



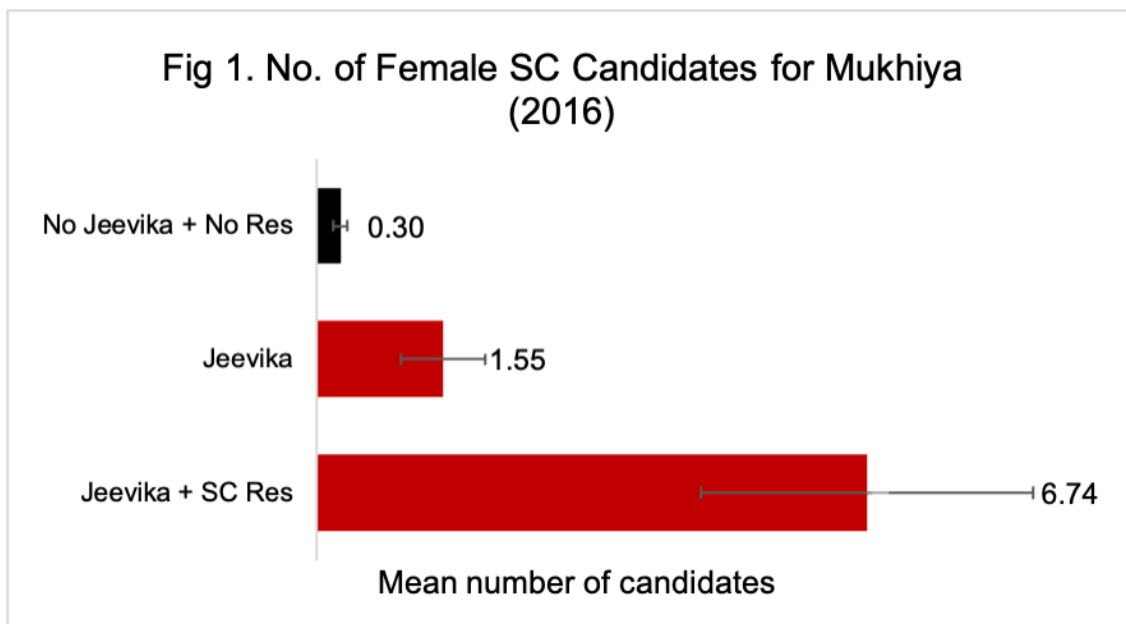
Impact of Jeevika self-help groups on local government participation among SC women

INTRODUCTION

Bihar's SHG program, called the Bihar Rural Livelihoods Project (or, more commonly, Jeevika'), has organised over 12 million women into 1 million self-help groups (SHGs), initially prioritising women from Scheduled Caste (SC) households. A recent paper by Sen and Sharan (2024) finds that the presence of Jeevika SHGs lead to a 148% increase in the number of SC women candidates contesting local elections. They also find that the SHGs encourage the entry of candidates from poorer households and also improve voter turnout in local body elections.

DATA AND METHOD

The authors use administrative data from the Bihar Rural Livelihoods Promotion Society (or Jeevika) and the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM) for group and member information of SHGs. They also collect data indicating when each GP in Bihar was first exposed to Jeevika. Additionally, they match candidate data from Bihar State Election Commission (SEC) to the Socio-economic and Caste Census (SECC) 2012 to analyse the demographic profile of the candidates across GPs.



FINDINGS FROM AN RCT (2012 - 2016)

The authors compare political participation outcomes in the 2016 local body elections across a sample of 179 Gram Panchayats, among which 89 were randomly selected to begin the Jeevika program in 2012, two years earlier than the control GPs. This was part of a World Bank-evaluation.

RESULTS

The paper finds that, on average, the presence of Jeevika SHGs increases the number of SC women candidates by 148% and SC candidates overall by 50% in the 2016 GP elections. However, these results are mainly driven by places that have both Jeevika and reservation for SCs. SC-reserved GPs with SHGs see, on average, 2.4 additional candidates contesting for the post while GPs reserved for SC women see an additional 5 candidates. No significant results are observed for GPs with Jeevika but no SC reservation.

The socio-economic profile of candidates in GPs with the presence of Jeevika and reservations, show that they are, on average, from poorer households and have lesser years of education. Finally, voter turnout in local body elections is also higher in GPs with both SHGs and political reservations.

FINDINGS FROM THE ROLLOUT OF JEEVIKA ACROSS BIHAR (2007 - 2016)

The authors also study Jeevika's rollout across Bihar's 8392 GPs over a 10 year period (2007 - 16) and see how GPs that saw Jeevika groups form earlier compare with those that saw these groups form later. To analyse impacts of Jeevika, they use an econometric technique called Staggered Difference-in-Discontinuities.

GPs that were exposed to Jeevika earlier saw more SC and SC women candidates participate in elections, but only when these GPs are reserved for SCs. Among SC-reserved GPs, those where SHGs were introduced between 2007-09 see an additional 3-5 candidates for Mukhiya; those where SHGs were introduced between 2010-12 see an additional 2.5-4 candidates; and GPs where Jeevika started between 2012-15 see an additional 1-3 candidates.

DISCUSSION

The paper shows that Jeevika politically empowers extremely marginalised Dalit women. By providing financial support, expanding women's networks and creating a space to build leadership and community organising skills, SHGs reduce barriers for SC women. However, the fact that this empowerment occurs only in places reserved for SCs points to the fact that caste structures are hard to overturn. Moreover, the absence of impacts on women from other marginalised caste groups – like EBCs – suggests that Jeevika could do more to focus on all disadvantaged women groups.

1 Hoffmann, V., Rao, V., Surendra, V., & Datta, U. (2021). Relief from usury: Impact of a selfhelp group lending program in rural india. *Journal of Development Economics*, 148, 102567.