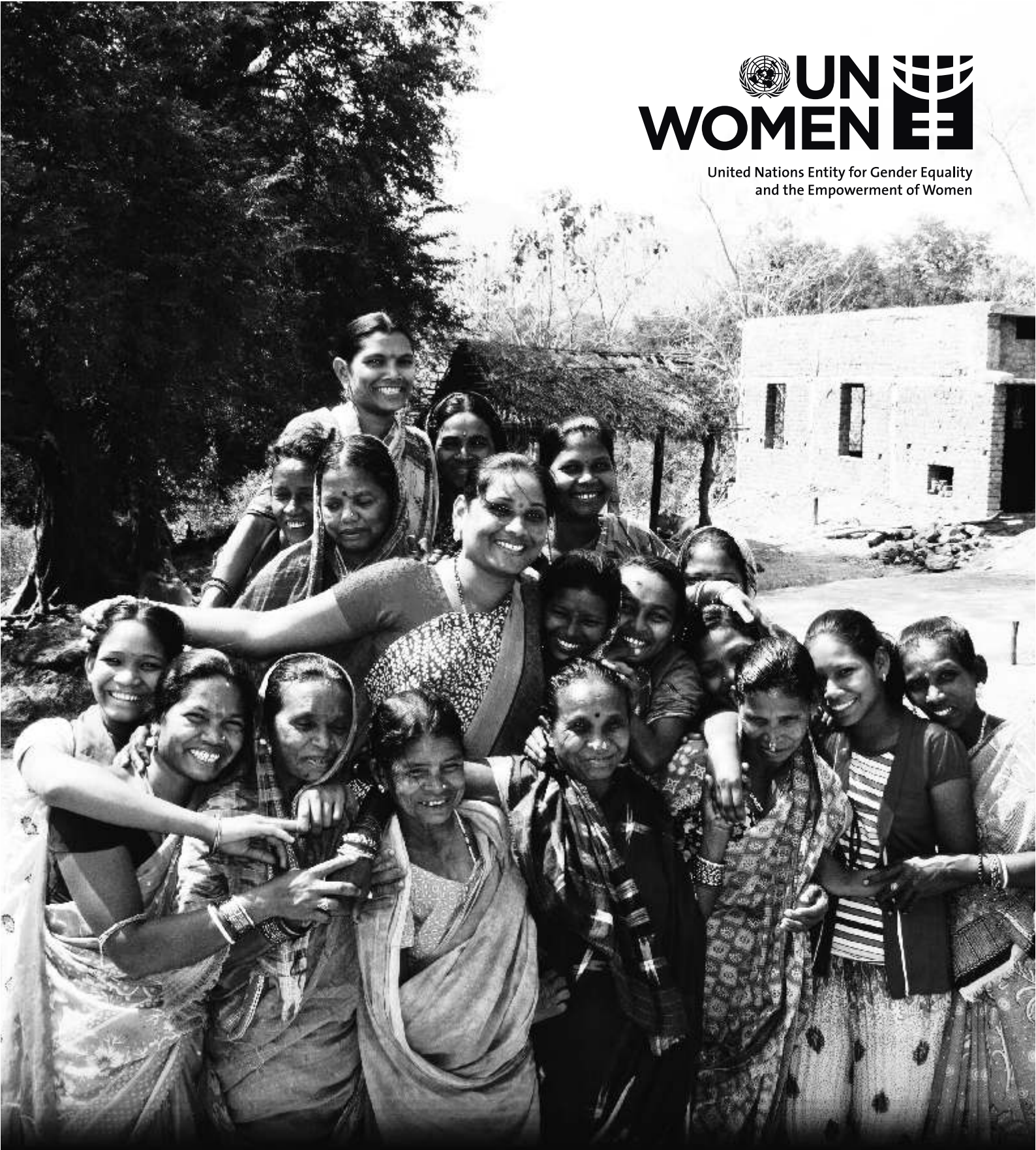




United Nations Entity for Gender Equality  
and the Empowerment of Women



# **HEARTS & MINDS**

## **WOMEN OF INDIA SPEAK**

SHAPING THE POST-2015 DEVELOPMENT DISCOURSE & AGENDA

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# **HEARTS & MINDS**

## **WOMEN OF INDIA SPEAK**

SHAPING THE POST-2015 DEVELOPMENT DISCOURSE & AGENDA

This report and photo-essay are aimed at sharing the “lived experiences” of women and girls in India and ensuring that the voices of especially those who remain socially, economically and geographically marginalised are meaningfully reflected in the emerging post-2015 development discourse and agenda. The analysis contained in this report is based on in-depth interviews with women and focus-group discussions with almost 200 elected women representatives — a constituency over a million strong in India and considered as equal and important stakeholders in helping shape the post-2015 global development agenda.

### **THE REPORT TEAM**

This report is the product of a collective effort under the guidance of the Representative, Ms. Anne F. Stenhammer and Deputy Representative, Ms. Sushma Kapoor, UN Women Office for India, Bhutan, Maldives and Sri Lanka. UN Women’s Gender Responsive Budgeting Specialist, Yamini Mishra, worked with the team of authors mentioned below and UN Women staff to make this report a reality. A number of people provided detailed comments and advice throughout the research process, from UN Women’s programme specialists, partners to field staff.

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# FOREWORD

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In the life of every nation, there are moments and events that register in public consciousness as signalling a clear before and after — when something shifts fundamentally; when something occurs that changes a country or even the world forever; when we are forced to look in the mirror and ask ourselves, how did we get here?

In late 2012, a tragic event took place, which involved the brutalisation, rape and eventual untimely death of a 23 year old girl in India's capital, New Delhi. This was one such moment, or so it is hoped by millions of people across the country. The tragedy made international headlines and pried open a much-needed debate on women's safety and the unacceptably high levels of violence against women — by no means a uniquely Indian phenomenon and often sidelined by development agendas and public policy. Thousands of young women and men mobilised for collective action to make their government accountable and enforce the rule of law. It also presented a rare historic window and the necessary pre-cursors often required for major social transformation and course correction — public mood and opinion — to possibly begin to deliver genuine safety, empowerment and equality for Indian women and girls now and into the long run.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were arguably an ambitious and unprecedented attempt to seriously try to resolve, in a time-bound manner, the greatest human challenges of our time — an increasingly threatened planet suffering from uncomfortably high levels of human indignity and preventable deprivation, hunger, disease, inequality, conflict, violence and death.

Against this backdrop, the MDG framework did try to address what it considered at the time as the most pressing challenges facing women and girls such as increasing access to education for girls and reducing maternal mortality. It even delivered considerable, though not sufficient, progress on its gender-related goals. However, with the passage of time and benefit of hindsight, it has become clear that the framework did not do justice to the degree, range and complexity of challenges facing women on a daily basis, particularly the most marginalised women who have the least voice and agency. The feedback from women in this report reveals that there are, in fact, disturbing trends of either stagnation, slow progress or even reversal in many areas determining women's basic needs and survival, leave aside greater progress, well-being, empowerment and equality. For instance, in the Indian context:

1. Although the MDGs included wage employment for women in the non-farm sector as an empowerment indicator, it has stagnated for the past five years;
2. An increasing “feminisation” of poverty, agriculture, old age, migration and HIV and AIDS is taking place, while social security and protection measures remain grossly inadequate;
3. Shifting weather patterns are leading to crop failure and food insecurity, which are disproportionately impacting rural women — the majority of marginal farmers; and
4. Gender-based violence remains all-pervasive and the existing legal safeguards are insufficient to protect women and girls.

Despite the shortcomings of the MDG framework, as it turned out, a development took place over time, which was perhaps hoped but not expected by the United Nations — a majority of its 193 member countries that had adopted the framework, began aligning their national development

policies with the attainment of the MDGs. In some countries, accountability mechanisms were also erected or built into existing structures to fulfil targets. Thus, regardless of whether there was a complete buy-in of the MDGs within countries or not, eventually, substantial resources were mobilised to try and achieve them. Furthermore, there has even been noteworthy progress on some targets and indicators in almost every country, including India.

Recognising this very real influence that global development agendas have on domestic policy-making and their potential impact on millions of the most vulnerable people of the world, this report is an attempt to inform the emerging post-2015 agenda through the lived experiences of Indian women at the grassroots. Their stories are representative of millions of others whose extraordinary daily courage and human resilience hold the tapestry of families, communities, countries and humanity together; who absorb the violence in society at great personal peril, pain and unimaginable sacrifice and have increasingly become its silent and unsung peacemakers and peacekeepers.

For too long, development agendas and frameworks have been prepared without truly consulting or giving voice to those whose lives they aim to improve the most. This report is a humble but conscious attempt to address that gap. The challenges highlighted and analysed here in all their complexity, multi-dimensionality and inter-relatedness will hopefully resonate among women in all societies and countries across the globe —the indignity and desperation of poverty and deprivation, the pangs of hunger and worse still, the pain and helplessness of seeing their children go hungry, the physical weakness from toiling away in their households and farmlands all day to take care of everyone else's needs first, the exhaustion from hours spent fetching water and fuel wood from far, the insecurity and instability of threatened livelihoods, the dejection of unemployment, the anger and humiliation of suffering inequality and discrimination and the silent erosion of confidence, self-esteem and struggle to maintain self-respect and protect their very lives in the face of daily mental, emotional and physical violence.

At the same time, the analysis contained in this report is based on discussions with almost 200 elected women representatives (EWRs) in local self-government — a constituency that is over a million strong in India now. These EWRs are not only the change themselves, but are leading it and have the potential to bring about lasting positive transformation in women's lives.

India is considered a “swing state” in shaping not only the post-2015 agenda but also the emerging global order, thus providing the pragmatic imperative for why we should hear and understand what both the “other Indias” are telling us — “women” at the “grassroots.” And when tragic events and loss make the people of a country or humanity at large feel like they will never quite be the same again, they provide the moral imperative and emotional spark that lights the prairie fire for desired change to take place.



**Anne F. Stenhammer**

Representative (2008-2013)

UN Women Office for India, Bhutan, Maldives and Sri Lanka

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