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## Bank Sakhis Enabling Financial and Social Inclusion

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***The above scene is from a Customer Service Point of Munni Kumar at Harpur Bhindi village in Samastipur district of Bihar, where some of the customers were sitting on chairs and waiting for their turn for conducting banking transaction. 'What is so special about this picture?'***

The usual reaction to the picture above would be, it is just a picture of six people sitting on chairs. Our reaction was also similar when Munni Kumari asked us the same question. She explained that we should be using the rural lens to understand how the above picture is a testimony to dissolving gender barriers in her village.

Sitting on a chair along with non-related men is considered as a social taboo for women in her conservative rural setting. Her outlet has a few chairs for customers to sit on; however, when she started operations, her female customers used to stand or sit on the ground, in the presence of any male customer. Now women are breaking this social taboo and sitting down on chairs along with other male customers without any hesitation. These women gradually have become more confident through their frequent exposure to banking services and are not as hesitant as earlier.

Munni Kumari is one of the SHG members of JEEViKA, she joined JEEViKA's bank *sakhi* program. Before joining as bank *sakhi*, Munni used to support her husband in agricultural and animal husbandry activities. She was looking for avenues to increase her household income by either starting some business or taking up a job. JEEViKA started its Digital Financial Service Initiative in 2016 to enable access to doorstep banking for rural women by developing a network of women community agents or banking correspondents known as *Bank*

*Sakhis.* JEEViKA and SIDBI's PSIG program came together for a partnership in early 2017 to promote penetration of alternate banking services for JEEViKA's community members.

JEEViKA onboarded Munni as bank *sakhi* in April 2018 because she was educated, had basic digital literacy skills and the support of her husband to start the work. Munni started the Customer Service Point (CSP) counter in the compound of her house which is easily accessible to everyone in the village. At her counter some basic financial services such as opening of savings account, recurring deposit, fixed deposit, Pradhan Mantri Jeevan Jyoti Bima Yojana, Pradhan Mantri Suraksha Bima Yojana, withdrawal through AePS and ATM card, deposit through ATM card and money transfer facility are available.

Earlier people had to travel at least 6 to 7 Km to transact at nearby ATM, CSP point or bank branch. Many times, they had to return without conducting transactions due to server downtime or cash crunch at CSP point or ATM. The cash-carrying risk for JEEViKA's SHG members and MFI customers has also reduced as they can now transfer funds to SHG account or MFI account from the bank *sakhi* outlet.

People with restricted mobility due to physical conditions such as old age, being physically challenged, or those restricted by social norms such as teenage girls or newly married women are now able to access financial services without being dependent on anyone. In rural settings in Bihar, young girls and women are not allowed to go alone outside their village or go to any male-banking agent point. Around 50 elderly customers, who had to earlier depend on their family members to take them to a bank branch or a nearby CSP point to withdraw pension, can now easily visit Munni's outlet on their own anytime. Munni has been instrumental in the financial inclusion of more first-time women customers who are usually illiterate, semi-literate or still in their teens.



*Women of all age groups conducting transactions at Bank Sakhi outlet*

Out of the total 287 savings account opened by Munni, **80% accounts** are of **first-time users** and **70% accounts** are of **women**. With access to banking facility within the village, not only the ownership but also the usage of bank accounts by women has also increased. This is evident from the high turnout of women customers at Munni's outlet. "Access of remittance money and scholarship fund has become much more convenient for me", said one of the customers of Munni called **Anita Kumari who is studying**.



*Anita operating her own bank account at Bank Sakhi outlet*

Earlier her father used to send remittance to the bank account of a neighbor as Anita couldn't go alone to Tajpur which is about 8-10 km to withdraw funds. Now her father sends money to her bank account and she comes to Munni's outlet to withdraw remittance, her scholarship funds and disability pension of her brother. Anita mentioned that she feels much more confident since she started operating her own bank account.

Earlier men didn't involve women of the household in financial matters as women were not allowed to travel alone to bank branch or ATM to conduct transactions. Due to improved access and ease of transactions for women, men have now started involving their female counterparts in financial matters and household savings.

Men find it easier now to outsource the bank related work to the female counterparts as the agent counter is in the village itself.

*Shankar Prasad works in railways and keeps on travelling around the country for his work. His wife and children stay in Harpur Bhindi village along with his parents. He understands the importance of regular savings for building a savings corpus for the future needs of family. However, due to continuous travel he struggled to visit bank branch for regular savings. He was also unable to outsource the task of regular saving deposits to his wife, as she could not travel alone to bank branch which was 8-10 km away from their village. His wife was also not literate; therefore, she was hesitant to visit bank. When Shankar came home for his Diwali vacations, he came to know about Munni's banking outlet. He got an RD account opened for his wife as she can easily visit Munni's outlet in the village. At Munni's outlet her wife is easily able to make deposit through AePS and doesn't have to fill any forms. Now, every month, his wife, Reena Devi makes a monthly contribution of Rs. 500 in the RD account. With the outsourcing of financial matters to his wife, Shankar mentioned that now his family's savings corpus has increased. Reena feels that her respect has increased as now Shankar involves her in the financial matters and takes her opinion before planning any major expenditure.*

Apart from boosting financial inclusion for women, Munni's bank *sakhi* journey has been instrumental in driving both social and economic inclusion in her village. On the surface, it may seem like just another BC outlet; however, this one is different because she has made it normal for women to do banking in her village. These women not only open accounts but also save, transfer money and enroll into government schemes exhibiting greater confidence.

Men's perceptions are also changing, earlier male customers who were elder to Munni, wouldn't allow her to touch their finger to place it properly on the Aadhaar biometric scanner, considering it to be culturally inappropriate. Now these same male customers ask Munni to help them in placing their finger correctly for biometric authentication. In the last nine months, Munni has become an important role model for women's public engagement and their increased participation in public forums.

When she opened her outlet, people in the village would denigrate her husband for making his wife work and being dependent on his wife's earnings. They were also skeptical about Munni's competence to successfully conduct banking transactions and manage the business. Munni's entrepreneurial journey has been a learning experience for her about her own potential as she started with a commission of Rs.6000 and is now earning around Rs. 24,000 a month. This also broke the myth that women are less enterprising than men. Men have also started adapting to the changing gender dynamics. Some of the families have started encouraging females to work and a few of them have joined JEEViKA as community mobilisers after getting inspired by Munni.

Bank *sakhis* like Munni are gradually becoming the face of rural banking across Bihar. These women entrepreneurs are ushering in a culture of equality where women transcend the boundaries of social and financial exclusion.