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Bihar's 'Mahila Samvad' Campaign : A Strategic Initiative for Women's Empowerment

In a landmark move aimed at bolstering women's empowerment, Hon'ble Chief Minister of Bihar Shri Nitish Kumar launched the 'Mahila Samvad' campaign on Friday, 18th April 2025. This ambitious initiative seeks to connect with over two crore women across the state, informing them about various welfare schemes and creating a platform for direct dialogue between women and government officials.

Unveiling the 'Mahila Samvad' Campaign

Hon'ble CM Shri Nitish Kumar flagged off 600 'Mahila Samvad Jagrukti Vahan' (awareness vehicles) equipped with large television screens. These vehicles are set to traverse all districts, showcasing video films about government initiatives and facilitating real-time interactions, especially in rural and remote areas.

"These vehicles will be travelling to all districts and spread awareness about government welfare schemes for women and facilitate dialogue. The campaign aims to educate, inspire, and connect women with resources and opportunities provided through state-run schemes.

A personal letter from the CM, addressed to the women of Bihar, was also released during the launch, underscoring the government's commitment to addressing women's concerns and aspirations.

Objectives and Structure of the Campaign

The 'Mahila Samvad' campaign is designed with several key objectives:



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- **Education and Awareness:** Inform women about various government welfare schemes available for their socio-economic development.
- **Encouragement of Resource Utilization:** Inspire women to actively utilize public resources, particularly in healthcare, education, livelihood, and social protection.
- **Facilitation of Dialogue:** Create a platform for direct communication between women and government authorities to address grievances and gather suggestions.
- **Policy Feedback:** Collect feedback and recommendations from women to shape future policy decisions and governance practices.

The campaign plans to organize dialogues at approximately 70,000 village organizations across the state, aiming to directly engage with over two crore women. Senior government officials are also participating in these community-level dialogues to address grievances promptly and understand women's perspectives on state interventions. The problems received during the dialogue will be resolved quickly at various levels. It will help the government in further formulating policies and schemes for women.

Integration with Existing Programs

A notable feature of 'Mahila Samvad' is its integration with the government's flagship 'Saat Nischay' programme, which focuses on infrastructure, skill development, and public services. Through direct engagement with women, the campaign seeks to evaluate the on-ground impact of these initiatives and gather community feedback. Officials will compile suggestions and insights gathered during the campaign to inform the next phase of policy development and program delivery. This participatory governance model positions women not only as beneficiaries but as key stakeholders in shaping the state's developmental trajectory.

Comparative Analysis with Other Initiatives

The 'Mahila Samvad' campaign aligns with broader national efforts to empower women but stands out due to its scale and direct engagement strategy. Unlike other programs that may focus solely on disseminating information, this initiative emphasizes two-way communication, ensuring that women's voices are heard and acted upon. Moreover, the campaign's integration with existing schemes like 'Saat Nischay' ensures a holistic approach to development, addressing both immediate needs and long-term empowerment goals.

Challenges and Considerations

While the 'Mahila Samvad' campaign is ambitious, its success will depend on several factors:

- **Effective Implementation:** Ensuring that the dialogues lead to tangible outcomes and that feedback is systematically incorporated into policy decisions.
- **Sustained Engagement:** Maintaining the momentum of the campaign beyond the initial phases to ensure long-term impact.
- **Resource Allocation:** Adequate funding and staffing to support the extensive outreach and follow-up activities.

By fostering direct dialogue, raising awareness about welfare schemes, and integrating feedback into policy-making, the initiative aims to create a more inclusive and responsive governance framework. As the campaign unfolds, its impact on women's socio-economic status and political engagement will be closely watched, potentially serving as a model for other states aiming to enhance women's participation in governance and development. In a concerted effort to empower women and integrate their voices into the state's developmental narrative, Bihar's 'Mahila Samvad' campaign has been actively engaging women across the state since its launch. This initiative aims to foster direct communication between the government and women, ensuring their concerns and aspirations are both heard and addressed.

Progress and Outreach

Over the past month, the 'Mahila Samvad' campaign has made significant strides, covering approximately 40,000 locations in districts such as Araria, Arwal, Sitamarhi, Supaul, West Champaran, Bhojpur, Munger, and Lakhisarai. The campaign's primary objective is to interact with women, understand their issues, and disseminate information about various government welfare schemes designed for their benefit.

Women's Voices and Aspirations

The interactive sessions have provided a platform for women to express their needs and aspirations. In Bhagalpur district, for

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instance, more than 300 'Mahila Samvad Karyakram' (MSK) sessions have been conducted since April 20. Women have utilized these forums to discuss both the benefits they've received from existing welfare schemes and areas where they seek further support.



Nutan Devi from Pirpainty block emphasized the need for a local college offering vocational courses, stating that such an institution would enable women to pursue quality education without the need to travel far. Similarly, Rinku Devi from Rifayatpur panchayat advocated for the establishment of a 'Jeevika Bank' to streamline and regulate the loan process for women engaged in various vocations. Additionally, participants have highlighted the necessity for improved healthcare services, community sanitation facilities, disability allowances, and better infrastructure, including roads and electricity, at the panchayat level. These discussions underscore the multifaceted challenges faced by rural women and their eagerness for comprehensive development.

Government's Response and Initiatives

In response to the feedback garnered from the 'Mahila Samvad' sessions, the state government has initiated several development projects. On May 9, 2025, Chief Minister Nitish Kumar inaugurated and laid the foundation for 107 development projects worth over ₹64 crore in Begusarai district. These projects encompass various sectors, aiming to address the infrastructural and economic needs highlighted by the women during the campaign.

Furthermore, the Chief Minister distributed symbolic cheques amounting to over ₹58.32 crore as bank loans to 23,352 women associated with self-help groups under JEEVIKA. This move is intended to bolster women's economic empowerment by facilitating access to financial resources for entrepreneurial ventures.

Comparative Analysis of the Women's Aspirations

Methodology

Research Objective: The primary objective of the data collection was to:

- Gather real-time, qualitative and quantitative data on the needs, demands, and aspirations of rural women.
- Categorize the data thematically under development indicators such as health, nutrition, education, infrastructure, livelihood, safety, and social security.
- Translate these grassroots insights into a policy-informing evidence base for future programs and planning.

Study Area and Coverage

- Geographical Scope: The initiative was conducted across 17 days in more than 13 districts of Bihar, covering all three cultural regions — Bhojpuri, Mithila, and Magadh.
- Sampling Frame: A purposive sampling technique was used to ensure representation from all categories of villages (remote, flood-prone, tribal, and socio-economically vulnerable panchayats).
 - Total Outreach: Over 10 lakh women were engaged through direct and indirect means, including Samvaad sabhas, focused group discussions (FGDs), and digital outreach.

Participatory Methodology: A blend of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) and Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) tools were used to ensure women not only shared data but participated in analyzing and prioritizing their own needs.

Key tools included:

- Community Mapping (for infrastructure and health access gaps)
- Seasonal Calendars (to discuss employment and migration trends)
- Venn Diagrams (to assess institutional service access and trust)
- Direct Voting/Ranking (to prioritize top 3 development demands)
- Storytelling and Testimonial Sharing (for qualitative insights)

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Data Collection Techniques

A. Structured Group Discussions

- Format: 60–90-minute moderated sessions of Mahila Samvad.
- Participants: Rural Women including SHG members, non-members, adolescent girls, elderly women, and persons with disability.
- Themes covered: Infrastructure, health, education, social protection, livelihood, mobility, safety, and leadership.

B. Digital Data Entry App

- Tool: An MIS based data collection app developed by the BRLPS-IT team.
- Features: Pre-coded responses, thematic tagging, and geo-tagging.
- Purpose: Ensure real-time capture and uploading of demands by community professionals.

C. Testimonials and Case Study Collection

- 3–5 individual stories were captured per block to illustrate the lived experience behind each major demand (e.g., story of a woman without ration card; adolescent dropping out due to lack of school).
- These were digitized for publication in the Samvaad Compendium.

Outcome and Data Highlights (Sample Overview)

- Total Demands Captured: 8,40,000 unique entries
- Districts Covered : 13
- Blocks Covered : 106
- Panchayats Reached : 2150
- Average Participation per Samvaad : 45 women

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Top 5 Demand Categories by Frequency

In a landmark initiative aimed at empowering women and integrating their voices into the state's developmental framework, Bihar's Chief Minister Nitish Kumar launched the 'Mahila Samvad' campaign. This extensive outreach program seeks to engage over two crore women across approximately 70,000 locations in Bihar, facilitating direct dialogue between women and government officials. The campaign's primary objective is to inform women about various welfare schemes and, more importantly, to gather firsthand insights into their needs, challenges, and aspirations.

Over the past month, the 'Mahila Samvad' campaign has traversed numerous districts, including Araria, Arwal, Sitamarhi, Supaul, West Champaran, Bhojpur, Munger, and Lakhisarai. Through interactive sessions, women from diverse backgrounds have articulated their experiences and highlighted areas requiring governmental intervention. Their demands, rooted in daily lived experiences, span various sectors and offer a grassroots blueprint for holistic development. Multifaceted demands voiced by women during the 'Mahila Samvad' sessions, categorizing them into key indicators of rural well-being. Each section provides an analytical perspective on the issues raised, the underlying challenges, and potential pathways for addressing these concerns.

1. Infrastructure & Basic Amenities

Infrastructure is the backbone of development. The absence of robust infrastructure not only impedes economic growth but also affects social well-being. For women, inadequate infrastructure translates to limited mobility, reduced access to healthcare and education, and heightened safety concerns. Investing in infrastructure tailored to women's needs can lead to increased participation in economic activities, improved health outcomes, and enhanced quality of life. Moreover, community-driven

infrastructure projects can foster local employment and ensure that the developments align with the specific needs of the populace.

Challenges and Demands:

- **All-Weather Pucca Roads:** Women emphasized the necessity for durable roads connecting homes to markets, health centers, schools, and especially interior villages. The absence of such infrastructure hampers mobility, access to essential services, and economic opportunities.
- **Solar-Powered Streetlights:** Safety after dark remains a significant concern. Women returning from work or self-help group (SHG) meetings expressed the need for adequate lighting to prevent accidents and deter potential threats.
- **Public Toilets:** The lack of sanitation facilities in market areas, bus stands, and panchayat buildings poses health risks and infringes on women's dignity. Elderly women, in particular, highlighted this as a pressing issue.
- **Drainage Systems:** Overflowing drains during monsoons lead to water logging, breeding grounds for diseases, and damage to property. Cemented drainage systems were proposed as a solution.
- **Safe Drinking Water:** Access to potable water remains inconsistent. Women called for the repair of hand pumps, construction of new water towers, and implementation of piped water systems to ensure a reliable supply.
- **Cleanliness Drives and Waste Disposal:** Accumulation of waste in weekly markets and densely populated wards contributes to unsanitary conditions. Regular cleanliness drives and efficient waste disposal mechanisms were requested.
- **Community Buildings:** Spaces designated for SHG meetings, health camps, and community training sessions are lacking. The construction of community buildings would facilitate these activities and promote communal engagement.

2. Health & Nutrition

Health is a fundamental human right and a critical determinant of development. For women, access to quality healthcare services is essential not only for their well-being but also for the health of their families and communities. The demands articulated underscore systemic gaps in healthcare infrastructure, service delivery, and health education. Addressing these requires a multi-pronged approach: strengthening health systems, ensuring the availability of essential medicines, promoting health literacy, and implementing targeted interventions for vulnerable groups. Furthermore, integrating women's voices into health policy planning can lead to more responsive and effective healthcare services.

Challenges and Demands:

- **Primary Health Centers (PHCs) and Sub-Health Centers (SHCs):** Many blocks lack functional health centers, compelling residents to travel long distances for medical care. The establishment of new PHCs and the revitalization of existing SHCs were advocated.
- **Ambulance Services:** In emergencies, timely medical intervention is crucial. Women requested the availability of ambulance services in every panchayat, along with clear information on how to access them.
- **Medicine Availability:** Stock-outs of essential medicines at PHCs and SHCs compromise healthcare delivery. Ensuring a consistent supply, especially for children and maternal care, was highlighted.
- **Sanitary Pad Distribution:** Menstrual hygiene management remains a challenge due to the inaccessibility and unaffordability of sanitary products. Distribution through Anganwadi centers was proposed to address this gap.
- **Health Awareness Camps:** Preventive healthcare is vital. Camps focusing on maternal nutrition, anemia, tuberculosis, and menstrual hygiene were suggested to educate and empower women.
- **Outreach for Elderly and Disabled Women:** Marginalized groups often face additional barriers to healthcare. Home visits by health professionals were recommended to cater to the needs of elderly and disabled women.

3. Education & Skill Development

Education is widely acknowledged as a catalyst for social change, gender equality, and economic empowerment. The campaign's focus on high schools and vocational centres indicates a shift in rural aspirations—from subsistence to upward mobility. Women no longer see education as a luxury but as a necessity for social security and self-reliance. However, systemic barriers—such as lack of infrastructure, safety concerns, and socio-cultural constraints—continue to obstruct access. Addressing these will require collaborative efforts across departments, civil society engagement, and leveraging digital platforms to expand reach.

Challenges and Demands

High Schools in Underserved Blocks: The absence of secondary education facilities forces students, especially girls, to discontinue their studies. Establishing high schools in these areas would promote higher enrollment and retention rates.

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- **Playgrounds and Open Spaces:** Physical activity is crucial for holistic development. Women emphasized the need for recreational spaces for children to support their physical and mental well-being.
- **Digital Libraries:** Access to digital resources can bridge educational disparities. Setting up digital libraries at the panchayat level, equipped with computers and internet connectivity, was proposed.
- **Career Counseling Centers:** Guidance on career paths can help students make informed decisions. Establishing counseling centers would ensure that rural youth are not left behind their urban counterparts.
- **Vocational Training and Skill Development Centres:** Women expressed the need for local training hubs to enhance employability. These centres could offer courses in tailoring, embroidery, agri-based skills, digital literacy, and other livelihood options suited to regional markets. Particularly for adolescent girls and young women, access to skills training can be a transformative pathway out of poverty and into dignified livelihoods.
- **Scholarships and Support for Higher Education:** Many bright students, especially girls, drop out after secondary school due to financial constraints. The demand for need-based scholarships and mentoring support reflects the community's desire to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty through education.

4. Livelihoods & Financial Inclusion

Women's economic empowerment cannot be achieved in isolation; it needs a thriving ecosystem of credit, capacity, connectivity, and community. The 'Mahila Samvad' campaign has surfaced deep-rooted demand for financial independence through entrepreneurship. In rural Bihar, SHGs have become an institutional platform for women to negotiate their identities and futures. However, many remain stuck at a survival level due to poor market linkages, low working capital, and inadequate support systems. A sector-wide strategy that includes digital tools, producer collectives, partnerships with e-commerce players, and public procurement commitments can exponentially increase income levels and economic resilience.

Challenges and Demands

- **Self-Employment Opportunities and Enterprise Capitalisation :** Members of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) under JEEVIKA demanded more capital infusion for scaling up micro-enterprises—such as stitching units, mushroom cultivation, or pickle making. They seek streamlined access to credit under schemes like NRLM or PMEGP, without bureaucratic delays.
- **Linkage with Marketplaces and E-Commerce Platforms:** While many women are producing quality goods, limited access to markets curtails profitability. They demanded training on branding, pricing, digital payments, and online selling platforms like GeM, ONDC, or Flipkart Samarth.
- **Training on Product Diversification :** Women involved in collective enterprises requested exposure to innovative product ideas and diversification based on local demand. They suggested thematic workshops, buyer-seller meets, and technical exposure visits.
- **Microcredit and Low-Interest Loans :** High interest rates from informal lenders are a major setback. Women demanded easier access to formal credit institutions with transparent terms and capacity-building support to manage finances.

5. Governance & Public Service Delivery

When women are seen as beneficiaries rather than decision-makers, development outcomes are often sub-optimal. What the 'Mahila Samvad' campaign reveals is a robust, bottom-up push for participatory governance. Rural women are not passive recipients but active citizens demanding clarity, access, and voice in public delivery systems. This shift presents an opportunity to institutionalize community-based monitoring, improve last-mile delivery, and create localized feedback loops for continuous improvement in governance.

Challenges and Demands:

- **Transparency in Scheme Benefits :** Women demanded timely and accurate information on schemes like PMAY, Ujjwala, Jal Jeevan Mission and Lakhpati Didi. Many complained about being unaware of application processes or missing out due to irregular Gram Sabha participation.
- **Simplified Grievance Redressal Systems :** Existing complaint mechanisms were described as confusing or inaccessible. Women proposed the creation of single-window facilitation desks at the panchayat level to help with paperwork, application tracking and issue escalation.
- **Social Audits and Community Monitoring :** Women called for greater inclusion in monitoring public services like PDS, MGNREGA, or school mid-day meals. SHGs volunteered to act as vigilance groups to ensure accountability at the local level.
- **Reservation and Representation :** Many asked for more effective participation of women in panchayat governance, beyond mere

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symbolic representation. They demanded leadership training and exposure to roles such as PDS dealer, school management committee member, or panchayat standing committee head.

6. Social Protection & Entitlements

Social protection is the scaffolding that holds vulnerable communities together in times of need. For rural women, these schemes are not just subsidies but social security nets that ensure survival and dignity. However, exclusion errors, opaque processes, and lack of grievance mechanisms weaken the trust in government programs. Digital governance solutions—such as Aadhaar-linked portability, online dashboards, and Jan Soochna portals—must be made more inclusive by ensuring that women can access and use them. Moreover, community champions and SHG volunteers can be trained to act as “social protection navigators.”

Challenges and Demands:

- **Pensions for Elderly, Widows, and Single Women** : In multiple districts, women expressed discontent with delays or irregularities in pension disbursements. They demanded doorstep facilitation for applying and tracking pension benefits.
- **Housing for Marginalised Households** : Many raised concerns over ineligibility or delays under PMAY-G. Women-headed households, persons with disabilities, and families without land title often get excluded due to documentation gaps.
- **Ration Card Inclusion**: Several women from landless or migrant households demanded inclusion under the National Food Security Act (NFSA), pointing to gaps in data and identification.
- **Support During Shocks (Flood, Drought, Migration)**: Communities that face recurrent floods or out-migration demanded disaster relief mechanisms, mobile ration units, and temporary work programmes to manage shocks.

7. Gender-Based Violence, Legal Awareness & Rights

The most transformative aspect of 'Mahila Samvad' is the normalization of discussing safety and gender rights in a public forum. Rural women reclaiming their space in legal and social discourse is a powerful step toward gender justice. However, this must be accompanied by institutional mechanisms like functional women's commissions, SHG-based paralegal groups, and partnerships with legal aid societies. Gender-based violence is not a standalone issue but interconnected with mobility, education, economic autonomy, and representation. Tackling it requires cross-sectoral strategies embedded in local governance systems.

Challenges and Demands:

- **Safety in Public and Private Spaces**: Women voiced fear of harassment while travelling to markets, schools, or even collecting water. They demanded stricter patrolling, gender-sensitive police stations, and fast-track grievance redressal for violence.
- **Legal Literacy Campaigns**: Many women confessed ignorance of basic rights, legal aid provisions, and protection laws such as PWDVA or POSH. They recommended mobile legal clinics, simplified IEC materials, and SHG-based awareness sessions.
- **Domestic Violence and Alcoholism**: Women reported rising cases of domestic abuse, often linked to substance abuse. There was overwhelming support for de-addiction centres and community campaigns against alcohol.
- **Women's Help Desks and Hotlines**: The suggestion to set up easily accessible helpdesks at panchayats or block offices was a recurring theme, along with mobile-based helplines in regional dialects.

Conclusion: Towards a Holistic Development Paradigm in Bihar

The 'Mahila Samvad' campaign is not merely a listening exercise; it is a reimagining of policy-making through the lens of women's lived experiences. It validates the idea that **development must be co-designed with those it intends to serve**. The voices captured from different corners of Bihar signal an urgent demand for dignity, opportunity, safety, and inclusion. From better roads to clean water, from skill training to safety, each demand reflects a deeper aspiration for autonomy and agency. This is a call for a **feminist development paradigm**—one that centers women not just as beneficiaries but as designers of their future.

To make this vision real, the Government of Bihar and allied institutions must now move from dialogue to delivery. Some suggested next steps include:

- Creating **district-wise Mahila Samvad Dashboards** for transparency and tracking of demands.
- Institutionalizing **SHG-based grievance and feedback cells**.
- Linking women's demands to planning instruments like the **Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP)**.
- Partnering with universities, CSOs, and CSR institutions to pilot innovative solutions.

Phul Kunwar's Journey from struggle to Self-Reliance
through Satat Jeevikoparjan Yojana



Phul Kunwar, wife of Late Ravindra Pandey, hails from Sihari village under Tal Panchayat of Haspura Block in Aurangabad district. She is an active member of the Kadam Jeevika Mahila Self-Help Group, which is affiliated with Asha Jeevika Mahila Gram Sangathan (Village Organization) and Bharat Jeevika Mahila Sankul Stariya Sangh (Cluster Level Federation). Phul Kunwar's life is a powerful story of resilience and transformation. A resident of Sihari village in Tal Panchayat under Haspura block of Aurangabad district, Phul Kunwar once struggled daily just to make ends meet. Her family faced acute financial hardship, and even basic needs like children's education were neglected due to lack of money.

Life was an unending battle for survival. Her late husband, Ravindra Pandey, used to work as a daily wage laborer in the village. Given the

village's remote location, getting regular work was a challenge—especially during the rainy season. Whatever little he earned often went towards alcohol. Over time, his addiction worsened, and he even began borrowing money to fuel his habit. His health deteriorated due to excessive drinking. Doctors eventually diagnosed him with liver damage. Despite seeking treatment in Patna, the high cost of medical care forced the family to return home, and sadly, Ravindra Pandey passed away. His sudden death left Phul Kunwar devastated and burdened with the sole responsibility of raising five daughters and two sons. With mounting debts and no one willing to lend her help, she faced one of the darkest periods of her life. She wandered from place to place seeking support but found none.

However, her life took a turn on 13 October 2019, when she was identified by a Community Resource Person (CRP) as a beneficiary for the Satat Jeevikoparjan Yojana (SJY) under JEEVIKA. This scheme was launched by the Hon'ble Chief Minister of Bihar on 5 August 2018, specifically targeting ultra-poor families, including those formerly engaged in the production and sale of traditional liquor or toddy, especially among SC, ST, and other backward communities. The scheme aims to promote sustainable livelihoods, build capacity, and provide financial support to empower marginalized families both socially and economically.

Under SJY, eligible families receive financial assistance ranging from ₹60,000 to ₹2,00,000 to build integrated assets like livestock, small shops, and agricultural activities. Beneficiaries are also linked to essential government services such as ration cards, housing schemes, pensions, and health insurance. Following a detailed micro-plan, Phul Kunwar received ₹53,200 (under SIF, LIF, and LGAF components) to start a small grocery store in her village. This was the beginning of her journey to self-reliance. She put in tremendous effort to run her shop successfully and gradually expanded her offerings to include snacks like fritters and eggs. A year later, she also began goat rearing. Today, she owns ten goats, and between the grocery store and livestock, she earns an average monthly income of ₹9,000 to ₹10,000. This income has brought financial stability to her home.

Phul Kunwar reflects, "If it weren't for the Satat Jeevikoparjan Yojana, I don't know what would have become of me and my children. This support gave me a new lease on life."

Realizing the Power of Self-Reliance:

Phul Kunwar says, "With the support I received under the Satat Jeevikoparjan Yojana, I was able to start a grocery store and goat-rearing. Together, these give me an income of about ₹9,000–₹10,000 every month. Now I am able to manage my household expenses comfortably. Thanks to the scheme, I feel empowered and self-reliant."

Phul Kunwar's journey is not just a success story—it is an inspiring example of how timely support, combined with hard work and determination, can change the course of a life.