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Women in local self governance creating a vibrant democratic society in Bihar An initiative of Equity Foundation (NGO in Bihar)

EQUITY has enabled Women PRIs to work in spite of all oppositions from society as a whole and patriarchy in general.....

Bihar is a landlocked state, located in the eastern part of the country. The extremely poor state of Bihar lies to the north of Nepal. The state has the lowest literacy rate in the country and the gap between the literacy rate for men and women is more than 25 percentage points. Only one in three women is literate and this reflects the limited access that women have to education and opportunities for growth. The caste system has traditionally had significant influence over people's access to power in Bihar. The privileged upper caste groups benefit more by gaining substantially more economic and political power, while the lower caste groups have limited access to those powers.

In rural Bihar, upper and middle-ranking castes dominate the ownership of land. They were able to transfer this control over wealth into political dominance over Panchayat decision. The Panchayat is a local government unit that is in-charge of resources disbursement. The upper caste groups monopolize leadership positions in the over women. The society past, money and muscle have played a major role

Many mukhiyas created election. They 'put up' candidates and tried to on caste. Political long history. The status of particularly low because feudal, caste and Though matters have time the situation is still women. Bihar's women class citizens.



EQUITY Foundation has been working in Bihar since 2003 for the Empowerment of women. They are working against female feticide and strengthening of women through education so that more and more women can enter political process. Various campaign & counseling initiatives undertaken by the organization has drastically altered the social mind set of community towards female feticide and girl child.

Panchayat especially is conservative. In the power, caste and religion in elections.

trouble during the their wives as front mobilize support based violence in Bihar has a women in Bihar is of a lethal combination of patriarchal oppression. improved slightly with biased heavily against are treated as second

Women's involvement in decision and policy-making processes is absolutely essential for changes in women's political, social and economic status. As such women are seen as actors of change. To support the participation of women in local politics and for improving the lives of women in general ASW with the support of NGO Equity Foundation initiated a project to bring about change in the lives of countless women in local Panchayats. The involvement of grass roots NGO EQUITY, who were familiar with village politics and dynamics, helped in implementation of the programme.

Actually a basic assumption since 1992 of the Indian constitution was based on the participation of women in the local politics. 33 percent of the seats in village were supposed to be occupied actually by women. In the 2006 elections, 50 percent of the seats in Bihar were reserved for women candidates. Awareness amongst the people about the Panchayati Raj system and its benefits was low and there was lack of knowledge amongst them about the election process in general and about the reservation for women in particular. In the perspective building phase, getting women to come out of their houses was quite difficult. Even after the election, many of the EWRs were unable to comprehend that they had become leaders and carried certain responsibilities and accountabilities.

During the 2006 elections, Soniya Devi decided to contest for the post of *sarpanch* and she won the election. Soniya Devi was elected four years ago in Bajitpur Saidat Panchayat as Sarpanch. In a meeting with our India advisor **Detlef Stüber** she reported of a number of difficulties faced by her at the Panchayat level. **Mr. Stüber's** interview with a few elected representatives threw light on the women's struggle to find a place in local governance, role of family members particularly males played in women's participation in PRIs, social impediments they faced, problems they encountered, success they achieved and changing views society holds about them."No one explained to me, what my tasks were. In the beginning I did not use to hold Gram Kutchehry. We have been given a venue for holding Gram Kachahari but it was unsafe as the applicants used to threaten me to give decisions in their favour. I

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Aktionsgemeinschaft
Solidarische Welt e.V.
Kennwort:
Frauenfonds Indien
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was unable to find a way to protect myself. Especially in evenings it was very dangerous for me. "First I used to bring members, now I hold Gram Kutchehry at home". She needed support in her day to day activities and EQUITY played an important role in this regard. Soniya Devi now successfully conducts the Gram Kuchehry. She took a major decision against a PDS shop owner with the support of Equity Foundation staffs in spite of all opposition from his henchmen. The beneficiaries were not getting the regular ration at the PDS on the price fixed by the government. The case was heard in the Gram Kuchehry and finally the Owner had to withdraw his complaint. He was directed to distribute the ration on the actual price. The follow up was made by the staffs of EF and it has been observed that the beneficiaries are now getting ration regularly although not at actual price. . "This is perhaps one of the biggest changes in us," admitted Soniya Devi, a *Sarpanch*, from *gram Panchayat*. She mentioned that when she assumed office, she was nervous to even utter a word at the *Panchayat* meetings, but that

seems to be a thing of the past. Today, she is at ease discussing common problems of her village. But still much needs to be done as there is no drinking water and no toilet facilities.



"We are concerned with threats we get", confirmed Gita Devi, the Sarpanch of a neighboring Panchayat Mathura. She decided to contest election against the wife of a powerful man. She was forced to withdraw, but she declined. Her husband and son were badly beaten as a result. But she fought with undaunted courage and defeated her powerful opponent. "There is no protection" and out of fear it is difficult to look into various civil and criminal cases, and punish and impose fine on those violating rules and give justice. "How one can perceive of a fair judgment when there was fear and insecurity. Also, I feel afraid in my office, there is no light in my office ". She feels difficulty in taking decisions and getting work done sometimes but otherwise she feels confident to overcome the hurdles and determined to march ahead towards betterment of village people. This is because EQUITY has given me the support.

From EQUITY we now receive important tips to improve our difficult work", says Manju Devi, Mukhiya of Mathura Panchayat. The activeness shown by Manju Devi in panchayat activities is not without hurdles. She faces difficulty at every step, either by her panchayat members or the local musclemen. Many a times the panchayat members were encouraged by the others to lodge false case against her. This hampered her work "Since now I have succeeded in my work the memories of resistance has faded". She has been actively working for opening of school in her hamlet as the existing school is located at a far off place and children have to cover a long distance to attend school.

In her Panchayat Veena Devi, Mukhiya, Bajitpur Saidat has been working hard for the emergence of women leadership in a male- dominated society on one-hand and got several village development works completed through involvement of panchayat. Her office is equipped. She has applied for a High school for girls. Now old villagers and widows receive regular pension due to her efforts. After training through EQUITY, she wants to line up with the staffs of the Organisation and her Panchayat members to work for further development of her Panchayat. "I will co-operate with EQUITY to work for development of my community ".

The major focus of EQUITY FOUNDATION is capacity building of the marginalised community, especially women. The Organisation selected 100 PRIs for training, out of which 70 were women and only 30 were men. The slogan of EQUITY FOUNDATION is "Knowledge", "Voice" and "Action". And the organization has actually succeeded in providing knowledge and voice to these women which has been translated into action. Capacity building exercises and the strengthening of relationship of elected women representatives were critical elements in the transformation of many EWRs from passive, non-participating members to confident, active and responsible members of the community. Women who had so far been largely silent in public began to share and voice their concerns with the efforts of EQUITY.

Earlier the women PRIs were unable to recognize their identity & work freely for the community. Now after the trainings, we notice that they are capable of working on their own for the betterment of their Panchayat. Today, women PRI members have become more articulate and assertive in the gram Panchayat meetings and some of them are particularly eloquent. Results of the confidence building measures being undertaken in the course of project implementation is noticed who, when called to speak, confidently addressed the gathering.

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Vertriebsstelle Solidarische Welt, Potsdamer Straße 89, 10785 Berlin, Postvertriebsstück, Entgelt bezahlt



Aktionsgemeinschaft Solidarische Welt e.V.

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Aktionsgemeinschaft Solidarische Welt e.V.
ASW, Potsdamer Straße 89, 10785 Berlin,
Telefon: 030/259 408 01, Fax: 030/259 408 11,
E-Mail: mail@asw-net.de
www.asw-net.de

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Tobias Zoltenkopf

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Für eine Welt, die zusammenhält