

EQUIDIVERSITY FOUNDATION
Promoting Equity in Diversity

"Ensuring Access to Rights and Entitlements for Marginalized Households through Collectivization and Improving their Participation in Local Governance, across 5 Gram Panchayats of Nanoor and Labhpur blocks, Birbhum district, West Bengal"

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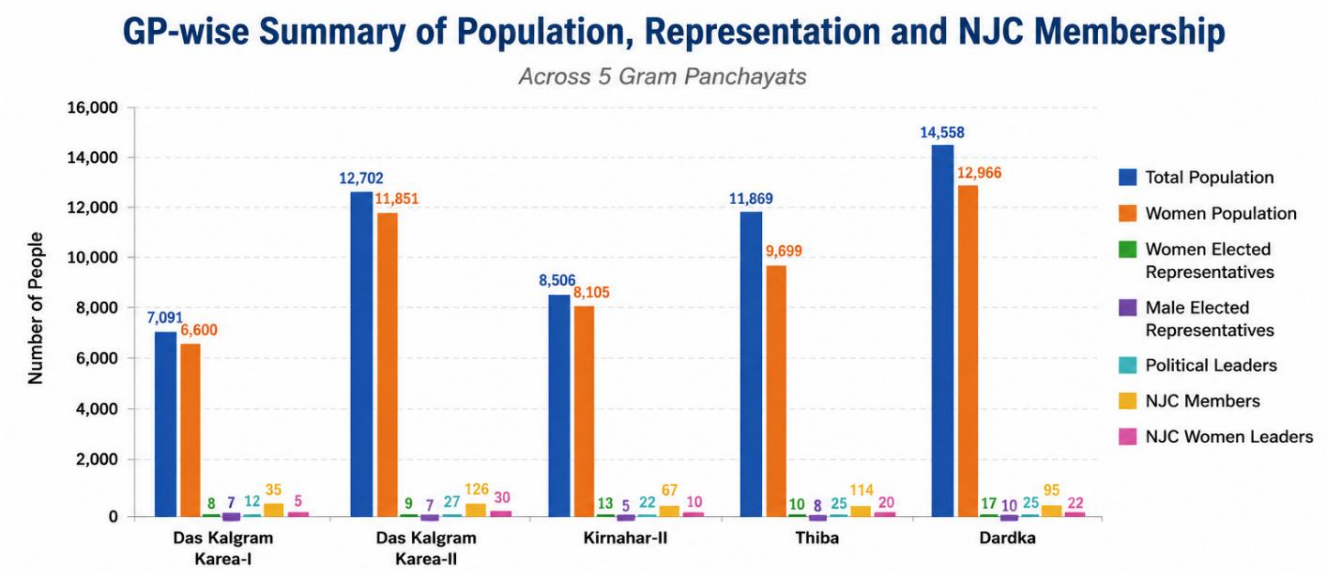
"Ensuring Access to Rights and Entitlements for Marginalized Households through Collectivization and Improving their Participation in Local Governance, across 5 Gram Panchayats of Nanoor and Labhpur blocks, Birbhum district, West Bengal"

Introduction

Equidiversity Foundation (EDF), with support from Azim Premji Philanthropic Initiatives (APF), is implementing a three-year programme across five Gram Panchayats in Nanoor and Labhpur Blocks of Birbhum district, West Bengal. The programme seeks to strengthen access to rights and entitlements for marginalized households by building women's collective leadership, increasing participation in local governance, strengthening community institutions, and improving responsiveness of local systems to the needs of women and children.

This programme is founded on the belief that sustainable access to rights and entitlements requires more than awareness—it requires organised communities, empowered local leadership and responsive governance systems. By strengthening Nari Jagaran Committees, building the leadership of Women Elected Representatives, and fostering collaboration with Panchayats and frontline institutions, the programme seeks to enable marginalized households, particularly women and children, to actively influence local decision-making, access public services and entitlements, and hold institutions accountable. The ultimate goal is to create more inclusive, gender-responsive and accountable local governance across five Gram Panchayats in Nanoor and Labhpur Blocks of Birbhum district.

The programme area covers five Gram Panchayats with a combined population of 54,726 people and works directly with 57 Women Elected Representatives (WERs) across GP and Panchayat Samities, 437 members of Nari Jagaran Committees (NJCs), community leaders, Panchayat functionaries, and local institutions. Given below is the landscape of operation.



Gram Panchayat	Total Population	Women Population	Women Elected Representatives	Male Elected Representatives	Political Leaders	NJC Members	NJC Women Leaders
Das Kalgram Karea-I	7,091	6,600	8	7	12	35	5
Das Kalgram Karea-II	12,702	11,851	9	7	27	126	30
Kirnahar-II	8,506	8,105	13	5	22	67	10
Thiba	11,869	9,699	10	8	25	114	20
Dardka	14,558	12,966	17	10	25	95	22
Total	**54,726**	**49,221**	**57**	**37**	**111**	**437**	**87**

Note: NJC – Nari Jagaran Committee | WER – Women Elected Representatives

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Progress Towards Three-Year Programme Outcomes

Strategic Outcome	3-Year Target	Year 1 Progress	Current Status
Women Elected Representatives (WERs) Strengthened	40 WERs	34 WERs strengthened	Ongoing. The remaining WERs will continue to receive mentoring and leadership development over the next two years.
NJC Women Leaders Developed	150 women leaders	87 women identified and undergoing structured leadership development	Leadership development is ongoing through mentoring, governance engagement and institutional strengthening.
Households Linked to Rights & Entitlements	1,500 households	Household-level entitlement facilitation yet to commence	Preparatory work has been completed for the rollout of the **GEET App**, including mapping Government of West Bengal schemes, updating entitlement information and translating the platform into Bengali. Household data collection could not commence due to the Assembly Elections and the subsequent revision of state welfare schemes and eligibility criteria. The programme will begin household profiling and entitlement facilitation once the revised systems are stabilised.
Gram Sansads Activated	68 Gram Sansads (across the five Gram Panchayats)	34 Gram Sansads activated, covering 100% of the constituencies represented by Women Elected Representatives	The programme prioritised activation of all Gram Sansads represented by WERs during the first phase. Expansion to the remaining Gram Sansads will continue progressively over the project period.
Nari Jagaran Committees (NJCs) Established	5 NJCs	5 NJCs established and institutionally strengthened	Completed. The focus now is on strengthening leadership, governance systems and long-term sustainability of the committees.
Cases Supported by NJCs	150 cases	48 cases supported (40 domestic violence and 8 child marriage cases)	Community-based casework systems are operational. Case identification, referral and survivor support are continuing to expand through the NJC Casework Core Committees.
Community Awareness Programmes	34 programs	26 awareness programmes conducted	Remaining awareness programmes will be conducted during Year 2 alongside expansion into additional Gram Sansads.
Community Priorities Advanced through GPDP	150 community priorities	108 priorities identified and submitted through Para Baithaks and Gram Sansad processes	Community priorities have been submitted to Gram Panchayats. Their inclusion in the GPDP is currently under review following the Assembly Elections and the reconstitution of local governance processes.

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Overall Reflection

The first year of implementation focused on laying the institutional foundations for long-term systems change. Although women held positions within Panchayats and community institutions, their influence was often constrained by gender norms, political hierarchies, limited confidence, and weak institutional responsiveness. In response, the programme invested in strengthening women's leadership, building Nari Jagaran Committees as community institutions, creating community-based casework systems, and enhancing participation in local governance. It also laid the groundwork for improving access to rights and entitlements through the localisation of the GEET App for West Bengal. While the post-election political transition temporarily delayed work on entitlement facilitation and GPDP approvals, the programme established the relationships, community platforms and institutional mechanisms needed to deepen implementation in the coming years.

Over the course of the year, EDF supported women to move from participation towards influence—strengthening their confidence, expanding collective action, improving engagement with governance systems and building pathways for accessing justice and entitlements.

Story 1

Chaitali Bhattacharya, an elected member of Das Kalgram Karea-I Gram Panchayat and Convenor of the Women, Child and Social Development Standing Committee, initially had limited understanding of her roles and responsibilities as a public representative. Through EDF's leadership and governance trainings, she developed the knowledge and confidence to actively monitor public services and hold frontline institutions accountable.

During a routine visit to the Brahmandihi Anganwadi Centre, Chaitali observed unhygienic cooking practices and poor maintenance of the kitchen and utensils used for preparing meals for children. She immediately raised these concerns with the Anganwadi Worker, emphasizing the importance of maintaining hygiene standards for children's health and nutrition. During the visit, she also learned that a damaged culvert near the centre had remained unrepaired for a long time despite repeated requests. Chaitali took up the issue with the Gram Panchayat, resulting in action to address the problem.

Reflecting on her journey, Chaitali shared, "Before EDF started working in our Gram Panchayat, I did not fully understand my responsibilities as an elected representative. Today, I know my role, I actively perform it, and I find immense satisfaction in being able to improve services for my community."

Her story illustrates how strengthening the capacities of women elected representatives can translate into improved oversight, better service delivery and greater accountability of local institutions.

Strengthening Women's Leadership in Governance

At the start of the programme, many elected women representatives described their role as largely symbolic. Although they held elected positions, decisions were often influenced by male political leaders or family members. Several women lacked confidence in speaking during meetings, understanding budgets, engaging with service providers or influencing local planning processes.

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EDF worked with 34 Women Elected Representatives across five Gram Panchayats through structured capacity building, mentoring and handholding support. Twenty handholding meetings were organized with 34 women representatives focusing on gender, governance, service monitoring, GPDP planning, gender-responsive budgeting, public speaking and leadership.

A significant shift occurred in how women began viewing their role. Instead of seeing themselves solely as elected members, many started understanding themselves as accountable leaders responsible for ensuring quality services for women and children.

This change became visible through their engagement with frontline institutions. Twenty-one WERs regularly participated in visits to ICDS centres, primary schools, Shishu Shiksha Kendras, and Village Level Child Protection Committee (VLCPC) meetings to assess the quality and accessibility of services for women and children. Through these engagements, they identified critical service gaps, including irregular mothers' meetings, inadequate infrastructure such as the absence of cooking sheds, broken tube wells, irregular attendance of children, lack of learning materials, and cases of severe malnutrition among children. Many of these issues had previously remained invisible to the women representatives themselves before they received training and mentoring through the programme.

Armed with new knowledge and confidence, WERs increasingly began raising these concerns in Fourth Saturday Meetings and Gram Panchayat forums, advocating for corrective action and improved service delivery. This marked a shift from passive participation to active oversight and accountability.

Three WERs also are emerging as regular and influential members of Village Level Child Protection Committees (VLCPCs). Beyond attending meetings, they played a proactive role in child marriage prevention efforts by organising awareness campaigns and rallies, mobilising adolescents into local groups, identifying girls at risk of child marriage, and conducting household visits to engage parents and caregivers. Through these efforts, WERs have begun positioning themselves as visible champions for children's rights and gender-responsive governance within their communities.

Women representatives increasingly raised these concerns during Panchayat meetings and Fourth Saturday review meetings, creating new channels of accountability between communities and service providers. Over the reporting period, 45 Fourth Saturday Meetings were held across five Gram Panchayats, bringing together 257 frontline health and service providers. A significant outcome of the programme was the emergence of Women Elected Representatives (WERs) as active monitors of public services and child protection systems.

Over the reporting period, EDF worked with 34 Women Elected Representatives (WERs) across five Gram Panchayats to strengthen their role in participatory planning and local governance. A notable shift was observed in women's confidence and visibility within public decision-making spaces. Twelve WERs spoke publicly during Gram Sansad meetings—an important personal and political milestone for many who had previously remained silent in such forums.

Twenty-three WERs took leadership in organising 108 Para Baithaks ahead of Gram Sansad meetings, with active participation from 72 Nari Jagaran Committee members. These consultations engaged 3,456 women and 864 adolescents, creating opportunities for communities to articulate their priorities and influence local development planning.

Through these processes, women successfully advocated for gender-responsive priorities that were incorporated into 23 Gram Sansad discussions and GPDP planning processes. Key demands included safer public spaces through street lighting and civic volunteers, changing rooms near bathing ghats, breastfeeding rooms, women's toilets, drinking water facilities, livelihood and legal literacy training, sports infrastructure for girls, smart classrooms, and sanitary napkin vending machines in secondary schools were raised in 108 neighbourhood plans involving women and youth.

These efforts demonstrate how women representatives are increasingly moving beyond participation to actively shaping local development agendas and ensuring that women's and girls' needs are reflected in governance processes.

Despite these gains, women representatives continue to face considerable challenges. Political leaders often attempt to control decision-making processes, Panchayat staff sometimes dismiss women with lower educational backgrounds, and meeting schedules are rarely designed around women's care responsibilities. Nevertheless, the year demonstrated that sustained mentoring and collective support can help women move from symbolic representation towards substantive participation.

Making Local Planning More Gender Responsive

A core objective of the programme is ensuring that local planning reflects the lived realities and priorities of women.

Historically, many development plans have been prepared with limited consultation with women and adolescents. As a result, everyday concerns relating to safety, mobility, sanitation and care work often remain invisible within formal planning processes.

To address this gap, EDF supported women representatives and Nari Jagaran Committees to organise extensive consultations before Gram Sansad meetings.

During the year, 108 Para Baithaks were organized across the five Gram Panchayats. These meetings brought together 3,456 women and 864 adolescents to discuss local priorities and formulate recommendations for Gram Panchayat Development Plans.

The growing legitimacy and influence of Nari Jagaran Committees was reflected in the inclusion of 63 NJC members in Gram Panchayat Facilitation Teams (GPFTs). Through active participation in Para Baithaks and Gram Sansad meetings, women moved beyond being beneficiaries of development programmes to becoming agenda-setters within local governance processes. By consistently raising issues related to women's rights, safety and wellbeing, they helped shape local priorities and influence resource allocation. This contributed to greater investments in women- and child-friendly infrastructure and services, including initiatives aimed at creating safer and more inclusive public spaces.

The priorities that emerged reflected women's lived experiences. Women advocated for changing rooms near bathing ghats, improved street lighting, breastfeeding rooms, safe drinking water facilities, public toilets, sanitary napkin vending machines in schools, livelihood training opportunities, civic volunteers for women's safety and improved recreational infrastructure for girls and women.

What is significant is not only that these issues entered planning discussions, but that women themselves led the process of identifying, articulating and advocating for them. Women representatives who had previously remained silent in public meetings began presenting these concerns before community members and Panchayat authorities.

Community Priorities Proposed for the GPDP 2026–27

Development Theme	Key Community Priorities Proposed	No. of Proposals
Child-Friendly Villages	Children's parks, smart classrooms, gym centres, sanitary napkin vending machines, career counselling, sports support, safe drinking water in schools, girls' toilets, mobile libraries, awareness on child marriage, coaching centres, repair of schools and ICDS centres, nutrition gardens, police patrolling near vulnerable areas, playground repairs, kitchen sheds	**21**
Women-Friendly Villages	Breastfeeding rooms, awareness programmes on domestic violence and women's rights, livelihood training, livelihood support for women-headed households, community toilets, women's meeting spaces, bathing ghats with changing rooms, street and solar lighting, annual sports events, repair of solar lights	**12**
Water-Secure Villages	Drinking water pipelines, tube wells, rainwater harvesting systems, solar-powered submersible pumps	**5**
Clean and Green Villages	Waste bins, roadside social forestry, covered drainage systems, solid and liquid waste management	**4**
Social Justice and Social Protection	Disability support, disability identification camps, SC/ST/OBC certification camps, Women and Child Sabha meetings	**4**
Village Infrastructure	Upgradation of roads connecting schools, ICDS centres and health facilities	**1 major programme (88 road links)**

Although the proposals are currently under review following the Assembly Elections and the reconstitution of local governance processes, the bottom-up planning process has strengthened community ownership and established an evidence-based agenda that will continue to guide engagement with Gram Panchayats during the next phase of the programme.

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Strengthening Nari Jagaran Committees as Community Institutions

Over the past year, the Nari Jagaran Committees evolved from community groups into increasingly organized and influential community institutions.

Story 2

Mallika Bagdi's life was shaped by poverty, early marriage, domestic violence and economic hardship. Despite these challenges, she pursued education through open schooling, completed tailoring training and gradually established a livelihood to support her daughters.

Her involvement with the Nari Jagaran Committee introduced her to a collective platform where she could channel her own experiences into supporting other women. Through leadership training and community engagement, she emerged as an active leader and was later elected both as a Panchayat representative and as President of the Nari Jagaran Committee.

Mallika now supports survivors of violence, advocates for women's rights and helps connect vulnerable women to services and opportunities. She describes the Nari Jagaran Committee as the place where she found "power, identity and confidence."

Across five Gram Panchayats, NJC membership reached 437 women, supported by 87 women leaders. A new committee was established in Das Kalgram Karea-I Gram Panchayat with 35 founding members, expanding the programme's reach into a new geography.

EDF invested significantly in leadership development and institutional strengthening. Seventy-five women received gender training, fifty women received training on laws and rights, fifty-two women received training on citizenship and entitlements, and forty-two women received training on organisational development.

"The trainings I received through the Nari Jagaran Committee transformed the way I see myself. Earlier, when my husband became violent, I remained silent because I did not know what to do. Today, I understand my rights, know how to prepare a safety plan, and have the confidence to protect myself. I can challenge the violence, and if necessary, I do not hesitate to call the police and seek help."- Mousumi Das, NJC Member

Rather than functioning only as awareness platforms, NJCs increasingly took responsibility for community mobilization, governance participation, violence response and institutional engagement.

91 Core Committee meetings were organized during the year involving ninety-two women leaders. These meetings became important spaces for reviewing community issues, discussing violence cases, planning awareness campaigns and strengthening committee functioning.

At the grassroots level, NJCs organized 248 village meetings attended by 397 women. These meetings facilitated discussion on gender equality, women's rights, governance participation and violence prevention.

The programme also focused on strengthening democratic governance within NJCs themselves. Over the reporting period, Nari Jagaran Committees (NJCs) took important steps towards strengthening internal democracy, accountability and long-term sustainability. Four NJCs—Drishtikon, Samabyathi, Proyas and Basundhara—organised Annual General Meetings attended by 325 women members. These forums provided opportunities to review progress, strengthen transparency and collectively plan future priorities.

Two NJCs adopted democratic leadership transition processes through elections.

- Eighteen women contested for leadership positions
- and 123 members participated in voting to elect ten new leaders.

The elected representatives subsequently assumed leadership roles through discussions within the Core Committees, creating opportunities for emerging leaders while continuing to benefit from the experience of existing leadership. The remaining committees developed action plans and leadership responsibilities for the coming year, ensuring greater ownership and continuity.

Building Financial Ownership and Sustainability

To strengthen institutional ownership and reduce dependence on external support, NJCs introduced membership fees and monthly contributions. Members contributed a one-time enrolment fee of ₹100 and a monthly contribution of ₹2, creating a locally-owned resource base for committee activities.

During the year, Drishtikon NJC opened its own bank account, joining Samabyathi and Basundhara NJCs, which already maintained independent accounts. Financial transactions are now managed through committee-owned accounts and reviewed annually during General Body Meetings, strengthening transparency and accountability.

Collectively, the NJCs accumulated savings of ₹20,992 during the reporting period. While modest, these resources represent an important shift towards self-reliance and demonstrate women's willingness to invest in and sustain their own institutions.

These developments indicate that NJCs are increasingly becoming sustainable community institutions rather than programme-dependent groups.

Kabita Saha joined the Nari Jagaran Committee while struggling with discrimination within her marital family after the birth of her two daughters. Through the committee, she learned about women's rights and began exploring opportunities for economic independence. This was a crucial step for her.

She enrolled in tailoring training under EDF's Swabhimaan programme and subsequently has established a small income-generating activity. Beyond improving her own financial situation, Kabita has become an advocate for girls' education and empowerment. She has enrolled her daughters in adolescent groups and actively encourages other women to pursue livelihood opportunities.

Responding to Gender-Based Violence Through Collective Action

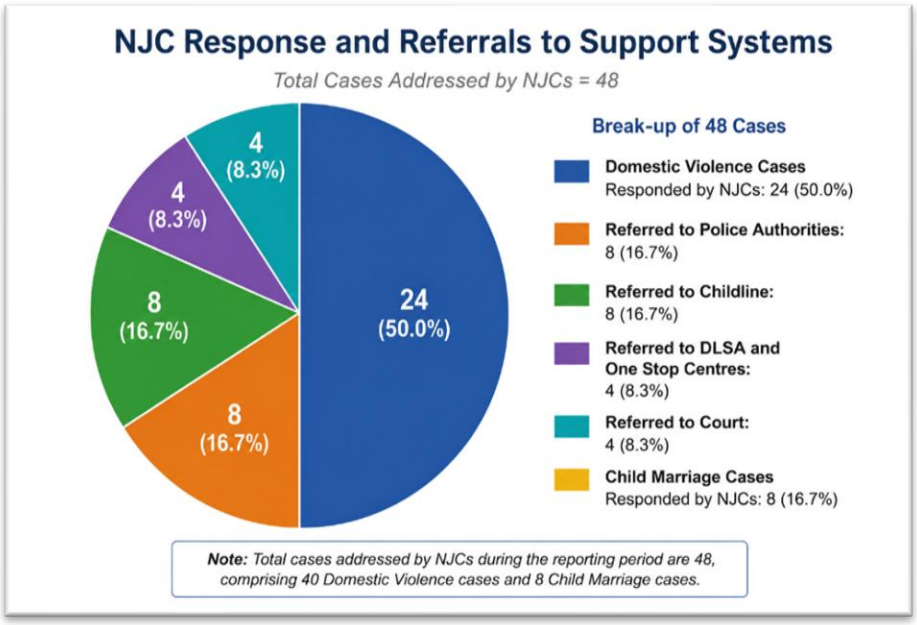
Gender-based violence remains one of the most persistent challenges facing women in the programme area. Yet many survivors continue to face barriers in accessing support, including social stigma, family pressure, institutional insensitivity and political interference.

The programme therefore prioritised building community-based mechanisms for violence prevention and response.

A Case Work Core Committee comprising twelve slowly trained women leaders was established to strengthen case management, referrals and survivor support. Regular orientation sessions enabled committee members to discuss cases, learn legal processes and develop response strategies.

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"For years after my marriage, I accepted violence as a normal part of my life. The trainings and support from the Nari Jagaran Committee gave me the courage to believe that abuse is neither acceptable nor my fault. Today, I speak up when violence occurs, encourage my son to reject violence against women, and have the confidence to seek help from the police whenever necessary. The Committee has taught me that silence is not the answer—knowing our rights and standing together gives us strength."- Rina Khatun, NJC Member



Over the reporting period, NJCs directly responded to 40 cases of domestic violence and 8 cases of child marriage.

- Eight cases were referred to Childline
- twenty-four cases were referred to police authorities
- seven cases were referred to DLSA and One Stop Centres,
- and four cases were referred to court.

NJC leaders also provided direct counselling support in four cases.



Importantly, twenty-six survivors subsequently joined NJCs as members, demonstrating increasing trust in collective support systems.

Story 3

Sanchita Mukherjee from Akupur village in Kirnahar-II Gram Panchayat has been a member of the Nari Jagaran Committee (NJC) for the past three years. Living with her husband and two daughters, while her widowed mother struggled in extreme poverty, Sanchita felt she had nowhere to turn when she experienced domestic violence. For years, she silently endured abuse, believing that she herself was responsible for the violence she faced. Although invited to several NJC trainings, her family repeatedly prevented her from attending.

Recognising her situation, EDF staff made repeated visits to her home, engaging with her husband and mother-in-law to negotiate her participation in the programme. Gradually, Sanchita was able to attend NJC meetings and leadership trainings, which became a turning point in her life.

Reflecting on her journey, Sanchita shared, "The Nari Jagaran Committee gave me a new life. For the first time, I began to value myself as a person. Earlier, whenever I faced violence, I only cried and blamed myself. Today, I no longer believe the abuse is my fault. I speak with confidence, stand up for myself, and respond with reason instead of fear."

Today, Sanchita is a member of the NJC Casework Core Committee. She accompanies survivors to police stations and the District Legal Services Authority (DLSA), provides emotional support, follows up with families, and participates regularly in case review meetings and casework orientations. Her growing confidence and leadership have also transformed attitudes within her own family, who no longer prevent her from engaging in community work.

Quarterly support meetings were organised with survivors to discuss legal rights, mental health, safety planning and case progress. Twenty-seven women participated in these forums.

The year also witnessed important improvements in case documentation. *All five NJCs began maintaining case registers and documenting follow-up actions, helping strengthen accountability and institutional memory.*



To ensure timely, coordinated and survivor-centred responses to gender-based violence, EDF has established a dedicated case management system across its programme locations. A ten-member Casework Team has been constituted, comprising two members from Kolkata, four from Birbhum, two from South 24 Parganas and two from Purulia. The team is supported by a full-time Case Coordinator and a professional Counsellor who provide technical guidance, supervision and psychosocial support.

The Casework Team meets online twice every month, with additional meetings convened for urgent or complex cases. This platform enables coordinated decision-making, peer learning and consistent follow-up across locations.

The team is responsible for:

- *Conducting rapid assessments and facilitating timely referrals to lawyers, the District Legal Services Authority (DLSA), police and other support services.*
- *Reviewing ongoing cases, discussing action plans and monitoring progress.*
- *Reflecting on successful interventions as well as challenging cases to strengthen learning and improve practice.*
- *Maintaining standardized case documentation and records across all programme locations.*
- *Facilitating access to professional counselling through EDF's Kolkata office whenever survivors require psychosocial support.*

This structured case management mechanism has strengthened the quality, consistency and accountability of EDF's response to women experiencing violence while ensuring that survivors receive coordinated legal, psychosocial and institutional support. EDF slowly intends to transfer this rigor and quality to NJCs as well in the coming few years.

Challenges in Case Work

As Nari Jagaran Committees increasingly took on casework responsibilities, several challenges emerged in supporting survivors of violence and accessing justice. Women leaders frequently encountered insensitive responses from police stations and legal aid institutions, with cases often receiving inadequate attention or delayed action. In some instances, survivors and community leaders experienced harassment while pursuing justice.

Case follow-up was further constrained by women's limited mobility and financial resources. Survivors were often prevented by family members from accessing counselling services, participating in support meetings, or seeking external assistance. Deeply entrenched social norms, stigma, and fear of backlash continued to discourage women from reporting violence and accessing support.

NJC caseworkers also faced social hostility, intimidation and political pressure, particularly when supporting survivors whose cases intersected with local political interests. In some instances, women leaders received threats for pursuing cases and advocating for survivors' rights.

These challenges underscore the need to strengthen the next phase of casework by deepening partnerships with police, DLSA, OSCs and child protection systems, while building the skills of community caseworkers in survivor-centred counselling, documentation, safety planning and referral management. Greater investment is also needed in community awareness and family engagement to create safer pathways for survivors to access support and justice.

Building Responsive Institutions and Community Accountability

Women leaders repeatedly highlighted challenges in accessing justice. Many reported dismissive treatment at police stations, delayed responses to complaints and inadequate support from legal aid systems.

In response, EDF facilitated structured engagement between women's groups and institutions.

Thirty NJC leaders participated in interface meetings with Panchayats, Police, DLSA and One Stop Centre representatives. Women directly shared their experiences and concerns regarding institutional responsiveness.

A particularly important initiative was the exposure visit of twenty-five women leaders to Kirnahar Police Station. During the visit, police officials discussed procedures for responding to violence cases, shared contact information and established direct communication channels with community leaders.

WhatsApp-based communication groups and GP-level police contacts were subsequently created to improve responsiveness. Women leaders reported increased confidence in approaching institutions and seeking support when required.

During the reporting period, 26 awareness sessions were conducted across 24 Gram Sansad constituencies in five Gram Panchayats, reaching 2,351 women. The sessions focused on child marriage prevention, women's rights, forms of gender-based violence, and the role of Nari Jagaran Committees as community support and accountability platforms. Significantly, the sessions were facilitated by 83 NJC women leaders and 16 Women Elected Representatives, reflecting increasing confidence, leadership, and community ownership among women leaders. These forums helped expand awareness of rights, strengthen community vigilance against violence, and increase visibility of local support mechanisms for women and girls.

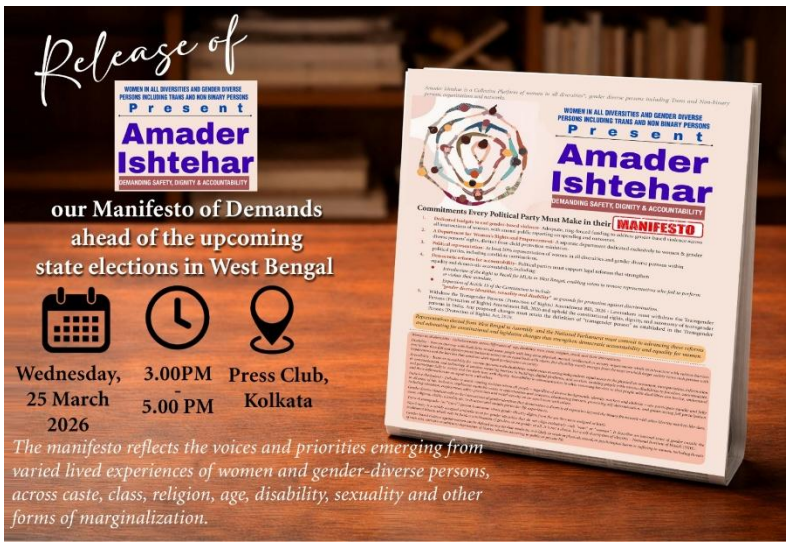
The awareness sessions translated into tangible community outcomes. 42 new women joined the Nari Jagaran Committees, while existing members demonstrated stronger engagement through improved attendance and participation in committee meetings. Increased awareness and trust in the committees also encouraged women to seek support, resulting in 4r new cases of violence against women being reported. Community leaders further observed a declining tendency among families to arrange child marriages, indicating growing awareness of the legal and social consequences of child marriage and increased community vigilance.

The programme also strengthened women's participation in child protection systems. Eighteen NJC members became active members of nine Village Level Child Protection Committees. Together with elected representatives they organised awareness campaigns, identified vulnerable adolescents and engaged families on child marriage prevention.

These developments suggest that women are increasingly viewed as legitimate stakeholders in local governance, child protection and justice systems.

EDF's work to strengthen community accountability extends beyond the village level to active engagement with state and national platforms working on women's rights and child protection. During the reporting period, EDF continued to contribute to the **Aman National Network** on ending violence against women by actively playing a significant role in training lawyers as a partner of the network in collaboration with State Legal Services Authorities in different districts and the **Bhabna Network** on child marriage prevention, enabling field experiences to inform broader policy dialogue and collective advocacy.

A significant milestone during the year was EDF assuming the Secretariat of Maitree, a long-standing platform of women's rights organisations and individual feminist practitioners in West Bengal since 1996. Through this role, EDF facilitated dialogue and collaboration among member organisations and played a key role in developing and releasing ***Amader Ishtehar*** **(Our Manifesto)** ahead of the State Assembly Elections. The manifesto consolidated the voices and priorities of women's organisations across the state and presented a collective agenda on gender equality, violence against women, governance, social protection and women's rights for consideration by all political parties.



This engagement has strengthened EDF's ability to connect grassroots realities with state-level advocacy, ensuring that the experiences of women leaders, survivors of violence and community collectives contribute to wider discussions on policy, governance and institutional accountability.

Engaging Men and Power Holders

EDF recognizes that sustainable gender justice requires shifts not only among women but also among those who hold social and political power.

During the year, twenty-four male elected representatives and political leaders participated in a three-day residential workshop focusing on gender, empathy, leadership and women's safety.

Seven dialogue sessions involving ninety-four family members of women representatives were organised to strengthen support for women's public participation.

In addition, fifteen meetings were conducted with 111 political leaders across the programme area. Discussions focused on women's participation in governance, gender-responsive planning and creating enabling environments for women leaders.

Panchayat staff were also engaged through regular advocacy and dialogue to strengthen cooperation with women representatives and support more inclusive governance processes.

While changes in attitudes remain gradual, women increasingly reported receiving greater respect during meetings and greater recognition of their leadership roles.

Male Allies: Transforming local governance requires men in positions of power to become partners in advancing gender equality and child rights.

Story 4

For Kamal Sekh, a Gram Panchayat member and Convenor of the Agriculture and Animal Resources Standing Committee, the programme provided an opportunity to view governance through the lens of rights and accountability. Through EDF's leadership and governance trainings, he began recognising child protection as a shared community responsibility rather than the sole mandate of government departments.

Today, Kamal plays an active role in strengthening Village Level Child Protection Committees (VLCPCs), ensuring that meetings are held regularly and that issues affecting children are discussed systematically. He has also helped bring concerns related to women and children into Gram Sansad discussions and local development planning.

Reflecting on his experience, Kamal shared:

"The trainings helped me understand that being a public representative is not only about implementing schemes. It is about ensuring that women and children receive their rights and that our Panchayat becomes accountable to the community."

Story 5

As Pradhan of Das Kalgram Karea-I Gram Panchayat, Sanjib Ghoshal viewed EDF's engagement as an opportunity to strengthen the Gram Panchayat's responsiveness to women and children.

Working closely with EDF, he supported the inclusion of women's priorities within the Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP) and facilitated the formation of a Nari Jagaran Committee in his Gram Panchayat. Recognising the importance of institutional legitimacy, he also committed that the new Panchayat building would include a dedicated space for the Nari Jagaran Committee so that women's collective action would have a permanent place within the local governance system.

Speaking about this process, he reflected:

"EDF helped us notice issues that often remain invisible. Small changes in the way institutions function can make a significant difference in protecting people's rights. The Nari Jagaran Committee deserves a permanent place within the Gram Panchayat."

Reflections and Learning

The first year of implementation reinforces an important lesson: meaningful participation requires more than representation.

Women may occupy formal positions within governance structures, but without confidence, collective support, institutional access and enabling social norms, their influence remains limited.

The programme demonstrates that leadership development, collective action and institutional engagement are mutually reinforcing processes. Women representatives became stronger leaders because they were supported by community collectives. Collectives became more effective because they engaged with governance systems. Institutions became more responsive because organised women demanded accountability.

At the same time, persistent challenges—including political control, gender norms, economic insecurity and institutional barriers—highlight the need for continued engagement.

As the programme moves into its second year, EDF will focus on deepening women's leadership, strengthening collective institutions, improving access to justice and entitlements, and expanding pathways for economic empowerment.

The year has laid a strong foundation for building communities where women are not merely beneficiaries of development but active participants in shaping decisions that affect their lives.

Challenges and Emerging Risks

The programme was implemented during a period of significant political transition and uncertainty in West Bengal. While important gains were achieved in strengthening women's leadership, collective action and local governance engagement, several contextual and operational challenges affected implementation.

Political Transition and Leadership Turnover

The most significant challenge emerged from the unprecedented post-election political situation in West Bengal, which resulted in abrupt changes in local leadership structures. Many of the women and men elected representatives, political leaders and governance actors with whom EDF had built relationships over several years are faced with indecision whether they will remain actively engaged in local governance processes or not.

As a result, the programme now faces the task of rebuilding relationships, orienting new leaders and re-establishing institutional partnerships. Frequent leadership changes due to political realignments have also created uncertainty regarding decision-making processes and likely to slow the pace of programme implementation in the coming years.

This changing context raises important questions regarding the continued relevance of certain baseline findings, particularly those related to elected representatives and political leadership. Many of the respondents who participated in the baseline were long-standing partners and leaders with whom EDF had worked extensively. The evolving political landscape may therefore require a review and recalibration of some assumptions that informed the original programme design.

Increasing Political and Social Polarization

The growing political polarization and communal tensions within communities has also affected programme engagement. In some areas, minority women and men have become hesitant to participate openly in

community forums, Nari Jagaran Committees or Gram Panchayat processes. Fear, uncertainty and changing local dynamics have reduced participation in certain locations and made community mobilisation more challenging.

Institutional Instability

Frequent transfers and turnover of Gram Panchayat functionaries created delays in programme implementation. Much of EDF's work relies on building relationships with frontline officials and supporting institutional processes. Repeated staff changes meant that orientation, relationship-building and coordination efforts often had to be restarted, slowing progress and affecting continuity.

Economic Vulnerability of Women Leaders

While Nari Jagaran Committees have successfully strengthened women's collective leadership, many members continue to face significant economic insecurity. Most women are engaged in informal or seasonal labour and often prioritise immediate livelihood needs over participation in collective activities. During peak agricultural periods such as paddy harvesting and processing seasons, attendance in meetings and community activities declined considerably. The discontinuation of MGNREGS is likely to have an impact.

The experience of the year reinforced the importance of linking women's leadership development with livelihood and economic empowerment opportunities. Without greater economic security, sustaining long-term engagement and leadership among marginalised women remains a challenge.

Uncertainty Around Rights and Entitlements

The transition in government has also affected the programme's work on entitlements. As welfare schemes, eligibility criteria and administrative processes undergo revision, both community members and programme staff face uncertainty regarding entitlements and access pathways. Reports from the field indicate that some women who were previously included in beneficiary lists have been excluded or are unsure about their status under revised systems.

This uncertainty has delayed planned work around entitlement facilitation and the introduction of digital tools such as the GEET App. While EDF has participated in orientation meetings and training processes, effective implementation will require greater clarity and stability within the entitlement ecosystem.

Learning and Way Forward

The experience of the year demonstrates that community institutions such as Nari Jagaran Committees provide an important source of continuity during periods of political transition. While elected representatives and local leadership structures may change, organised women's collectives remain rooted within communities and continue to provide support, accountability and leadership.

In the coming year, EDF will focus on rebuilding engagement with newly elected leaders and local institutions, strengthening livelihood pathways for women leaders, revisiting baseline assumptions where necessary, and deepening community-based systems for rights, entitlements and casework support. Particular attention will be given to strengthening women's collectives as stable community institutions capable of sustaining change even within shifting political environments.