



Building Bridges: Collaborative Insights to Strengthen Gender Approaches in Developmental Work

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Introduction

The German Federal Government, committed to fostering sustainable development, has prioritised a Feminist Foreign and Development Policy that emphasises the intersectionality of factors contributing to and amplifying gender discrimination. This policy establishes a framework for advancing gender equality and eliminating discrimination in society.

On behalf of the German Federal Government, the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH has been working jointly with partners in India for over 60 years. GIZ focuses on promoting sustainable economic, ecological, and social development, with gender equality and the eradication of gender-based disadvantages at the core of its development policy and implementation approach.

In support of these goals, Indo-German development cooperation projects integrate gender-responsive and gender-transformative approaches across their activities. This document aims to capture and compile best practices, innovative approaches, and effective interventions from various sub-projects within the global programme “Sustainability and Value Added in Agricultural Supply Chains”(AgriChains).

The AgriChains programme is part of the Special Initiative “Transformation of Agricultural and Food Systems” (SI AGER). On behalf of the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), the programme promotes the sustainability of selected agricultural supply chains in 25 countries. In India, it is implemented by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH in close cooperation with the Ministry of Textiles and Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers’ Welfare. The formalisation of cooperation with the Ministry of Commerce and Industry is also in-process.

In addition to the government, the project collaborates with multiple partners to enhance sustainable production and strengthen processing operations for cotton, tea and spices. These partners include global sustainability standards, international and national companies, and accredited research institutions from both Germany and India, along with other relevant stakeholders.

The insights shared in the document are intended to inspire cross-learning, facilitate contextualisation, and replication-cum-scaling up. It also aims to provide a basis for generating innovative ideas and formulating strategies to further strengthen gender-transformative approaches in developmental work.



Cultivating Change: Empowering Women in Tea and Spice Communities (UN Women)

© UN Women

This initiative champions a gender-transformative approach in the tea and spices sectors, prioritising the health, well-being, and safety of women workers. It equips partners with critical expertise on women's health and workplace safety, particularly in plantation settings, fostering resilient supply chains through improved health practices.

By offering trainings to tea and spices workers, local women's groups, and government agencies, the programme aims to build lasting resilience, ensuring preparedness for future disruptions. Through collaborative platforms, it drives multi-stakeholder engagements, designing workshops, and compiling global best practices to advance gender equality and advocate for women's health.

Mahima, a resident of Kishanganj, Rajasthan, is one of the many women impacted by this initiative. A garlic and ginger cultivator in a remote village, Mahima faced persistent fatigue and weakness, which severely affected her quality of life. Due to limited healthcare access in her area, she was unaware that her symptoms were due to anaemia. "Each day felt like a struggle," she recalls. Through the project's community training sessions, Mahima learned about its symptoms, prevention, and available treatments. Motivated by the knowledge gained, she consulted a doctor, who diagnosed her condition and advised dietary adjustments. She began incorporating iron-rich foods and adopted cooking methods that preserve nutrient content, as guided by the training.

Today, Mahima experiences fewer episodes of fatigue and feels more energetic, recognising the interconnectedness of mental and physical health. "Now, I understand the importance of taking care of both aspects," she says. Her experience underscores how such programmes can transform women's lives, enhancing their agency to make informed health choices.

This initiative not only raises health awareness among rural women, but also empowers them to seek healthcare actively. Mahima's journey reflects a shift in traditional gender roles, as she prioritises her well-being and advocates for increased access to healthcare resources within her community.



Women Driving Success in Organic Cotton Farming (bioRe Association)

In the Khargone district of Madhya Pradesh, India's cotton farming landscape is being transformed through a gender-focused sustainable agriculture initiative led by GIZ and the bioRe Association (the social arm of Remei-bioRe). This initiative was a follow-up of the bigger project on organic cotton and market linkages implemented in cooperation with GIZ. The special support on bio-input production addresses key challenges in organic cotton production, such as enhancing access to affordable and quality home-made biological preparations for soil fertility and plant protection, while empowering women farmers who are integral to India's agriculture.

This project brings together 2,500 organic cotton farmers, including 800 women in a community-led effort to improve the supply chain of bio-inputs. With the goal of fostering both ecological and economic sustainability, the project establishes community-owned input production centres on leased land. These centres produce organic inputs and botanical extracts at scale, using locally available resources. In collaboration with FiBL Switzerland, scientifically validated methods ensure consistent quality, supporting healthy crop yields and soil fertility.

What sets this initiative apart is its commitment to women's empowerment as a cornerstone of sustainable agriculture. Recognising the pivotal role of women in farming, the project emphasises women's involvement in training programmes, knowledge-sharing, and leadership roles. Women farmers are active participants in decision-making, many assuming leadership roles within their communities. This shift not only elevates their economic position but also challenges and transforms traditional gender roles in agriculture.

The impact is profound: increased use of biopesticides, improved soil health, and higher crop yields, all fostered by community-driven solutions and a supportive network. By integrating gender empowerment with agricultural practices, the initiative reinforces resilience and sustainability within the farming sector.

This - model serves as a blueprint for sustainable agriculture, showing how combining traditional wisdom, women's leadership, and modern techniques can create prosperous, resilient farming communities. As women step into influential roles, they lead the way towards a sustainable future, making this initiative a powerful testament to the role of gender equity in agricultural progress.



Promoting Gender Equality through Joyful Learning Centres (JLC) in Assam's Tea Estates (Ethical Tea Partnership)

© Ethical Tea Partnership

Community Development Fora (CDF), which are strengthened through the Plantation Community Empowerment Programme (PCEP) jointly by GIZ and the Ethical Tea Partnership (ETP), have pioneered a gender-empowerment model in Assam's tea estates by emphasising gender equity and inclusive governance.

CDF committees, with a minimum of 50% women representation, work collaboratively to implement "estate development plans" that address structural gender inequalities within the tea supply chains. This gender-sensitive governance model promotes worker inclusion in decision-making, establishing fair business practices and supporting sustainability.

One impactful initiative operationalised under the PCEP is the Joyful Learning Centres (JLCs), which directly address educational challenges identified in the 2023 ETP Assam Landscape Study¹, including high dropout rates and gender-based educational barriers. By creating informal education spaces with gender-equitable curricula, the JLCs foster engagement in learning among children of both genders, encouraging girls in particular to return to schooling instead of staying home to perform household duties.

Julie Proja, a mother of two children attending JLC Centre II in New Addabarrie division, Assam, highlights the programme's influence on family dynamics, noting that her children are now disciplined and value hygiene and education, which was not the case earlier. This shift reflects the JLC's role in changing attitudes towards education within tea communities, particularly for young girls, who are often left out of formal schooling.

The JLC initiative trains local youth, selected by CDF, to facilitate inclusive learning experiences through storytelling and music, making education accessible and enjoyable.

With support from the Assam State Education Department, ETP has trained 29 facilitators across 29 JLCs in 20 tea gardens, benefiting around 1,000 children and fostering gender equity in educational opportunities. Recognised as an asset by tea producer companies, ETP and local partners aim to expand this model, building a foundation for more inclusive, gender-transformative education throughout Assam's tea estates.

¹ See Women-in-Assam-Fact-Sheet.pdf at <https://etp-global.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Women-in-Assam-Fact-Sheet.pdf>



Suvarna Chandrashekhar Ambatkar: A Journey Towards Self-Confidence and Community Empowerment (Welthungerhilfe)

Suvarna Chandrashekhar Ambatkar, a 33-year-old farmer from Anji Mothi village in Wardha, Maharashtra, exemplifies the power of gender-transformative approaches in rural communities. With 8 acres of farmland and a large family, Suvarna's journey of empowerment began when she was encouraged by her village's Community Resource Person (CRP) to join a local women's group under a GIZ-Welthungerhilfe initiative called Linking agriculture & nutrition for nutrition security among cotton growers. The project is implemented in Maharashtra and Gujarat with the support of partners including the Welspun Foundation for Health and Knowledge and civil society organisation Swayam Shikshan Prayog

Although initially unfamiliar with such groups, Suvarna's active participation led to her being selected as an ex-secretary, a role that provided her with the opportunity to lead, learn, and connect with other women. Her involvement in Community Learning Forum (CLF) meetings further deepened her understanding of leadership and gender equity.

Suvarna's transformation was not limited to her personal growth. Through training and support from SSP, Krishi Sakhis (farmers and para extension professionals trained in natural farming and soil health management) and the Welspun Foundation, she embraced organic farming practices, reducing chemical fertiliser usage and promoting sustainable agriculture. She applied these methods across three acres of her farm, setting an example of how women in agriculture can take charge of their livelihoods while promoting environmental sustainability.

Beyond her farming success, Suvarna demonstrated leadership in addressing gender-based challenges in her community. At a pivotal moment, she played a crucial role in preventing the early marriage of a 15-year-old girl. By sharing insights on the health risks and social consequences of early marriage, learned through the trainings, Suvarna and her team, with the support of local leaders, convinced the family to prioritise education and delay the marriage.

Suvarna's story highlights the impact of gender mainstreaming and grassroots leadership. Through education, community collaboration, and empowerment, she has become a role model, proving that women's active participation and leadership can drive change in rural India.



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Breaking Ground: Women Leading the Way in Three-Tier Farming Strategies (Development Support Centre)

Kokila Rupsinh Manat, a 45-year-old farmer from Gayvachharda Village in Gujarat's Aravalli district, diversified her family's diet and income through an innovative three-tier farming approach. On just 1470 square feet, this method has enriched her family's nutrition, moving from market-bought staples to fresh, homegrown produce. "Our meals were limited before," Kokila recalls, "but now, with three-tier farming, we enjoy an abundance of vegetables."

Three-tier farming stacks crops vertically at different heights, making optimal use of space and water while enhancing biodiversity, soil health, and resilience to pests. The project, facilitated by the Development Support Centre (DSC), prioritises women farmers. "Our goal was to empower Kokila as a woman farmer and role model for sustainable practices," shared DSC's field leader.

Kokila received training and resources, including seeds for eight vegetable varieties and 60 bamboo sticks to build a creeper shade, to which she contributed INR 2,100. Her husband, initially skeptical, soon saw the benefits as their fields flourished, attracting curious neighbours eager to replicate her success. By May 2023, Kokila's farm yielded 42 kg of cluster beans, 49 kg of long beans, 152 kg of okra, and more, generating an income of over INR 25,400 from surplus sales. Her organic practices, using homemade pesticides like Jivamrutand Panchparni, earned praise for the quality and taste of her produce.

Kokila's success has inspired a wave of adoption among other farmers in her village, fostering community empowerment and resilience. "Seeing Kokila's progress motivated me to try three-tier farming myself," says Babli Shankar Asari, her neighbour.

Kokila's journey underscores the potential of approaches like three-tier farming to promote inclusive, sustainable growth in rural communities, inspiring both women and men to build prosperous futures.



© UN Women

Empowering Women Through Gender-Transformative Health Interventions in Kellyden Tea Garden (UN Women)

Anastasia's journey as a community health worker exemplifies the transformative power of gender-sensitive healthcare approaches. Initially assisting the medical officer in Assam's Kellyden Tea garden with maternal and child health, she embraced the opportunity to become an Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) under India's National Rural Health Mission. Her passion for improving maternal and child health, combined with her role as an ASHA, enabled her to create a lasting impact on her community by promoting safe motherhood and child wellness.

In her role, Anastasia has witnessed the shift from high maternal mortality rates due to preventable pregnancy complications to a more secure health environment. "Women used to die in childbirth because their blood pressure went unchecked," she recalls, highlighting the urgent need for institutional support in the tea gardens. Through her outreach, she provides vital education on safe pregnancy, significantly reducing risks for mothers and children.

Her involvement in UN Women's gender-focused training deepened her commitment to a holistic approach to community health. By learning about women's rights, health laws, and policies, she gained tools to advocate for women's safety and health comprehensively. "Knowing there are laws to protect women has given me a sense of security," she says, reflecting her expanded understanding of structural support for gender equality.

As a first responder during COVID-19, Anastasia became a steadfast advocate for healthcare access, gender equality, and social justice. Her resilience inspired other women to engage in health and safety discussions, fostering a community that values women's rights and well-being.

Today, Anastasia's dedication continues to transform lives. "When I see a healthy child and a smiling mother, my heart fills with gratitude," she shares, embodying the power of gender-transformative approaches to create lasting, positive change.



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Ahilyabai Holkar Mahila Bachat Gat: Transforming Gender Roles through Sustainable Agriculture (Ambuja Cement Foundation)

In Lonar, Maharashtra, the Ahilyabai Holkar Mahila Bachat Gat, a Self-Help Group (SHG) of 11 women, is redefining gender roles and agricultural practices by embracing sustainable bio-input production. Founded in 2020, this SHG has evolved from a financial support platform to a community-driven initiative promoting environmental sustainability and economic autonomy for women.

This transformation was catalysed by the project aiming to foster women's empowerment in agriculture, the project equipped these women with agricultural skills traditionally dominated by men, thus challenging conventional gender roles. Through comprehensive training sessions, the women learned to produce biopesticides like *Dashaparni* and Neem Extract, essential for reducing costs and enhancing crop resilience.

Through these new skills, the SHG produced 370 litres of bio-inputs, selling 310 litres and generating INR 19,600. The remaining 60 litres were used on their own farms, further cutting costs and boosting yields. This shift from dependency to self-sufficiency empowered them as agricultural entrepreneurs, contributing to both family income and community resilience. Their success has inspired two additional SHGs in the village, eager to join in bio-input production, extending sustainable practices and cost savings across Lonar's farming community.

Encouraged by their impact, the SHG members plan to expand into other biopesticides, like *Anda Lemon Sanjivak* and establish an input centre where farmers can access bio-inputs affordably. The SHG's story underscores the potential of agricultural training, where women, once limited to traditional roles, have become active agents of sustainable change.

Ahilyabai Holkar Mahila Bachat Gat exemplifies how equipping women with knowledge and agency in agriculture can foster inclusive community growth, economic independence, and environmental stewardship, proving that gender equity is a key driver of sustainable development.



Nurturing Health, One Garden at a Time: Megha Kelaskar's Story (Welthungerhilfe)

© Kasturi Laxmi Mohit/Unsplash

Megha Dhanaraj Kelaskar, a 33-year-old graduate from Dhanora village in Wardha, Maharashtra, had little knowledge about modern agriculture or nutrition despite managing a five-acre farm with her family. Her journey of transformation began when she was encouraged by her village's Community Resource Person (CRP) to join a local women's group under a GIZ-Welthungerhilfe initiative called *Linking agriculture & nutrition for nutrition security among cotton growers*.

The project being implemented in Maharashtra and Gujarat with the support of partners including the Welspun Foundation for Health and Knowledge and Swayam Shikshan Prayog (SSP).

While initially hesitant, Megha eventually participated actively in group meetings led by SSP trainers, where she learned about breaking the cycle of malnutrition and the importance of diverse food groups. Inspired by the stories shared during training, she decided to establish a Nutri-Garden on her farm. Guided by the trainers, she cultivated organic vegetables like leafy greens, brinjal, cauliflower, and potatoes, using eco-friendly practices such as Neem and *Dashparnisprays* to keep pests away.

This initiative not only improved her family's diet—ensuring they consumed five out of ten essential food groups daily—but also reduced reliance on chemically treated, market-bought produce. Megha's Nutri-Garden became an inspiration for other women in her community. She encouraged 10 women to adopt similar practices, while others started growing vegetables directly in their fields for consumption and sale.

Megha collaborated with local government bodies like Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) and the Health Department, and community leaders like ASHA workers and the Sarpanch, to promote nutrition awareness. Her efforts demonstrated how sustainable farming could improve rural health and livelihoods. Through this programme, Megha has become a beacon of empowerment, driving change in her community by fostering nutrition, sustainability, and leadership.

"Achieving self-confidence through organic farming and changing behaviours around health and cotton farming has transformed my life," Megha reflects.

Notes

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

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