GROUP RIGHTS, GENDER JUSTICE, AND WOMEN'S SELF-HELP GROUPS: EXIT, VOICE, AND LOYALTY IN AN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY IN INDIA

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Abstract: *This essay addresses tensions within political philosophy between group rights, which allow historically marginalized communities some self-governance in determining its own rules and norms, and the rights of marginalized subgroups, such as women, within these communities. Community norms frequently uphold patriarchal structures that define women as inferior to men, assign them a subordinate status within the community, and cut them off from the individual rights enjoyed by women in other sections of society. As feminists point out, the capacity for voice and exit cannot be taken for granted, for community norms may be organized in ways that deny women any voice in its decision-making forums as well as the resources they would need to survive outside the community. This essay draws on research among the Gond, an indigenous community in India, to explore this debate. Given the strength of the forces within the community militating against women's capacity for voice or exit, the question motivating our research is: Can external organizations make a difference? We explore the impacts of two external development organizations that sought to work with women within these communities in order to answer this question.*

KEY WORDS: group rights, gender justice, intersectionality, exit, voice, loyalty, livelihoods, indigenous communities

I. Introduction

This essay explores the tensions between group rights and gender justice as they play out among the Gond, an *adivasi* (indigenous) community, in Chhattisgarh state in India. The tensions reflect the way that

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India has sought to address the problems of poverty and discrimination among its poorest and most socially marginalized citizens. The Indian Constitution upholds the rights of all citizens to freedom from discrimination and equality before the law, regardless of gender, caste, ethnicity, and other aspects of social identity. At the same time, it extends a range of group-differentiated rights to address the historically entrenched disadvantage of certain social groups: religious minorities, *adivasis* (officially designated as Scheduled Tribes), and *dalits* (the previously "untouchable" castes, now officially designated as Scheduled Castes). These rights take two forms. The first includes rights such as quotas in elected bodies, public sector jobs, and the education system, which apply to *individual* members of *adivasi* and *dalit* groups. The second includes *group-based* protections, which are extended to certain groups. The civil code, for instance, allows personal law for religious minorities to be dictated by their religions, so there is no uniform civil code. Our concern here is with the group rights extended to *adivasi*s in recognition of the significance of land and forests to their identity and livelihoods. These give limited rights to administrative self-governance in areas where *adivasis* are concentrated. These rights were strengthened in 1996 by the Extension of Panchayat Raj to Scheduled Areas Act (PESA).[1]

This juxtaposition of individual and group rights presents a conundrum. Group rights are considered necessary to protect the identity of socially marginalized groups and to prevent their way of life from being assimilated into a mainstream culture that frequently despises them. At the same time, it is argued that group rights can have the effect of suspending the individual rights of members who occupy a marginal status within these groups, the "minorities within minorities."[2] As feminists point out, the rights of women are frequently overridden by the recognition of group rights.

We will explore this conundrum in the context of the Gond community by considering the impact of two development organizations that work in different ways to promote the position of women within that community. While both are engaged in forming poorer women, mainly from the Gond community, into self-help groups (SHGs) in order to promote household livelihoods, they have different histories and approaches. The first organization is Professional Assistance for Development Action (PRADAN), which is among the oldest development nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in India and a pioneer of the SHG approach. Over time, it has broadened its emphasis from the provision of microfinance services to its groups to other aspects of livelihoods and, more recently, to women's

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[1] The PESA Act emphasizes the village as a community managing its affairs in accordance with its traditions and customs. This Act empowers the *gram sabha*, made up of all members of villages in these Scheduled Areas, rather than elected representatives of the official *gram panchayat*, to decide on social and economic projects in the area.

[2] Avigail Eisenberg and Jeff Spinner-Halev, eds., *Minorities within Minorities: Equality, Rights, and Diversity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

empowerment and gender justice. Its overall goal is to promote SHGs as "autonomous spaces" for women,[3] spaces where they can come together to deliberate on the place assigned to them by their community and by society at large and to act on what they consider to be their priorities.

The second organization is the Chhattisgarh Aajeevika Samvardhan Samiti (BIHAN), which is the state agency in Chhattisgarh responsible for administering the National Rural Livelihood Mission, the central government's strategy for poverty reduction. It works closely with PRADAN, which provides formal technical support on rural livelihoods at the national level and is also responsible for organizing SHGs within certain blocks of the Kanker district. BIHAN constructs SHGs as "invited spaces," partly offering opportunities for reflection, but it is primarily a grassroots vehicle for the government's antipoverty policies.

This essay has a few objectives. First, we draw on philosophical discussions about group rights and gender justice to suggest that Albert Hirschman's[4] interrelated concepts of exit, voice, and loyalty provide a useful analytical framework for exploring the tensions involved. Second, we use empirical data to report on the different ways in which men and women in the Gond community experience the tensions between group rights and gender injustice. Third, we explore the impact of these two development organizations on the lives and livelihoods of women and families within the community. Given that these are different kinds of organization, we investigate how and why they differ in the kinds of changes they are able to achieve as well as what these changes imply in terms of the options of exit, voice, and loyalty available to women within the community.

II. Group Rights and Gender Justice: The Nature of the Conundrum

A. External protections and internal restrictions

At the heart of the conundrum are competing views about justice: liberal views that promote universalist notions of justice and communitarian views that favor particularistic approaches. Universalist notions are premised on the equal moral worth of all individuals by virtue of their common humanity and their equal rights in the eyes of the law.[5] The role of the liberal state is to uphold a notion of citizenship that embodies this assumption and provides an egalitarian institutional framework within which individuals are free to pursue the kinds of life they wish to lead.

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[3] Andrea Cornwall, "Spaces for Transformation? Reflections on Issues of Power and Difference in Participation in Development," in *Participation: From Tyranny to Transformation?* ed. Samuel Hickey and Giles Mohan (London: Zed Books, 2004), 75–91.

[4] Albert O. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970).

[5] See, e.g., John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971); Andrea Dworkin, *Right-Wing Women: The Politics of Domesticated Females* (New York: Putnam, 1983).

While most liberals recognize the disadvantage suffered by cultural minorities in a society, they differ in what they believe to be the appropriate response of the state. A minimalist position, put forward by Chandran Kukathas,[6] holds that any effort by the state to intervene on behalf of disadvantaged groups can descend into interest-group politics as each strives to gain an advantage at the expense of others. In the absence of a benevolent state, efforts at intervention may serve to impose the culture of the majority on minority groups. Kukathas thus suggests a position of neutrality on the part of the state.

Others believe that the existence of historic forms of disadvantage justifies some departure from principles of universalism. They argue that if members of such groups are to enjoy substantive rather than merely formal equality as citizens, it may be necessary to adopt affirmative measures to reverse the effects of past discrimination. Some go further to argue in favor of group-based rights that will allow such group members to pursue their chosen way of life rather than being subsumed into the culture of the majority.

The communitarian position is defined by support for group rights on relativist rather than universalist grounds.[7] It holds that different cultures and traditions do not constitute only the context of people's lives, but also give them their sense of identity and purpose in life. Community ideas about justice must therefore constitute the starting point for defining the claims and responsibilities associated with citizenship of different groups. Communitarians argue that the principles of universalism embodied in the liberal tradition prioritizing the rights of individuals over groups is itself particular to Western societies. Other cultures may not place the same value on autonomy and equality.

Advocates of group rights vary in their approaches to the question of inequalities *within* cultural groups. Those closer to the communitarian position have focused primarily on intergroup inequalities. They either fail to acknowledge intragroup inequality, seeing only difference and complementarity, or else see it as the price to be paid for community coherence.

Liberal thinkers who support the idea of group rights have paid greater attention to the problem of internal inequalities. Will Kymlicka, for instance, argues that while group rights are necessary to provide legitimate "external protections" to cultural minorities, they must be made conditional on the elimination of unacceptable "internal restrictions" through which groups discriminate against their own members.[8]

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[6] Chandran Kukathas, "Liberalism and Multiculturalism: The Politics of Indifference," *Political Theory* 26, no. 5 (1998): 686–99.

[7] See, e.g., Michael J. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Charles Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

[8] Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

This liberal tactic to protect "minorities within minorities" raises two questions. First, what conditions are necessary to justify the extension of "external protections" to minorities? Attempts to address this have singled out the right of exit from the groups in question as the most important of these conditions. Kymlicka suggests that the right of exit not only provides a means for protecting individuals within oppressive groups, but can also act as an incentive for such groups to transform oppressive practices.[9] Joseph Raz argues that the elimination of oppressive practices within groups is likely to be a slow process, but that these groups still merit external protections as long as the right to exit provides interim protection to the oppressed within them.[10]

Second, what "internal restrictions" are considered significant enough to warrant the denial of external protections? There has been a tendency to classify certain kinds of inequalities as less acceptable than other and hence of greater significance in withholding external protection. Kymlicka cites "gross and systematic violations of human rights," such as slavery, genocide, mass torture, and expulsions as examples of unacceptable internal inequalities; he thinks that less egregious forms of injustice do not warrant intervention as long as there is consensus within the community that they are legitimate.[11] Raz singles out slavery, racism, and homophobia as examples of unacceptable internal practices, but sees "gender differences" as less problematic because, as long as such differences do not carry the "implication of an inferior status," both men and women are likely to consider them socially acceptable.[12]

Kukathas, on the other hand, suggests that internal inequalities within groups should be allowed to exist without external interference or protection, provided such groups accept the right of exit.[13] If some members of those groups find their traditions unacceptable, they should have the right to leave. Those who choose to remain, however reluctantly, can be said to have acquiesced to those traditions, presumably because group membership continues to have some value for them.

B. Exit, voice, and loyalty: A conceptual framework

Some feminists question interpretations of consent and consensus within these debates on the ground that their emphasis on gross violations of human rights ignores and thereby legitimizes informal, everyday "internal restrictions" through which gender inequalities tend to be reproduced within different communities. Hirschman's interrelated concepts of exit, voice, and loyalty provide a useful framework for discussing how feminists

[9] Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship*.
[10] Joseph Raz, *Ethics in the Public Domain: Essays in the Morality of Law and Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).
[11] Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship*, 169.
[12] Raz, *Ethics in the Public Domain*, 86.
[13] Kukathas, "Liberalism and Multiculturalism."

envision the options available to women as subordinate members of subordinate groups.[14]

Women who neither voice their objections to their unjust treatment within their group nor choose to leave it would be considered "loyal" within the literature discussed above, with their silence taken as evidence of consent to both lesser[15] and more blatant[16] forms of discrimination. Feminists argue, though, that this overlooks the extent to which the very forms of discrimination to which women and girls are assumed to have consented serve to deny them the capabilities they need to exercise either exit or voice, leaving a hollow form of loyalty as their only option. They are trapped by the close relationship between voice and exit. Without the substantive capacity for exit, they are unlikely to voice their dissent from community norms. Without voice, it is difficult to see how they can acquire the resources they need to make exit a credible option by allowing them to survive outside their communities.

A review of the feminist literature on this topic suggests greater support for the idea of building women's capacity for voice within their communities than for strengthening their capacity for exit—and for good reasons. Aside from practical difficulties of exiting into an unfamiliar world with inadequate resources, there are likely to be psycho-social costs that tend to be overlooked by many who advocate this right. For example, deep cultural attachments can render an exit option deeply undesirable.[17] There is also no guarantee that women from communities occupying a marginalized status in relation to the wider society will be accorded respect and dignity in the world they are being asked to enter.[18] Finally, on a political note, the right of exit is seen as an individual response to discrimination; it does little to address its causes, leaving discriminatory practices intact.[19]

Consequently, feminists have focused on strengthening women's voice and influence within their communities as part of a broader approach to transforming power relations. As Anne Phillips points out, the norms of a community are rarely formulated under conditions of gender equality; they tend to embody notions of justice that reflect the standpoint of those who hold power in the community.[20] A broader-based notion of justice requires "parity of participation," the full involvement of all sections of the

[14] Anne Phillips, "Multiculturalism, Universalism, and the Claims of Democracy," in *Gender Justice, Development, and Rights*, ed. Maxine Molyneux and Shahra Razavi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 115–37.

[15] Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship.*

[16] Kukathas, "Liberalism and Multiculturalism."

[17] Oonagh Reitman, "On Exit," in *Minorities within Minorities*, ed. Eisenberg and Spinner-Halev, 189–208.

[18] Gurpreet Mahajan, "Can Intra-Group Equality Co-Exist with Cultural Diversity? Re-Examining Multicultural Frameworks of Accommodation," in *Minorities within Minorities*, ed. Eisenberg and Spinner-Halev, 90–112.

[19] Susan Moller Okin, "'Forty Acres and a Mule' for Women: Rawls and Feminism," *Politics, Philosophy & Economics* 4, no. 2 (2005): 233–48.

[20] Phillips, "Multiculturalism, Universalism, and the Claims of Democracy."

community in working out its institutional arrangements, crucially including their ability to question and renegotiate aspects of prevailing norms found to be oppressive.[21]

At the same time, and we return once again to our conundrum, these feminists also recognize that the most oppressed within a group are least likely to be in a position to recognize, let alone protest, the injustice of their situation. The discrimination that women experience tends to be deep-rooted and hidden, the product of long-term socialization processes, although they may be reinforced through overt coercion. While parity of participation requires building the critical consciousness and capacity for "voice" of those who have been hitherto disenfranchised, this is unlikely to occur through internal efforts within communities that have long practiced and justified discrimination against women.

It is in such circumstances that external actors may have a role to play in opening up new material possibilities, ways of thinking, and relationships, thus providing women within such communities the reflexive vantage point they need to evaluate community norms and practices and to renegotiate those they consider unjust.[22] It is this possibility that we here investigate, that is, whether the approaches promoted by PRADAN and BIHAN are able to play this role or whether the groups they form are merely vehicles through which they promote their own predefined goals.

C. Methodology

Our research was carried out in 2017–2018 in the district of Kanker and combines quantitative and qualitative methods. We selected twenty-eight villages in which PRADAN was active and sixteen villages that came under BIHAN's jurisdiction. Given our interest in women's experiences as subordinate members of a subordinate group, our main focus was on women, but we also included men from SHG villages to compare their views of gender injustice within their communities and the impact of the development organizations.

The first phase of the research consisted of qualitative interviews with twenty SHG members and twenty men married to SHG members who were not among those interviewed. We aimed to gain a better understanding of their life histories and their experiences in different phases of their lives. In the second phase we conducted separate focus-group discussions with forty-five women and twenty-eight men in groups of four to five to explore

[21] See, e.g., Onora O'Neill, "Justice, Gender, and International Boundaries," in *International Justice and the Third World: Studies in the Philosophy of Development*, ed. Robin Attfield and Barry Wilkins (London: Routledge, 1992), 47–72; Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text* 25, nos. 25–26 (1990): 56–80.

[22] Phillips, "Multiculturalism, Universalism, and the Claims of Democracy"; Naila Kabeer, "Empowerment, Citizenship, and Gender Justice: A Contribution to Locally Grounded Theories of Change in Women's Lives," *Ethics and Social Welfare* 6, no. 3 (2012): 216–32.

their views about poverty and injustice. We suggested that they use the metaphor of a "wealth ladder" as a way of thinking about how they positioned themselves in relation to others within their community. We left it up to them to interpret the idea of a wealth ladder in their own ways.

Based on our discussions, we developed various indicators to capture the key changes attributed to their SHG membership and incorporated them into a purposively designed survey. The survey was administered to 223 men and 228 women selected randomly across our study sites. The survey was not intended to be statistically representative but rather to provide a descriptive tool to capture the frequency with which different changes were reported and how these were distributed between men and women across PRADAN and BIHAN villages. We then combined insights from the survey with our qualitative data to reconstruct the processes through which the changes that our respondents described had come about.[23]

III. Contextualizing the Research

A. Adivasi women at the intersection of inequalities

The Gonds are one of the largest *adivasi* communities in India, largely concentrated in the hills and forests of central India. Like other *adivasi* communities, they are mainly engaged in agriculture and forest-based livelihoods and have a long history of being marginalized. British-colonial rulers regarded the *adivasis* as "noble savages" living in harmonious village communities in a symbiotic relationship with nature. The British-colonial rulers sought the "gradual assimilation" of these communities to protect their unique way of life from the onslaught of mainstream Hindu society.[24] Indian nationalists, on the other hand, sought to locate *adivasis* on the lowest rungs of the Hindu caste hierarchy. They believed that the introduction of Sanskritic traditions into *adivasi* society would help to transform its backward way of life to a morally superior one.[25] These attitudes persist today among many state officials who regard *adivasis* as "lazy," "backward," "alcoholic," and "promiscuous."[26]

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[23] Naila Kabeer, Nivedita Narain, Varnica Arora, and Vinitika Lal, "Group Rights and Gender Justice: Exploring Tensions within the Gond Community in India" (Working Paper 33, *International Institute of Inequalities*, London School of Economics, August 2019), https://www.lse.ac.uk/International-Inequalities/Assets/Documents/Working-Papers/LSE-III-Working-paper-33-Kabeer.pdf.

[24] Melvil Pereira, Bitopi Dutta, and Binita Kakati, eds., *Legal Pluralism and Indian Democracy: Tribal Conflict Resolution Systems in Northeast India* (London: Routledge, 2018).

[25] Govind Sadashiv Ghurye, *The Scheduled Tribes* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1963).

[26] Nandini Sundar, *Subalterns and Sovereigns: An Anthropological History of Bastar, 1854–1996* (London: Oxford University Press, 1997); Amita Baviskar, "Adivasi Encounters with Hindu Nationalism in MP," *Economic and Political Weekly* 40, no. 48 (2005): 5105–13.

Contemporary scholars focus on the continued marginalization of *adivasi* communities by post-independence development efforts.[27] As national data indicates, *adivasi* are currently the poorest social group in India, with the lowest rates of literacy and highest rates of child and maternal mortality.[28] While there have been overall declines in poverty rates in India, the pace of decline has been slowest among the *adivasis* and they remain concentrated at the bottom of the national income distribution.

Despite the inferior status ascribed to them by mainstream Indian society, the Gond themselves take considerable pride in their identity and way of life. They belong to what Ayelet Shachar describes as "*nomoi* groups," which are communities that have their own unique history and cultural memory and a normative universe in which law and cultural narratives are inseparably related.[29] They describe themselves as the first people to have inhabited the planet and foremost among indigenous communities. They follow the ancient animist religion of Koya Punem that sees the divine in nature and they define their identity in terms of the land and forests they occupy. While many *nomoi* groups define themselves in terms of culture, religion, and place, the Gond are among those who place additional emphasis on biological descent, making them more exclusionary than other such communities in their definition of membership—and more restrictive in relation to women's sexuality and reproduction.

There has not been much research on gender relations among the Gond, but an official report on women's situation in Chhattisgarh provides some insights into how patriarchy operates within the community.[30] Gond women are not subject to the norms of female seclusion that confine higher caste Hindu women to the domestic domain. They play a major and visible role in the local economy as the main workers in agriculture, active in all stages of crop production, preservation, and storage, and are primarily responsible for collection and processing of uncultivated crops and forest produce.

Despite their economic visibility, however, Gond women are subject to various forms of patriarchal control. Because membership in the community is defined by biological descent and the paternity of the child is critical for establishing its claims to membership, this has given rise to elaborate rules governing women's marital, sexual, and reproductive behavior. Marriage is endogamous with strictly enforced guidelines governing the

[27] Sundar, "Subalterns and Sovereigns"; Ramachandra Guha, "Adivasis, Naxalites, and Indian Democracy," *Economic and Political Weekly* 42, no. 32 (2007): 3305–12.

[28] World Bank, *Poverty and Social Exclusion in India* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2011); Virginius Xaxa, *Report of the High-Level Committee on Socioeconomic, Health, and Educational Status of Tribal Communities of India* (New Delhi: Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India, 2014).

[29] Ayelet Shachar, "On Citizenship and Multicultural Vulnerability," *Political Theory* 28, no. 1, (2000): 64–89.

[30] Ilina Sen, *A Situational Analysis of Women and Girls in Chhattisgarh* (New Delhi: National Commission for Women, Government of India, 2004).

possibility of marriage between different communities. Severe penalties are imposed for transgression of rules, more punitive for women than men, with social ostracism as the ultimate punishment. Women are expected to live and die in their husbands' home and to submit to their authority. Children are deemed to belong to the father, with mother's rights contingent on remaining within the marriage. Only sons can inherit land at the death of the father.

The Gond are also characterized by other internal inequalities. Among those we studied, wealth was concentrated in the hands of the men of the *malguzar* families, descendants of influential members of the community who, along with local Brahmins, had been "gifted" with large tracts of land by colonial powers. This allowed them to extract rents from tenant farmers, part of which was handed over to the state as tax.[31] Although that system was abolished after Indian independence from Britain, the *malguzars* continue to own the largest landholdings within the community and to occupy privileged positions within its different governance structures.

We find three levels of governance among the Gond. The official domain of *saskiya* defines the community as part of the national polity and is subject to the laws of the land. Its main representatives in the lives of the Gond are the local officials and elected representatives who administer special provisions and protections extended by India. The community domain of *samajik* is governed by the norms and customs of the Gond people within the region and is made up of forums operating from village to state-wide levels. The domain of *sarvajanik* relates to everyday life in the village community and it governs relationships between the different cultural groups that might live in the same village, though its membership is restricted to those born within the region rather than those who have migrated to it.

The Elders (*siyan*) of the community dominate in these various forums as guardians of the community, interpreting and enforcing its norms, adjudicating disputes, imposing penalties for transgression, and representing the community in the official domain. They are drawn mainly from the large landowning families, but women are excluded and have no voice in community affairs. Along with upholding the traditions of the community, Gond Elders also seek to defend it from outside influence. The steady encroachment of the external world through government policy, migrant settlers, the spread of market relations and cultural forces of Sanskritization, and religious conversion are all perceived as threats to the community's way of life. In response, Gond Elders in the district decided in 2010 to draw up a written constitution codifying the norms and rules of their community for the first time in its history, giving official status and more restrictive

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[31] Sundar, "Subalterns and Sovereigns."

interpretations to rules and norms than had previously existed in unwritten and more fluid forms.[32]

B. Gendered perspectives on injustice

We begin our empirical analysis with a summary of how men and women in our study perceive questions of injustice in their interactions within and outside their community Their responses suggest considerable overlap in how they describe their relationships with "outsiders" to their community, some degree of overlap in perceived inequalities within the community, and considerable divergence when it comes to gender injustice.

1. Male perceptions of injustice

Men's relationships with "outsiders" revolves around their efforts to access official entitlements. They spoke of complex bureaucratic hurdles they encountered: lost paperwork, multiple visits to government offices, and bribes demanded by local officials. They also spoke of their despised status in the outside world; they were described by others as *jungaliya* (wild people), constantly drunk and given to fishing, feasting, and making merry rather than hard work. Such views frequently colored how they saw themselves. Hari (PRADAN) described himself as only "half a man" compared to the educated people he encountered. He said he tried to behave well and speak politely, but "there is always this thought in my mind that I am illiterate and ignorant of things."

There was an initial reluctance to acknowledge inequalities within the community ("all Gonds are equal"), but the metaphor of the wealth ladder sparked an impassioned discussion about how families like theirs—our research was with the poorest in the community—had been born at the bottom of the ladder and had remained trapped there by the exploitative nature of their relationships with those at the top:

> The people at top of the ladder have a lot of wealth, they make progress. Those at the bottom are daily laborers, entire families work as daily laborers, we remain where we are, we are unable to climb to the next rung… . How are we to progress if we have nothing left after buying food? (Hari, PRADAN)

> It is only after they have used up our labor and ground down our bodies that we are given food to eat. Those who have a lot of land and wealth, they will progress… . Wealth begets wealth… . If we did

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[32] Alpa Shah notes a similar trend among *adivasis* in Jharkhand to reimagine the notion of *adivasi* communities in purer form through greater regulation of the social and sexual tribal body; see Alpa Shah, "The Labour of Love: Seasonal Migration from Jharkhand to the Brick Kilns of Other States in India," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 40, no. 1 (2006): 91–118; Sen, *A Situational Analysis of Women and Girls in Chhattisgarh.*

not work for them, they would turn us away when we were hungry and needed work. (Bansi, BIHAN)

Gender, on the other hand, barely features in men's discussions. They acknowledge differences in the treatment of men and women, but explain them in terms that neutralize their discriminatory implications. As one of them maintained, boys and girls were brought up equally in their community, aside from a "little" difference in their responsibilities: "We bring up our daughters and sons in the same manner. We send both to school from childhood…. We don't differentiate in their eating and drinking … The only little difference is that girls cook the food and wash the clothes. Boys sit to eat the food and just throw off their clothes once they are dirty" (Balaram, PRADAN).

Few men expressed concern about domestic violence within the community. They believe that it is kept within acceptable limits by clearly specified community norms governing men's right to beat their wives and equally clear norms forbidding women, under any circumstances, to raise their hands against their husbands:

> It is alright for a man to give a woman one or two slaps with the hand. If he hits her with his shoes, a penalty is levied on him. But men cannot be touched. A woman cannot hit a man, raise her hand on him. Even if a man slaps her a couple of times, she cannot retaliate or hit him. If this happens then the community levies a penalty on her. (Naresh, PRADAN)

Men's lack of concern about domestic violence also comes to the surface in their discussions about alcohol consumption. Alcohol is integral to Gond rituals and lifestyle and had traditionally been drunk only during festivals. However, this was no longer the case when we conducted this survey; alcoholism had become a major problem within the community.[33] Male FGDs acknowledged this, but framed its negative impact in terms of the health of individuals, its adverse influence on boys' education, and its contribution to poverty and unemployment. They rarely made the link between alcoholism and domestic violence and its implications for women's physical health and mental well-being.

They justified exclusion of women from community forums in terms of their inferior capacity, holding that men and women thought differently. They believe that women gossip, spread rumors, do not have the sense to know when and where to talk and what to talk about, and cannot travel on their own to different villages, so they cannot participate on an equal basis.

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[33] Shraddha Prabhu, David Patterson Silver Wolf, Catherine N. Dulmus, and K. S. Ratheeshkumar, "Prevalence, Nature, Context, and Impact of Alcohol Use in India: Recommendations for Practice and Research," *Journal of Global Social Work Practice* 3, no. 2 (2010).

Finally, men were adamant in their defense of male rights to land. They dismissed the idea that national legislation upholding women's equal rights to property could override the norms of the community, declaring that any woman who takes her claims to court could expect to be rejected by her family and community, regardless of the court's verdict. Men feared that if Gond women were given land rights, outsiders would seek to marry them in order to gain access to their land. Gond norms governing women's marriage to outsiders are particularly strict because of this fear, but some men want further legal guarantees: "There should be a law that just as outsiders cannot buy land belonging to Scheduled Tribe communities, they should not be able to marry women from Scheduled Tribe communities."

2. Female perceptions of injustice

The women in our study had less experience than men in the world beyond their community, but they too spoke of the discrimination they had experienced in their encounters with state officials. Such discrimination often has gendered undertones. For instance, a child's father had to be named on applications for caste certificates that determined eligibility for the government's special provisions. If women were separated from husbands who had refused to acknowledge the paternity of their children, they not only found it difficult to obtain certificates for their children, but also had to put up with insinuations about their morality, which is "a different kind of humiliation."

Like men, women also spoke about inequalities within the community. Saraswati (PRADAN) drew on the idea of the wealth ladder to illustrate her view:

> At the bottom of the ladder is the ground. Life for people at this level is bad. I will explain this using the example of lentils. If lentils are on the ground and just left there, they will go bad…. Until and unless you take those lentils up the ladder and dry them in the sun on the roof, they will just rot on the ground … and you will have to throw them away. That is why poor people get thrown away. Poor people must understand and learn properly, only then will they be able to climb the ladder.

But unlike the men, these women were extremely aware and articulate about the injustices they experienced as women within their community. They spoke, for instance, of the disproportionate burden of work they had to bear and its restrictive effects on their life chances. Most had been denied education because their labor at home and in the fields was considered sufficient preparation for life. The few who had been enrolled in school usually dropped out because their work responsibilities left them too exhausted to concentrate. As they grew older, both men and women had

to toil to earn a living, but men could fall asleep when they came home while women still had their domestic responsibilities to discharge.

The women spoke about the power of senior men to make strategic life choices, such as marriage, on their behalf. While men's marriages were also arranged, it was exclusively women who spoke of its oppressive consequences. This may have been because it was easier for men to leave the wives arranged for them and remarry or else to take on other wives. By contrast, women came under intense social pressure to remain with their husbands, regardless of their behavior:

> Sometimes … men throw this wife out or bring another wife when the first wife is still around. Your parents tell you to stay with him, whether he abuses you or fights with you, nobody cares. They say if you don't keep quiet, he will throw you out. Where can women go to be heard if their husband brings home a second wife? … And if I leave my husband, the community will point a finger at me. (Women's FGD, BIHAN)

They spoke of the widespread, sometimes life-threatening domestic violence that was frequently linked to excessive alcohol consumption. Satyawati (BIHAN) had been married off to a man known to be violent. He had been violent toward her throughout their marriage, but she had no option but to remain with him: "Where will I go? My parents are no longer alive … who is there for me?"

Saraswati (PRADAN), on the other hand, fled her husband, perhaps because she had parents she could return to. She describes how she found the courage to leave:

> Food was not an issue, but the tension, the drinking and violence all the time, who deserves to live like this? … If I had not left the day I did, I would not have left that place alive. I got the courage to leave from my mind, from my anger. When the body gets hurt and beaten like that, the mind suddenly wakes up, the body tells you that you have a mind, and your anger rises.

What exacerbated their sense of injustice on this matter was that there were no forums within the community where they could take their grievances. However, they were also discouraged from taking it to an external authority because doing so would bring the community into disrepute. One woman spoke of her anger at the response of the Elders when a little girl in their community was sexually assaulted by one of its male members. They fined the man but had forbidden the SHG to take the matter to the police as it would ruin the man's reputation.

Finally, there was the question of women's exclusion from land rights. Many of the women we spoke to were aware that the country's laws

recognized their right to land, but they spoke of the intense pressure on them by the community to waive their rights in favor of their brothers to maintain harmony in the family. This was particularly hard on women whose marriages had broken down, leaving them to fend for themselves and their children.

IV. Development Organizations and Self-Help Groups: Opening Up Space for Change

A. Government and nongovernment approaches to SHG strategy

PRADAN and BIHAN both began working in Kanker district in 2013, view SHGs as an important organizational route for providing members with access to livelihood interventions, and federated their groups into Village Organizations that act as an intermediary between groups and government programs. However, they differ in their vision and goals in ways that have a bearing on the changes they have been able to achieve.

First, their livelihood strategies differ. While both provide microfinance services, PRADAN places greater emphasis than BIHAN on the provision of skills training, technical expertise, and livelihood support to SHG members as well as to men in their families.

Second, they differ in their approach to promoting women's political participation. As a government program, BIHAN seeks to implement government policy of quotas for women in local elected bodies. It also introduces women-only village assemblies to allow members to discuss issues of concern to them. In addition, it is able to use its official status to pressure Gond leaders to allow women to participate in their government-initiated committees.

Third, PRADAN, as an NGO, cannot exercise the same pressure as BIHAN does. Its approach is to set up specialized committees within its village federations to take special responsibility for women's rights in priority areas such as gender-based violence, promotion of livelihoods, and strengthening self-governance structures and political capabilities within SHGs.

Finally, the two organizations differ in their long-term vision for SHGs. BIHAN envisages continued government support for the groups to enable them to act as part of the grassroots administrative structure to implement government antipoverty programs. Its SHGs thus represent what have been described as "invited spaces" for women's participation.[34] The goal of PRADAN, on the other hand, is to promote SHGs as "autonomous spaces" for women. It seeks to build the capacity of SHG members to operate independently in the future by building their own collaborations with local state, market, and civil society actors and taking increasing responsibility

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[34] Cornwall, "Spaces for Transformation?"

for the formation of new groups as PRADAN gradually disengages from older ones.

B. Improving livelihoods

Our life-history interviews show us that the lives of the men and women in our study were marked by hunger, hardship, and debt. They started working at an early age to support their families in a subsistence-based, cash-strapped economy, laboring in the homes and fields of wealthier families. In times of shortage, they survived on rice gruel, wild tubers from the forest, weeds from the field, and gleaned broken rice after threshing—or they simply skipped meals. When crisis became acute, they borrowed money from landlords and money lenders to buy paddy, either paying exorbitant interest rates or repaying their debt by providing free labor. This explains their resentment about those at the top of the wealth ladder.

Our survey data suggests, though, that there has been considerable progress over time. Most men and women are now able to feed themselves from their own cultivation for much of the year and can access government-subsidized rations or purchase food for the rest. Their diets are more diversified and nutritious than those they described in the past, most have access to potable water and electricity, and many have been able to purchase producer and consumer assets.

While these improvements are likely to reflect overall declines in poverty across the country, both men and women in our survey place great emphasis on the livelihood support they had received through the SHGs. The overwhelming majority of them said that SHG financial services enabling them to save, borrow, and access emergency funds are the most valued aspect of membership. Women are more likely than men to prioritize savings. The SHG savings mechanism not only represents a source of security, but it also protects their savings from their husbands and from their own temptation to use them for short-term needs.

The overwhelming majority of men and women identify SHGs as their preferred source of credit and mechanism for saving; it is to SHGs they are most likely to turn in times of financial distress. They report that this had reduced their previous dependence on traders, moneylenders, and landlords, the three groups they ranked as their least preferred sources of credit. They no longer had to "beg" from them in times of financial distress. They used their loans, in order of frequency, to purchase farm inputs, pay for medical expenses, improve housing, educate their children, meet food needs, set up a new business, purchase livestock, and hire labor.

The survey also shows that men are generally more likely than women to have benefited from other aspects of livelihood support, adopted new agricultural practices, and diversified their livelihoods. These gender differences were greater among PRADAN members. That there are gender differences in livelihood impacts is not surprising because men are more

likely to own and manage land, more mobile than women, and hence in a better position to take advantage of new opportunities. The greater gender differences in the impacts in PRADAN villages is likely to reflect its greater efforts to involve men in its livelihood activities than does BIHAN.

The qualitative interviews also suggest that women had been actively encouraged by family members to join BIHAN SHGs in the justified belief that, as part of a government program, they would be able to access various government benefits. By contrast, women in PRADAN villages met with considerable opposition from their families because they considered the NGO as taking the women away from their household responsibilities and offering little in return. As benefits began to accrue to SHG households and to men within them, this resistance diminished. It seems that PRADAN's decision to include men in its livelihood efforts made its entry into the communities easier, while the benefits that accrued to SHG households made it easier for women to remain within the SHGs.

C. Transforming consciousness, building networks

The qualitative interviews provide detailed insights into the processes through which the two organizations sought to promote women's political participation. Given that these women had grown up to believe in their own inferiority and accept their subordinate status, it is not surprising that changes at the level of individual consciousness was the starting point for broader processes of political change in their lives. Central to these processes were the weekly SHG meeting, which gave women the opportunity to meet regularly with each other, share personal experiences, and develop new kinds of relationships with each other. However, our interviews helped bring to the surface some important differences in processes associated with the two organizations that have important implications for the kind of political agency that developed among their members.

When women from BIHAN SHGs spoke of sharing their personal experiences, it was evident that this had happened as a natural outcome of their regular meetings. They spoke of the sociability of the SHGs and what it meant in their personal lives:

> What I liked best about the SHG is that after I got married and moved to my in laws' house, I used to feel shy and hesitate to socialize with people. I would feel scared of people, of my in-laws. After I joined the SHG, I got the opportunity to sit amidst people and interact with them… . I felt happy sharing my own thoughts with others. I found out that there is not much difference in how women think. We listen to each other's stories carefully and we understand each other. (FGD member, BIHAN)

Women from PRADAN SHGs also spoke of their meetings as a space for sharing personal experiences. However, this did not occur as the natural

outcome of regular encounters, but through a guided experiential-learning process facilitated by PRADAN staff.[35] Their first few meetings always began by asking women to talk about their own lives. Two themes that surfaced repeatedly in women's narration of their life histories were fear and silence: fear of men in their family, fear of the Elders, fear of the community, and silence in the face of fear.[36]

This was Samotin's recollection of her first meeting:

> [T]hey asked us to share experiences right from our childhood till now, to speak of all the painful things that had happened to us. It was very frightening; we were all very quiet. I was very scared and kept my mouth closed. All of us did. My heart was beating so fast, and I was feeling so strange. I had never been asked to speak like this. We continued to be quiet and then slowly, one by one, we started to speak. I was the last one. I remember saying a few things about my childhood. It was a frightening experience. It has become a lot easier now—compared to earlier when I was constantly wondering if I am right or wrong, should I open my mouth or not?

Saraswati, who had fled her abusive husband, explains why she had been silent for much of her life:

> I used to be so scared of men—I had to leave the room if a man came in—I could not bear to be near them for a very long time. I ran away from my husband because I was afraid and weak, how could I start to speak? … I am still afraid of our samaj … there is a lot of pressure and oppression even now… . Men live lives free of tension—what do they have to worry about? They have strength, they have money, they have arrogance, they can give us two slaps if they want, and we cannot protest. What courage do women have? … Our lives are just about earning and eating, earning, and eating.

It was evident that these women had suffered in silence on their own, that the community's culture did not encourage them to speak to others of their experiences. These meetings were therefore an important turning point, helping to build their courage to speak out in the public domain in the presence of those they had feared.[37] As Saraswati describes, the meetings

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[35] This methodology is used by feminist organizations across India. It became part of PRADAN's SHG strategy when it shifted its focus from livelihoods to building the capacity for self-governance among its members. PRADAN partnered with Jagori, a feminist organization in India, to develop its own approach.

[36] It is possible, given their past fears of "speaking," that the ability of SHG women to speak forcefully about the gender injustices they experienced in their community reflects the processes they had gone through as a result of SHG membership.

[37] Gaining the courage to speak about their personal lives with others like themselves through these processes may be one reason why they were so articulate when we spoke to them about their experiences of gender injustice in their community.

helped her to literally find her voice, speaking first in whispers and then with greater confidence at her SHG meetings as her fear faded:

> You know, there is a lot of difference between hearing with your own ears and seeing with your own eyes. So, I may have heard and known many things before but when I went to the meetings and saw what I saw with my own eyes and heard what they were saying for myself, it was different. That is how I built an understanding of things—I was still not shouting at the top my lungs but I was slowly and softly speaking to one or two people as well as speaking in the group, just whispering my thoughts. Slowly my fear started to fade away. But I have got a mind that now says to me: It is time to speak, you have to speak. I haven't spoken much but slowly I am starting to. At home also I keep asking myself and practicing how to say things—and then I finally go to the meeting and speak. If it is incorrect, then I improve.

And Surajbatti relates how she had gone from her earlier silence to speaking her mind in front of village elders:

> Earlier … I just could not talk to people, and I would not go anywhere at all. My thinking has changed from before. Now I feel like talking and engaging in meetings. Even if I make only one point, at least I make it… . I can now sit with the Elders, with anyone… . When there are Elders around, people tell you, do not talk too much. But now if something is wrong, I will speak up. When you believe that what the person in front is saying is incorrect, it is important to protest. I used to be scared of talking to big people—now I am less afraid. There is a change in the Surajbatti of then and now.

D. Political participation, collective action

Women's interactions through their SHGs changed their relationships with each other as they began to understand the common basis of the injustices they had shared. Their growing self-confidence, sustained inter-actions over time, and support of their organizations allowed SHG members to experience for themselves for the first time the power of acting together. This began with the problems of everyday life:

> Because we have unity, if somebody is sick, we can help them go to the hospital, even take them there. If there is no unity, even if the person dies you would never get to know. Once we joined the SHG, we got to know each other's well-being in depth. (PRADAN FGD)

> I feel this SHG is a tree, and we are the branches. Earlier if you called women to help with labor in your field, often nobody would come.

Now if a decision is made in the SHG, everyone must come so it's much easier to get work done. (BIHAN FGD)

Over time, they began to participate in public forums. However, our survey suggests that women's participation is greater in official forums where the government instituted quotas than in community forums where they continue to face old discriminations. It also suggests that BIHAN members are more likely than PRADAN members to attend the *gram panchayats* (officially elected forums) as well as Gond community-level forums, possibly reflecting BIHAN's capacity to pressure community leaders to include women. However, PRADAN members are more likely to report active *engagement* within these governance structures by interacting with and speaking in front of government officials. They are also more likely to report interactions with village elders, speak without fear in front of them, and believe that they were listened to during village meetings. Significantly, though, few women from either organization said that they had used those forums to question community norms.

Our survey asked SHG members about their participation in various forms of collective action that had been mentioned in the qualitative interviews. Their responses suggest that participation was unevenly distributed across issues and organizations. Some issues reflected government priorities and were initiated by government officials. The campaign against open defecation, for instance, was a major priority for the ruling Modi government. Over a third of women from both organizations had been involved in rallies to build awareness about its health risks and exhort the community to construct toilets to meet national targets.

The government had also mounted a public campaign against the production and consumption of alcohol. This was an issue on which development NGOs, including PRADAN, had been active for some time because of alcohol's links to violence against women. The survey finds that while BIHAN members are more likely to report involvement in the government-initiated anti-alcohol campaign, PRADAN members are more likely to report combating male violence by engaging in collective action outside of government campaigns.

About one-third of the women from both organizations were involved in collective action around nonpayment or delayed payment of their government employment guaranteed work (MNREG) wages. This was not part of a government campaign, but reflected the grievances of SHG members themselves. The protest took different forms between the two groups. BIHAN members took their grievances to BIHAN staff who were government officials, who then raised it on their behalf in the *gram sabha.* PRADAN members were mobilized by their Village Organizations in rallies against relevant officials responsible for disbursing payments, which seemed to have some effect: "If only one or two of us go, no one will listen to us… . They keep sending us back, tell us to come back tomorrow. If all of us go

together to the collectors' office or anywhere, even for a single day, the task gets done."

The other issue on which both PRADAN and BIHAN groups had taken initiative was the irregularity of school attendance by children. BIHAN women discussed the issue in their women's village forums and held rallies to encourage parents to send their children to school. PRADAN members provided community-level leadership on this issue with support from many men in the community who shared the belief that education was important for their children to learn how to "behave properly" in their encounters with the outside world. In addition, some PRADAN SHGs initiated collective action against the illegal felling of trees by commercial contractors. Here, too, they received support from the rest of the community.

E. The limits to change

Given that the two organizations had been active in these villages for only five years at the time we conducted our interviews, we would not expect them to have achieved radical change, but the limits to the changes they did manage to achieve is worth reflecting on. It is significant that few women in our study used community forums to speak out against its patriarchal norms. It is also significant that, apart from male violence and alcohol consumption, the collective actions undertaken by the SHGs were directed toward school authorities, government officials, commercial loggers, and health providers—all actions that did not bring them into direct confrontation with men within their families and communities.

One of the barriers limiting women's ability to challenge patriarchal structures is the attitudes of men—both within their family and in the larger community. We note the reluctance on the part of men in the focus-group discussions to acknowledge gender injustices within their community. We note also that, despite the fact that women had to combine unpaid domestic workloads with long hours of working for a living—a major source of grievance for many—men did little to take on a fairer share of the work burden. According to our survey, while men are more likely than women to take primary responsibility for occasional episodic household responsibilities, such as house repair and collecting government food rations, women remain primarily responsible for routine, time-consuming daily tasks, such as fetching water, cooking, collecting food and fuel, buying food, and washing clothes.

Our qualitative interviews suggest that, despite benefits that men gain from women's membership in SHGs, the additional demands on women's time in terms of attending SHG meetings and participating in public forums and government campaigns failed to trigger a reallocation in the distribution of domestic labor. Women were left to find their own ways of coping

with additional demands. As Sonsingh, the husband of a PRADAN SHG member, put it, women "carefully" scheduled meetings at a fixed time at night after they had finished all their household work. Another husband (of a BIHAN member) said that all three of his daughters-in-law were SHG members, but they had their meetings on different days of the week so that "things get managed."

However, our research finds examples of individual men who profess more egalitarian attitudes and appeared more open to change. Bhaskar (PRADAN), for example, said: "I do not consider my wife as separate in our relationship. She has her own troubles, but I consider them mine in the same way she considers my troubles to be hers. We consider ourselves as equals."

Discussions during a PRADAN focus group with men reveals some understanding on their part for what SHGs might represent to women: "These days they sit for meetings every week. Some women may be troubled by their husbands, someone troubled because of their children. When they go to an SHG meeting, for at least those two hours their mind is distracted. They can talk about it to others, and they also learn new things." Another male focus group recognizes that the SHGs made a difference to women's political participation:

> Women have started coming forward, this is a change. It used to happen was that men were left to themselves to do as they please and women woke up and cooked and cleaned and went to work in the fields. Earlier, men wouldn't even call the women to any meetings or events. They would go to meetings, gatherings or wherever they wanted to go. Now gradually women are coming out.

V. Conclusions

A. Revisiting our conceptual framework: Exit, voice, and loyalty

Based on our analysis, we can draw out a number of important points that have a bearing on how we frame concepts of exit, voice, and loyalty. First, while the failure of Gond women either to have expressed their dissent from community norms in the past or to have left their communities might be interpreted by some as evidence of "loyalty" to the community and "consent" to its ways, our findings suggest an alternative interpretation. In a context where the world beyond the Gond community regards the Gond as inferior human beings and women do not have the material resources and marketable skills to make their way in the outside world, exit is clearly not a realistic option for most women. Nor is there a great deal that women can do to voice their dissatisfaction with community norms. The same norms that deny them access to resources, overburden them with responsibilities, place them under authority of men, and permit men to beat

their wives, also excludes them from decision-making forums in which these norms are adjudicated.

Second, it is also clear to us that neither PRADAN nor BIHAN seeks to encourage women's exit option. Not only would doing so have been a politically contentious approach, given the status of *adivasis* as a protected group, but they may have had the same reservations about the exit option as those expressed by many feminists. Instead, both organizations opt to promote women's capacity for voice, but use somewhat different strategies. As a government agency, BIHAN regards SHGs as "invited spaces" in which women can develop capabilities necessary to participate in government programs and campaigns at the grassroots level. PRADAN, on the other hand, seeks to develop SHGs as "autonomous spaces" in which women can develop longer-term capabilities they need to participate in local political life and exercise greater voice and influence in local governance structures.

Third, the organizations have been successful in their goals, but within limits. There is little evidence that women were expressing public dissent about community norms and practices. At the same time, what they said in the private space of our interviews suggests strongly that their loyalty to the community could not be taken for granted, that their silence was the silence of limited options. There are two sets of observations that support this conclusion.

The first set of observations that stood out in the accounts that many women provided about their experiences of gender inequality within their community, is that they did not regard those experiences as isolated and individual phenomena but as manifestations of injustice that were woven into the fabric of community norms and traditions. Recognition of the systemic nature of gender injustice was evident in the generalized language in which it was described by these women, their references to the cultural traditions which underpinned it, and their bitterness about the *baba jat* (the male caste) who benefited and perpetuated it. Women in a PRADAN FGD articulated their view of gender relations in their community:

> Men and women work equally but there is greater recognition of men's work. Men plough and women plough, both work equally but … more importance given to men. When we go for government employment guarantee work (MNREGS) both men and women have to cut earth, but when we return home, women still have to do all the household chores, the work at home… . Men have more rights even though women do more work because they have the right to hit women. Women do not have that right. If women abuse men, men will hit them. If women retaliate by hitting back, society will penalize them. Why this is the case is not clear, it has been happening since the days of our ancestors. These rules are made by men, by male Elders… . The state says that daughters must have equal rights with the sons, but nobody

says that women should have the same rights as men or that wives should have the same rights as the husbands. This we have never heard.

A PRADAN SHG member spoke of frustrations with a culture that burdens women with responsibilities but denies them rights, including the right to speak:

> Women should just earn and keep quiet is the way that people think here. I do not like this way of thinking. Women folk should have same rights as men folk … women folk are not behind the men folk, they are equal. Women run the house, do farming, look after the children, look after their education—in everything, it is the woman. Men folk actually don't do very much, just a little bit of work in the fields…. My heart and mind feel that wherever my home may be, I would like to be an equal there. Both of us should be equal.

Saraswati, whose use of the idea of the wealth ladder to elaborate on her understanding of inequality was cited above, is clear that men are privileged from childhood within her community and thus inevitably dominate the higher rungs of the ladder:

> Who is at the top? Men of course. They know all the rules. Everywhere in society, men are on the higher levels, everyone knows that. When right from the beginning, we make the son "the precious one," then there is no other way for him but to go higher up the ladder. And the daughter, begins and lives in weakness, she cleans dishes so how will she ever go up the ladder. We give more respect to the son and so they climb faster. If we had done the opposite, given more respect to the girl instead of boys, the situation would have been very different.

She offers a succinct summary of men's arbitrary use of their interpretive authority to impose their view of the world and dismiss those offered by women:

> When men say wrong things, they prove them right. When they say right things, they are right anyway. So, they are always right. On the other hand, when women say right things, the men prove them wrong, and when the women say wrong things, of course they are wrong. So, women are always wrong.

The second set of observations that puts a question mark over women's loyalty to the community, relates to gender differences in the views expressed about the importance of community membership. The men in our study were far more vehement about defending the boundaries of their community, the special protections these carry for them, and the privileges

they enjoy. Indeed, some expressed anger that antidiscrimination legislation allowed intermarriage between communities, fearing that it would erode some of these privileges.

Many of the women, by contrast, considered the government's commitment to equal rights as holding out the promise of fairer treatment than they received within their community. They compared the egalitarian treatment that characterized their work on the MNREGS, where they did the same work as men and were (in principle) paid the same wages, with the unequal gender division of domestic labor that they came home to.

They pointed out that while state legislation recognizes the equal rights of sons and daughters to ancestral property, the community pressures daughters to waive their rights in favor of their brothers in order to maintain harmonious relationships. They felt that, on some occasions, the justice of the courts was preferable to the justice of their Elders. We note, for example, the SHG group that had wanted to take the matter of sexual assault of a child to the police in their belief that the law would mete out suitable punishment, but had been persuaded by community elders not to do so. The only example of "exit" we came across during our research is the case of a woman who left her community because, when its Elders denied her right to her daughter, she turned to the law for justice.

B. An intersectional strategy for change

This essay has explored tensions between group rights and gender justice within the Gond community and asked whether the self-help group strategy promoted by development organizations had any impact on the injustices experienced by women as a subordinate group within a socially marginalized minority. The special protections extended to *adivasi* groups by the Indian state was recognition of their historical disadvantages. However, as we noted, those protections did not end discrimination against these groups by the wider society, and so they continue to lag behind on a range of socioeconomic indicators. Taking away these special protections would be an enormous injustice, likely to undermine these groups' sense of identity, eradicate their ways of life, and destroy any security of livelihood they may still enjoy.

At the same time, while self-governance within the Gond community is understandably centered on defending its boundaries, the norms by which it does so has particularly oppressive implications for women, drawing attention to a key internal inequality within the community. In the light of our interviews, the silence that women have maintained in the face of past oppression would be difficult to interpret as consent to their subordination. It is the silence of those who have had no power to change the circumstances of their lives.

Given the political challenges associated with building women's capacity for exit, the two organizations featured in our research focus on

strengthening women's voice. Their basic strategy is to reconstitute social relations between women as new associational spaces—"invited," in one case, and "autonomous," in the other—and to use these spaces to promote their livelihoods and their capacity for collective voice and action.

However, the conundrum remains: group rights that privilege men override women's search for gender justice and continue to deny them a place in community decision-making structures. Without greater support from men within their community, there are clear limits to women's ability to openly challenge its patriarchal norms. At the same time, men have little incentive to bring about changes in traditional authoritarian structures that, despite wealth and status inequalities within the community, uphold their authority as a group over women as a group.

Our analysis of the different forms of collective action reported by SHG members suggests a possible way out of this conundrum. We noted that SHG women, particularly those associated with PRADAN, had taken leadership on various issues that were of concern to the wider community. They were able to take this leadership role because they had their own independent organizations. Men, by contrast, were co-opted to a greater extent into the community governance structures, even if the least privileged among them would never rise within its ranks.

The way forward may lie in an intersectional strategy of collective action that acknowledges both community-level injustices stemming from marginalization of *adivasi* communities as well as gender injustices reflecting women's marginalized status within a marginalized community. The key element in this strategy would be to use women's efforts on behalf of the community in order to leverage wider male support to address their gender-specific interests. While changes in men's consciousness lag considerably behind those of women, we noted examples of individual men who had begun to acknowledge some of the injustice women faced as well as the examples of leadership they had shown, suggesting that there is potential for change among men within the community. The SHGs could build on this potential as their starting point for forging a cross-gender coalition for women's rights within the community.

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