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ILLUMINATING THE SHADOWS: ADDRESSING THE LONELINESS OF INDEGENOUS WOMEN SURVIVORS OF WITCH-HUNTING

Pilot Project Area: Jharkhand in Eastern India

BY:

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Krishna Smita Pathak

Krishna, an MPP Year-2 candidate and a Li-Ka Shing Scholar at Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, is dedicated to preventing gender-based violence (GBV) and promoting gender equality. With over 6 years of experience with grassroots non-profits, she brings a participatory and innovative approach to her interventions. Through her brainchild, Surud, a youth-led sports campaign, Krishna has made significant strides in preventing GBV and in indigenous regions of Jharkhand for the past 2 years.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

ABSTRACT

Hi there! While reading this, someone might have texted you on WhatsApp - a friend or family, a colleague, a classmate, a community member, someone from the church, or a social group. Lucky you! You are part of some social group - A community. Imagine if a person had all the material wealth and resources and no one was around them. How would that person feel like? Hypothetically, Imagine how long you can survive if you are alone in this world and there is no other human being. At first, it might sound interesting and even fascinating. Still, in reality, it's near impossible to think of living alone without the companionship of another human being in this 21st-century of digital era. Now, here is a fact - at least a few thousands of women in villages of India live in the society with the community and still face isolation and loneliness. These women are ostracized in the village as they are labelled "Witches" and are invisible to the outer world.

Very recently, Loneliness has been considered an epidemic by many Nations in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. But for centuries, women's loneliness stemming from gender-based violence have been neglected and remain unaddressed in most parts of the World.

In this proposal, we highlight the loneliness of women in the villages of Jharkhand (a state in the eastern part of India) who are survivors of witch-hunting. These women for decades have been ostracized; they do not receive any benefit from government agencies, and their families too bear intergenerational violence and neglect. We conducted field visits and interacted with the survivors , local NGOs, government officials, and relevant community stakeholders. We relied on our primary fieldwork and scientific literature in making this proposal.

We begin by shedding light on their issues through case studies and photo voices in the first part. In conclusion, we propose Switch, a three-step solution aimed at tackling the structural factors that contribute to their loneliness and reintegrating them into the community. Our hope is that this proposal will serve as a small step towards fostering more discussions, debates, and, most importantly, actions to address this otherwise marginalized issue

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INTRODUCTION

When we think about loneliness, different images surface. We may envision an elderly individual seated in solitude within a quiet room, their heart filled with a deep yearning for companionship. Alternatively, the picture may shift to a young person, shattered by a recent breakup or burdened by work stress, seeking solace amidst the bustling atmosphere of a crowded pub, attempting to navigate their feelings of depression and frustration, whether through engaging with others or swiping left and right on a dating application. Furthermore, our contemplation may unveil the image of a vulnerable child, deprived of care and love, feeling adrift and unsure of where to go.

However, what often escapes our attention are the lonely women and girls who have endured some form of gender-based violence (GBV) and are grappling with its profound implications. Even more overlooked are the survivors of witch-hunting, a complex form of violence that encompasses physical assault, murder, burning and the continuous stigmatization and alienation of both survivors and their family members (WHRIN, 2021).

Obtaining comprehensive global-level quantitative data on this issue is challenging due to variation in practices and manifestations across communities and underreporting of cases. However, available information indicates that over the past decade, there have been more than 20,000 accusations of witchcraft, with a higher prevalence among indigenous communities in 60 countries including Spain, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Thailand and India. The victims and survivors often include persons with albinism, older individuals, children and women (United Nations, 2020).

Source: www.alamy.com

In the Indian context, this abhorrent form of violence is predominantly prevalent in states with significant tribal populations (Kumar & Madhura, 2021). Jharkhand, located in the eastern part of India and home to a tribal population of 26.2%, is one such state where this issue is alarmingly widespread. Witch accusations, known as "dayan pratha" in the Adivasi (indigenous) language, typically arise following a personal or familial loss. Such losses may involve the death of a family member or economic setbacks. Any adversity encountered is attributed to the supposed ill intentions or perceived involvement in "black magic" of a particular person, often targeting women (Kelkar & Nathan, 1991).

Once a woman is labeled as a "witch," she is subjected to a series of physical and emotional traumas. Instances of brutal murders have occurred, with women being violently dragged by their hair, choked, and beaten in public. This violence is often justified by traditional healers in the community, known as "ojhas," "bhagats," or "pahans." It is important to note that the Adivasi (indigenous) communities of Jharkhand live in conditions of extreme poverty and face structural exclusion, characterized by limited access to education, employment, and healthcare. Consequently, Adivasi communities often rely on traditional healers for medical assistance or to make sense of misfortunes. When a traditional healer confirms an identified woman as a witch, the impact of labeling and violence intensifies, exacerbating the already challenging circumstances they face.

The violence endured by witch-hunt survivors and their families extends beyond the initial acts of persecution. They face a profound and enduring sense of loneliness that spans generations, deeply influenced by the structural conditions in which they are forced to live. Literature consistently highlights that these survivors and their families are frequently denied access to public resources, community functions, and unjustly stripped of their property, resulting mostly in social exclusion and displacement from their villages in some cases. Further, inadequate attention to their concerns within existing laws, policies, and governance structures compounds their dire situation.

Against this backdrop, our policy proposal aims to address the profound loneliness experienced by Adivasi survivors of witch-hunting and prevent its implications. Traditionally, loneliness has been approached through individualistic perspectives, viewing it as an individual emotional experience of inadequacy and longing. However, our proposal adopts a feminist-sociological approach, recognizing the contribution of structural conditions to the prevalence of loneliness among survivors and offering appropriate solutions. The proposal is divided into two distinct parts.

In the first part, we contextualize the problem by investigating the interplay between socio-cultural factors, political systems (traditional and constitutional), and institutional frameworks and public policies perpetuating loneliness among Adivasi survivors. We draw on a combination of secondary data from existing literature and primary data collected during our two and a half month fieldwork (May-July) in Jharkhand . To prioritize survivor voices and agency, we employ feminist participatory research methodologies, including photo-voice, and case studies, fostering empowerment and solidarity among survivors.

In the second part of the proposal, we redirect our focus towards the solutions. These solutions are developed through the application of a feminist participatory approach, facilitating collaborative design of a theory of change involving relevant stakeholders. Our active engagement encompasses survivors, , community-based organizations, leaders of local self-government institutions, government officials, media and Non-governmental Organizations (NGO) collectively working to design interventions that effectively address the issues identified in the contextualization provided in part one. The solutions have been designed keeping in mind the possibility of pilot testing in Jharkhand. Additionally, we provide a concise summary of how the solutions can be replicated and scaled up in other similar contexts in India and beyond enabling us to make any necessary adjustments or refinements.

CONTEXTUALIZATION OF THE PROBLEM

LONELINESS OF ADIVASI SURVIVORS OF WITCH-HUNT

OVERVIEW OF WITCH-HUNTING IN INDIA: ITS MEANING, PREVALENCE AND CAUSES

In feminist analyses, witch-hunting is recognized as a form of gender-based violence that predominantly targets women. However, it is important to acknowledge that there are instances where entire families, including male members and children, have also been subjected to this type of violence (Chaudhuri, 2013). Defining witch-hunting definitively is challenging due to the variations in practices and manifestations observed across different regions. Nevertheless, in Indian literature on the problem, the term 'witch' is commonly used to describe individuals perceived to possess 'supernatural' or 'occult' powers that can cause or have caused harm to others, mostly neighbors or kins in their own communities (Nathan & Kelkar, 2020). Witch-hunting, therefore, entails the relentless quest to locate and destroy or eradicate such individuals perceived to be witches by community people themselves.

The phenomenon of witch-hunting transcends contemporary times, with its historical and cultural roots stretching back to the 15th century. This practice continues to persist in regions where a significant Adivasi population is present, highlighting its enduring nature (Kumar & Madhura, 2021). However, gathering reliable data on witch-hunt murders and accusations in India poses a significant challenge due to the absence of national legislation specifically addressing this issue. The National Crime Report Bureau (NCRB) records offer some insights, but they only capture cases of murders categorized as 'killings with the motive of witchcraft'. From 2017 to 2021, a total of 393 such cases were reported. The following Table 1 provides an overview of these reported murder cases, shedding light on their prevalence and distribution among states with significant Adivasi populations. However, this data represents only a fraction of the overall reality, as many cases go unreported. Furthermore, registered cases related to witch-hunting accusations are limited to eight states in India: Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Rajasthan, Assam, Maharashtra, and Karnataka (Grover & Patnaik, 2020).

TABLE 1

| States	Tribal Population (%)	Literacy level (%)	Reported cases of killings with the motive of witchcraft					
			2021	2020	2019	2018	2017	Total
Andhra Pradesh	7	67.02	6	4	2	9	2	23
Assam	12.5	72.19	0	0	2	0	3	5
Bihar	1.3	61.80	4	4	15	0	1	24
Chhattisgarh	30.6	70.28	20	16	22	8	6	72
Gujarat	14.8	78.03	2	3	3	4	6	18
Jharkhand	26.2	66.41	3	15	15	18	19	70
Madhya Pradesh	21.1	69.32	18	17	16	10	13	74
Maharashtra	9.4	82.34	0	3	2	0	5	10
Odisha	22.8	72.87	2	14	13	5	9	43
Rajasthan	13.5	61.11	1	1	1	1	2	6
Telangana	9.08	66.46	11	1	1	2	3	18
Uttar Pradesh	0.6	67.68	1	4	9	1	1	16
West Bengal	5.8	76.26	0	0	0	0	0	0
All India	10.45	74.04	68	88	102	62	73	393

Source: Table compiled by authors based on data from National Crime Records Bureau and Census 2011

OVERVIEW OF WITCH-HUNTING IN INDIA: ITS MEANING, PREVALENCE AND CAUSES

On the surface, witch-hunting may appear to stem from traditional and superstitious beliefs. However, a deeper analysis reveals that contemporary witch-hunts in India are driven by structural factors that encompass various socio-economic and institutional elements. Within the realm of sociology and feminist literature, significant emphasis is placed on gendered conflicts as a predominant factor in these incidents. These gendered conflicts are closely intertwined with property disputes, local politics, and epidemics, which further amplify the targeting of women (Chaudhuri, 2013) (Kelkar & Nathan, 1991). Among Adivasi communities, in particular, widows and unmarried single women often find themselves as the prime targets of witchcraft accusations due to their possession of life interests in lands that are desired by their male relatives. Accusing women of practicing witchcraft then becomes a means to dispossess them of their property or any form of perceived "power." (Chaudhuri, 2013).

Additionally, scholars have put forth the argument that contemporary witch-hunts in India can be better understood by examining the social crisis resulting from economic liberalization. According to this line of reasoning, the implementation of economic liberalization policies and contemporary operation of market forces have led to the exploitation and marginalization of already vulnerable communities. This has created a social crisis characterized by heightened competition for resources, which in turn gives rise to increased tensions, jealousy, and scapegoating (Sundar, 2001). By highlighting the role of government bodies and international financial institutions, these scholars assert that the structural causes of witch-hunts extend beyond individual prejudices and cultural beliefs. They argue that these institutions contribute to the social and economic conditions that fuel accusations of witchcraft. This perspective emphasizes the need for a broader understanding of the factors contributing to witch-hunts in India, recognizing the systemic forces at play.

ADIVASI WITCH-HUNTING SURVIVORS AND THE STRUCTURAL LONELINESS

Existing literature examining the relationship between witch-hunting and the experiences of loneliness among survivors is limited. However, feminist research focusing on gender-based violence has established a substantial correlation between the two phenomena, suggesting a potential causative link. Within this scholarly discourse, it is posited that the increased prevalence of violence serves as a potential factor for amplifying the loneliness experienced by survivors in numerous instances. The loneliness endured by these survivors is described in terms of being left alone, subjected to negative labels, and experiencing cumulative loneliness, wherein their isolation exacerbates their vulnerability to further abuse, victimization and deteriorating mental and physical health (Arokach, 2006) (Goodman & Epstein, 2020).

Further, within the framework of feminist discourse, it is also posited that the loneliness experienced by survivors cannot be solely understood at the individual level but should be seen as something 'structurally produced'. This perspective highlights the structural conditions that contribute to the emergence, intensification, and perpetuation of the lonely world experienced by survivors. Several studies have demonstrated that the intensity of loneliness is particularly pronounced among marginalized individuals. Marginalization, inherent to their circumstances, engenders a sense of disconnection and dissociation from society at large, leading to feelings of aloneness and loneliness (Rokach, 2014). This is especially true for survivors, as they have often been let down by the very social and political institutions designed to ensure their protection, including law enforcement, courts, support cells, and other relevant entities (Goodman & Epstein, 2020). Consequently, these encounters of being discredited and dismissed externally ultimately trigger an internal experience of deep-seated loneliness. The narratives of survivors in feminist literature underscore the interconnectedness of external manifestations of being discounted and invalidated, which in turn intensify their feelings of loneliness.

An analysis of the situation of Adivasi survivors of witch-hunting from a similar perspective reveals the stark reality of 'structurally produced' loneliness, influenced by the intersecting dynamics of gender, class, and ethnicity. Till date, no specific laws or national legislations have been enacted to penalize the practice of witch-hunting. This is often justified on the fact that the Indian Penal Code of 1860 already includes provisions for punishing offenses committed during the processes associated with witch-hunting, such as murder and torture. Additionally, law enforcement and maintaining public order are the responsibility of the respective State Governments under the Seventh Schedule of the Indian Constitution. This means that addressing crimes related to witch-hunting and similar forms of violence, including their investigation and prosecution, fall within the jurisdiction of the State Governments, who have the authority to handle such offenses using existing laws and provisions (S, 2021).

As previously mentioned, eight states in India have implemented regional laws addressing the issue of witch-hunting. However, these state-level legislations primarily focus on the punishment aspect rather than providing comprehensive support, rehabilitation, and reintegration measures for survivors. Although some states, such as Assam and Odisha, have included provisions for survivor support, the implementation of these provisions is contingent on the resources and provisions made available by the respective state governments (Mehra & Agrawal, 2016).

Empirical evidence demonstrates that witch-hunting inflicts both immediate and enduring repercussions on its victims and survivors. It encompasses physical violence alongside social consequences such as stigmatization and isolation. The long-term effects of witch-hunting, including forced displacement, expulsion from communities, and limited access to vital resources, contribute to the impoverishment and perpetuation of fear among the survivors. Additionally, survivors' families also experience collateral consequences, encompassing dislocation, property loss, and disruption of livelihood.

To address such consequences, the institutions and stakeholders in closest proximity to the survivors are the Panchayats, which are local self-government bodies operating at the village level and entrusted with the responsibility of governing and resolving various issues within their jurisdiction. Panchayats possess the authority to mediate and settle disputes pertaining to a range of matters, including land, property, community conflicts, and social disputes. However, their effectiveness in resolving cases of witch-hunts becomes questionable due to the deeply ingrained cultural and traditional roots of this practice, and there are numerous instances where the panchayat members themselves have been found assisting the perpetrators of witch-hunting practices (Mehra & Agrawal, 2016).

Moreover, in many Adivasi regions, the Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas Act (PESA),1996 is enacted. This Act grants autonomy to Adivasi communities, allowing them to preserve and adhere to their traditional systems of governance, including customary laws, social and religious practices, and traditional resource management ((PESA Act, 1996), n.d.). While the realization of PESA brings advantages for Adivasis, the emphasis on existing customary law and traditional mechanisms, it also poses challenges in terms of gender dynamics, as the predominance of existing customary law and traditional mechanisms often leads to the marginalization of women's issues within local governance structures, which tend to be male-dominated.

Hence, the combination of state apathy, insufficient legislation and policies, deficiencies in the functioning of local political structures, the impact of cultural norms, and the overall disadvantages faced by Adivasi communities collectively fosters a distressing environment of loneliness for Adivasi women who have endured the atrocities of witch-hunting.

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STRUCTURAL LONELINESS AND ITS IMPLICATIONS THROUGH SURVIVORS' NARRATIVES

In this section, we delve into the narratives of survivors to illuminate their experiences of loneliness. To achieve this, we adopt a Feminist Standpoint Theory approach, which acknowledges power dynamics and underscores the significance of knowledge produced by marginalized groups (Gurung, 2020). We believe that by centering the voices of those directly impacted by witch-hunts, we were able to gain a nuanced understanding of their loneliness and its implications. This understanding has, in turn, informed and influenced the development of policy solutions, which will be discussed in Part 2 of this proposal.

To capture the standpoint of the survivors, we have employed two primary methods: case studies narrated in the first person and photo-voice. These narratives have been gathered from Adivasi survivors residing in various villages in the Ranchi and Khunti districts of Jharkhand. The choice of Jharkhand as a field study site can be justified by two significant reasons.

Firstly, Jharkhand has a disconcerting prevalence of witch-hunting cases, despite the existence of a state law since 2001 and a recently dedicated program known as the Garima Project. The disproportionate occurrence of this pernicious practice within Jharkhand emphasizes the critical necessity to closely investigate and comprehend the experiences of survivors within the specific contextual framework of the region.

Secondly, Jharkhand stands out due to its significant proportion of Adivasi population. It serves as the home to 32 distinct Adivasi communities, including prominent ones such as Oraon, Munda, and Santhal, each with its own distinctive culture and traditional systems of governance. The substantial presence of these Adivasi communities further strengthens the justification for selecting Jharkhand as the research site, as it enables the exploration of the unique perspectives and experiences of Adivasi survivors within the broader socio-cultural landscape of the state.

She, a forgotten verse,
Whispers in the tongue of misty ink,

Bearing witness to years of neglect
To moments of isolation,
By those in her closest orbit.

She, a forsaken verse,
Silently traverses the desolate
terrain
Of her constructed fate,

A victim of unwantedness, callously
taken,
Being under-understood,
Ensnared in the confines of gender,
class and ethnicity.

Her struggles with depression,
Failing health and poverty,
Resound against the backdrop of
governance's broken compass.

In this misty ink lies a potent
defiance,
And an impassioned plea,
For justice, societal reliance, and
enlightened sight.

For she seeks to dismantle the
structures that bind,
To rise above the forlorn realms of
her loneliness.

In unity and solidarity with fellow
inks,
Where they all intertwine,
To ignite a beacon
Of visibility, of light!
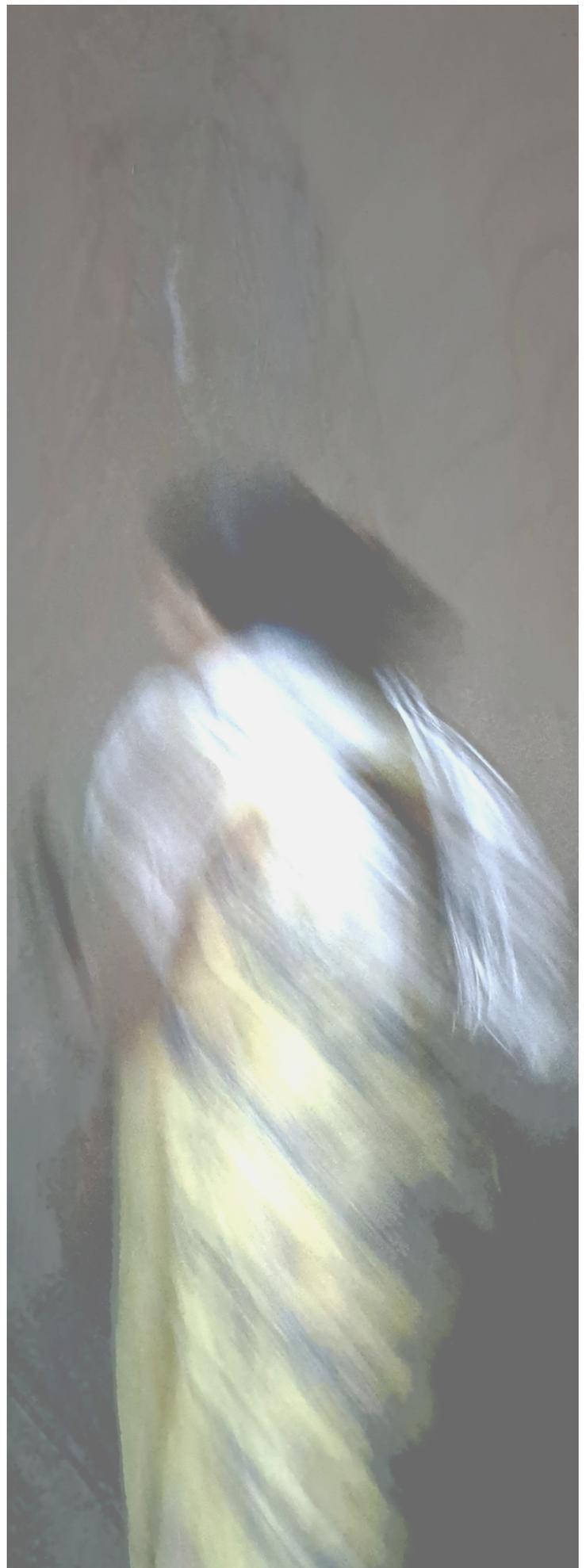
CASE STUDY 1

I am Jariya, a 52-year-old woman who was married off at the tender age of 14 to this village, Hudwa in Ranchi. Back then, child marriages were the norm, and education for girls was not given much importance. I could only learn to write my name, but I take solace in seeing young girls today marching proudly to school in their red and white uniforms.

My marriage, however, did not bring the happiness that people said it would. Despite my husband's family being relatively well-off compared to others in the village, my husband himself was plagued by addiction. He was addicted to alcohol and gambling, which are still prevalent issues in our village. In the early days of our marriage, he would spend most of his time away from home, drinking and enjoying himself with his friends. As a consequence, he fell ill frequently.

During those challenging times, my refuge was in praying to God and performing Puja rituals for Sarna, our deity. I prayed earnestly every day, seeking good health and well-being for my family. Gradually, with time and my persistent prayers, my husband's behavior began to change. I decided to take him to a local Ved (a traditional healer) who prescribed Ayurvedic medicine. Miraculously, his health improved, and he even managed to overcome his addiction to alcohol.

However, the transformation in my husband's behavior brought suspicion and hostility from the villagers. They believed that I possessed supernatural powers that had cured my husband. Whenever someone fell ill in the village, they blamed me, accusing me of performing some kind of puja to cause their suffering. The accusations became more intense and violent after my husband passed away. I was even physically attacked by my own relatives.

The attacks took a toll on me, and I was confined to the house, stripped of my freedom and mobility. I was left to fend for my young children all by myself. It was a lonely and challenging time. I would often cry alone at night, finding solace only in my unwavering faith in Sarna Maa.

Despite the isolation, I worked tirelessly to sustain my family. I took care of our livestock and worked in the fields, providing for their needs. The villagers, however, continued to isolate me, forbidding any social interactions. They made me feel like an outcast.

IMy children, too, faced verbal abuse whenever they ventured out. Today, my daughters are married and live far away from our village. Sadly, due to the prevailing belief that I am a dayan, a witch, and perform puja, their marriages were not conducted with proper rituals. They chose to elope instead, seeking love and acceptance elsewhere.

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CASE STUDY 1 (CONT.)

Even now, my daughter-in-law faces occasional abuse, and we are still not free to move around the village without restrictions. It has been more than twenty years of enduring this stigma. While the direct attacks have reduced, the indirect ones persist. We are even denied access to the water from the village pond, facing verbal abuse whenever we try to use it.

I am aware that there are women's self-help groups today, but unfortunately, I have not been included in them. This exclusion makes me deeply upset and affects my health, causing constant anxiety. However, I find strength in my grown-up children, who continue to support me through these difficult times.

ANALYSIS

Jariya's narrative sheds light on the far-reaching implications of structurally produced loneliness experienced by witch-hunt survivors. The societal ostracism she endures not only reinforces her isolation but also takes a toll on her mental well-being, intensifying emotional distress and diminishing her overall quality of life. The imposed restrictions on her mobility further compound her sense of loneliness, limiting social interactions and access to vital resources and support systems. Additionally, the denial of basic resources, such as water, reinforces her marginalization and perpetuates social exclusion. These implications extend beyond Jariya's individual experiences, exposing the intergenerational effects, as her daughters and daughter-in-law face challenges in finding acceptance and participating fully in their communities due to the stigma associated with their family background.

CASE STUDY 2

My name is Fagun, and I am 61 years old. I have been living in a slum in Ranchi city for the past three decades. Originally, I belong to Jagu, a village in Khunti district. However, due to the hostility I faced in my village, I was forced to leave. They called me a bisahi (witch) and blamed me for causing a miscarriage in my brother-in-law's daughter-in-law. I still don't understand why they accused me.

At that time, my husband had already passed away, leaving me alone with my son and two daughters. Seeking help, my relatives took me to a bhagat (faith healer), but instead of finding support, the situation escalated. My relatives became violent and even involved the panchayat, including our pahan (village priest). They all believed in my guilt and publicly ostracized me.

With nowhere else to go, I decided to flee with my children and seek refuge in this slum. To make a living, I started working as a daily wage laborer at construction sites. Unfortunately, I am illiterate, and this is the only work I can manage. In our village, we had acres of land and lived in a spacious house, but here, we are confined to a small room. My daughters have grown up now and also work as domestic help since I couldn't afford to provide them with higher education.

My son returned to our village after getting married and lives there. He believes that now we have the option to seek help from the police if needed, so he no longer faces physical violence. However, he experiences social isolation and is excluded from community functions. He mainly takes care of the little remaining land we have, as most of it has been taken over by our brother-in-law's family.

In our village, when my husband was there, we had a peaceful life and enjoyed a sense of dignity. However, in this busy city, we feel like nobody. Both my daughter and I are afraid to return to the village due to constant threats of violence and accusations that my daughters are also bisahis. The thought of going back fills us with anxiety. Moreover, my physical health is deteriorating, with back pain and sleeplessness, but I have no money for treatment. I am unable to take any action against these powerful individuals, especially the influential Pahans in the panchayats.

ANALYSIS

The analysis of Fagun's narrative reveals the complex factors contributing to her structural loneliness as a survivor of witch-hunting. Apart from social ostracism, irresponsibility and indifference of the panchayat play a crucial role. The influence of Pahans, who hold significant power and authority within the panchayat, further compounds Fagun's experience. Their biased decisions and failure to advocate for justice contribute to her ongoing marginalization. The influence of these individuals reinforces the cycle of discrimination and leaves Fagun without avenues for recourse or support.

Fagun's daughters also suffer from limited educational opportunities due to their family's stigma, trapping them in a cycle of poverty and hindering their social mobility. They are also at risk of violence, further isolating them from the community. Fagun's failing health and inability to access government healthcare schemes deepen her sense of loneliness, as she struggles with physical pain and lacks the necessary support for treatment.

CASE STUDY 3

My name is Reema, and I am a 32-year-old daughter-in-law living in the village of Bundubera in Bandhwa Panchayat. My husband and I have made the difficult decision to admit our daughter and son into a private residential school in Khunti district. We want them to have a better education and protect them from the discrimination and hardships we face daily. The condition of government schools in our area is disappointing, and we hope to give our children a brighter future.

Living in this village is a constant struggle. My husband's family, who accused his mother of being a witch, has ostracized us. We are never invited to family functions, and if we dare to question them, we face taunts and threats of our destruction. The abandonment we experience is overwhelming, and it's disheartening to feel so helpless.

I find solace in being part of a self-help group formed by the Jharkhand State Livelihood Mission. Initially, they believed in my potential to lead the group because of my active and vocal nature. However, I face constant obstacles from other group members who try to undermine my leadership and discourage my participation. They rarely attend meetings, and it makes me doubt my own abilities and question my role.

Seeking help from the police is another challenge I face. I have heard instances where the police can be easily manipulated, making me skeptical about their support. This constant stress has even taken a toll on my menstrual health too, as stated by my doctor. However, accessing proper medical care is a struggle, as private treatments are expensive, and government clinics lack adequate facilities. I have to travel long distances, often around 30 kilometers, just to see a doctor.

I often ask myself who is accountable for all of this.

ANALYSIS

Reema's narrative highlights important points. Her mistrust in seeking help from the police is indicative of the systemic issues within the justice system. Witnessing instances of manipulation and potential biases, she questions the effectiveness and fairness of law enforcement, adding to her feelings of vulnerability and loneliness.

Further, the unavailability of proper medical care and the financial constraints associated with private treatments further compound Reema's challenges. Her struggle to access adequate healthcare facilities for her own well-being, specifically in relation to her menstrual health, underscores the structural barriers that limit her ability to seek proper treatment and support, leaving her to grapple with physical and emotional hardships alone.

PHOTO-VOICE 1: A LENS INTO SURVIVORS' LIVES

In the months of May-July, when you enter our village in Lali Panchayat, you will see this 'Loonda Bhada' -an annual ritual inhabitants do to cast off evil eye
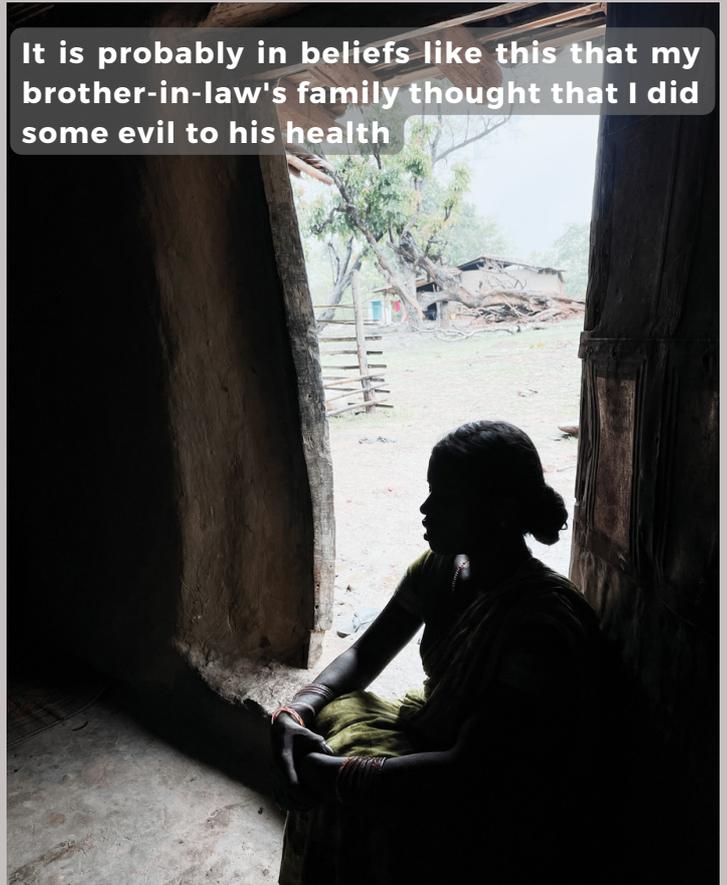
It is probably in beliefs like this that my brother-in-law's family thought that I did some evil to his health
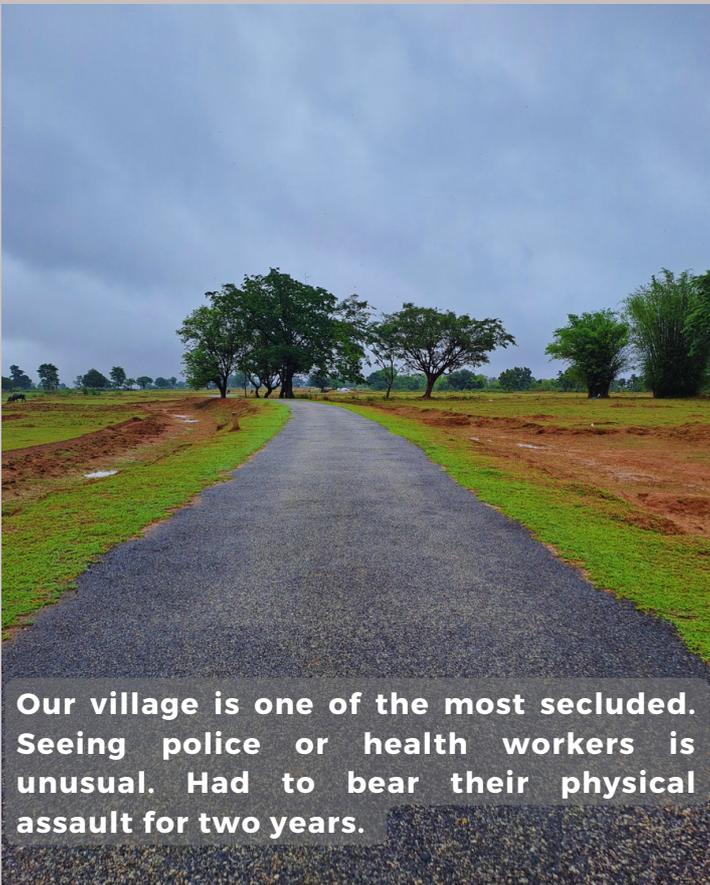
Our village is one of the most secluded. Seeing police or health workers is unusual. Had to bear their physical assault for two years.
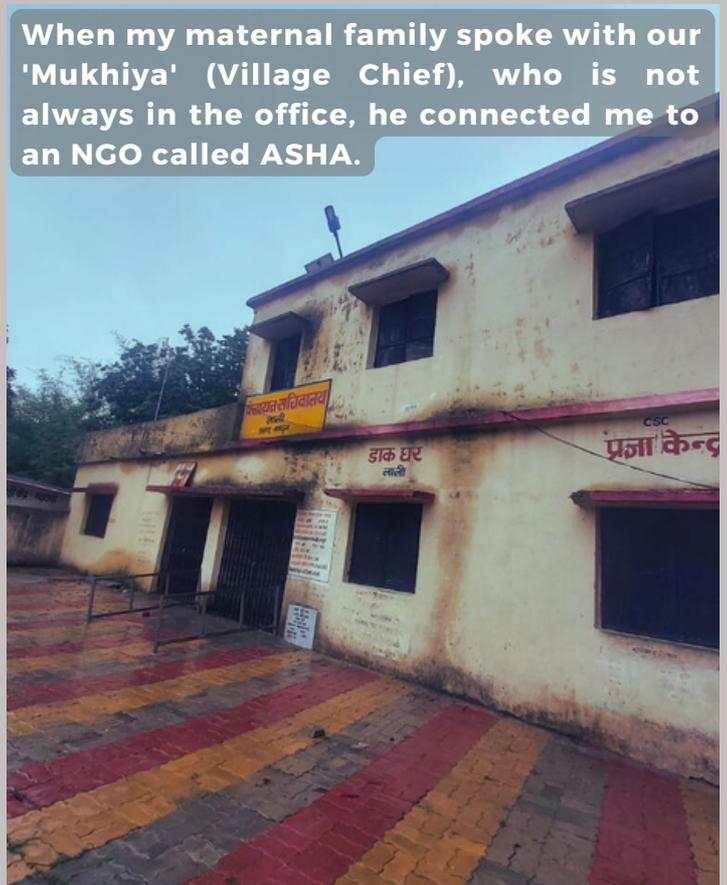
When my maternal family spoke with our 'Mukhiya' (Village Chief), who is not always in the office, he connected me to an NGO called ASHA.

Even though I complained to the police, I had to compromise upon the villagers' insistence.

Ostracized by Village, All I do is Silently Pray
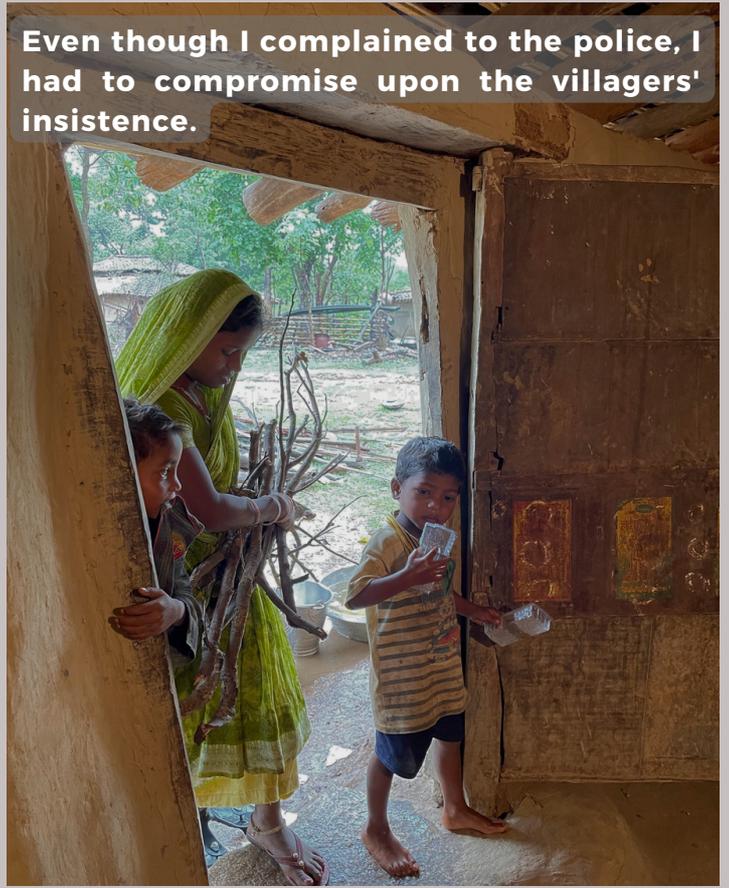
Yet, I am all alone-Taking care of my family

I am Lalitha, 50 years old. I live in Akta Gram Panchayat

When I was 25, my village labelled me as a 'WITCH'

I am made the Enemy of the Village. Do I exist for anyone?

PHOTOVOICE 2: A LENS INTO SURVIVORS' LIVES

Gram Panchayat (a village governance body) fails in maintaining cleanliness. Village tap water facility get polluted. People drink same unsafe water & fall sick. Community blames a woman. Entire village calls that woman a "WITCH"
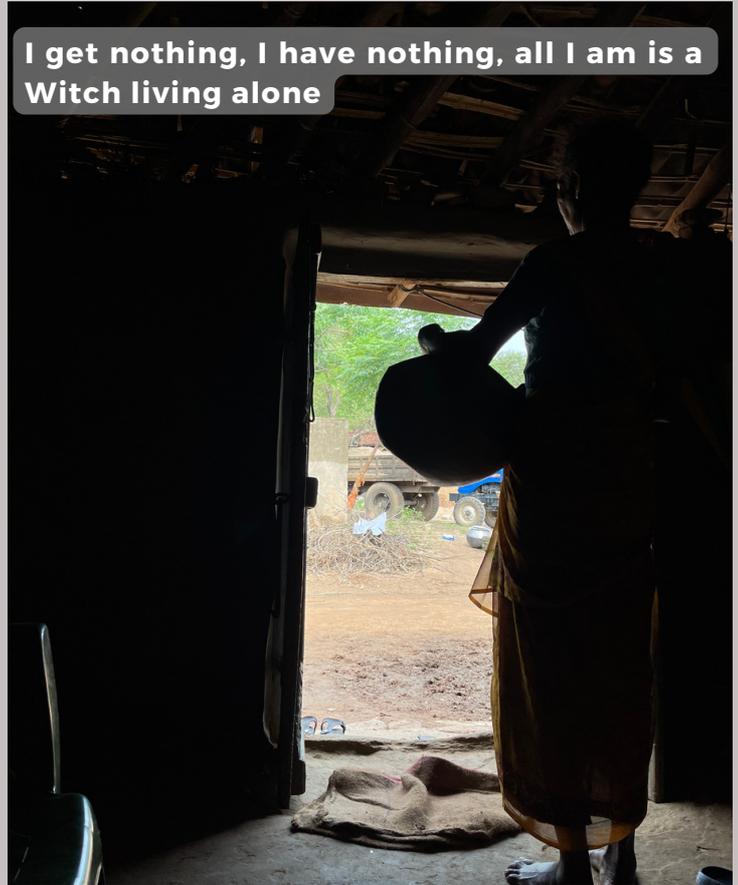
I get nothing, I have nothing, all I am is a Witch living alone

I lost my 25 years, now my granddaughter is called baby witch, she is losing her "Present" and there is no one to look out for our "Future" because we are Witches and we are alone.

PART II

SWITCH
A COMMUNITY-BASED SOLUTION TO ADDRESS THE LONELINESS OF WITCH-HUNT SURVIVORS AND ITS ADVERSE CONSEQUENCES

Image Source: Archives of ASHA

BACKGROUND

Based on the findings, we propose SWITCH, a community-based program to address the loneliness faced by survivors and its associated negative consequences. The program has been developed using a feminist participatory approach, aiming to enhance the problem-solving abilities of all stakeholders, particularly the survivors, through their collective involvement in the design process. By adopting this approach, we aim to promote inclusivity, empowerment, and the co-creation of knowledge, ultimately leading to a more widely accepted and feasible program design (Beckett et al., 2018).

For the initial consultation, we reached out to two Non-Governmental Organizations, namely the Association for Social and Human Awareness (ASHA) and Sanmat. ASHA has been dedicated to advancing the rights of Adivasi women in Jharkhand since 2000, while Sanmat has been actively working since 2008 to enhance livelihoods, education, and health for the most marginalized individuals in the state. Following conversations with the senior leadership teams of both organizations, we identified key stakeholders to be involved in the program design process. The identified stakeholders and their involvement strategy are as follows:

TABLE 2

	Stakeholder	Involved Through	Description
1	Witch-Hunt Survivors	Case Study Interviews, Photo-voice, Focus Group Discussions	The survivors have been mobilized from program operation areas of ASHA namely Ranchi, Khunti, Saraikela-Kharsawan, Bokaro and West Singhbhum districts covering 12 villages from 7 panchayats
2	NGOs	Individual Meetings and Joint Field Visits	Representatives of ASHA and Sanmat have played a crucial role in providing insights and guidance based on their years of on-ground experience of working with Adivasi communities as well as advocacy with government stakeholders
3	Leaders of Community-based Organizations (CBOs)	Focus Group Discussions	Representatives of Self-help groups and Village Organisations formed under Jharkhand State Livelihood Promotion Society were consulted
3	Media	Individual Meetings	Two journalists from Prabhat Khabar, a leading regional newspaper, who have been consistently writing on the issue, were involved
4	Panchayat Raj Institution (PRI) Leaders	Individual and Group Meetings	Pramukh (President of Block Panchayats), Mukhiya (Chief of Village Panchayats) and Ward Members were consulted
5	Government	In-person and telephonic conversations	Block Level Officials of Department of Women and Child Development, Paralegal Volunteers of District Legal Service Authority, Health Outreach Workers were involved

Source: Table compiled by authors

In our discussions and consultations, we intentionally employed the asset-framing model. Asset framing is a narrative-based methodology that places importance on identifying stakeholders' strengths, assets, and aspirations before addressing challenges and deficits. (Fotias, 2018). By adopting this model, our guiding questions aimed to uncover stakeholders' existing organic interventions and aspirations, rather than solely focusing on deficiencies (Guiding Questions annexed). This approach was chosen to acknowledge and develop a sustainable program that harnesses the potential of stakeholders for ongoing contributions and societal benefits while addressing the identified problems.

The program has been specifically tailored for piloting in Jharkhand, with considerations for its unique context and needs. However, a discussion on the replication and scalability of the program will be presented in subsequent sections of this document.

POWERMAP OF STAKEHOLDERS (BASED ON CONSULTATIONS)
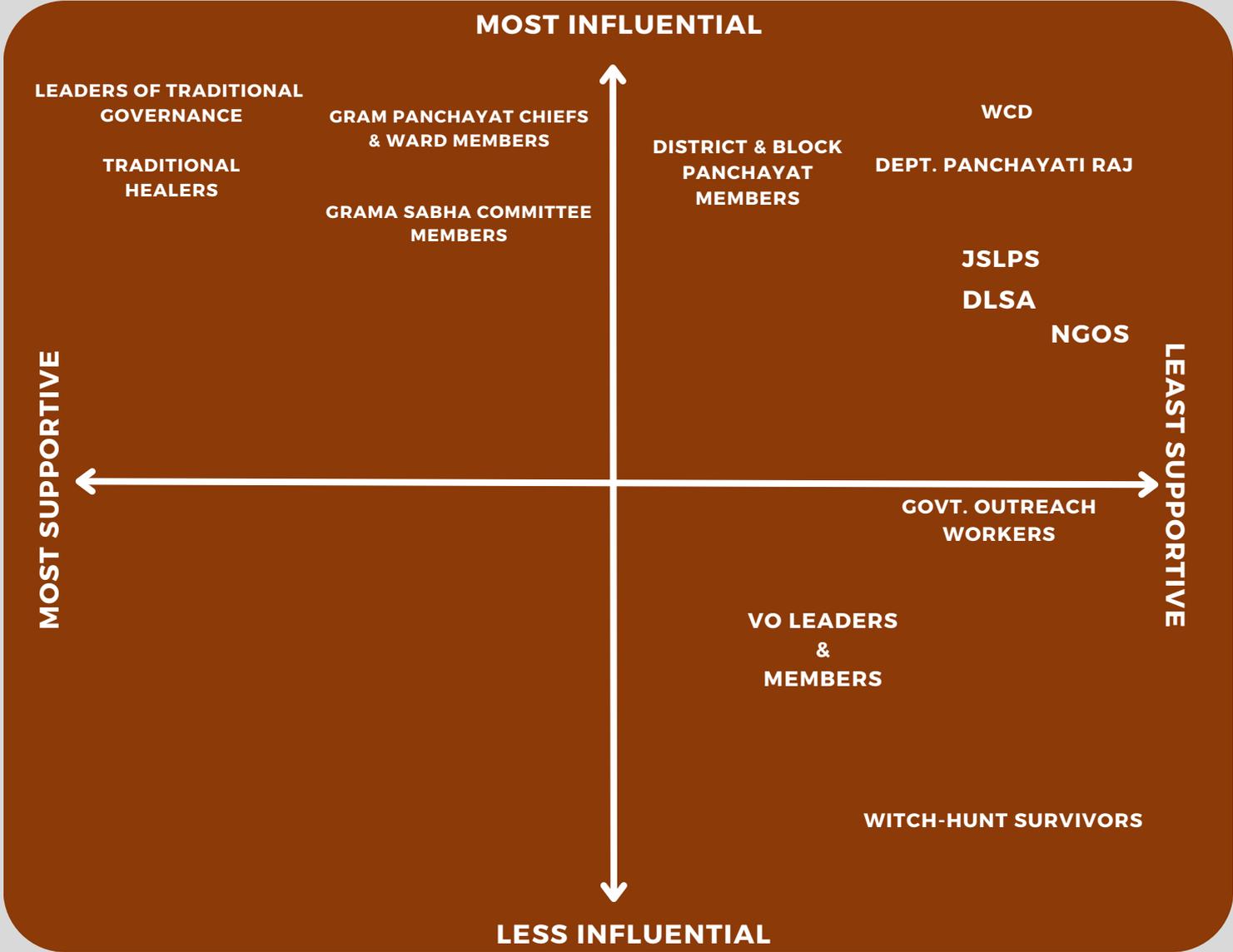
STAKEHOLDER DESCRIPTION (CONT.)

	Stakeholder	Description
1	Witch-hunt Survivors	Any female who has been labelled as a witch in her village and has been grappling with the adverse consequences of it
2	VO Leaders and Members	Village Organizations (VO) are community-based organizations formed in a particular village and consists of 10-20 Self Help Groups. Each VO is led by three members . In the context of Jharkhand, VOs have been formed under the Jharkhand State Livelihood Mission
3	Leaders of Traditional Governance	Adivasis have their own traditional system of governance. The Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas Act has provisions for these traditional systems to operate in sync with constitutional Panchayati Raj System. Leaders of this system are known as Pradhan, Pahan who still play a crucial role in areas under PESA.
4	Traditional Healers	A traditional healer is an individual who lacks formal medical education and training but is recognized as capable (according to the local tribal community) of delivering healthcare through the use of animal, plant, and mineral substances (Tribal Affairs, 2023). In Jharkhand's context, these healers are known as Ved, Ojha and Bhagat
5	Gram Panchayat	Gram Panchayat (Village Council) is a part of the Panchayati Raj Institutions (local self governance). It is responsible for governing the village and undertaking its administration.
6	GP Mukhiya and Ward members	These are elected members of the Gram Panchayat. Mukhiya is the head while ward members lead clusters within the village.
7	Grama Sabha Committee members	Gram Sabha is the lowest unit of governance of a particular Gram Panchayat. It consists of all members above 18 years residing in that village. Each Gram Sabha appoint various committees to form agenda and actions
8	WCD	State Department of Women, Child Development and Social Security

STAKEHOLDER DESCRIPTION

	Stakeholder	Description
9	JSLPS	Jharkhand State Livelihood Promotion Society is an autonomous organization set up by the Rural Development Department of Jharkhand.
10	NGOs	These are not for profit organizations usually undertaking social activities with the help of grants, donations, aid, CSR funds
11	Dept of Panchayati Raj	State department for local self governance
12	Govt Outreach Workers	Appointed for outreach work under WCD
13	DLSA	District Legal Service Authority , government entity responsible for providing free legal service to the disadvantaged.

SWITCH: IMPACT OBJECTIVES, MILESTONES OF CHANGES AND STRATEGY

Impact Objective: Witch-hunt survivors experience healing, heightened self-assurance, and successful reintegration into the community with robust community backing.

To achieve this impact, the project will strive to attain the following three **measurable outcomes or milestones of change:**

MILESTONE 1: HEALING	MILESTONE 2: TRANSFORMING	MILESTONE 3: REINTEGRATING
WITCH-HUNT SURVIVORS COME TOGETHER ON A UNIFIED PLATFORM, WHERE THEY FEEL SAFE TO SHARE THEIR EMOTIONS AND EXPERIENCE REDUCED FEELINGS OF ISOLATION AND ANXIETY	SURVIVORS UNDERSTAND THAT WITCH-HUNTING IS A FORM OF VIOLENCE, FEEL CONFIDENT AND HAVE A STABLE SOURCE OF INCOME.	A NETWORK OF INFLUENTIAL CHAMPIONS ESTABLISHED, WHO ACTIVELY ADVOCATE FOR SURVIVOR RIGHTS AND WELL-BEING AND WORK TOWARDS CREATING A SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITY ENVIRONMENT FOR SURVIVORS.

STRATEGY

The strategies to accomplish the milestones will involve the following:

Establishment of survivor support groups at the gram panchayat level and providing them with counselling through dance therapy:

In Jharkhand, a typical Gram Panchayat consists of 5-10 villages or wards (PRIA, 2018). As per ASHA's in-house survey, there are at least two women per village who have been labelled as a witch. Therefore, 10-20 women in gram panchayats will be mobilized into support groups, who will then be provided with dance therapy.

[The impact of dance therapy on reducing isolation and anxiety has been demonstrated in various studies. For example, a study by Margolin exploring the therapeutic impact of creative dance on an adolescent woman's recovery from dating violence found that creative dance facilitated restoration after trauma by recovering the social engagement system, reducing social isolation, and increasing bodily self-awareness and self-esteem (Margolin, 2019). Additionally, survivors expressed excitement during our Focus Group Discussions when they attended a similar workshop organized by ASHA.]

Image Source: Archives of ASHA

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Capacity-building of survivors on their rights and livelihood skills:

The survivor support groups will be empowered by engaging them in a reflective process that helps them comprehend their situation in relation to their community and society at large. Furthermore, their livelihood skills will be enhanced through training, and capacity-building programs focused on Non-Timber Forest Product (NTFP) business and establishing market linkages for these groups.

[Adivasi communities often have deep cultural connections to forests and rely on forest resources for their livelihoods. NTFPs, such as medicinal plants, herbs, fruits, and nuts, hold significant cultural value and have been traditionally used by Adivasi communities for sustenance, healthcare, and rituals.
NTFPs offer an opportunity for sustainable resource utilization, as they can be harvested without causing significant harm to the forest ecosystem. By enhancing the capacity of survivors in NTFP-related skills, such as sustainable harvesting techniques and market linkages, they can effectively utilize forest resources while ensuring their long-term conservation].

Revival of Traditional Dhumkuria system for community sensitization:

Dhumkuria, a tribal youth dormitory in Jharkhand, played a vital role in training on socio-cultural, economic, and religious aspects, emphasizing collective living. Learning occurred through hands-on experience and mentorship from elder cohorts called Dewna. However, these systems have eroded over time due to modernization.

The program aims to revive the system by establishing non-residential youth clubs at the gram panchayat level to reintegrate survivors into the community. Mobilizing mentees aged 18-24, they will be empowered to become champions who promote survivor rights and provide support. Mentors, selected from supportive panchayat leaders and Village Organizations, will guide these champions. The young champions will in turn engage wider communities, particularly traditional healers and gram sabha members, using art, dance, and theater to raise awareness about the persisting beliefs in witchcraft. They will also engage in advocacy activities with block and district panchayats.

Source: www.youthkiawaaz.com.   A traditional Dhumkuria- A tribal youth dormitory

A **critical/causal pathway** to achieve impact objective

IMPACT OBJECTIVE: Witch-hunt survivors experience healing, heightened self-assurance, and successful reintegration into the community with robust community backing.						
No	**Milestone of Changes**	**Strategy**	**Measurable Indicators**	**Suggested Activities**	**Stakeholders**	**Timeline**
3 ↑↑↑↑↑	A network of influential champions established, who advocate for survivor rights and well-being and actively work towards creating a supportive community environment for survivors.	Revival of Traditional Dhumkuria system for community sensitization	.no. of gram, block and district panchayats taking witch-hunt as an agenda to be addressed and actions planned with a focus on addressing survivors' loneliness	3e) Community Engagement/ Sensitization/Advocacy Events by Dhumkuria Champions	Dhumkuria Champions/ Youths, Traditional governance leaders, healers, gram sabha committee members, Dept of Panchayati Raj & RD	2 years and ongoing
			. % of champions actively advocating for survivor rights/number of events organized by champions at gram, block and district levels	3d) Mentorship sessions for Dhumkuria Champions 3c) Selection & Training of Mentors	Dhumkuria Mentors, Youths, WCD Thematic Expert NGOs, Supportive VO & Panchayat Leaders (block & gram), WCD	
			.No. of influential champions engaged in supporting survivor rights and well-being.	3b) Formation of Gram Panchayat Dhumkuria Clubs 3a) Chai Chaupal (Meet over Chai) for youth mobilization	Thematic Expert NGOs, Youths, Dept of Panchayati Raj & RD Thematic Expert NGOs, Youths, WCD	

No	Milestone of Changes	Strategy	Measurable Indicators	Suggested Activities	Stakeholders	Timeline
↑ 2 ↑ ↑	Survivors understand that witch-hunting is a form of violence, feel confident and have a stable source of income.	Capacity-building of survivors on their rights and livelihood skills	.% of survivor support groups with NTFP market linkages and bank accounts	2c) Monthly Training on NTFP business (components include collecting, drying, packaging, group savings, bank linkage and market linkage)	JSLPs, Survivors, VO leaders	2 years
				2b) Bi-yearly Leadership Workshops	Thematic Expert NGOs/WCD, Survivors	
			.% survivors taking part in gram sabha to talk about their issues	2a) Quarterly Gender Workshops	Thematic Expert NGOs/WCD, Survivors	

No	Milestone of Changes	Strategy	Measurable Indicators	Suggested Activities	Stakeholders	Timeline
1	Witch-hunt survivors come together on a unified platform, where they feel safe to share their emotions and experience reduced feelings of isolation and anxiety	Establishment of survivor support groups at the gram panchayat-level and providing them with counseling through dance therapy	Reduction in self-reported levels of anxiety and isolation among survivors	1b) Monthly dance therapy sessions with survivor support groups	Thematic Expert NGOs/WCD, Survivors	2 years
			. % of survivors actively participating in monthly sessions			
			. No. of Panchayats with active survivor support groups	1a) Mobilization Drive/Door to Door	Outreach Workers under WCD &PLV, survivors	

MONITORING, EVALUATION AND LEARNING FRAMEWORK

The program will adopt a participatory framework for Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning, which includes the following steps:

- **Participatory monitoring at the Gram Panchayat level** will be implemented, engaging Dhumkuria Champions, survivor support group leaders, and Village Organization leaders. They will be responsible for conducting monthly monitoring activities to assess progress towards achieving the three milestones mentioned earlier. The monitoring tools will include social watch scorecards that capture survivors' self-reported levels of isolation and anxiety, their active participation through attendance, and their sharing of issues within the support groups.

- **Quarterly peer-to-peer learning exchanges will be organized at the block level**. Each gram panchayat will send one community representative to share the impact of the program in their respective panchayats, exchange insights, and identify lessons learned. These interactive learning sessions will be facilitated by appointed NGOs, promoting open dialogue, critical thinking, and knowledge exchange. The participation of Block Panchayat leaders will also be encouraged in these sessions.

- **Bi-yearly storytelling and case studies workshops will be organized at the district level.** The workshops will invite 2-3 representatives from each block to attend. Their participation will encourage community leaders to share personal stories and experiences related to the program. The stories will be captured through qualitative interviews, written narratives, or audiovisual recordings. These stories and case studies will serve to showcase individual and collective journeys, highlight challenges overcome, and demonstrate positive changes achieved.

- **Collaborative yearly workshops will be conducted at the district level**, bringing together block panchayats, WCD officials, appointed NGOs, Dhumkuria champions, and survivor support group representatives. These workshops will provide a platform for stakeholders to collectively analyze and interpret the findings gathered from the monitoring activities mentioned earlier. The objective is to foster dialogue and reflection, enabling a deeper understanding of the data's implications for program implementation and impact.

- At the conclusion of the 6-year program implementation, **a comprehensive state-wide external impact evaluation** will be conducted. Collaborative efforts will be made to engage external evaluators in designing evaluation frameworks and methods that are aligned with the community-led approach. The aim is to ensure the evaluation captures the program's impact accurately and effectively.

ESTIMATED BUDGET

S NO	BUDGET HEAD	TOTAL COST FOR 1 GRAM PANCHAYAT (In INR)	In CHF
1	**Program Cost**		
1.1	Community Mobilization for Survivor Support Groups & Dhumkuria Club Formation	105000	1097.87
1.2	Community Training Cost (Survivor Support Groups, Dhumkuria Mentors & Mentees)	1296000	13550.90
1.3	Formation & Operation of Dhumkuria Club	1365000	14272.36
1.4	Community Advocacy Cost	510000	5332.53
1.5	Regular Monitoring	600000	6273.57
1.6	External Impact Evaluation	200000	2091.19
	Total Program Cost	**4076000**	**42618.43**
2	**Personnel Cost**		
2.1	Dance Therapist	126000	1317.45
2.2	Gender Trainer	36000	376.41
2.3	NTFP trainer	72000	752.83
2.4	Dhumkuria mentor trainer	60000	627.36
	Total Personnel Cost	**294000**	**3074.05**
3	**Other Admin Cost**	**216000**	**2258.48**
	Total Budget for 1 Gram Panchayat for 6 years	**4586000**	**47950.96**
	Budget for 1 Gram Panchayat per Year	**7,64,333**	**7991.82**

ESTIMATED BUDGET

The total budget per Gram Panchayat Per Year Amounts to Rs. 7,64,333 (CHF 7991.82). If the program is piloted in at least 823 (20%) Gram Panchayats of Jharkhand, the total budget per year will amount to Rs. 629046059 (CHF 6577270.98)

Based on our capacity assessment with stakeholders, it is assumed that the program can be implemented collaboratively by the Department of Women and Child Development (WCD), Jharkhand State Livelihood Promotion Society (JSLPS), and the Department of Panchayati Raj and Rural Development. The table below presents the estimated budget per year for each stakeholder, along with the corresponding verticals for which the budget will be spent.

Department	Verticals for Budget Allocation	Total Cost for 823 Gram Panchayats per Year (In INR)	In CHF
WCD	Community Mobilization and Training of Survivor Support Groups on Dance Therapy/Gender/Leadership, Training of Mentors, Monitoring & Evaluation	342230559	14072227.05
Dept. of Panchayati Raj	Establishment and Operation of Dhumkuria Clubs, Community Advocacy Events by Champions	257187500	2696407.76
JSLPS	Training of Survivor Support Groups for NTFP livelihood skill enhancement	29628000	310626.17
Total		**629046059**	**6577270.98**

CONCLUSION

The proposed program is an outcome of a two-month participatory engagement process involving key stakeholders. It is therefore assumed that the program is feasible in Jharkhand. The feasibility is based on factors such as the organizational capacity of the State Government in terms of technical expertise and budgetary resources, as well as the acceptance of the community. However, for replication and scaling-up of the program in other similar contexts, the following considerations should be taken into account:

- **Contextual Adaptation:** Ensure that the program's design and implementation tactics may be modified to fit the unique sociocultural, economic, and political environment of each target area. To adapt the program to the special requirements and conditions of the new setting, conduct detailed analyses and consultations.

- **Stakeholder Engagement:** Involve local stakeholders, including community members, government officials, NGOs, and relevant institutions, in the planning and implementation of the program. Seek their input, build partnerships, and ensure their ownership and commitment to the program's objectives.

- **Capacity Assessment:** Assess the capacity of local organizations and institutions in the new contexts.

- **Resource Mobilization:** Develop a clear strategy for resource mobilization to sustain and scale up the program. Find potential funding sources and investigate collaborations for technical and financial support. Create a sustainable financial strategy and a reasonable budget.

WE BELIEVE THAT OUR SOLUTION SHALL SUPPORT THE WITCH HUNT SURVIVORS TO OVERCOME LONELINESS, FIND A SUPPORT GROUP, CREATE A SAFER ECOSYSTEM AND MOST IMPORTANTLY REINTEGRATE THEM INTO THE COMMUNITY. FINALLY, WE SINCERELY HOPE THAT THIS SMALL EFFORT OF OUR IS BEGINNING TOWARDS FOSTERING MORE DISCUSSIONS, DEBATES, AND, MOST IMPORTANTLY, ACTIONS TO ADDRESS THIS DEEP ROOTED AND NEGLECTED ISSUE

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ANNEXURES

Questionnaires

Stakeholder 1- Witch Hunting Survivors

To gain insights into the loneliness and social isolation experienced by survivors within communities, we utilise the UCLA loneliness scale and create customised questionnaires specifically tailored for the tribal communities of Jharkhand.

Participants answer each item as either O ("I often feel this way"), S ("I sometimes feel this way"), R ("I rarely feel this way"), or N ("I never feel this way").

1.1 Understanding her loneliness

- Do you feel connected with the people around you?
- Is there anyone you can turn to?
- Do you lack companionship?
- Do you have anyone to talk to about day-to-day problems?
- Are you an outgoing person?
- Are you no longer close to anyone?
- Does anyone know well about you?
- Can you find companionship when you want it?
- Are there people who really understand you?
- Do you feel alone?
- Are you unhappy being so withdrawn?

1.2 Understanding her social network

- Do you have friends in your village? Or at your workplace?
- Do you meet them frequently? How frequent is it?
- Do you feel part of a group of friends?
- Do they call you for any get-togethers, picnics etc?
- Do you share your interests and ideas are shared by those around you?
- Do you feel left out?
- Are there people you feel close to?
- Do they ask for any help from you?
- Do they share their feelings with you?
- Are your social relationships superficial?

1.3 Understanding her community

- Do you talk to your neighbours? Do they talk to you?
- Do you visit their houses? Do they visit your house?
- Do you feel isolated from others in the village?
- Do they invite you to community gatherings/festivals or any occasions?
- Do you celebrate any occasions, festivals etc.?

- Do you call them for any occasion?
- Do you feel that people are around you but not with you?
- Do you have people you can talk to?
- Do you have people you can turn to?

Stakeholder 2- Panchayat Raj Institution (PRI) Leaders

- What do you think of Witch-hunting?
- Do you have 'witches' in your village?
- Are they women or men?
  If the respondent says the majority of the witch-hunting survivors are women, then ask why?
- Do you believe in witch-hunting?
  If yes, have you seen or experienced their power personally ? or
  If not, how do you handle such situations in your community?
- Have you personally resolved any issues of survivors? What and How?
- Do you call them Grama Sabha?
- Do you involve them in any community decisions?
- Do you provide them with any government provisions?

Stakeholder 3- NGOs, Leaders of Community-based Organizations, Govt Officials

3.1 Survivor interactions-

- What do you think about witch-hunting?
- How many survivors have you identified and reached so far?
- How frequently do you meet with them?
- Where do you meet them?
- How often do you visit their villages and houses?
- What kind of support are you providing to the survivors?
- How are you addressing their loneliness?

3.2 Programs and government policies-

- Are you conducting any programs related to witch-hunting survivors?
- What do you think about the government policies and programs on witch-hunting?
- What problems do you face while implementing the project?
- Does your organization have professional psychologists?
- What can be done to improve the existing policies?
- Is it possible to have a new government pilot project? Why & How?