

# Women's Empowerment in India

Misean Cara member organisations in India  
working to empower Dalit and tribal women



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## Background

Misean Cara is a faith-based NGO of Irish religious and lay missionary organisations. Through Misean Cara and with the financial support of the Irish Government, member organisations of Misean Cara are implementing projects focused on education, health, livelihoods and human rights. Cross-cutting concerns are justice and human rights, HIV and AIDS, gender and the environment.

This brief highlights the work of four Misean Cara member organisations in India aiming to empower Dalit and tribal women. Their projects range from education support through tuition and bridge schools, to health care provision through health centres and medical camps, to livelihood support through income generation activities, to supporting women to claim their rights and entitlements through capacity building and life skills training.

## Context

The dominant social norm in India with regard to women is marked by gender discrimination and gender inequality, compounded – in the case of Dalit/Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (SC/ST) – by caste-based discrimination which has led to social

and economic exclusion. This has resulted in Dalit and tribal women having low self-esteem, low literacy and awareness of trafficking of women and girls and poor linkages to state service providers.

Women also face economic barriers such as low access to financial and productive resources. By tradition, they mostly have no land and few other assets in their names, with only their labour to sustain themselves. Women's lower status also translates into a low level of collective action for political engagement with power holders in order to access the few benefits available to SC/ST communities under the government's reservation policy for the lower castes.

## Methods

Five projects in India of four member organisations were selected by Misean Cara for an evaluation of their work to promote the empowerment of women. The participation of project teams guided the evaluation process through workshops and field visits that helped to review the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability of the work. This process provided sufficient space for reflection, discussion and the identification of key learnings.

## Key findings

- Multiple discriminations that Dalit and tribal women face in India are addressed by the projects. Thus, cross-cutting issues of gender, justice and human rights are also addressed. Project contributions at individual and household level are particularly visible.
- The needs of target groups are met through addressing their strategic, practical and gender needs for education, legal support to counter domestic violence and trafficking, and to strengthen income generation activities.
- The added value of the missionary approach contributes positively to long term vision and facilitating transformative change, commanding community trust and respect and therefore support for the interventions.
- Respect for the religious inspires support by different stakeholders such as officials, media, lawyers, local businesses and philanthropists, and husbands of project beneficiaries/participants.
- The time-frame of the projects (1-3 years) addresses short-term practical needs with some potential for long-term structural goals such as addressing poverty and economic marginalisation.

*“Now my husband encourages me to go to meetings. He says listen to what they say and then tell us about it.”* Suseela, Chowtigudem Village (Mulakalapalli)

*“The Sisters are personally visiting every house. They feel the pulse of what is happening.”* Youth at FGD, Kanoor Village

*“I am illiterate, but I have a brain and we can fight for issues as a group.”* SHG Woman at FGD, Himmat Nagar

*“The motivation we receive from the Sisters, we cannot buy it!”* Woman at FGD, Mulakalapalli

## Key Learnings

- The missionary approach to development is a key factor for efficient and effective project implementation and for sustaining results, but this can be affected by transfers of Project Manager.

- A long-term perspective (in project and funding) is required to achieve sustained and structural change.
- Individual encouragement and motivation is an important enabler for women’s empowerment. The involvement of women in the planning and design phase of a project could be in itself an empowering process.
- It is important to consider women’s gender needs when scheduling trainings. Also to hear from the women why, for example, they lack access to a specific govt. scheme, or do not come for a follow-up training and to address those challenges. To understand from the perspective of women – as participants and not just beneficiaries – what is required to make change happen in their lives.
- It’s also important to engage men to support women’s project activities – through trainings on what is of interest to them as an entry point for securing their support (e.g., agriculture in GSS project).
- Family visits are an important way to engage the family, especially men, and to provide counselling and to support women.
- Higher education and vocational training helps link youth to employment opportunities and is an important step to break intergenerational poverty.
- It is important to ensure that trainings and awareness-raising is followed up with individual and group interactions at village level for attitude and behaviour change.
- More time and staff capacities need to be invested to help target groups achieve better access to government schemes.
- Specific and intensive mentoring support to women with interest and potential for leadership is a means to increase collective action and political empowerment of women.
- A cooperative society in combination with SHGs allows for an increase in savings and access to low interest loans.
- Integrated approaches for increasing earnings are promising, e.g., for farming, seed funding for agricultural inputs and also technical training, information on markets, linking farmers to govt. departments for subsidies and schemes, legal services to secure land titles.

- With the phenomenon of elopement by girls and boys increasing, life skills and sexual and reproductive health training are needed to raise awareness of rights (especially for girls) and develop the capacity to take the right decisions.
- Alcoholism in men is known to lead to cycle of indebtedness, poverty, violence towards women and children and social exclusion. This is a potential area for future work for Misesan Cara members.
- It is important to define SMART indicators which allow tracking of progress.

## Most significant change

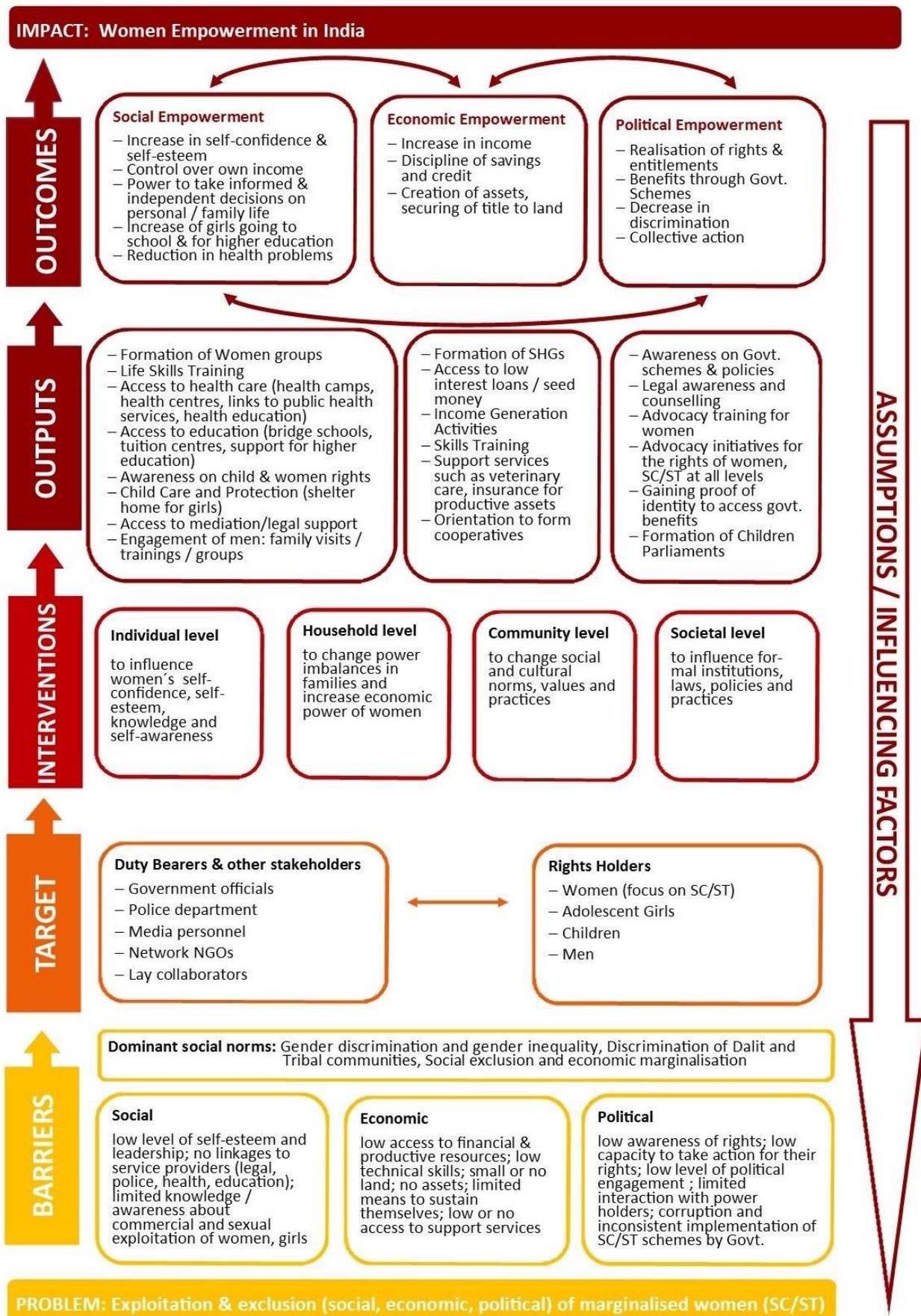
Stated by the stakeholders of the project (women, men, children, officials) and confirmed by project staff

Empowerment	Achievements	Attribution to project activities
<b>Social</b>	Increase in self-confidence and self-esteem Unity and social bonding among women in groups	Formation of Women Groups and regular meetings Training received (life skills, parenting, education, health) Constant encouragement and motivation through house visits, exposure visits and celebration of special days (e.g. Women's Day, Children's Day)
	Increased support of husbands Increase in number of children going to school or higher studies	Family Visits Formation of men's groups and sensitisation training for men (GSS) Awareness-raising of women, men, children, and the general public on importance of education, parenting, girl child rights Bridge schools for non-formal education and evening tuition centres (SVD, Salesian and Presentation Sisters) Financial support, career guidance and motivation to youth for higher education (SVD, Salesian, Presentation Sisters)
	Improved health-seeking behaviour	Medical camps for rag pickers (SVD); Health Centre (Presentation Sisters) Health awareness, referral to government hospitals (GSS)
<b>Economic</b>	Habit of Saving Collective action by some SHGs Increase in earnings	Women Groups (GSS) SHGs (Presentation Sisters, SVD), Cooperative Society (SVD) Access to low-cost loans reduces dependency on moneylenders Seed money loans for IG inputs in combination with trainings, insurance and additional services (e.g. veterinary) leads to new learnings to improve small business skills and minimise loss/risk. Vocational Training with link to follow up employment (SVD)
<b>Political</b>	Collective action by some women organised in SHGs	SHGs have been functioning for more than 3 years (SVD)
	Awareness increased that collective actions can result in benefits.	Information about cooperative (SVD, GSS) Sensitisation of rag pickers and inclusion in waste picker collective actions (SVD)
	Increase in ChildLine calls, reduction in child marriages, intervention in child abuse cases	Sensitisation and training of different stakeholders on trafficking, child rights; public campaigns, forming district-level network on child rights; formation of community-based groups at village level for watchdog function (GSS, Salesians).

## Theory of Change of Women's Empowerment

The Theory of Change (ToC) on women's empowerment presented below synthesises the five project-level ToCs and considers available evidence and promising approaches outlined in the literature reviewed.

## Pathways to change – explaining the theory of change



## Outcomes

The three outcomes of social, economic and political empowerment are intended to contribute towards the ultimate goal of women's empowerment. The outcomes are important in themselves as well as for the ultimate goal, because:

**Social Empowerment** means an increase in knowledge, self-awareness and self-confidence of women to make choices in personal and family spheres. At the same time an increase in access to education and health are also contributory factors.

**Economic Empowerment** is indicated by women's capacity to contribute to and benefit from economic activities – that they can negotiate a fairer return for their goods and services, leading to the creation of assets over which they have title and control. More equitable access to assets and services can increase agricultural productivity, reduce poverty and raise healthier, better educated families, as women usually invest a higher proportion of their earnings in their families and communities than men.<sup>1</sup>

**Political Empowerment** relates to equity of representation in political institutions and enhanced voice as citizens and leaders so that women claim their rights and entitlements; and can exercise their power to participate in and make the decisions that affect their lives and the community at large.

## Interventions and outputs

The set of outcomes is connected with activities and their respective outputs presenting the pathway to achieve change.

**Key activities contributing to the social empowerment of women** are the formation of women's groups, life skills training, health education and healthcare, access to basic and higher education and protection of children, mediation/legal support services for women, and engaging men to support their spouses in the project activities.

Women coming together in groups results in a feeling of unity and solidarity. Such social networks are seen as key to drive change.<sup>3</sup> Through trainings such as life skills, the women acquire knowledge and leadership skills which contribute to an increase in self-confidence and self-esteem. Health and education activities as well as protection of girls are viewed as

important in themselves but also influence economic and political empowerment.

Access to education can break intergenerational poverty cycles, delay marriage and childbearing and improve economic outcomes in the future.<sup>4</sup> Access to shelter and rehabilitation services for girls in distress will contribute to their well-being and open opportunities for their future. Counselling, mediation and legal support ensures women's protection and safety. The engagement of men is key – it enables women to meet and engage in different social, political and economic activities.

**Key activities contributing to the economic empowerment of women** are the formation of SHGs, technical and skills training as well as the provision of support services (e.g. insurance, veterinary services). Membership in an SHG inculcates the habit of saving and gives access to cheap loans that allow them to send their children to school, respond to emergency needs, strengthen existing livelihoods or start new initiatives. SHGs help to increase women's bargaining power with their husbands.<sup>3</sup> Seed money combined with technical input and/or skills training enables women to start new or strengthen existing ventures. Technical input such as training on care of buffaloes or on farming, provision of veterinary services, all contribute to an increase in yields.

For an increase in yield to result in an increase of income, it is important to also add specific trainings on marketing or cooperatives.

Also economically empowering are support for securing land titles or identity cards for being eligible for govt. benefits, and enabling women to access low interest loans (e.g. via cooperative societies or being linked to govt. schemes). Combining higher education/vocational training with life skills and sexual and reproductive health education can be highly beneficial to mitigate the risk of drop out, abuse, early marriage and teenage pregnancy.<sup>3</sup>

**Key activities contributing to the political empowerment of women** are providing awareness on government schemes and policies, helping gain proof of identity to access govt. benefits, legal awareness and counselling, advocacy training, and formation of Children's Parliaments. The experience of group solidarity and social cohesion in women's groups/

SHGs helps women to organise themselves collectively and build their capabilities for voice and influence.<sup>5/3</sup> Targeted training (including legal and technical knowledge) and mentorship, especially for women who demonstrate leadership skills, will support them to claim rights with power-holders as well as facilitate their involvement in politics (e.g. attend Gram Sabha meetings, becoming panchayat leaders). The combination of social and economic interventions increases the likelihood that women gain more power at household level and can potentially influence change at the community and national level.<sup>5</sup> The support of the media to highlight project work and for advocacy at all levels (including with duty-bearers) goes a long way to transform and activate policies for women's empowerment. The work of forming Children's Parliaments prepares them to learn about rights, governance and citizenship.

## Influencing factors

There is no blueprint available on how change for women must evolve. The specific context in which women live as well as their lived experience matters. Women raising their voice will not be sufficient to gain influence. It will also depend on the circumstances they live in (household level), on institutional structures and political opportunities (societal level), as well as space for associational life (community level).<sup>5</sup>

## Guiding principles

Key **principles** to be considered for the design of all interventions aimed at women's empowerment are:<sup>2</sup>

- **Context:** understand the local, national and global context while designing interventions.
- **Human rights:** enabling women's rights is an important end in itself.
- **Voice:** listen to women, and enable women to address power structures and become agents of change.
- **Multi-level:** need for interventions at individual, household, community and societal level.
- **Intersectionality:** responding to multiple discriminations of gender, caste, class, sector.
- **Focus on transformative approaches:** addressing root causes and structural barriers to transform power relations with men.
- **Affirmative action:** inclusion is not enough, affirmative measures are key.
- **Protection against backlash:** identify and mitigate risks; ensure personal safety of women.

*(adapted from DFID 2015)*

## References

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## Authors

Nicole Moran, Lakshmi Raman

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## Photo

*Members of a Self Help Group in Himmat Nagar, Indore, MP, India.*

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## About Mísean Cara

Established in 2004, Mísean Cara is an international and Irish faith-based missionary development movement made up of 90 member organisations working in over 50 countries. We work with some of the most marginalised and vulnerable people in developing countries. Adopting a human rights focus, we support communities addressing basic needs in the areas of education, health, and livelihoods, as well as advocating for economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights. At times of humanitarian crisis, the trusted and long-term presence of missionaries in affected communities also allows for rapid, efficient and targeted responses.

Mísean Cara and our members work collectively and individually through the missionary approach to development. This framework is based on five values: respect, justice, commitment, compassion and integrity. Together, these establish the basis for the approach of missionaries to good development practice.

Our Strategy 2017-2021 identifies five goals:

- Uphold the right to quality education
- Uphold the right to better health, clean water and sanitation
- Uphold the right to sustainable livelihoods
- Uphold and advocate for human rights
- Enhance and promote the missionary approach to development.

Further expressing our desire to reach the most vulnerable and marginalised, the Strategy will see Mísean Cara bringing a particular focus to bear on targeting five groups: women, children, refugees, displaced people and people with disabilities.

