

TOGETHER WE CAN

A Learning Document on
**DAY-NRLM Institutional Mechanisms to
Address Gender-based Violence**

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MESSAGE

The Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana-National Rural Livelihoods Mission (DAY NRLM) views the issue of gender-based violence as an important area of intervention that is intrinsically linked with poverty reduction, gender equality and women's empowerment. Its programmatic architecture and institutional mechanisms, therefore, are being increasingly equipped to identify and respond to issues ranging from economic, physical, sexual and emotional violence, that often stem from social norms and practices. Collectivizing women from poor and traditionally marginalized communities has shown promising results in enhancing their voice, choice and agency. Leveraging the strength of women's collectives, while building support systems to tackle issues of safety, can, thus, effect sustainable change in social norms, building a brighter future for women and girls, as India steps into its 75th year of independence.

'Together We Can', is an endeavour of DAY-NRLM, MoRD with support from the 'Initiative for What Works for the Advancement of Women and Girls in the Economy (IWWAGE)', to present a compilation of case stories of how women's collectives from different states addressed the issue of gender-based violence that could serve as example for others. In doing so, we hope that this publication will have a ripple effect across DAY-NRLM's grassroots institutions as well as officials across states to exchange learnings and adapt their strategies to better address the issue at hand. These case studies, expressed through the voices of women, will aid all actors working on GBV by helping them to understand how to leverage these platforms to eliminate the baneful effects of GBV in all of its forms and allow women to live a life of dignity.

I congratulate the DAY-NRLM for bringing out this volume. I hope this will serve as an inspiration to other states and will provide valuable guidance to the rural women, their institutions and all concerned stakeholders on overcoming the vicious cycle of violence with the help of institutions built for support. I do hope that the commendable role played by the state actors and community institutions and raw courage of women themselves presented in this compendium will be an inspiration to all.

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Message

Gender-based Violence (GBV) is a human rights violation and a global issue. One in every three women in the world is affected by violence in her lifetime. While data on GBV for India as reported in the National Family Health Survey- 5 (2019-21) has shown a decline, the figures are far from ideal. National level figures reveal ever-married women's experience of spousal physical or sexual violence has declined marginally from 31 percent in NFHS-4 to 29 percent in NFHS-5. Only 14 percent of women who have experienced physical or sexual violence by anyone, have sought help to stop it. Violence has serious short and long-term consequences on women's health and well-being.

Deendayal Antayodaya Yojana-National Rural Livelihoods Mission (DAY NRLM), under the aegis of Government of India has been tirelessly working on raising awareness and implementing programmes to assist women and girls and also sensitising men and boys to be active in preventing violence at home, and in communities. Establishing a strong institutional mechanism such as Gender Resource Centres (GRCs) will help women to exercise their voice and agency and play a vital role in delivering appropriate response to the crime. The GRCs will link women's groups with each other, for securing social, economic and political rights, and provide women with legal counsel, build their skills and educate them on gender discrimination, atrocities and violence.

DAY-NRLM, MoRD, with support from the 'Initiative for What Works for the Advancement of Women and Girls in the Economy (IWWAGE)' has compiled this case study document "Together We Can" that seeks to understand how and why GBV takes place, while also showcasing availability and access to institutional mechanisms that can help address such cases. The document applauds the efforts of some outstanding women who, with their grit and courage, have set an example for others in the community to resist and fight against cases of violence.

I appreciate the effort put in by the gender teams of the national and state missions, and especially the bold women who shared their personal stories of struggles and triumph for the purpose of developing this document. I would also like to commend the efforts of IWWAGE for constantly rendering the technical expertise required to support the work being undertaken by NRLM to advance gender equality and women's empowerment.

(Nita Kejrewal)

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IWWAGE would like offer special thanks to the IB / CB team from DAY-NRLM for providing direction to this document. Finally, we would like to extend our heartfelt gratitude to all the women who took the time to share their stories for this document. Nothing we do would be possible without their strength, resilience and dedication.

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Abbreviations

ADS	:	Area Development Society
BDO	:	Block Development Officer
CDPO	:	Child Development Project Officer
CDS	:	Community Development Society
CLF	:	Cluster-Level Federation
CRP	:	Community Resources Person
DAY-NRLM	:	Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana-National Rural Livelihoods Mission
EC	:	Executive Council
GF	:	Gender Forum
GBV	:	Gender-based Violence
GPP	:	Gender Point Person
GRC	:	Gender Resource Centre
ICDS	:	Integrated Child Development Services
MGNREGA	:	Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act
RDO	:	Rural Development Officer
SAC	:	Social Action Committee
SHG	:	Self Help Group
SRLM	:	State Rural Livelihoods Mission
VO	:	Village Organisation

Executive Summary

Existing social norms make women and girls more vulnerable to physical, sexual and emotional abuse compared to boys and men. In such situations, women draw strength and hope from the collectives they belong to and institutional mechanisms available to them at the village, block and district level through the engendered strategy of the National Rural Livelihoods Mission. The NRLM efforts are directed towards empowering women's collectives with information on their rights and entitlements, along with avenues to seek redressal for their grievances. The on-ground experiences reveal that women are able to not only resolve issues at community level, but also reach out to formal redressal mechanisms for resolution of higher order challenges.

This compendium is a collection of stories of grit, perseverance and support offered by women's collectives and institutional mechanisms available within the DAY-NRLM ecosystem in their fight against gender-based violence. It encapsulates ten stories across six States of India with the objective of sharing learnings of how an issue of such complexity can be addressed using DAY-NRLM's engendered strategies. All the names in the stories have been changed to protect the identities of women and their families involved.

Some stories are unique to tribal contexts, like Phulmani's fight against witch-hunting in Jharkhand. With the CLF's intervention, over 400 women from 20 VOs rallied against witch hunting, followed by a written commitment by Panchayat officials to protect not only Phulmani, but all women from witch hunting. Rita's story from Assam highlights how she was able to draw strength from the support offered by her natal family along with the strategies applied by the VO to ensure an end to the domestic violence meted

out by her husband. Sita's story from Madhya Pradesh unravels her struggle for economic independence after she was deserted by her husband, and documents the support she received from Samta Sakhis. Unlike Rita from Assam, Kamli from Madhya Pradesh did not receive support from her natal home, and the efforts by the Self Help Group (SHG) and the Cluster Level Federation (CLF) were unsuccessful in changing her husband's mindset. Her struggle with domestic violence ended only with the intervention from the Gender Justice Centre. Lakshmi was traumatised by her son's abusive behaviour. When repeated police complaints did not work, Snehitha Gender Help Desk, Kerala facilitated a response from the Revenue Divisional Officer, Panchayat President and the Police. Reshmi's husband was addicted to pornographic videos, and forced her into performing sexual acts against her will. Refusal to give into his whims resulted in serious injuries to her. Snehitha aided her with medical, legal and counselling support.

Lalitha's story from Andhra Pradesh brings out the circumstances that lead to horrors of trafficking for sexual exploitation. Support from the Gender Community Resource Person (CRP) not just busted the trafficking network, but helped her secure a loan for livelihood support. The second story from Andhra Pradesh highlights the issue of child marriage and how the gender CRP Preethi was able to prevent its solemnisation through appropriate mechanisms despite resistance from the families of the bride and groom. The incident from Nagaland stands out as it highlights the issue of wage parity. The issue was discussed in the SHG meetings followed by the VO SAC, and a formal appeal to the Village Council, which decided to increase the wages for all field-related work for women.

Introduction

Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana-National Rural Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NRLM) is a flagship scheme implemented by the Ministry of Rural Development to address multidimensional poverty and create livelihood opportunities for the rural poor. It endeavours to achieve this by building strong institutions of the poor and their federated structures. DAY-NRLM's interventions underline the fact that there are multiple intersectional vulnerabilities and deprivations that the poor face. There is a significant gender gap in well-being with studies¹ highlighting multidimensional poverty as being more prevalent among women than men. Against this backdrop, the Mission works with rural women in hundreds of villages in India to enhance their agency as economic actors and, through them, impact the overall well-being of the household while boosting the rural economy.

The Mission is one of India's largest programmes focused on social and economic empowerment of rural women, envisioning a transformational impact on gender and poverty. It organises rural women into well-structured institutions that support them with access to resources and opportunities and enable them to emerge as empowered social and economic actors. These institutions are founded on the vision of mobilising, building and sustaining specialised institutions of the poor as a prerequisite and core investment for large-scale poverty reduction. A well-planned gender responsive institutional structure has been put in place to address gender norms which impede

women's capacities to emerge as robust economic players. Through platforms such as Gender Forums (GFs) and Social Action Committees (SACs), Village Organisations (VOs) and Cluster-Level Federations (CLFs), the Mission strives to create awareness on women's rights and address multiple issues through linkages with public institutions.

With a robust vision and well-defined strategy for poverty alleviation and gender responsive implementation of DAY-NRLM activities, the differential needs of women are continuously being discussed at these institutional platforms and integrated in the development planning process to achieve the objective of increased agency of women. The collective experiences of women, their mobilisation and consciousness raising has led them to seek support of these platforms to challenge varied social issues ranging from child marriage to individual and community violence, asset ownership, governance, and so forth. Using the lens of women's rights perspective, these institutional mechanisms show how a focus on building and strengthening the collective and individual identities of women by consistently working on increasing their gender consciousness, enabling an understanding of the political economy and their position in the development process can play a significant role in reducing their vulnerabilities in the household and at the community level.

DAY-NRLM's gender mainstreaming strategy emphasises the need for gender-specific policies and interventions with

¹https://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/2021_mpi_report_en.pdf



a focus on the rights-based approach as well as an increased need for gender sensitisation and capacity building. Gender interventions at the Mission start at the base level with the Self Help Groups (SHGs) and progressively move up to the block level. Community Resources Persons (CRPs) play a critical role in pushing the gender agenda from the base to the Gender Justice Centres (GJCs) level. They also support the institutions in addressing various issues impacting the lives of women.

The Institutional Architecture to Address Gender and Rights-Based Issues of Women

A. Gender Point Person

The Gender Point Person (GPP) is a self-motivated, sensitised and proactive member of the SHG who is willing to devote time to support SHG members in dealing with gender-related issues and help build their capacities to avail services, rights

and entitlements. GPP is the first point of contact at the village-level to support the women who are facing gender/social issues. She is a key link between the community and its institutions in creating an enabling environment for women to address all issues around gender inequity. To help women SHG members mitigate gender-related issues, a GPP is responsible for addressing such issues at the SHG-level and escalating them to the next level. There is one GPP in each SHG.

B. Sakhi Manch (GPP Collective)

The collective is a solidarity forum which is a consolidation of GPPs at the village-level and ensures discussion and intervention on gender issues.

C. Village Organisation Social Action Committee (VO SAC)

VO SAC is formed within a month of VO formation with three to five members from the VO Executive Committee and two GPPs from the Sakhi Manch as ex-officio members. The VO SAC conducts

meetings once a month before the VO meeting is organised. Its role is mainly focused on developing gender action plans and intervening on gender and social issues.

D. Gender Forum (GF) at Gram Panchayat-level

The GF is a space for discussions, deliberations and resolution on gender issues, entitlements, needs, and so forth. It works at the village/Gram Panchayat level and comprises of key stakeholders such as elected representatives, Accredited Social Health Activists, Auxiliary Nursing Midwives, members of line departments and community-based organisations, other frontline workers, and VO SAC members who address prioritised gender issues. The GF works in convergence with frontline workers to access entitlements and rights, services and schemes of various departments, resolve issues of violation of rights, gender-based violence, etc.

E. Cluster-Level Federation Social Action Committees (CLF SAC)

At the cluster-level, SACs are formed within three months of the formation of CLF and consist of three to five members from the VO leadership. The CLF SAC can take up practical and strategic gender needs in its constituency. CLF SAC can work with block-level officials, such as Block Development Officer (BDO), Child Development Project Officer (CDPO), Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) supervisor, the police department, education officer, on higher-order issues or issues that are escalated from the VO level. The role of CLF SAC is to review, support and monitor the work of VO SACs;

monitor the planning and implementation progress of the Gender Action Plan at the VO level; monitor the training programmes of community cadres and the community; develop an action plan based on the gender plan submitted by the VO; and intervene to facilitate access to entitlements, schemes and services, among other responsibilities. CLF SAC can resolve cases with the support of GPPs and VO SACs. If some cases cannot be resolved at its level, it can approach the police station and a lawyer at the cluster/block level. If necessary, the case can be sent to the district administration depending on its nature and severity.

F. Gender Forum (GF) at the Block Level

The GF at the block level comprises of elected representative of the Panchayat, BDO, CDPO, ICDS supervisor, health officials, education officials, police, etc. The forum meets once a month to address issues raised by the CLF SAC. At the Gender Forum, all practical and strategic gender issues that have not been resolved at the VO level, CLF level or Panchayat level Gender Forum can be discussed in detail with stakeholders.

G. Gender Resource Centre (GRC)

The GRC at the block level are managed by the CLF to enable women to access their rights and get support in resolving issues such as education, child/early marriages, violence against women and girls, violation of rights, female infanticide and foeticide, human trafficking, and so forth. Also known as Lok Adhikar Kendras, GRCs work as centres to provide information and help to connect distant and far-off villages to the GRC.

The GRC is a huge advantage for the government as well as for the women collectives as it establishes the last mile connect with the women's federations for claiming rights and entitlements. It helps government institutions to directly connect with women's federations to hear their voices, bring women closer to government institutions, and enable them to know and access their rights and entitlements. This helps to connect varied gender issues with the relevant line departments for expeditious actions. GRC provide a parallel citizen space with the governance machinery to organically and systematically interject gender in the development planning process. At an individual level, the GJC, as an institution, gives women the confidence to reach out to institutions and once their faith is established that systems are working and addressing their needs, a trickle-down effect is created. It bolsters the confidence of the other women in the community to reach out and use this critical institutional mechanism to address gender issues.² They are also known as Lok Adhikar Kendras.

Gender-based Violence and Institutional Mechanisms

Globally, it is estimated one in every three women have faced violence in their lifetime. Most violence against women is perpetrated within the homes and most often by current or former spouses or intimate partners. In the year 2020, it was

estimated that a woman or girl was killed every 11 minutes in her home.³ Despite this, less than 40 per cent of the women experiencing violence seek help. In the Indian context, the prevalence of lifetime physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence is 29.3 percent.⁴ It is estimated that there has been an increase in incidences of gender-based violence with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The lockdowns resulted in women and girls being limited to their own homes which often are the primary sites of violence. The National Commission of Women in India reported a two-and-a-half times increase in domestic violence cases within four months of the start of the pandemic in 2020.⁵ Women rarely seek help from formal institutions, especially the police, even though the government has implemented some noteworthy measures to counter gender-based violence such as the establishment of an Emergency Response Support System through the pan India helpline of 112 or the integrated One Stop Centres Schemes. Despite India's commitment to gender equality, India ranks 123 out of 189 countries on the Gender Inequality Index reported in the Human Development Report 2020.⁶ This indicates the need for concerted multisectoral interventions in order to address issues of gender equality in India.

DAY-NRLM's gender integration approach is aimed at mitigating this situation by using a gender lens to shape policies and programmes in all its verticals. Its grassroots-based institutional structures

²Handbook-on-institutional-mechanisms-for-addressing-gender-issues.pdf.IWWAGE

³<https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures>

⁴<https://evaw-global-database.unwomen.org/en/countries/asia/india#4>

⁵<https://www.theigc.org/blog/the-growing-concern-around-violence-against-women-in-india-where-do-we-stand/>

⁶<https://hdr.undp.org/system/files/documents/hdr2020pdf.pdf>



are geared to generate gendered social action through an ecosystem that consists of community-based and government actors. For example, financial inclusion of women is promoted through their individual ownership of bank accounts or offering them customised financial products that address gender specific vulnerabilities. It continuously seeks to answer some of the following gender-centric questions through its institutions and programmes: How can women's economic identity, independent to that of men, be strengthened? Can women's control over economic resources be advanced through promoting ownership of assets in their name or women led or women owned enterprises? Or by imparting them skills, market information and technical know-how? Can women's

food security and nutrition levels, and those of their children be improved through promotion of nutrition sensitive agriculture and kitchen gardens? NRLM's differentiated strategies are also aimed at the most vulnerable – elderly women, those with disabilities, marginalised and excluded women, survivors of violence, trafficked women, and so on. The idea is to recognise the extreme vulnerabilities faced by these groups and ensure targeted use of funds to address their needs.

This compendium of case studies from different states across India is an attempt to capture the various redressal mechanisms being employed by the institutional architecture put in place under the Mission to address Gender-based Violence.

Andhra Pradesh

Acting against Human Trafficking

A widowed woman, Lalitha from Talupula mandal, Ananthpur district in her anxiety to make ends meet and care for her children, was trapped by a human trafficking racket. She was lured by Lakshmi Devi who offered to help her find work as a domestic worker in Mumbai. In reality, Lakshmi Devi ran a brothel in Mumbai and was part of a human trafficking network. Upon reaching Mumbai, Lalitha was forced her into commercial sex work, where she suffered severe physical and mental abuse in addition to sexual exploitation. After several years, she got the opportunity to return to her village to meet her children. That is when she heard about Gender CRPs. She saw them as a way out of her difficult situation and took down their contact details. She was unable to gather the courage to tell her story while she was in her village. Upon her return to Mumbai, she managed to call the gender CRP and narrate her story. She also informed her family and shared her Mumbai address.

Her family together with the gender CRPs approached the police station to file a case against Lakshmi Devi. The Talupula mandal police then

contacted Mumbai police and rescued Lalitha as per protocols established under the Immoral Trafficking Prevention Act, 1956. Lakshmi Devi was apprehended and interrogated. The CRPs, the Mandal Federation OB and the Police helped with Lalitha's repatriation.

Thereafter, she underwent necessary health check-ups. She joined the SHG in her village through which she received and a loan of INR 25,000 from the Community Investment Fund under the Anti-Human Trafficking Project as well as INR 50,000 as bank loan for goat rearing. She also found an additional income source by ironing clothes in the village. She was linked to the Vulnerability Network formed under the Anti-trafficking project to help her access various schemes and entitlements, mental health support and legal assistance.

Today she lives a life of dignity and received support from her village who encouraged her to start afresh. One of her son's is married and the other is completing his education. Drawing learnings from this incident, the Village Organisation conducted refresher sessions on Human Trafficking among SHG members to support identification and redressal for future survivors.

The Anti-Human Trafficking Project, initiated in Andhra Pradesh in 2014 as part of NRLM, is being implemented in Chittoor, Cadappa and Anantapur districts. Gender CRPs have been identified for intense training and intervention activities to provide technical support to Mandal Samakhya and Zilla Samakhya on interventions related to human trafficking.

The Vulnerability Network has developed to include survivors of human trafficking who received support to heal from their experiences and build solidarity and mutual support. In addition, they are provided access to entitlements, health and mental health services, legal assistance and livelihood support. Members of vulnerability networks are included in SHGs and their federations.

Preventing Child Marriage

An SHG member, Preethi was promoted to the position of VO SAC member and later to Gender CRP. She took on the responsibility of creating awareness on gender-related topics such as human trafficking, dowry harassment, violence against women, family disputes, child marriages, legal instruments and mechanisms and diligently worked to resolve issues related to these matters within the community.

On one occasion, Preethi was invited to a wedding in the community in Gandla Penta mandal, Ananthapur which was to be held two days later. Being from the community, she realised that the bride and groom were both children. She immediately informed Childline-1098, following which the Anganwadi Worker, Village Sarpanch, Mandal Samakhya O.B,

Gender CRPs approached both parties to convince them to cancel the wedding. However, they were met with hostility from the families. The VO SAC took this matter to the police. The police sub-inspector tried to reason with the parents of the bride and groom but since both families were too conscious of their social status, they were adamant on seeing the wedding through. Instead, they started threatening the VO SAC members. The sub-inspector sternly informed that they were liable to imprisonment and a fine for breaking the provisions under the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006. Finally, the parents gave in and provided a written statement mentioning that they would solemnise the wedding only after the bride completed 18 years of age.

This intervention was possible due to awareness generation within the larger community and specific sessions for members of Village Organisations and Social Action Committees. In addition, they also addressed cases of other forms of gender-based violence during the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, when there were cases of heightened domestic violence, the VO SAC members had conversations with male perpetrators and exerted social pressure. Their work has also focused on admitting drop-out girl children to Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalyayas, resolving land disputes with the help of the Revenue Divisional Officer and providing access to entitlements such as Aadhar and ration cards to vulnerable women. Their strategies have included counselling, working with frontline workers and using legal instruments in prevention of issues and protection of survivors.

Assam

Standing Strong against Domestic Abuse

The mighty Brahmaputra and Kolong River flow through the picturesque district of Nagaon in Assam. For Rita Patar, a young woman from block Dolonghat in Nagaon, the natural beauty belies the trauma she has faced in her marital life. The physical and mental abuse by her husband started right after the birth of their first child in the year 2012. Rita lived with her husband and parents-in-laws after marriage, and problems began when she realised her husband was an alcoholic. Constant fights and Rita's mental and physical abuse by her husband became a routine. The abuse escalated with the birth of their first child. Rita's parents-in-law tried to resolve their differences, but to no avail.

In despair, the parents-in-law asked the young couple to move out of their home and live separately. Over time, Rita became a mother of two, however, the abuse continued unabated. One day when she could no longer bear the violence, Rita gathered courage to seek help. She initially wanted to escape it all, leaving her husband and children behind. But her maternal

instincts got the better of her, and she decided to return to her natal village with her younger child. Her older son was left behind with her husband.

She was determined to fight back and find a solution. Her maternal family was apprehensive of approaching the legal authorities because of expense and social rebuke. Rita and her parents therefore decided to seek support from the VO of which her mother was a part. She shared about her daughter's plight with the VO representatives.

The VO secretary responded immediately and called for a public meeting at Rita's parents' home. Coincidentally, on the day of the meeting, Rita's husband had come to take her back and found himself unable to escape participation in the meeting. The meeting was attended by members from all SHGs and the Gram Panchayat, as well as men and boys from the community. Rita narrated her struggle over the years and showed the marks of abuse and bruises all over her body. After day-long discussion and deliberation, Rita's husband finally confessed to his crimes. He pledged to turn over a new leaf, and not resort to any form of violence in the future. The Village

Sangathan stood like a rock with Rita, assuring her that, if the violence continued, together they would resort to legal help. Furthermore, the VO representatives ensured that regular follow-ups were conducted with Rita and her husband. Updates about Rita's well-being were also sought from her maternal family by the VO. Rita's parents-in-law have, however, not reconciled with their son.

Anupama Gramya Sangathan, a community-based organisation promoted by the Assam SRLM, under the aegis of the National Rural Livelihood Mission, became a ray of hope for Rita and her family when the dark cloud of incessant domestic violence threatened to overwhelm them. Each point of deliberation between the parties (Rita and her husband) was recorded in writing in the proceeding

copy of the VO. During the deliberations, Priyanka Bordoloi, the office bearer from the VO, played a critical role in the redressal process.

On the eve of International Women's Day celebration 2022, the CLF applauded the efforts of Anupama Gramya Sangathan and its office bearers for swift and effective action. She mentions that hers was not the only instance of such violence in her village. In meetings held by the VO, members make it a point to sensitise women on issues of gender-based violence. Since the violence is deeply rooted within the social and economic structure, they feel that there is a need to sensitise the men as well. This, they believe, can be achieved through awareness sessions with the community using the medium of their Village Organisation.

Jharkhand

Solidarity against Witch Hunting

Phulmani and Budheshwar, an elderly couple, live in Koleibira block of Simdega district in Jharkhand along with their family. They belong to the Chikbadaik weaver tribe, one of the 32 tribes of Jharkhand, traditionally well-known for its red border sari, widely worn by all tribal groups in the state. However, this family no longer engages in traditional weaving; instead, it ekes out a living through different sources of income, like most families in the area. Phulmani works in the nearby brick kiln, while her husband is a construction worker. Their daughter works as domestic worker in Delhi, while their son is in transport business. Their extended family includes Kalavati and Dhyanchand, who live in the same village and own a small grocery shop. The daughters-in-law of Phulmani and Kalavati are members of the same SHG.

Dhyanchand passed away in August 2020 after prolonged poor health. The grocery shop, which the family owned had been closed for long due to the pandemic and ill health of Dhyanchand. A few months after the death of Dhyanchand, his 12-year-old grandson opened the shop after a long duration. After a while, he ran back to his mother and narrated a strange tale. He said that he had

seen Phulmani inside the shop, who then transformed into a cat and ran away. Kalavati shared this story with the entire village, labelling Phulmani a witch with evil supernatural powers. A crowd of women gathered and decided to visit Phulmani's house.

When confronted, Phulmani denied the accusations and dismissed the story as fertile imagination of a child. Her woes, however, did not end there. The next day, the entire village gathered at her house, and she was forcibly pulled outside and brought to the middle of the village by the mob. Her hair was cut; she was disrobed and paraded across the village. Her son had to be a mute witness to this despicable act. One person in the crowd took a video of the entire incident and shared it with the police.

The CLF members immediately called an emergency meeting, where Phulmani's daughter-in-law narrated the incident. Knowing that there was a law against witch-hunting in Jharkhand, the CLF members decided to file an FIR and also help the family with INR 5,000 to cover emergency incidental needs. The CLF stood firmly against this shameful incident and pledged to provide protection to the family. Three days after the incident, in September 2020, the police came to the village and arrested nine people, mostly women, for defaming Phulmani.

The CLF called for another meeting, this time in the presence of representatives from 20 VOs to discuss redressal mechanisms for Phulmani. Representatives of the Jharkhand State Rural Livelihoods Mission (SRLM) were also present at this meeting. It was decided that, since the incident had caused Phulmani immense humiliation, she would be felicitated for her courage and her 'honour returned'. They were determined that 'what had been taken in public must also be returned in public'.

Later that month, over 400 women from 20 VOs of the CLF rallied against witch hunting in their own villages with placards. The entire crowd then marched towards Phulmani's village, raising slogans against witch hunting practices. On reaching the village, they brought Phulmani to the same platform where she was humiliated, only this time she was given a warm traditional welcome with garlands and music. The Panchayat representatives, school teachers and all other influential people of the village were also witness as the crowd gathered in support of the survivor to 'return her honour' symbolically. Several women spoke their heart out about this evil practice in public that day.

Phulmani was given saris, garlands, money and grain from 20 villages. Several of her fellow villagers asked for her forgiveness publicly. The Panchayat and other key opinion makers of the village made a

written commitment to protect not only Phulmani but of all women from witch hunting. Following this incident, a signature campaign was launched in six blocks of Simdega as well as other blocks of the 'Garima project'. A memorandum was drafted and all key community members including the Mukhia, ward member, Anganwadi Sevika, school teacher, Sahiya, traditional Gram Pradhan, SHG members, VO/CLF EC members took an oath and put their weight behind the campaign. Signatures of 20,000 villagers were submitted via district officials to the Chief Minister's office, Jharkhand.

Project 'Garima' (meaning dignity) was launched in April 2020 in Jharkhand on behest of the Chief Minister to restore dignity of women branded as 'witches' with the objective of eradication of the practice by March 2023. The project aims to reach 2,068 villages of 342 Gram Panchayats in 25 selected blocks of Bokaro, Gumla, Khunti, Lohardaga, Simdega, West Singhbhum and Latehar. In addition to awareness generation to curb the practice, efforts are being made to identify women suffering from accusations of witchcraft and provide them equal status in society by linking them with government schemes and livelihood support under the Jharkhand State Livelihood Promotion Society (JSLPS).

Kerala

Providing Succour in Old Age

Demographic transition has resulted in a rapidly growing elderly population in Kerala. Older people are often abandoned as the younger generation migrates to other parts of the country and abroad. Older women, especially, face severe isolation and abuse as they do not usually own assets and are taken care of only when they can work and contribute to domestic chores.

Kudumbashree, in alignment with its policy of elderly inclusion, has formed neighbourhood groups for the elderly across the state. Snehitha Gender Help Desk, its 24x7 helpline, was set up to support women and children in distress and addresses grievances of the older population. Lakshmi, a 54-year-old woman from Thrissur district contacted Snehitha because of her son's abusive behaviour. His neglect and mistreatment had forced her to fend for herself by getting Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) work. She had made

repeated complaints at the police station but to no avail as her son had political clout.

One day, she was locked out of the house and had to forgo food and medicines; she spent long hours in the backyard. She then approached an Anganwadi worker for help who contacted Snehitha for assistance.

The Community Development Society (CDS)⁷ and the ward member tried to contact the son without success. The police refused to act. A detailed complaint had to be given to the Revenue Divisional Officer (RDO) who asked the police to take action. The counsellor helped the woman to draft the complaint and submit it at the police station. Finally, the Panchayat president and the police intervened and warned the son to abstain from his abusive behaviour. The son and his family were asked to leave the house and the woman was given full right of residence. The woman was then able to live peacefully. Members of the Area Development Society (ADS)⁸ and the counsellor conducted monthly follow-up and ensured that the woman was safe and secure.

⁷Community Development Society in Kerala is similar to Cluster Level Federation in other states of India

⁸Area Development Society in Kerala is equivalent to Village Organisations in other states of India

Snehitha supports the most vulnerable and marginalised social categories and ensures that concerted efforts are made with the help of institutions such as SHGs, ADS, CDS, local self-governments, the police and counsellors.

Dealing with Domestic Violence

The practice of Mysore marriage is widely prevalent in the bordering districts of Tamil Nādu, Kerala and Karnataka. These are forced interstate marriages in areas with high rates of poverty, illiteracy and social backwardness. Families facing economic distress are pushed into marrying off their daughters to men from bordering States. The legal validity of many of these marriages is questionable and the issues such as violence towards brides, ill-treatment, desertion and non-payment of maintenance to wife and children are common. Often these marriages end with women and girls being deserted by both the natal and marital home.

A 27-year-old woman, Rehmat was married off to a man living in Udumalaipettai, Tamil Nādu. She had to discontinue her studies because of her family's extremely precarious economic situation which also compelled her family to marry her off into the neighbouring state. However, no prior inquiries were attempted before the marriage about the groom who turned out to be an alcoholic. He would engage in severe violence after drinking and wouldn't provide any economic support. When she came to her parents' place to deliver her son, not even once did he visit her or the child.

On being referred to Snehitha, she received counselling and support to engage in income generation activities. Her application for livelihood support was submitted to the Snehitha Gender Help Desk. Through the Athijeevanam project,⁹ Rehmat was provided with financial support of Rs. 20,000/- which she used to purchase a cow. Thus, cow rearing and sale of milk provided her a stable source of income and financial independence. She also has support from her neighbourhood and community members in her natal village.

As Kudumbashree focusses on economic activities and livelihoods, women survivors are also economically rehabilitated. They are provided training, hand-holding support as well as access to credit through ADS and CDS.

Overcoming the Stigma on Sexual Violence within Marriage

Sexual abuse and rape within marriages are issues that are shrouded in silence and secrecy; they are hardly even mentioned in the public sphere and are much less the subject of a complaint. It is considered a man's prerogative to behave as he likes in a sexual relationship with his wife or to objectify her.

When a young woman Reshmi of 27 years from Pathanamthitta district got married, her relatively well-off parents gave a dowry of INR 1 crore. However, her husband was addicted to watching pornographic videos and wanted her to re-enact those sexual acts. When she refused, he sexually

⁹Ajeeveitham project has provisions for extending interest free loans to victims of human trafficking

assaulted her. Unable to bear the torture, she approached Snehitha.

Snehitha stepped in to address her trauma through mental and emotional support and also referred her to relevant agencies for legal recourse- She was referred to Adoor General Hospital, the local self-government, the District Legal Services Authority (DLSA) and a protection officer. Snehitha extended counselling and therapeutic support. A case was registered under the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 through Snehitha after which she received legal support including protection orders from the protection officer as well as support in filing for her divorce petition through the DLSA. She also received medical aid from the hospital and counselling sessions with a trained therapist. She has now returned to her marital home and has resumed her education.

Snehitha has offered women a space for voicing issues and grievances that are considered taboo or shameful. The stigma has been overcome through gender self-learning modules rolled out in CDSs, ADSs and SHGs by gender resource persons. Internalisation of gender concepts, realisation of gender-based violence and the confidence to protest had led in reporting issues. Institutionalisation of the system and its responsiveness have led in resolving the issues.

GRCs in all Panchayats, Snehitha Gender Help Desks in all districts supported by the Government of Kerala, vigilant groups at the ward level, sensitisation of all stakeholders and concerted action have led to the addressing and combating of a multiplicity of gender-based violence cases.

Madhya Pradesh

Braving all Odds for the Right to Livelihood

Sita has been part of the SHG in her village situated in Niwas block, Mandla district, since 2012. When she was seven months pregnant, her husband left her to marry again. Despite pressure from her parents-in-law to leave her matrimonial house, she stayed. With her changed situation at home, she wanted to become economically self-reliant and started exploring ideas for a sustainable livelihood. She discovered an abandoned community pond outside the village that was once used for fish rearing. The pond had been managed by a men's Samooch (SHG) from the same village but the project had stalled due to some issues in the group management. Looking at the possibility of starting fish rearing in the abandoned community pond, Sita initiated a discussion in her SHG. She gathered 10 fellow SHG women who were willing to partner with her in this venture. After receiving the Panchayat's permission, the women cleaned the pond and started fish rearing in it. Eventually, their hard work bore fruit as their venture started getting noticed by villagers and became profitable.

It was then that some members of the men's Samooch approached them with an offer to collaborate and 'help' the women sell their produce in the block market. The women

collectively rejected the proposition, emphasising that they would sell their produce themselves. By the time the first lot of fish was sold, the men approached the Panchayat, insisting on their collaboration with the women. Panchayat's verdict favoured the men, asking women to include them in fish rearing and selling. However, the women rejected the Panchayat's verdict on the ground that they had acquired permission for fish rearing from the Panchayat itself and had made the venture profitable with their sheer hard work and dedication. This led to a hostile environment for the 10 women within their homes and in the community at large. They were renounced by the Panchayat and thereby the whole village so that they would be pressured to agree with the Panchayat's decision.

The situation came to a head when during the wedding of the daughter of one of the women who was fish rearing, the village collectively decided to boycott the occasion. Dejected yet determined, the 10 women stood their ground and organised the marriage by themselves. Realising that the women would not bend, the men complained to the police and even threatened the women and their families. They started harassing the women while they walked to the pond. They also unfairly insisted that the women should either accept their collaboration or pay them compensation.

The women approached various departments with complaints against the men's unlawful demands and the Panchayat's arbitrary decision. Left with limited options, the women approached the District Chief Executive Officer and the District Magistrate at the 'Jan Sunvai' because of which a surprise visit was made by the district officers to the village to arrive at a sustainable solution. In the meeting, it was decided that the women held a legitimate right over the fish rearing pond. However, the working rights over the community pond would be rotational and would be transferred on a yearly basis between the women and the men – a solution agreeable to the women.

In this entire endeavour, Sita, who is a Samta Sakhi (Gender CRP) herself was supported by other Samta Sakhis and Lok Adhikar Kendra CLFs. The support of the larger collective was instrumental in instilling faith and confidence in the women in their fight for their right to livelihood. No amount of public sanction by the Panchayat and the larger community, harassment or threats by the men dampened the resolve of the women.

With the judgement from the higher officials in their favour, the women reclaimed their right to earn their livelihood in the community pond. Without hostility or harassment, they earn their livelihood, sell the produce and keep the profits to themselves.

Confronting Domestic Abuse

Kamli Bai from Niwas block of Mandla district was married off 14 years ago to a man chosen for her by her family. Her husband was an alcoholic, prone to violence after drinking. Kamli has been

at the receiving end of severe domestic violence since the early days of her marriage. She suffered in silence since cases like hers were common in her village and community.

However, a particularly violent episode compelled her to speak out. In an intoxicated state, Kamli's husband started beating her over the food she had cooked. She remembers being beaten on her back and head while her young, scared children howled of fear. The crying of the children and the yelling of the husband was so loud that the neighbours came to help. They pulled her away from her husband who was trying to strangle her with the ends of her sari. It was then that she realised that she had to act. She decided to go to her maternal home.

Such incidents are quite common in rural Madhya Pradesh. However, seldom is redressal sought against such horrific violence because societal norms reinforce the culture of silence and conformity, even during distress. In fact, in many cases, no support is available from the woman's maternal family and she is forced to return to the space of violence which she managed to escape and suffer again, perpetuating the vicious cycle.

Despite her unsupportive maternal family, Kamli found a ray of hope in Jyoti from the Mahila Aajeevika Sankul. Jyoti listened to Kamli's journey in detail and insisted that she attend the upcoming CLF meeting to share her ordeal. In the CLF meeting, it was decided that all members would come together and act on the matter. The CLF SAC often attend to domestic violence cases for redressal and take proactive steps to set an example for other women to come forward and not suffer domestic violence in silence. Just sharing her story and finding allies was cathartic for Kamli.

Since 2013, the Gender Justice Centre (GJC) has been active in Niwas block and Samata Sakhis have been actively conducting regular gender sessions to raise gender consciousness amongst women in the area. Over 200 women members form the three CLFs in the block assembled at Kamli's house to support her and find a solution. Led by the president of the nodal CLF and Samata Sakhis, the women spoke to Kamli and her husband. After hearing both sides, Kamli's husband was informed that domestic violence was a crime under the law and liable to strict punishment. If the violence continued, the CLF would collectively support Kamli in taking legal and social action. Frightened by consequences of his actions and the unity of the women, he accepted his

mistakes in of the presence of all the CLF members and asked for forgiveness. The Samata Sakhis and the CLF office bearers recorded the proceedings in writing and drafted an agreement highlighting the harm caused by the husband and the terms of settlement as decided by Kamli.

Post this incident, for two consecutive months, CLF office bearers and Samta Sakhis followed up with Kamli through regular home visits and on phone. After display of reasonable behaviour by her husband over time, the frequency of follow-up visit was reduced. The CLF and the Samta Sakhis were like rocks behind Kamli's struggle. Kamli is now a Samata Sakhi herself and wishes to make each home free from violence.

Nagaland

Seeking Wage Parity at the Grassroots

Mountains, rivers and forests define the geography of Nagaland. The state has a rich heritage of tribal culture with each tribal group having its own distinct customs. These customs have been handed down the generations and many are often patriarchal in nature. Since some of these gender unequal practices are deeply entrenched in the social fabric, they are tacitly accepted in general. In rural Nagaland, women toil in the fields especially during weeding, sowing and harvesting, yet they are paid less for the same work in comparison to men.

In Changtongya block of Mokokchung district, paying men more wages for the same work compared to women is an unwritten and understood practice. Even though both men and women put in equal number of hours, often men are paid more for wage work which includes strenuous activities such as wood cutting, stone quarrying, seed sowing, cleaning and harvesting. The issue of unfair wages is not voiced at community platforms such as the Village Council meeting which is the primary forum for justice and administrative decision making. Traditional practices restrict women from attending these meetings which are considered as male domains.

However, this issue of wage discrimination was discussed at the SHG meetings, with women voicing their sense of deprivation over the unfair practice. They also lamented the triple burden of household chores,

care work and productive labour outside of home. As a result, the case of unequal wages was brought up to the VO SAC of the village in Changtongya block. After discussion, the SAC members decided to talk over the issue of wage disparity with the Village Level Organisations (VLO) leaders; the issue was also discussed at the VLO Executive Council (EC) meetings.

The VO deliberated on the strategic steps that needed to be taken to address the issue. The members decided to first engage in one-to-one advocacy with the village elders. Subsequently, they officially approached the Village Council. The Village Council accepted the appeal and deliberated on the matter. In fact, having the issue discussed at the Village Council was in itself a huge achievement for the women, as these spaces are denied to women for arbitration. However, the feat was not achieved in a day. It was a protracted process where community cadres and SAC and VO EC members came together to seek justice. Collectively, they made an urgent appeal.

Finally, it was decided by the Village Council leaders to increase the wages for all field-related work for women and initiate the journey towards equal wages. As a result, women's wages were increased from INR 200 to INR 350 per day; for men the day wage remained INR 400. The VO hopes that, in the near future, this will change too and the same amount will be paid to both men and women for the same amount of work.



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