



# Qualitative Research Tools to Study Women's Voice, Leadership, and the Role of Collectives and Programs on Household and Community Change

Kalyani Raghunathan, Alka Chauhan, Moogdho Mazhab, Sonjida Simi, and Jordan Kyle

## INSTRUMENTS IN THIS TOOLKIT

- TOOL A: FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE WITH GROUP MEMBERS AND NON-MEMBERS
- TOOL B: INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW GUIDE WITH WOMEN GROUP MEMBERS AND WOMEN LEADERS
- TOOL C: INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW GUIDE WITH HUSBANDS AND MOTHERS-IN-LAW OF WOMEN GROUP MEMBERS AND LEADERS
- TOOL D: FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE WITH FRONTLINE PROGRAM STAFF
- TOOL E: KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS WITH PROGRAM LEADERS

---

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|                                                                                                                      |           |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| <b>About this toolkit .....</b>                                                                                      | <b>3</b>  |
| Purpose and Audience .....                                                                                           | 3         |
| Relationship to Prior Work.....                                                                                      | 3         |
| Emphasizing consequences of women’s leadership for households and communities ...                                    | 4         |
| Isolating programmatic contributions to change.....                                                                  | 4         |
| Including household member perspectives .....                                                                        | 4         |
| Piloting and Validation .....                                                                                        | 5         |
| Instruments in this toolkit.....                                                                                     | 6         |
| How to use these guides .....                                                                                        | 7         |
| <b>Tool A: Focus Group Discussion Guide with Women Members and Non-Members of the Focal Group / Collective .....</b> | <b>8</b>  |
| <b>Tool B: Individual Interview with Women and Women Leaders of Focal Group / Collective .....</b>                   | <b>13</b> |
| <b>Tool C: Individual Interview with Husbands and Mothers-in-Law .....</b>                                           | <b>18</b> |
| <b>Tool D: Focus Group Discussion Guide with Frontline Program Staff .....</b>                                       | <b>22</b> |
| <b>Tool E: Key Informant Interview with Program Leaders.....</b>                                                     | <b>25</b> |
| <b>About the Authors .....</b>                                                                                       | <b>27</b> |
| <b>Acknowledgments .....</b>                                                                                         | <b>27</b> |
| <b>References .....</b>                                                                                              | <b>27</b> |
| .....                                                                                                                | 27        |

## About this toolkit

These guides are designed to support researchers and implementing organizations in conducting rigorous, in-depth qualitative research on women's voice, agency, and leadership and its impacts on households and communities.

### *Purpose and Audience*

This toolkit is intended for social scientists, research teams, and program staff who want a structured, validated approach to understanding how women experience and exercise voice and agency and how collectives, social movements, and programmatic interventions shape those experiences. It is designed to be used when the objective is to understand current conditions, to reconstruct the process of change that produced those conditions, and the consequences on communities and community groups of women's leadership over time.

The toolkit takes a multi-level approach, comprising five instruments that together capture individual, household, collective, and organizational perspectives on women's leadership. Community- and individual-level instruments capture individual and collective experience from the perspective of male and female group members and non-members, leaders, and household members. An organizational-level instrument captures the programmatic perspective — what conditions preceded program entry, how decisions were made about where to start programming, and how organizations understand their own contribution to change. Together the instruments enable a more complete account of how women's voice and leadership environments develop than any single data source could provide.

### *Relationship to Prior Work*

These guides build directly on the methodological note on qualitative research on women's leadership in relation to natural resources by Morgan et al. (2023). That note introduced two core tools — a Focus Group Discussion tool on women's leadership and a Leader Profile Interview tool — developed and piloted across 15 villages in four Indian states (Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Karnataka, and Odisha) in the context of the Promise of Commons Initiative. It also provided conceptual guidance on studying women's leadership, including the drawing out the distinction between formal and informal leadership, the relationship between participation and leadership, and the use of a participation ladder to anchor discussions of women's decision-making roles. The guides included here retain several core elements from that foundation: the participation ladder exercise, the conceptual framing of formal versus informal leadership, and the life-history approach to tracing leadership trajectories.

These guides are also responsive to the shared research agenda on women's leadership in agrifood systems laid out in Elias et al. (2025). That agenda identifies three interconnected gaps in the current evidence base: the tendency to measure leadership through counts of women in formal positions, overlooking quality and influence; the invisibility of collective and informal forms of women's leadership in most measurement frameworks; and the lack of evidence on leadership pathways, enabling conditions, and downstream effects. The agenda calls for a portfolio of qualitative and mixed-methods case studies built around a common set of research

questions, shared measurement tools, and a synthesis strategy designed to generate cumulative learning across geographies and organizational types. The instruments presented here are designed as open-access contributions to that shared methodological backbone that can be used and adapted by researchers contributing to the evidence base across contexts.

These guides extend the prior methodological work in three important directions.

### **Emphasizing consequences of women's leadership for households and communities**

These guides contribute a structured before/after arc in the measurement tools designed to trace the changes that women's leadership can produce in households and communities. Respondents characterize what conditions were like before a collective / programming / group was active, trace the process of change, and connect shifts in women's status to material outcomes in households and the broader community. Mechanism-focused questions (what specifically drove change?) and material impact questions (what has changed for better or worse in people's lives and in communities?) generate process-tracing evidence on how changes in women's leadership translate into tangible community-level outcomes over time – an area the shared research agenda identifies as a priority for the field.

### **Isolating programmatic contributions to change**

For organizations and programs seeking to support women's leadership, understanding whether observed changes in women's voice and leadership reflect programmatic impact or pre-existing conditions is essential and requires additional evidence. This toolkit addresses that through two complementary instruments. The frontline staff FGD (Tool D) captures the ground-level programmatic view — how groups were formed, what conditions staff observed when entering communities, and how staff perceive the collective's broader impact on women's voice and community life. The Program Leader Key Informant Interview (Tool E) operates at the organizational level, asking how expansion decisions were made, whether women's pre-existing economic activity shaped where programs went, and how senior leaders understand their organization's causal contribution to change. If programs systematically expand into communities where women were already more economically active or gender norms more permissive, community-level evidence of change may reflect initial conditions rather than intervention. The organizational instrument is designed to surface that selection logic and make it available for analysis alongside community-level findings.

### **Including household member perspectives**

Changes in women's voice and agency do not occur in isolation from household relationships — they are frequently negotiated within them, and their sustainability depends in part on whether husbands and mothers-in-law accommodate, support, or resist them. This toolkit adds semi-structured interviews with husbands and mothers-in-law of women group members (Tool C), capturing how those closest to women leaders and members perceive changes in women's skills, intra-household dynamics, and the household's standing in the community. This perspec-

tive is important both for understanding whether gains in women's agency are reinforced or constrained at home, and for assessing second-order effects of collective membership on household relationships and well-being.

### ***Piloting and Validation***

The community-level instruments were piloted as part of a qualitative case study series on women's voice and agency conducted by the CGIAR Accelerator on Gender Equality and Inclusion. Data collection took place in Rajasthan and Bihar in September through November 2025, in partnership with two organizations at very different stages of growth and development.

#### **SPSS – BIHAR**

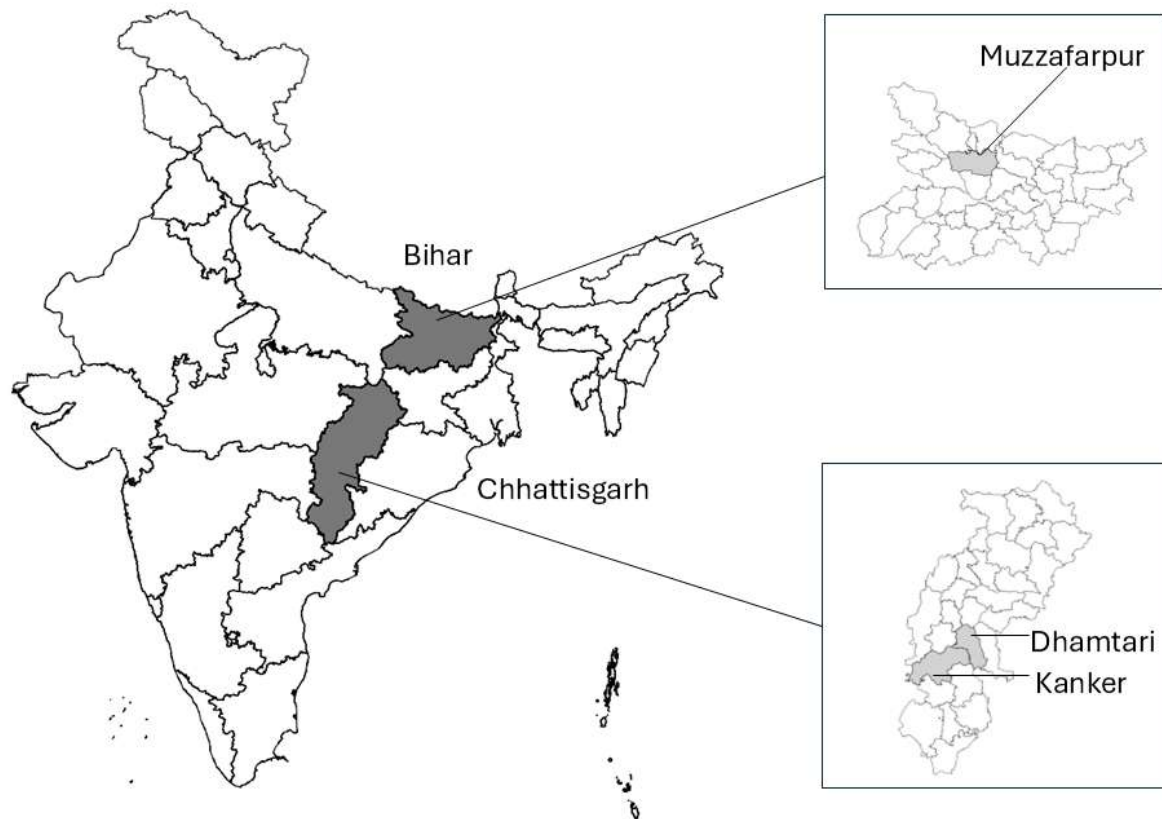
The Samaj Parivartan Shakti Sangathan (SPSS) is a collective formed mainly of landless laborers agitating for their rights under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). The organization had been formed around 10 years prior to fieldwork and was actively growing. Questions about leadership and governance of the collective were ongoing challenges while the collective was in the process of consolidating and expanding membership. Communities in Bihar tend to be hierarchical, gender-unequal, and caste-based.

#### **PRADAN – CHHATTISGARH**

The Professional Assistance for Development Action (PRADAN) is a large NGO operating across 9 states of the central belt in India. Founded in 1983, PRADAN works toward enabling marginalized and vulnerable people, especially rural women, to earn a decent living and increase agency, with a vision of creating a just and equitable society where everyone can live and work with dignity. It does so by organizing rural communities into collectives like savings and credit focused self-help groups (SHGs) and broader federations comprised of multiple SHGs. In contrast with SPSS, groups organized by PRADAN are well-established with governance principles and guidelines for leadership. Fieldwork was conducted in Chhattisgarh, a state with a high proportion of scheduled castes and tribes, which are generally less hierarchical and more gender egalitarian.

The Samaj Parivartan Shakti Sangathan (SPSS) in Bihar and PRADAN in Chhattisgarh both work with marginalized communities and with women in states with high poverty rates and large informal labor sectors. Two communities per state were purposively selected for depth of organizational presence. Interviews were conducted in Hindi and local languages and transcribed into English for analysis. Figure 1 illustrates the location of the piloting and validation within India.

**Figure 1: Fieldwork Locations**



Note: The zoomed in maps illustrate districts within the primary fieldwork sites where the instruments were piloted.

The organizational interview guide was developed in parallel for use with NGO leadership in contexts where organizations have expanded programming over an extended period and is designed to complement the community-level findings by providing an organizational account of the conditions preceding program entry and the impacts of programming on women's leadership. It was piloted in Bangladesh with several prominent NGOs.

### ***Instruments in this toolkit***

The toolkit comprises five instruments used together to build a multi-perspective picture of women's voice, agency, and leadership. The first four are designed for use at the community level, capturing the perspectives of group members, non-members, individual women, and their household members, as well as the frontline staff who work directly with them. The fifth operates at the organizational level, targeting senior program leaders with institutional memory of how and why programs expanded into particular communities.

## FIVE INSTRUMENTS

- ▶ **Tool A – FGD with women and men members and non-members.** Group-level participatory discussion using the participation ladder to assess collective perceptions of women's voice and how they have changed over time. Conducted in separate single-gender groups, with both members and non-members of the focal collective.
- ▶ **Tool B – Individual interview with women (leaders and non-leaders).** Semi-structured interview exploring personal histories, transitions in voice and agency, material and relational impacts, gender norms, and the role of the collective — with individual women identified as leaders and those not identified as leaders.
- ▶ **Tool C – Individual interviews with husbands and mothers-in-law of women group members and leaders.** Semi-structured interview exploring how women's membership in a group or collective has changed her skills, intra-household relationships, and the household's position in the community, and how household members perceive the broader impact of the group on community life.
- ▶ **Tool D – FGD with frontline program staff.** Group-level discussion with staff working directly with the focal group, exploring initial conditions in the community before the group was formed, the process of group formation, formal leadership structure and decision-making processes within the group, and staff perceptions of the group's broader impact on women and the community.
- ▶ **Tool E – Individual interviews with NGO leaders.** Individual interview with senior program leaders about organizational decisions to expand programming into new communities, the conditions staff observed on entry, and how the organization understands its own contribution to changes in women's leadership over time.

### *How to use these guides*

**Community and individual-level instruments (Tools A-C)** are designed to capture the perspectives of women, their household members, and the broader community. They should be administered by a trained interviewer or facilitator working with a note-taker and should not be read verbatim — they provide a structured framework for conversation rather than a fixed script.

The **frontline staff instrument (Tool D)** follows a similar facilitated discussion format but targets program staff rather than community members. Facilitators should be attentive to the organizational context and probe beyond official accounts of group formation and impact.

The **Program leader interview instrument (Tool E)** is administered differently. It targets senior staff with institutional memory of programmatic expansion decisions and requires a different rapport-building approach. The site selection question is the most analytically critical and is designed to move respondents past official narratives toward candid descriptions of actual decision factors. Interviewers should review available organizational documents on expansion history before conducting the interview so that follow-up questions can be grounded in specific decisions or time periods.

For all instruments, voluntary consent is required from all persons being interviewed.

## Tool A: Focus Group Discussion Guide with Women Members and Non-Members of the Focal Group / Collective

### **Tool description**

The following is a guide to conducting a focus group discussion with women affiliated with the focal group, as well as women who are non-members. A separate FGD should also be conducted with men. Prior to beginning the interview, you must first obtain voluntary consent from the people you are interviewing. If consent is not granted, you may not proceed with the interview. Additional instructions for the administration of the guide will be noted in enumerator instructions in bold, which should not be read aloud. It is very important that you avoid yes/no responses and probe for in-depth answers.

Note that some questions are phrased for specific types of people depending on the composition of the FGD you are convening (e.g. some questions are designed for FGD with men, and then within all-female FGD, some questions are designed for members of groups and others for non-members).

Throughout this guide, the placeholder [group] is used to refer to the focal collective, group, or organization. Enumerators should replace this with the actual name of the group before use. Similarly, references to specific leadership roles – such as sarpanch – reflect common usage in India where the guide was piloted and should be adapted as needed for other country contexts.

### **Introduction [Fill out prior to beginning interview]**

|                                |  |
|--------------------------------|--|
| Name of revenue village        |  |
| Name of Gram Panchayat         |  |
| Name of district               |  |
| Date of Interview (dd,mm,yyyy) |  |
| Name of facilitator            |  |
| Name of note taker             |  |

### **Respondent Characteristics**

| Code | Age | Caste | Marital status | # of children | Highest level of education | Primary occupation |
|------|-----|-------|----------------|---------------|----------------------------|--------------------|
|      |     |       |                |               |                            |                    |
|      |     |       |                |               |                            |                    |
|      |     |       |                |               |                            |                    |
|      |     |       |                |               |                            |                    |
|      |     |       |                |               |                            |                    |
|      |     |       |                |               |                            |                    |

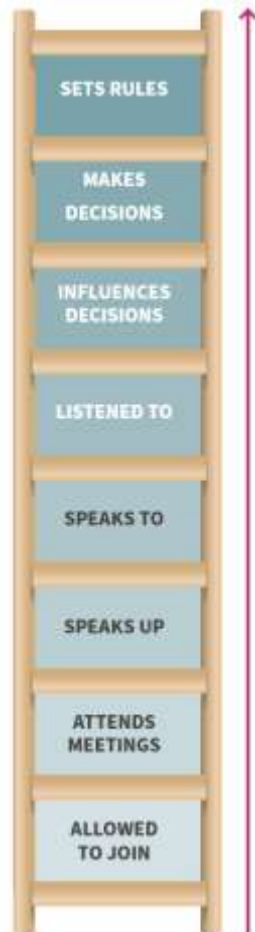
1. Tell us a bit about yourselves. What kind of work do you do, how do you earn your income? Do you own land (if so, how much)? What kinds of crops of you grow? Does anyone in your household work outside for an income (if so, where)?
2. **[For women group members]** How long have you been affiliated with [group name]? How did you first hear about the [group], what motivated you to join?  
 What does your [group] do? When you meet, what kinds of things do you discuss?
3. **[For women non-members]** Have you heard of the [group] that are active in this area? What do you think these [groups] do?  
 Why have you not joined [group]?
4. **[For men]** Have you heard of the [group] that are active in this area? What do you think these [groups] do?  
 Has someone in your household joined the [group]? Why or why not?
5. **[For all]** What is the kind of work that these SHGs have been involved in in this community?
6. We want to understand leadership and voice and agency, and what this means in your community. We want you to think about what a leader in your village or someone who has voice and agency might look like or what they might do.

Remember: leaders can be people in formal leadership positions, like a sarpanch, gram Rozgar sewak and so on, but also those who do not have formal positions, like a village elder. And sometimes people can be in formal positions but they do not have voice and agency and are not leaders.

-  When you first thought of a leader, did you think of a man or a woman? Why?

- ▷ What are the qualities of leaders, according to you?
- ▷ Are there any women leaders or women with voice and agency in your community? Can you give some examples?
- ▷ When you think of women who are leaders or who have voice and agency – Are the qualities or skills that women leaders have different from those of men leaders? How so?
- ▷ How are such women leaders perceived by the community?

**Figure 2: Participation ladder**



Source: Reproduced from Morgan et al. (2023).

7. Now we will ask you some questions about women's voice and agency in your community. Think about a recent meeting in your community, like a gram sabha.

- ▷ **[Show the first step (bottom) of the ten-step ladder.]** Do you think women in this community are allowed to join meetings?
- ▷ **[If most participants say yes]** Do many women actually attend meetings?
- ▷ **[If most participants say yes]** Are women able to speak up? All women or only some women?
- ▷ **[If most participants say yes]** Are women listened to when they speak up? All women or only some women?
- ▷ **[If most participants say yes]** Are women able to influence decisions? All women or only some women?
- ▷ **[If most participants say yes]** Are women able to make decisions?
- ▷ **[If most participants say yes]** Are women involved in setting the rules in these meetings?
- ▷ **[Group places a stone on the step of the ladder where they agree that most women in the village are.]** Are all women in the village at this step? Are there some women who are not on the ladder at all? Who and why?
- ▷ Are there some women who are high up the ladder? Who are these women? What is different about them? **[Probe:** caste affiliations, education, family connections, group membership etc]

8. **[How has the collective helped]** Now let's think back to before [group] was set up in this community. Were most women in your village still at this step of the ladder? If not, which step were they at?

- ▷ What has changed in this time?
  - ▷ How did this change come about? [**Probe:** What were the first things to change? What types of change took a long time to happen]
9. What role would you say [group] had to play in this change? If they had not been present, do you think this change would have occurred? Why or why not?
10. Has anyone else helped women improve their voice and agency? Who and what roles did they play?
11. What would you say are the main results of this change in women's voice and agency or their leadership, both within households and in the community? [**Probe:** Are there some issues that women leaders raise that men leaders do not? Have discussions in the gram sabha meetings changed, and how? Does having women participate more actively help other women in the community do the same? What changes have you seen within households? What changes within the broader community?]
12. [**Gender norms and community perception**] In your community, are there some things men can do but women can't? Can you give us some examples? [**Probe:** are there certain types of work that women can't do? Can women leave the home at night freely? What about if they want to travel, or sell crops at the market?]
- ▷ What about women leaders as compared to men leaders? Are there some things men leaders are able to do or achieve that women leaders can't? Can you give us some examples?
  - ▷ Is there anything that women or women leaders can do that men or male leaders cannot do?
  - ▷ To what extent do you think community perceptions or norms around gender affect women in your community, and the roles they take on? Please elaborate. [**Probe:** Are there restrictions on women's mobility? Women talking to men who are not family members? Women handling money or conducting business in public? Are women expected to listen to men and elders, or not have opinions etc?]
  - ▷ In your opinion, what are the most important things that would need to change in your community so that women could be more empowered, or have more voice and agency?
13. Finally, we want to understand your relationship with nature and how that has changed. Could you describe for us the different ways in which you depend on nature for your lives? [**Probe:** do you rely on the forests for food or other resources? What about rivers and waterbodies?]
- ▷ Has your relationship with nature, with forests and waterbodies and the land, changed in the last ten years or so? Could you elaborate?

- ▷ In what ways has this change affected the way you live your life? [**Probe:** have things improved? Does this change make you happy or unhappy? How often would you say you thought about this?]
- ▷ Has this changed relationship with nature had any impact on your sense of empowerment? What about your sense of place in the world?

## Tool B: Individual Interview with Women and Women Leaders of Focal Group / Collective

### **Tool description**

The following is a guide to conducting a semi-structured interview with women affiliated with the focal group, including those in leadership positions. Prior to beginning the interview, you must first obtain voluntary consent from the people you are interviewing. If consent is not granted, you may not proceed with the interview. Additional instructions for the administration of the guide will be noted in enumerator instructions in bold, which should not be read aloud. It is very important that you avoid yes/no responses and probe for in-depth answers.

Throughout this guide, the placeholder [group] is used to refer to the focal collective, group, or organization. Enumerators should replace this with the actual name of the group before use. Similarly, references to specific leadership roles – such as sarpanch – reflect common usage in India where the guide was piloted and should be adapted as needed for other country contexts.

### **Introduction [Fill out prior to beginning interview]**

|                                |  |
|--------------------------------|--|
| Name of revenue village        |  |
| Name of Gram Panchayat         |  |
| Name of district               |  |
| Date of Interview (dd,mm,yyyy) |  |
| Name of facilitator            |  |
| Name of note taker             |  |

### **Respondent Characteristics**

|                                                                       |  |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|--|
| Name of respondent                                                    |  |
| Respondent sex                                                        |  |
| Respondent caste / ethnicity                                          |  |
| Marital status (never married, married, separated, divorced, widowed) |  |
| Age                                                                   |  |
| Number of years as part of the [group]                                |  |

## 1. Background

- ▷ Did you grow up in this community? If not, where did you grow up and why did you move here? How long have you lived here?
- ▷ What work do you do to earn money? **[If agriculture]** What kinds of crops do you grow? **[If non-agriculture]** Where do you go to work?
- ▷ Who else is a member of your household? What work do they do? **[For children]** Do they go to school, what class are they in?
- ▷ How long have you been a member of the [group]? How did you join? Are you in any leadership position?
- ▷ Are you in any kind of leadership role in your community (not related to [group])? What role is that? This could be a formal or informal role.

## 2. Understanding of women's voice, agency, and leadership.

We want to understand leadership and voice and agency, and what this means in your community. We want you to think about what a leader in your village or someone who has voice and agency might look like or what they might do.

- ▷ Can you describe this person for me? **[Probe: is this person a man or a woman? Of a certain caste/class group? Of a certain occupation? Why? What kinds of characteristics does this person have?]**
- ▷ Are there any women leaders or women with voice and agency in your community? Can you give some examples?
- ▷ When you think of women who are leaders or who have voice and agency – what are the different qualities these women have?
- ▷ Are the qualities or skills that women leaders have different from those of men leaders? How so?
- ▷ How are such women perceived by the community?

## 3. Transitions to current state

In the previous question, you mentioned that a woman leader possesses qualities like [\_\_, \_\_]; **complete based on previous answer**].

- ▷ Do you think you have these qualities at present? Have you always had them? **[Probe: Think back to when you were living with your parents as a child. Do you think you had these qualities then? Why or why not? What about when you got married? How about after you had children?]**

- ▷ **[If always had them]** What do you think helped you develop these qualities? [**Probe:** family support, strong women leaders or women role models in the community, progressive social movements]
- ▷ **[If she did not always had these qualities, try to pinpoint “inflection points” where an event happened that changed her trajectory]** Thinking back, at what point do you think you began to acquire these qualities? What happened that helped you acquire them?
- ▷ **[If she still does not have these qualities]** What about your circumstances—at your current or paternal home, in your friend circle, in the large community—is holding you back from acquiring these qualities?
- ▷ **[Aspirations]** Do you want to be a leader or develop voice and agency? If yes, why? If no, why not?

#### 4. Material impacts of women’s voice and agency

- ▷ **[If she reports having these qualities now]** What are the biggest changes or improvements you see in your life as a result of having these qualities?
  - [**Probe:** how has it changed your personal relationships? How has it changed your material circumstances? How has it changed your health, or your children’s wellbeing? How has it changed outcomes outside your household?]
  - Have you been able to make a change in your community as a result of having these qualities? For example, demanding benefits under a government scheme, or improving the functioning of a community service etc. Can you give some examples?
  - Do you feel like you are treated differently as a result of having these qualities?
- ▷ **[If she reports not having these qualities now]** When you think of women in your community who *do* have these qualities, what aspects of their lives seem different to yours?
  - [**Probe:** how has it changed their relationships? What about their material circumstances, health, or children’s wellbeing? How has it changed outcomes outside their household? ]
  - Are they able to speak up in the communities? Has that changed any outcomes for them or their community members?
  - Do you feel these women are treated differently as a result of having these qualities?

#### 5. The role of [group]

- ▷ Think back to before [group] was set up in this community. What was the status of women in your community at that time? [**Probe:** What role did women play within the household? Could women move freely outside the household? Did they participate in meetings? Did they speak freely in front of men? What about government officials?]

- ▷ Now compare that time to the current time. What do you think has changed about the status of women in your community?
- ▷ How did this change come about? [**Probe:** What were the first things to change? What types of change took a long time to happen]
- ▷ What role would you say [group] had to play in this change? If they had not been present, do you think this change would have occurred? Why or why not?
- ▷ Has anyone else helped women improve their voice and agency? Who and what roles did they play?
- ▷ What would you say are the main results of this change in women's voice and agency or their leadership, both within households and in the community? [**Probe:** Are there some issues that women leaders raise that men leaders do not? Have discussions in the gram sabha meetings changed, and how? Does having women participate more actively help other women in the community do the same? What changes have you seen within households? What changes within the broader community?]

**6. Leadership roles: tradeoffs and aspirations** (to be asked if the woman is in a leadership role of any kind)

You are considered to be a leader – either as a role model for other women, or in a formal position within the collective or another organization.

- ▷ What are some of the benefits or advantages of being a woman leader? [**Probe:** has it changed outcomes within the household? Outside the household? Has it changed their relationship with other women? With village officials? Are you treated differently by service providers or other key community figures?]
- ▷ What are some of the risks or disadvantages to being a woman leader? [**Probe:** have you experienced any backlash from men in your household? What about men outside the household? What about any resentment or ill feeling from other women in the community? Are you treated differently by service providers or other key community figures?]
- ▷ [**If not mentioned above**] How has taking on leadership roles affected your time and workload? Is the change manageable or not?
- ▷ [**For those in formal leadership positions**] What kind of leadership arrangement exists in the organizations you have a role in? [**Probe:** Is there a strict hierarchy? Is there a group/council of women who make decisions? If you disagree, do others listen? Does any one person have veto power or the power to override others' decisions?]
- ▷ What kinds of leadership arrangements do you think work well? [**Probe:** flatter or more hierarchical ones? Ones with women at the top or men? Ones that work on consensus or majority? Etc]

**7. Gender norms and community perception**

- ▷ In your community, are there some things men can do but women can't? Can you give us some examples? [**Probe:** are there certain types of work that women can't do? Can women leave the home at night freely? What about if they want to travel, or sell crops at the market?]
  - ▷ What about women leaders as compared to men leaders? Are there some things men leaders are able to do or achieve that women leaders can't? Can you give us some examples?
  - ▷ Is there anything that women or women leaders can do that men or male leaders cannot do?
  - ▷ To what extent do you think community perceptions or norms around gender affect women in your community, and the roles they take on? Please elaborate. [**Probe:** Are there restrictions on women's mobility? Women talking to men who are not family members? Women handling money or conducting business in public? Are women expected to listen to men and elders, or not have opinions etc?]
  - ▷ In your opinion, what are the most important things that would need to change in your community so that women could be more empowered, or have more voice and agency?
8. Finally, we want to understand your relationship with nature and how that has changed. Could you describe for us the different ways in which you depend on nature for your lives? [**Probe:** do you rely on the forests for food or other resources? What about rivers and waterbodies?]
- ▷ Has your relationship with nature, with forests and waterbodies and the land, changed in the last ten years or so? Could you elaborate?
  - ▷ In what ways has this change affected the way you live your life? [**Probe:** have things improved? Does this change make you happy or unhappy? How often would you say you thought about this?]
  - ▷ Has this changed relationship with nature had any impact on your sense of empowerment? What about your sense of place in the world?

## Tool C: Individual Interview with Husbands and Mothers-in-Law

### **Tool description**

The following is a guide to conducting a semi-structured interview with the husbands and/or mothers-in-law of women affiliated with the focal group, including those in leadership positions. Prior to beginning the interview, you must first obtain voluntary consent from the people you are interviewing. If consent is not granted, you may not proceed with the interview. Additional instructions for the administration of the guide will be noted in enumerator instructions in bold, which should not be read aloud. It is very important that you avoid yes/no responses and probe for in-depth answers.

Throughout this guide, the placeholder [group] is used to refer to the focal collective, group, or organization. Enumerators should replace this with the actual name of the group before use. Similarly, references to specific leadership roles – such as sarpanch – reflect common usage in India where the guide was piloted and should be adapted as needed for other country contexts.

### **Introduction [Fill out prior to beginning interview]**

|                                |  |
|--------------------------------|--|
| Name of revenue village        |  |
| Name of Gram Panchayat         |  |
| Name of district               |  |
| Date of Interview (dd,mm,yyyy) |  |
| Name of facilitator            |  |
| Name of note taker             |  |

### **Respondent Characteristics**

|                                                                       |  |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|--|
| Name of respondent                                                    |  |
| Respondent sex                                                        |  |
| Respondent caste / ethnicity                                          |  |
| Marital status (never married, married, separated, divorced, widowed) |  |
| Age                                                                   |  |

|                                                  |  |
|--------------------------------------------------|--|
| Household has woman member of the [group]<br>Y/N |  |
| Number of years woman was part of the [group]    |  |

## 1. Background

- ▷ Did you grow up in this community? If not, where did you grow up and why did you move here? How long have you lived here?
- ▷ What work do you do to earn money? **[If agriculture]** What kinds of crops do you go? **[If non-agriculture]** Where do you go to work?
- ▷ Who else is a member of your household? What work do they do? **[For children]** Do they go to school, what class are they in?

## 2. Understanding of women's voice and agency, women's leadership

We want to understand leadership and voice and agency, and what this means in your community. We want you to think about what a leader in your village or someone who has voice and agency might look like or what they might do.

- ▷ Can you describe this person for me? **[Probe:** is this person a man or a woman? Of a certain caste/class group? Of a certain occupation? Why? What kinds of characteristics does this person have?]
- ▷ Are there any women leaders or women with voice and agency in your community? Can you give some examples?
- ▷ When you think of women who are leaders or who have voice and agency – what are the different qualities these women have?
- ▷ Are the qualities or skills that women leaders have different from those of men leaders? How so?
- ▷ How are such women perceived by the community?

## 3. Position in the household

- ▷ There is a woman in your household who is a member of a [group] – who is this person and what is their relationship to you?
- ▷ How long has this women been a member of [group]?
- ▷ How did you feel when she first joined the [group]?
- ▷ Does she possess these qualities of a woman leader you described earlier? Could you elaborate? Did she always have these qualities, or did they come from her association with [group]?

- ▷ How has her association with [group] changed your relationship within the household? [**Probe:** has it caused any disagreements at home? Has it changed how much time she spends at home? Has it changed who does what within the household? have you benefitted materially from her membership? In what way?]
- ▷ How has her association with [group] changed your household's relationship with the community? [**Probe:** Do people view your household differently because she is a member? How so? Are you able to reach government officials and other community leaders more easily? Has it changed your confidence or ability to voice your opinion on community matters?]

#### 4. The role of the collective

- ▷ Think back to before this [group] was set up in this community. What was the status of women in your community at that time? [**Probe:** What role did women play within the household? Could women move freely outside the household? Did they participate in meetings? Did they speak freely in front of men? What about government officials?]
- ▷ Now compare that time to the current time. What do you think has changed about the status of women in your community?
- ▷ How did this change come about? [**Probe:** What were the first things to change? What types of change took a long time to happen]
- ▷ What role would you say [group] had to play in this change? If they had not been present, do you think this change would have occurred? Why or why not?
- ▷ Has anyone else helped women improve their voice and agency? Who and what roles did they play?
- ▷ What would you say are the main results of changes in women's voice and agency or their leadership, both within households and in the community? [**Probe:** Are there some issues that women leaders raise that men leaders do not? Have discussions in the gram sabha meetings changed, and how? Does having women participate more actively help other women in the community do the same? What changes have you seen within households? What changes within the broader community?]
- ▷ What are the biggest changes or improvements you could see or have seen once women in your HH acquire voice and agency?
- ▷ Do you feel like women are treated differently as a result of acquiring voice and agency? How so?

#### 5. Gender norms and community perception

- ▷ In your community, are there some things men can do but women can't? Can you give us some examples? [**Probe:** are there certain types of work that women can't do? Can women leave the home at night freely? What about if they want to travel, or sell crops at the market?]

- ▷ What about women leaders as compared to men leaders? Are there some things men leaders are able to do or achieve that women leaders can't? Can you give us some examples?
  - ▷ Is there anything that women or women leaders can do that men or male leaders cannot do?
  - ▷ To what extent do you think community perceptions or norms around gender affect women in your community, and the roles they take on? Please elaborate. [**Probe:** Are there restrictions on women's mobility? Women talking to men who are not family members? Women handling money or conducting business in public? Are women expected to listen to men and elders, or not have opinions etc?]
  - ▷ In your opinion, what are the most important things that would need to change in your community so that women could be more empowered, or have more voice and agency?
6. Finally, we want to understand your relationship with nature and how that has changed. Could you describe for us the different ways in which you depend on nature for your lives? [**Probe:** do you rely on the forests for food or other resources? What about rivers and waterbodies?]
- ▷ Has your relationship with nature, with forests and waterbodies and the land, changed in the last ten years or so? Could you elaborate?
  - ▷ In what ways has this change affected the way you live your life? [**Probe:** have things improved? Does this change make you happy or unhappy? How often would you say you thought about this?]
  - ▷ Has this changed relationship with nature had any impact on your sense of empowerment? What about your sense of place in the world?

## Tool D: Focus Group Discussion Guide with Frontline Program Staff

### **Tool description**

The following is a guide to conducting a focus group discussion with select frontline program staff who are working with the focal group. Prior to beginning the interview, you must first obtain voluntary consent from the people you are interviewing. If consent is not granted, you may not proceed with the interview. Additional instructions for the administration of the guide will be noted in enumerator instructions in bold, which should not be read aloud. It is very important that you avoid yes/no responses and probe for in-depth answers.

Throughout this guide, the placeholder [group] is used to refer to the focal collective, group, or organization. Enumerators should replace this with the actual name of the group before use. Similarly, references to specific leadership roles – such as sarpanch – reflect common usage in India where the guide was piloted and should be adapted as needed for other country contexts.

### **Introduction [Fill out prior to beginning interview]**

|                                |  |
|--------------------------------|--|
| Name of revenue village        |  |
| Name of Gram Panchayat         |  |
| Name of district               |  |
| Date of Interview (dd,mm,yyyy) |  |
| Name of facilitator            |  |
| Name of note taker             |  |

### **Respondent Characteristics**

| Code | Name | Sex | Caste | Age | Role in the organization |
|------|------|-----|-------|-----|--------------------------|
|      |      |     |       |     |                          |
|      |      |     |       |     |                          |
|      |      |     |       |     |                          |
|      |      |     |       |     |                          |
|      |      |     |       |     |                          |
|      |      |     |       |     |                          |

## 1. Background of the organization

- ▷ Tell us a bit about how [group] started working in this area [**Probe:** when did [group] set up offices here? What was the motivation?]
- ▷ When [group] first started working in this area, what were the main challenges that you faced? [**Probe:** ask about forest rights and land rights related issues, incomes and livelihoods, government entitlement schemes etc]
- ▷ What was the status of women when [group] first started working here? What were the main challenges in that aspect?
- ▷ What were the goals you set for yourself at the beginning? How have those changed or expanded over time? Why? [**Probe:** has there been a change in economic conditions – worsening unemployment, increasing youth unemployment etc, what happened during COVID, has migration increased or decreased etc]
- ▷ How has the community responded to [group's] work in this region? How has this changed over time?

## 2. Current membership and scale of operations

- ▷ Who is eligible to join [group]?
- ▷ At present, what is the spread of [group's] operations? How many blocks? Is there full saturation within those blocks? Approximately how many women in the [group]?
- ▷ What is the caste composition of [group's] members?
- ▷ Has the type of women associated with [group] changed since you first started working [**Probe:** has the age or caste composition changed, has the occupation of members changed?]
- ▷ How do people hear about and join your organization?

## 3. Engaging women

- ▷ What have been the main challenges in getting women involved? [**Probe:** family permission, women's own reluctance to leave the household, suspicion about the movement's goals, pressure from the community etc – how have these changed over time]
- ▷ If yes, how have these challenges changed over time?
- ▷ Overall, how has your movement/organization overcome these challenges to engaging women? Can you give us an example of a conflict that arose and how you handled it?

## 4. Women's voice and agency in the community (this question will refer to the participation ladder included in Figure 2 in Tool A)

- ▷ Think about a recent meeting in this area, like a gram sabha. [**Show the first step (bottom) of the ten-step ladder.**] Are women in this community allowed to join meetings?
- ▷ [**If most participants say yes**] Do many women actually attend meetings?
- ▷ [**If most participants say yes**] Are women able to speak up? All women or only some women?

- ▷ **[If most participants say yes]** Are women listened to when they speak up? All women or only some women?
- ▷ **[If most participants say yes]** Are women able to influence decisions? All women or only some women?
- ▷ **[If most participants say yes]** Are women able to make decisions?
- ▷ **[If most participants say yes]** Are women involved in setting the rules for these meetings?
- ▷ **[Group places a stone on the step of the ladder where they agree that most women in the village are.]** Are all women in the village on this step? Are there some women who are not on the ladder at all? Who and why?
- ▷ Are there some women who are high up the ladder? Who are these women? What is different about them? [**Probe:** caste affiliations, education, family connections, group membership, etc.]
- ▷ What changes have you observed since your group started working? Please explain.

## 5. Leadership structure and decision making processes

- ▷ Can you describe the leadership structure in [group]? What are the leadership positions? How are women selected to these positions?
- ▷ How are decisions taken? Do all members vote?
- ▷ How are decisions taken communicated to the members?
- ▷ How often are meetings held? What is discussed at these meetings?
- ▷ Who usually speaks up at meetings? Do all women speak up?
- ▷ How has this changed since your organization first began working here?
- ▷ Can you give us some examples of issues that were raised at group meetings and how those were resolved?

## 6. Successes and future direction

- ▷ What do you see as the broad successes of your movement/organization so far?
- ▷ What are your goals over the next 5 years? Or what do you think should be the goals?

## Tool E: Key Informant Interview with Program Leaders

### **Tool description**

The following is a guide to conduct a key informant interview with select leaders within an NGO or other program leadership positions. Prior to beginning the interview, you must first obtain voluntary consent from the people you are interviewing. If consent is not granted, you may not proceed with the interview. Additional instructions for the administration of the guide will be noted in enumerator instructions in bold, which should not be read aloud. It is very important that you avoid yes/no responses and probe for in-depth answers.

Throughout this guide, the placeholder [group] is used to refer to the focal collective, group, or organization. Enumerators should replace this with the actual name of the group before use.

### **Introduction [Fill out prior to beginning interview]**

|                                                    |  |
|----------------------------------------------------|--|
| Name of program                                    |  |
| Name of interviewee                                |  |
| Interviewee position within program / organization |  |
| Interview location                                 |  |
| Date of Interview (dd,mm,yyyy)                     |  |
| Name of facilitator                                |  |
| Name of note taker                                 |  |

1. When your organization decided to open a new branch or expand into a new area, what drove that decision? Walk me through the process as concretely as you can for a specific expansion you remember well.
  - ▶ Can you recall when this expansion happened (which year or period)? Thinking back to that time, what factors influenced the decision — for example poverty levels, population need, proximity to existing branches, or donor/geographic priorities?
  - ▶ Were women's economic participation or empowerment conditions part of the discussion or consideration in any way?
  - ▶ Did these considerations differ across periods such as the 1980s, 1990s, or 2000s?

2. Think about the communities where you first began working. How would you describe women's roles in economic life and in community decision-making at that time — before your programs started?
  - ▷ Was this similar across communities, or did it vary? Were there places where women were already more active?
  - ▷ Were women already participating in savings groups, market activities, or community meetings? Were they attending community meetings?
  - ▷ Did you notice differences in gender norms or women's participation across the communities where you first worked?
3. Some organizations deliberately seek out communities with more restrictive gender norms because they see greater potential for change; others prefer communities where there's already some openness because programming is easier to implement. Which described your approach, and did it change over time?
  - ▷ Did you ever turn down a community or delay entry because gender norms were seen as too restrictive? Did donor requirements shape this?
  - ▷ Did you have a view on whether women needed to already be somewhat economically active for microloan programs to work?
4. When you were deciding where to expand, did you think about whether women in a given area would actually be able to take out and use loans, given local norms around women handling money or conducting business publicly?
  - ▷ Did you need women to already have some economic role or mobility for the program to be viable?
  - ▷ Were there communities you entered where you had to do significant prior work on gender norms before loans were feasible?
  - ▷ Did you work with male household members or community leaders to create conditions for women's participation?
  - ▷ Did you observe any differences in these issues across the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s during the organization's expansion?
5. In communities where you've been working for 10, 15, or 20+ years, what changes have you observed in women's roles beyond economic outcomes — in community meetings, local governance, household decision-making?
  - ▷ In your view, what drove those changes: was it the economic programs themselves, or were other factors — schools, mobile phones, political changes — equally important?
  - ▷ Did women's participation in groups lead to participation in community meetings? Were there "spillover" effects to women not in the program? Did you see backlash, and if so, how was it managed?

---

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Kalyani Raghunathan** is Senior Economist at the Asian Development Bank based in Manila. She was formerly a Research Fellow in the Poverty, Gender and Inclusion Unit (PGI) at the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) based in New Delhi.

**Alka Chauhan** is a Research Analyst at IFPRI based in New Delhi.

**Moogdho Mazhab** is a Research Fellow in PGI at IFPRI based in Dhaka.

**Sonjida Simi** is a Research Analyst in PGI at IFPRI based in Dhaka.

**Jordan Kyle** is a Research Fellow in PGI at IFPRI based in Washington, DC.

---

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work was undertaken as part of the CGIAR Gender Equality and Inclusion Accelerator. The CGIAR Gender Equality and Inclusion Accelerator is grateful for the support of CGIAR Trust Fund Contributors: [www.cgiar.org/funders](http://www.cgiar.org/funders).

---

## REFERENCES

- Elias, Marlène, Jordan Kyle, Miranda Morgan, Dina Najjar, Ana Maria Paez Valencia, and Kalyani Raghunathan. 2025. "Women's Leadership in Agrifood Systems: Power, Pathways, and Possibilities. Toward a Shared Research Agenda." CGIAR Gender Equality and Inclusion Concept Note. <https://hdl.handle.net/10568/179292>
- Morgan, Miranda, Deepannita Misra, Khanjan Ravani, Apurwa Kachhap, P.S. Madappa, Marlène Elias, Ruth Meinzen-Dick, and Pratiti Priyadarshini. 2023. "Methodological Note: Qualitative Research Methods to Explore Women's Leadership." Foundation for Ecological Security and Bioversity International. <https://hdl.handle.net/10568/137188>

---

Funding for this work was provided by the CGIAR Gender Equality and Inclusion Accelerator. This publication has been prepared as an output of the CGIAR Gender Equality and Inclusion Accelerator and has not been independently peer reviewed. Any opinions expressed here belong to the author(s) and are not necessarily representative of or endorsed by IFPRI.

## INTERNATIONAL FOOD POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

*A sustainable world free of poverty, hunger, and malnutrition*

IFPRI is a CGIAR Research Center

1201 Eye Street, NW, Washington, DC 20005 USA | T. +1-202-862-5600 | F. +1-202-862-5606 | Email: [ifpri@cgiar.org](mailto:ifpri@cgiar.org) | [www.ifpri.org](http://www.ifpri.org) | [www.ifpri.info](http://www.ifpri.info)

© 2026 International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI). This publication is licensed for use under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0). To view this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>.