

Stories of Change: Samta Sakhis of Sheopur, Madhya Pradesh

Case Studies Report



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Suggested Citation

Sengupta, N., Uppal, R., Laha, S., & Banerjee, S. 2022. *Stories of Change: Samta Sakhis of Sheopur, Madhya Pradesh*. New Delhi: International Center for Research on Women.

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Acknowledgements

The Case Studies Report is based on in-depth interviews with Samta Sakhis and a detailed process documentation of the Gender Justice Program (GJP) implemented by Area Networking and Development Initiatives (ANANDI) in Sheopur district of Madhya Pradesh. We are deeply grateful to all research participants such as Master Trainers, Samta Sakhis, CLF Office Bearers, CLF SAC members, and MPSRLM state, district and block teams who shared their valuable time and rich experiences with us. We want to specially mention the Samta Sakhis who have been our constant source of inspiration in this research journey.

We thank the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF), the Initiative for What Works to Advance Women and Girls in the Economy (IWWAGE) and ANANDI for this opportunity to engage with an extremely vital piece of work.

We thank senior members of National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM), Ms. Nita Kejrewal, Ms. P. Usha Rani and Ms. Seema Bhaskaran for their guidance and inputs. We also thank officials at Madhya Pradesh State Rural Livelihoods Mission (MPSRLM) at Bhopal, Mr. L.M. Belwal, Mr. Raman Wadhwa (formerly MPSRLM*), Ms. Anita Vatsalya, Mr. Nemchand Jadav, Mr. Shailendra Bhadoria and Ms. Sushma Mishra, for their support. Our gratitude goes out to the District and Block teams of Sheopur District, MPSRLM, who extended tremendous support and cooperation during the research process, especially in helping us organize remote research activities during the COVID period.

We acknowledge with gratitude our colleagues at ICRW Asia- Perna Kumar for continuously mentoring and guiding us through this process, Ravi Verma and Pranita Achyut for their critical inputs, Sandeepa Fanda for program assistance, Nitya Agarwal and Akriti Jayant for communication support and liaising with multiple vendors. We also appreciate the transcription support provided by our interns, Soham Basu and Shalini Datta. We would like to thank Tripti Nainwal for copyediting support and Inzenius Consultancy Services for designing the infographics for the report.

We are grateful for our learnings from the work of several organizations in this space especially SWAYAM# project partners. The review meetings between the partners have been an immense source of learning and information. We also acknowledge the work of several individuals, organizations and institutes, for their free source publications and other knowledge products, which have contributed to our understanding and research.

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Through Strengthening Women's institutions for Agency and Empowerment (SWAYAM), IWWAGE is partnering with DAY-NRLM to provide technical assistance to support gender mainstreaming efforts across the Mission.

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List of Abbreviations

AAP	Annual Action Plan
ANANDI	Area Networking and Development Initiatives
BMGF	Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation
BMMU	Block Mission Management Unit
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CLF	Cluster Level Federation
CM	Chief Minister
CRP	Community Resource Person
CSO	Civil Society Organization
CTC	Community Training Center
DAY-NRLM	Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana- National Rural Livelihoods Mission
DMMU	District Mission Management Unit
DPM	District Program Manager
EC	Executive Committee
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GJP	Gender Justice Program
GM	Gender Mainstreaming
GPP	Gender Point Person
IB/CB	Institution Building/Capacity Building
ICRW	International Center for Research on Women
IDI	In-depth Interviews
IWWAGE	Initiative for What Works to Advance Women and Girls in the Economy
KII	Key Informant Interview
LAK	Lok Adhikar Kendra
MGNREGA	Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act
MP	Madhya Pradesh
MPSRLM	Madhya Pradesh State Rural Livelihoods Mission
NMMU	National Mission Management Unit
OB	Office Bearer
PALS	Participatory Action Learning System
SAC	Social Action Committee
SC	Scheduled Castes
SI/SD	Social Inclusion/Social Development
SHG	Self-help Group
SMMU	State Mission Management Unit
SPM	State Program Manager
SRLM	State Rural Livelihoods Mission
SS	Samta Sakhi
SWAYAM	Strengthening Women's Institution for Agency and Empowerment
VO	Village Organization
WCD	Women and Child Development

Glossary

<i>Adivasi</i>	Member of an indigenous tribe
<i>Aajeevika Mission</i>	Refers to National Rural Livelihoods Mission
<i>Anganwadi</i>	Centre providing health and nutritional care for children (up to 6 years) and their mothers in rural India - part of the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS); a government program in India
<i>Avedan</i>	Application
<i>Bada Sahab</i>	Senior officer
<i>Bank Mitra</i>	Refers to Community Resource Person creating bank linkages
<i>Chaprasi</i>	Peon
<i>Devrani</i>	Wife of younger brother-in-law
<i>Didi</i>	Sister
<i>Dukh Sukh</i>	ANANDI's PALS training tool on discrimination faced by women across their life cycle
<i>Gram Sabha</i>	General body of all villagers above 18 years of age, whose names are included in the electoral rolls for the Panchayat which meets at least four times per year
<i>Haatbazar</i>	Local marketplace
<i>Jaankari</i>	Information
<i>Janpad</i>	Unit of local governance at the block level
<i>Jati Praman Patra</i>	Caste certificate
<i>Jethani</i>	Wife of elder brother-in-law
<i>Karamcharis</i>	Workers
<i>Khadyan Parchi</i>	Food coupon
<i>Kirana/Kirane ka dukan</i>	Small grocery shop
<i>Kiska Palda Bhari</i>	ANANDI's PALS training tool on gender division of work and decision-making
<i>Kuposhan se Jung</i>	Refers to a government scheme in M.P. to fight against malnutrition among Sehariya tribals
<i>Lok Adhikar Kendra</i>	New institution set up by Samta Sakhis through GJP at block level for addressing women's rights and entitlements
<i>Mera Haq, Meri Pehchaan</i>	ANANDI's PALS training tool on women's rights and entitlements
<i>Munna Munni</i>	ANANDI's PALS training tool on gender socialization and discrimination between girl child and boy child
<i>Mukhiya</i>	Customary head of village



<i>Naka-bandi</i>	Blockade
<i>Nanad</i>	Husband's sister
<i>Nigrani Committee</i>	Monitoring Committee
<i>Panchayat</i>	Unit of local governance at the village level
<i>Patwari</i>	Block level land officer
<i>Prerak</i>	Book-keeper attached to the CLFs/VOs/SHGs, responsible for maintaining records of SHG loans and repayments
<i>Salwar</i>	Light trousers, popular as women's attire in South Asia
<i>Samaj</i>	Literally society but used here as immediate community
<i>Samta Sakhi</i>	Community Resource Person for Gender
<i>Saree</i>	Fabric elaborately draped around the body, one of the traditional attires of women in South Asia
<i>Sarpanch</i>	Elected Head of the Panchayat
<i>Swasthya Kendra</i>	Health center
<i>Tandav</i>	Wild dance
<i>Tehsil</i>	Revenue office
<i>Tehsildar</i>	Revenue officer

Introduction

The Case Studies are a documentation of the journeys of change of the Samta Sakhis appointed as part of the Gender Justice Program (GJP) in Sheopur and Karhal blocks of the Sheopur district of Madhya Pradesh (MP). The GJP was implemented by a CSO ANANDI (Area Networking and Development Initiatives), from 2019 to 2021 in collaboration with the Madhya Pradesh State Rural Livelihoods Mission (MPSRLM) with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) through the SWAYAM initiative, with IWWAGE (Initiative for What Works to Advance Women and Girls in the Economy) as an umbrella coordination and learning partner. This implementation was a pilot that ended in March 2021. After a brief gap¹ from April 2021 to August 2021, the GJP was resumed in Sheopur district as part of the larger gender upscaling strategy of MPSRLM. In fact, given the success of the pilot, MPSRLM has recently adopted GJP as a gender upscaling strategy across 18 districts (covering 19 blocks and 60 CLFs), including Sheopur.

The Samta Sakhis, a name given to Community Resource Persons (CRPs) for Gender, were the main agents of change envisaged under the GJP. They were meant to work closely with community institutions of MPSRLM—such as Cluster Level Federations (CLFs), Village Organizations (VOs), Self-help Groups (SHGs)

and their social action sub committees—to give gender training to members of community institutions and facilitate discussion and social action² on gender and social issues at the village and block levels. The GJP, in its pilot stage at Sheopur, also appointed three Master Trainers to oversee the work of the Samta Sakhis and support them in their day-to-day activities. This report focuses on the experiences of Samta Sakhis in the period between November 2019 and March 2021 and some reflections from the project break period (April–August 2021). It analyzes the changes they brought about in their lives and in the lives of women in their community, thereby transforming the role that institutions like SHGs, VOs and CLFs play in the rural community. The report also documents narratives of change in the voice of four Samta Sakhis and one Master Trainer. These are their voices from the ground, the stories of their struggle and survival and how they led the process of change in their own communities.

The report is divided into two parts. Section 1 introduces the GJP and the research methodology, before undertaking an in-depth analysis of the changes brought about by the Samta Sakhis. Section 2 presents the narratives of change of a few selected Samta Sakhis in their own voice and ends with a conclusion and discussion.

1 There was a gap from April 2021–August 2021 when most of the Samta Sakhis were not paid through the GJP. In this period, most Samta Sakhis continued to work in their own villages and also supported the LAK twice a week. Their regular activities across other villages were suspended due to lack of funds. Master Trainers and the Project Lead of ANANDI continued to support the Samta Sakhis and LAK in this period. This period is referred to as project gap/break/pause period across the report.

2 Social action here refers to individual or group behavior that involves interaction with other individuals, groups or institutions, geared towards achievement of individual or collective rights or social norm change. It involves individual accompaniment as well as collective action utilizing various platforms for realizing rights and entitlements of rural women.



1

Background and Analysis

1.1. --- About the Gender Justice Program

The GJP was one among the four gender pilots that aimed to mainstream gender into the Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana- National Rural Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NRLM) and State Rural Livelihood Missions (SRLM). It was supported by Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation in collaboration with DAY-NRLM. These pilots were part of a larger vision of gender mainstreaming within DAY-NRLM and were meant to demonstrate how gender could be integrated and embedded within the existing structures and programs of the DAY-NRLM. True to this

vision, GJP anchored itself within the existing structures, activities and priorities of MPSRLM, with an aim to develop rural women's voice and agency to claim their rights and entitlements. GJP focused on gender work across three pillars which are the three overarching strategies of the program: i) Gender Mainstreaming at the system level – changes in policy, staff capacity, monitoring mechanism etc., of MPSRLM across state, district and block; ii) Institutional Strengthening – by making community institutions more responsive to gender and social issues and iii) Feminist Leadership Development – by developing Samta Sakhis; a cadre of strong women community leaders.

The Gender Justice Program was implemented from 2019 to 2021 in Sheopur and Karhal blocks of Sheopur district. In each block, the program was launched in three CLFs each. In these six CLFs, there were initially 12 Samta Sakhis (two per CLF). Later, 12 additional Samta Sakhis were selected, bringing the total to 24 – four Samta Sakhis per CLF. ANANDI also employed three Master Trainers to mentor and support them in the field.

1.2 Role and Selection of Samta Sakhis

Samta Sakhis are 'Gender CRPs' attached to the CLFs, who conducted gender training and supported social action through the CLFs, VOs and SHGs. Samta Sakhis were envisaged as community leaders who would transform community institutional spaces from within and empower members of these spaces to raise gender issues and find solutions through leveraging multiple platforms of governance and administration. In the cascading model of training, ANANDI trained the Samta Sakhis, who in turn trained community members, especially at the CLF and VO levels. They were supported in their day-to-day work by three Master Trainers (two women and one man), who were employed by ANANDI but mostly drawn from the community itself. These Master Trainers supported and guided Samta Sakhis to lead social action across a range of issues. These included entitlement-related issues such as pension, identity cards, job cards, ration

cards; service and infrastructure-related issues such as water and health services; issues of land rights and even domestic violence. At the beginning of the program, the Master Trainers also led the social action and Samta Sakhis learned the skills by accompanying them to the field. Some of these issues were resolved at the village level through interactions with the Panchayat (including representations at Gram Sabhas). Those issues which required intervention by line departments at the block level were escalated to the Lok Adhikar Kendra (LAK). The LAK is an institution set up by the Samta Sakhis and anchored by the CLFs at the block level Janpad (Block Panchayat office), Tehsil (Revenue office) or an administrative office. It is managed by Samta Sakhis and Master Trainers. The LAK is a new institution set up through the GJP and is based on similar work done by ANANDI in Mandla district, MP in 2017. The Samta Sakhis and Master Trainers played an active role in setting up the LAK by liaising with government officials and obtaining a physical space for the office. Such liaising and negotiations created an enabling environment for the acceptance of LAK



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as a legitimate institutional space to raise community women's rights and entitlements issues. The LAK served as a bridge between block level administration and community institutions and facilitated access of community members to the relevant line departments. The Samta Sakhis and Master Trainers also worked closely with police stations and hospitals for resolution of various cases such as domestic violence and issue of disability certificates.

The Samta Sakhis were selected by the CLF. At the beginning of the program, the ANANDI team visited the six CLFs across Sheopur and Karhal blocks and asked them to select Samta Sakhis from among their members. The main criterion was that these should be women from marginalized social and economic backgrounds who have lived experiences of struggle and resilience, can move around and invest time in the program. Two additional criteria for this second batch of Samta Sakhis were: they should be educated as a lot of documentation work was required to record the social action undertaken; and they should belong to unrepresented geographies (villages) since both Sheopur and Karhal were large blocks and Samta Sakhis from different villages would enable deeper engagement with community institutions across these villages. The ANANDI project team, especially the Master Trainers and the Block Nodal officers played a more important role in the selection of the second batch of Samta Sakhis. This was different from the selection process for the first batch where CLFs had played the most important role in nominating Samta Sakhis. The first and second batch of Samta Sakhis worked in pairs, each pair managing about 16 to 18 VOs between them. They reported their activities every month during the CLF meeting and also planned the next month's activities in consultation with the CLF office bearers (OBs), the Nodal officer (the block level MPSRLM staff who oversees the work of the CLF) and the Preraks who were the book-keepers attached to the CLF and VOs.

1.3 Methodology for the Case Studies

The research team had undertaken process documentation of the GJP from January 2020 to March 2021 and collected information and insights through a series of research activities. These activities entailed

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with ANANDI project leadership and MPSRLM officials at the state level, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with the ANANDI field team, including Master Trainers, district and block staff of MPSRLM, CLF OBs, members of CLF Social Action Committees (SACs), and the Samta Sakhis. Additionally, two rounds of In-depth Interviews (IDIs) were conducted with selected Samta Sakhis and one Master Trainer. Section 1 of the report draws from all these research activities and undertakes a nuanced analysis of the field observations, findings and empirical evidence. It therefore incorporates the voices and reflections of all the Samta Sakhis and not only those with whom IDIs were conducted. In Section 2 on 'narratives of change', the research team draws exclusively from the IDIs with the Samta Sakhis. The attempt has been to retain as much of their original voice as possible, creating only some segues to connect the excerpts of the interviews together so that a coherent story emerges. The first round of IDIs were conducted between December 2020 and February 2021 and the last round during September 2021. Thus, while the focus of the stories is the Samta Sakhis' reflections on their life and work till March 2021, there are also some reflections on the period when the project had paused, and they were not being paid for their activities.

Given that this was research with human subjects, all procedures approved by the Institutional Review Board were followed, including informed consent, confidentiality, privacy and voluntary participation. Due to COVID-19, all the research activities from March 2020 onwards were shifted to remote methods (online or telephonic). Extra precaution and care were taken to ensure that the respondents' privacy and confidentiality is maintained. The date and time of the interviews were scheduled based on participants' convenience. The rapport building process with the participants was relatively easy, since the research team had met most of them (except the SAC members and the new batch of Samta Sakhis) face-to-face during field visits prior to COVID-19. This was also because of ANANDI's field team's active engagement and assistance in the recruitment of the participants. This enabled trust building between researcher and the participants despite the remote nature of the study. Care was taken to organize interviews and FGDs at a time convenient for the participants and most of them took calls either from their homes or at the CLF office before or after a scheduled CLF meeting.

To select Samta Sakhis for IDIs, the research team developed a set of criteria to ensure diverse representation across:

- Educational Qualification
- Marital Status
- Caste Background
- Batch (First/Second)
- Block/CLF
- Holding positions of leadership in CLF or other forums
- Level of engagement (very active, not so active)

Based on this, seven Samta Sakhis were chosen for the first round of IDIs. A subsequent follow-up round of IDIs was conducted with four of them. The rich experience shared by the Samta Sakhis across both the rounds has been immensely valuable in gaining an in-depth understanding of their journeys and has contributed to Section 1. The detailed personal narratives of four of these Samta Sakhis are mentioned in Section 2.

Additionally, an IDI was conducted with Aditi, one of the three Master Trainers appointed by ANANDI, who was herself a CLF member and resident of Karhal block. Therefore, her role in mentoring Samta Sakhis, supporting social action and ushering changes in her own life was also critical to document. Aditi's own narrative of change is also part of Section 2. The names of all the Samta Sakhis and Master Trainers have been changed in this document to retain confidentiality.

1.4 Analysis of the Journeys of Change

This section discusses the strategies, outcomes, enablers, barriers and mitigation strategies of feminist leadership development. It draws from various research activities such as FGDs with the project team, block and district level staff, CLF OBs, CLF-SAC, and FGDs and IDIs with Samta Sakhis to present an overall analysis of the different outcomes flowing from strategies.

1.4.1 Strategies of Feminist Leadership Development

When the ANANDI team began the GJP in Sheopur, they had a very clear set of strategies for feminist leadership development and community engagement. They were drawing on decades of work on similar interventions across various parts of the country, in particular from the LAK work in Baria, Gujarat and Niwas in the Mandla district, Madhya Pradesh. The GJP was a flexible model, responding and adapting to the needs on the ground as well as the priorities of the state. The key vision behind feminist leadership building was to foster gender transformative change in local communities through feminist leadership from those communities



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who would carry out consciousness raising and norm change activities. To that end, the specific operational strategies were:

- Continuous capacity building of Samta Sakhis.
- Cascading model of training where Samta Sakhis trained community members in CLFs, VOs and SHGs.
- Engaging Samta Sakhis in leading and facilitating social action at the village level and LAK.
- Engaging Samta Sakhis in leveraging various governance and administrative platforms for social action.

Continuous capacity building entailed different kinds of training, an exposure visit to Gujarat (to understand the functioning of the LAK there), as well as continuous mentoring and handholding on a day-to-day basis by Master Trainers and occasionally by senior ANANDI staff. ANANDI conducted an intensive five-day residential gender perspective training using their Participatory Action Learning System (PALS) training tools. Apart from basic concepts of gender, the training introduced the participants to the concept of rights and citizenship and identity documents such as the Aadhaar and MGNREGA cards. The training pedagogy was participatory and interactive. Songs, role-play and other activities were used to initiate discussions and conversations. Participants were encouraged to reflect on their own lives and the experiences of women in their community. Other trainings received by Samta Sakhis included LAK management and scheme-related training by the Department of Women and Child Development. The Master Trainers also participated in the first five-day gender perspective training in November 2019 with the first batch of Samta Sakhis.

After the gender perspective training, the Samta Sakhis were asked to train members of CLFs and VOs with the training tools developed by ANANDI, to which they had been introduced during their own training. This was the cascading model of training. Training tools included *Munna Munni, Dukh Sukh* (gender discrimination faced by a woman from the womb till the end of her life), *Kiska Palda Bhari* (recognition of women's work, sharing of household work by women and men, and women's share in decision-making) and *Mera Haq, Meri Pehchan* (a woman's identity as a worker/farmer as well as her rights and entitlements) etc.³ It was expected that the cascading model of training would not only build gender

perspectives among community women but also trigger discussions and help raise rights and entitlement-related issues, on which social action could be undertaken.

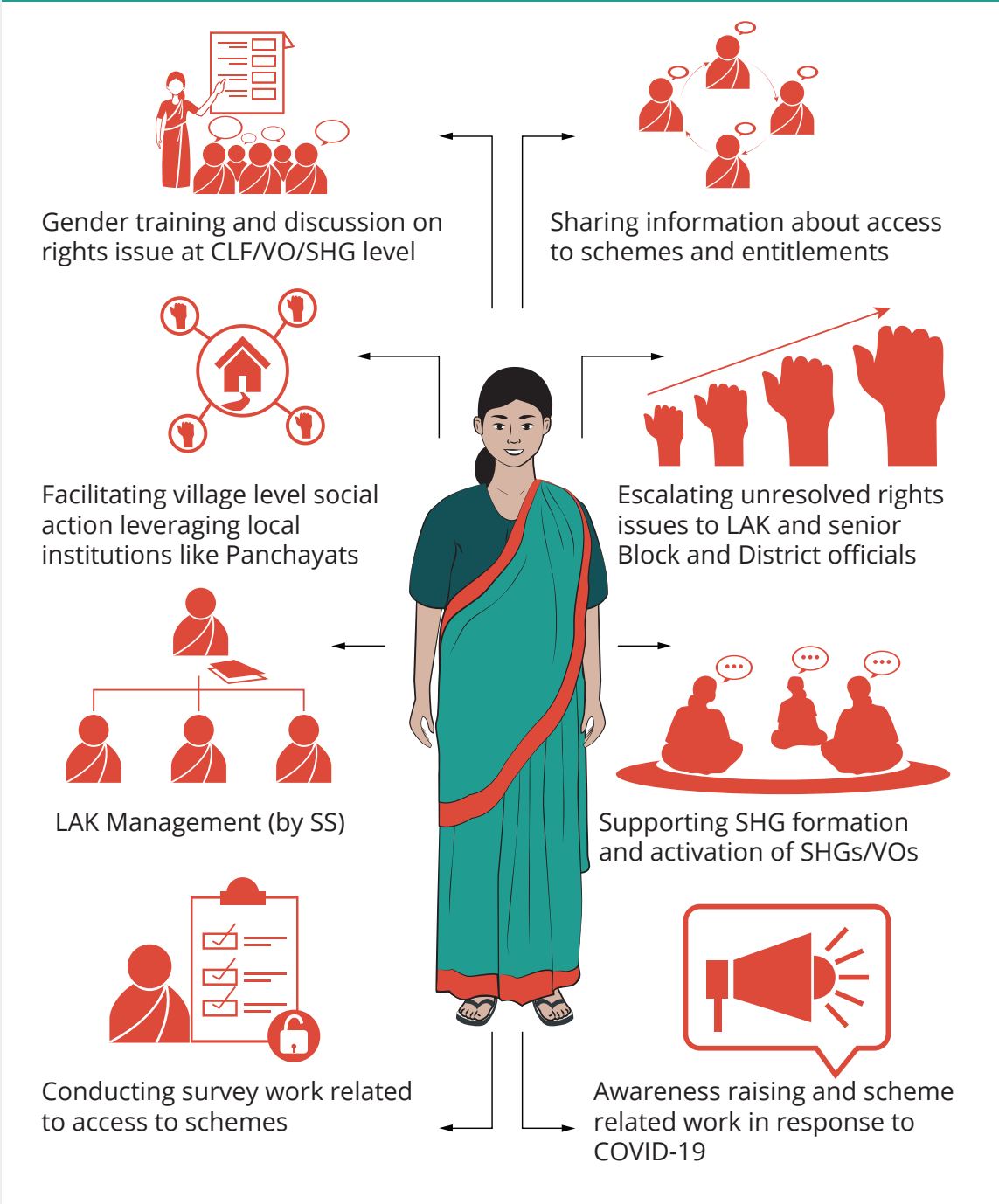
Samta Sakhis were also entrusted with the responsibility of facilitating and leading social action on various issues that were raised in the community. These included collective service-related issues such as drinking water, roads, streetlights and primary health centers; rights such as land and housing; entitlements such as widow, old age and disability pensions; ration, job cards under MGNREGA, identity cards related issues such as Aadhar cards and even issues of domestic violence. Participatory social action was encouraged so that SHG, VO, CLF and ordinary members of the community were also empowered to take action. Most of the social action needed to leverage governance and administrative platforms such as Gram Sabhas, Gram Panchayat offices, Janpad offices and line departments at the block and district levels. The cascading model of training, as well as social action, therefore offered direct opportunities to the Samta Sakhis to translate what they learnt into action and create pathways for change in their own lives and that of the community.

A critical component cutting across all these strategies was the mentoring and handholding support offered by the Master Trainers to Samta Sakhis. Master Trainers handhold Samta Sakhis through the trainings and social action conducted by them. They were present physically or telephonically to advise and train Samta Sakhis and problem solve in different situations. Each Master Trainer was responsible for work done by eight Samta Sakhis in two CLFs. Thus, between themselves the three Master Trainers supervised 24 Samta Sakhis in six CLFs across two blocks. On a day-to-day basis, they supported Samta Sakhis by offering them advice; leading or supporting training and social action till Samta Sakhis became confident to do these on their own; linking Samta Sakhis to officials at block and district level till they became familiar with the system; helping in documentation of activities; facilitating monthly review reflection meetings and monitoring all the work done by Samta Sakhis.

Figure 1 shows the different roles and functions of Samta Sakhis within the GJP.

3 Details of these tools can be obtained from the following links: <https://anandi-india.org/gender/>; <https://anandi-india.org/human-rights-of-women/>

Roles and Functions of Samta Sakhis



SS: Samta Sakhis ; LAK: Lok Adhikar Kendra

Figure 1: Roles and Functions of Samta Sakhis

1.4.2

Outcomes of Feminist Leadership Development

This subsection looks at various outcomes (as illustrated in Figure 2) of the above-mentioned strategies. It is important to bear in mind that these outcomes are processes of change rather than final end points. Given the short duration under study, the change was gradual and continuously evolving. Further, the outcomes are interlinked and the relationship between them is not linear; each outcome reinforces and complements the other.



1.4.2.1

Access to information and skills

All the Samta Sakhis talk about *jaankari* (information) and how that contributed to their ability to bring about multiple changes. This *jaankari* is not simply ‘information’ about schemes and entitlements, but also knowledge and perspectives on gender disparity and pathways of change. For example, Priya, while talking about the *jaankari* received through ANANDI’s five-day gender perspective training, recalled how the

tool *Kiska Palda Bhari* made her realize that no matter how much work women do, ‘*uski ginti nahi hoti*’ (It is not counted/valued). She also reflected on the *Mera Haq, Meri Pehchan* tool and said that she learnt how it is important for women to raise their voice and fight for their rights. After becoming a Samta Sakhi, Geeta learnt about her property rights and visited the Panchayat to put her name first in the house deeds, followed by her husband’s name.

There are countless examples of how both awareness of rights and information about schemes enabled Samta Sakhis to help people access entitlements such as ration cards and pensions because they knew whom to approach, where to go and which documents were required. Often, officials like a Panchayat Secretary could not simply turn them away because they came with that information and awareness. The attention of the Panchayat Secretary was also gained because the Samta Sakhis were connected to higher platforms at the Janpad office and also because of the collective pressure they were able to build at the village level. In fact, *jaankari* here refers also to knowledge of steps as well as strategies for social action. Samta Sakhis learnt as part of their job and training that what cannot be done by a single individual is often achieved through collective pressure, and what cannot be resolved at a particular level needs to be escalated to a higher level. In their narratives, we see a clear understanding of these processes.

They also talk about the skills they acquired through the trainings and social action. From a situation where they hesitated to speak to people outside their family, they gained self-confidence to approach and address anyone. Ankita, Sushma, Kiran, Priya all talk about how they have acquired the skill to talk to officials, speak at Gram Sabhas and train large groups of women. Initially, when they started training in VOs and CLFs, the Master Trainer would handhold and lead the training. Gradually, the Samta Sakhis developed training skills, became confident and could lead trainings on their own. In fact, when the second batch of Samta Sakhis joined, they were asked to work in pairs with the first batch because the latter were more experienced and could handhold them on the job. Many of Samta Sakhis from the first batch like Ankita or Kiran were not very educated and unable to write. However, over time, they successfully acquired and demonstrated skills for both training and negotiation.

1.4.2.2

Confidence, self-esteem, understanding of gender norms and ability to challenge them

Ankita, when asked about the change she has experienced since becoming a Samta Sakhi, points first to courage and confidence: *"Mera dar khatam ho gaya hai"* (My fears have disappeared). All the Samta Sakhis share this confidence. Kiran shared that earlier she was scared to go to other villages on her own. Now she walks both ways and feels no fear. Priya said that earlier she was hesitant to speak even to her male family members. Now she can talk to anyone, even *'gaon ke bare log'* (influential people in the village). Sushma, despite being a Sarpanch, struggled to talk in front of many people. Now she has gained so much confidence that she can address large gatherings, which also helps her to transact her role as a Sarpanch. The position of Samta Sakhis as leaders, their interaction with community members and officials as well as their access to information, have all boosted their confidence and self-esteem. On-the-job mentoring provided by Master Trainers also helped them immensely in this process. The knowledge of gender discrimination and how women's work and contribution are systematically devalued by society also helped restore a lot of their lost self-esteem. Ankita says that earlier, she silently put up with a lot of pressure at home, but now her voice is heard and respected in the household. Talking about courage and confidence, Kiran recounted how during the recent flood, she made a quick report of the damage in her village and shared it with higher authorities. Consequently, the Patwari (block level land officer) along with the Panchayat Secretary visited the village and took cognizance of the damage. Kiran attributes this to her role as Samta Sakhi, without which she could not have taken this step or known what to write and whom to write to. Even Aditi, the Master Trainer, who had been working for several years and taken several trainings, felt that the ANANDI training, her current role and the recognition she has received have deepened her understanding of gender, increased her confidence and helped her overcome her fears. She shared with the research team jokingly and with some pride, that while she had received TOT (Training of Trainer) earlier, it is only now as a Master Trainer that she has actualized that learning – she is now truly a Trainer of Trainers.

Samta Sakhis have also gained the confidence to speak across power structures; not only at Gram Panchayat level, but also at the Janpad level and even with Preraks and in a few cases, with Block Nodal officers. For instance, when an officer at the Janpad level was not cooperating, Samta Sakhis involved other stakeholders including the CEO, Janpad and District Program Manager (DPM), District Mission Management Unit (DMMU) to put pressure on and persuade the relevant officer to perform her role. In the case of Preraks, Samta Sakhis often raised their challenges of working with them at CLF meetings and in front of Nodal officers, creating accountability for the Preraks and persuading them to be cooperative and attentive to their work.

Further, all the Samta Sakhis and Master Trainers talked about their understanding of gender norms and the ways in which they have challenged these regressive beliefs and practices in their own households. During an FGD with Samta Sakhis, Geeta shared that she has built a house in her own name, and that she has claimed for herself the right to go out and interact with other people. In her own words, *"Hum bhi niklenge, kab tak ghar mei ghut ghut ke marenge, ghoonghat mei rahenge? Hamara bhi to adhikaar hai"* (We will also go out. For how long will we continue to suffocate inside the four walls of our homes and inside our veils? We too have rights). Almost all the Samta Sakhis depicted a strong understanding of the right to property and the importance of mobility. Many, like Ankita and Sushma, fought to include their names in the land title.

Most of the Samta Sakhis have been able to negotiate for greater mobility. They often encountered initial resistance from family members, but after the ANANDI project team met and explained the work to the family members, and after the Samta Sakhis started getting recognition from the community and government officials, the situation changed in most cases. In one or two instances, there was continued resistance, culminating even in violence, for example, when a Samta Sakhi took longer than usual to reach home after a day's work. In such cases, a show of strength by the Samta Sakhis and Master Trainers visiting collectively to counsel the family, became necessary. The fact that this work generates significant remuneration and is done to serve the greater good of the community, also helped in negotiating greater freedom of movement and timings. One of the Master Trainers reported that for a particular Samta Sakhi, Meenu, problems persisted despite negotiations and counseling, and this impacted

her performance. However, during an FGD, Meenu denied this saying that her husband had allowed her to even go for the Gujarat exposure visit. This contradiction between what the Master Trainer said and what Meenu reported could be because of Meenu's desire to highlight some of the positive changes and wins she has achieved within her domestic sphere, rather than the conflicts and resistances. The contradiction could also be a result of her discomfort in disclosing the resistance that she has been facing in her household.

Connected with the question of mobility, is also the issue of unpaid household work. The sole responsibility of this often lies with the women, restricting the time Samta Sakhis can devote to transacting their work. The tool *Kiska Palda Bhari* to which they were introduced during the five-day residential training and with which they had conducted training over a considerable period of time, talked precisely about the ceaseless cycle of women's unrecognized labor and their minimal share in decision making. When asked about what gender equality means to them, all the Samta Sakhis referred to this and talked about the need for women and men to participate equally in decision-making and all forms of work, whether inside the household or outside. Most of them have been able to initiate some changes in terms of sharing household work and decision-making. For example, Ankita shared that earlier she had the entire load of household work. Gradually, after joining ANANDI, she started discussing with her husband and sons how it was important for women and men to share all types of work, including household work. She explained that as a family, it was necessary that everyone participates in all types of work and decision-making. Gradually, her husband and sons became convinced and started taking on more responsibility at home. She fondly remembered that her husband, before his death earlier this year, always prepared hot food for her on the days when she was out for work. Aditi, Master Trainer, shared that all the members of her household share household work as well as decision making. She said that everyone sits together and everyone's voice is heard during decision making. Further, she expects her son to participate in household work, even though his wife is present. Priya mentioned that her husband now asks her opinion in everything including what seeds to sow and how to spend the income. Many Samta Sakhis have influenced household members about different issues. For example, Kiran, a widow, was able to persuade her brother-in-law to

continue with her daughter's college education and allow her to use a mobile phone. Priya also advocated for her sister-in-law's nursing training and even accessed a loan from the SHG to enable her to study.

Samta Sakhis also show a very pragmatic approach to change. They understand that change is gradual and does not always come through contestation. Ankita said that in her own household and also for the community, quarrels and fights can worsen the situation; it is better to speak nicely and persuade people using reason and patience. In their own homes, most Samta Sakhis took the route of explanation and sharing of ideas to initiate change such as mobility for women and sharing of household work. Given Samta Sakhis' strong articulation of rights, this pathway of change in the household through persuasion rather than open resistance seems strategic rather than submissive, and depicts their understanding of norm change as a gradual process through dialogue and mindset change. For the community, the process of challenging gender norms started with answering people when they questioned their stepping out for work. In response to comments like "*bari madam ban ke nikal rahi hai, pata nahi kahan jati hai*" (this woman is going out like a big madam, don't know where she goes), they explained about the work they do and sometimes even retorted with "*agar purush karamchari ho sakta hai, to mahila kyun nahin?*" (If men can be workers, why can't women?). One of the strategies for Samta Sakhis was to take their husband into confidence and gain their trust. This could be done by sharing about the work, taking him initially to some of the meetings and villages so that he understood the nature of work and did not suspect the wife of any 'immorality' (read: relationship with other men). Once their husbands supported them, they were able to negotiate both with families and people of the village. Further, as they worked and helped more and more people in the village through social action, people understood and stopped passing snide remarks about their mobility.

The other challenge to gender norms within the community was through visiting the Panchayat office and raising demands at Gram Sabhas, traditionally perceived to be male spaces. Ankita narrated an incident when they were questioned while visiting a Gram Sabha since it was considered to be men's domain and women never came to attend meetings. She brought back many more women to the Gram Sabha to claim their share in this space and raise

demands for pensions. Gradually their work for the village and their contacts with higher officials at the block level brought about a change and now many of the Samta Sakhis are received respectfully in Panchayat offices. Sushma shared that now, unlike earlier, more women than men visit the Panchayat office. The presence of Samta Sakhis' at the LAK also challenges gender norms and brings about visibility and the voice of community women in administrative offices, often seen as male spaces.

When asked about their vision of gender equality, the Samta Sakhis talked about structural as well as normative issues. Thus, they brought up issues of right to property, right to mobility and work, right to lead violence-free lives, right to education and sharing of household work. They also showed awareness of how caste discrimination intersects with gender discrimination. For example, Master Trainer Aditi mentioned that gender inequality is not only about women's oppression, but about oppression in any form. Only in the one case of Samta Sakhi Meenu, there seems to be some resistance to the idea of a woman claiming rights in contestation with men. She narrated an incident where the wife of a Sarpanch demanded a separate living and maintenance allowance when her abusive husband brought in a second wife. In Meenu's narrative, there is a discomfort with the fact that the wife wanted to move away despite the husband wanting her to stay, no matter that he was abusive or had remarried. The other Samta Sakhis do not show this discomfort at a woman wanting to stay separately from her husband. Their approach is to try their best to counsel the family so that wives and husbands can stay together in a violence-free and non-threatening environment. In case these negotiations fail and the abuse continues, they understand that the wife has a right to move away and demand maintenance or police action. Thus, Samta Sakhis do try their best to uphold familial and marital relations but not at the cost of women's safety and dignity.

Further, in a few instances, the translation of awareness of gender rights into action continued to be governed by social norms. For instance, in one case, a Samta Sakhi shared that she and her family have accumulated dowry for her sister-in-law's wedding because the prospective groom is very good. It is interesting to see that this Samta Sakhi had also advocated actively and funded that sister-in-law's nursing training. When asked why she was considering dowry, she said that

the groom is really good and would 'allow' her sister-in-law to work after marriage, thus, she is willing to give dowry to make this marriage happen. This shows that while this Samta Sakhi has questioned some societal norms, such as right to paid work, she has been unable to resist some others, like the payment of dowry. Challenging gender and societal norms are gradual and ongoing processes and sometimes one is able to resist some norms, while succumbing to others. However, it is important to note that such articulations, such as acceptance of dowry, by the Samta Sakhis are rare. In fact, most Samta Sakhis show a very strong awareness of women's rights, though the translation of these rights into action are at various stages of implementation in their households. In the words of Ankita, in a gender equal society, "all work should be divided equally between women and men, and women should have title to land, houses and equal rights to assets. Husband and wife should take decisions together and there should not be any violence against women".

1.4.2.3

Ability to lead and facilitate social action

The Samta Sakhis have worked on a range of issues such as widow pensions, old age pensions, disability pensions, issuing of caste certificates, Ayushman Bharat (health) cards and other identity cards, housing, water, land, job cards under MGNREGA and also on cases of domestic violence etc. During the COVID-19 period, they also worked actively with the district administration to spread awareness, help in quarantine of affected people including returnee migrants, link people to ration and job cards so that economic survival is ensured, engaging women to make masks and soaps, as well as dispelling misinformation and concerns around COVID-19. When the government announced the street vendor policy (INR 10,000 to each street vendor family), they were asked by district and block MPSRLM staff to identify street vendors and get them registered under the scheme. Due to their knowledge, confidence and desire to help, they also connected many people to banks and checked whether they had received benefits under different schemes, especially during the COVID-19 period. When beneficiaries did not receive money, they questioned district and block staff stating that it is very frustrating

for people to register their names and then not get the promised money.

While most cases arise during the gender training and discussion at VOs and are resolved through village level action or LAK, there are instances where Samta Sakhis have responded to issues they encountered during their travel or in other spaces. For example, Sushma narrated an incident when she was on her way to the bank and saw a woman lying on the road, writhing in pain because she was in labor. She immediately called up ANANDI project team members, who were close by and had a car, and took the woman to the hospital at Karhal. She waited at the hospital till the child was born and the mother and child were declared healthy. Realizing that the absence of a sub health center in the village put pregnant mothers at risk, Sushma exercised her powers as Sarpanch to get a sub health center started in her village. Now, with help from the hospital administration, the center is functioning well. Another case narrated by Samta Sakhi Priyanka described how she met a disabled man during a bus ride and helped him get his disability certificate despite the fact that he was from another district. In fact, she accompanied the man to the neighboring district hospital to get his disability certificate issued. She then explained the entire process of getting a disability pension through the Panchayat. By following her instructions, the man was able to access his pension.

Samta Sakhis have demonstrated the ability to lead and facilitate social action across a range of issues. They have also encouraged participatory social action, inspiring community women to own and participate in the process. For issues like water that affect a large number of people in the village, there is a greater incentive for people to come together and engage in action. During an FGD, Samta Sakhi, Sonu and Preeti mentioned that women from a certain village reported their drinking water problem during the training at the VO. There were no water taps in people's homes, as a result of which, women had to spend much time and effort traveling to fetch water. Apparently, the Panchayat was not responsive to their needs and the men also did not care since it was the women's responsibility to fetch water. The Samta Sakhis called the husbands of the women to the meeting and built a consensus around the need to solve the water problem. Thereafter, they wrote an *avedan* (application) and 40 women along with the Samta Sakhis met the Sarpanch. The Sarpanch initially tried to bypass the

issue but yielded under the collective pressure from the Samta Sakhis and processed the application. The next month, Sonu and Preeti found that the Sarpanch had arranged for a borewell construction. They applauded the development saying that "*mahilaon mei hi takat hoti hai*" (only women have the power). Narrating another incident, Samta Sakhi Rashmi recounted how the VO members formed a *Nigrani* (Monitoring) Committee to monitor the case of an alcoholic and abusive husband. The women went together to talk to the husband and family and persuaded him to give up alcohol which also led to a cessation of violence. The committee followed up on the case and kept a close watch over several months to monitor whether the family was able to be free from violence and alcoholism. However, such participatory action is still at a nascent stage.

Sometimes during such action, Samta Sakhis have to negotiate multiple challenges. Samta Sakhi Rashmi described how the Panchayat Secretary of a particular village was taking bribes from women to issue caste certificates necessary for making ration cards. When approached, the secretary lied and said that the women have lost their cards and nothing can be done about it. Rashmi strategized with the women and on a day when the Janpad CEO visited the Gram Panchayat, all these women visited the Panchayat and lodged a complaint about the Secretary. The CEO immediately took cognizance, especially seeing the Samta Sakhis there, rebuked the Secretary and instructed him to take prompt action. This yielded immediate results and caste certificates were issued for all those women. There are many more instances of how escalation or the threat of escalation of cases to the Janpad CEO have compelled Panchayat Secretaries and Sarpanches to take action. The strategy of collective pressure also works very well. Most cases are attempted to be resolved at the Panchayat level. For those which do not get resolved, the LAK helps the women. The Samta Sakhis at the LAK put women in touch with the relevant line departments, hospitals or police stations to smoothen their access to various entitlements and rights.

In fact, given how Samta Sakhis have been roped in for all kinds of work, including making lists of beneficiaries of different schemes, there is a propensity to treat them as service delivery people who compensate for the lack of human resources at district and block administrative offices. An important factor that saves them from becoming service delivery agents is their strong awareness of gender discrimination and rights and

their role as leaders in participatory social action that involves questioning and negotiating with authorities and challenging entrenched gender norms. Thus, while they do facilitate linkages to schemes and also perform different functions that enable better services, the process of doing these often involves dialogue to create awareness, generating consensus within community institutions and participatory action. Most importantly, their activities contribute to empowerment of individuals through knowledge and perspective building around rights and entitlements along with access to services and schemes.

All Samta Sakhis demonstrate abilities to conduct social action in various ways and at various levels. They initially needed the mentorship of Master Trainers to understand the different steps of the process. But gradually their confidence, knowledge and reach among Panchayats and block level offices increased, enabling them to take decisions and act on their own. They even empowered ordinary women to raise their demands and seek solutions from office bearers and duty bearers. As one Samta Sakhi reflected during an FGD, *“mahila ki takat ke age, kuch nahi hai”* (Nothing is impossible when confronted with womens’ strength).

1.4.2.4 Recognition and reach as a leader at household, community and state level

Samta Sakhis across the board shared that they have received a lot of recognition from the community as well as government officials. This was not always the case. Earlier, community members would heckle them and express doubts about what work they did and where they went. During VO meetings in other villages, women and men would often be skeptical saying that so many people have earlier come and gone recording their issues but nothing has been done. But as they started helping people in their own and other villages, people’s attitude changed. They started reaching out to Samta Sakhis for advice and assistance. Even within families, the detractors came around when they realized that the Samta Sakhis can help them with their own issues, such as making ration cards, getting caste certificates or initiating pensions. As shared by Ankita about her family members, *“unko pata hai ki mai unke saath jaungi to unka kaam ho jayega”* (they know



Photo Credit : Pradeep Gaurs/Shutterstock

that if I go with them, their work will get done). Priya, while describing the recognition she received from family members and the community due to her work, laughingly said *“ab main to famous hun”* (I am famous now).

Many of the Samta Sakhis talked about how the attitude of Sarpanches and Panchayat Secretaries have also changed over time. Ankita also took pride in how they are now offered chairs whenever they visit the Panchayat office. Geeta talked about how they are offered tea and listened to attentively at the Panchayat office. Even at the Janpad office, their identity is well established. Priyanka said that she knows the CEO of the Janpad well and can call him up at any point of time if need be. Ankita shared a story of how some women on their way to meet a Janpad official were turned away by a peon. But as soon as Ankita accompanied the women, the peon apologized and said that he would never have turned them away had he known that they were going to the LAK. In fact, the presence of the LAK and its operations has been critically important in creating recognition and visibility of Samta Sakhis at block administrative offices. If the Samta Sakhis lead an application, it is sure to be heard. This also helps in their reach and recognition within their own community and families. Aditi, Master Trainer, shared a story about how her husband was treated with extra respect at the Collector's office as soon as it was known that he was Aditi's husband. Such recognition by officials also helped them gain higher status and recognition within the families.

The social action led by them during COVID-19 in close association with the district administration also helped them gain legitimacy and recognition. Everyone, including the DPM, MPSRLM district team, Janpad CEO and Collector praised their work. It is a testimony to the recognition of their work that Samta Sakhis and Master Trainers are also invited to speak at different forums, including those organized by the district or MPSRLM/DAY-NRLM. The community also benefitted greatly, especially in their own villages and bestowed a seal of approval on their work. As a result, all the heckling and criticism have stopped and people are respectful towards them. The MPSRLM block and district teams during their FGDs also praised the work done by Samta Sakhis in the last two years. Reflecting on their work, a Block Nodal officer observed that Samta Sakhis reach where they cannot reach and if Samta Sakhis are present at a place, it is as good as the officers being

present themselves. A senior district team member shared, “Our District Collector also informed the Chief Minister about the work of the Samta Sakhis’ and how they have played a crucial role in creating awareness of and access to rights. Our sisters have become politically awakened. They can no longer be oppressed. They are capable of becoming District Panchayat Presidents”.

1.4.2.5

Social capital, friendship, solidarity and peer network

Sushma shared that sharing with other Samta Sakhis, and Master Trainers relieves her stress and tensions, *“Sukh dukh ki baatein kar ke dil halka ho jata hai”* (I feel lighter after sharing stories of pain and happiness). Thus, these people have become much more than professional colleagues, they have become friends who share their pain and joys. There are several instances of Samta Sakhis helping each other including tackling family resistance to mobility and work. In one instance, a Samta Sakhi faced violence at home because she returned late from a meeting. The very next day, the Master Trainer and several Samta Sakhis went and met the husband and explained why she got late and how it was wrong of him to perpetrate violence. They also pooled money to buy him a mobile phone so that she could inform her husband in case she got delayed in the future. While buying a mobile phone could be read as encouragement to surveillance, it also manifests the willingness of Samta Sakhis to spend their own money to help another Samta Sakhi tackle issues pragmatically at home.

The Samta Sakhis and Master Trainers have formed a close peer network helping and supporting each other. The monthly review reflection meeting was a formal platform for peer learning. They used to be continuously in touch; phones rang all through the day and Samta Sakhis and Master Trainers reached out to each other to support and share about their work. Master trainers, particularly, played the role of everyday mentors and participated in several social action cases undertaken by the Samta Sakhis. They also led the LAK work from the front sitting in the LAK offices and supporting Samta Sakhis in documentation and resolution of cases. Aditi, Master trainer, calls the Samta Sakhis, *“meri didiya”* (my sisters) and is extremely protective and supportive towards them. Some of the CLF and VO leaders also became important allies

of Samta Sakhis. Ankita narrated her own case where someone had grabbed her land. In this case, not only the Samta Sakhis, but also other VO leaders and members came forward and went up to the police station to support Ankita's claim.

However, the research team also came across a couple of instances of conflict between Samta Sakhis and also between Samta Sakhis and leaders of VOs and CLFs. For Samta Sakhis, the conflict had arisen primarily because some of the educated Samta Sakhis in the second batch had to take up the additional task of documentation, increasing their work burden. At the same time, some Samta Sakhis from the first batch felt that their importance was waning because of their inability to document. These problems were resolved mainly through the mediation of Master Trainers. Further, some of the CLF and VO leaders felt unhappy that Samta Sakhis were being paid, while they were not. Though all this did not hamper the program activities on ground, it did impact the solidarity building process in a few cases.

Nevertheless, this peer network became important social capital for the Samta Sakhis. These were people whom a Samta Sakhi could call upon to resolve a case or share a story or seek help on a personal family issue. Another important source of social capital was the contacts built among administrators and elected leaders. The Samta Sakhis' reach with the line department officials, the Janpad CEO, people in the District Collector's office, as well as the Sarpanch and Panchayat Secretaries formed an important social network which they drew upon to conduct social action and enable rural women's access to rights and entitlements. Thus, in the process of emerging as community leaders, the world of the Samta Sakhis' expanded beyond the four walls of their home and beyond familial circles.

1.4.3 Enablers, barriers and mitigation strategies

This section discusses the key enablers, barriers and mitigation strategies of the program, followed by a discussion on some of the challenges experienced by Samta Sakhis when the present phase of GJP ended in March 2021.

1.4.3.1 Enablers

One of the chief criterion for selection of Samta Sakhis was their experience of struggle and resilience. They came from marginalized economic and social backgrounds; some were single women, and some had to negotiate many challenges in their own lives. This helped them to relate to the issues and problems faced by other women in their communities and created a desire for change. As Samta Sakhi Rashmi said, *"Kyun ki main khud pareshaan hun, main dusre behen ke pareshaaniyon ko samajh sakti hun"* (Because I myself experience problems, I can understand the problems of my sisters). Thus, their own experience of struggle has been a key enabler for Samta Sakhis to empathize with other women's issues and fight for their rights.

For some Samta Sakhis, cooperative and supportive families worked as enablers. However, many had to negotiate resistance at home to be able to do their work. All of them had been part of the SHG/VO/CLF system for a very long time, which gave them familiarity with the institutional spaces within which they worked. This was an important enabler. Further, most of the Samta Sakhis, especially from the first batch, had prior experience of leadership positions in SHGs/VOs and some of them were also CRPs. This too enabled them in assuming the role of a community leader under the GJP.

It is also important to mention that a key enabler has been the GJP strategy of continuous mentoring and handholding by Master Trainers. The ability to reach out to the Master Trainers and the support they received on a day-to-day basis from them, greatly enhanced their confidence to go out into the field. Further, each outcome of feminist leadership development became an enabler for other outcomes. For example, social capital, friendship, solidarity and development of a peer network enabled them to conduct social action and receive recognition as community leaders.

1.4.3.2 Challenges and mitigation strategies at the community level

Samta Sakhis have faced several challenges at the community level and have, over time, gained

experience and confidence to suitably deploy mitigation strategies to deal with them. Initially when they began work, there used to be a lot of open criticism in their own villages because it was against the established gender norms for women to be traveling so much every day for work. Priyanka shared how the men in her village said that women going out dressed like *madams* would create *tandav* (wild dance) in the village! One of the mitigation strategies was to take the husband into confidence so that there is support at home. The other was to try and explain to people and also let their work speak for itself. Many Samta Sakhis described how their work within their own villages, and their presence and articulation in the Gram Sabhas of their villages helped to change people's attitude. For example, Sushma spoke about how she helped a man who had been her critic, during a difficult phase of illness and SHG women pooled money to bear his hospitalization expenses. This changed the situation, not only for her, but for all the SHG members in the village.

Sometimes, however, Samta Sakhis have had to retort or answer back, and sometimes be patient and wait it out. Thus, they used a combination of the strategies of resistance, subversion and negotiation to overcome some of the challenges they faced. For example, there was a lack of trust among community members when Samta Sakhis first started taking training in other villages. Priyanka stated that when she first visited a new village for training, the men and women all doubted her and said that so many people come and go, but no difference is made to their lives. Priyanka was patient but persistent and explained her role to them. She said that she had come to neither take nor give but only to share. She asked the men whether they have got their job cards for MGNREGA. On learning that they do not have them, she took them to the Panchayat Secretary and got the cards issued. In another village, she began the training with *Dukh Sukh* which made many women emotional and able to relate to the issues discussed. In her next visit, Priyanka helped them access some of the rights such as pension and ration, which had so far been denied to them. This brought acceptance and legitimacy to the work she did.

Other Samta Sakhis recounted similar experiences. Many of them shared how patience, good behavior, consistent presence and facilitation of rights and entitlements had helped them turn the situation around to gain credibility among people. Only in rare

cases did the situation not get resolved despite their best efforts. Meenu talked about a particular village where the VO President's husband was a member of a dominant caste and used to run the VO meetings. He did not listen to problems of members belonging to castes lower down in the caste hierarchy. Though Meenu and the Block Nodal officer tried their best, the situation could not be changed.

1.4.3.3 Challenges and mitigation strategies at the family level

Samta Sakhis have also fought challenges at home, especially over mobility. Strategies to mitigate these challenges have included sharing the details of training and work with the husband, taking him to some of the meetings and work sites and also getting the Master Trainer and other Samta Sakhis to come and meet the husband to explain the work requirements. Their monthly remuneration as well as the recognition they receive from MPSRLM, and other government officials also helped to create acceptance for their work and mobility. Once she got her husband's support, the Samta Sakhi was able to negotiate with other family members to at least accept her work routine, if not outright support it. In fact, once it became evident that the Samta Sakhis had the knowledge, information and contacts to help people access their rights and entitlements, the family members too turned around and started seeking their help and advice in various matters.

1.4.3.4 Challenges and mitigation strategies at the level of Panchayats and line departments

At the Gram Panchayat level, initially there were many instances where Samta Sakhis faced non-cooperation and rude behavior. One of the mitigation strategies was collective pressure by bringing many women together to raise a demand. When that did not work, Samta Sakhis escalated the issue to the Janpad office. There have been times when the Janpad CEO has summoned

the Panchayat Secretary or called him up to rebuke him and instruct him to pay heed to the women's demands and take action. This worked in almost all the cases. Priya also mentioned that in a Block Gender Forum meeting, the District Collector had called all the Gram Panchayat members in the presence of the Samta Sakhis and Master Trainers. He explained the work to them and requested their cooperation. Thereafter, the situation became smoother and Panchayat representatives became more respectful towards Samta Sakhis and other women when they brought cases to the Panchayat and the Gram Sabha. By and large, Block Nodal officers were supportive of Samta Sakhis' work with the Panchayats. However, there was one case when a Block Nodal officer told a Samta Sakhi that her constant badgering of the Panchayat Secretary/Sarpanch could cause disharmony between MPSRLM and Panchayati institutions. In general, however, Block Nodal officers have requested Panchayat officials to respond positively to Samta Sakhis since they were raising legitimate demands.

Though the line department officials have by and large been cooperative, there has been an occasional non cooperative line department official. After a few rounds of discussion with the concerned official by the Samta Sakhis when things did not improve, the matter was escalated to the DPM, Sheopur. The DPM then spoke to the concerned official but that did not yield any results. The problem was then escalated to the District Collector's office who called the concerned official and instructed her/him to respond to the cases brought in by Samta Sakhis through the LAK. Since then, the official has become responsive and helpful. Thus, Samta Sakhis have learnt what to escalate, when and at which level.

1.4.3.5 Internal challenges, also with leaders or members of community institutions, and mitigation strategies

The research team came across a couple of instances of conflict between Samta Sakhis and also between Samta Sakhis and CLF and VO leaders. During the FGD, the project team reported that some of the Samta Sakhis of the second batch felt that owing to their education, they were given the additional responsibility of documentation while Samta Sakhis from the first

batch did not have to do this work. The Samta Sakhis of the first batch also felt that their importance was waning because of their inability to document. This caused tension in some cases. However, the situation was handled well by the Master Trainers who explained that while the second batch came with education and documentation responsibilities, the first batch had greater experience and knowledge of the work. The reason for pairing them together during training and social action was to gain from the comparative advantage of both.

Further, during FGDs with the project team and Samta Sakhis, it came to light that in some instances, CLF and VO leaders did not want to participate in social action and other work because Samta Sakhis were paid while they were not. One Samta Sakhi reported that a particular CLF OB always gave negative reports about her to the Block Nodal officer because she wanted to oust her and give the job to her own daughter-in-law. Such cases of tension between CLF OBs and Samta Sakhis were too few to impact the GJP or the activities of the Samta Sakhis. However, this could become a serious problem if more such instances occur. One approach by the GJP to preempt this problem was to give the responsibility of selecting Samta Sakhi to the CLF members led by the OBs. In the event of such tensions, it might have been important for the project team, including Master Trainers, to discuss and resolve these issues between Samta Sakhis and CLF OBs. This did not happen in the current project because of the rarity of cases. In the few cases where the relationship between the Samta Sakhis and CLF OBs soured, it affected the process of solidarity building.

Another internal challenge was the issue of long distances and transportation. The Karhal block has remote villages with inadequate transport connectivity. This posed problems for many Samta Sakhis. To address the problem, 12 more Samta Sakhis were recruited so they could work in pairs and no one had to travel alone to distant villages.

Finally, the Samta Sakhis had to contend with inattentive participants during training and irregularity in attendance for SHG/VO meetings. They devised and developed various methods to tackle these issues. They would visit a day prior to the meeting to inform and mobilize women. On the day of the meeting too,

they would go door-to-door to mobilize women to attend. To engage them during trainings, Samta Sakhis used participatory tools like *Kiska Palda Bhari* and tools like *Munna Munni* and *Dukh Sukh* that women could relate with. They also shared experiences from their own lives. Since they were from the same community or had a similar background, the participants could identify with them. Over time, as the Samta Sakhis undertook different kinds of social action, their credibility increased. Women also realized the benefit of these trainings and meetings beyond merely receiving information on schemes and took greater interest.

1.4.3.6 Challenges with Nodal officers and Preraks

Samta Sakhis had to work closely with Preraks especially during VO meetings. The Block Nodal officers asked the Preraks and Samta Sakhis to go to the VO meetings together so that the former could perform their book-keeping role (related to financial transactions) while the Samta Sakhis could undertake training and discussion on gender and social issues. In many cases, they worked well together. In some cases, however, there was a communication gap because the Preraks would not inform the Samta Sakhis about the visits on time. This meant that they would not be able to coordinate their visit to the village together. Some Samta Sakhis also reported that a few Preraks were lax and falsely reported that they had visited a village. This could be because some of the Preraks held multiple jobs and shouldered a tremendous workload due to which they could not manage their time and responsibility. Samta Sakhis raised these issues with the Block Nodal officer and the CLF OBs.

To resolve this, a meeting was scheduled between the Nodal officer, Preraks and Samta Sakhis once a month to settle any problems between them and plan the activities of the next month. It is important to note that most of the Preraks were men and had better education and information compared to the community women, as a result of which they held a position of power. The introduction of Samta Sakhis in the GJP upset this power equation. Now, Samta Sakhis as well as CLF OBs held Preraks accountable for their work. In one instance, salary was deducted for a particular Prerak because he

had falsely reported going to a village when he had not. Samta Sakhis also had a lot of information and knowledge whether or not they were educated and were capable of and committed to social action. This also questioned the Prerak's authority.

In certain instances, when Samta Sakhis wanted to write a complaint against a non-cooperative Panchayat Secretary, the Prerak refused to write the complaint or the *avedan*, as that could damage his relationship with the Panchayat. In such instances, Samta Sakhis would themselves write the *avedan* or get someone else to do it. These issues would also be discussed in the monthly meetings. There was also a case when a particular Prerak sexually harassed a Samta Sakhi by sending her improper messages on the phone. She raised this issue in the CLF meeting and the CLF OBs issued a strong warning to the miscreant. Through these monthly meetings and Preraks' own observation of the gender training conducted by the Samta Sakhis, many of these tensions were resolved over a period of time. During an FGD, the project team reported that although no direct gender training was organized for Preraks, they were present at most of the trainings of Samta Sakhis and so they too acquired gender perspectives and understood the importance of their role.

By and large, the MPSRLM block teams were supportive of the Samta Sakhis. However, there was the occasional case of one or two Block Nodal officers who were not very cooperative and did not listen to the issues raised by Samta Sakhis. To address this, the ANANDI project team including the Master Trainers interacted continuously with both the district and block teams, sharing about the program and taking their advice. Some Samta Sakhis also felt overburdened because Block Nodal officers asked them to undertake a lot of work such as making survey lists, identifying beneficiaries of government schemes such as the street vendor scheme, forming SHGs and activating dormant SHGs. The ANANDI team explained to the Samta Sakhis that as CLF members and CRPs attached to the CLFs, it was also their responsibility to perform these tasks. The team further showed how a gender lens can be integrated into each and every task performed by the Samta Sakhis. For example, while forming new SHGs or activating dormant ones, Samta Sakhis could introduce gender training tools such as *Dukh Sukh* and inspire women to be part of these groups, not only for financial transactions but also to realize their rights. To build a

better understanding about the GJP, some of the Block Nodal officers were also invited to participate in the Gujarat exposure visit. This did ease some tension for a while but not permanently.

Unfortunately, most Nodal officers did not take a lot of initiative to support the Samta Sakhis after project paused in April 2021. There was a gap of five months between project pause period and the start of the new phase of the project. In this period, it was expected that CLFs would pay Samta Sakhis out of their own funds and with the support of Nodal officers. With the exception of one CLF, Sagar, this did not happen. While the project team and other stakeholders reported that this could be because CLFs were themselves short of funds, it was equally true that many Block Nodal officers did not show much interest in supporting Samta Sakhis. One Samta Sakhi reported that when she raised the issue in a CLF meeting, the Block Nodal officer said, *“ANANDI ab khatam ho gaya, to paisa kahase aayega?”* (ANANDI is gone now, so where will the money come from?). This posed a real challenge since most Samta Sakhis continued to work on their own initiative and without any promise of payment. However, at the state level, MPSRLM has shown an intent to continue and support the cadre of Samta Sakhis. This is visible in their effort to provide financial support to the Samta Sakhis in the event that the CLF is not able to cover this cost.

1.4.3.7 Reflections on challenges during the project pause period

When the project paused in April 2021, there was uncertainty about when the project will resume and what will be the terms of renewal. As mentioned earlier, none of the Samta Sakhis received payment except those from one CLF. Despite that, most of them continued to work in their own villages and also at the LAK. As Ankita said during an interview, *“Bhale paisa na mile, lekin gaon ka sudhaar karna hai – is liye apan*

kaam karte rahe” (Even if I don’t get any money, I have to work for the betterment of my village. So, I continued to work). They worked on a range of cases including entitlements, vaccine camps and domestic violence in their own villages.

The project was resumed in September 2021 as part of an upscaled gender strategy of MPSRLM implemented across 18 districts, including Sheopur. In this upscaled strategy, the selection criteria of Samta Sakhis includes a certain level of education since they are expected to document their actions. Unfortunately, that would exclude many of the Samta Sakhis of the first batch who have been doing exemplary work over the last two years. Some of their narratives in the next section bear witness to their work and contribution. It is important, therefore, to reflect on how to recognize and utilize the rich experience of these less educated but extremely capable Samta Sakhis. Given the experience of the project pause period, it is also important to understand how ownership of the gender strategy can be better built among Block Nodal officers and CLFs so that they are willing to sustain this work beyond any project cycle and departure of any organization like ANANDI.

Conclusion

This section brought to light the strategies, outcomes, challenges and mitigation measures that were adopted by Samta Sakhis as part of the GJP in Sheopur and Karhal blocks of the Sheopur district. What comes forth is the capacity and commitment of Samta Sakhis to enable community women’s access to rights and entitlements. They have integrated gender within community institutions and leveraged existing systems to effect social change and women’s rights. It is important to carry this work forward, recognize these women as community leaders and offer them opportunities to continue to work for their communities and societies.

2

Voices from the Ground – Journeys of Change

This section contains the testimonies of four Samta Sakhis and one Master Trainer. The first-person accounts bring out their journeys of struggle, change and leadership development. They speak about their background, the process of joining the GJP implemented by ANANDI, the work they have done, the challenges they have faced and the changes they have brought about in their own lives, households and communities. These accounts are drawn from in-depth interviews conducted by the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW). The attempt has been to retain as much of the actual narrative voice as possible of the research participant during the interview. The names of the Samta Sakhis and the Master Trainer have been changed for purposes of confidentiality.

2.1 Kiran, Samta Sakhi

Namaste, my name is Kiranbai. I am 33 years old and I am from a village in Sheopur block. I was married when I was 16 years old. I am a widow now; my husband passed away eight years ago and I have three daughters

and one son. I felt helpless then—I was worried about money, my children; about raising them properly. I live with my father and mother-in-law, my elder brother-in-law and his wife and children. My elder brother-in-law works on the family farm and takes care of all household expenses, including my children's education and health needs. I also earn and take care of my personal expenses. My in-laws treat me well but there is some tension with my elder brother-in-law's wife. My own parents have passed away. I have four brothers and four sisters-in-law. They often ask me to visit them, but I barely get time due to my work.

I joined the SHG after my husband's death. Some women had come to my village from Andhra Pradesh through the Aajeevika Mission to form SHGs. I took them around and attended the training to form SHGs. I was made the SHG President and after two years, I became a member of the VO. In the SHG, we discussed savings, loans and repayment. It was all about financial transactions and women did not bring up their personal issues or domestic problems. I also became a CRP and went to different villages to form SHGs. I have studied till Class 3. I can read but not write. For documentation, I sometimes take my daughter's help.

I got to learn about gender for the first time in ANANDI training when they made us aware of discrimination, early marriage, land rights of women etc. I was made a Samta Sakhi by CLF members because nobody at my home stops me from going out. They also thought that this will be a source of income for a single woman like me. Things have changed since I started working as a Samta Sakhi. Earlier women did not raise their concerns, support each other in times of need or visit the Panchayat collectively. Some SHGs became dormant and even some VOs were not functioning properly. When we started going to SHG/VO meetings, the situation improved and the SHGs and VOs started functioning actively. Women also recognized the benefit of coming to the meetings as they gained information about various issues and schemes through us. Now we do not have to go door-to-door to call them. They come by themselves and we also do different activities like stitching, kitchen gardening, etc.

During the SHG/VO meetings, we first discuss the issues faced by the women and also tell them about government schemes and benefits. We help them access widow pension, get ration cards, job cards and anything else they need assistance with. Last year, during a training on the *Mera Haq, Meri Pehchan* tool in the VO, three women said that they were not getting their widow pension. We asked them to bring all their documents like Aadhar card and bank passbook and went to the Panchayat. I mobilized 10–12 women, including the VO President, VO SAC members and other members to go to the Panchayat office. Earlier, this Sarpanch never used to listen to women or do their work. But he was forced to attend to our issues when all the VO women went and pressurized him together. We gave the documents to the Secretary and also followed up with him later to check whether the pension had started. Soon afterwards, the women started receiving their pension. Once, I helped women to apply for pending payment of *Kuposhan se Jung* in the LAK by directly taking them to the CEO.

I have also dealt with cases of violence against women. I helped a woman file a police report on domestic violence. Now that woman stays separately and receives some alimony from her husband. When an issue does not get resolved individually, we gather women to put collective pressure. There was another case in my village where a widow was treated very badly by her in-laws. They did not speak to her, abused her, beat her up and also refused to give her any share

of the land. She went to her maternal home with her brother. We asked her to come back and assured her that we will collectively stand by her. We gave her suggestions on how to file a police complaint. Once she was back in the village, I, along with the SHG members, SAC members, VO President and a few other women from the village, met her in-laws' family. Since so many women were there, her in-laws could not misbehave with us. The woman told her in-laws that she will report them to the police. So, the in-laws agreed to give her four bighas of land. This is in her father-in-law's name now but will become hers after his demise. We also helped the woman join the SHG and now if there is any trouble, all the SHG members support her.

I have sometimes faced challenges, like when the Panchayat Secretaries do not listen to us. Then we put collective pressure by getting all VO women together. If that does not work, I threaten to call up senior officers in the Janpad. Usually that works. If I have any problems in my work, I share them with other Samta Sakhis and Master Trainers and they help. All of us learn from each other. If there is any issue with a Prerak, I share the problem at our monthly meeting with the Nodal officer where Samta Sakhis and Preraks are present. Sometimes a Prerak would not inform us about a meeting or would not turn up at a meeting. In that case, we would discuss and resolve the issue during the monthly CLF meeting.

Now everybody understands the significance of my work. Recently, the Panchayat Secretary asked me to prepare a list of people interested in MGNREGA work, so I did a survey and gave the names of ten men and ten women. The Panchayat Secretary trusts my judgement. The attitude of my family members has also changed substantially. In the beginning, when I began the CRP work, my family members kept asking me where I was going every day. The villagers would also taunt me and say, "*God knows where this madam goes every day*". I had to put up with all this. But after all the work I did in the village as a Samta Sakhi, they have started respecting me.

My own process of change started when I joined the SHG. I used to break down quite often since my husband had recently passed away. Then, as I started going out, organizing women into SHGs, working with them and training them, my grief and pain lessened. This strengthened after becoming a Samta Sakhi. I now work very closely with women and on a variety of social issues on a frequent basis. As a result of my exposure,

jaankari (information) and earning, I am now consulted on important household issues. I convinced my elder brother-in-law to allow his daughter to continue her education and give her college exams. I also got her enrolled in a tailoring class and she now stitches clothes at home. I supported her when she wanted a mobile phone from her father. They also consulted me on her marriage. I told them that I think girls should not get married before they are at least 20–21 years old. Household work is also now shared between all of us.

Pehle itna anubhav nahin tha, itna bolna bhi nahin janti. ANANDI training mein jaankari mili aur kaam karne se bolne ki himmat aayi (I did not have much experience earlier; I could not speak freely. ANANDI training gave me information and knowledge and the work has given me the courage to speak and act). During the flood this year, I informed the Panchayat about damage in the village and did a survey on my own initiative. Based on my report, the Panchayat Secretary and Patwari came to my village and took photos of the damaged houses. Earlier, I would not have been able to take this initiative and talk directly to government officials. It is my work as Samta Sakhi that has enabled me to do this. When ANANDI work stopped briefly after April, many women from other villages called me up and asked, “Why you don’t come anymore? Many cases are still incomplete, who will finish them? We need you.” This is the importance and value of our work.

2.2

Priya, Samta Sakhi

Namaste, my name is Priya and I am a Samta Sakhi. I am 28 years old. I was born in Chandrapura and I have three brothers and two sisters. My maternal family is very poor and I could not complete Class ten. I was quite young when I got married and had a daughter soon after. My daughter is eleven years old now and I have a son who is eight years old – they are both in school. I stay with my husband, children, father and mother-in-law, my husband’s elder brother, his wife and their two kids in Sheopur block. We have ten bighas of land and it is in my father-in-law’s name. Everyone in the family has an Aadhar card, PAN card, voter ID and ration card.

It has been 12 years since my marriage and in the beginning, I was involved only in household work. Then a *didi* (sister) came from Andhra Pradesh. She gathered some of us together and told us about the benefits of SHGs, how we can take loans and earn. After some time, I was made the SHG secretary since I was educated. To start with, I took a loan of Rs. 2,000 from the SHG and opened a vegetable shop. When my customers increased, I returned the money and took another loan of Rs. 5,000 to set up a small grocery shop (*kirane ka dukan*). Then I borrowed Rs. 15,000 at one go and expanded the business. My husband sometimes manages the shop and also works in the farm.



Photo Credit : Arun Sambhu Mishra/Shutterstock

Though my in-laws treated me well, I had to take permission to go out of the house; my sister-in-law was also not allowed to go to the market. Initially, my husband accompanied me everywhere and I told him that *bahar niklenge tabhi toh mahila aage badhegi* (unless women go out on their own, they will not be able to move forward in life). He understood and I started going for training in Sheopur, Karhal and Bhopal. I also went to Andhra Pradesh for a 15-day residential training with my daughter as she was only two years old. My husband supported me and assured me that he would take care of everything at home.

It has been nine years since I have been associated with Aajeevika Mission (DAY-NRLM) and gradually I have become knowledgeable about many things. I was a book-keeper and took training in maintaining registers and records of SHG loans and repayments. I was also a CRP and was trained in Bhopal about forming SHGs and reviving defunct SHGs. Around seven years back, I also attended a training by Aajeevika Mission where some gender issues such as early marriage and discrimination between the boy and girl child were discussed. However, after becoming a Samta Sakhi, ANANDI gave us a detailed training on gender.

About two years ago, ANANDI was looking for the second batch of Samta Sakhis. Our Nodal sir said, “she is regular at meetings, diligent and well equipped to handle the Samta Sakhi position as she has participated in all the trainings. She is also educated and can move freely to train women in other villages”. So, I was selected as a Samta Sakhi. I also knew the two Samta Sakhis from the old batch as we had all worked together on the CRP drive. During ANANDI’s training, we learned about the tool, *Kiska Palda Bhari*. In this, we learned that *mahila itna kaam karti hain toh uski ginti nahi hoti, purush ek kaam do kaam karte hain, phir dadagiri dikhate hain* (how women work harder and longer than men, yet their work is not valued, and men take all the decisions). We also learned about *Mera Haq, Meri Pehchan* – how women should raise their voice and fight for their rights and entitlements.

Each Samta Sakhi was given nine villages to oversee and I went to SHG meetings, VO meetings and trained the women. I also gave them information on ration cards, disability certificates and widow pension. If a woman’s problem was not resolved at the Panchayat level, I guided them to the LAK. I once took a few newly married women to the LAK to include their

name in the BPL cards and helped them prepare their applications.

As Samta Sakhi, we have to deal with a range of issues and problems. There was a case of domestic violence in a village. Perna’s husband who is a sarpanch, used to beat her up regularly. He also had a relationship with another woman and sold off the entire seven bighas of land without telling anyone. He also told Perna to leave her four children and go to her parent’s house. She said that she wants to live separately and he should give her *harjana* (maintenance) which was her right (*aap mujhe mera haq de do*). The sarpanch did not agree, so I took her to the LAK and registered her case there. Now a lawyer has been arranged and the sarpanch is willing to let her live separately. When I last enquired, the case was under process.

I also worked extensively during COVID-19. I conducted surveys in my own village, raised awareness on vaccine benefits and also gave information to women in other villages on the phone.

Over time, the attitude of the villagers towards me and my work also changed. Initially there were some problems. The Sarpanch of my village did not always listen to me. Once in a meeting of the Block Gender Forum, in the presence of the Sarpanch, CEO, Collector, Master Trainer and Nodal officer, I raised the issue of uncooperative Panchayat members. After that, there was a marked change in the Sarpanch’s behavior and his response to women’s problems. I have a good relationship with all the CLF OBs and the book-keeper. Now both men and women respect me and often ask my advice. All departmental officials appreciate me and say, “*hamari gaon ki mahila kaise seekh ke, apne aur sab ke haq, adhikar ke liye lad rahi hain... khud ko, apne gaon ko aur samaj ko aage badha rahi hain*” (a woman from our village is fighting for the rights of everyone and taking herself, her community and her village forward with her knowledge and efforts).

I have become much more aware and confident after becoming a Samta Sakhi. I assist the villagers whenever required. Earlier, I hesitated to talk to the male family members and villagers. Now I can speak up in front of anyone, even the Collector and *gaon ke bade log* (influential people of the village). I also take my own decisions now; where to go, what work to do, when to come back. My family was initially hostile and would taunt me about my work. I took my husband to some meetings

so that he could understand the significance of my work. I gained their trust and respect slowly and they started asking my opinion. Now my husband asks me what seeds to sow, which vegetables to plant. We also discuss the income from the shop and our savings and expenditure. Both men and women in my family share house work. Everyone at home had a ration card except my sister-in-law (*jethani*). I collected her caste certificate (*jati praman patra*) from the Panchayat and helped her to get a ration card. I also advocated for my sister-in-law's (*nanad*) nursing training even when my in-laws opposed this. In fact, I took a loan from the SHG to fund her training.

My work and my experience as a Samta Sakhi have changed me as a person. Earlier, I was less attentive towards my daughter's education but now I treat my son and daughter equally in all respects. I wear salwar suits when I go outside for work. I saw that in Gujarat and also the madam who came from Andhra Pradesh wore suits. Now I wear both suits and sarees, though initially my family members were not happy about it. Now they understand and respect my decisions and work. In fact, in my village, *ab hum famous hun* (I have become famous for my work).

I continued my work as a Samta Sakhi in the period when ANANDI was not present. I was not paid but I am not greedy for money. *Paise lene se kya kaam hai? Apan ko toh kaam karna hain aur apan ki gaon ki samasya hum nahin sunenge to kaun sunega?* (What is the point of taking money for working in my village? If I do not listen to the problems of my village, then who will?).

2.3

Sushma, Samta Sakhi

Namaste, my name is Sushma and I am 33 years old. I am from a village in Karhal block. I am the treasurer of my CLF and also a Samta Sakhi. My journey as a Samta Sakhi has brought about a lot of change in me and my work. Let me share some glimpses of my journey.

I was born to a poor family and as a result had to drop out from school and work with my elder brother to support the family. We were staying in a different place at that time, not in Sheopur. My marital family was a large one; my husband, his parents and six siblings. After my marriage, I worked with my brother-in-law to support the family. My husband was studying and after

a few years, he got a job as a school teacher in Sheopur district. The marital family moved to Sheopur during this time, bought land and settled down.

In 2008, I joined an SHG. I became the Secretary of the SHG and then joined the VO. Before joining the SHG, I wondered how I would speak with others and feared that I might say something wrong. But slowly the ten of us in the SHG started talking about savings and increasing our income and I felt that there is indeed a benefit in being a part of an SHG. Then the Panchayat elections came and the SHG and VO women said that we need someone who can speak up on our issues and raise our concerns in front of others. When they wanted me to take up the role, I straightaway refused saying that I am scared. But they were determined and took me to fill up the form. I kept telling them that I will not be able to take this responsibility. But the women said, "you listen to us, you try to improve things...if not for yourself, then at least do this for us". The men did not support me and kept saying, "she just sits there and barely does anything, how can she work for the village?" But the women supported me whole-heartedly. My mother-in-law was also reluctant when I placed my nomination and wanted me to focus on housework. But my father-in-law, who had also been a sarpanch, stood by me and I became a sarpanch in 2015.

In 2019, the ANANDI team came to our CLF meeting and talked about the Gender Justice Program. Initially, I was not really interested because many such organizations keep coming and going. Then we had a meeting in Sheopur where our Nodal officer gave my name as a Samta Sakhi and said that I am capable of training women in the villages. I took the five-day training by ANANDI where we learned about our responsibilities as Samta Sakhi, discrimination between girls and boys through *munna-munni* plays, how women alone should not be burdened with housework, child marriage or early marriage etc. I learned a lot about women's rights and entitlements.

I started working in different villages after ANANDI's training and shared about my work in the regular monthly meetings of the CLF. I also gave training to women using the gender tools and one of the first things we did was to include women's names in the land documents. Now, 35 women in my village have land in their name or jointly with the husband. I also gave people information on pensions and disability certificates, and helped them access these benefits.

Then COVID-19 struck and there was a lot of confusion all around. I started spreading awareness on the preventive measures. In my village, we held meetings with women with adequate social distancing and kept in touch with the women of other villages through phone. Everyone was scared and I got the women together to make 500 masks and distributed them in the villages. I also worked to arrange a 14-day quarantine for returnee migrants and ensured that everybody gets ration due from the Panchayat during COVID. I helped in opening a COVID-19 Center or Swasthya Kendra in the Panchayat and the doctor expressed his gratitude. During this time, I also did a *naka-bandi* (blockade) at all the entry points of my village. I took help from my VO members and all of us ensured that no random person entered the village. We asked them why they were coming to the village. In case someone was a migrant coming back to the village, we sent them to a 14-day quarantine first. It was important to keep my village safe from COVID-19.

There are many other issues on which I worked. For example, I resolved a misunderstanding between the Anganwadi and the villagers about child nutrition and also assisted another Samta Sakhi colleague to put her name in the land papers. I took one survivor of violence to the Lok Adhikar Kendra to register a case of domestic violence and recently guided 280 women from my village to get gas connections through the Ujjwala scheme.

There was a lot of change in me after I became a Samta Sakhi. Earlier, even though I was a Sarpanch, I hardly ever went to the Panchayat. For the first two years, my family members also discouraged me, saying that the Panchayat secretary will take care of the work. After becoming a Samta Sakhi, I became aware of my responsibilities even as a Sarpanch. I started taking many initiatives and now my village is the best village. It is neat and clean, and I also have tables and chairs in my Panchayat office. Initially, I would hesitate to stand up and talk in front of everyone. But now I have overcome that and have gained a lot of confidence. To start with *samuh mein sirf len den hota tha, uske alawa aur kuch nahin kar paate the – paise nikalna aur jama karna, bas* (we only had discussions about savings and deposits in the SHGs, nothing more than that). This has changed and now we discuss other social issues in the SHGs.

My family was not supportive of my work as a Samta Sakhi in the beginning but once I started helping

them in their own issues, they realized that I am doing something important. I helped my sister-in-law (*devrani*) to put her name in the land documents, took a loan from the SHG for my brother-in-law's shop and am pitching in for my sister-in-law's (*nanad*) education. Now there are two brothers-in-law, their wives and my father and mother-in-law living with us in the house. They acknowledge that my work will not only improve the condition of my family but also that of my community and my village. My husband no longer stops me from attending meetings because he understands the importance of my work as a Sarpanch, as the president of the VO and as a Samta Sakhi. I have told my family members about the training we received and now I fully participate in all household decisions. We have a total of 30 bighas of land and there are five bighas in my name. Everyone in the family shares the housework. I can also move about freely now while earlier I needed someone to take me to other villages and also bring me back.

The other Samta Sakhis and Master Trainer have become close friends and my support system. *Sukh dukh ki baat kar lete hain to mann halka ho jata hai* (I share my happiness and sorrows with them and feel much better and lighter). In the beginning, when I started stepping out for work, I had to put up with a lot of taunts and comments from the villagers, especially men. They would say that “*yeh toh madam ban gayi*” (she has become a big madam now). Things changed radically when we helped one of these men at a time of distress. He had fallen critically ill and no one was helping him. We had Rs.7000 in SHG savings which we meant to deposit in the bank. But it was necessary to save his life, so we got him admitted to hospital and paid for his medical care for more than a month. When he was discharged, he thanked all the women. Now whenever I meet him, he greets me warmly and respectfully. He has also told off the other men and asked them to stop passing comments. However, some men continued with their taunts. To stop this, we held a meeting with women who explained the issue and the work we do to their husbands. When these families received loans through the SHGs and VOs, then the men felt that this was also for their welfare. One day in a meeting, some men came and listened to us. Finally, they said that they will always support us and promised never to taunt us. Since then, we noticed the change in the village and now no one comments on our work. Earlier I used to work alone, now there are many women and even men supporting and working with

me. *Pehle Panchayat mein koi mahila nahin jati thi. Aur aaj ki tareekh mein dekho to koi purush nahin aate hain, puri mahilayen aati hain – mujhe bahot garv lagta hai* (Earlier no woman would come to the Panchayat. Now fewer men and more women come to the Panchayat office. I really feel very proud for bringing about this change).

Now everybody appreciates my work. Once in a meeting in Sheopur, DPM sir commented that due to the work by Samta Sakhis, the VOs and SHGs are running so smoothly. I continued working and going to the LAK, even after the Gender Justice Program by ANANDI was paused temporarily. I told everyone that though the project is not happening right now, we should not abandon the path we have been shown and move forward on it, whether we are paid or not.

Although I could not study much because of my family conditions, I want my son and daughter to study and get good jobs. I want my elder daughter to become a nurse so that she can serve people and I want my son to do MBBS. For myself, I want to keep working and serving others. Now that the Gender Justice Program has resumed, I feel that I have all the support required for pursuing my dream of contributing to society.

2.4

Ankita, Samta Sakhi

Namaste, my name is Ankita and I was born in Gotra village of the Sidhi district in Madhya Pradesh. I have studied up to Class five, after which I started helping my father in his shop as I was the eldest among my siblings. I got married when I was 17 years old and came to my in-law's place in a village in Karhal. My husband used to work as a laborer in other's farms and I would work on ours – we had ten bighas of land. Later, we acquired ten more bighas of land. I also earned through stitching work and a small grocery (*kirana*) shop that I started. Before my husband passed away earlier this year, he used to sit in the *kirana* shop as well. He had two younger brothers and two sisters and all of them are married. Now I live with my father and mother-in-law, one brother-in-law, his wife and my children. My eldest daughter is married and my sons are 16 and 12 years old.

I formed an SHG around 12 years ago with ten other women from my village and became the secretary.

We started a bank account with only Rs.100 and afterwards became a part of the VO. I was also the secretary of the VO and the CLF. I became a CRP in 2016. The president of the CLF was from my village and she suggested my name as a Samta Sakhi to ANANDI. I was initially hesitant as there was a rumor in the area that women are being kidnapped by outsiders to sell kidneys in Bhutan. But the *didis* from ANANDI dispelled my fears when they came to my house to drop me and talked with my family. I became a Samta Sakhi and took a five-day training from ANANDI. My husband was supportive even when I was away for the residential training. I learned a lot in the training. For example, in *Kiska Palda Bhari*, we learned about women's heavy work burden and how men should also do housework instead of dumping it all on women. There were also discussions on *Mera Haq, Meri Pehchan* and on child marriage in the training.

After I became a Samta Sakhi, my confidence increased manifold. I started putting all my training into action. In SHG meetings, I encouraged women to attend Gram Sabha meetings. They said, "it's a men's space, how can we go?" I said that attending Gram Sabhas and raising issues is our right and we must go. There were some women who needed old age pensions. One of them went to the Gram Sabha meeting with me but the men were not very comfortable or cooperative with us. So, I came back, gathered five more women and went once more to the meeting. Seeing so many women together, the men were much more respectful and asked us what issues we wanted to raise. We told them about the pension problem and discussed eligibility criteria and necessary documentation. Later, I got all the papers ready and submitted them to the Panchayat Secretary. Soon after, the women started receiving their pensions. Then, other women in the village also came forward to demand pensions and I guided them in the process.

The Samta Sakhi training and action have helped me fight for my own rights as well as that of others. Two years ago, a non-Adivasi man grabbed about five bighas of my land. He hired a machine and started digging the land. He did not listen when I protested, and I took the issue to the village heads (*mukhiyas*). They decreed in my favor, but advised me to pay Rs. 30,000 to compensate for the money the man had already spent to dig the land. I paid the money, but the man did not budge. Instead, he came with his entire family and started a quarrel. I was beaten up in that fight. Immediately, I contacted a madam at the Janpad

office, whom I knew through the LAK. Madam was very supportive and asked me to meet her at the LAK. She gave me the CEO sir and Tehsildar's phone number and advised me to file a police report. All my sisters at the LAK supported me and some of my village people also came with me to the police station. They verified that this was Adivasi land and rightfully belonged to me. The police were very sympathetic and asked me what I wanted. I said that both that man and I are poor and I do not want to send him to jail. I just want my land back and want to register it in my name properly so that such an incident cannot happen again. Since I did not have papers for the land, I met the CEO, Tehsildar, and Patwari and they helped me get the land registered in my name. The police summoned the landgrabber to the police station and the matter was resolved. Thanks to my role and training as a Samta Sakhi, I could win back my land. A few years ago, I would not have known what to do and where to go but since I have become a Samta Sakhi, *jaankari mili hai aur dar to mera khatam ho gaya hai* (I have information and my fears have disappeared).

I have tried to fight caste-based discrimination in my village too. In a school, there was an Adivasi cook who cooked mid-day meals. Only the Adivasi children had their meals in the school. The other children went home to eat. One day, I went to the school and spoke to the

teacher and children. I asked them whether they look at the caste of the cook when they go to a restaurant or a hospital. I also said that the same blood flows in the veins of an Adivasi woman as in any other person. They understood what I was saying and since that day, all the children have eaten together.

Now I get a lot of respect from the villagers. Earlier they used to taunt me and say that I have become such a big madam that I go out at ten every morning and my husband does not even scold me! I remember retorting that if men can be *karamcharis* (workers), why can't women? The situation has changed now. I have done a lot of work in my own village, and this has brought me respect. Now, every time I go the Panchayat office, the Secretary treats me respectfully and asks people to get a chair for the *bada sahab* (senior officer). Very recently, I went with a woman with a widow pension issue to the Panchayat office and two chairs were immediately brought for us to sit. The Secretary listened to us carefully and immediately took action to facilitate the widow's pension. Earlier, these officials would never listen to me or any other woman. I get the same kind of respect at the Janpad office too. Once some women from the village had come to the Janpad office to meet some official. The *chaprasi* (peon) turned them away. While they were going back, they met me, and



Photo Credit : ANANDI

I immediately brought them to the LAK. Seeing the women with me, the *chaprasi* said, “Oh, I did not know they are with you, Madam, they should have said they wanted to visit the LAK”. Not only did the women gain entry that day, but their work also got resolved, as we helped them to talk to the concerned officials.

The situation in my family has also changed over the years. In the beginning, when I joined the SHG, there was a lot of conflict at home. I was afraid and hesitant about everything. *Mai sunti rahi par phir meri dum barhi* (I listened to everybody but then my courage increased). I used to share my problems with my SHG sisters and that lifted a weight off my shoulders, *mera dukh halka ho gaya* (I could relieve my pain and stress). Earlier, I had to do most of the housework. Once I started going to the SHG meetings, my mother-in-law and sister-in-law did some of the work. But it was a temporary relief because once I got back home, there was the same burden of work and the same problems and conflict. Once I became a Samta Sakhi and took the training, *maine kisiki nahi suni* (I did not listen to anyone). Now, it is my voice that is heard in the household. In fact, ever since the five-day residential training, I am a changed person. I told my family about the things I learned in the training and how it is important for women and men to share all work and also participate in decision-making equally. My husband understood and agreed to make a change. Initially, he was not very supportive but gradually he became one of my staunchest supporters. He and my sons started participating actively in household work. He would never stop me from going out; instead, he would urge me to get ready and go out as soon as I can. When I came back home tired after a day's work, food would be ready for me. This change was gradual, and I did not fight with him to make this change. I spoke to him, explained things to him and gradually he understood and changed. *Maine didi logon ko bhi kaha ki lad jhagad ke pati ya bete se kaam nahi kara paoge. Aapko pyar se bolke hi kaam karwana padega* (I told the women that there is no point in fighting. You have to explain nicely to your husband and sons that they should also do the housework). The land that I won back is also registered in my name and my husband supported that. My other family members have also started respecting me. The relatives who used to taunt and abuse me before, now come to me whenever they have some work at the Janpad, Tehsil or Panchayat. They ask me to accompany them because they know that if I go, their work will get done.

I think that in a gender equal society, all work should be divided equally between women and men, and women should have title to land, houses and equal rights to assets. Husband and wife should take decisions together and there should not be any violence against women. After the ANANDI Gender Justice Program was paused in April 2021, I kept on working though there was no payment. *Hum to sikhate rahe, salah dete rahe, jankaari di* (I continued to teach and give advice to girls and women and gave them all the information). I also visited Anganwadis and hospitals to see if things are working fine. I talked to pregnant women and raised their awareness. I convinced 111 women to get COVID-19 vaccines. *Bhale paisa na mile, lekin gaon ka sudhaar karna hai, is liye apan kaam karte rahe* (Even if I don't get any money, I have to work for the betterment of my village. So, I continued to work).

2.5 Aditi, Master Trainer

Namaste, my name is Aditi and I was born in Shivpuri district and then moved to Bhopal with my parents and two brothers. My father worked in a press and my mother cooked for government officers. I was married during my Class ten exams and I missed the science test because the wedding was on the very day of the exam. After my marriage, I came to Karhal and completed Class 12 from my in-laws' place. My father-in-law discouraged me because he thought that the housework would be neglected. But my husband supported me fully. He had two brothers, who both died prematurely. Then the entire responsibility of the family, including the wives and children of my brothers-in-law had to be shouldered by us. That was a very difficult period. My husband did not have a job and we raised all the children with the returns from our 10–15 bighas of land. Now my husband also earns through managing the water pump of the Panchayat. I have one son and one daughter. My son works with ayurvedic plants and medicines. I earn through my Master Trainer work and some sewing work.

It was a huge change for me when I moved from Bhopal to a village in Karhal after marriage. It felt like a different world altogether—I had to struggle and took some time to adjust. I took up a job as a teacher in a private school nearby where my children also studied. Alongside, I managed all the housework and also worked on our

farm. This was very different from my life in Bhopal. My mother-in-law had passed away and I had to take care of everything at home, all the cooking and cleaning work. I had to cook on a traditional oven with fuelwood and got a gas cylinder recently in 2010. But I never refused to do any work because I was determined to learn.

After teaching for 15 years in the school, from 2008 I started working in NGOs. Since then, I have worked in at least five NGOs on a variety of issues. I was a social enumerator and trained women on education and nutrition of girl children in two villages in the capacity of village welfare staff. I also worked as a tutor in a project on health, nutrition and cleanliness and taught women sewing in an Anganwadi center. Then in 2014, I joined an SHG and became its president and member of the VO. After that, I became a book-keeper in the CLF. I also trained as *Bank Mitra* and received CRP training in Gwalior. As CRP, I trained members and office bearers of the VO and CLF and was made the CLF coordinator. In 2019, ANANDI asked me to sit for a written exam and interviewed me for the Master Trainer position. I was selected and became a Master Trainer. I learned in detail about my role. The five-day gender training organized by ANANDI also helped me understand about gender in depth. As a Master Trainer, my duty is to support the Samta Sakhis and facilitate their work through handholding – specially to guide them in difficult cases and solve any problem that they encounter in their work. My role is that of a Trainer of Trainers. As I went from village to village to support Samta Sakhis in training other women, I realized that the *Mera Haq, Meri Pehchan* tool, followed by *Kiska Palda Bhari* is very effective in reaching women. I feel important and influential when I see that women are listening carefully during the training and relating to many of the issues explained by us. I give information about government schemes and the functioning of the Gram Sabha to Panchayat members as well. I have learned a lot from receiving and giving trainings. I have acquired detailed knowledge about the steps to accessing government schemes after working with so many women on the same issues. I learned about the schemes during trainings but social action on the ground helped me to understand the actual steps.

I have participated in and led different kinds of social action, be it access to entitlement, land issues, water issues or cases of domestic violence. We adopt different strategies according to the need of the hour. In the tribal areas of the Karhal block, low levels of education,

poor awareness about government schemes and early marriages are very common. There, we always meet the mukhiya of the village; he is the customary village head but not the Sarpanch. It is necessary to consult and convince him first as all the villagers follow him. I have understood that *sahi samay pe, sahi jagah pe, sahi baat karna, yeh bahut zaruri hai* (it is very important to say the right thing, at the right moment and the right place).

As a Master Trainer, I not only support the work of the Samta Sakhis but also try and provide solutions for any challenges they are facing in their personal or professional lives. For example, I mediated minor disputes between Samta Sakhis arising from the fact that someone was reaching a meeting later than others. I brought them together and explained that while it is very important to be on time, it is equally important to be empathetic to the fact that some of the Samta Sakhis have to travel long distances to reach a village for a meeting. Actually, transport is a serious problem as all the villages are not very well linked by bus service.

We work collectively and I am very close to the Samta Sakhis. We discuss and support each other on personal issues as well. One of our Samta Sakhis had faced domestic violence because she got late in reaching home after a meeting. Many of us visited her home and talked to her husband to explain the situation and our work and persuaded him to change his attitude. I believe that meeting families and standing by each other helps Samta Sakhis overcome many of their personal problems.

Sometimes cases become challenging, and I have had to solve problems to avoid dispute. In one instance, when we had gone to make disability certificates for a man and woman at a hospital, a doctor behaved rudely with us. When we explained our work, his attitude changed, and he immediately issued the certificates. There was another incident towards the end of 2019 in which we got embroiled in a dispute. We had gone to the police station to file a case of violence against an Adivasi woman. It so happened that on the same day, another group of tribals were there with a separate complaint against a particular group of people, namely the Sikh community. There was a journalist who mixed up the two cases and put our photos in the paper reporting that SHG women were agitating against the Sikh community. This created a lot of controversy. Both the Sikh community members and the police summoned us for questioning. We

explained to both that this was a misunderstanding created by the journalist and that none of the Samta Sakhis were involved with this case. When the police insisted that we come to the police station, I took a stand that since our *didis* are innocent, we will not go to the police station, but we were willing to cooperate and asked the officer to meet us at my home or even the gurudwara if necessary. They agreed. We met the police officers and the members of the Sikh community and the misunderstanding was cleared. As a Master Trainer, I had to protect the Samta Sakhis and also clear the confusion so that the matter was settled amicably. After a couple of months, when we went to the police station to invite the officers to the opening of our *haatbazar* (a market place for local people), the police were very respectful.

Meri ek pehchan si ban gayi hai ki har gaon mein didiyan mujhe janne lagi hain (I have an identity now and women in different villages know me by my name). All of the office bearers of the CLF appreciate my work and recognize that I am working for the benefit of my *samaj* (community). The department officials also recognize me and consider me to be a capable Master Trainer. I am a trainer of trainers and I get that respect. This recognition has also changed the attitude of my family towards me. Once my husband was in the collector's office for some work. The CEO sir met him and said, "You are Aditi didi's husband? Please come and sit". My husband was really proud that CEO sir knew me and treated him respectfully because he was my husband. When my recognition outside the home increased, my family also gave me their full support. Earlier, they were not so understanding and used to always comment on my late work hours and moving around. There was a time when my late father-in-law disapproved of my work and I had to leave through the back door to go to school or do other work. The other women in the family were also unsupportive and used to comment that "*yeh to awara hain, faltu ghumti hain. Pata nahin kahan kahan jati hain, kis kis ke saath jati hain... koi bhi isko lene aa jata hai motor cycle pe. Main bahut kuch sunti par iske baad bhi maine kaam band nahin kiya tha*" (I have become reckless; I roam around with strange men on the bike and go out and come back at all times of the day. I put up with all that but I did not abandon my work).

Gradually things changed, especially after I became a Master Trainer. Despite the fact that I had worked for many years, I did not have much confidence. After the training, social action and the recognition I

have received from the government and the people, my confidence increased manifold. I am not afraid of anything anymore. I also understand gender very deeply and am able to counter anything that is unfair or disrespectful. My family now recognizes my work and the respect I get from others and this has changed their attitude completely. Since the last two years, I have been taking my own decisions about my work, my timings and housework. Regarding any household decision, we all sit together and discuss before arriving at any decision. Everyone's opinions are heard unlike earlier when only one person would dictate all the decisions in the house. My husband and son also share housework and it is not solely on me, my daughter or even my daughter-in-law. Everyone has separate bank accounts in their names; me, my daughter and also my daughter-in-law. Earlier, I used to hand over all my income to my husband. Now I keep the money in my own account and withdraw from it whenever I need it. I spend for the family only, but I control the process. I have given both my son and daughter a good education. My daughter has done her B.Sc. and MSW (Masters in Social Work). We have recently fixed her wedding but I hope she will get a good job and will work after marriage. I am strictly against dowry. I did not take a single penny when I got my son married and I will not be giving dowry for my daughter's marriage.

This year has been extremely difficult with the flood and COVID-19. During COVID-19, most of the Samta Sakhis were very active and I helped them to build awareness about vaccines and prevent the spreading of rumors and superstition. I conducted a survey about COVID-19 in my village and did ten days duty in the vaccination center. The Samta Sakhis were not paid from April 2021 but I got my monthly payment. But we had all decided that *koi hamari madad kare ya na kare, jo kaam humne shuru kiya hai usko hum yahan nahin rokenge* (whether anybody helps us or not, we will not stop the work we have started). Our work is extremely important, not just for the SHG or VO women, but for all the women in the villages. Actually, it is important for anybody who is marginalized and vulnerable; man or woman. Gender inequality is not just about discrimination between men and women, it is also about disparity between the rich and the poor. So, no matter what, we will keep working to remove disparity in our villages.

2.6

Concluding Discussion

These narratives bring out the rich experiences of change in the community leaders' own lives and work. These are voices from the margins speaking about their journey to leadership. Many of them began with hesitancy and very little self-esteem. They faced challenges in their homes and their communities. Some had cooperative families, some had to negotiate their way through not so supportive circumstances. In all this struggle their peer network, their understanding of rights, their pragmatism and their conviction in the work they do helped to steer change. For women from the margins, recognition as a leader has meant a lot. It has bolstered their courage, helped them navigate difficult circumstances at home and outside, and most importantly, has made them feel that they have the power to influence change. Some of these Samta Sakhis are from socially marginalized communities, such as the Adivasis. But this does not seem to have deterred their growth as leaders. This could also be because they have worked in areas such as Karhal which are largely Adivasi dominated and therefore their acceptability as leaders was easier to establish. In fact, the narratives do not refer to any specific challenge they have faced as Adivasi women. However, they do recognize caste discrimination in their societies and have worked to challenge such discrimination, as Ankita did, for example. Education too has not been a deterrent to their emergence and performance as a leader. Some of the Samta Sakhis whose stories are presented


here, are educated and some are not. However, no matter the level of education, their understanding of issues and the steps required for resolution of cases has been excellent. After the wearing down of initial resistance and doubts, they have been respected in their community for their contribution and have grown in confidence, self-esteem, resourcefulness and social capital. It is important, therefore, that all of them, irrespective of their education level, are given the opportunity to carry on with their roles as Samta Sakhis. Unfortunately, owing to the need for documentation, the upscaled gender strategy of MPSRLM, has put a certain education level as a criterion for Samta Sakhi selection. This would exclude many of the current Samta Sakhis in Sheopur district who have already done wonderful work and established themselves as leaders. In fact, most of them continued to work after the project was paused, despite not receiving payment for such work. It is strongly recommended therefore, that MPSRLM takes their contribution into consideration and continues to create avenues for them to explore their role as community leaders and change makers.

To conclude, these narratives are stories of change and change making. One of the key successes of the Gender Justice Program has been the ability to link capacity building with action on the ground and Samta Sakhis are the protagonists through which this has been actualized. This change making in perspectives and actions is in process. It is a journey that is ongoing and it is important for all the stakeholders to continue to support this journey.



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