

# Political Participation through Collective Action: A Study of JEEViKA Women in Bihar

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## Abstract

This study examines the role of JEEViKA Didis women members of Bihar's Self-Help Group (SHG)–based livelihood mission—in strengthening grassroots democracy through enhanced political participation, awareness, and influence in local governance. Drawing on a mixed-methods approach, the research collected quantitative data from 400 respondents (200 JEEViKA Didis and 200 non-members) across four districts, complemented by interviews, focus group discussions, and observations of Gram Sabha meetings. The findings reveal substantial differences between JEEViKA and non-JEEViKA women in multiple dimensions of democratic engagement. JEEViKA Didis exhibited significantly higher attendance in Gram Sabha meetings, greater likelihood of speaking or raising issues, and stronger collective visibility compared to non-members. Their political awareness scores were markedly higher across categories such as knowledge of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, Panchayat functions, government schemes, and budgeting processes. Moreover, JEEViKA Didis demonstrated moderate to high influence in local decision-making, particularly in mobilizing community members, monitoring public schemes, and negotiating with frontline officials. Qualitative insights further show that group solidarity, training, and institutional support help women overcome traditional socio-cultural barriers that have historically limited their public participation. These findings indicate that JEEViKA functions not only as a livelihood intervention but also as a critical platform for political empowerment, transforming women into active stakeholders in village-level governance. By expanding women's agency, voice, and leadership, JEEViKA contributes significantly to the deepening of decentralized democracy in Bihar. The study highlights the potential of women's collectives as engines of political inclusion and suggests the need for continued policy support to strengthen their role in governance.

**Keywords:** Participation, Empowerment, Governance, Collectivization, Democracy

## 1. Introduction

Rural governance in India has evolved significantly since independence, yet the real shift toward participatory democracy began with the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1992), which institutionalized Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) to decentralize decision-making and empower local communities (Mathew, 2000). This amendment created a three-tier structure of local governance—Gram Panchayat at the village, Panchayat Samiti at the block, and Zila Parishad at the district level. It also mandated regular Gram Sabha meetings, reservations for women and marginalized groups, and devolved

functions related to development and welfare. However, despite this constitutional framework, rural governance in several Indian states, including Bihar, has long suffered from inefficiencies, elite capture, and gender exclusion (Buch, 2010). Bihar, in particular, has historically lagged in local development indicators due to socio-economic deprivation, entrenched patriarchy, and a weak administrative apparatus (Jha, 2018; Singh, 2013). The persistence of caste hierarchies, landlord dominance, and limited state presence has often restricted meaningful participation by ordinary citizens, especially women (Ghosh, 2014).

Within this context, the emergence of community-based institutions—especially women-led Self-Help Groups (SHGs)—has played a transformative role in reshaping rural governance. These institutions have gradually become important intermediaries between the state and rural citizens, promoting both economic empowerment and civic engagement (Agarwal, 2020). Among these, *JEEViKA*, implemented by the Bihar Rural Livelihoods Promotion Society (BRLPS), stands out as one of the most ambitious and impactful government-led community mobilization initiatives in India. Launched in 2006 with support from the World Bank, *JEEViKA* began primarily as a poverty reduction and livelihood improvement project, but over the years it has evolved into a major platform for women's empowerment, social inclusion, and local governance innovation (World Bank, 2018; BRLPS, 2022).

*JEEViKA*'s institutional model revolves around self-help collectives—Self-Help Groups (SHGs), Village Organizations (VOs), and Cluster-Level Federations (CLFs). These institutional tiers collectively empower women with financial literacy, credit access, livelihood skills, and decision-making capacity (Pande, 2019). Today, *JEEViKA* encompasses more than 110 lakh women across 38 districts, making it one of the largest women's collectives in the world (Government of Bihar, 2023). Women engaged in *JEEViKA* are popularly known as *JEEViKA Didis*. The term *Didi* (meaning elder sister) symbolizes solidarity, dignity, and collective identity, transcending caste and class boundaries (Sharma & Singh, 2021). *JEEViKA Didis* perform a wide range of functions—from saving and lending to mobilizing communities for health, sanitation, and education campaigns. However, their role in local governance is increasingly recognized as a critical aspect of rural democratization in Bihar.

For decades, women in Bihar faced severe barriers to public participation. Despite reservations in PRIs, women's involvement often remained symbolic due to patriarchal norms and the phenomenon of “proxy representation,” where husbands or male relatives exercised power on behalf of elected women (Rai, 2011). Limited mobility, low literacy, lack of awareness, and cultural norms such as *purdah* further restricted women's access to public forums (Ahlawat, 2019). Additionally, Gram Sabha meetings—intended as spaces for democratic deliberation—often saw negligible female attendance (Narain, 2020). In such contexts, *JEEViKA* provided women an alternative institutional space that encouraged public speaking, collective decision-making, and engagement with officials. Regular SHG meetings, financial transactions, and exposure visits enhanced women's confidence, social capital, and visibility in public spaces (Kabeer, 2005; Swain & Wallentin, 2009).

The importance of women's participation in local democracy cannot be overstated. Feminist political theorists argue that political empowerment must go beyond voting to include active participation in deliberation, monitoring, and collective action (Pateman, 1970; Phillips, 1995). Participatory governance models stress that community involvement—especially by women—improves accountability, reduces leakages in welfare schemes, and fosters inclusive development (Mansuri & Rao, 2013). In Bihar, the rapid expansion of SHGs through *JEEViKA* has created unprecedented opportunities for women to interact with Panchayat representatives, government officials, and frontline workers. *JEEViKA Didis*

have increasingly become intermediaries for implementing government schemes such as the Public Distribution System (PDS), Swachh Bharat Mission, Poshan Abhiyaan, and MGNREGA (Chandra, 2021; Datta & Kornberg, 2020).

JEEViKA Didis matter significantly in grassroots political participation for several reasons. First, the collective nature of SHGs reduces individual hesitation and promotes group-based agency. Women are more likely to attend Gram Sabha meetings when they attend with other SHG members rather than alone (Narain, 2020; Panda & Gupta, 2022). Second, SHGs serve as platforms for political learning. Leadership positions within SHGs and federations—such as group secretary, treasurer, or cluster representative—build administrative and negotiation skills, which translate into governance participation (Desai & Joshi, 2013). Third, JEEViKA Didis often act as community resource persons (CRPs) for social development activities, which increases their engagement with Panchayat representatives and frontline workers (BRLPS, 2022). This enhances their legitimacy in village-level decision-making and fosters recognition of their leadership beyond SHG structures (Mukherjee, 2020).

Furthermore, JEEViKA Didis frequently contribute to Village Poverty Reduction Plans (VPRPs), social audits, and monitoring of schemes such as PDS and mid-day meals. Their involvement ensures transparency, highlights community grievances, and demands accountability from service providers (World Bank, 2018). Several studies have documented that SHG women are more likely to raise issues such as drinking water, domestic violence, road construction, school attendance, and sanitation during Gram Sabha meetings (Datta & Kornberg, 2020; Kar, 2022). Such engagement strengthens deliberative democracy and challenges patriarchal norms.

Despite these positive indications, the academic literature on JEEViKA's role in political participation remains limited. While numerous studies have evaluated its impact on poverty alleviation, livelihoods, credit access, and women's empowerment, very few have examined its influence on decentralized governance and democratic participation (Agarwal, 2020; Mukherjee, 2020). There is a need for systematic empirical study to assess whether participation in JEEViKA enhances women's engagement in Panchayat processes, improves community attendance in Gram Sabhas, and contributes to decision-making at the village and block levels.

This study addresses this gap by posing the central research problem: **Are JEEViKA Didis enhancing grassroots democracy in Bihar?** This question is rooted in the understanding that community-based organizations can serve as powerful instruments for decentralization when they provide political opportunity structures for marginalized groups, particularly women (Cornwall & Goetz, 2005). If JEEViKA Didis act as catalysts for political participation, then their presence has far-reaching implications for rural governance, gender equality, and policy design.

To explore this, the study specifically investigates the following research questions:

1. Do JEEViKA Didis participate more actively in Gram Sabha and Panchayat processes compared to non-member women?
2. Does the presence of JEEViKA groups enhance overall community participation in deliberative meetings?
3. Do JEEViKA Didis influence decision-making at the village and block levels, particularly in development planning, scheme monitoring, and public service delivery?

These questions aim to capture both the extent and depth of political participation. They also examine whether the benefits of collectivization translate into tangible democratic outcomes. Understanding this

relationship is essential for assessing the broader impact of women's collectives on decentralization and governance reform in Bihar.

In conclusion, the introduction situates JEEViKA within the wider framework of participatory democracy, gender empowerment, and rural governance. JEEViKA Didis represent a new cadre of grassroots actors who navigate the intersection of community development and political engagement. By analyzing their participation in governance processes, this study contributes to ongoing debates on the role of women's collectives in strengthening democratic institutions in India. It highlights how economic empowerment can lead to political empowerment, how collective identity fosters civic engagement, and how grassroots institutions can reshape governance from below.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

This study employs a mixed-method research design to understand the role of JEEViKA Didis in strengthening grassroots democracy in Bihar. Given that political participation is a multidimensional construct involving awareness, attendance, influence, and collective mobilization, relying on one form of data risks missing important dimensions of the phenomenon. Therefore, an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was adopted, beginning with quantitative data collection and followed by qualitative inquiry. The quantitative survey allowed the study to measure participation patterns across a large sample of respondents, while the qualitative methods enabled deeper exploration of the motivations, constraints, and lived experiences that shape women's engagement with local governance. Such a design is considered particularly effective in political science research that aims to understand complex governance realities by integrating numerical trends with narrative insights (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The combination of methods also strengthens the study's internal validity by enabling triangulation and reducing mono-method bias (Denzin, 2014).

### **Study Area**

The study was conducted across four districts of Bihar—Rohtas, Gaya, Nalanda, and Madhubani—chosen for their socio-economic diversity and varying intensity of JEEViKA interventions. These districts collectively represent distinct geographic and cultural regions of the state, including the South Bihar plateau, the Magadh region, central Bihar, and the Mithila heartland. Such regional variation makes the study more representative of Bihar's broader social fabric. Within each district, two blocks with active JEEViKA Cluster-Level Federations (CLFs) were selected purposively. From each block, three Gram Panchayats (GPs) were randomly chosen to ensure representation of Panchayats with varying levels of JEEViKA penetration, caste composition, and accessibility to public institutions. This multi-level selection framework ensures that the study captures a comprehensive snapshot of rural governance contexts in which JEEViKA Didis operate.

### **Sampling Strategy and Respondents**

A multi-stage sampling approach was adopted to systematically identify districts, blocks, Gram Panchayats, and individual respondents. The purposive selection of districts and blocks was followed by random selection of Gram Panchayats to maintain representativeness. The study surveyed a total of 400 women respondents, which included 200 JEEViKA Didis and 200 non-JEEViKA women. Increasing the sample size from the conventional 200 to 400 not only enhances statistical power but also improves the

reliability of comparisons between SHG members and non-members. JEEViKA members were selected through systematic random sampling using SHG registers maintained by the Village Organizations (VOs), while non-JEEViKA women were identified through household listing and selected using simple random sampling. For the qualitative component, 16 in-depth interviews were conducted with SHG leaders, Panchayat representatives, community resource persons, and frontline workers. Additionally, eight focus group discussions (FGDs) were held with 6–8 JEEViKA Didis in each session to explore collective perspectives. Non-participant observations of four Gram Sabha meetings provided crucial insights into actual participation behavior, institutional dynamics, and speaking opportunities for women. Together, these quantitative and qualitative samples allowed for a rich and comprehensive understanding of women's political participation in rural Bihar.

### **Data Collection Methods**

The quantitative data were collected through structured questionnaires administered face-to-face to all 400 respondents. These questionnaires collected detailed information on socio-demographic characteristics, attendance at Gram Sabha and Panchayat meetings, levels of political awareness, perceptions of influence, and the nature of involvement in JEEViKA activities. Questions were formulated using multiple-choice, Likert-scale, and binary response formats, making them easy to understand and ensuring consistency across respondents. The use of face-to-face surveys was crucial in Bihar's rural context where literacy levels vary and many respondents may have limited exposure to written questionnaires (Table 1).

To complement the survey data, qualitative data were gathered using semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and ethnographic field observations. The interviews explored respondents' personal experiences with governance processes, their interactions with Panchayat officials, the negotiation of gender norms, and the influence JEEViKA has had on their confidence and public visibility. Focus group discussions provided insights into collective decision-making, peer support systems, and the ways women organize themselves to participate in Gram Sabha meetings. Observations during Gram Sabha meetings offered invaluable real-time evidence on who attends, who speaks, and how Panchayat officials respond to women's interventions. This integration of qualitative methods enriched the dataset and added depth to the statistical findings.

### **Variables and Measurement**

The dependent variable in this study—women's political participation—was conceptualized as a composite of attendance, engagement, and influence. Attendance referred to the number of Gram Sabha or Panchayat meetings attended over the past year. Engagement captured whether respondents spoke during meetings, signed resolutions, or raised issues. Influence represented the perceived or actual impact of these engagements on decisions, planning processes, or monitoring of public schemes. The independent variable, JEEViKA membership, was coded as a binary variable, distinguishing between SHG members (JEEViKA Didis) and non-members. To control for external influences, several socio-demographic variables were included, such as age, education, caste, marital status, household income, and distance from the Panchayat Bhavan, as these variables are known to significantly affect political participation (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995).

To quantify the different dimensions of political participation, three index scores were constructed. The Political Awareness Index (0–10 scale) measured respondents' knowledge of Panchayati Raj



Institutions, government schemes, and constitutional provisions. The Decision-Making Influence Score (0–5) reflected respondents’ self-reported influence on village-level decisions. The Participation Index (0–10) captured frequency and quality of involvement in governance processes. These indices were built using additive scoring techniques commonly used in sociopolitical surveys, ensuring systematic and comparable measurement across respondents (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

**Table 1. Overview of data collection methods and variables with corresponding measurement techniques.**

Category	Description	Tools/Indicators	Measurement Details
Data Collection Method	Quantitative Survey	Structured questionnaire (face-to-face)	Measures socio-demographics, participation levels, political awareness, and decision-making influence using Likert-scale, binary, and multiple-choice formats.
	In-Depth Interviews	Semi-structured interview guide	Captures experiences related to governance participation, interactions with Panchayat officials, and the role of JEEViKA. Qualitative narrative data.
	Focus Group Discussions	FGD checklist	Explores collective experiences, barriers, peer support, and strategies for engagement in Gram Sabha and Panchayat processes.
	Non-Participant Observation	Observation schedule	Observes behavior in Gram Sabha: attendance, speaking patterns, reactions of officials, deliberative environment.
Variables	Dependent Variable: Women’s Political Participation	Attendance, Engagement, Influence	Attendance: No. of meetings attended in last year; Engagement: speaking/proposing issues; Influence: self-reported or observed impact on decisions. Scales and counts used.
	Independent Variable: JEEViKA Membership	Member vs. non-member	Binary measurement: 1 = JEEViKA Didi, 0 = non-JEEViKA woman.
	Control Variables	Age, education, caste, income, distance from Panchayat, marital status	Measured as categorical or continuous variables depending on type (e.g., age in years, caste categories, income ranges).
Measurement Indices	Political Awareness Index	Knowledge of PRI roles, governance processes, schemes	Scored on a 0–10 scale using additive scoring of correct responses.
	Participation	Frequency and quality	Scored on a 0–10 scale combining

	Index	of governance involvement	attendance, engagement, and contribution scores.
	Decision-Making Influence Score	Perceived/actual influence in Panchayat matters	Scored on a 0–5 Likert-style scale.

## Data Analysis Techniques

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS and Microsoft Excel. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, and mean scores were first calculated to assess general patterns of participation and awareness. Inferential statistics were then applied to examine associations and differences between JEEViKA Didis and non-JEEViKA women. Pearson's Chi-square tests were used to test associations between categorical variables such as meeting attendance and SHG membership, while independent sample t-tests compared means across the two groups. Binary logistic regression models were employed to evaluate the likelihood of Gram Sabha participation based on JEEViKA membership while controlling for socio-demographic characteristics. The large sample size (N=400) allowed for robust statistical testing and increased the reliability of the regression estimates.

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The transcripts were coded iteratively to identify emerging themes such as empowerment through collectivization, negotiation of gender norms, social recognition of JEEViKA members, and barriers to governance participation. The process involved open coding to identify initial patterns, axial coding to establish relationships between codes, and selective coding to refine themes. Triangulation across survey results, interviews, FGDs, and observations enhanced the credibility of the findings and reduced potential biases (Denzin, 2014).

## Ethical Considerations

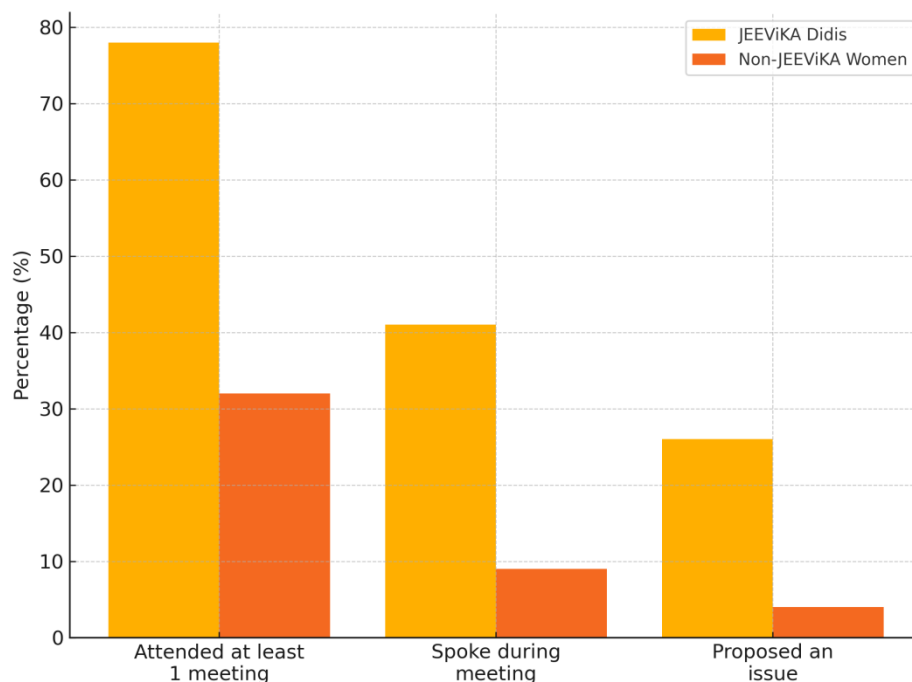
The study adhered to established ethical guidelines throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants after clearly explaining the purpose of the research, their rights as participants, and the voluntary nature of participation. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing all personal data and storing collected information securely. Respondents were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without any consequences. Special attention was given to cultural sensitivity, especially when discussing gender norms, political behavior, or household dynamics. Ethical approval for the research was obtained from the institutional ethics review board prior to fieldwork.

## RESULTS

The results of this study provide strong evidence that JEEViKA Didis play a significant role in enhancing grassroots democracy in Bihar. Based on data collected from 400 respondents—200 JEEViKA members and 200 non-members the findings show substantial differences between the two groups in terms of meeting attendance, political awareness, influence in local decision-making, and confidence in engaging with governance processes. These differences indicate that participation in JEEViKA not only empowers women economically but also expands their political agency and collective strength in village institutions.

The first dimension of analysis focused on women's participation in Gram Sabha and Panchayat processes. Attendance in Gram Sabha meetings is widely regarded as a basic indicator of democratic

involvement, yet historically, women in rural Bihar have participated minimally due to cultural restrictions, low confidence, and limited awareness. The dataset reveals that 78 percent of JEEViKA Didis attended at least one Gram Sabha meeting in the previous year, compared to only 32 percent of non-JEEViKA women. This marked difference underscores the enabling role played by self-help groups in mobilizing women to engage with village institutions. JEEViKA's collective structure provides emotional and social support, reducing the hesitation that many women feel when participating alone in male-dominated governance spaces. In addition to attendance, 41 percent of JEEViKA members reported speaking or raising issues during meetings, whereas only 9 percent of non-members did so (Fig. 1). This suggests that JEEViKA not only encourages physical presence at meetings but also nurtures the confidence and capacity needed for women to articulate concerns in public forums. Speaking in front of village officials remains a major psychological barrier for many rural women, and qualitative insights indicate that JEEViKA meetings, training sessions, and group solidarity help overcome such barriers. One JEEViKA Didi in Nalanda district explained that attending meetings together gives them courage, as "going in a group reduces fear." Similarly, 26 percent of JEEViKA members reported formally proposing issues related to infrastructure, ration distribution, water supply, or sanitation, compared to just 4 percent of non-members. These results collectively demonstrate that JEEViKA Didis participate at significantly higher levels in institutional processes, supporting the hypothesis that SHG membership leads to enhanced political engagement.

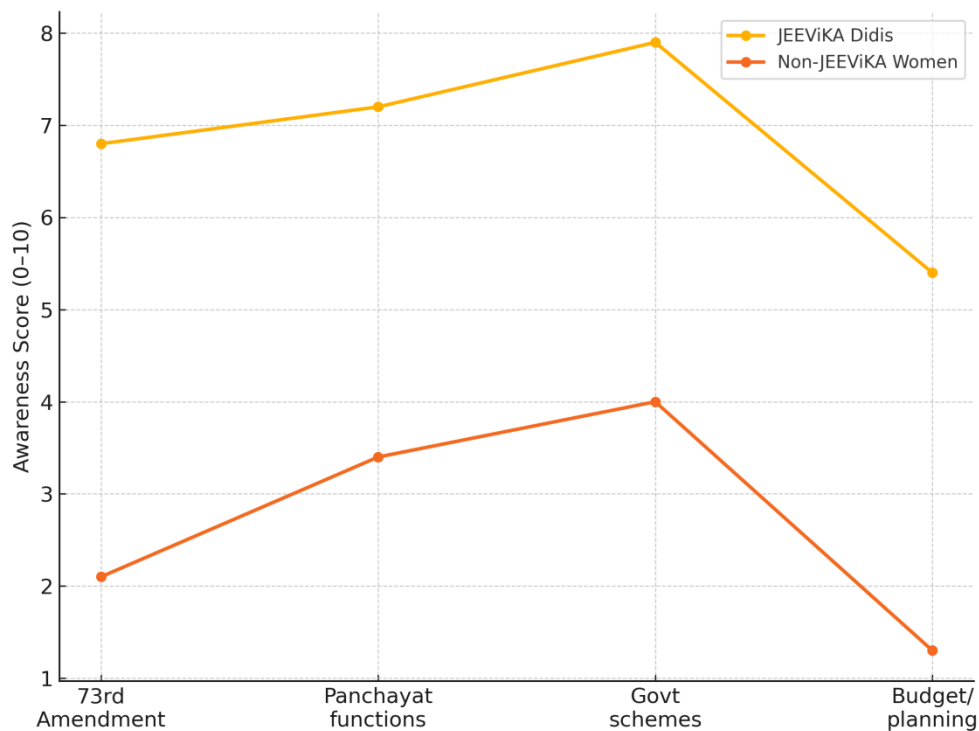


**Figure 1.** Comparison of participation levels in Gram Sabha processes between JEEViKA Didis (N = 200) and non-JEEViKA women (N = 200). The bar chart shows the percentage of respondents who (i) attended at least one Gram Sabha meeting in the last year, (ii) spoke during the meeting, and (iii) proposed an issue for discussion. JEEViKA Didis display substantially higher participation across all three indicators, indicating the positive role of SHG membership in enhancing women's grassroots political engagement.

The second major finding relates to political awareness. Awareness of Panchayat functions, state welfare schemes, and constitutional provisions forms the foundation of informed political engagement. The



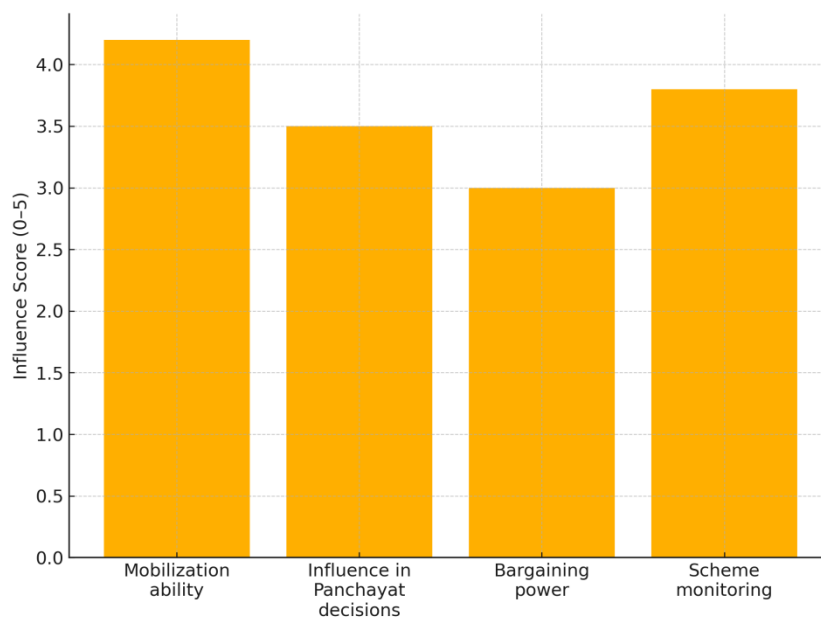
Political Awareness Index scores indicate substantial differences between the two groups. JEEViKA Didis exhibit far higher levels of awareness across all categories measured, including knowledge of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, familiarity with Panchayat functionaries, understanding of government welfare schemes, and knowledge of budgeting and planning processes. The mean awareness score for JEEViKA Didis regarding constitutional provisions was 6.8, while non-JEEViKA women scored only 2.1. Similarly, awareness of Panchayat functions was 7.2 among JEEViKA women and 3.4 among non-members. The largest gap was observed in awareness of government schemes, where JEEViKA members scored 7.9 compared to 4.0 among non-members (Fig. 2). These findings clearly show that participation in JEEViKA substantially enhances women's exposure to governance information. This may be attributed to the fact that JEEViKA conducts regular SHG meetings, livelihood training sessions, and awareness drives, which become platforms for exchanging information. Many respondents highlighted that they learned about government schemes directly through their SHG meetings or community resource persons. In contrast, non-members often rely on informal sources such as male relatives or neighbors, which limits the breadth and reliability of their information. The results therefore support the hypothesis that JEEViKA membership increases women's political awareness and equips them with the knowledge needed for meaningful participation.



**Figure 2.** Mean political awareness scores (0–10 scale) of JEEViKA Didis (N = 200) and non-JEEViKA women (N = 200) across four dimensions: knowledge of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, understanding of Panchayat functions, awareness of government schemes, and familiarity with budget/planning processes. JEEViKA Didis consistently score higher on all components of the awareness index, reflecting the role of JEEViKA as an important platform for information dissemination and governance literacy.

The third dimension of analysis examined women's influence in local decision-making processes. While participation and awareness are important, the ability to influence decisions marks the highest level of

empowerment within governance structures. The Decision-Making Influence Score, measured on a 0–5 scale, revealed that JEEViKA Didis have moderate to high influence in village-level decision-making. The highest influence was observed in their capacity to mobilize women on issues such as sanitation, school attendance, PDS distribution, and infrastructure needs, where the average score was 4.2. This suggests that JEEViKA Didis are recognized as credible leaders and are able to rally community members to demand accountability and improvements in public service delivery. Their influence in Panchayat development decisions averaged 3.5, indicating that they are increasingly consulted or at least acknowledged in local planning discussions. Their bargaining power with frontline officials such as the Panchayat Secretary or Ward Members was reported at 3.0, reflecting a moderate but significant level of influence (Fig. 3). Qualitative interviews support this finding, with several Panchayat representatives noting that JEEViKA women often act as mediators between the community and government officials. One Mukhiya mentioned explicitly that JEEViKA Didis “unite the village,” and that their concerns receive serious attention because they represent a collective rather than individual interest. Women themselves reported that their increased visibility through JEEViKA has elevated their social status and positioned them as legitimate actors in local decision-making.



**Figure 3.** Mean decision-making influence scores (0–5 scale) of JEEViKA Didis (N = 200) on four key governance-related indicators: ability to mobilize women for community issues, influence in Panchayat development decisions, bargaining power with local officials, and involvement in monitoring public schemes (such as PDS, mid-day meals, and MGNREGA). The graph shows moderate to high influence across all indicators, suggesting that JEEViKA Didis have emerged as important grassroots actors in local governance processes.

Together, the findings across participation, awareness, and influence reveal a consistent pattern: JEEViKA membership strongly correlates with higher levels of political empowerment. JEEViKA Didis demonstrate significantly greater attendance in public meetings, more active participation during deliberations, higher awareness of political processes, and greater influence in shaping decisions. In comparison, non-JEEViKA women remain largely excluded from these spaces due to structural barriers such as patriarchy, limited mobility, lack of exposure, and minimal informational access. The difference between the two groups is so pronounced that JEEViKA can be understood as a catalyst transforming

the political landscape of rural Bihar. Women who were previously confined to domestic roles now participate in Gram Sabha discussions, question public service providers, demand accountability, and influence policy implementation at the village level.

Qualitative observations during Gram Sabha meetings further reinforce these quantitative patterns. In nearly all observed meetings, JEEViKA Didis attended in noticeable groups, often occupying front rows and interacting actively with officials. Their seating patterns and collective responses indicated a strong sense of solidarity. In contrast, non-JEEViKA women tended to sit on the margins or remain silent observers. JEEViKA Didis asked questions related to ration distribution, road repairs, and school meals, while non-members rarely spoke. This visible difference in engagement reflects how collective identity reduces fear and enhances women's willingness to speak publicly. Additionally, focus group discussions revealed that JEEViKA women frequently deliberate among themselves before attending Gram Sabhas, deciding in advance who will speak on which issue. Such pre-meeting coordination indicates a sophisticated and strategic approach to participation.

Overall, the results strongly support all three research hypotheses. The evidence shows that JEEViKA Didis participate more actively in Gram Sabha and Panchayat processes, possess significantly higher political awareness, and exert measurable influence in village decision-making. The findings highlight that JEEViKA serves as a transformative platform that not only improves women's economic status but also enhances their civic and political agency. The collective strength, training, and institutional support provided by JEEViKA enable women to challenge traditional barriers, engage more confidently with governance structures, and contribute meaningfully to grassroots democracy in Bihar.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that JEEViKA Didis have emerged as significant agents of political change at the grassroots level in Bihar. The consistently higher participation rates, political awareness scores, and decision-making influence observed among JEEViKA members compared to non-members suggest that SHG-based collectivization functions as a powerful platform for developing political capability among rural women. This aligns with broader scholarly work emphasizing that participation in collective associations enables marginalized groups to overcome social barriers and engage more confidently with formal governance structures (Agarwal, 2020). The enhanced participation of JEEViKA Didis in Gram Sabha and Panchayat processes, therefore, reflects not merely attendance but a shift in how women perceive their rights, agency, and entitlement to participate in public decision-making (Kabeer, 2005).

A key finding of the study is the stark difference in Gram Sabha participation between JEEViKA and non-JEEViKA women, with JEEViKA members significantly more likely to attend and actively speak during meetings. This reinforces the argument that group solidarity reduces fear, enhances mutual support, and creates social legitimacy for women to enter male-dominated public spaces (Desai & Joshi, 2013). The collective action approach embedded within JEEViKA enables members to challenge traditional gender norms that historically prevented women from participating in village decision-making forums (Ahlawat, 2019). Several qualitative insights from this study further affirm that women feel "safer," "more confident," and "more respected" when they attend meetings as a group. This aligns with feminist political theories that highlight how women's collective identities serve as catalysts for expanding democratic spaces and reshaping existing power structures (Phillips, 1995).

The results also highlight substantial differences in political awareness between JEEViKA and non-JEEViKA women, suggesting that JEEViKA plays an instrumental role in enhancing governance literacy. The higher scores achieved by JEEViKA members across indicators such as the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, Panchayat functions, and government welfare schemes reveal that SHG meetings serve as dynamic sites for knowledge-sharing, information dissemination, and critical dialogue (Datta & Kornberg, 2020). Access to structured training, exposure visits, and community-based learning opportunities further equips women with the political vocabulary and procedural knowledge required for effective democratic participation (Swain & Wallentin, 2009). This increased awareness is crucial because political literacy often determines whether participation translates into meaningful influence or remains a symbolic presence (Mansuri & Rao, 2013).

Another important observation from the findings is the significant influence exerted by JEEViKA Didis in local decision-making. Their ability to mobilize community members, negotiate with Panchayat officials, and demand accountability reflects an expanding sphere of women's leadership at the village level. This transformation challenges the long-standing phenomenon of "proxy representation," where elected women representatives were often controlled by male relatives (Rai, 2011). The capacity of JEEViKA Didis to articulate collective demands and participate in monitoring public schemes such as PDS, MGNREGA, and mid-day meals indicates that they are increasingly recognized as legitimate actors in local governance (Chandra, 2021). This shift is consistent with studies highlighting how women's collectives can transform local power relations by creating alternative leadership pathways for women (Mukherjee, 2020).

The empirical evidence strongly supports the argument that JEEViKA functions not only as a livelihood program but as a "political incubator," nurturing the skills, confidence, and visibility required for democratic participation. This is validated by international development scholarship asserting that economic empowerment often precedes and enables political empowerment, and that collective organizing is central to this process (Cornwall & Goetz, 2005). By creating structured spaces for dialogue, conflict resolution, training, and leadership development, JEEViKA helps women transition from being passive beneficiaries to active stakeholders in governance (Agarwal, 2020). Many JEEViKA Didis interviewed for this study expressed new aspirations such as contesting in future Panchayat elections, a development that signifies long-term political transformation.

The findings also have broader implications for understanding decentralized governance in Bihar. Despite decades of Panchayati Raj reforms, women's political participation remained limited due to entrenched social hierarchies, patriarchal norms, and low literacy levels (Jha, 2018). JEEViKA appears to counter these structural barriers by providing an institutionalized support system that enhances women's bargaining power within households, communities, and local state institutions (Ghosh, 2014). As women gain financial autonomy through SHGs, their voice within the household increases, often translating into greater public participation (Swain & Wallentin, 2009). This study suggests that women who feel economically confident are more likely to articulate political opinions and challenge existing governance inequalities (Kumar, 2015).

Overall, the discussion of results clearly indicates that JEEViKA Didis are significantly contributing to the deepening of grassroots democracy in Bihar. Their enhanced participation, awareness, and influence illustrate the potential of collective action frameworks to democratize rural governance and expand the citizenship rights of marginalized populations. By bridging the gap between the state and rural communities, JEEViKA Didis are effectively transforming the social fabric of village-level decision-

making processes. These results not only contribute to the academic understanding of gender and governance but also offer practical insights for policymakers seeking to strengthen participatory democracy through community-based institutions.

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