wheat on her farm. A zero tillage machine allowed for the direct sowing of seeds, resulting in higher productivity at a lower cost.

Inspired by her success, Ruby has encouraged her neighbours to try this method as well. In addition to her work as a farmer, she is also a health worker and a Change Agent.



Stories OF CHANGE

REKHA KUMARI, 28

PANAPUR
VILLAGE

Rekha's small kitchen nutri-garden is the envy of her neighbors. As a member of the Women Farmers School and one of the most active farmers in her village, she grows a variety of vegetables in her 50-square-foot garden. Through the program, she has learned how to cultivate vegetables with minimal use of chemicals.

Participants in the Women Farmers School were given seven types of seeds to grow as part of the nutri-garden initiative. Rekha has successfully grown those seeds, along with additional plants like drumstick, coriander, chilies, and mangoes. The garden not only provides her family with nutritious food but also results in significant savings.

She takes pride in being able to provide homegrown nutrition for her two young sons, father-in-law, and husband.



Stories OF CHANGE

KAJAL KUMARI, 20

PRASAD
VILLAGE

Kajal's parents became involved with the initiative during its early phase, which led to a shift in their mindset regarding women's role in society. Now, they regret getting Kajal's older sister married at a young age.

Kajal has already completed a computer course and is currently in her first year of college. She lives in a joint family. Alongside her studies, Kajal helps her family with farming and running their grocery shop.

An outspoken and active young woman, she became a Change Agent in November 2023. She plays a key role in training villagers on good sanitation practices and promoting behavior change.

Kajal aspires to become a school teacher.



Stories OF CHANGE

NILU KUMARI, 19

NARAYANPUR
KUSHAHI VILLAGE

Nilu's studies were disrupted after she completed her class 12, despite her strong desire to continue learning. Her family didn't have the resources to send her to college. During a Women's Leadership School (WLS) meeting, Nilu's mother, a participant, learned about the Mukhyamantri Kanya Utthan Yojana—an initiative by the Bihar government to encourage further education for girls in their first year of a BA program.

Nilu's mother encouraged her to apply for the scheme, and with support from her mother and other Change Agents, she applied and received a 'protsahan rashi' (stipend) of ₹25,000 to help her pursue further education.

Now, Nilu is in college, pursuing her first year of a BA program, and looks forward to a brighter future.



Stories OF CHANGE

AFSANA KHATUN, 27

PRASAD
VILLAGE

Afsana is a resilient woman who, after losing her husband unexpectedly, had to navigate the complexities of widowhood while raising two young daughters.

She joined the Women's Leadership School (WLS) in 2023. Despite resistance from her neighbors, she persevered, recognizing the importance of education in empowering herself. Through WLS, she gained confidence, learned about her rights and entitlements, and even developed public speaking skills.

The self-confidence she gained from WLS motivated Afsana to take up farm labor to sustain her family. She is determined to provide her daughters with better opportunities, ensuring their regular attendance at the local anganwadi (a government-sponsored mother and childcare center). Reflecting on her own journey, Afsana regrets not having had similar support in her youth but remains optimistic about shaping a brighter future for her family.



Stories OF CHANGE

RENU DEVI, 38

PRASAD
VILLAGE

Renu Devi's family consists of five members. Alongside her husband and three children, she manages their agricultural endeavors. Despite the demands of farming, all her children are enrolled in school, highlighting the family's commitment to education.

A member of the Women's Farmers School (WFS) since 2023, Renu has actively participated in programs promoting sustainable agricultural practices. Before joining WFS, she was part of the Women's Leadership School (WLS), which laid the foundation for her self-reliance. Through WFS, she received compost bags and gained valuable knowledge on composting techniques.

With 5 acres of land, Renu cultivates wheat, rice, and vegetables, using the compost to enrich the soil and reduce the need for chemical fertilizers. She attests to the effectiveness of composting, noting its significant role in lowering the input costs associated with fertilizers.



Stories OF CHANGE

REKHA DEVI, 30

PANAPUR
VILLAGE

Rekha Devi lives with her husband and two sons, aged eight and six. She assists her husband in running a small shop in their village. With 2.5 bighas (1.56 acres) of land at her disposal, Rekha efficiently cultivates a fruit crop on part of her land, while growing rice, wheat, and potatoes on the rest.

In 2023, Rekha embraced both personal and community development by enrolling in the Women's Leadership School. Through group discussions, she gained knowledge of innovative agricultural techniques, further boosting the productivity of her land.

Rekha has learned to balance her roles as a wife, mother, and entrepreneur, while actively contributing to the welfare and progress of her community.



LOOKING AHEAD

The first step to empowering communities is through knowledge. This initiative has given women the confidence to voice their aspirations, ideas, and concerns, enabling them to become active participants in their households and communities. Educating women with the right tools, while sensitizing men and youth to gender equality, will contribute to building gender-just communities.

10+

Change Agents



20

Women Leadership
Schools



20

Women Farmer
Schools



3,200

Women Reached

10,000+

Villagers Reached





Women
Empowerment
in Local
Development

TOGETHER
WE
EMPOWER
RURAL
INDIA.

