

# Recasting Culture to Undo Gender

A Sociological Analysis of *Jeevika* in Rural Bihar, India

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September 2015

## Abstract

This paper brings together sociological theories of culture and gender to answer the question—how do large-scale development interventions induce cultural change? Through three years of ethnographic work in rural Bihar, the authors examine this question in the context of Jeevika, a World Bank-assisted poverty alleviation project targeted at women, and find support for an integrative

view of culture. The paper argues that Jeevika created new “cultural configurations” by giving economically and socially disadvantaged women access to a well-defined network of people and new systems of knowledge, which changed women’s habitus and broke down normative restrictions constitutive of the symbolic boundary of gender.

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**Recasting Culture to Undo Gender:  
A Sociological Analysis of *Jeevika* in Rural Bihar, India**

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**JEL Codes: J16 , O12, Z13**

**Keywords: Gender, Culture, Poverty, Participation, India**

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<sup>1</sup> All the authors (listed in reverse alphabetical order) contributed equally to this paper. The authors are indebted to 3ie and the South Asia Food and Nutrition Security Initiative (SAFANSI) for financial support, the Praxis team (Sanjay K. Paswan, Shilpi, Vijay Prakash, and Vijeta Laxmi) for data collection, and Arvind Chaudhuri, Upamanyu Datta, Ajit Ranjan, Shobha Shetty, Vinay Vutukuru and Parmesh Shah for their help.

## Executive Summary

This paper examines the nexus between development and culture. We try to understand the process by which a large-scale anti-poverty intervention, in a very poor and patriarchal region of India, induced a cascading set of changes that led to the empowerment of women. Through three years of qualitative fieldwork in rural Bihar, we examine this in the context of *Jeevika*, a poverty alleviation project assisted by the World Bank and implemented by the Government of Bihar. It provides a particularly interesting venue for examining the relationship between development and culture for three reasons:

First, primarily targeted towards women and structured to induce rapid economic and cultural change, *Jeevika* began operations in six districts in 2006 and is projected to cover all 38 districts of Bihar and 12.5 million households by 2022. A project of this scale, gives us the opportunity to understand how cultural change can be brought about, not in one or two communities, but at a significantly large scale. Second, *Jeevika* operates in rural Bihar, a particularly ‘hard context’ with respect to existing inequalities – the state is one of the poorest in India, the population is almost 50% illiterate, and gender and caste hierarchies are oppressive – making cultural change very hard. Third, our quantitative analysis of Phase1 of *Jeevika* suggests that it had considerable impact on women’s empowerment both within the household, and in the public sphere. In this paper we dig further and ask – what are the processes and mechanisms of change that remain invisible in the quantitative study, but result in the social impact captured by it.

By relying on qualitative data (semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions with members, non-members and key stakeholders, as well as participant observation of group activities), collected in four villages (i.e. two matched pairs of treatment and control villages) in the first phase of *Jeevika* over a three-year period i.e. from 2011 to 2015, we find support for an integrative view of culture. Comparing two pairs of treatment and control villages, we find that, by giving women privileged access to a) *symbolic resources* (that facilitate the formation of a new identity anchored in the SHG, rather than caste or kinship), b) *physical resources* (such as group money, access to credit and passbooks), and c) an associated *institutional environment*

(SHGs, VOs, CLFs, etc.), *Jeevika* cultivated new cultural competencies and capabilities that defied the traditional conventions of gender. Combined together, they give economically and socially disadvantaged women access to a well-defined network of people (women cutting across caste and religious boundaries, and both within and outside the village) and access to new systems of ‘knowledge’ with which they can challenge old generationally transmitted cultural systems that are more concerned with preserving boundaries rather than disrupting them. These changes manifest themselves most dramatically in the process of collective arbitration – as more women enter spheres of activity outside the household and participate in civic, political and financial institutions they *further* break down long-standing normative restrictions that were constitutive of the symbolic boundary of gender, thereby significantly changing both men’s *and* women’s ideas of what it means to be a woman.

The paper demonstrates (1) that a development intervention is capable of inducing large-scale cultural change that leads to greater gender equality, and that (2) this is not simply a matter of making behavioral “nudges” at the individual level, but is akin to creating a mini-social movement within the village that challenges traditional structures of power and patriarchy.

This paper is the first in a series that conducts an in-depth examination of the *Jeevika* project. In a forthcoming paper we will study the nuts and bolts of targeting, mobilization and facilitation in *Jeevika* i.e. the frontline work of the project that led to these outcomes.

## INTRODUCTION

Development, both macro-economic transformations of infrastructure and the economy as well as interventions designed to improve community lives and livelihoods, influences our material and non-material lives (incomes, access to goods and services, ideas, and aspirations). Among its many impacts, development also influences culture. Economics, anthropology, and development studies have a long history of studying development interventions, including their interaction with and impact on culture. Anthropologists have for long focused on the interaction between culture and development (Geertz 1963, Srinivas 1966, Singer 1972). And, of late, economists have also tried to understand the role of culture in economic growth and well-being (Rao and Walton 2004, Alesina et al 2013, Platteau and Peccoud 2013). In sociology, initial scholarly interest in development was focused on understanding the historical origins of the transition to capitalism and the capitalist world economy (Wallerstein 1974) and the role of the different social classes in the transition to modern democracy (Moore 1967). Subsequently, scholarly interest focused on labor laws and protests under different economic regimes of production (Lee 2007) and a focus on workers in the formal and informal sectors of non-Western ‘developing nations’ (Lee 1998, Agarwala 2013).<sup>2</sup> Within sociology, scholars have only recently turned their attention to development interventions and the relation between development interventions and culture (Dworkin and Blankenship 2009; Sanyal 2009, 2014; Watkins and Swidler 2012, 2013).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Cultural change induced by development is a theme in ‘modernization theory’ (Inglehart and Welzel 2005), but it has since been criticized.

<sup>3</sup> For a review of sociology of development, see Viterna and Robertson (2015).

Studying the relationship between culture and development poses certain challenges. *First*, theories of what constitutes culture abound with each theory identifying a unique element as culture – norms and values, “habitus”, “tool kit”, “symbolic boundaries”, meaning making – and often rejecting other views. <sup>4</sup> *Second*, and more contentiously, the study of culture in poor communities has been tainted by the legacy of “culture of poverty” and the related tendency to link cultural pathologies with people from economically disadvantaged and socially marginalized categories. <sup>5</sup> *Third*, the dynamics of cultural change are not very easily observed since cultural change usually occurs over generations and historical periods. And the causal mechanism at work often cannot be clearly identified.

A key site in which we can study how development interventions interact with culture and induce cultural change is gender. For the past few decades, anti-poverty interventions have targeted women as beneficiaries in pursuing the goal of ‘gender-mainstreaming’ in poverty eradication programs (Kabeer 2003). <sup>6</sup> Women have been given access to material and non-material ‘benefits’ ranging from microcredit loans and savings, cash transfers, skills training, etc., on the assumption that these will facilitate greater human development and women’s

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<sup>4</sup> Recently, Patterson (2014) has proposed an integrative view of culture.

<sup>5</sup> Lamont and Small (2008) have proposed a new framework of culture that helps us understand culture’s causal influence on poverty free of the racializing tendencies of previous scholarship.

<sup>6</sup> See Kabeer (2003) for an analysis of how poverty eradication programs have evolved since the nineteen seventies till now to incorporate gender.

empowerment. One example is microcredit programs, which have been globally popular and disseminated worldwide since the 1990s.<sup>7</sup>

This paper is based on a study of an antipoverty development intervention, *Jeevika* (meaning livelihood or subsistence), targeted at women and structured to induce rapid economic and cultural change. We observed the intervention in action as it rolled out and examined the process of facilitated cultural change. We used a quasi-experimental methodology using matched pairs of “treatment” and “control” villages combined with qualitative data (personal interviews and focus groups with program participants, non-participants, women, and men) collected over a three year period.

The four villages (two treatment and two control) studied here are a subset of a sample of 400 villages (200 treatment and 200 non-treatment) that were the subject of a survey in 2011 (across 4,000 households). The survey asked retrospective questions on changes observed by respondents between 2006 and 2011. Quantitative analysis of that data using propensity score matching methods found that *Jeevika* had a large and significant impact on women’s empowerment measured as physical mobility, participation in decision-making, political participation, and confidence in undertaking collective action (Datta 2015). Women in treatment households had improved physical mobility (going to grocery stores and health centers, visiting

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<sup>7</sup> The focus on women is guided by a complex set of assumptions and rationales: men are not as compliant clients as women with regard to the repayment of credit; women make more family-friendly use of credit; poor women do not have access to credit and by giving them collateral-free loans they can start or boost their small-scale income-earning enterprises and, thereby, become more empowered.



relatives outside the village) and higher levels of participation in *panchayat* meetings, a key grassroots political institution.<sup>8</sup> They also participated more in decision-making about the household's primary livelihood activity and political preference and about their own work. Overall, the quantitative analysis suggests that, compared to *Jeevika*'s success in achieving its targeted economic impacts, its social impact on achieving women's empowerment were "substantially deeper" (Datta 2015, 9).<sup>9</sup>

In this paper, our aim is to illuminate the *processes of change* with respect to culture and gender that remain invisible in the quantitative study but resulted in the social impacts captured

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<sup>8</sup> In control areas, a 3-3.5% of women attended *panchayat* meetings, whereas, in treatment areas 5.8-6.5% more women attended these meetings.

<sup>9</sup> On the economic-poverty front the biggest impact of the intervention was found to be restructuring the debt portfolio of borrowing households – compared to control households, households enrolled in the intervention had a significantly lower high cost debt burden (for example, money borrowed from moneylenders); were able to access smaller loans repeatedly; and borrow more often more for productive purposes (livestock and petty business) than for health and wedding expenses. Other economic impacts included increased ownership of cows (although not buffaloes, whose milk is more profitable) and mobile phones and somewhat improved food security. Among treated households, 0.5% of them take up animal husbandry as a primary source of livelihoods. However, more significant things like patterns of land ownership and land leasing for agriculture remained unchanged, showing that the place of agriculture as a livelihood source had remained the same with neither more movement toward (project aim) nor away from agriculture (Datta 2015).

by it. This is an important intellectual agenda because much of the discussions in the scholarly and policy circles of development about how poor people's behaviors (financial and non-financial) can be changed are currently dominated by development and behavioral economists (World Bank 2015). These discussions focus on figuring out the optimal mix of costs, incentives and information that can nudge individuals to behave in desired ways. What is frequently neglected in this way of thinking is an effort to understand the sociological underpinnings of behavior and the negotiated relational processes at the household and community levels that are an integral part of such changes.

In our view, our findings support an integrative view of culture. *Jeevika*, by giving women privileged access to *symbolic resources* (that facilitate the formation of a new identity anchored in the SHG, rather than caste or kinship), *physical resources* (such as group money, access to credit and passbooks), and an associated *institutional environment* (new collective entities created by the intervention), led to changes in norms and women's habitus and cultivated new cultural competencies and capabilities that defied the classical conventions of gender. *Jeevika* created "cultural configurations" (Patterson 2014) that gave economically and socially disadvantaged women access to a well-defined network of people and access to new systems of 'knowledge' with which they could challenge old generationally transmitted systems of knowledge that were more concerned with preserving gender boundaries rather than disrupting them.

We begin the paper by discussing of the theoretical literatures on culture and gender. We then discuss the local context, the key components of the development intervention, and the methodology. Next, we turn to the empirical section where we focus on women's physical mobility and their participation in the public sphere. By focusing on these two aspects we show

how gender - its associated norms, “habitus”, “cultured capacities” and “symbolic boundary” - are being challenged by a process of externally induced change in a very poor and highly patriarchal context. We end the paper with a discussion of the findings and address the recent turn in contemporary development policy circles.

## **CULTURE**

In this section we discuss the major sociological conceptualizations of culture. We also draw out propositions on what each concept offers about how development might impact culture.

*Social norms and values* have made a recent comeback in sociology of culture after being rejected by cultural sociologists as explanations for actions following the seemingly deterministic role of norms portrayed in Parsonian sociology. Norms are collectively authorized prescriptive and proscriptive injunctions about behavior. There are “oughtness norms”, moral judgments about behaviors that are internalized, generating internal sanctions like guilt and shame. And there are “regularity norms”, behavioral regularities that generate social expectations, which if violated trigger external sanctioning (Hechter and Opp 2001, xiii). Cultural sociologists have recognized that norms are cultural productions in that they are narrations focused on producing “behavioral regularities” (Fine 2001, 141, 157). Opinion on the process of socialization into norms is split between arguments that it is achieved through the discursive mechanism of talk (Fine 2001) and the non-discursive mechanism of habituation (Bourdieu 1977). Viewed from this perspective, it *should be important to evaluate development’s impact on changing the moral judgments that buttress actions and in generating new “behavioral regularities”*.

“*Habitus*”, another dimension of culture, is the embodied consequence of objective opportunities and constraints and of the material environment surrounding us (Bourdieu 1977).

Elaborating on Mauss's (1973, 73) theory of a deeply cultivated "habitus" of the body, Bourdieu articulated it with systems of gender and class stratification. "Habitus" is the individual manifestation, in the form of durable preferences (likings) and dispositions (temperaments and their corollary bodily manifestations), of objective conditions and constraints of life that are experienced by an entire collectivity of people and which are determined by the group's structural position in a stratified society. Culture in this model is embodied and manifests through bodily practices that are individually cultivated through societal collaboration and have publicly recognized and shared meanings. It suggests "strong socialization" (Lizardo and Strand 2010, 211) that is achieved through non-propositional/ discursive mechanisms, i.e. through a slow process of modifying the body as individuals imbibe the practical knowledge and tacit presuppositions stored in objects and spaces in their lived material environments. *Development's impact on culture would, accordingly, have to be reflected in changing preferences and dispositions, practices and skills, and associated bodily manifestations, facilitated by changes induced by development in the opportunities and constraints under which a group lives.*

The "tool kit" approach to culture takes the view that "Culture influences action...by shaping a repertoire or "tool kit" of habits, skills, and styles from which people construct "strategies of action" (Swidler 1986, 273)", i.e. figure out how to act in ways that can enable them to meet their different life goals (1986, 277).<sup>10</sup> Culture consists of "symbolic vehicles of meaning, including beliefs, ritual practices, art forms, and ceremonies, as well as informal

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<sup>10</sup> Vaisey (2009) has pointed out that this is the "justificatory" view of culture initially proposed by C. Wright Mills, where culture is seen as a repertoire of narratives, framings, and competencies that people use selectively and instrumentally.

cultural practices such as language, gossip, stories and rituals of daily life (1986, 273),” all of which Swidler later termed “cultured capacities” (2008, 614). The core argument is that “...action *and* values are organized to take advantage of cultural competencies (1986, 275)” rather than norms and values having causal influence on competencies or on actions. These “cultured capacities” are shaped by sources of influence that differ by the kind of times, times of relative stability versus times of instability and tumultuous change. Culture’s causal role in influencing cultural competencies and action is most obvious during “unsettled lives” (1986, 278) when political and religious ideologies establish new ways of organizing individual and collective action by constructing new entities (selves, families, corporations) and by forging new rituals that reorganize taken-for-granted habits and modes of experience. *Accordingly we should focus on investigating the extent to which development interventions have an unsettling effect by creating new entities that can inculcate new “cultured capacities” and ways of action, facilitate new forms of cooperation, and put into place new structures of authority.*

*Symbolic and social boundaries* are another way of viewing culture (Lamont and Molnar 2002). Symbolic boundaries, in particular, are conceptual distinctions (which become symbolic resources) that social actors construct and subscribe to in order to classify people, practices, and objects into distinct categories. Gender, which is of specific interest to us in this paper, is one of several distinctions that are created and maintained via the use of symbolic resources for “boundary-making” (beliefs about worth and competence of women and men, ideas about how women and men should act and interact, i.e. conceptions about womanliness and manliness). These are discussed in detail in the subsection on gender. From this perspective, *it is important to examine whether development interventions force dynamism into existing symbolic boundaries and subject them to revision.*

The “*dual process model*” of culture integrates the two contradictory approaches to culture, the “justificatory” approach (“tool kit”) and the motivational approach (norms and values), by distinguishing between “discursive” and “practical” modes of culture and cognition (Vaisey 2009, 1675; Vaisey 2008). Cultural schemas are deeply internalized, largely unconscious networks of associations built up over time that facilitate perception, interpretation, and action. From these schemas that are internalized into our practical consciousness arise moral intuitions – “the unreflective attractions and repulsions of practical consciousness – that have motivational influence on action (Vaisey 2009, 1684)”. But the connection between internalized morals and actions are not always apparent to the actors themselves and cannot always be captured in their own explanations of their behavior since individuals are prone to “discursive inarticulacy” (Vaisey 2009, 1704). The other half of culture is the consciously stated values and beliefs (discursive consciousness) that are verbally expressed as justifications for actions. Development interventions, then, can be expected to have *bi-level impact on culture: on consciously and discursively stated values and beliefs and on internalized cultural schemas, which can be changed by interventions designed to give people repeated access to new experiences and by providing new stimuli that, over time, catalyzes new mental associations or revises existing ones.*

“*Cultural configurations*” is the most recent approach to culture and one proposed in an integrative effort in this diverse and contentious literature (Patterson 2014). Patterson theorizes culture as different forms of knowledge – declarative (facts and events), procedural (skills and “habitus”) and evaluative (norms and values). Bringing together all these elements under a single conceptual framework, Patterson has proposed a new concept: “Cultural configurations” – “the availability and activation by networks of persons of any ensemble of cultural knowledge and practices structured around a core set of values and norms motivated by a common set of

interests, goals, or needs. Configurations vary in duration, density, complexity, and availability. (Patterson 2014, 20)” “Cultural configurations” have three features: “configural availability” – the number and variety of cultural configurations that are present in a certain context; “cultural focus” – the cultural configuration that is most commonly available to a group and salient for identity, emotional security and normal functioning; and the role of trust and norms”. *Viewed from this perspective, we have to ask if development projects expand the “cultural configurations” available to communities and what are its implications.*

## **FROM DOING TO UNDOING GENDER**

We now turn to the sociological literature on gender to examine how gender has been conceived and the conceptions of culture that scholars of gender have relied on. From this discussion we delineate the diagnostics of change in gender behavior and relations that are relevant for our analysis. There are four principal traditions of thinking about gender – the institutional, the interactional, the structural, and the performative. The *institutional perspective* (Lorber 1994) views gender as a socially constructed system of stratification for maintaining inequality and subordination (of women by men). The focus in this approach is on the common belief in gender differences that pervades all social processes and organizations, and the concomitant institutionalized practices for constructing men and women as separate categories that are then hierarchically placed in relation to each other.

The *interactional perspective* on gender highlights the interactional work in everyday situated conduct that is required to sustain gender, i.e. “doing gender” (West and Zimmerman 1987). The two important elements are public normative expectations about sex-typed behavior and how individuals routinely comply with these by gendering their behavior, thus providing interactional validation of sex category distinctions, and conferring upon them their sense of

“naturalness” and “rightness” (1987, 147). “Doing gender involves a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine “natures.” (1987, 126)” Therefore, gender is a “routine, methodical, and recurring accomplishment (126)” that creates and sustains power inequality.

The *structural perspective* on gender (Risman 2009) emphasizes the importance of understanding change in gender, or rather the process of “undoing gender”. This integrative approach views societies as having a gender structure that has implications at the individual, interactional, and institutional levels. It produces gendered selves, generates interactional expectations from men and women, and gives rise to institutional forms of organizing and controlling men and women. Thus, the structural approach to gender, in keeping with structuration theory (Giddens 1984), recognizes the recursive causal relationship between gender structure, its power to produce compliance (through nonreflexive habituation and coercion), and the transformative power of non-conforming action that forces dynamism into gender structures (Risman 2004, 433). The two indicators of “undoing gender” that are emphasized by this approach are *diminishing male privilege* and the *declining salience of sex categorization*.

Other scholars are less hopeful that we can ever achieve the utopian goal of making sex categorization non-salient because it has become an integral cultural and cognitive tool for human beings to organize relationships. However, these scholars argue that we might still aim to reduce sex-categorization’s implications for inequality through “social interventions that will create multiple, repeated instances of situations where women participate (more) equally and are acknowledged as equally competent to similar men at socially valued tasks (Ridgeway and Correll 2000, 114).” To understand how interactive participation-based interventions can be used to ameliorate the gender inequality arising out of sex categorization, it is useful to turn to status



construction theory (Ridgeway 1991; Ridgeway et al 1998; Ridgeway and Correll 2000). Beliefs about the status of a group of people play a crucial role in the process through which inequality across different dimensions is generated and justified. “Doubly dissimilar encounters” (Ridgeway et al. 1998, 334) – interactions, in the course of jointly working toward accomplishing a common goal, between individuals who belong to separate nominally different categories (in this case women and men) who are also different in their resource position (men generally having more resources than women) – play a vital role in the genesis and diffusion of beliefs, until they become consensually-held beliefs about the status value of the nominal categories (all men as valued and all women as devalued). A very important link in this process of how status beliefs gain firm consensual root in society is the belief of the societally devalued status group (women) that they are indeed less competent and hence of lesser value. A second important link is beliefs about the public perception (an individual’s guess about what most people think) of competence and worthiness of nominal categories (men and women), beliefs that are derived from the influence of and esteem given to particular men and women in specific encounters. “For people in both advantaged and disadvantaged categories, the formation of status beliefs turns on believing that *most others* agree that people of one category are more worthy and competent than those of another category (Ridgeway et al. 1998).”

The *performative perspective* on gender has two distinct strands of theorizing, only one of which equips us to understand undoing gender. Butler’s theory of gender “performativity”, which highlights the “double contingency” of gender in a field of normative constraints imposed by innumerable and unspecified external actors, is centrally concerned with “undoing gender” (Butler 2004). In this view, gender is an “incessant activity performed, in part, without one’s knowing and without one’s willing (Butler 2004, 1).” However this does not make it automatic

or mechanical. Rather, this unceasing activity is “a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint (1)” and is always done with or for another (real or imagined). Butler uses the word performativity referring to the capacity to produce through repetition and is interested in the transformative capacity inherent in repeated performances. Agency materializes in the improvisations through which normative behavioral prescriptions are actualized (always partially and imperfectly) through repeated practice, or in the “iterability of performativity” (Butler 2004: xxiv). Every performance or enactment of a norm opens the possibility of slight deviations from conforming to the norm’s socially endorsed meaning and from complying with its precise bodily practice, thereby, opening up the promise of undoing gender.

The above elaboration makes it quite clear that for gender scholars, norms have been an acknowledged force in shaping ideational aspects such as desires and in guiding interactions and actions. Norms have been understood not only as internalized behavioral prescriptions that have in them implied notions of worth that are generative of desires but also as being coercive, i.e. injunctions that can be reinforced by external sanctioning. Along with norms, practice has received a place of prominence. In the scholarship on gender, there is no debate over socialization – whether and to what extent it is a discursive/ propositional versus non-discursive/ non-propositional process – and scholars have concluded from their various empirical studies that gender is both internalized (produces gendered selves) and also externally present and impinging through status expectations held by others and through institutional forces.

*A diagnosis of the process of undoing gender then should focus on a development intervention’s impact on the following: changing gender norms; undoing of the gender habitus; promoting non-conventional ways in which women and men act and interact; declining salience of sex categorization; diminishing male privilege; enhancing women’s (as a sex category) status*

*by creating interactional settings around socially valued tasks which privilege women's participation and where women are acknowledged as equally competent to similar men; and also by changing the subjective and objective resources women have access to.*

## **THE CONTEXT**

Bihar has stark social inequality, 67 % rural literacy for men and 50% for women, and the lowest human development index (HDI) rank among all Indian states. Caste and gender hierarchies have been the most oppressive in Bihar, with upper caste men monopolizing control over economic and political power for a long period. Simultaneously however, Bihar also has had a long history of progressive movements that constantly challenged upper caste hegemony, including the mobilization of backward castes on affirmative action in the 1960s, the anti-landlord movement (led by Jayaprakash Narayan) in the 1970s, and the Naxalite movement in the 1980s. These movements had set the stage for lower caste leaders to capture the reins of power. In 1990, the movements culminated in Laloo Prasad Yadav, from the low-caste Yadav community, coming to power, with an explicit mandate of bringing lower castes into Bihar's political arena. For the next fifteen years, more subordinate groups (particularly Yadavs and Muslims) had been brought into political society on their own terms. The end of the era of elite domination had been marked by an upsurge in identity politics that gave some measure of dignity and respect to previously downtrodden social groups (Varshney 2013).

However these movements had limited success at remedying gender inequality. Amid the constant churning of caste and class alliances, the status of women and their empowerment had rarely been paid attention. Bihar ranked the lowest in the Gender Equality Index, and there had been a decline in absolute terms over an earlier period (Planning Commission 2002). For the most part, women in rural Bihar continued to be relegated to the private sphere of domesticity.

And lower caste women faced double subordination. Even in villages where women were allowed to enter the public sphere through affirmative action, they remained tethered to their subordinate status.

In 2005, Laloo Yadav's "democratically endorsed non-governance" (Mitra 2006: 103) was overthrown with Nitish Kumar (from the Kurmi caste) and his party Janata Dal (United) coming to power with its alliance partner, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). One of his leading election mandates was women's empowerment. During his regime, existing programs on women's empowerment were strengthened, and a new innovative program, the bicycles-to-girls program was launched. It was in the midst of this regime that *Jeevika* was piloted and implemented.

## **THE INTERVENTION**

*Jeevika*, or The Bihar Rural Livelihoods Project, is a community-based anti-poverty intervention of the Bihar government. It was initiated in 2006 by a low-interest loan and "technical assistance" from the World Bank to the Government of Bihar. The intervention's main economic objective was livelihood expansion and poverty alleviation.<sup>11</sup> It also aimed to establish self-managed institutions for a majority of participant households – these were the SHGs (self-help groups).<sup>12</sup> It was an embodiment of participatory development that has characterized development assistance since the millennium (Mansuri and Rao 2012). The target population was women from the poorest of poor families. *Jeevika* mobilized them into bankable

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<sup>11</sup> For details on the economic aspects of the intervention, see (Datta 2015).

<sup>12</sup> Worldwide, microcredit based interventions are largely targeted at women. The SHG based model of microcredit is common in India and preceded *Jeevika*.

SHGs of 10-15 women. They were then federated into Village Organizations (VOs), a group of 10-15 SHGs, and finally into Cluster-Level Federations (CLFs) that spanned 35-45 VOs. The project was first piloted in six districts in 2006. It is expected to be in operation in all 38 districts of Bihar by 2022, covering 12.5 million households.

At the SHG level, women came together in weekly meetings held in their neighborhood, saved ten rupees each at every meeting (forty rupees a month), and relied on their own funds for giving and taking out small loans (interloaning). In principle, these meetings were managed and run by three office bearers, or leaders – the President, the Treasurer, and the Secretary – elected from among the group members by the women. But because low literacy and numeracy were frequent obstacles, a Community Mobilizer (a man or woman with basic financial literacy skills) was appointed for account keeping. When SHGs matured, their bank accounts were opened in local (nationalized) bank branches, and they were linked to other SHGs to form VOs.

At the VO level, a federation of 10-15 SHGs, meetings were held twice a month. These meetings were attended by all three leaders of each of the member SHGs (i.e. 30-45 women in attendance). There were several committees at this level – the loan repayment committee; the social action committee; and procurement committee. Similar to the SHG, each VO had its own elected leaders, who conducted the meetings, and a bookkeeper who managed the financial accounts. These VOs, in turn, were federated to form CLFs that were responsible for enhancing livelihood activities. CLFs were being made the foundational organizational infrastructure for rolling out other programs and for linking up with government subsidy schemes. Thus, because of the intervention's focus on women as its frontline clientele and because of the institutional design of the program, a significant institutional space and “associational mechanism” (Sanyal 2009, 2014) had become available to women.

## METHODOLOGY

The present analysis draws on three years of data from four villages, two where *Jeevika* has been operating since 2006 and two where it has not intervened. The “treatment” villages were selected at random from the set of treated villages in two different districts (counties) – Muzaffarpur and Madhubani. Each “treatment” village was then matched with a set of “control” villages using propensity score matching methods (Imbens and Rubin 2015) on the basis of village level data from the 2001 government census on literacy, caste composition, landlessness, levels of outmigration, and the availability of infrastructure. The statistical matching method gave us a choice of three possible controls for the treatment village in Muzaffarpur and two possible controls for the treatment village in Madhubani. In order to find the closest treatment-control match, field investigators then visited the set of possible controls for two-days for visual inspection and qualitative assessment. This combined quantitative and qualitative matching method gave us two matched pairs of treatment and control villages, with each pair located within the same district.<sup>13</sup> For the purpose of keeping their identity anonymous,<sup>14</sup> we have named the villages in Madhubani district Ramganj (treatment) and Virganj (control) and villages in Muzaffarpur district Saifpur (treatment) and Bhimpur (Control). See table 1 below. This method of sample selection allows us to compare the village with the intervention with its “untreated” statistical clone, allowing us to draw causal inferences about the effects induced by *Jeevika*.

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<sup>13</sup> This method is similar to Barron et al.’s (2011) sociological analysis of the impact of a development intervention in Indonesia.

<sup>14</sup> We have also kept the names of informants anonymous in the paper.

Table 1: Sample

<b>Jeevika</b>	Muzaffarpur	Madhubani
Treatment: (since 2006)	1 <i>(Saifpur)</i>	1 <i>(Ramganj)</i>
Control	1 <i>(Bhimpur)</i>	1 <i>(Virganj)</i>
<b>TOTAL</b> [N= 4 villages]	2	2

The two villages in Madhubani are divided into segregated and caste-homogenous habitations or *tolas*. The Brahmins are a majority in both villages, and their *tolas* are located close to the main resources of the village – the temple, pond and school – and all other *tolas* extend southwards in decreasing order of status in the caste hierarchy, with the Schedule caste (SC)<sup>15</sup> communities being located farthest south. Each of these communities is also spatially segregated. The SC communities of both villages are mainly comprised of Musahar, Pasi, Ram, and Dhobi subcastes, and the Other Backward caste (OBC) communities are comprised of Yadav, Mandal, Badhai, Hajaam, and Teli subcastes. The only big difference between Ramganj and Virganj is that the former has a sizeable Muslim population, comprising Sheikhs, Ansaris, Nutts and Pamariyas, while in the latter, there is only one Muslim (Sheikh) family in the entire village. Inhabitants of both villages primarily depend on agriculture and related activities for their livelihood. The two villages in Muzaffarpur district are largely similar to the ones in Madhubani with the important differences being that they are both primarily bazaar (market)-centric and the dominant caste is the Chaudhury, who belong to the business community.

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<sup>15</sup> Groups of formerly “untouchable” castes that are included in a “schedule” of the Indian Constitution in recognition of their historic marginalization and subordination.

In each of these villages, first, preliminary studies were conducted using several participatory rural appraisal (PRA)<sup>16</sup> methods to gain an understanding of the layout of the village. Following this, qualitative data was collected in twelve cycles over three years from 2011 to early 2015. Every three to four months, a team of four field investigators (recruited from a local research-based NGO) accompanied by one of the three principal researchers would visit the villages for a cycle of data collection. Qualitative data were collected through a variety of methods: a) personal interviews (open-ended structured and unstructured) and conversations with program participants and non-participants; b) focus group discussions with participants and non-participants; c) passive observation of group meetings, trainings, workshops, mobilization drives and interactions at several levels (village, block, district); d) structured interviews with Jeevika staff at all levels in all villages; and finally e) interviews and focus groups with men and other key stakeholders in the village (religious heads, village council members, moneylenders, subsidized food shop dealers, landlords, and other public officials). The interviews, observations and focus group discussions were guided by a set of themes that were modified throughout the data collection. The interviews were conducted in the local language (Hindi and Maithili) by researchers, transcribed in English, and coded in QSR NVivo (a qualitative data analysis software). During the coding, some themes were preselected to match the themes of the questions asked, but we also allowed themes to emerge from the data in an inductive mode.

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<sup>16</sup> PRA methods are simple mapping, graphics and other analytical tools that are used in development interventions to allow largely illiterate populations to reveal information about their living conditions within focus group settings.



These multiple cycles of data, coupled with the matched experimental design, allow us to understand cause-effect relations and the mechanisms of change over time. We are able to study social processes as they unfold in the villages with the evolution of *Jeevika*, rather than being solely reliant on informant recall. In addition, having a comparison in the control villages and across districts allows us to capture variation in processes that occurred in similar rural landscapes. In addition, the qualitative nature of the study permits us to incorporate the participants' own evaluative metrics and to understand why the women prioritize certain transformations over others. From our data analysis, which aims at identifying the changes prioritized by women, four dimensions of change emerge to the top. These are increased physical and spatial mobility; group solidarity; access to money; and finally access to public spaces of deliberation and action. Because of space constraints, in this paper we focus on mobility and access to the public sphere.

## **I. Physical & Spatial Mobility**

### ***Control Villages and Non-joiners in Treatment Villages***

In rural Bihar, spatial mobility implies taking control over one's body and staking claim on public spaces. Until a few of decades ago, the spatial boundaries within which women could move about without the risk of jeopardizing their gender status – how far women could travel, where women could go with or without being accompanied, and what they could do in those spaces – were firmly drawn and upheld by sanctions. Being a woman and femininity were associated with the domesticated space of the home, where women served and had their safety protected by men.

In control villages, men's views revealed the dominant narratives about conventions. Men typically spoke of mobile women as immoral and perceived the public domain of local *bazaars* (markets) as threatening to women's modesty and sexuality.

*Man:* No no, women should not go out alone [oughtness norms]. Many women go to the market, and then they run away. They do go once in a while [regularity norms], but they should not go alone or just like that. They should only venture out if there is some need or work [oughtness norms].

*Researcher:* Do you see women sitting together and chatting sometimes?

*Man:* Yes, they do sit and talk among themselves. During long summer days, they sit under a tree and talk [regularity norms].

*Researcher:* And, do you approve of this?

*Man:* It's ok at some level, but I think it's wrong [oughtness norms]. They are influenced by the witch (or *dayan*, referring to a widowed nurse in the village who often tries to organize women to bring them together and circulate information about public health and sanitation). She teaches them how to speak and fight with others. One woman got influenced by her, and she was finally sent to jail. Now no one says anything.

(Virganj, Cycle 2, Virendra Mishra, Brahmin *tola*)

This excerpt indicates that the moral codes of behavior were resistant to change even though regularity norms had yielded to some extent to the pressure of changing times and needs. Behavioral patterns that deviated from conventions of gendered behavior were decried, non-conforming women who instigated breaks with convention were depicted as witches, and women who moved about unmonitored were depicted as immoral.

The husbands of non-joiners in treatment villages expressed similar views. A police officer in Ramganj used the discourse of male competency and protectionism to justify why women's place should be in the household.

It is a man's duty to provide for his wife. If he can't do that, it's his fault. That's when his wife has to step out of the house. You ask about mobility, I'll tell you – no more than ten percent of the women in the Sheikh *tola* (Muslim neighborhood) leave their homes [regularity norm], including mine. Now you might think this is *shaasan* (domination/ control), but that's not what this is. It's just inconvenient to

let her out, and I'll tell you why. If I let her out, she will have to be accompanied by someone sent by me. Also, she cannot go beyond the destination she has sought permission for. So at every point it's not full freedom, you see. Her freedom will always be regulated by me. So what's the point?! At the end of the day, a woman belongs to the house (*aurat ghar ka saamaan hai*<sup>17</sup>). If she starts earning and steps out, I'll lose all my rights over her!

(Ramganj, Cycle 6, Emaduddin, Constable, Sheikh tola)

These gender norms were tied to caste affiliation. While upper caste women simply could not step out of their homes and neighborhoods, lower caste women who had to step out of their homes and beyond their neighborhoods could not get societal consent. For Brahmins, Kayasths, Bhumihars, Rajputs (all Hindu upper/ forward castes) and Sheikhs (Muslim upper caste) alike, their own *aangan* (courtyard) was their world. Some of them spoke of their limited mobility as a matter of pride and saw it as being linked to their husband's accomplishment of the classic provider-and-protector masculinity.

Why do I need to step out of the house if my husband is providing for me!

(Virganj, Cycle 2, Dhobi tola FGD)

Women should not set foot outside their threshold. Women from the Brahmin community will starve to death, but they won't step outside.

(Virganj, Cycle 8, Rani Devi, Brahmin tola)

However, the political empowerment of lower caste groups and a dramatic rise in male out-migration (particularly from the lower castes) had introduced subaltern discourses that were frequently contradictory to the dominant discourse. In many focus group discussions with Yadav and Paswan women, some women (particularly wives of migrants) argued that life would be difficult if a woman did not step outside (Ramganj, Cycle 2, Paswan tola FGD). However, a

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<sup>17</sup> The literal translation of *saamaan* is objects, inanimate things. This quote implies that a woman is an object of the house and should remain within its confines.

majority of women who had to go out did not glorify this liberty and saw it as symptomatic of male deficiency. They perceived sitting at home and doing household work as "... a luxury, available only to women from well-to-do and decent families. (Bhimpur, Cycle 2, Shakeela Khatoon)" Women's need to be physically mobile was seen by women and men as symptomatic of male deficiency and a husband's failure to be a provider. Occasionally, Brahmin women whose husbands had migrated did not see any harm in stepping out of the house into the public domain to fulfill their family's caregiving needs. The importance of women's physical movements in maintaining the symbolic boundaries of gender, caste and class was strongly expressed in these responses. And the household as a physical and symbolic space emerged as being salient to the legibility of females as 'wifely' instead of 'wayward'.

### ***Institutionally Induced Mobility***

Once *Jeevika* was introduced, women from lower and upper castes were drawn into *Jeevika*'s fold where they were forced to be mobile. Performing the role of a *Jeevika didi*<sup>18</sup> meant that women had to attend mandatory weekly meetings of their SHG for savings and loan activities. These meetings were usually held in the open courtyard of one of the three group leaders' houses. Women selected to be group leaders had to additionally attend VO meetings twice a month with the leaders of all the SHGs in a VO. One of these meetings addressed all intervention-related non-financial matters and the other addressed financial matters (loans and repayment). At times, group members were allowed a chance to appear at the VO meetings to make a direct case for loans. These meetings were held in public places such as temples, *panchayat* buildings, or schools. Group leaders and sometimes group members had to go to local

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<sup>18</sup> *Didi* means elder sister.

banks for conducting financial transactions (such as drawing out loans). As a result, many of the *Jeevika* women, for the first time, laid claim to spaces that had traditionally been out bounds. A smaller number of the women who were selected to serve as CMs (community mobilizers) and CRPs (community resource persons) had to travel even further than their village boundaries. A select few had to travel beyond their district, the state and even beyond India for mobilization drives, immersion trips, and trainings. As a result of their stepping out for *Jeevika* work, women had also started stepping out into public domains, like markets, schools, and village government. Thus, the symbolic spatial boundaries that provided the edifice for the construction of gender identities had begun to get dismantled with pressure from the intervention's institutional requirement of mobility.

### ***Institutionally Constructed Identity & Discourses***

The new discourse carefully crafted by *Jeevika* focused on disembedding identity from caste and religion and instead sought to anchor it class categories. '*Gareeb didi*' (poor sister) was the most common refrain in *Jeevika*'s trainings and workshops. For instance, in one such training in Madhubani, a *Jeevika* staff member was providing a refresher course to the CRPs in preparation for their upcoming CRP drive<sup>19</sup> in another state. The central purpose of this training was building and bolstering the collective identity of the women as '*gareeb didi*' and exhorting them to take pride in that identity. The two most repeated sentiments at the training were – “We have one religion and one religion alone, and that is poverty”, and “We're poor, we're defenseless, so what?” This conversion of a class category (poor) to a cultural category (religion) is significant

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<sup>19</sup> CRP drives are focused on mobilizing women to enroll in *Jeevika* SHGs and are conducted when the intervention enters new areas.

and can be interpreted as a strategic institutional effort at reorienting identity around economic disadvantage, but recasting it in conceptually familiar terms without launching a more revolutionary discourse calling for the abandonment of caste and religious distinctions.

Through role play, games, songs, folk tales, street theatres, narration of real-life field stories, the staff worked on inculcating a sense of we-ness, ownership, of rising above the individual as a unit of focus and interest. Women rehearsed and performed these new identities, momentarily suspending their caste and religious affiliations. They were asked to denounce the idea that women are domesticated and meant only to serve their family. The staff members spoke about how what is considered feminine is shaped early right from the toys girls and boys play with, how gendered valuations pervade parental decisions about girls and boys schooling, and treatment by in-laws. These ideas were enthusiastically received by the women CRPs who often joked, interjected, and added examples from their own experiences.

Every woman was encouraged to narrate and bring her own life story to the forefront during the mobilization process. Those who were shy were egged on by the other women in the group and by the facilitators, who often worked with the women on specific details such as body language, eye contact, occupying space in a room, and other techniques that could help them boost their confidence and become better mobilizers. They sang several songs together and told each other folk tales, all of which drove home the point that the problems of a woman neck-deep in poverty can only be understood by another poor woman, and only she can help pull her out of this vicious cycle. This strong dose of indoctrination, it was hoped, would foster solidarity by binding women together through the unifying identity of a *gareeb didi*.

In addition to identity-work, *Jeevika* also sought to ritualize the process of coming together. Meetings of the SHGs, VOs and CLF were infused with discipline and sanctity. In the

initial days of group formation, *Jeevika* staff and the community mobilizers taught women the significance of sitting together in a circle formation. The practice of sitting in a circle, a spatial arrangement aimed at fostering inclusion and giving voice, was novel to the women as was the act of introducing themselves in every meeting with their own name and the names of their group and the VO (for example, “My name is Sita Devi, Janki Swayam Sahayta Samooh (name of SHG), Archana VO (name of VO)”). The predictably recurring practice of participating in weekly and semi-monthly meetings that were held in public spaces, sitting in a circle and speaking up started the process of deconstructing the participants’ existing “habitus” – the way women carried themselves within the gendered and relational domestic space of the house – and cultivating a new “habitus”. Along with this, verbally affirming their affiliation to a new collective entity was a symbolic way of claiming and proclaiming their access to institutional spaces that were previously out of their reach, and of taking on a new identity untethered from caste, marriage and family. In one instance, when women complained about the village resisting and constraining their movement, the project helped organize a VO meeting at the main intersection of the village, instead of their usual meeting place inside the village temple. This was intended to further stake a claim for the *Jeevika didis* on public spaces and to “visualize their existence” (Ramganj, Cycle 2, Mallah tola FGD).

Along with these features, there was another novel act that the women were required to undertake at the start of every meeting. This was the ritualized singing of the *Jeevika* song scripted by the intervention, the words of which were “*Badhte kadam*” (Forward steps/ Stepping forward). At a glance, observing the women sing in unison may appear simply as their compliance to the intervention’s dictates. But this act collided with the conventionalized performance of gender (like keeping voices subdued) and, therefore, had transformative potential

that the women sometimes realized in special moments. For example, Gulaab Devi, a veteran CRP in Ramganj, spoke about how the song gave her inspiration during mobilization drives (new group formation) when she confronted verbal abuse from men of dominant castes. At these junctures, she reminded herself and her fellow mobilizers of the *Jeevika* song, as a reminder of the essence of what they did and its significance. These seemingly trivial practices – sitting in a circle, introducing oneself by group identity, singing the song – were orchestrated social performances that the women in the treatment villages had been repeating every week for seven years. In many cases these practices had aided the construction a strong collective identity tied firmly to group affiliation.

An exemplary incident that substantiates this point is one that Labho devi, from the Dom<sup>20</sup> caste, proudly narrated to her peers and the researchers. This incident had occurred during a CRP drive, where a Yadav man had verbally harassed her during the mobilization process. She recounted with much pride the slew of swear words she used to push back, and how she “finished him off” with her speech. She ended by saying,

... and then at last, he asks me ““What’s your name?” I said, my name? Go *anywhere* in Ramganj and ask them the following – Labho Devi, Archana VO – anyone will tell you who I am. Is that enough for you? Go to Premnagar block, ask the BPM if he knows Labho Devi, Archana VO, and he’ll tell you. Is that enough for you? Go to the district office, ask Varun the DPM if he knows Labho Devi, Archana VO, and he’ll tell you. Is that enough for you?

Affiliation with the SHG and the VO had become alternative sources of identity and dignity, free of the ignominy of poverty and crippling caste status.

Another identity that *Jeevika* staffs worked to establish was centered on capability. They created idealized portrayals of ‘*saksham Jeevika didi*’ (capable women) as those who were

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<sup>20</sup> Caste occupationally associated with burial and cremation, which are viewed as unclean tasks.



competent in moving beyond the threshold of the house, the quintessential architectural marker of domesticity and femininity: “A *Jeevika* didi is one who can do more much more than just stoking the fire and cooking at home. She is a woman that can work inside as well as outside the home. She can get real work done” (*Jeevika* Madhubani district office, Cycle 9, CRP training). Being in the public domain was actively supported, and if women were afraid to do it alone, they were encouraged to do it collectively. The idea of being mobile was delinked from a woman’s morality and firmly tied up instead with ideas of self-sufficiency and capability and her ability to push herself out of economic and social deprivation.

### ***Joiners in Treatment Villages***

The meetings and the required mobility, the new discourse and identity had started the process of undoing the everyday practice of gender. From having their voices subdued by notions of interactional propriety within the relational hierarchy of the family, women now had the institutional scope for leaving the perimeter of their house and speaking with strangers. One participant depicted the dramatic change in this way: “Earlier we were not allowed to stand on the entrance of the house, and women used to be reprimanded if their voice was a little too loud or audible outside their home. But now we can go anywhere we please. (Saifpur, Cycle 1, Chaudhary *tola*, FGD).” Rekha Chaudhary from Saifpur described how the restrictions on mobility and interaction had fallen off with time.

Earlier I was confined to my house, I had no freedom to talk to anyone. My brother-in-law would ask me not to go out in the village and my brothers didn’t like for me to be working. They had apprehensions about me joining the group. But now women have really moved ahead. Now women are not burdened with restrictions anymore. Now we talk to other women, even men if required...

(Saifpur, Cycle 4, Rekha Choudhary, Kalwar *tola*)

A woman who was a community mobilizer explained it from her unique perspective.

Earlier I never used to go anywhere. But ever since my association with *Jeevika*, I've started managing a lot of work outside home. Typically, I would go out to conduct meetings and to do SHG related work. I even had to go live in the block office once until our bank linkages were done. But then I realized that if I keep going out for *Jeevika* work and not for work that my family needs done then it will look bad. So now I go to the market when my children need things. I even go to their school when needed. One thing is for sure, that when a woman starts going out of the house, then the in-laws and everyone assumes that she can manage everything, both inside and outside the house

(Saifpur, Cycle 4, Sita Devi, Kalwaar *tola*)

Even more spectacular transformations occurred among some of the most disadvantaged lower caste women like Anita Devi and Labho Devi, from Ramganj. Anita was a middle-aged widow from the Hajaam *tola*. The fact of her being lower caste, widowed, living with her parents, being vocal and defiant,<sup>21</sup> and most importantly being mobile consistently brought shame to her and her family and made them the object of ridicule. When *Jeevika* was rolled out in her village, she was the first to join and to help the project staff recruit members by approaching families widely in the village. Because she was seen working outside with unknown men, villagers targeted her with ridicule and vulgar comments. Being a 'first mover' she quickly rose to the top becoming the President of her group and of the VO. In time she became a licensed PDS dealer<sup>22</sup> within *Jeevika*. She proudly reported that, since her status had changed, no one dared to make any comments on her being "*freefain*" (mobile). She was now treated as a

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<sup>21</sup> She taught herself the art of Madhubani painting, which is closely guarded by Brahmins and Kayasths and has a national and international market, and earned a livelihood through it.

<sup>22</sup> PDS stands for Public Distribution System and refers to government regulated price controlled shops for food staples and other essential goods distributed by the government for all households, with below-poverty line households being offered the most subsidized prices.

respected community member. She was welcomed in every neighborhood, and women looked up to her as a trusted figure. The fact that *Jeevika* work had taken beyond her village, beyond the state (Delhi and Hyderabad), and even beyond the country (Bangladesh) was a matter of great pride for others in her village.

Labho and her family were also actively discriminated against and considered untouchable throughout their lives. No one visited her house, which was on the periphery of the village right next to the open defecation area, and she was not allowed to visit anyone, let alone to be within physical proximity or interact with them. She was now one of the highest paid members of *Jeevika* in Ramganj. She was an active CRP who had gone for more than fifteen CRP drives far beyond the confines of her home. So much so that she spoke with disdain of housewives that stayed at home. “The other *didis* that come with me for CRP drives frustrate me. They are women who can feed (others), women who can clean and scrub utensils, but once they are outside they can’t get even a word out of their mouths (Ramganj, Cycle 6, Labho Devi, CRP, Dom *tola*).”

### ***Contesting Conventions: Resistance & Resilience to Cultural Change***

In Ramganj and Saifpur, men and many women reacted to the new ideas and discourses promoting women’s mobility with a lot of resistance. Men would question the morality of women who were part of the project. “They would say, such and such person’s daughter and daughter-in-law have gone out of the home. People would say that these women’s groups are spoiling women; women are going out freely and being indecent. Many would think it’s wrong, and women joining the group are bad women. Some men would even suspect their wives (Saifpur, Cycle 1, Janki Devi, Kalwar *tola*).” For many upper caste women, being part of *Jeevika*

was extremely difficult in the beginning as their husbands would resort to violence in protest of their enhanced mobility.

I faced a lot of opposition. Once I had to go to Muzaffarpur for training. There was this woman...She had said that it was a one-day training, and I would have to stay back for only one night. It took four days instead. By that time, everyone at home was worried. Those days there were no mobile phones, and I did not leave any contact number where they could call me. I too couldn't inform them. When I came back home, my husband beat me up. He asked me to leave home. But where could I have gone?

(Saifpur, Cycle 1, Sita Devi, Chaudhary *tola*)

Some village men passed crude remarks targeted at husbands who had allowed their wives to enroll in *Jeevika*. As a result, some men who had initially allowed their wives to step out forced their withdrawal out of peer pressure.

On seeing women convene meetings and going out of the village, villagers (men) used to tease and criticize the husbands of *Jeevika didis*. "You (husband) are working in the village, while your wife works outside the village with other men!" This often caused intra-household conflict between husband and wife over her enrolment in the group.

(Ramganj, Cycle 2, Mallah *tola* FGD)

The husband of Sanjeeda Khatoon, a *Jeevika* member since 2007, reacted in this manner in response to comments made by community members.

Two years back my husband was not keeping well; he had a severe infection in his liver. We borrowed 100,000 rupees<sup>23</sup> for his treatment. So I thought, why don't I go for a *Jeevika* training, it will be helpful in repaying the loan (because *Jeevika* could provide access to a inexpensive credit). We left for a one-month training to Sarai (a town in Bihar), but I had to come back in eleven days. It was training for a CM (community mobilizer) drive. I made thirty-five groups in eleven days while I was there. After I had left (my village), men from our community started speaking ill of me. They said, "Oh look, the man stays at home and the woman has gone out to work!" My husband got angry with this and asked me to return. Many members from the Muslim community were not allowed to go for the CRP drive again.

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<sup>23</sup> About \$1,600.

Women from the Kushwaha, Mallah, Ram community don't face these problems at home anymore.

(Saifpur, Cycle 3, Sanjeeda Khatoon, Sheikh *tola*)

This sanctioning behavior has to be simultaneously understood as keeping women within conventionalized boundaries of womanly behavior as well as men zealously defending their manliness. Often, men were reacting not just as individual husbands trying to assert their power within a conjugal dynamic, but as members of a larger community that saw this intervention as threatening emasculation. Hence, in the short run, women's defiance of gender norms, specifically mobility restrictions, was sometimes met with violence and ridicule. Over time these instances had reduced as mobility was legitimized and as *Jeevika* women grew in numbers.

Women from upper castes also reacted to the intervention in the initial days with resistance and some of them continue to distance themselves from it. Women like Anita and Labho were not hard to mobilize. It was upper caste women like Asha Devi and Bindu Jha, who would usually not share space with lower caste women, who were hard to bring into the project's fold. Particularly in Ramganj where Maithil Brahmins were the dominant caste, some women still chose not to join *Jeevika* because, in their worldview, it was not dignified work. One of the non-joiners explained her reasons "I am not attached with any saving group. In groups of lower castes there is just too much backbiting and bickering. All of them are illiterate and fight too much. That is what my husband said. (Ramganj, Cycle 2, Gullo Devi, Brahmin *tola*)"

Another Brahmin woman from the Pathak *tola*, Urmila Devi, had refused to join the group at its start because as she explained, "This is the work of *chhotka log* (small, i.e. inferior, people). (Ramganj, Cycle 1, Urmila Devi, Pathak *tola*)" Eventually she joined, but refused to let her daughter-in-law join, "She's an educated girl; she's meant for bigger things. She won't sit with us illiterates, no way! (Cycle 4)" She would also often complain about Anita, disliking the

fact that everyone in the village now listened to her even though she was of a lower caste. Lately however, she has been more supportive and accepting.

You know, when a woman sees other women go out, she is willing to try it out herself... Now, I too have gone to other villages on CRP drives. We don't go alone; four-five other women are also part of the group. It is not wrong to do so, even though the men at home don't like that we are moving together, but we are still adamant and we go. You tell me, what is wrong with going to other villages and speaking with other women? Nitish (Chief Minister) has made *Jeevika* for our benefit; we *have* to spread the word. He has tempted even those of us from upper castes. With what? With a steady income (the promise that cheap loans and skills training would expand livelihoods).

(Ramganj, Cycle 6, Urmila Devi, Pathak tola)

It is important to bear in mind, however, that the process of re-negotiating boundaries of womanhood and caste is an ongoing and fluid one. While some women were optimistic about the changes as they unfolded, others were skeptical. Bindu Jha, for instance, as the wife of the temple's head priest, struggled to make peace with the enhanced mobility of lower caste women. As a community mobilizer, she worked hard to convince the staff and the researchers that she had come a long way – that ten years ago, she would not even allow the shadow of a Ram woman to touch her, but now she allowed them into her courtyard and hosted their meeting. Observing her group meetings however revealed the gap between rhetoric and practice. She sat on the bed along with the two other Brahmin group members, while the remaining eleven women from the Ram community jostled for space on the floor. She collected the Brahmin women's savings by hand and insisted that the rest leave their money on the edge of the bed. She kept women from the Ram community at arm's length. The Ram women complained about her in her absence, and it often became a subject of ridicule, both in her absence and her presence. In similar vein, Labho Devi claimed that she was acutely aware of the fact that her mobility was circumscribed, and it would last only as long as her identity as a *Jeevika* woman lasted.

I am allowed to be in the temple premises during our VO meetings because I am a *Jeevika didi*. But the day I am not a member of my savings group, you'll see, they will not accept my donations (to the temple) or allow me in the temple premises ever again. That is the fate of a Domin (Dom woman).

(Ramganj, Cycle 6, Labho Devi, CRP, Dom *tola*)

## II. Public Debate and Action

Spaces for public debate and deliberation at the local level in rural India were strongly associated with the *Panchayati Raj*, which has been established to promote decentralization and grassroots democracy. It was in the *Gram Sabhas* (village assemblies) that the drama of deliberation and everyday democracy was supposed to unfold (Rao and Sanyal 2010). However, rural Bihar did not have an established system of holding the constitutionally mandated village assemblies for a long time (Corbridge et al 2001).

*Panchayat* elections were held in 2001 after a gap of twenty-three years, but the PRIs neither had functions nor funds. Moreover, evidence suggested that even in the 2001 elections, the upper castes were able to retain their foothold at the grassroots level (even though they lost political ground at higher levels of government), and the sociopolitical profiles of elected Mukhiyas in the 2001 elections were largely similar to those elected in 1978 (Pankaj and Singh 2005). Virganj for instance, had a male Brahmin *Mukhiya* (village president) and *Sarpanch* (judicial head) for thirty years unopposed. As a result, Brahmins dominated every aspect of decision-making and public debate in the village, and villagers complained of a bias in favor of Brahmins in disbursing the benefits of government-subsidized schemes. “Whenever there is conflict or a big decision is to be taken, there are ten senior male members of the village that are called upon. They were all Brahmins for a long time, only now two new members have joined – one Yadav and one Dhobi. (Virganj Baseline Report)”

### ***Control Villages***

The Nitish Kumar government introduced laws that reserved fifty percent of seats in village councils for women, exceeding the thirty three per cent mandated by the Indian constitution. As a result, the number of women representatives grew in successive elections from 2006 and 2011. In practice, however, women in the control villages did not see the PRIs as a legitimate problem-solving arena that catered to their needs. Instead, they considered it to be a male-dominated space, which did not have room for their voice or interests. In 2001, when Bihar held elections to the village councils for the first time, very few women voted. In the next two elections (2006 and 2011), even though half the seats were reserved for women, in practice, the husbands of the woman candidates would fight the elections. The husbands of the winners would rule the roost. This was termed as the ‘proxy *mukhiya*’ phenomenon.

Interviews with public officials in the control villages revealed that women were seldom seen as capable of being active participants in public debates. Most of the women in Virganj and Bhimpur had never attended the *Aam Sabha*, a forum intended to resolve individual and collective problems raised by participants and for selecting beneficiaries for government schemes. The only women that attended these meetings were widows seeking their old-age pension or their housing rights under a subsidy scheme. For the most part, it was seen as a forum for men, and even if women wanted to attend, they were denied information and access.

In the only known instance when women arrived in large numbers at an *aam sabha* in Virganj, they were asked to come for being photographed with the *Mukhiya*. “We went one time, but you know what goes on there? We went, all of us women, and they took a group photograph and made us sign on a piece of paper, and then we left” (Virganj, Cycle 8, Arula Devi). The *Sarpanch* of Virganj disclosed his attitude toward women attempting to enter the public sphere.



These days women have become the *seth*<sup>24</sup> (with sarcasm)! But does that mean they are equal? One time I went to a BDO in a neighboring village who told me that a bunch of illiterate women had been selected from their wards as *mukhiya* candidates. I tell you, how can a bunch of illiterate women fight for elections! That's the problem with women's empowerment!

(Virganj, Cycle 8, Rajeshwar Jha, Sarpanch, Brahmin *tola*)

For the most part, in control villages, women had never experienced the state directly, instead, had seen it as mediated through the observation of male household members. As a result, a majority of the women across caste and income strata were unaware of the actual doings of the state (how to get entitlements, where to go for public services, who to meet for obtaining signatures etc.).

### ***Joiners in Treatment Villages***

In strong contrast, women enrolled in *Jeevika*, particularly those women who were position holders in their groups, regularly made their presence felt in the public space of debate and action. They attended *Aam Sabhas*, occasionally with the stated intention of making noise, freely voicing their opinions against corrupt *mukhiyas* and positioning themselves as being opposed to politics. This was not surprising given that *Jeevika*, in part, was designed and set up in parallel to the existing local governance system (PRIs). The apex body of the SHGs, the Cluster Federation (CLF), had been created with the envisioned goal for it to become the principal conduit for the multiple women-centered interventions run by the government.

Even though creating distrust of the PRIs or attempting to replace them was not the intention of the intervention, quite often, the dominant discourse among *Jeevika* women was that

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<sup>24</sup> This word connotes a person, inevitably a man, who controls important material resources and is powerful.

the *panchayat* could not be trusted, and it was time they took matters in their own hands. Some of the women were fiercely critical of these institutions. “We are quite against the *mukhiya*. When we said we wanted to attend the *Aam Sabha*, he just stopped holding them! (Ramganj, Cycle 7, Anu Devi, CRP, Dhanuk *tola*).” The women also felt strongly about corruption in the PRIs and were fairly vocal on the issue “You know, they came to bribe us once. They said, “Here goes the money, now get me all the votes from your *Jeevika* ladies.” We rejected the money and told him, just win fair and square if you can.” Some of the women felt confident that, given an opportunity, the Cluster Federation (CLF) could replace the PRIs in some years. “I think if our CLF keeps moving in the right direction, then a day will come when *they* will have to come to *us*.” (Saifpur, Cycle 7, Sudha Devi, CLF president, Gopalpur *tola*).

Indeed, many of the *Jeevika* leaders presented themselves as conduits or brokers for public services. They had become the contact points for other women for all kinds of problem reporting and solving, from difficulties in getting their due share of government subsidized food staples to old age pensions and subsidies for housing and sanitation. Women brought their concerns to the leaders of the *Jeevika* SHGs and VOs instead of the PRIs, and the leaders then arbitrated with the PRIs or with other institutions and personnel to resolve the problems. For instance, Sudha Devi, the CLF president in Saifpur, spoke about how she particularly enjoyed this aspect of her work – problem-solving and helping other women. Having risen through the ranks and having won *Jeevika* elections at all three levels – SHG, VO, and CLF – she considered it her responsibility to take care of her ‘constituency’ of women. (Our conversations with her were frequently interrupted by women coming to her doorstep for help or information.) Her home had turned into an open and inclusive problem-solving arena, where she regularly performed her role as a broker with competence comparable to any skilled politician:

I wish I could take the law into my own hands. Then I would take care of the thirty to forty VOs in my CLF and push each one of those ten thousand *didis* forward. Then we would show everyone that women are not weak. We can sit at the same table with you... You know, all the poor are my supporters. That is because I am against the rich.

(Saifpur, Cycle 7, Sudha Devi, Gopalpur *tola*)

The cases that were informally brought to women leaders who had risen from the rank and file of the intervention were mostly focused on land issues involving *Jeevika* members and non-members. While most cases were dealt with on an individual basis, very often these cases were seen as a means of correcting historical injustices over land meted out by men of dominant castes to women of backward castes.

Given the kind of unity among women, we do take action whenever needed. For instance, one of the members of Ganga *Jeevika* SHG had a land dispute with a Brahmin. The way to her land is through the land of this Brahmin, and he was blocking it, so that no one could pass. All of us women went together and resolved the issue.

(Ramganj, Cycle 1, Anita Devi, Hajaam *tola*)

In Saifpur, too, there had been instances of women arbitrating in land disputes. The reason women felt they had to take matters into their own hands was because the existing institutional system did not listen to them, and also because they received no help from the village men.

Men sort out their issues amongst themselves. But when it comes to women, if we get to know about any land disputes of members or non-members, we club together and work to sort out the problem. They have to listen to us then, and why wouldn't they? We go in large numbers, and non-group members also join us. No man can dare ignore us then.

(Saifpur, Cycle 4, Anita Devi, CM, Choudhary *tola*)

*Jeevika* members had also arbitrated in financial disputes. Poonam Devi gave the example of solving a moneylending case.

“*Didi* (sister), earlier all conflicts were dealt with by men. Women were not even allowed to be present. But now things have changed. Now ten to twenty women can come together and go and solve any problem. Someone from this village had

given a loan of Rs. 4000 to a person from another village. The creditor's two daughter-in-laws were members of *Jeevika*. Men from that family would go and demand their money but they (debtor) refused to repay. Then ten of us *didis* hired an autorickshaw and went there and demanded the money and compelled them to repay the loan right away. The debtor repaid. Things have changed *didi*. Now we are confident and can talk to unknown men without hesitation. We got exposure and learnt so many things in *Jeevika*.

(Saifpur, Cycle 1, Phulwati devi, Chaudhary *tola*)

*Jeevika* members had also taken action in disputes involving women and their employers.

Once a brick kiln owner was not refunding Rs. 4000 for four years to one of our members. All of us women hired a Jeep and chased him. We warned him that if he didn't repay instantly it would cost him his bricks and goats. Finally he repaid on the spot. Women's collective has established its status in the community, and often people are scared of it. Whenever we go out in a group, people passing by are alert and they start whispering to each other. Earlier they were disrespectful, but now no one dares to be so.

(Saifpur, Cycle 1, Paswan *tola* FGD)

Group members also arbitrated on behalf of women in domestic violence cases. Unlike women in the control villages who were reluctant to protest on behalf of other women, fearing they would get rebuffed or entangled, women in Ramganj and Saifpur found strength in numbers and did not hesitate to take action.

Yes, we routinely discuss these issues in our meetings. If a group of thirteen members can't stand up for each other, then what is the use? If I won't intervene, the woman will die. It happens in every family. If it is a very serious matter we call for a meeting, and they (perpetrator) are made to apologize. All the women from all the groups come to the meeting and take a decision.

(Saifpur, Cycle 3, Razia Khatoon, Tok *tola*)

Initially men disapproved of women mobilizing and would often mock their wives: "My husband would taunt us. He said that he would see what women power could achieve. He had doubts about our strength. He felt that when the *mukhiya*, the *sarpanch* and the police could not resolve the land dispute how would we resolve it. But we did it. (Saifpur, Cycle 1, Sharda

Devi).” Participants shared that, over time, their husbands and the community had begun to appreciate their efforts to resolve disputes. “They say it is a good thing that women are now united and don’t just sit at home. Now they do meetings and are aware of what’s going on in the house next door and share it in the group, which also makes other women aware of the recent developments in the village. Earlier women didn’t know any better. They didn’t report any mistreatment from men of the village. (Saifpur, Cycle 1, Chaudhary tola FGD)”

Women’s participation in the public space of debate and action had largely expressed itself in the forms of problem solving, arbitration and creating alternatives to the rule of the *sarpanch* and *mukhiya*. The logical conclusion of this process of transformation was standing for elections for positions in the local government (PRIs). A select few women had fought for *panchayat* elections. Sudha devi, a CLF leader, felt strongly about her chances of winning and, even though she had been unable to oust the existing order, she had succeeded in mobilizing women who had rallied for her. She had developed a unique political discourse based on rejecting politics and eradicating poverty.

I had fought for *Mukhiya* elections, but I lost. The other candidate bought the seat; he spent thirteen lakhs.<sup>25</sup> And I had no money. I had no money to give to any *didi*...My aspiration was that, if I win, I can do social work; I can do the work for all my *didis* for free; then can you imagine how much our *didis* would progress? I wanted to fight this business of a proxy *mukhiya*. It’s a women’s seat after all, and if a woman wins the election, she should work! Before elections I had declared that if I win, then you will find me at every doorstep and in every SHG and VO meeting. And I will do your work. I have the *jazbaa* (will). I’m going to help the poor. I’m going to get them what they need...

(Saifpur, Cycle 7, Sudha Devi, Gopalpur tola)

For Sudha’s counterpart in Ramganj, Navina Devi, the next logical step after becoming the CLF president was also to contest the *panchayat* elections. She contested the elections for the

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<sup>25</sup> About \$20,000.

Ward Member position: “Women came in large numbers from eight different villages for the election. And everyone voted for me. You know why? Because I’ve made groups everywhere. And I’ve done it all by foot.” However, she lost out to her opponent: “I would have won if the election had not been rigged by Choudhary. They threatened to be violent when I tried to protest against them.” But this did not deter her from aspiring to stand for elections again. She wanted to stand for the next *Mukhiya* elections, “Give me the position and then see.” (Ramganj, Cycle 7, Navina Devi, CLF president, Paliwar *tola*).

This particular aspect of women’s empowerment had grown without any direct facilitation by *Jeevika*. In 2006, before women were mobilized into the project, *Jeevika* staff had spent a considerable amount of time gaining “buy-in” (i.e. promise of support or non-interference) from key members of the *panchayat* by assuring them that the project had little interest in changing the social and political order of the village, and that it was strictly a women’s microfinance program. This allowed the project to operate without the interference of the *panchayati raj* institutions (PRIs). However, as the project had garnered increased funding and public support, as women’s visibility had been enhanced, and as *Jeevika* women had developed an effective and autonomous problem-solving mechanism that directly challenged the PRIs, the *Jeevika* staff withheld support. Consequently, women often felt let down by the fact that when they asked *Jeevika* for financial or any kind of assistance to fight elections or to fund their mobilization for anti-liquor campaigns, they were denied help. To a large extent, therefore, *Jeevika* women’s entry into the public space of debate and action, particularly the sphere of the *panchayat*, can be seen as an unintended consequence of the project, because it was expected to run parallel to it and pursue economic goals and not intersect with the established political, governance system.

However even though the project did not directly facilitate this, it did create the enabling environment. The women claimed that “*Jeevika* does help build leadership skills and instills confidence in us to handle a community. No school, no formal education can teach you that. (Ramganj, Cycle 7, Veena Paswan, CLF Treasurer, Paswan *tola*)” Second, the project had strengthened the notion of a collective by mobilizing and bringing women together under the unifying identity of “*gareeb didi*” (poor women) and through the system of institutional affiliation had significantly improved the terms of recognition under which women participated in the public space.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

This paper examines the cultural impact of an anti-poverty development intervention, *Jeevika*, in one of the poorest and most patriarchal parts of India (rural Bihar). *Jeevika* works by forming women’s self-help groups and giving women access to credit in order to induce improvements in their livelihoods and to promote gender equality. We used propensity score matching methods to match two pairs of treatment and control villages and tracked them over three years by collecting qualitative data to understand the process of change. Since our method allowed us to compare pairs of very similar villages, one subject to the intervention and the other not, we were able to isolate the causal effects of *Jeevika* on the communities.

In both treatment and control villages, traditional restrictions placed on women were getting relaxed due to increased male out-migration, which resulted in greater exposure to comparatively egalitarian ideologies. Also, the absence of migrant men had in some cases opened up scope for women to fill in gaps in local labor markets (as agricultural laborers) and compelled them to step into the public sphere (of markets and local institutions) when needed for their household. Local democratic politics had also created scope for women to participate in

village-level politics through casting their ballots, attending discussions in village assemblies, and running for political office.

Beyond these organic changes, in the treatment villages *Jeevika* had been able to induce a process of more sharply accelerated and acute change. By forming women into SHGs, *Jeevika* had been able to expand the framing of women's identities from being exclusively based on the conventional categories of kinship and caste to include new collective groupings that were meant to transcend traditional social boundaries. The conceptions of 'gareeb didi', poor woman/sister, and 'saksham didi', capable woman/sister, were propagated by the intervention as *symbolic resources* that could facilitate a new form of solidarity exclusively among women and that could propel women forward, breaking through the shackles of normative injunctions.

Moreover, *Jeevika* infused the environment within which women lived with new elements: *physical resources* such as group money, collections for loan repayments and mandatory savings, that women got to regularly handle, count and account for (even though within the household they may not have control over or handle the loan monies); and passbooks to keep track of money. The *institutional environment* was radically transformed with the creation of new entities: women's groups; village organizations; and the cluster federation, each inaugurating institutional spaces by instituting weekly and semi-monthly meetings. Women's access to existing financial institutions, like banks, had also opened up. The rituals of these new institutional spaces – singing the group song, manner of introduction – aimed to serve multiple purposes: to dis-embed identity from caste and kinship and anchor it in the group and to inscribe new values and meanings. These physical elements and institutional entities and spaces required different cultural competencies and bodily comportments. While some practices entailed physical modifications and habituations – how to conduct oneself in a meeting, when



and how to sit, when to stand, how to articulate one's claims and arguments – other practices, like handling money, had cognitive effects. Thus, participation in *Jeevika* led to changes in women's *habitus* and to the cultivation of new cultural competencies and capabilities.

Over time, these influences instilled new preferences and dispositions, which were most evident from the instances of collective arbitration by the women. The most dramatic transformation of preference and dispositions were observed in a select group of these women who had developed the aspiration to enter mainstream political institutions. That this had happened without any institutional encouragement or support (policy of political non-interference) was a testament to the causal influence of changed preferences and dispositions as a result of being habituated into the meanings and values promoted by the intervention and that infused the physical objects, symbolic resources, and the institutional spaces created by it.

As more women entered spheres of activity outside domesticity and the household and participated in civic, political and financial institutions they broke down long-standing normative restrictions that were constitutive of the symbolic boundary of gender. Conceptions of women as womanly (coy, docile, incapable) and men as manly (the antithesis) were challenged and new conceptions were expressed. Initially these new conceptions were often cloaked in sarcasm and ridicule. But, with the progression of the intervention, politically powerful men had started treating women SHG members as a group to be contended and negotiated with (even if initially for winning their en bloc vote). Men had thus yielded to the identity of women as SHG-members as separate from their old caste and family identities.

In development interventions such as *Jeevika* this process of normative change occurred through the iterative process of collective violation of classical behavioral injunctions on women, which were for the most part tolerated without en masse public sanctioning (although there are

cases of household based opposition and violence) because of the lure of the financial incentive of less expensive credit, and which led to the gradual receding of the symbolic boundary of gender. Internalized schemas relevant to gender, i.e. notions of women's worth that had implications for women's status in society, were seriously challenged by the intervention. This intervention, similar to many other microcredit programs, by focusing on women and privileging them by giving women exclusive access to groups and loans, had instituted an alternative to "doubly dissimilar encounters" that were predominant in every other sphere of village life. By formally restricting microcredit to women (even though these loans were transferred within the household by women to men), these interventions created an invaluable opportunity for women to participate (more) equally and to be acknowledged as equally competent to similar men at a socially valued task. This task was not simply to access money in the form of loans (because simply accessing loans does not require much skill and one can access loans from money lenders) but the associated institutional task of managing credit at the group level, including taking financial decisions on the disbursement of group loans, managing repayments, and the general financial management of the groups. These tasks were perceived in this context as masculine tasks, because they required circulation in the public world of institutions, broad based interactions and being mobile, and a certain type of cognitive ability, capacities that women were typically thought to be deficient in. So, ironically, even though sex categorization had been made even more salient by this and similar interventions by giving women exclusive access and formally excluding men, yet they did make a positive impression about women's worth by allowing only women to engage in activities that were thought to be typically masculine and socially valued, because it brought some measure of financial relief to poor families.

Change of gender norms in the treatment villages was a vital contribution of this intervention and one that had happened even in the absence of any significant poverty reduction impact. But this process of induced change was an uneven and contentious one, with women who were the vanguard of change facing the bulk of the abuse and disapproval. A conservative assessment from this data suggests that regularity norms changed faster than oughtness norms. Importantly, change of norms was not a uniform process, and there were class and gender differences in the pace of normative change. Compared to upper castes, lower castes were less immune from change because of their economic necessity, which often forced the men to migrate and the women to perform the role of household heads and to participate in such development interventions. Sometimes, norms changed faster among women (barring class differences) than among men when women were at the frontline of new discursive messages from development interventions, messages that reinscribed the meaning of actions. Among men, husbands of joiners had become gradually open to altering their normative expectations about gendered behavior through the course of their wives' participation in the intervention compared to husbands of non-joiners and men in control villages.

Whether these normative changes can sustain beyond the time period of the intervention is a question that cannot be answered with any certainty. Indeed there are plenty of historical examples from countries like Iran, Afghanistan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka where women broke out of normative restrictions to participate shoulder-to-shoulder with men in revolutions and civil wars for decades, only to have their rights and freedoms from pre-revolutionary and revolutionary periods revoked and cast back to conventional lives and sidelined from political institutions after successful revolutions.

In the terms of the sociological theories of culture, therefore, ideologies of gender equality and empowerment (a cultural system of meanings and values) that are promoted by modern day anti-poverty interventions facilitate (a) the creation of particular kinds of entities and institutional spaces to which women have privileged access and the exclusive right to participate in; and (b) the cultivation of new cultural competencies (concepts, meanings, language, rituals) and “capabilities” (Sen 1990) that defy the classical conventions of gender. Combined together, for women, these entail a process of opening up their internalized schemas to revision and remolding their embodied cast of habitus. These changes are reflected in individual and collective practices and performances, and all together these results in a process of shifting the symbolic boundary of gender as it exists, changing men’s and women’s ideas of what it means to be a woman. In time, activities that were seen as the antithesis of womanliness come to be viewed as normal. All of these changes, to express it in Butler’s language, increase the livability of women’s lives even if they do not ameliorate the material deprivations that women suffer.

In our view, our findings support an integrative view of culture (Patterson 2014). The new entities created by development interventions, like the *Jeevika* SHGs and VOs, are representations of “cultural configurations”, i.e. networks of persons and associated ensembles of knowledge - “declarative knowledge” (ideologies and facts associated with the intervention); “evaluative knowledge” (norms and values upheld by the intervention, and symbolic resources created by it); “procedural knowledge” (*habitus* and cultural competencies cultivated through participation in the intervention). Development interventions that work through forming new groupings and ideologies add to the cultural configurations available to people and also enable new forms of collective action and alternative systems of authority. This is a particularly salient change for women in contexts where the family and kin group are the sole cultural

configurations available to them. This multiplication of “cultural configurations” is significant because it gives economically and socially disadvantaged women access to a well-defined network of people (largely composed of peer-women) and access to new systems of ‘knowledge’ with which they can challenge old generationally transmitted systems of knowledge that is more concerned with preserving boundaries rather than disrupting them.

What our study shows, that is not very well captured in the sociology of culture literature, is that culture is not an immutable constraint. Seemingly unchangeable things like norms and *habitus* can be changed within a relatively short period of time. In this respect, social movements come to mind for showing how successful movements can yield dramatic changes within a relatively short time-span. In this regard, we find the political commitment (of ruling parties) to be a key variable that sets the stage within which development interventions flourish or flounder. We also find that the escalating pressure to ‘scale-up’ such interventions can have ambiguous effects – they might increase coverage of the population in need but at the cost of diluting these processes of induced and facilitated cultural change.

The arguments presented in this paper on the process of cultural change have implications for how culture matters for development interventions, a discourse that is currently dominated by a behavioral perspective (World Bank 2015). Our analysis suggests that is incomplete. Shifting culture is not just a matter of nudging individuals to move towards new forms of behavior. Simply tricking the brain into behaving differently cannot result in long-term change, without a fundamental reconfiguration in the relationships of power at the household and community levels. Behavioral change (in how women and men can act and interact), when it is aimed at diminishing male privilege and achieving greater gender equality, is a deeply political

process that entails undoing gender as it exists. This requires the formation of new solidarities and the recalibration of symbolic and social boundaries.

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