

THE FIRST RESPONDERS



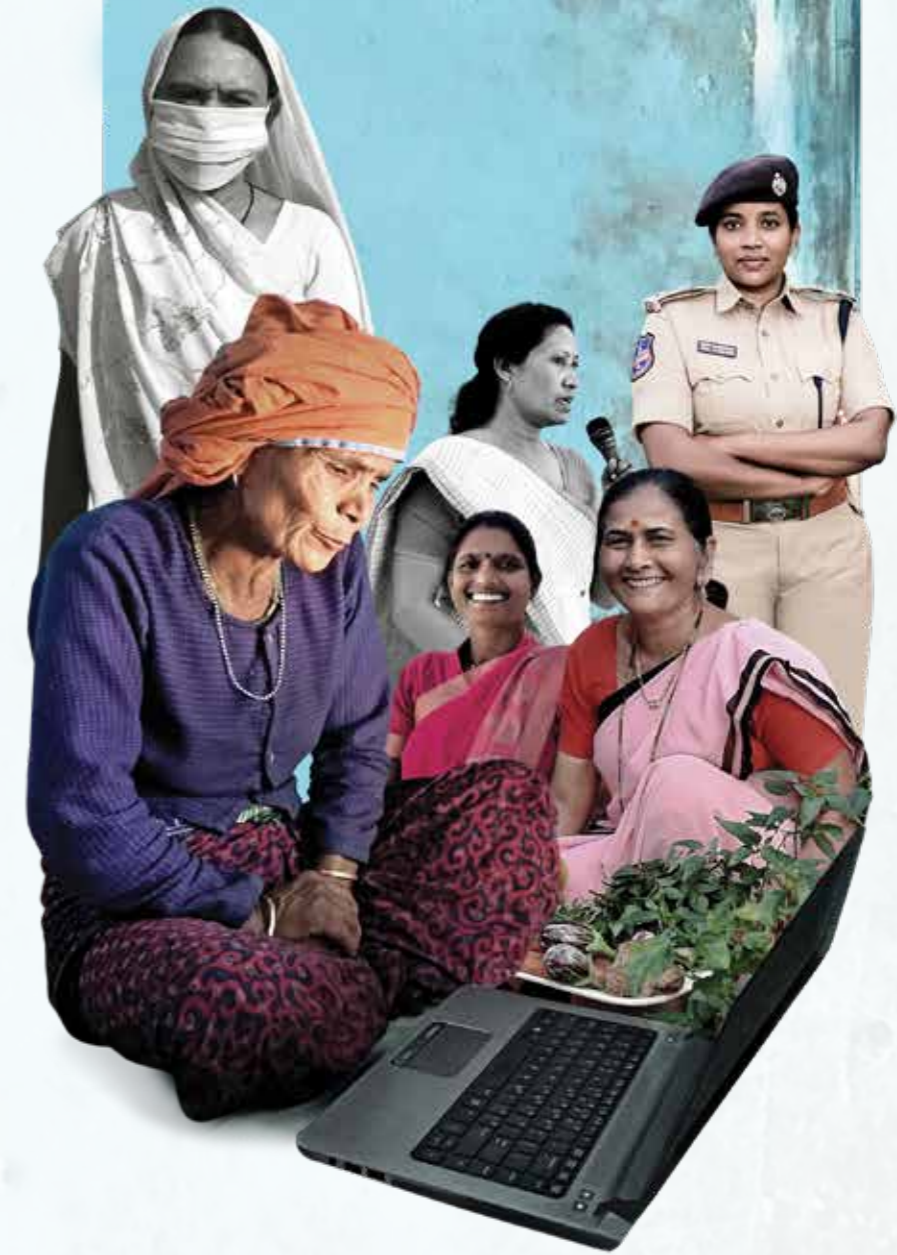
WOMEN WHO LED INDIA
THROUGH THE PANDEMIC



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Attribution: Jayashree B, Sunaina Kumar,
Anirban Sarma, Vanita Sharma, and Shoba Suri, Eds.,
The First Responders: Women Who Led India Through the Pandemic,
April 2022, Reliance Foundation and Observer Research Foundation.

ISBN: 978-93-90494-34-7
ISBN Digital: 978-93-90494-26-2

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Editors' Introduction

Jayashree B, Sunaina Kumar, Anirban Sarma, Vanita Sharma, and Shoba Suri

The Covid-19 pandemic is perhaps the greatest humanitarian crisis of our time. Global in scope and wide-ranging in impact, it has required bold and urgent innovations and interventions in every field of endeavour, especially to support the most vulnerable communities who are bearing the brunt of the cascading effects of the pandemic.

The First Responders tells the stories of twenty-five Indian women who have led their communities through the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic. These women did not only put up nets to make sure their communities did not fall through the cracks; they filled those cracks. Each story in this volume chronicles a woman's leadership journey, and explores how she crafted an appropriate pandemic response. These women gave governance a human face, promoted entrepreneurship and livelihoods, ensured access to food and water, strengthened public health systems, and galvanised vaccination campaigns.

It is often said that women hold up half the sky. As the women featured in this publication stepped forward to steer their communities through the worst days of the crisis, the pandemic acted as a "moment of lift" that spurred them to become agents of change. Yet, many of these women remain largely unrecognised and their achievements are underreported. *The First Responders* aims to address that gap and highlights some of these powerful, yet untold stories. It raises awareness about these women's exemplary work, and seeks to serve as a catalyst for efforts to invest in women's empowerment and leadership at every level of governance.

The last two years have shown that traditional gender roles and political expectations dissolve during crises. The true value of leadership, therefore, is that it cuts across gender, task, and geography. This principle is borne out by the conversations that underlie this book. The stories span every part of India—from Uttarakhand in the north, to Karnataka in the south, Nagaland in the north-east, and Gujarat in the west. But the women's experiences are remarkably similar. Indiraben in Gujarat has never met Nuzovolu in Nagaland, but thanks to both of them, large numbers of women in their communities were able to generate incomes during the pandemic and experience financial independence for the first time in their lives.

As the stories in this volume criss-cross India's six regions, six lessons emerge.

1. Build ecosystems of awareness that incubate women's intrinsic ability to lead.

Many of the first responders rose to leadership in spite of socio-political structures that impede women's growth. Their trajectories of work and self-realisation could become the norm for many others. Therefore, we must build ecosystems of awareness—involving governing bodies, civil society organisations, and communities—that incubate women's inherent ability to lead. Every effort must be made to raise awareness about the ways in which women's interventions boost local development. Savita Mahto from Gurugram, for example, could have found her vocation as a public health advocate far earlier if only she was equipped with the necessary knowledge and provided an enabling environment.

2. Promote sustainable livelihoods for women.

Among the strongest themes that run through the stories in *The First Responders* is that women need to generate their own incomes as this helps strengthen livelihoods and lives for both them and their families. Without exception, the women in this volume believe that earning a livelihood is the first step to self-sufficiency. In this regard, Self-Help Groups have had a transformative impact on women's lives.

They must be vigorously promoted as a path to economic empowerment. Moreover, women with an entrepreneurial bent must be supported. Communities need more women like Yashoda from Karnataka who, despite all hurdles, was able to launch her own enterprise during the pandemic.

3. Collaborate at the individual, group, and institutional levels.

Multi-level collaboration is at the heart of community development. We must enable the formation of women's collectives, and nurture cooperation between these collectives and other institutions, and with the government in particular. Jagat Janani from West Bengal, who heads a large cooperative society, emphasises the importance of building bridges between the community and the local administration. Similarly, Rema Rajeshwari, an Indian Police Service officer in Telangana, believes that "collaborative policing" is essential for maintaining law and order.

4. Build trust-based relationships within communities.

The women whose stories are told in this volume all agree on the need to inspire trust within their communities. Such trust is built through a genuine desire to serve the community, engage in transparent actions, and promote effective communication, information-sharing, and meaningful stakeholder engagement. Indeed, the trust placed in elected women representatives like Sunita Kumari and Kiran Devi, both of Bihar, and their readiness to lead by example, allowed their communities to overcome vaccine hesitancy—in the process, serving the larger battle against the pandemic.

5. Act and communicate to improve public healthcare systems.

The first responders have all worked at the frontlines of the Covid-19 response. They have witnessed how the pandemic has exacerbated the manifold, entrenched challenges that have long beset the country's healthcare systems. Clearly, more women could be trained to deploy behaviour change communication and act towards improving public health. Despite the pandemic, Shipra Singh in Madhya Pradesh, for example, is setting up nutrition gardens to help families fight malnutrition; and Mausam Kumari in Bihar is revolutionising women's understanding of menstrual hygiene. Their work must be held up as a model for others to emulate.

6. Ensure women's right to live with dignity.

Many of the first responders triumphed over various kinds of discrimination in the course of their journeys as leaders. And if their stories show one thing, it is the primacy of being able to live with dignity. Discrimination against women is detrimental for the entire fabric of society; when women rise up, entire communities rise, too. Therefore, when institutions, individuals, and communities take a firm stand against all forms of bias and prejudice, we are able to build empowered, inclusive, and gender-respectful societies.

One of the most important features of this book is the replicability of the actions that the stories describe. The methods used by a particular leader, and the lessons learned from her work, could be applied elsewhere with the right facilitation and environment. The book could thus serve as a useful tool for development practitioners and policymakers alike. Goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals commits the international community to the aim of ensuring "women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership [...] in political, economic and public life." *The First Responders* demonstrates the impact of doing so.

For the publishers of this volume, this initiative marks a beginning. Reliance Foundation and Observer Research Foundation will continue to work together to disseminate tales about women-led change from partners across India and the world. We will document and celebrate women's leadership, and train the spotlight on new and emerging leaders. Real change is wrought through example and effort, and the publishers are committed to both.



STORIES



SMITA AWASTHI WOMAN ON A MISSION

GROWING UP IN A MARKET TOWN in Uttarakhand, Smita Awasthi had a carefree childhood. She recalls being impish as a child—enjoying life made comfortable by her parents, a stenographer father in the Public Works Department, and a homemaker mother. At 18, however, as she completed her schooling and stepped into adulthood, her life changed, and everything became the opposite of all she had known and seen. She was married into a traditional Gadhwal family, to a man who is today a technician at a medical college. She moved from a bustling town to a sleepy village called Jineth in the Uttarkashi district, where the language spoken was one that she always heard but never learned. Far from the ease of town life, she found that, in Jineth, one lived off the soil.

Smita's story is not unique. The 2011 census recorded that 46 percent of all migrants in India moved because of marriage. In all, over 70 percent of married women are migrants—those who have moved from their place of birth to begin a new life.¹

For Smita, that life meant enrolling and receiving a Bachelor's degree in Political Science, Hindi, and Sanskrit, and eventually, dedicating her life to the service of the people of her village. Her efforts at advocacy began with two issues that are critical to children's well-being—education and nutrition. In Jineth, with parents occupied with making both ends meet and putting food on the table, they are often unable to devote time to their children's education. This meant that they did not attend

parent-teacher interactions in the school, leading to both the student and the school missing out on the opportunity to review the child's progress. Smita made it a point to attend all meetings, and in each meeting personally taking a few parents with her. By introducing a culture of parental participation in school activities, the condition of the government school in Jineth began to improve. Teachers became more attuned to the students' needs, and parents viewed education more seriously and sought to encourage their children to focus on their schooling.

She also remembers how she got involved with nutrition issues in her village. She was at the Anganwadi with her child, and there she saw another woman, also with her own children. She noticed right away that the children were malnourished. At that moment she knew that she wanted to help improve the nutrition situation in her community.

Fully aware that the health of the mother determines the health of the child, Smita set out to share her knowledge with the women in the village. The Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs or community health workers) helped. Indeed, chronic malnutrition remains an issue of critical concern across India. The NFHS-4 (National Family Health Survey) released in 2015-2016 found 38.4 percent of children under five years of age to be short for their age, and 21 percent are wasted (or have low weight for their height).² Partial data from the NFHS-5 (2019-2020) shows that malnutrition has continued to increase among children under 5 years of age.³

¹ Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, India. 'Migrants Classified by Place of Last Residence, Sex and Duration of Residence in Place of Enumeration - 2011', n.d. <https://censusindia.gov.in/2011census/d-series/d-2.html>.
² 'National Family Health Survey 4 (2015-2016), International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS), n.d. <http://rchiips.org/nfhs/nfhs-4Reports/India.pdf>.
³ 'National Family Health Survey 5 (2019-21), "Compendium of Fact Sheets - Key Indicators, India and 14 States/UTs (Phase-II)", http://rchiips.org/nfhs/factsheet_NFHS-5.shtml

She faced mixed reactions to her advocacy. "Some gave me a chance to speak, others said I was behaving like a politician. Some said I did a good job, and some would tell other people that they should learn something from me." She tries to take in everything in a positive light.

In the mid-2010s, the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM) founded several Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in Jineth,⁴ and Smita was elected head of the SHG federation, a village-level collective. They started to organise meetings, and Smita would sit for hours in the Panchayat Hall and wait for people to join but only a few were willing to come. It was only when the Revolving Fund was introduced by the NRLM that more people started joining the group. Interest also grew after Reliance Foundation began holding educational sessions and discussions on good agricultural practices, as well as on health issues like anaemia.

Today, Jineth has witnessed a sea-change, as villagers have acquired new skills and techniques to boost their livelihoods. Reliance Foundation's livelihood sessions have helped them learn how to grow crops better, use pest control, and improve soil health. They successfully cultivate different mushrooms, as well as flowers to be sold for use in weddings and other events. Smita also participated in a month-long session on agrarian sciences recommended by the Foundation.

When the Covid-19 pandemic broke out in early 2020, Smita's fellow villagers dismissed it as a problem of the plains. Following extensive media coverage and announcements by the prime minister, however, people became more aware of the crisis posed by the new virus. Smita stepped in to provide help to her community. Having already worked advocating for menstrual hygiene and

vaccinations for infants, she knew that she would be able to manage the challenges posed by the pandemic. It also helped that she has an effective working relationship with the ASHA workers.

The first issue was dealing with the many migrants returning to Jineth. Over 0.33 million workers returned to Uttarakhand in the first wave.⁵ They had lost their jobs amidst the nationwide lockdown, and most had to beg and borrow to reach their homes.

Jineth's dependence on the plains and the exposure risks that came with it also worried Smita. One of the first things Jineth's women worked on was making masks. Since they lacked the know-how, they received training from Reliance Foundation. While following distancing protocols, Jineth's women stitched masks using their machines and made over 1,000 masks in three rounds for distribution.

Smita also insisted that everybody download the Aarogya Setu app—a contact-tracing app developed by the government as part of its pandemic response. Each house was easily covered through a phone and her efforts ensured that the village of Jineth reached 100-percent coverage of Aarogya Setu by June 2020. She regrets that the lockdown guidelines interrupted her outreach activities and did not allow her to go from village to village and create similar coverage in those areas.

As she expected, some people needed assistance to download the app. Here, the youth of Jineth were most helpful. Eventually, however, people saw little use for the app—Jineth saw only two cases of infections during the first wave between March to October and many began to uninstall the app. Smita tried to convince them to not uninstall it, since they were still at risk.

Smita used the difficulties at hand to convince people to be safe. If someone living in the mountains fell sick, the hospitals were far away. She told people that those who were in Dehradun or Delhi, for example, could get to a hospital easier; whereas they who are in the mountains might just succumb to their illness even before they could make their way down to the plains. She warned people, "It is only we who can take care of ourselves, having neither the money nor the capability to seek external care."

The contact-tracing app was not the only technological response to Covid-19. As schools shut and learning had to take place remotely from homes, digital devices became important to most families in Jineth. However, there remains a concerning digital divide, and not only in Jineth. A 2021 study by the Azim Premji Foundation found that 60 percent of school children could not access online learning in India.⁶

The village of Jineth sits in the mountains, and during the lockdown, Smita's first worries were their community's dependence on the plains and the exposure risks that came with it. One of the first things the SHG worked on was making masks.



4 A Self-Help Group (SHG) is an affinity-based group of 10–20 people, usually women from similar social and economic backgrounds, who collect money from those who can contribute and give the funds to members in need. Members may also save contributions and begin lending funds back to the SHG's members themselves or to others in a village for a particular purpose. Many SHGs are linked with banks and can deliver micro-credit.

5 Raju Sawan, "45% of Migrants Will Stay Back in Uttarakhand, Says CM Rawat", *Down to Earth*, August 26, 2020. <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/interviews/economy/45-of-migrants-will-stay-back-in-uttarakhand-says-cm-rawat-73050>

6 "Loss of Learning during the Pandemic: Field Studies in Education | February 2021", Azim Premji University, n.d.

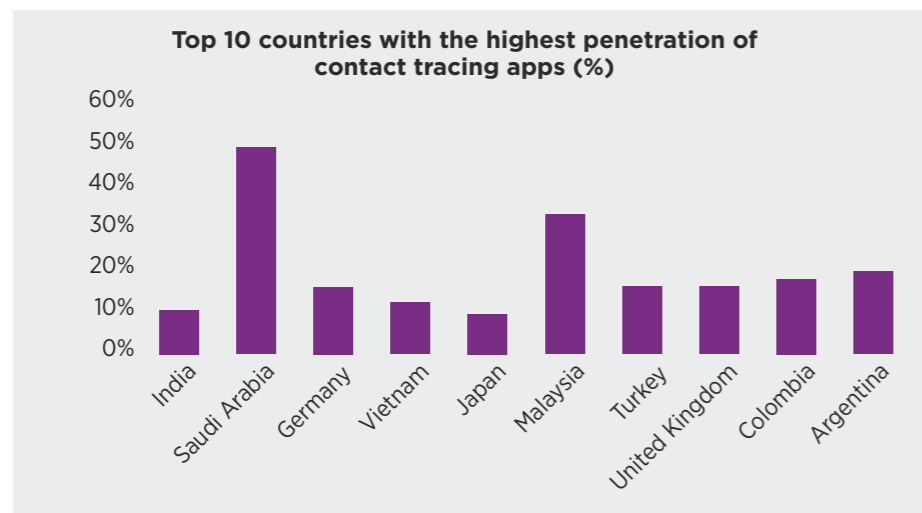
Still, for Smita's SHGs, messaging apps have proved useful—it is where they give each other up-to-date information on many things like government schemes, pensions, and farming practices. If members cannot meet in person for their weekly meetings, they meet virtually. These meetings predominantly focus on the economic status of the participants, as they are the recipients of loans disbursed from the revolving fund that comes from NRLM. A sum of 3 lakh rupees, received right before the pandemic, was used for those facing economic difficulties because of the pandemic. Some bought livestock with the loan received or even stores, and the others paid off private school or medical fees.

Smita's leadership has changed her own life. While Jineth knows of her contributions, she has today become a

regional figure. She wears many hats other than her work as the head of the Village Organisation, the cluster-level SHG federation, and treasurer of the Zila Mahila Morcha as a nominated leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party. For her, the secret to what she has achieved in life is simple. "Education is essential. At each opportunity, it is my education that comes to my advantage."

She makes sure to tell people that they must keep moving forward. That if she has been able to do it, so can they. "What I have done is also not just an individual victory, but a collective success of the many women who have helped me along the way."

Sitara Srinivas



Source: Paul Bischoff, "Contact-tracing app adoption by country", Comparitech, April 13, 2021, <https://www.comparitech.com/blog/vpn-privacy/contact-tracing-app-adoption-by-country/>

Key lessons

- The digital divide, limited digital literacy, and the lack of access to devices in rural Uttarakhand have impeded app-enabled contact tracing, and continue to impact other activities such as students' participation in online learning.
- Mechanisms such as revolving funds incentivise women to join SHGs in larger numbers and help SHGs upscale their operations. SHG members should also be encouraged to use communication tools, including messaging apps, as they strengthen information- and knowledge-sharing within collectives.

LAKHMA DEVI

THE POWERHOUSE OF MASHON

WHEN ONE FIRST MEETS LAKHMA DEVI, it may look like she is weathered by her responsibilities. Yet, she seems joyful at the same time.

Born in the village of Saund in the Uttarkashi district of Uttarakhand, Lakhma, now 37, was the youngest in her family. She recalls being adored by everybody as a child. “I didn’t study much though,” she says. Her schooling ended after class five, and although married life in the village of Mashon was kind to her and her two children are delightful, she was eventually left feeling listless. Growing up, all Lakhma had wanted to do was help people. But with the limited education she had, she did not think she could make a difference: “After all, knowledge is power, and I was weaponless.”

Lakhma decided that she would have to begin by making the change happen within herself. She started working with the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM), a poverty alleviation project that was launched in 2011 to promote self-employment and mobilisation of the rural poor by organising them into Self-Help Groups (SHGs).⁷

“Working for my community gave me a sense of purpose,” she says. The people of Mashon, like two-thirds of

Uttarakhand’s rural population, are primarily involved in agricultural work.⁸ Uttarakhand’s villages face massive environmental and economic challenges stemming from climate change, natural resource depletion, forced migration, and the loss of livelihoods.^{9,10,11} Clearly there was a lot of work to be done, for Lakhma and the SHGs.

Lakhma soon became the president of an SHG herself. With limited support however, the SHG was not functioning particularly smoothly. It was around this time that Reliance Foundation began to work in the village of Mashon in Uttarakhand, providing trainings across many different fields like water conservation, vegetable cultivation and composting.

With the Foundation’s support, Lakhma’s SHG grew. She also went from being head of an SHG to president of Amrit Gram Sangathan, a federation of SHGs to which six SHGs are attached. The trainings that Reliance Foundation provided helped the SHGs acquire a better understanding of the local environment and the people’s capabilities.

Lakhma now recalls that she was initially unsure about taking on the role of a leader and then not living up to her community’s expectations. “There were other

7 A Self-Help Group (SHG) is an affinity-based grouping of 10–20 people, usually women from similar social and economic backgrounds, who collect money from those who can contribute and give the funds to members in need. Members may also save contributions and begin lending funds back to the SHG’s members themselves or to others in a village for a particular purpose. Many SHGs are linked with banks and can deliver micro-credit.

8 Jha, Prashant, “Uttarakhand Lost 1.2 Lakh Hectare Agricultural Land in 2 Decades”, *Times of India*, September 8, 2021, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/dehradun/uttarakhand-lost-1-2-lakh-hectare-agricultural-land-in-2-decades/articleshow/86017950.cms>.

9 Kasturi Das, “Climate change forces Uttarakhand farmers to migrate”, *The Third Pole*, May 17, 2021, <https://www.thethirdpole.net/en/climate/climate-change-forces-migration-uttarakhand-farmers/>

10 Mridula Sharma, “Climate change, population drift and violent conflict over land resources in Uttarakhand”, *IOSR Journals*, <https://www.iosrjournals.org/iosr-jestft/papers/vol11-issue%202/Version-1/L1102017682.pdf>

11 Kavita Upadhyay, “Inside the ghost villages of Uttarakhand”, *The Indian Express*, June 24, 2018, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/uttarakhand-baluni-saina-bhootiya-abandoned-villages-migration-5230715/>

women far more capable, far more educated than I was.” But the community believed in her, and she was emboldened by that faith. “It doesn’t matter if I make mistakes, I’ll keep looking ahead.” She got the support of her husband, who felt that the more Lakhma grew as a person, the better it would be for their children. With her family firmly behind her, she would soon prove herself a capable leader.

The Covid-19 pandemic tested Lakhma’s leadership skills even more, as the lockdown exacerbated the community’s lack of access to water. Indeed, Uttarakhand frequently suffers from water crises because of the seasonality of rains. Out of 13 districts, four are in the normal rainfall category, while one is in excess and eight are in the deficient category.¹² The problem is not unique to Uttarakhand, though, and many parts of the Himalayas are considered water-stressed owing to various natural and human-induced threats.

A crucial consequence is the scarcity of drinking water, particularly during the peak summer months.¹³ The burden of finding solutions to the scarcity of drinking water often falls on women. It is common to see women and children taking on the responsibility of sourcing water for their households. This task can take the whole day, as a water source can be miles away and the distance has to be covered on foot. Attempts have been made over the years to mitigate the water crisis in the hills, through water conservation methods such as ‘Naula’ and ‘Chals and Khals’, the latter being particularly popular in Mashon.¹⁴

Yet the water problem persists and, as briefly discussed earlier, worsened due to cascading crises like the Covid-19 pandemic. Lakhma Devi collaborated with Reliance Foundation to build ferro-cement tanks and water storage facilities in order to ensure a supply of drinking water. This ensured that people would have access to water at all times. Under her leadership, traditional water conservation structures are being revived in her village.

Food insecurity is another persistent problem in Mashon, and as the pandemic broke out, the people grew concerned about the uncertainty of their rations. Children, in particular, were badly affected as the closure of schools meant they would not be getting their mid-day meal. This scheme feeds nearly 200 million children in India.¹⁵ During the lockdown in early 2020, many of these children were not able to access this crucial support.¹⁶

Lakhma, with aid from the Zilla Panchayat (the district-level Panchayat or council) and Reliance Foundation, organised the distribution of food kits for multiple families. The Red Cross also helped her mobilise kits, and the Krishi Vigyan Kendra (farm science centre), a Government of India scheme that aims to apply location-specific technologies in agriculture and allied enterprises, provided seeds such as masoor (lentil) and makka (maize). Lakhma’s intervention gave many families in the village access to a regular food source during the lockdown.

In early 2020, Lakhma had conducted a series of training sessions on composting with Reliance Foundation’s

support. By the time of the Covid-19 outbreak in March, ten compost pits had been prepared, with selected beneficiaries earning 4,000 rupees each through direct benefit transfers. Under Lakhma’s supervision, the practice was continued well into the lockdown, providing massive help to the scheme’s beneficiaries. Besides receiving a regular income, these villagers were no longer dependent on procuring compost from outside Mashon.

The lockdown had also halted the incomes of many households. Lakhma was responsible for facilitating loans to members of her community, helping them pay for carts for mobility, and livestock as a source of livelihood. The money came in the form of a revolving fund and a community investment fund instituted by the NRLM.¹⁷

The loan amount is deposited directly into the bank accounts of the women—a significant step towards the aim of financial inclusion. It is not a small matter, given the financial illiteracy that hobbles the development of women in India’s rural districts.¹⁸ This means that even if,

say, the money was requested with the intention of the husband using it, the wife was now part of the decision-making process.

Still, Lakhma admits that there is always fear that the family would not be able to pay back the loan. Indeed, it has happened many times over. The organisations that were aiding her SHGs continue to place their trust in her, though, and in turn, she has the same trust for the villagers. “People only default when they’re seriously unable to pay. They can’t return money that they don’t have. I have to keep helping them.”

Her community knows this too well. The women, in particular, have flourished under her guidance. The SHGs are helping engage them in productive work, increasing their self-reliance. This can only bring benefits to the community of Mashon, and beyond, to Uttarakhand. Statistics show that Uttarakhand’s women contribute 56 percent of all labour in the state, and their work, in particular the women-led SHGs, has been integral to

Lakhma was initially unsure about taking on the role of a leader and then not living up to her community’s expectations. ‘There were other women far more capable, far more educated than I was.’ But the community believed in her, and she was emboldened by that faith.

¹² “2021 Summer: North India staring at severe water crisis?”, SANDRP, March 31, 2021, <https://sandrp.in/2021/03/31/2021-summer-north-india-staring-at-severe-water-crisis/>

¹³ “Water crisis in Uttarakhand”, ENVIS Newsletter on Himalayan Ecology Vol. 14(1), 2017, [http://gppihedenvi.nic.in/ENVIS%20Newsletter/ENVIS%20Newsletter_Vol.14\(1\).2017/Water_Crises_Maheshanand.pdf](http://gppihedenvi.nic.in/ENVIS%20Newsletter/ENVIS%20Newsletter_Vol.14(1).2017/Water_Crises_Maheshanand.pdf)

¹⁴ Naveen Chandra Joshi, “Saving traditional water harvesting systems in Uttarakhand”, Down To Earth, August 30, 2018, <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/blog/water/saving-traditional-water-harvesting-systems-in-uttarakhand-61480>

¹⁵ Sourav Roy Barman, “Mid-day meal scheme is now ‘PM Poshan’, pre-primary children will be covered”, The Indian Express, September 30, 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/mid-day-meal-scheme-is-now-pm-poshan-pre-primary-children-will-be-covered-7542748/>

¹⁶ Vineet Upadhyay, “Around 1.38 lakh children left out of midday meal benefits in Uttarakhand, Haridwar tops the list”, The New Indian Express, May 30, 2020, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2020/may/30/around-138-lakh-children-left-out-of-mid-day-meal-benefits-in-uttarakhand-haridwar-tops-the-list-2150183.html>

¹⁷ “Making poor preferred clients of financial institution”, Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana – NRLM, Government of India, <https://aajeevika.gov.in/en/content/components/financial-inclusion>

¹⁸ Dilip Modi, “Financial Literacy Among Rural Women: Foundation Of Economic Inclusion”, Business World, October 15, 2021, <http://www.businessworld.in/article/Financial-Literacy-Among-Rural-Women-Foundation-Of-Economic-Inclusion-/15-10-2021-408763/>

reviving the state's economy after the fallout of the pandemic.¹⁹

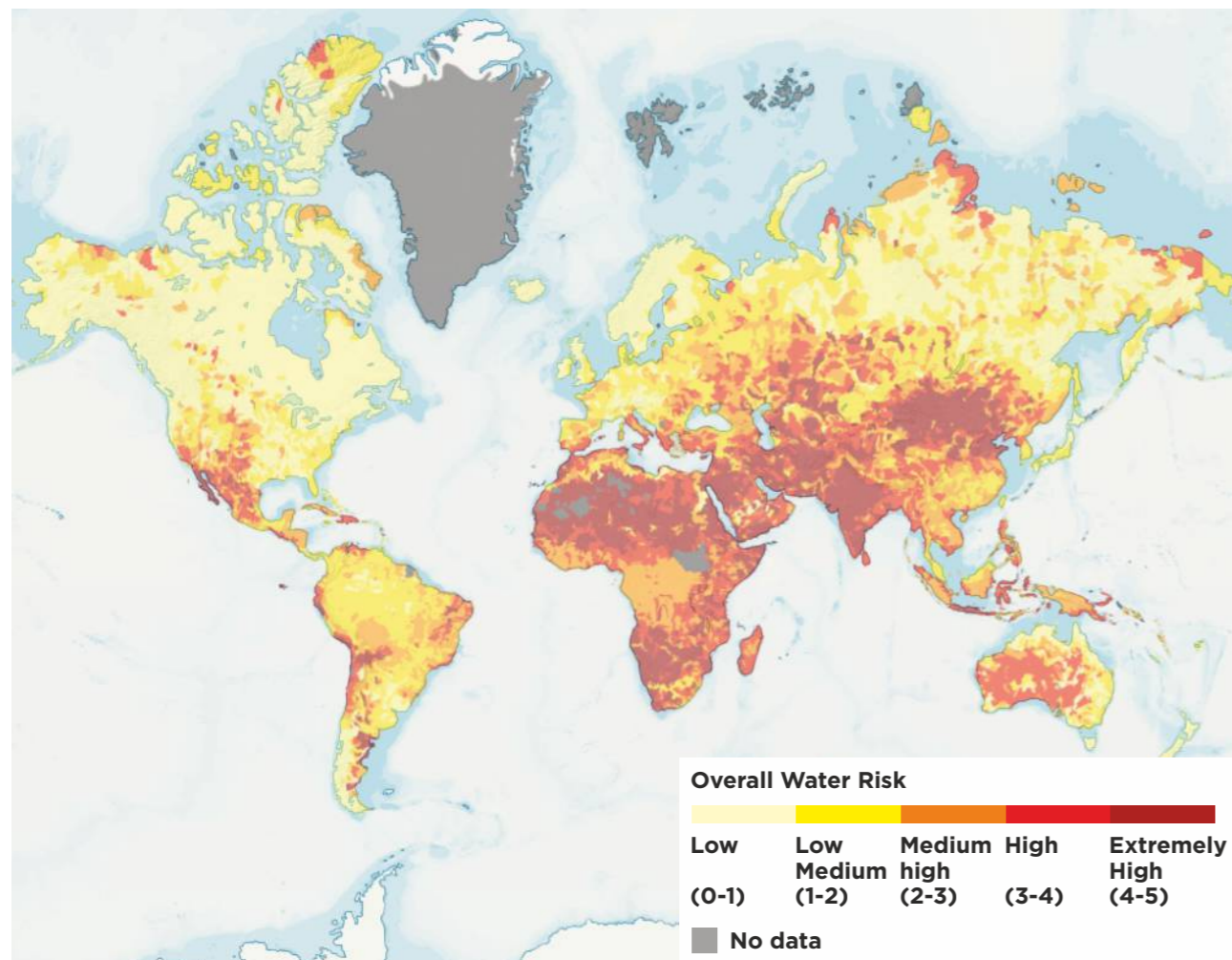
Besides being the president of Amrit Mahila Gram Sangathan (village organisation), Lakhma is also the president of the Jaiwik (organic) cluster made by the agriculture department, a position she got through the unanimous vote of the women in her village. Lakhma's

responsibilities continue to grow, but she does not buckle under pressure. "It's important to keep our morale up."

People frequently refer to Lakhma as neta (meaning politician or leader), and see her as a rightful candidate to the position of the village Pradhan. Lakhma remains modest, though if the community insists on one thing, it is this: "What we can't do, Lakhma can."

Noyontara Gupta

Overall water risk across indicators



Source: World Resources Institute, Aqueduct Water Risk Atlas, <https://www.wri.org/data/aqueduct-water-risk-atlas>

¹⁹ Kalyan Das, "Uttarakhand: Govt encourages women's self-help groups to boost Covid-19-hit economy", Hindustan Times, November 18, 2020, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/dehradun/uttarakhand-govt-encourages-women-s-self-help-groups-to-boost-Covid-19-hit-economy/story-HFcHyJdooMFFkM00sBwXiO.html>



Key lessons

- In regions where access to water continues to be a challenge, communities must be trained in water conservation methods. Local governments, civil society organisations and communities must work jointly to strengthen the implementation of programmes such as the Jal Shakti Abhiyan.
- Traditional knowledge about local water management practices, such as the construction of percolation pits, must be preserved and systematically disseminated within communities.
- Standard operating procedures and mechanisms should be put in place for ensuring continued access to food during pandemics or other widespread emergencies. Gender-based considerations should be mainstreamed into every aspect of these plans and their implementation.



SARTAMA DEVI A FORCE OF NATURE

RIVERS ARE AN EXTRAORDINARY force. Emerging from ice, they flow down great heights, eroding even the toughest of stone. They do not stop for anyone or anything, and engulf or push away any obstacle in their path. In India, some of the greatest rivers call the northern state of Uttarakhand home. So does Sartama Devi—a woman whose strength can be likened to that of a river.

Sartama Devi, 58, has fond memories of her childhood. She first learned to write in the sand with her fingers, and later on a slate with chalk. At festivals, she would perform Tandi, a folk song and dance indigenous in those parts of India. Probably the only time her voice dulls is when she speaks of the long distances she had to walk to collect water for her family.

At 19, Sartama was married and left home for the village of Patara. “When I first moved here, I did not really like it. I missed my mother and her love.” Nearly four decades since she moved to Patara, that sentiment is gone. Sartama is fascinated with what she calls the “perfect balance” of mountains and plains in the village. Just like the place of her childhood, however, it has an acute water problem despite being at an altitude of 648 metres above sea level and close to several glaciers and water bodies.

Over the years, Patara has been heavily dependent on natural springs and rainwater for its survival. Massive deforestation, climate change, and land conversion have caused half of these springs to dry up, or else become

seasonal.²⁰ During the dry months, women undertake the back-breaking labour of walking far distances and carrying water back for their homes, fields, and livestock. This is true for Sartama's own family of five, who rely on agriculture like most of Patara's households.

Since her husband's death over 30 years ago, Sartama has been tending to their fields, where she grows their family staple, millets and green leafy vegetables such as spinach. She was not even 30 when she became a widow. “People thought I would not survive. They wondered who would earn for my children.” But she stepped up and ploughed her field. A few years ago she received training from NGOs, and she has since been able to diversify her crops—to include cabbage, cauliflower, and broccoli—and increase their production, too. The income from farming has helped Sartama make ends meet and ensure that her children—three daughters and a son—received an education. Two of her children studied till class eight, the third till 12th, and the fourth completed her Bachelor's degree.

Today, Sartama extends a helping hand to those in need. When counselling them, she often recounts her own experiences and tells them, “Do something—it will benefit you.” The first opportunity to help others came with the State Rural Livelihood Mission, the implementation arm of the National Rural Livelihoods Mission launched by the government in 2011. The scheme aims to create self-sufficiency through Self-Help Groups (SHGs) as vehicles of development.²¹ Ten SHGs were initially

²⁰ Akhilesh Gupta, Himanshu Kulkarni, *Report of Working Group | Inventory and Revival of Springs in the Himalayas for Water Security*, New Delhi, NITI Aayog, 2018 https://www.niti.gov.in/writereaddata/files/document_publication/doc1.pdf

²¹ *National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), Manual for District- Level Functionaries*, Department of Administrative Reforms and Public Grievances, 2017 <https://darp.gov.in/sites/default/files/National%20Rural%20Livelihood%20Mission.pdf>

constituted, and Sartama was elected Head of the Hem Patara Gram Sangathan, which oversees the SHGs.²² Some 94 women from Patara are members of these groups. Under her leadership, each of these SHGs was given a community investment fund of Rs 55,000, and a revolving fund of Rs 10,000 to be used for livelihoods and development activities.

The SHGs' efforts have been bolstered by training from various civil society organisations and development foundations such as Reliance Foundation. These trainings impart specific skills in community leadership, nutrition, water conservation, commercial vegetable cultivation, animal husbandry, and mushroom cultivation skills. Mushroom cultivation, for example, has provided jobs and economic empowerment to many, allowing them opportunities to earn income in their home village and not have to migrate for economic reasons.²³ The concept of "nutrition gardens" has also been introduced to Patara: in simple backyards, edible gardens are set up for fruits and vegetables, intended both for sustenance and commerce. These nutrition gardens help address many of the health issues facing Patara's youth, such as anaemia.

As Sartama notes, "Ever since we joined hands with civil society organisations, the water from our taps that would otherwise go to the livestock are now being conserved. We have been able to restore chal-khals²⁴ which are now ready water sources for animals and contribute to soil moisture.

For their efforts, Sartama and the SHGs have received awards and recognitions. Sartama has been recognised as a "Women Water Champion" by the United Nations Development Programme. The Him Patara Gram Sangathan has also been

awarded the 'Earth Day Network Stay Women's Group' by Earth Day Network, an environmental NGO for their easy-to-implement strategies on water conservation.

And Sartama is delighted. "Earlier, because I had no man in my life, no one even sat beside me." She credits her own growth to the trainings she received from NGOs. "Thanks to their efforts, I have learned and taught others. Knowledge is being shared, and many have benefited."

But just as Patara overcame its most significant challenge of access to water, a new one arose, and not just in the village. The Covid-19 pandemic broke out in early 2020, and in March, many found themselves without a job and in a city that was not their home. Like migrants in different parts of the country, many of Patara's own had no money to travel back home. This was not a small number, as estimates say 30 percent of Patara's youth have migrated elsewhere to find some income.²⁵ Patara's SHGs lent money to three persons ranging between Rs 15,000 and Rs 50,000. "We sent money from our groups, from our bank accounts, to bring them back home." In all they managed to help 90 of their villagers to come back home, supporting them with food, water and other arrangements at the village quarantine centres.

Showing foresight even when the country was yet to come to terms with the pandemic and its related protocols, all returnees to Patara were made to stay in a school building away from the village. The Anganwadi and SHGs in Patara brought them water to drink and food to eat. Twenty-one days after they arrived, the returnees were allowed to leave the school and go home to the village. Sartama organised meetings in her SHGs. She insisted that

everyone should wear a mask while outside their home and sit at a distance while in a group. They managed to keep the virus at bay, and no one in the village got infected. Sartama's relief is understandable, given how Uttarakhand has been badly hit by Covid-19. As of December 2021, more than 350,000 residents have been infected.²⁶ The rural districts, in particular, given their lack of health facilities and the return of migrants, have fared poorly.

Facilitating the return of the migrant workers would have been the first pandemic-related challenge for Sartama and her SHGs. Today it is about battling vaccine hesitancy, which is borne of two reasons: the absence of an easily accessible vaccination centre, and a general fear of vaccines. The vaccination centre closest to Patara is more than 10 kilometres away. "I went myself and got myself vaccinated," Sartama recounts. Using herself as an

example, she tried to convince the villagers to get inoculated. "I went from house to house, door to door urging everyone to get vaccinated." Their work paid off, and Patara has achieved complete adult vaccination.

It is hardly surprising that the SHGs like those run by Sartama, and their efforts in fighting the pandemic and boosting the Uttarakhand economy, have been recognised both at the state and national level. After all, these SHGs—and not just in Patara but across Uttarakhand—have been involved in producing many necessities, including LED lights, PPE, and sanitisers, as well as prayer material and offerings for the state's many temples.²⁷

Listening to Sartama tell stories about the work of the SHGs, one might find it hard to imagine that she has met with many challenges in her own life. In 2013, her son-in-law

Like in other parts of the country, many of Sartama's community's own had no money to travel back home during the lockdown. The SHGs lent them money. In all, the group helped 90 of their villagers to come back home.

22 A Self-Help Group (SHG) is an affinity-based group of 10–20 people, usually women from similar social and economic backgrounds, who collect money from those who can contribute and give the funds to members in need. Members may also save contributions and begin lending funds back to the SHG's members themselves or to others in a village for a particular purpose. Many SHGs are linked with banks and can deliver micro-credit.

23 Ranjini Sivaram, "This 26-Year-Old Is Using Mushroom Cultivation to Bring Livelihood Opportunities to Uttarakhand," *The Better India* <https://www.thebetterindia.com/64150/livelihoods-mushroom-uttarakhand-divya-rawat-social-entrepreneur/>

24 Chal-khals are percolation pits, part of traditional water management practices in hilly areas. Over the years, traditional know-how has largely been lost, and chal-khals have fallen into disarray. Built on sloping terrain, they collect and contain rainwater – and become a watering hole for livestock and wild animals. They also help maintain groundwater levels. In restoring their chal-khals, the women of Patara have now been saved the back-breaking labour of fetching water from long distances.

25 Megha Prakash, "Covid-19 spurs return of the natives to Uttarakhand ghost villages," *Down to Earth*, March 26, 2020, <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/health/Covid-19-spurs-return-of-the-natives-to-uttarakhand-ghost-villages-70008>

26 Department of Medical Health and Family Welfare, "Covid-19 Health Bulletin for Uttarakhand", Government of Uttarakhand <https://health.uk.gov.in/pages/view/101-Covid19-health-bulletin-for-uttarakhand>

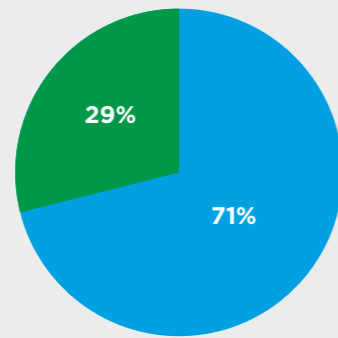
27 Thomas de Hoop, Sapna Desai, Garima Siwach, Chinmaya Holla, Yulia Belyakova, Sohini Paul, Roopal Singh, *Women's Groups and Covid-19: Challenges, Engagement, and Opportunities*, Evidence Consortium on Women's Group, 2020 https://www.popcouncil.org/uploads/pdfs/2020_WomensGroupsCOVID_ECWG.pdf Press Trust of India, "Women SHGs in Ukhland to be trained in making LED lights", *Business Standard* https://www.business-standard.com/article/pti-stories/women-shgs-in-ukhand-to-be-trained-in-making-led-lights-118030700869_1.html

died in the floods. A year later, her second daughter, who had long been ill, passed away. No one came to her aid. "They thought it would be best if I died of starvation. I am broken that my 24-year-old daughter who I raised and educated passed away. At that time, I did not even have money. I took her to Dehradun three times, and because she could not get operated on, she died."

Maybe it is this grief that has pushed Sartama to help others. "I know how hard it is for a poor woman to do well." In spite of her own grief, she continues to work hard for other people. Sartama would like to make sure that not one of the 94 women in her SHGs have to deal with a similar fate. She has taught them to be self-sufficient: "They do not have to ask anyone for anything."

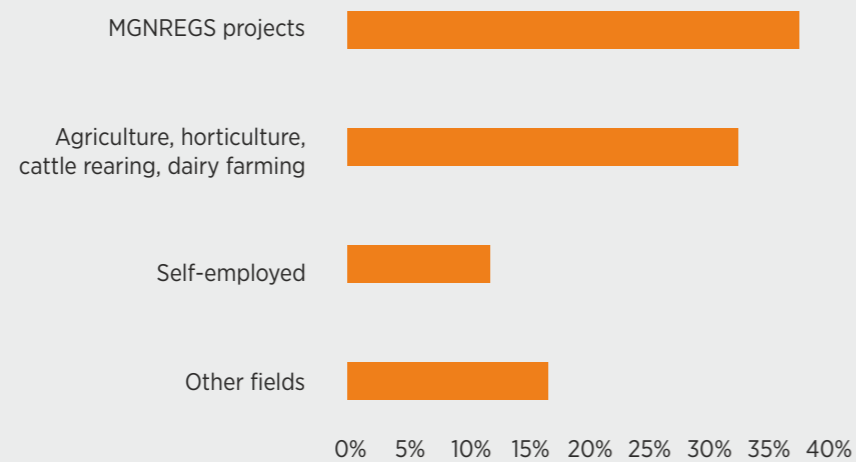
Sitara Srinivas

Uttarakhand's absorption of migrants returning due to Covid



Returned migrants opting to stay on in Uttarakhand till at least December 2020
 Returned migrants opting to leave Uttarakhand by October 2020

Livelihoods taken up by returned migrants



Source: Vineet Upadhyay, "Uttarakhand managed to absorb most migrants who returned home: Survey", The New Indian Express, November 4, 2020, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2020/nov/04/uttarakhand-managed-to-absorb-most-migrants-who-returned-home-survey-2219072.html>



Key lessons

- **Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and federations of SHGs have tremendous potential to help formulate and carry forward the effective implementation of social welfare policies. SHGs could do this more effectively by collaborating among themselves or forming larger federations.**
- **Traditional water conservation methods, like the one implemented by the women of Patara in Uttarakhand, can improve groundwater levels, help mitigate acute water shortages in hilly areas, and positively impact the community.**
- **Local administrations and civil society organisations could strengthen promotion local activities that achieve the dual result of strengthening food security and generating incomes – such as establishing nutrition gardens, rearing livestock, and cultivating mushrooms.**



SAVITA MAHTO

BREAKING TABOOS, SAVING LIVES

EVERY MORNING AS SAVITA MAHTO steps out of her house and walks down the busy lanes of her neighbourhood, shopkeepers greet her with *namaste* and residents call out with cheerful deference. She acknowledges them warmly, stops to exchange a word or two, and moves on. There is hardly anyone in Gurugram's Surat Nagar Phase 2 who does not know her.

Savita, 43, was born in the village of Ichag in West Bengal's Puruliya district. Her father was a schoolteacher, who insisted that all his five daughters finish their schooling. From an early age, Savita and her sisters were encouraged to take their studies seriously and become self-reliant young women. Unlike most girls her age, Savita had access to good schooling. To be sure, West Bengal's educational system helped. With a female literacy rate of 70.54 percent in 2011²⁸—higher than the then national average of 65.46²⁹ percent—the state has offered a congenial environment for girls' education across the primary and secondary levels. The family moved to Jharkhand during Savita's high-school years, where the emphasis on a sound education remained.

In 1996, Savita's selection for the Kolkata Police Constable Recruitment was a turning point. Her extended family was firmly opposed to the idea of her joining the police service, and her father found himself caving in. "The choice put to me was stark," recalls Savita. "I was told I could get married and not join the service, or join the service and never marry at all."

The decision was made for her, and the quest for a suitable groom began. In 1997, while pursuing her BA in Bengali, her marriage was arranged. Savita could not appear for her third-year examinations and thus failed to graduate. Overnight, she was uprooted from her home in Jharkhand and moved to a bustling colony in Gurugram in the state of Haryana. Indeed, according to statistics that show a long-standing trend, 46 percent of all migrants in India move because of marriage, and 97 percent of them are women.³⁰ Haryana continues to be one of the top five destinations for these migrants.

A new life began abruptly for Savita in Gurugram. "Gurugram and its people were very different from the friends and family I had known in Jharkhand or Bengal." She found it hard to adjust initially, but drew strength from her supportive family and the neighbours—she found them to be "broad-minded"; she specifically mentions her "friendly landlady". Savita's husband Shyam Dhan worked for a company that made stainless steel products. Soon she settled into the routine of being a housewife, and over the next few years became a mother of four children. It was a modest life, but not an uncomfortable one.

The family fell upon hard times when Shyam lost his job in 2015 and there was virtually no income to run the household. As luck would have it, representatives of the humanitarian organisation, World Vision visited her area, looking to train women who have had schooling, to learn

28 West Bengal, Census 2011, <https://www.census2011.co.in/census/state/west+bengal.html>

29 India, Census 2011, <https://www.census2011.co.in/literacy.php>

30 Varun B Krishnan, "What is the biggest reason for migration in India?", *The Hindu*, 22 July 2019, <https://www.thehindu.com/data/india-migration-patterns-2011-census/article28620772.ece>

counselling and raise awareness on a range of public health issues such as reproductive health, immunisation, family planning, pregnancy, and childcare. As a mother herself, Savita found these issues highly relevant. As the National Family Health Survey has found, as of 2019-21, Haryana has one of the lowest awareness rates among expectant mothers on issues such as the need for antenatal visits (45.1 percent).³¹

Savita knew the task would not be easy. “Openly discussing sex or the use of a condom is considered shameless in our society.” Fully aware of the possibility of becoming the subject of people’s ire, Savita threw herself enthusiastically into World Vision’s training programme. Always an avid learner, within three years, she was thoroughly conversant with the fundamentals of healthcare advocacy. Today she cannot help but talk about the support she received from her family, including the men who were more “progressive” than their peers. “My father and husband applauded my efforts to work for the community. That was deeply motivating.”

As Savita’s work expanded, she started working with Smile Foundation as part of its programme to promote maternal and reproductive health, sharing lessons with expectant mothers on how to lead a healthier life. Along with a few other women in her neighbourhood, Savita worked to sensitise the community about what reproductive health entailed—meaning that it was not only the women who needed to be counselled, but the men, too. “Why should the burden of family planning be shouldered by womenfolk alone?”

Home to almost 8.71 lakh inhabitants, Gurugram has a sex ratio of 854 females to 1,000 males, and a literacy rate of 79.5 percent among women.³² Nonetheless, social norms

remain conservative, and Savita was not surprised to find the women in her area being reticent with the very idea of talking about sexual health with their husbands. “Some of the men would get angry when their wives tried to broach the topic.”

She decided to speak to the husbands herself. She called them on the phone or visited the family in the evening, and always, she was careful with her words. “Some of them would try to avoid me on one pretext or another,” Savita recalls with a laugh. She did not give up, though, and eventually found that most of the men were open to conversation and would even have sensible questions about family planning and sexual health. As part of their campaign, Savita and her group distributed condoms to the couples.

Soon enough, the work of Savita, her group, and Smile Foundation caught the attention of the local Anganwadi Kendras or centres providing care for mothers and young children in rural areas. The Kendras began to integrate their work, such as the immunisation programme for newborns and regular antenatal check-ups for expectant mothers, and bringing them from their homes to hospitals located at a distance. Over the years, Savita has continued to receive training from the Smile Foundation, and has volunteered as well as taken up paid work on their projects.

Perhaps one of the biggest challenges that Savita and her group have met with in recent years is the lockdown that was implemented as the first wave of Covid-19 broke out in March 2020. “The chaos that followed threatened to disrupt all our interventions.” At the same time, she knew that it was precisely amidst the massive crisis that their help was needed most. The outbreak—and the consequent restrictions on movement—affected pregnant

women, who could not reach hospitals for their antenatal visit or delivery, nor access the medicines they needed.³³ The marked reduction in medical care and attention for pregnant women had negative physical and psychological effects on them.

The experiences of these women in Savita’s district were multiplied many times over at that time. In Gurugram, for example, the city initially saw 60 cases of Covid-19 infections in the early part of the outbreak. The cases quickly began to increase, and by the end of 2020, the whole of Surat Nagar Phase 2 was reeling from the pandemic.

Savita and her group set out to ensure access to basic medicines for expectant mothers who were unable to reach local hospitals. She went about the city—immobilised by the restrictions on movement—day after day to help expectant mothers and provide supplies, care, counselling and support. She helped at least 10 women by arranging emergency ambulances and reaching them to

the hospital amidst the lockdown so that they could deliver their baby. Keeping aside the challenges faced by women during the lockdown, Savita’s efforts also helped in raising awareness about the importance of institutional deliveries. Over the years, Haryana has fared better on this index. In 2019-2021, the state recorded 94.9 percent institutional births; in pre-pandemic times (2015-16), these figures stood at 80.4 per cent.³⁴ To some extent, it was women like Savita who made this possible.

However, it was not just these women who were in Savita’s mind then. Her husband, Shyam, had suffered a serious spinal disorder around March 2020 and his condition was deteriorating with each passing day. Braving all risks to herself and her family, she left home every day to distribute Covid kits to affected families. She was called a “braveheart”; she knew she was only doing what she needed to do.

Food insecurity also gripped Savita’s community as the lockdown prolonged. Focusing on the pregnant women,

Braving all risks to herself and her family, Savita left home every day to distribute Covid kits to affected families. She was called ‘braveheart’; she was only doing what she needed to do.

³¹ National Family Health Survey 5 (2019-21), “Key Indicators: State and Districts of Haryana”, http://rchiips.org/nfhs/NFHS-5_FCTS/COMPENDIUM/Haryana.pdf

³² Gurugram, Census 2011, <https://www.census2011.co.in/census/district/225-gurgaon.html>

³³ Megha Garg, Uma Pandey and Stephen W Lindow, “Women’s Health during Covid-19”, *Indian Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology Research*, 2021; 8 (1): 10-14.

³⁴ National Family Health Survey 5 (2019-2-21), “State Fact Sheet: Haryana”, http://rchiips.org/nfhs/NFHS-5_FCTS/Haryana.pdf

she counselled their families – particularly their mothers-in-law – about providing a nutritious diet to the expectant mother. She would personally conduct follow-up visits to these households, too.

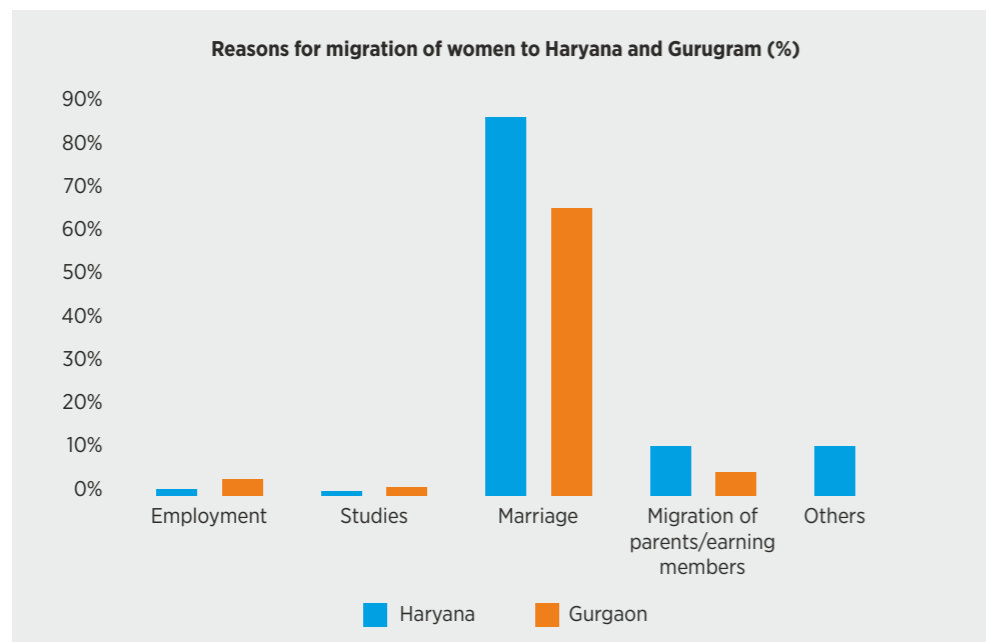
In July 2021, tragedy struck Savita's own family. Shyam underwent spinal surgery in the hands of a local doctor; the doctor botched the procedure, resulting in Shyam's untimely death. Losing her husband of 24 years broke Savita's spirit. "I was angry with the whole world." Bringing herself to heal, Savita soon learnt that such bitterness would not bring Shyam back. "He would want me to keep working for all those women," she says today.

Savita's concern for her community has made her a much-loved figure in Surat Nagar. People call her at all hours for

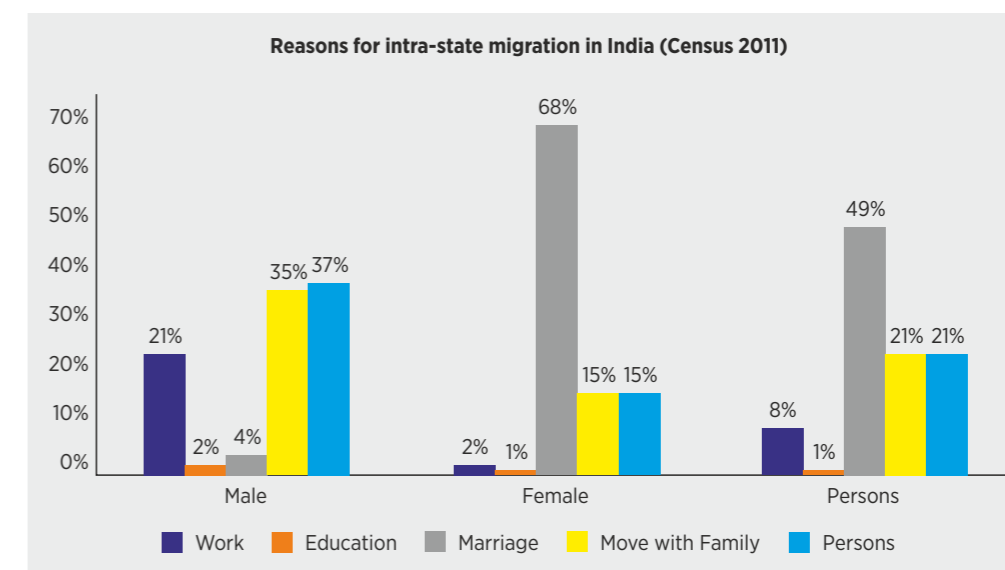
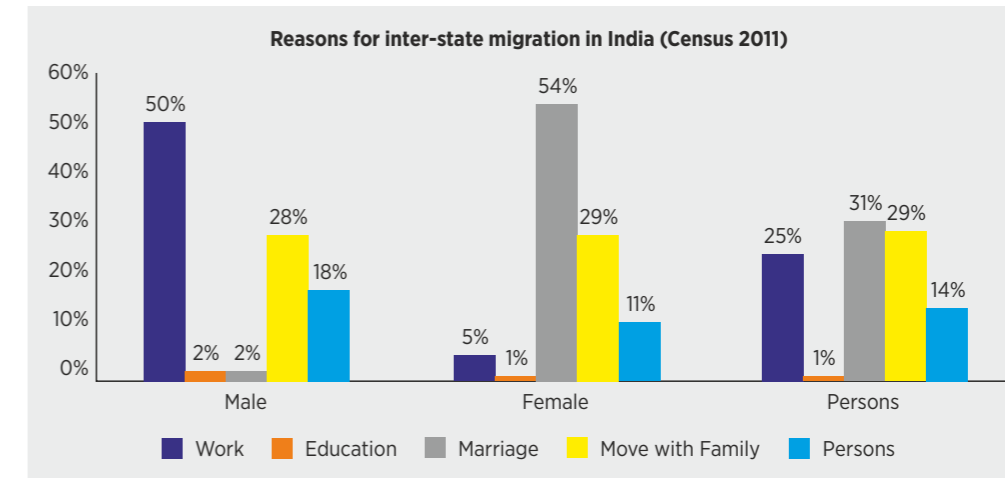
advice—be it about giving birth in a hospital, whether or not to take the Covid-19 vaccine, or simply about what a good diet should be. "It makes me proud when people ask me for guidance. I think of it as an achievement for my entire family."

As night falls over Surat Nagar and the sounds of the neighbourhood fade into silence, Savita turns off the kitchen light. She understands the enormity of the task before her. The lack of awareness about reproductive and maternal health is still rampant, and a major shift in attitudes and behaviour is needed. But Savita remains optimistic. For now, it is time to get some rest.

Swati Prabhu



Sources: K Visalakshi, "Female Labour Migration in India", Indian Journal of Applied Research, Vol.6, Issue 4, April 2016, [https://www.worldwidejournals.com/indian-journal-of-applied-research-\(IJAR\)/special_issues_pdf/April_2016_1461059210__22.pdf](https://www.worldwidejournals.com/indian-journal-of-applied-research-(IJAR)/special_issues_pdf/April_2016_1461059210__22.pdf)
 Exploring Rural-Urban Dynamics: A Study of Inter-State Migrants in Gurugram, Society for Labour and Development, March 2014, http://www.im4change.org/siteadmin/tinyce/uploaded/Migration_Gurgaon_Report.pdf



Key lessons

- **Education about sexual and reproductive health and safe sexual practices is essential in order to prevent sexually transmitted infections.**
- **Raising awareness and strengthening the implementation of schemes like the Janani Suruksha Yojana is important to help strengthen efforts to reduce maternal and neonatal mortality through institutional deliveries.**
- **Given the restrictions on mobility and the challenge of visiting hospitals or healthcare centres during the pandemic and in similar disaster situations, it is important for these institutions to collaborate with local communities to ensure that people requiring medical attention are brought in and attended to.**



SUNITA KUMARI

THE WOMAN WHO FOUND HERSELF

KNOW YOUR PLACE AS A WOMAN. For as long as Sunita Kumari can remember, she had been repeatedly told these words by the men in her life. Now 36 and with three children of her own, Sunita remembers pleading with her father, after she finished class ten, to let her continue with her schooling. But as was common among older men in the village, he refused, and advised her to stay home and prepare for becoming a “good wife”. At 18 she got married and, at her husband’s household, could hardly step outside.

Restrictive as her early married life seemed, there was a turning point on a fateful day seven years ago. She went to drop her youngest son to school and the teacher quickly noticed that she had a way with children. The teacher asked Sunita if she would be interested in volunteering her time to the school. She came home and asked her husband. At first, he was reluctant to let her volunteer, but Sunita was undeterred and her husband relented when she pressed on. “Every one of us has to learn to not give up,” she says.

Today Sunita Kumari is a ward member of the Tineri Panchayat in Patna, a city in the state of Bihar. (Every Panchayat or village council in India is divided into wards, and each ward is represented by a ward member who is directly elected by the villagers.) She is a household name not only in her village of Gopalpur, but also in the surrounding villages where her work has been recognised by district authorities in recent years.

By the time the Covid-19 pandemic reached their village in early 2020, Sunita’s five years of experience as a ward

member had equipped her to lead. As the nationwide lockdown was announced in late March, she was among the early responders in her village. People had locked themselves in their homes because of extreme fear, she recalls. She went to their homes, gave them advice on Covid-appropriate behaviour, and led efforts in building quarantine centres for returning migrant workers.

In May 2021 as India worked to stave off a devastating second wave of Covid-19 infections and deaths by conducting mass inoculation, Sunita ran a campaign across her village—she called it, “Teeka lagao, Corona bhagao (Take the vaccine, chase Corona away)”. With eight other ward members, Sunita went door-to-door accompanied by health workers, counselling people to get the shot. Many of them closed their doors on her; she experienced being chased off with a stick. But she knew why they were afraid of the vaccine. For weeks, rumours had built up in the village: people believed the vaccine would make the men impotent, and the women, infertile. Sunita was the first in her village to get the vaccine, after which she persuaded her entire family to get theirs. The neighbours were convinced she and her family would die from the jobs.

Sunita’s village would not have been unique. In the first few months of the vaccine rollout, hesitancy took deep roots in the rural districts. It is the resolute work of women leaders like Sunita that helped turn the tide for vaccine coverage in the country. From an average of 1,781,000 daily doses administered between May and June, the country’s rural regions saw 2,966,000 daily doses in August.³⁵

³⁵ “Vaccination drive has made heartening gains. Local governments must build on them”, *The Indian Express*, August 13, 2021. <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/editorials/covid-vaccinations-india-vaccine-hesitancy-coronavirus-7451183/>

By October of 2021, Sunita and her team had convinced over 1,500 people to get vaccinated, and mid-way through the month, the Tineri Panchayat had achieved 100-percent first-dose coverage, a far higher proportion than the district average of 84.98 percent³⁶ at that time. More than eight of every 10 (85 percent) of the target population had received their second dose by the end of December.

“We had a job to do, whatever it took,” she now says. Their tireless efforts to persuade families to get inoculated yielded results. “Those who had chased me with lathis (sticks) now queued up for the vaccine,” says Sunita with a laugh.

This same steadfastness that Sunita showed in the vaccine campaign, she uses in her household as primary decision-maker. Sunita is among the many women in rural Bihar whose husbands have migrated to cities or another state to earn some income. Her husband, Bambam Paswan, works in a milk dairy in Patna. After Uttar Pradesh, Bihar is the state with the highest rates of migration in India. Called the “left-behind women” of rural Bihar—women like Sunita are breaking stereotypes, leading their households and often engaging in their own enterprise.

Indeed, the fifth National Family Health Survey (2019-20)³⁷ showed a 50-percent increase in women in Bihar owning bank accounts, from 26.4 percent in 2015-16 to 76.7 percent in 2019-20. The state has also recorded progress in other gender indicators: spousal violence declined from 43.7 percent to 40 percent in the same period, and the participation of women in household decision-making increased from 75.2 percent to 86.5 percent.

Sunita's term as ward member coincided with a crucial reform introduced by the Bihar government in 2016. The ‘Saat Nishchay’ scheme focused on the provision of essential services such as piped water, electricity, and

housing, the generation of employment, promoting education, building infrastructure, and bridging the gender gap.³⁸ The scheme empowered ward members by giving them access to funds, which were previously controlled by the Mukhiyas (heads of the village council or Panchayat, also known as Sarpanches). The scheme has resulted in the decentralisation of powers at the grassroots level and improvements in delivery of services, and allowed ward members like Sunita to directly make a difference in the lives of her community. When the tap water scheme was brought to Tineri, she remembers how she and other women got blisters on their hands from many hours of pulling water from handpumps. “This has brought us some relief,” she says.

Today her blisters may be gone, but that experience would constantly remind her of the challenges she faced as a newly elected ward member not too long ago. Among the first tasks she undertook was to mobilise women in improving the uptake of health and nutrition schemes. The part she found most difficult was to speak in front of block officials. “But once I started speaking to the Sirs, they also respected me.” Finding that voice in itself had been a victory, having had to navigate the many hurdles in her life, for being a woman and belonging to a marginalised caste.

Bihar reserves 50 percent of all seats in Panchayati Raj Institutions (a three-tier system of governance consisting of the village council, the district council, and a rural local government body that links the two) for women; it was the first to do so in 2006, and since then, other states have followed suit.³⁹ The impact of such a policy can be seen in the steady increase in women's participation in rural governance.

These reservations notwithstanding, prejudices against women leaders often remain entrenched. In 2016, when Sunita decided to join politics, she was not prepared to

face the barrage of insults from the men in her village. They called her names, accused her of meddling in other people's business and inciting the women to rebel. She squared her shoulders, contested against men on a general seat, and won with a resounding majority.

She was not the first woman in Bihar to have a seat in the ward, and she will not be the last. After all, of the 136,325 elected representatives in PRIs in Bihar in 2016, 70,400 were women, according to the Bihar Gender Report Card of 2018.⁴⁰ In the last PRI election in the state in September 2021, over 52 percent of candidates were women.⁴¹ Many of these women are merely proxy candidates for their husbands. However, increasingly, women like Sunita are contesting seats and aiming to take part in governance, no matter the obstacles.

She remembers being made to sit on the floor during the first ward meeting she attended, and everyone accepted it

as a given. Sunita protested, and the Mukhiya had to offer her a chair. “Now all Dalit members get to sit. I had to demand respect to receive it.” She is aware, of course, that other elected women leaders belonging to marginal castes could be facing even greater forms of discrimination.⁴²

When asked today, what made her who she is, Sunita credits the mentoring she received from an NGO called Centre for Catalyzing Change. Indeed, most women in rural India rely on external support, perhaps in the form of mentoring from non-profit organisations that help them emerge as community leaders. Such support allows them to overcome their shortcomings, whether perceived or real: For example, women can be held back because of low literacy. According to the latest round of NFHS,⁴³ a low 55 percent of women in Bihar are literate, compared to 76.4 percent of men. In Sunita's case, there was resistance not just from the community, but also from home. The field workers from the Centre for Catalyzing Change, which

Their tireless efforts to persuade families to get inoculated yielded results. “Those who had chased me with lathis (sticks) now queued up for the vaccine.”

³⁶ covid19bharat.org, <https://covid19bharat.org/>

³⁷ National Family Health Survey 5 (2019-20), “State Fact Sheet: Bihar”, http://rchiips.org/nfhs/NFHS-5_FCTS/Bihar.pdf

³⁸ Saat Nishchay Programme, Bihar Vikas Mission, Government of Bihar, <https://www.bvm.bihargov.in/Application/uploadDocuments/Docs/7%20Nischey.pdf>

³⁹ Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseframePage.aspx?PRID=>

⁴⁰ A Gender Report Card, Government of Bihar, Women and Girls in Bihar – Taking Stock, Looking Ahead, 2018, http://www.c3india.org/uploads/news/C3_Bihar_Gender_Reportcard-min.pdf

⁴¹ Arun Kumar, Reena Sopam, “Bihar panchayat polls: Trend reverses, women emerge as ‘better half’ after 50% quota,” Hindustan Times, September 16, 2021, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/others/bihar-panchayat-polls-trend-reverses-women-emerge-as-better-half-after-50-quota-101631808129735.html>

⁴² Bhanupriya Rao, “Why Muthukani, a Dalit, had to build her own panchayat office,” India Spend, April 14, 2018, <https://www.indiaspend.com/why-muthukani-a-dalit-had-to-build-her-own-panchayat-office-36754>

⁴³ National Family Health Survey 5 (2019-20), Bihar, http://rchiips.org/nfhs/NFHS-5_FCTS/Bihar.pdf

works on gender equity in her area, had to convince her husband to allow her to attend leadership trainings that were being held outside the village.

Sunita also thanks her mobile phone. Amidst the ongoing pandemic, she says, it is her mobile phone that has become her most important source of information and she wishes more women in her village had a phone like her. Addressing the gender digital divide is an important priority. In Bihar, only 20.6 percent of women reported having access to the internet in the NFHS-5 (2019-20),⁴⁴ and only 51.4 percent of women had access to a mobile phone. Women and girls have found themselves excluded from the digitalisation of life since Covid-19, including in online schooling, skills and entrepreneurship trainings, and finding work opportunities.⁴⁵

The Panchayat election in Bihar in November 2021 drew a throng of candidates for the first time in the state's history. Ward members have recently been given access to funds

by the government, and it could partly explain why local elections are contested more actively. Sunita stood in the election again but lost to a woman—by most accounts a mere proxy candidate whose campaign was run by her husband who was powerful locally. Sunita has not let her loss dampen her spirit, though; nor will it stop her from making change happen for her community. She continues to work on the vaccination drive in her ward. She plans to focus on the education of girls and mentoring young women to be leaders. Most of all, she wants to send her daughter Arushi, who is 13, to study outside the village, to live in all the ways her mother could not.

“I am very proud of what I have achieved,” she says. “People call me Sunitaji, they ask, ‘Where is Sunitaji’s home?’ Earlier they would say, ‘Where is the home of the wife of Bambam Paswan?’”

Sunita Kumar



⁴⁴ National Family Health Survey 5 (2019-20), Bihar, http://rchiips.org/nfhs/NFHS-5_FCTS/Bihar.pdf

⁴⁵ Mitali Nikore and Ishita Uppadhyay, “India’s gendered digital divide: How the absence of digital access is leaving women behind,” Observer Research Foundation, August 22, 2021, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/indias-gendered-digital-divide/>

State- and Union Territory-wise percentage of Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) vis-à-vis total Elected Representatives (ERs) as of March 2018

Sl.No.	Name of the States/ UTs	Total ERs	Total EWRs	% EWRs
1	Andhra Pradesh	156050	78025	50.00
2	Arunachal Pradesh	9383	3658	38.99
3	Assam	26820	13410	50.00
4	Bihar	127391	57887	45.44
5	Chhattisgarh	170285	93287	54.78
6	Gujarat	144016	71988	49.99
7	Haryana	70035	29499	42.12
8	Himachal Pradesh	28723	14398	50.13
9	Jammu & Kashmir	33847	11169	33.00
10	Jharkhand	60782	30757	50.60
11	Karnataka	104967	50892	48.48
12	Kerala	18372	9630	52.42
13	Madhya Pradesh	392981	196490	50.00
14	Maharashtra	240122	121490	50.60
15	Manipur	1723	868	50.38
16	Mizoram	3502	828	23.64
17	Odisha	107487	53551	49.82
18	Punjab	97180	32393	33.33
19	Rajasthan	124854	70527	56.49
20	Sikkim	1096	548	50.00
21	Tamil Nadu	117599	39975	33.99
22	Tripura	6646	3006	45.23
23	Telangana	103468	51735	50.00
24	Uttarakhand	64606	35957	55.66
25	Uttar Pradesh	826458	272733	33.00
26	West Bengal	59402	30157	50.77
27	Dadra & Nagar Haveli	136	47	34.56
28	Daman & Diu	172	92	53.49
29	Goa	1564	516	32.99
30	Chandigarh	169	58	34.32
31	Lakshadweep	110	41	37.27
32	A & N Island	858	302	35.20
	Total	3100804	1375914	44.37

Source: MoPR Compilation as on 27.03.2018

Source: Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India, Basic Statistics of Panchayati Raj Institutions, 2019, https://www.panchayat.gov.in/documents/20126/0/Statistical+handbook_MoPR+02082019.pdf/

Key lessons

- To manage large-scale public health campaigns, like vaccination, involvement of women leaders from within the community goes a long way to create trust and counter hesitancy.
- Empowering elected representatives by allocating funds to them for development can strengthen and lead to more effective implementation especially in emergency situations.
- Women representatives in Panchayats can often be inhibited; but mentoring from civil society organisations can equip them for effective leadership and decision-making.



RAUSHAN JAHAN

THE EMBODIMENT OF STEADFAST RESOLVE

RAUSHAN JAHAN, 39, EXUDES a sense of quiet determination that vindicates the respect she commands in her village of Sugapahari in Jharkhand's Deoghar district. Raushan moved to Sugapahari after marriage, and fondly recalls a carefree childhood in Bhagalpur, Bihar, where she was born, and her formative years in Raniganj, West Bengal where her family moved when she was four. She has vivid memories of playing in the fields with her friends, cousins, and siblings, and attending a local school till class ten. Her parents were farmers and labourers in coal mines.

In Sugapahari—where she lives with her husband, two sons (her daughter is already married), a daughter-in-law, and grandchildren—Raushan noticed numerous irregularities in the supply of and access to clean water and rations. At the same time, she began to grow aware of the important role women could play in diversifying household incomes through avenues such as animal husbandry. “I began to understand that women needed to play a larger role within their own homes and also as part of the village community,” she remarks. These realisations eventually drove her to assume a prominent role in Sugapahari. Over the years, Raushan has become increasingly involved in the betterment of the lives of her village's 400-odd residents. Her efforts have been focused on securing a steady water supply, rations, and helping local women to earn a living.

In December 2019, Raushan became the village leader of the Sankalp Mahila Sangathan, a block-level women's collective mentored by Reliance Foundation. “The Sangathan comprises over 1,200 women who meet regularly and work actively to facilitate the empowerment

of local women,” she says. Under Raushan's guidance, the group's membership has increased substantially.

Individually and through the group, Raushan has been working closely with organisations that offer training programmes to women. With their support, she has been able to encourage many local women to play a larger part within their families and also in the development of the community. The Covid-19 outbreak in March 2020 threw up a host of unprecedented challenges for Raushan, but her efforts to support, mobilise and empower women continued unabated. Indeed, as she says, “Much of my most impactful work has taken place during the two years of the pandemic.”

For instance, while the country was immobilised by a series of Covid-induced lockdowns in mid-2020, Raushan worked with the Sangathan to facilitate loans to nine women to set up goateries. Goats are reared for meat in most parts of India, but in the Deoghar district, goateries are particularly widespread due to the economic prospects they create as an under-intensive or semi-intensive mode of farming.⁴⁶ As a result, many women have taken up goat farming on a commercial scale.

In addition to goat farming, Raushan has also helped establish backyard poultry farming as a means to supplement household incomes in Sugapahari. She began this initiative around July 2020, at a time when the continuity of livelihoods and access to rations were becoming increasingly uncertain because of the pandemic. The community responded enthusiastically to Raushan's efforts, and as of August 2021, 45 women

⁴⁶ “Scientific Practices Enhance Income from Goatery”, Indian Council of Agricultural Research, <https://icar.org.in/node/447>

including Raushan herself were actively engaged in backyard poultry farming. Under her energetic leadership, various training programmes on poultry management have been organised in collaboration with the Reliance Foundation and Abhivayakti Foundation. By participating in these activities, local women are becoming progressively more active members of the community.

Another of Raushan's key contributions to the development of Sugapahari is the development of Reliance Nutrition Gardens (RNGs) in the backyards of village households in order to develop self-sufficiency in food and nutrition⁴⁷ and to boost people's nutritional intake through a variety of fruits, vegetables and medicinal plants that can be grown through the year.⁴⁸ The need for improved nutrition is particularly significant for Jharkhand which is one of the poorest states in the country. As the National Family Health Surveys have shown in 2015-16 and 2019-21, a high proportion of women and children in the state tend to suffer from acute malnutrition. The RNG structure serves to equip rural women to engage in growing their own produce in order to be able to supplement the intake of nutrition for their respective families. RNGs are part of Reliance Foundation's "Bharat India Jodo" programme that aims to bridge the development gap between rural and urban India. According to a 2017 study by the International Food Policy Research Institute, Deoghar ranked 450 out of 555 districts in India in terms of its nutrition levels.⁴⁹ Raushan was one of the first women in her village to set up an RNG in 2019, with nine more such gardens being set up under her guidance during the lockdowns of 2020.

For much of 2020, Raushan's biggest challenge was to allay the villagers' fears over the risks posed by the pandemic. Upon witnessing the anxiety and panic of people in Sugapahari, Raushan took on the responsibility of raising awareness about the importance of sanitisation and other precautionary measures and Covid protocols. She also worked with Reliance Foundation to help identify people who needed the most help as part of Covid relief programmes. Her mobile phone and several community Whatsapp groups that she had helped create proved invaluable for the purpose of information dissemination and outreach. Raushan proudly states that her work on identifying and selecting beneficiaries for the distribution of dry ration kits has helped about 30 families.

In order to encourage community members to get vaccinated, she decided to lead from the front: "I decided to become the first person to get inoculated so that I could show everyone that there was nothing to be scared of and that the vaccine would help people protect themselves better," she recalls. She was able to convince people of the benefits of getting vaccinated, and assuring them that the vaccine would not harm them in any way. Thanks to Raushan's tireless efforts, all households in Sugapahari have been vaccinated at least once.

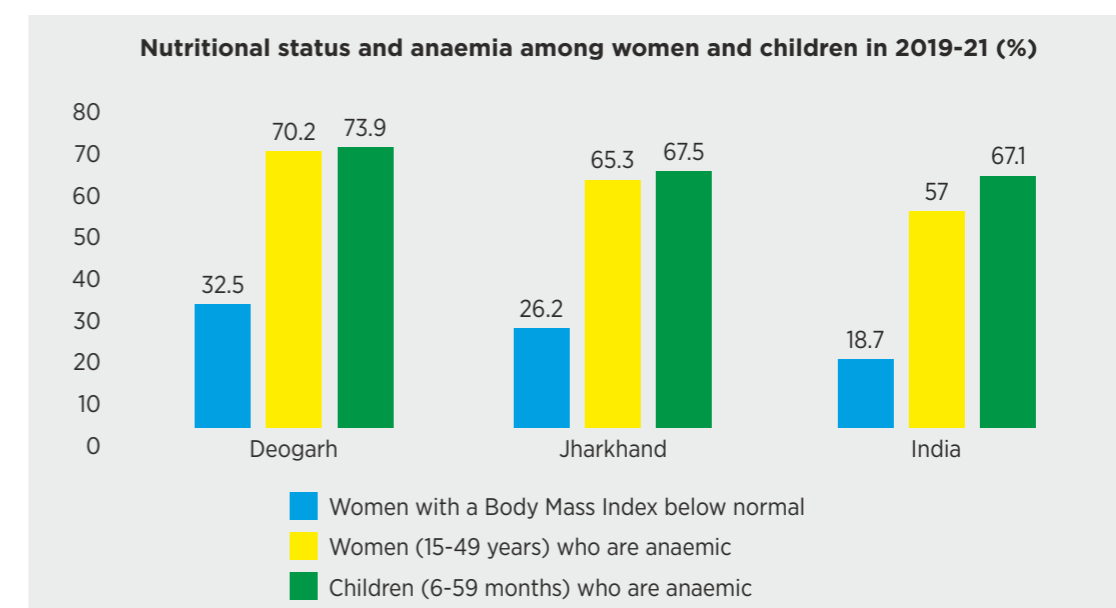
While Raushan has undertaken diverse projects, most have focused on empowering women. Her work has had a tangible impact on her community, be it through engaging women in poultry farming and goat farming, or raising awareness about the importance of proper nutrition, and distribution of ration kits to those in need. It is little wonder then that despite her quiet presence and self-effacing

demeanour, Raushan has earned the respect of everyone in Sugapahari. She credits her husband for being a huge

support throughout. "He has stood by my side through all that I have ever dreamt of achieving," she says fondly.

Pratnashree Basu

While the country was immobilised by a series of Covid-induced lockdowns in mid-2020, Raushan worked with the Sangathan to facilitate loans to nine women to set up goateries.



Source: National Family Health Survey -5 (2019-21), <http://rchiips.org/nfhs/>

Key lessons

- **Women in rural communities could be further sensitised about the possibility of leveraging animal husbandry and livestock management as income generation opportunities.**
- **Nutrition gardens are a proven and sustainable model for enhancing household food security and dietary diversity in order to combat malnutrition, and must be encouraged in malnourished regions of the country.**
- **Leading by personal example in terms of getting inoculated is an especially effective way for women leaders to help communities overcome vaccine hesitancy.**

47 Shoba Suri, "Nutrition Gardens: A Sustainable Model for Food Security and Diversity," ORF Issue Brief No. 369, June 2020, Observer Research Foundation, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/nutrition-gardens-a-sustainable-model-for-food-security-and-diversity-67933/>

48 "Nutrition Security", Reliance Foundation, <https://www.reliancefoundation.org/nutrition-security>

49 Nitya George et al., Jharkhand District Nutrition Profiles, POSHAN, International Food Policy Research Institute, 2017, <http://ebrary.ifpri.org/cdm/ref/collection/p15738coll2/id/131937>



MAUSAM KUMARI THE “PAD GIRL”



IN MANY PARTS OF INDIA, the subject of menstruation remains a taboo⁵⁰ among significant proportions of the population and young girls and women continue to engage in unhealthy practices related to their monthly period. High numbers of Indian children do not discuss the subject in school; nor would families willingly discuss it as part of a basic scientific, biological system that begins during a girl's puberty.

The village of Hardia in Bihar's Siwan district has 690 households and a population of 3,870.⁵¹ Agriculture—chiefly the production of rice and wheat—is the backbone of the district's economy; and micro enterprises and artisan-based industries also support local economic growth on a minor scale.

Most of Hardia's girls and women use cloth to manage their monthly period. And while current awareness in fact promotes the use of reusable sanitary cloth pads for menstruation—because commercial, disposable sanitary pads are non-biodegradable—the practice of using cloth requires that the washing and drying processes be sanitary. However, long-standing cultural taboos often force girls to dry their menstrual cloth in nooks and corners of their house, or else under other cloths—this practice makes the user vulnerable to infections.

In 2016, Mausam, then 16 years old, conceptualised a “napkin bank”. She saw a friend of hers suffer from infection after using cloth for her flow, and decided to take up the cause. She thought there must be many other girls

in her community who are experiencing the same difficulties and unable to speak openly. It was then that Mausam's journey as a menstrual rights activist began. She received training from the Gram Nirman Mandal and the Population Foundation of India (PFI) on the safe management of menstruation. She quickly set up adolescent support groups (Yuva Baithak) in her village to act as discussion forums.

The journey was not easy. After all, Mausam's community was deeply traditional. Girls were not allowed the same freedoms as the boys; her friends' families would ask her why she insisted on studying when her goal should be to get married and bear children. Her friends felt no less imprisoned, torn between complying with social norms and talking about their own needs and problems, of which they knew little. They had to deal with simultaneous pangs of embarrassment and anxiety.

“I wanted to break the taboo,” says Mausam. “I had to find a way to change people's attitudes.” Not unexpectedly, Mausam's community was not supportive.

Convincing her own family about her plans to attend the PFI trainings proved to be a challenge. Her mother, especially, was afraid of what the community would say. But Mausam was determined. She was called cruel names—“crazy”, “shameless”, “uncultured”. “These are modern concepts from the city and not for village girls to discuss,” she remembers them saying. She was unfazed.

⁵⁰ Suneela Garg and Tanu Anand. “Menstruation related myths in India: strategies for combating it.” *Journal of family medicine and primary care* 4, no. 2 (2015): 184.

⁵¹ Census 2011. *Hardia Population, Siwan, Bihar*, <https://www.census2011.co.in/data/village/231915-hardia-bihar.html>

NEELASH

She started the adolescents support group with 16 other girls from her village, and held sessions to discuss the various aspects of menstruation. She led the conversations around the potential dangers of managing periods with used cloth.⁵² She initiated a financial pool system to create a “napkin bank”, and collected 30 rupees a month (one rupee for each day of the month) from each of the group members. In their monthly meetings, they would pool the money and purchase sanitary napkins for the bank, from which girls could take napkins whenever they needed. After the initial few months, the storekeeper started giving Mausam a discount and thus allowing her to save. The group then used the savings to distribute sanitary pads to other girls in their village.

In early 2020, the Covid-19 outbreak came as a jolt to Mausam’s village, as it did everywhere else. With pandemic protocols and lockdown measures in place, the group could no longer hold their meetings. The biggest challenge was the non-availability of sanitary pads. Their napkin bank itself could no longer be sustained as families lost livelihoods. “By then the women in my community were largely aware of menstrual hygiene and would call me for sanitary pads,” recalls Mausam. “I felt so helpless.”

With support from her network, she got in touch with the organisers of ‘Bleeding Blues’, a campaign that promotes menstrual health and hygiene through awareness, education, and provision of hygienic products in the country’s rural districts. After a sustained effort over four months, she started receiving supplies of sanitary pads, but she still had the problem of how to distribute them to the women and girls. She would ride her bicycle several kilometres to obtain the sanitary pads, personally go to individual households, knock on their door, and drop the pads at their doorstep. While her efforts were appreciated, her family were constantly terrified she would contract Covid-19. She would assure them she was taking all precautions, and carried on. The word eventually spread to the neighbouring

villages that Mausam – the daughter of Chotelal Singh, who is a driver – had a “napkin bank”. Today she says this with pride—that her father is known by her name.

Mausam recalls visiting a nearby village, Chikarkoli Panchayat, where knowledge about sanitary pads was very low, that as they looked at the pads in her hands, the women thought it was bread. “Coronava mein parathe khae? (Do we eat parathas during corona?)” they asked her. The men, meanwhile, would say, “Auratan ko bread baathbo, hamke na debo (The bread is only for women, not for us).”

Mausam realised how difficult the task was. She counselled the villagers so they would understand the importance of sanitary pads and menstrual hygiene. Since the pandemic began, she has managed to deliver sanitary pads to more than 2,000 women. She is now known as ‘Pad Girl’. She actively collaborates with community health workers and is indebted to them for accomplishing what she has. Her efforts brought in an evident change in the behaviour of not only the individual girls and women, but the entire community as well. Boys have also started joining the youth group, and she believes the community will only benefit more from their combined efforts.

Yet there are bigger challenges in Mausam’s village. The lack of awareness is not only about the use of sanitary pads, but issues of sexual and reproductive health. There are other problems as well, including substance abuse and lack of knowledge of government programmes for adolescents. Mausam’s sustained advocacy led to the setting up of a Yuva Clinic in her village so that adolescents could discuss issues pertaining to reproductive health. Mausam continues to play an important role as a community coordinator, reaching out to youth in distress, and addressing issues like mental health, smoking, and sexually transmitted diseases. She would connect with the medical doctors at the Yuva Clinic, consulting with them on various problems and asking for their help in devising solutions.

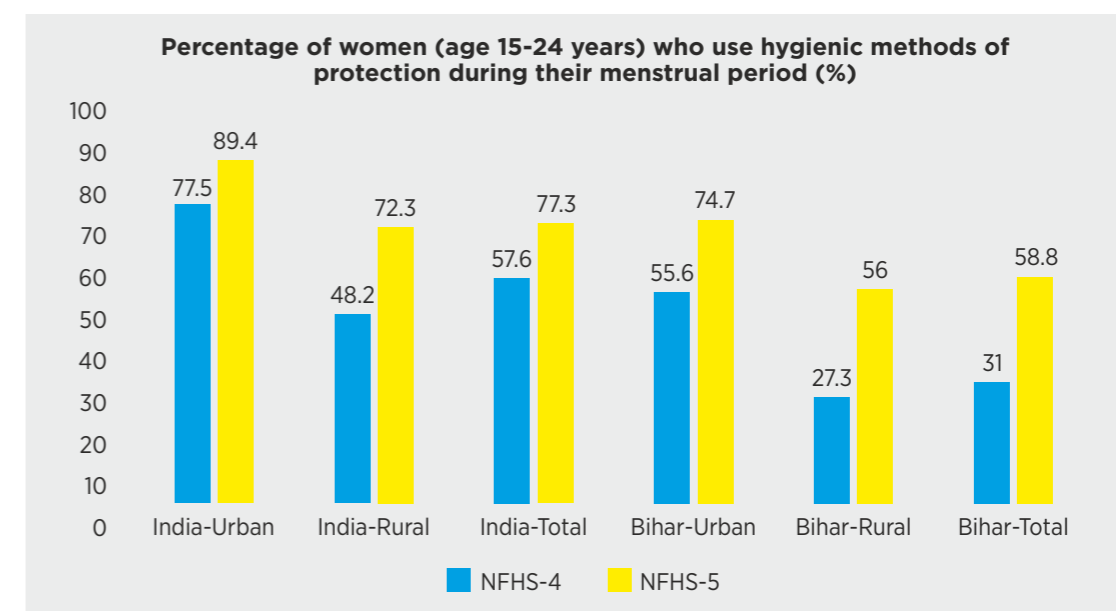
She was also instrumental in the rollout of the Covid-19 vaccine in her village. The villagers were afraid at first, as they had heard that getting inoculated could make them ill or even kill them. To set an example, Mausam and her parents lined up first to get vaccinated. Today, almost the whole of Rajouli Panchayat is vaccinated. “The pandemic

may have created havoc in our lives, but it has been a learning phase.”

Mausam is rightfully celebrated in her village for the work she has done and continues to do, but she knows there is much more to be done.

Shoba Suri

She would ride her bicycle several kilometres to obtain the pads, go to households, and drop the pads at their doorstep.



Source: National Family Health Survey 4 (2015-16) and National Family Health Survey 5 (2019-20). <http://rchiips.org/nfhs/>

Key lessons

- **Every effort must be made to motivate and empower youth to take up social issues, transform their ideas into actionable plans, and become agents of change within their communities.**
- **Young women, mothers and families, including men, must be educated about menstrual health and hygiene, and be provided accurate information about menstruation and its management.**
- **There is an urgent need to break the prevailing social and cultural norms around early marriage, teenage pregnancies and family planning, with a view to strengthening the right to education and health.**

⁵² Tanya Mahajan, “Imperfect information in menstrual health and the role of informed choice.” *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 26, no. 1-2 (2019): 59-78.



KIRAN DEVI

GOING THE EXTRA MILE

“A STRONG WOMAN stands up for herself, a stronger woman stands up for everybody else.” If there was an adage that could best describe the life of Kiran Devi, this would probably be the one. From supporting her family from a very young age to becoming a ward member of the Powari Panchayat in Harnaut block of Nalanda district in Bihar, Kiran Devi has come a long way; she dreams of going farther.⁵³

Kiran Devi was born to a Dalit family in Baigaj, a village in Biharsharif, part of Nalanda. She recalls a childhood where she was curious to learn, looked forward to her classes at school, and enjoyed wandering through the fields near her village in her free time. Her childhood came to an abrupt halt, however, when she was in class eight: she was forced to stop schooling because their family could no longer afford it. She took over most of the household chores, giving her mother time to work in the fields along with her father. Soon after, she was married to Alakh Paswan, who was a daily wage labourer. To add to the income of her husband, she started working as a daily wage labourer, too. Kiran would soon bear four children—three sons and a daughter. Her husband then decided to migrate to Delhi to find better opportunities for earning some income. Kiran and her children, however, stayed back at their village.

While raising her children and working as a daily wage labourer, Kiran Devi began to observe fundamental challenges in her community related to the lack of access to healthcare, especially for women. She helped expectant

mothers access maternal health clinics located at a distance from the village. Realising the importance of local health centres that could provide care for the people in her village, she began advocating for the availability of essentials such as medicines and equipment while spreading awareness about the importance of accessing healthcare. She communicated frequently with other members of the community.

Eventually, the villagers would urge her to run for the position of ward member. She was apprehensive at first. “But the more I thought about it, I came to realise that being a woman and having lived in my village for so long, I was fit for the job.” She shared the idea with her husband, who encouraged her. And so began a journey which has since helped transform the lives of her fellow villagers.

When she campaigned, she focused on what she thought were the most essential development issues in her ward that needed urgent attention: access to clean water, the need for roads to link the village with surrounding areas, proper drainage facilities, better hygiene and sanitation, and learning facilities. The community was ready to listen when she visited their homes. Her husband moved back to the village to support her endeavour. After she won, she immediately set to work on the first point on her agenda: the provision of clean water.

Kiran Devi was soon approached by the NGO, Centre for Catalysing Change (which mentors Panchayat-level

⁵³ Every Panchayat or village council in India is divided into wards, and each ward is represented by a ward member who is directly elected by the villagers.

women leaders) who encouraged her to participate in a training programme. She received training to work on various social issues like improved health and nutrition facilities. In particular, she learned how to obtain information on services available for pregnant women, such as antenatal care, the uses and availability of iron-folic acid tablets, and ambulance services.

It is the same training that equipped Kiran Devi with the skills that were required to handle the Covid-19 pandemic. The initial outbreak made the people afraid. She helped facilitate the distribution of masks, soaps and sanitisers in her ward, and went door-to-door to raise awareness about pandemic-appropriate behaviour.

Now in 2022, and nearly two years into the pandemic, the difficulties continue to be felt, and Kiran Devi's resolve to help her community has not waned. These days, the challenge in the village is to make people understand the importance of getting inoculated. She was the first in her village to get vaccinated, and hoped that her example would allay the fears of the others. "I told them, 'If the vaccine has a harmful effect on me, then you should not take it.'" It worked, and the target residents in her ward have received both doses of the vaccine. Overall, the state of Bihar crossed⁵⁴ the 80 million mark in vaccinations in late November 2021, ranking among the top five states in the country in the number of vaccine doses administered.

Kiran Devi has accomplished many other things. She ensured the construction of a water tank to service the entire village, worked to improve the drainage facilities, and oversaw the construction of toilets. She has also facilitated the improvement of service delivery through the Anganwadi Centres (AWCs), in addition to the

distribution of food rations and the provision of elementary education to all children. There is no doubt that her efforts in her own ward, have helped score progress for the entire Nalanda district. According to district-level data, the percentage of mothers⁵⁵ who had received an antenatal check-up in the first trimester increased from 40.2 percent to 64.7 percent between 2015-16 and 2019-20. Similarly, the percentage of pregnant women who consumed iron-folic acid for 100 days or more rose from 7.1 percent to 16.4 percent in the same period.⁵⁶

Kiran Devi's work as a ward member was also key to the reopening of the local Additional Primary Health Centre (APHC), which had for long been non-functional. In the absence of the facility, villagers, and especially pregnant women have had to travel long distances, often crossing a few villages to access maternal and child healthcare. She was determined to ensure that the APHC become functional again. She reached out to the Medical Officer-in-Charge and followed up on the task by seeking out a meeting with Hari Narayan Singh, member of the Legislative Assembly at the Harnaut block. She discussed with him the urgency of having the APHC running again. In March 2019 the APHC was finally reopened, but Kiran Devi's work did not end there. She made arrangements for the availability of basic healthcare equipment at the centre and ensured that the broken windowpanes in the examination area were replaced, and the toilet was renovated, too. "If the village is healthy then I am healthy."

When the Covid-19 vaccination rollout began across the country in early 2021, the APHC had to be closed again. This was because staff from the APHC such as the Auxiliary Nurse Midwives who were posted at the APHC

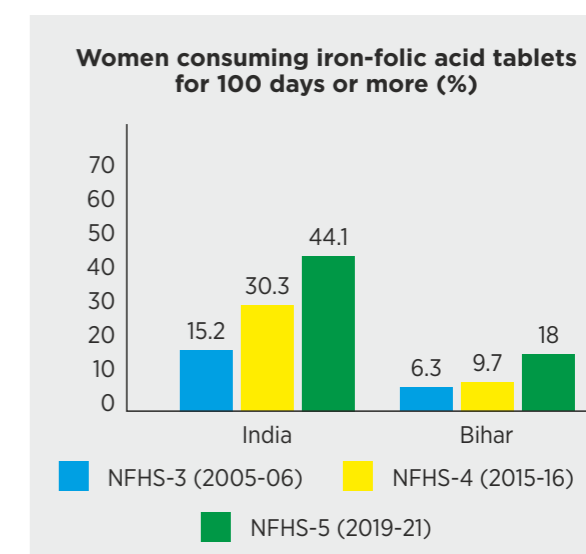
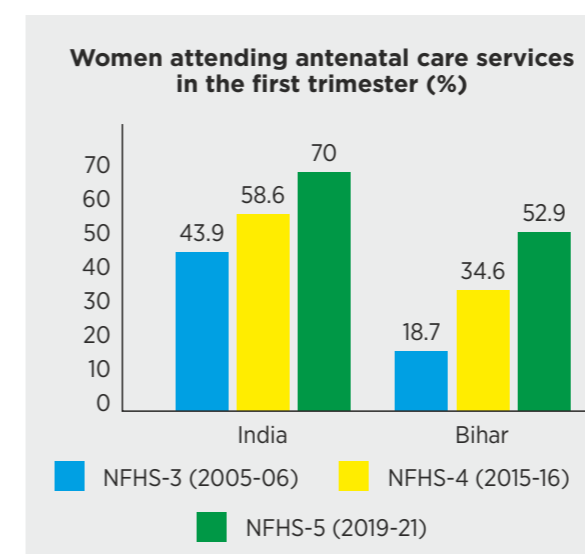
were called for vaccination and other Covid-19-related duties. Kiran Devi is intent on reviving the APHCs, and she has submitted a written application via the grievance redressal system of the Ministry of Health & Family Welfare and plans to follow through with the local MLA and Civil Surgeon. If one listens to Kiran Devi describe her tasks as ward member, it seems there is no end. And she does not complain; she conducts her tasks seriously, deriving inspiration from the support of her community members. She made promises to her fellow villagers when she campaigned those years ago; she has delivered on many of them, she believes, and she would like to do more for the development of the Powari Panchayat. While her own grit, determination and perseverance have been fundamental,

the learnings that she has derived from her experiences have also been essential to the role she has played.

Through all these years, Kiran Devi's experiences as an elected representative have made her realise the importance of enabling women to find their voice and use it. When asked about her hopes for her own children, she says she would like for them to have a good life. Her face lights up when talking of her daughter, in particular. She is very much aware of the many obstacles that her own daughter will face. She wants her, unequivocally, to complete her education and build a life for herself. Then she can pay it forward and help the community, too.

Pratnashree Basu

She was the first in her village to get vaccinated.



Source: National Family Health Survey 3 (2005-6), 4 (2015-16) and 5 (2019-21), <http://rchiips.org/nfhs/>

Key lessons

- **Well-equipped health centres are key to ensuring community health and well-being, particularly during pandemics. The efficient management and maintenance of village health centres is thus crucial.**
- **Leading by personal example in terms of getting inoculated is an especially effective way for elected village representatives to help communities overcome vaccine hesitancy.**

⁵⁴ Faryal Rumi, "Bihar now crosses 8 crore Covid vaccination-mark", *The Times of India*, November 29, 2021, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/patna/bihar-now-crosses-8-crore-Covid-vaccination-mark/articleshow/87967233.cms>

⁵⁵ National Family Health Survey 5 (2019-20), "District Fact Sheet: Nalanda, Bihar", http://rchiips.org/nfhs/NFHS-5_FCTS/BR/Nalanda.pdf

⁵⁶ National Family Health Survey 5 (2019-20), "District Fact Sheet: Nalanda, Bihar"



NEELABH

JAGAT JANANI

THE MOTHER WHO NEVER GAVE UP

WINTER DUSK fell early over the Churni River, in many parts clogged with silt, as it flowed sluggishly past the settlement of Ramnagar. The children who had been playing on the riverbank were back in their homes, and the only sounds in this corner of Nadia were the rattle and whir of looms that would run late into the night, the cries of vegetable sellers, and the boisterous chatter of labourers returning home.

Jagat Janani Biswas sat by the river watching the darkness gather. For the first time in her life, she was afraid. After ten years of an abusive marriage, she and her husband – a daily wager from Ramnagar—had separated and she had returned to her father’s house for good. She was 24 now and a mother of two young girls. Around her, people whispered about the shame of being a single mother.

Her first worry, though, was her future. Her father was dead, her mother had never known paid work, her two younger brothers were too young to find a job, and her three sisters had left Ramnagar.

She knew how it was to have little or no money. Ever since she got married, at 14 and having finished only class eight, Jagat Janani had never had a chance to enjoy the meagre income she earned from operating a loom at home; her husband and in-laws would take her earnings from her as soon as they came. “I had no courage to ask for anything, neither could I spend a paisa on my own daughters. Working the loom was what I was

expected to do,” she says. Her husband’s family discouraged her attempts—tentative as they were—to set up a little women’s collective. “Every time I needed to meet a few women or go to the bank, they objected. I felt like a prisoner.”

When Jagat Janani returned to her own family in 2011, her mother and brothers persuaded her to rebuild her life. “Don’t lose heart,” they said, and encouraged her to do something for herself. Besides, there were her own children to consider. Her younger daughter Rumi was with her, but her firstborn Dipti had remained with her in-laws. She was determined to bring Dipti home someday.

Knowing that the first step to self-sufficiency was earning some income, she brought together 10 women in 2011 to form a Self-Help Group (SHG) so that the women in her community could take loans to purchase hand looms and begin weaving silk yarn.⁵⁷ Reliance Foundation then stepped in to support the group through capacity-building, end-to-end support for creating business plans, trainings on engaging with banks, and facilitating market linkages that would help generate livelihoods.

The district of Nadia is a centre for handloom production in West Bengal, with a long tradition of excellence in the craft.⁵⁸ The availability of cheap labour and raw material, and the accumulation of weaving skills across generations have helped build a local handloom sector that employs over 200,000 people and produces two crore rupees

⁵⁷ A Self-Help Group (SHG) is an affinity-based group of 10–20 people, usually women from similar social and economic backgrounds, who collect money from those who can contribute and give the funds to members in need. Members may also save contributions and begin lending funds back to the SHG’s members themselves or to others in a village for a particular purpose. Many SHGs are linked with banks and can deliver micro-credit.

⁵⁸ Chandan Roy, “The silk handloom industry in Nadia district of West Bengal: A study on its history, performance and current problems”, Munich Personal RePEc Archive, July 2017, https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/80601/1/MPRA_paper_80601.pdf

worth of sarees every month.⁵⁹ Jagat Janani's SHG and its potential for enhancing livelihoods sparked much interest among the 5,200-odd residents of Ramnagar, half of whom were women. Within two years, her group grew.

The timing of Jagat Janani's entry into community development was fortuitous, coinciding with the launch of the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM) in Bengal in 2012. Mandated to help the rural poor increase their incomes through sustainable livelihoods and access to financial services,⁶⁰ the NRLM was quick to leverage the organisational power of women's SHGs across the state.

With Reliance Foundation's guidance, Jagat Janani learnt how to lead her SHG, educate its members about loans, determine the number of looms to purchase, and utilise funds effectively. As word spread about her abilities as an SHG leader, other women's groups across Nadia came to her for advice. She personally helped scores of women access credit and launch livelihoods.

In 2014, over 150 SHGs including her own, decided to pool their resources and form a cluster. Unanimously chosen to lead the collective, Jagat Janani found herself at the helm of over 2,000 women, each of whom looked to her for leadership on matters well beyond livelihoods. Indeed, Jagat Janani by then was busy campaigning against domestic violence, promoting menstrual health, and serving as a supervisor for the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) as well.

The journey was not easy. "We decided to form an SHG cluster because we needed to build a bridge between the community and the local administration," says Jagat Janani. The needs of the SHGs were not always adequately

attended to by local officials and politicians. On a few occasions the women even felt their work was being thwarted. They realised that their strength was in numbers. "Only if we came together as a group would we be taken seriously."

However, their cluster too, failed to disburse loans and mobilise funds for community-level investment on the scale that she had envisioned. In 2016, she led her cluster in taking the crucial step of registering as a cooperative society. They called it Ramnagar Bahumukhi Samabay Samity (RBSS), and it acts as a micro-bank. Reliance Foundation offered assistance by helping provide loan-related information. Jagat Janani is still the president of the five-year-old society.

The Covid-19 outbreak in March 2020 presented an unprecedented challenge. Within a week of lockdowns being announced in West Bengal, women began to arrive at Jagat Janani's doorstep, asking for help as their families had run out of food. By May, the supply of rations had come to a standstill.⁶¹ Jagat Janani rushed to a local store to purchase some immediate relief. She also sought the help of certain residents of Ramnagar and the neighbouring municipality of Ranaghat who were better-off, who agreed to send stocks of food for infants and children. Working with the Sabhapati (chairperson) of the local Panchayat Samiti (an intermediate rural local government body that links the village council or Village Panchayat to the District Panchayat), she also facilitated 15 days' worth of rations for Ramnagar and ensured that supplies of basic medication and sanitary pads continued.

By June 2020, returning migrants had begun streaming into Nadia – a part of the wave of over a million migrants who returned to West Bengal in the early days of the

pandemic.⁶² As a first step, RBSS worked round the clock with the Sarpanch (head) of Ramnagar's Panchayat (village council) to set up quarantine centres. As the lockdown continued, it became evident that the returning migrants would have to find some income. Led by Jagat Janani, RBSS disbursed loans worth nearly 28 lakh rupees from its corpus to set them up as door-to-door sellers of essential items and groceries. Loans were also offered to loom operators whose businesses had plummeted due to the closure of markets and absence of demand.⁶³ The terms of repayment were generous and flexible, involving minimal interest rates.

Throughout the extended lockdowns of 2020, Reliance Foundation supported RBSS by distributing masks, conducting audio-visual conferences to share information about the benefits of the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan package, helping to register residents on the CoWin platform (an online platform for registering for Covid inoculations), and guiding them about procedures for taking loans. Eventually, around 2,000 households took loans from SHGs during the lockdown, and the SHGs in turn borrowed funds from banks.

In May 2021, vaccination drives began in earnest in West Bengal.⁶⁴ The people of Ramnagar were scared that the vaccine would make them sick, or even kill them. Jagat Janani spent many hours counselling families about the pandemic, and convincing them to get inoculated. She and her colleagues also began to speak at public events about overcoming vaccine hesitancy. They told the residents: "If we can give our children the polio vaccine, why can't adults take the Covid vaccine?" She estimates that as of December 2021, over 90 percent of Ramnagar's adult inhabitants have taken both their jabs—far higher than the prevailing state-level average of 27 percent adults who have been vaccinated twice.⁶⁵

Jagat Janani is aware that much remains to be done to protect the people's welfare amidst a prolonged pandemic. She is quietly confident that the triumphs of the past year will see them through the days ahead. Indeed, for many residents of Ramnagar, Jagat Janani has been the face and prime mover of Covid relief. She gives credit to the local officials, the members of her cooperative, the NGOs that assisted them, and her own family: "A lot of people have helped me."

'You have to stand beside people.'
Jagat treasures the joy of seeing a smile
on the face of someone she has helped.

59 Manogya Loiwai, "We might die of hunger: Handloom workers in West Bengal share plight as saree production, export halt", *India Today*, May 18, 2020, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/coronavirus-pandemic-india-lockdown-die-of-hunger-handloom-workers-west-benga-1679160-2020-05-18>

60 Anandadhara: West Bengal State Rural Livelihoods Mission, <http://wbprd.gov.in/anandadhara/>

61 Sujit Nath, "Bengal govt cracks down on nearly 300 ration dealers for corruption, retrieves stolen food items", *News18*, May 04, 2020, <https://www.news18.com/news/india/bengal-govt-cracks-down-on-nearly-300-ration-dealers-for-corruption-retrieves-stolen-food-items-2604731.html>

62 Shiv Sahay Singh, "Over a million migrant workers have returned to Bengal, says Mamata", *The Hindu*, Jun 04, 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/over-a-million-migrants-workers-have-returned-to-bengal-says-mamata/article31744094.ece>

63 Gurvinder Singh, "There has been no business this year: Demand plummets for Bengal's weavers", *The Wire*, June 10, 2020, <https://thewire.in/labour/bengal-weavers-lockdown>

64 Saikat Ray and Sumati Yengkhom, "West Bengal: Govt centres to roll out vaccination drive for 18-44 age group, relaunch first dose for 45+", *The Times of India*, May 27, 2021, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/govt-centres-to-roll-out-18-44-vax-relaunch-1st-dose-for-45/articleshow/82986391.cms>

65 Sumati Yengkhom, "West Bengal reaches 7-crore jab mark; last 1 crore in 17 days", *The Times of India*, October 23, 2021, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/bengal-reaches-7-crore-jab-mark-last-1-crore-in-17-days/articleshow/87213526.cms>

Ask her today what life has taught her, and she will quickly say it is the importance of heart, and self-reliance. “You have to stand beside people.” She treasures the joy of seeing a smile on the face of someone she has helped. She also underlines the importance of earning the respect of those around you. “That can only be done by finding your voice, having an income, and creating your place in the world.”

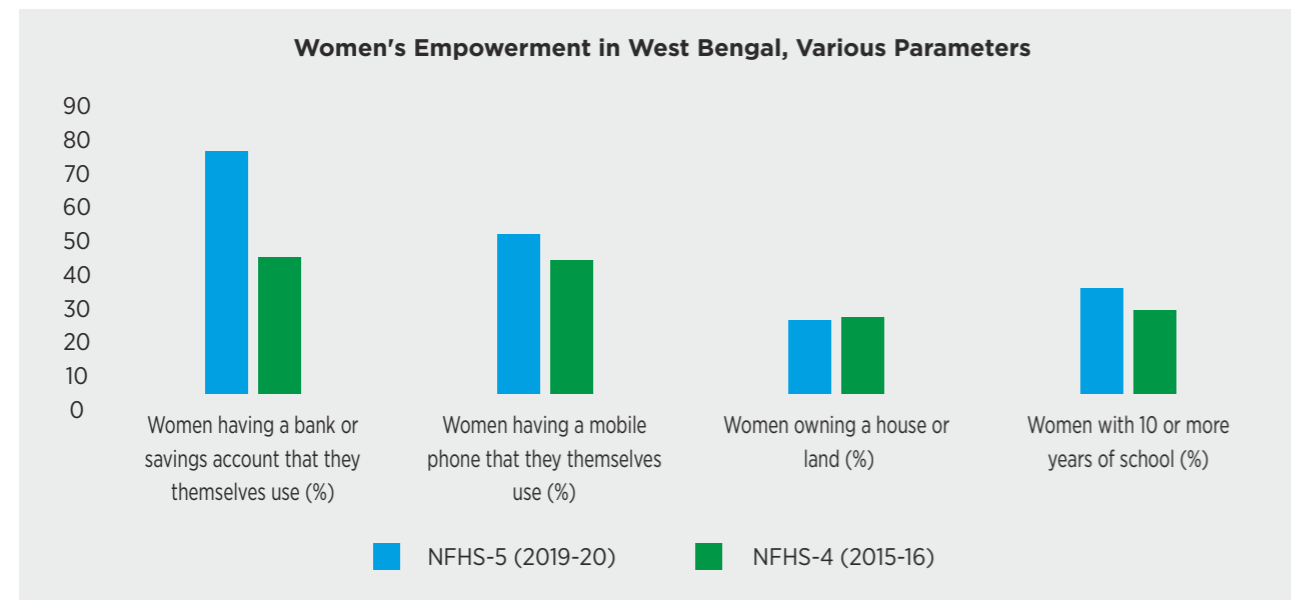
Jagat Janani is not alone in this thought. As the National Family Health Survey 5 (2019-20) found, 77 percent of women in West Bengal now have bank accounts that they use themselves – a rise of nearly 35 percent since 2015-16.⁶⁶

Jagat Janani herself has built a house of her own in Ramnagar, and runs four power looms besides heading

RBSS and mentoring countless SHGs. Rumi is in Class 11 and is aspiring to become a doctor. Dipti—who has since returned to Jagat Janani’s household—has graduated from college and has dreams of owning a beauty parlour.

At 34, Jagat Janani is busier than ever before. Her days are full, her mobile phone rarely stops ringing, and every week brings a new emergency. But in the evenings, when she makes her way home by the slow, turbid Churni, she feels at peace. Jagat Janani’s name translates to “mother of the world”—for now she is content being a mother of two, and an inspiration to many.

Anirban Sarma



Source: National Family Health Survey 5 (2019-20), “Key Indicators: State and Districts of West Bengal”, http://rchiips.org/nfhs/NFHS-5_FCTS/COMPENDIUM/West_Bengal.pdf

⁶⁶ Ambika Pandit, “Sharp rise in bank accounts operated by women”, *The Times of India*, December 14, 2020, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/sharp-rise-in-bank-accounts-operated-by-women/articleshow/79712517.cms>



Key lessons

- **Self-Help Groups (SHGs) can strengthen women’s livelihoods on a larger scale if they collaborate, pool resources, form clusters, or upscale themselves into cooperative societies.**
- **During emergencies that threaten livelihoods, if community members are offered loans at flexible interest rates and supported in identifying new income generation opportunities, this can help limit impact.**
- **Pandemic and disaster management measures are strengthened when they involve partnerships between local self-government bodies, civil society organisations and SHGs.**



SHARADA MAJHI

THE TRAILBLAZER OF URLADANI

“I WAS BORN HERE, got married here, and maybe one day I'll die here, too.” ‘Here’ for Sharada Majhi is the village of Jurakhaman, in Odisha’s Kalahandi district.

A history of thriving human settlements in Kalahandi goes back at least 2,000 years. The district has been agriculturally rich: it supplied tons of rice to Bengal during the famine of 1943, and was regarded as the “rice bowl of Odisha”.⁶⁷ Yet in the last fifty years, Kalahandi has become almost synonymous with drought, hunger and poverty – even giving birth to the term, the “Kalahandi Syndrome”. Recent initiatives such as innovative farming and water projects have helped improve conditions in the district somewhat. Most of the local population is still involved in agriculture.

Sharada belongs to a Kondh tribal family who, like many others in the village, are dependent on agriculture, wage labour, and forest resources. When she was little, Sharada was the only girl in her village who could go to school. By the time she was in class ten, though, that number had risen to sixteen. “Now everybody in Jurakhaman goes to school,” she says with pride.

Burdened with work at home and in the fields while growing up, Sharada never had time for leisure. Little has changed since. Working as a community volunteer, she traces her interest in social work back to her childhood, when the NGO Seba Jagat was established in Kalahandi in

1992. She was enthralled by the discussions on community service, and soon began to participate in village-cleaning drives and other activities. “Being of help to someone has always made me very happy.”

Sharada was greatly inspired by the activities of Seba Jagat, and they repaid her loyalty in kind, offering her close support as she began to engage in social work. With the help of the training she received from Seba Jagat, she began mobilising the women of her tribal community to fight for their right to own land. She helped set up a network of tribal women, which they called Jailaitamu. Seba Jagat also introduced her to Ekta Parishad, an organisation dedicated to working for land rights, which assisted their network through the contentious and complex processes involved in acquiring land ownership.

Having been denied access to familial property, Sharada was well aware of the importance of female ownership of resources, especially of land. In 2015-16, according to NFHS-4, women owned 28.3 percent of land in India, either on their own or in joint ownership. But land ownership numbers in India remain inconclusive due to a lack of uniformity in data collection across different surveys.⁶⁸

Another issue in which Sharada and her network involved themselves, was the women’s lack of access to proper and hygienic latrines—an experience that is shared by many

⁶⁷ Kanti Kumar and Amit Mitra, “Death by starvation”, *Down to Earth*, June 15, 1993, <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/coverage/death-by-starvation-31046>

⁶⁸ Pranab R Choudhury, “How Much Land Do Women Own in India? Nobody Really Knows,” *Scroll.in*, March 11, 2021, <https://scroll.in/article/989157/how-much-land-do-women-own-in-india-its-still-not-known>

women across India. In a study conducted in the rural households of Puri, Odisha, decisions on the construction of latrines were made exclusively by men in 80 percent of the households.⁶⁹ Once again, Seba Jagat provided their group with trainings, after which they took up the task of sensitising women on the importance of proper healthcare, sanitation, and hygiene.

In 2019, UNICEF's Sampurna Barta (a programme established in 2018 to help reduce the infant mortality and maternal mortality rates in Odisha) chose Urladani as a project location. (Urladani is the larger village where Sharada's Jurakhman village is located.) Sharada volunteered her services as she already had experience in community development work. This kind of work was essential. Odisha has a high rate of neonatal deaths: around 5,000 babies died in 117 tribal blocks of the state in 2017-18 alone, with over 270 mothers dying each year in tribal areas.⁷⁰

Sharada started the arduous task of teaching people about institutional births and child immunisation, and imparting lessons on proper nutritional habits in order to ensure the good health of mothers and children. She also worked for people to get access to different pension schemes, if they were eligible. "I see the people of the community as members of my family."

In early 2020, during the initial outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, Sharada's village became particularly vulnerable for various reasons: high migration rates, the lack of access to health services, and inadequate health infrastructure. Odisha is one of the biggest contributors to India's migrant labour force: many are forced by poverty to migrate for work—what analysts call "distress migration".⁷¹ The Covid crisis, however, triggered a wave of reverse migration, which inevitably worsened the situation in the state, especially the rural areas.⁷²

The health threat was massive, as their community has had a history of high rates of diarrhoea, malaria, typhoid fever, and other ailments. The lockdown brought challenges to the lives and livelihoods of many in the village. With most farmers operating on a small scale with less than two hectares of land, the Covid crisis brought all their work to a standstill. Harvest of the rabi crops had to be delayed since neither labour nor machinery was available. Restrictions on transport facilities and movement limited the opportunities, and farmers of perishable commodities incurred significant losses. There were cases where farmers reportedly had to throw away large amounts of produce, unable to find a way to sell them during the lockdown.⁷³

Tribal communities are especially vulnerable in terms of food and nutrition security. The halt in farm-based

activities, and the collection and sale of non-timber forest produce like mahua flowers and kendu leaves, left tribal communities without an income, as no collection agents came and markets closed down.

People in her village were also apprehensive about approaching health centres for help. Yet despite being afraid herself, Sharada, with the help of Seba Jagat, set down to work in reviving the community and informing those unaware of – or unwilling to follow – Covid protocols. Support from UNICEF and Seba Jagat opened up new avenues of assistance. With their help, Sharada encouraged migrant workers to stay in quarantine, and was involved in spreading awareness across the community about Covid-19 and what measures they could take to protect themselves. People were educated about social distancing norms, and Sharada and her group distributed information materials in order to normalise Covid-appropriate behaviour.

Sharada worked closely with the Panchayat to provide supplementary health and nutrition services to vulnerable sections of the community, offering her support in the preparation and distribution of cooked food. She also visited isolation centres and provided counselling, and was a strong proponent of the vaccination drive. Tackling

false news was a formidable task. Misinformation, which has plagued India's Covid-19 experience, was rampant, with unscientific suggestions on prevention and cure, the spread of data without the necessary context, and both hysteria and dismissiveness in equal measure. But Sharada soldiered on, addressing any and all fears with facts with extensive support from UNICEF. With the help of government guidelines forwarded by Seba Jagat and Sampurna Barta – which Sharada then shared with the community through interpersonal engagement and Whatsapp – she ensured that the people in her village were fully aware of what was taking place.

Sharada's efforts greatly benefited communities of returning migrants. Not only did she encourage their immunisation, vaccination, and proper nutrition, she also helped them acquire job cards and apply for work through the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS).

Indeed, the efforts of Sharada and other leaders have helped bring about change in their community that has been historically plagued by hunger, droughts, and malnutrition. "Circumstances could change at any moment, so we must grab opportunities to improve our community."

Noyontara Gupta

69 Parimita Routray, Belen Torondel, Thomas Clasen, and Wolf-Peter Schmidt, "Women's Role in Sanitation Decision Making in Rural Coastal Odisha, India," Edited by Hafiz T.A. Khan, NCBI. Public Library of Science, May 24, 2017, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5443550/>

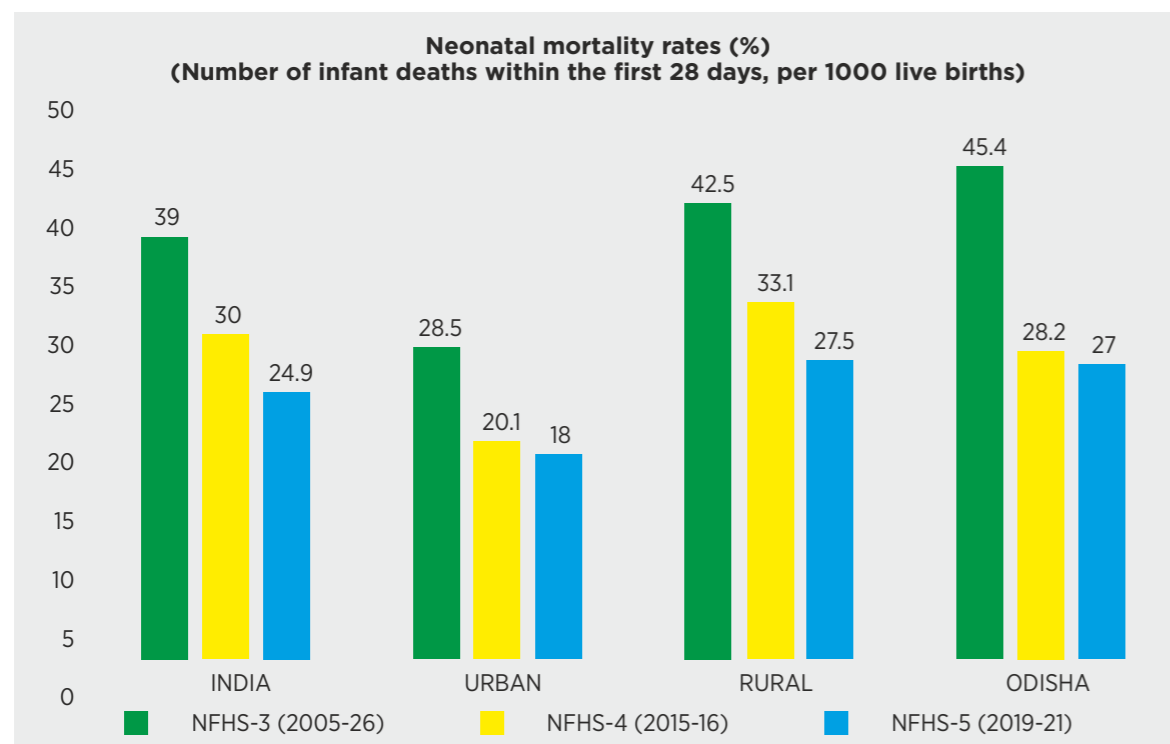
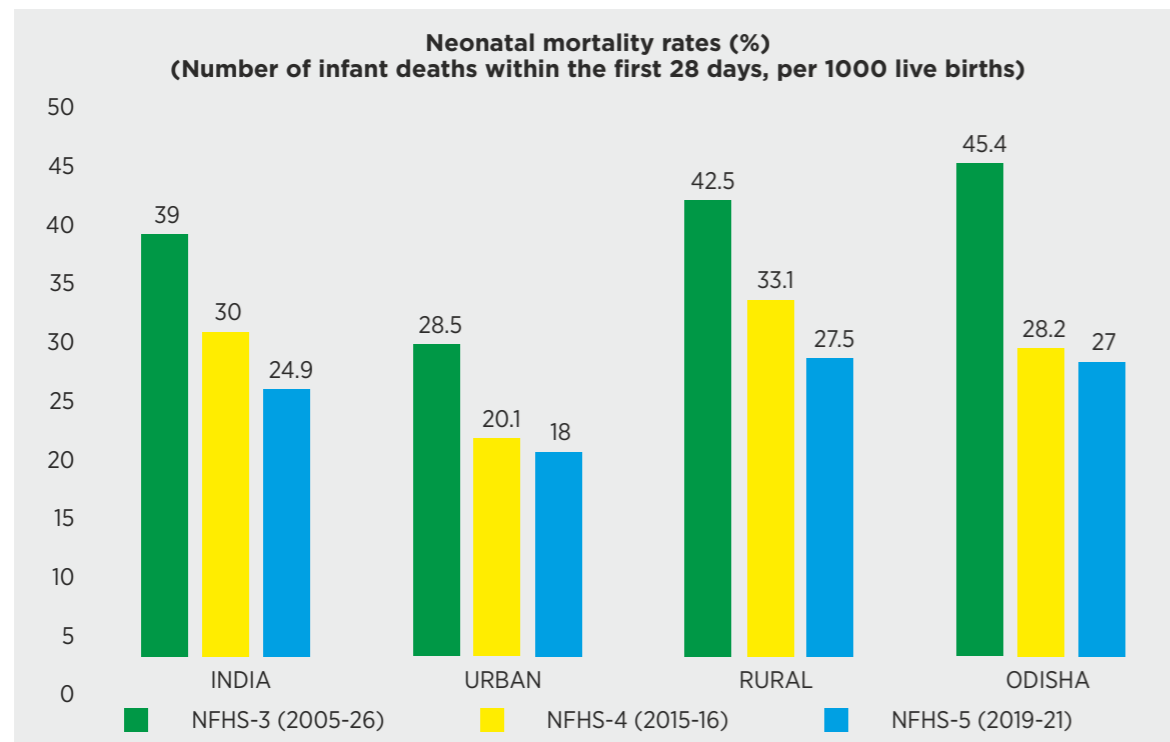
70 Sid Shrestha, "Going the Extra Mile for Marginalized Children," UNICEF Office of Innovation, March 12, 2019, <https://www.unicef.org/innovation/stories/behaviour-change-interventions-for-marginalized-children-odisha>

71 Minaketan Behera, Sibanarayan Mishra and Alok Ranjan Behera, "The Covid-19-Led Reverse Migration on Labour Supply in Rural Economy: Challenges, Opportunities and Road Ahead in Odisha," Sage, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/00194662211013216>

72 Ranjan Mohapatra, Pradeep Kumar Das and Venkataramana Kandi, "Challenges in Controlling Covid-19 in Migrants in Odisha, India," NCBI, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7444634/>

73 Chetan Chauhan, "Despite Bumper Crop, Prices of Farm Produce Lowest in Recent Years Due to Covid-19 Lockdown," Hindustan Times, May 26, 2020, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/despite-bumper-crop-prices-of-farm-produce-lowest-in-recent-years-due-to-lockdown/story-C7b3Btu1TzGsWQWjtRtJfK.html>

Sharada's efforts greatly benefited communities of returning migrants. Not only did she encourage their immunisation, vaccination, and proper nutrition, she also helped them acquire job cards and apply for work through the MGNREGS.



Source: National Family Health Surveys 3 (2005-6), 4 (2015-16) and 5 (2019-21), <http://rchiips.org/nfhs/>



Key lessons

- **Mainstreaming women in programmes to improve health and nutrition at the community level is particularly important in regions with a history of hunger, and a high incidence of infant and neonatal mortality.**
- **Peer counselling and community engagement are highly effective means for improving health services. These can be reinforced by behaviour change communication initiatives led by local administrations and civil society organisations.**
- **With the growing use of smartphones by community members, women's groups must be further sensitised about the benefits of messaging applications for information dissemination and advocacy.**



NEELABH

JUNUMONI DEKA

THE ONE-STOP PROBLEM SOLVER OF SARPARA

AS THE MORNING MIST begins to clear, a blue line of hills becomes visible above the rooftops in Sarpara, a village in Assam's Kamrup district. Generations of villagers have looked upon the distant Mirza Pahar range, watching them change colour at different times of day. Over the years, the residents of Sarpara have come to see the hills as sentinels watching silently over them, their paddy fields, the nearby river, and the old groves of trees beyond their houses.

The days begin early for 45-year-old Junumoni Deka, who works as a community mobiliser. She sets out as the streets begin to stir. She is brisk, business-like but soft-spoken and has become a well-loved figure across Sarpara.

Junumoni was born in a village a mere seven kilometres away from Sarpara. Her father was an eri silk fabric trader, and her mother wove shawls, garments, and other products that they sold. Although weaving became second nature to Junumoni at a young age, her true passion lay in learning and education. However, since her parents could not afford to send her to school beyond class eight, she began to weave after school hours to raise money to pay for her education and even bought a cow to sell its milk. Junumoni successfully completed her higher secondary education. It was in her second year at college that her funds ran out and she was forced to drop out without graduating.

But she had already attained a considerably higher level of education than was typical for women from the district. As data from the National Family Health Survey 2019–20 shows, even today, less than 40 percent of women in Kamrup have 10 or more years of schooling.⁷⁴

Junumoni first noticed discrimination against women, including herself, while she was still in school. For instance, while she loved to perform the traditional Assamese sattriya dance,⁷⁵ she was forbidden to do so as her family believed girls should not dance. Similarly, although she was a good volleyball player, Junumoni was barred from playing the game and was once even made to skip school for a few days when caught participating in a tournament.

Perhaps the most scarring experience was witnessing one of her neighbours—a young woman whom she affectionately called *bhabhi* (sister-in-law)—being beaten mercilessly by her husband and in-laws. “They would often chase bhabhi out into the street and beat her publicly,” says Junumoni. Indeed, a staggering 33 percent of women between 18 and 49 in rural Assam are victims of spousal violence.^{76, 77}

Junumoni was 18 when she met Naramohan Das, a weaver and master trainer in Kamrup, who had a profound impact on her life. He helped her train as a specialist in ahikuta, a

74 National Family Health Survey 5 (2019-20), “District Fact Sheet: Kamrup, Assam”, http://rchiips.org/nfhs/NFHS-5_FCTS/AS/Kamrup.pdf
75 “Sattriya nritya – A beautiful classical dance of Assam”, Assam Info, 2022, <http://www.assaminfo.com/culture/5/sattriya-nritya-beautiful-classic-dance-of-assam.htm>
76 National Family Health Survey 5 (2019-20), “State Fact Sheet: Assam”, http://rchiips.org/nfhs/NFHS-5_FCTS/Assam.pdf
77 Mythree Ramesh, “Why Assam recorded highest crime rate against women for fourth consecutive year”, The Quint, September 18, 2021, <https://www.thequint.com/leon/gender/assam-highest-crime-against-women-ncrb#read-more>

heritage form of weaving, and connect with niche markets where her talents were rewarded. He also introduced her to the North East Network (NEN), an NGO promoting women's rights and empowerment across Assam, Meghalaya and Nagaland. Junumoni began to attend NEN meetings and soon realised that it was the perfect forum for her to articulate her ideas and aspirations and to work towards women's upliftment with like-minded peers. She joined NEN as a community mobiliser in 1995. Except for the years 2008 to 2016 when certain health difficulties compelled her to undertake home-based work, she has since continued to work for the organisation.

When she first started working with NEN, Junumoni was chiefly involved with a project to empower handloom weavers. As she honed her skills as a mobiliser, winning the confidence of the communities she engaged with, her responsibilities began to expand. "I soon found myself dealing with a range of other issues, such as building awareness about health and wellbeing, and educating women about their menstrual and reproductive health," she says. But what has made her a household name in Sarpara is her work as a counsellor offering psychosocial support to victims of domestic violence, and her campaigns against gender-based violence (GBV). Through counselling, sensitisation, and awareness-raising activities, Junumoni helps women deal with and overcome the trauma of domestic abuse, and often connects them to the local police so that action can be taken against the perpetrators of GBV.

But things are not always easy. "Domestic violence is a highly sensitive matter. Attempts to counsel victims and their families, or to take action against offenders, do not always go down well," she says. People have thrown stones at her house and smashed her windows, but this she says only shows the importance of the issue and her work.

When the Covid-19 pandemic broke out and lockdowns were initiated in 2020, Junumoni's face-to-face counselling activities came to a halt. But, according to Junumoni, this was precisely when domestic violence cases began to rise, and women needed all the help possible. Across India, violence against women (the 'shadow pandemic'⁷⁸) reached alarming proportions, with the National Commission for Women registering a 94-percent increase in complaints of domestic assaults against women during the lockdowns.⁷⁹

Junumoni quickly switched to offering tele-counselling services, providing a much-needed lifeline to many women. But these efforts were only partially effective as it soon became evident that few women owned mobile phones and the phones of many others were controlled by male family members. This reflects a state-wide trend; in 2019-20, less than 54 percent of women in rural Assam had a mobile phone that they were able to use unsupervised.⁸⁰

In Sarpara, just like across the rest of the country, instances of GBV were on the rise. India saw a 95 percent spike in traffic to pornographic sites during the lockdowns,⁸¹ a trend noted in Sarpara too. Junumoni observes that this

often led to sexual violence, with women being forced to perform the kinds of acts the men saw on these sites. As an example, she narrates the experience of a young woman who refused to do what her husband demanded and so he circulated her nude photos through Whatsapp.

Junumoni soon realised she would need to resume her on-ground activities to make a difference. With the permission of the village leader, she began to visit the houses where she knew domestic violence occurred to sensitise the women about legal remedies and counsel the families to prevent further violence. Notably, she activated the NEN's local Gramin Mahila Kendras (GMKs) to function as meeting places where women could gather to share their experiences and receive psychosocial support. "Besides our face-to-face meetings, I ensured that Zoom counselling sessions from and between GMKs took place regularly so that we could give more women the help they needed," says Junumoni.

One case she is proud of helping resolve involves a woman who had locked herself into a room because she could not face any further indignities by her husband. The police intervened and sought Junumoni's assistance. She counselled the couple over Zoom and notes that their relationship has since improved. Junumoni feels that in

general with the growth in women's awareness about formal legal solutions, there has been a marked reduction in instances of domestic violence in Sarpara.

Given that she could move freely around the village and had mobilised the GMKs, Junumoni was also able to lead Sarpara's Covid-19 mitigation efforts. During her house visits and Zoom calls, she sensitised people about wearing masks, washing their hands, and following social distancing restrictions.

Additionally, visiting households across the village helped Junumoni determine where essential items were most needed. She identified households with vulnerable groups (such as women living below the poverty line, abandoned women, or women with disabilities) and distributed rations sanitary pads, contraceptives, and other products to them, in partnership with a local club that distributed rations to over 350 families, Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs, i.e. community health workers) and the GMKs. Junumoni also conducted training workshops for local weaver communities, teaching them how to stitch masks. This helped them generate an income, while providing critical support to the community health centres to which the masks were supplied. The Assam government even lauded this initiative.

***Junumoni quickly switched
to offering tele-counselling services,
providing a much-needed lifeline
to many women.***

78 "The shadow pandemic: Violence against women during Covid-19", UN Women, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/in-focus-gender-equality-in-Covid-19-response/violence-against-women-during-Covid-19>

79 Shreyaa Mohanty and Swikruti Mohanty, "Covid-19 Lockdown: A Refuge from the Pandemic or the Harbringer of a Woman's Agony?" *International Journal of Law and Social Sciences*, Volume 1, Issue 1 (2021), <https://www.alliance.edu.in/ijls/ijls-2021/assets/documents/COVID19-Lockdown.pdf>

80 National Family Health Survey 5 (2019-20), "State Fact Sheet: Assam", http://rchiips.org/nfhs/NFHS-5_FCTS/Assam.pdf

81 Saikiran Kannan, "Pornography gets a pandemic boost, India reports 95 per cent rise in viewing", *India Today*, April 11, 2020, <https://www.indiatoday.in/news-analysis/story/pornography-gets-a-pandemic-boost-india-reports-95-per-cent-rise-in-viewing-1665940-2020-04-11>

Junumoni's unrelenting efforts to bring change to Sarpara have won her the community's affection and respect. "People now think of me as a voice of assurance and a contact point for a host of matters," she says. She acknowledges the support of her family over the years and is proud that her 14-year-old daughter has begun to speak the language of human rights and social justice.

Junumoni knows that the battle for women's dignity will be a long and hard one. But the progress made so far gives her hope. Indeed, she believes a day will come when respect for women's rights, voices and bodies become the norm.

Anirban Sarma

SINCE THE PANDEMIC, VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN HAS INCREASED



50% of women reported that they or a woman they know has experienced a form of VAW since COVID-19



25% of women reported experiencing it in lifetime



4 in 10 women feel more unsafe in public spaces



1 in 4 women

- say that household conflicts have become more frequent
- feel more unsafe in their home



1 in 5 women feel unsafe walking alone during the day



1 in 2 women feel unsafe walking alone at night



7 in 10 women said they think that verbal or physical abuse by a partner has become more common



6 in 10 women said they think sexual harassment in public has worsened



3 in 10 women think that VAW in their community has increased

Source: UN Women, Measuring the Shadow Pandemic: Violence against Women during COVID-19, 2021, <https://data.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/documents/Publications/Measuring-shadow-pandemic.pdf>



Key lessons

- In districts with high incidences of gender-based violence (GBV), mechanisms such as helplines, telecounselling services, women's counselling centres, home-based counselling, and mobile safety units could provide essential support.
- Higher numbers of women community mobilisers or field workers should be trained to address GBV. Their activities could include liaising with the local police and helping respond to cases of violence.
- Sensitising communities about legal remedies for GBV and enabling victims to access these solutions could help reduce crimes against women.



NUZOVOLU LEADING FROM THE FRONT

PERCHED ON A GREEN HILLSIDE at an altitude of 1500 metres, the village of Chozuba in Nagaland's Phek district looks up at an open sky. Small houses rise in tiers above the village's winding roads, and fanning out around the slopes are the graduated terraces where rice is cultivated.

It was here in Chozuba that thirty-seven-year-old Nuzovolu, fondly known as Avolu, was born. She studied up to class ten at a local school, and was married a few years later at the age of 22. An abiding interest in school-level education prompted Avolu to take up a position as a primary teacher at a private school. In order to supplement her income she also began to run a hostel for older students.

In 2013, Avolu and her husband Khrukutho moved to Kohima in search of a better life. The migration from a village to Nagaland's capital and its second largest city seemed daunting to the couple at first. Kohima, with its crowded lanes, noisy streets, thriving markets, and acute water shortages during the summer months, seemed far removed from quiet and sleepy Chozuba. Gradually however, Avolu and Khrukutho settled into their new home.

Khrukutho was appointed by All India Radio-Kohima as a news reader on a contractual basis, while Avolu worked as a salesperson at a medical store. Her husband also drives a taxi in his spare time to earn an extra income. In Kohima, the couple live in a mixed-tribe community where most men work as construction labourers and women do home-based work. It is here that Avolu came into contact with the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), which was, along with the North East Network (NEN),

advocating with the local authorities to recognise self-employed women as workers. She was motivated to work with SEWA to help support women in the community with livelihood opportunities and training.

In 2018, Avolu joined the SEWA leadership-building programme and received training on food processing, pickle and snacks making, and basket weaving. Avolu's engagement with the programme made her more assertive, confident, and articulate, and she became an active leader in Kohima. In 2018, she was selected as the convenor of SEWA Kohima district and an *aagevan* (leader). As an *aagevan*, and one of the most active leaders of NEN and SEWA, she became a master trainer on psychosocial care and menstrual hygiene. Additionally, she was also appointed as the field mobiliser for Kohima district under the Udyami: Building Resilience of Women Micro-entrepreneurs programme funded by US Agency for International Development (USAID). Avolu was a key part of SEWA and NEN awareness and supportive campaigns during the pandemic. This experience made her more aware of the problems faced by the community and their severity.

"I may not have had much money myself, but I still wanted to support my community," she says. She walked for over an hour during the lockdown to talk to people about their problems, and then approached the Kohima Municipal Commission and local authorities to seek assistance on their behalf.

The pandemic was extremely challenging, especially for daily wagers, she says. The lockdown aggravated the

obstacles faced by informal workers since they had no means to earn a living. As the SEWA district convener, Avolu was keen to help people, especially those who could not pay for food and their children's education. Despite the restrictions on movement, she travelled to the governor's secretariat to pick up an application for free rations for 19 wage workers. She also facilitated ration cards for many families and helped them open bank accounts during the lockdown.

Another significant challenge was that vendors could not operate due to Covid-19 restrictions. Avolu approached several government officials seeking ID cards for the vendors to allow them to operate. After much negotiations, the municipality issued 100 vendor IDs, although she had sought 300. As a result, she received threats from the families of vendors who did not get the ID cards. It took some effort but she was finally able to convey to the families that the municipality could not issue IDs to all due to pandemic protocols and would do so by turn. Appeased, the families backed off, and thanked Avolu for her tireless work on their behalf.

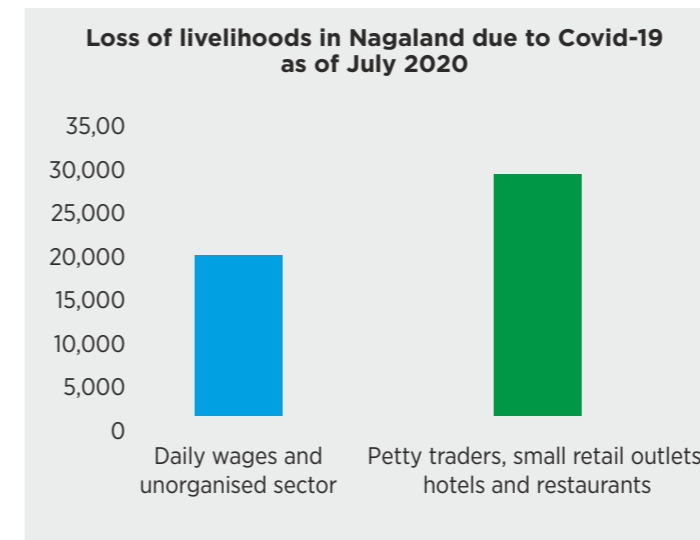
Avolu was also keen to help the women in the community by training them to weave basket and make pickles. She then helped them sell these goods to generate income.

Motivated by the support she received from NEN, and the practical training on Covid-19 management, she has built a rapport with home-based workers and street vendors in the community, who were the primary benefactors of her efforts. Avolu also acknowledges the support of her husband, who has shared household responsibilities and motivated her to work for the community.

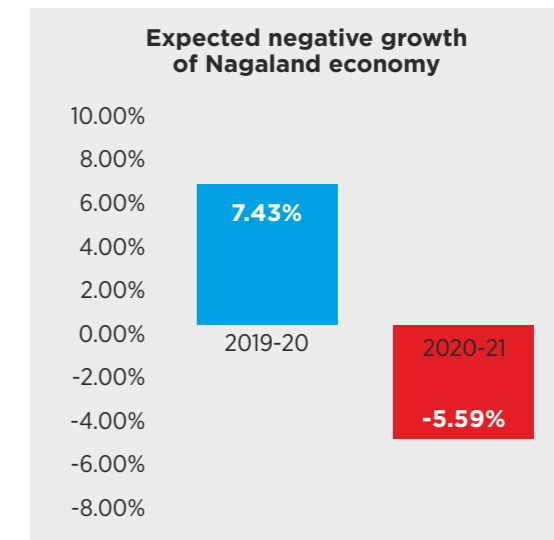
Avolu believes that it is important to build and sustain linkages between local authorities and communities, especially during a global pandemic and livelihood crisis. The past two years have been challenging but she has learnt to stay grounded. Her humility and hard work have earned Avolu the respect of the community and beyond. In 2021, she received an award from the USAID on International Women's Day for her exemplary leadership in supporting street vendors in reclaiming their right to work during the pandemic. But her goals are clear—"I will continue to serve people and help build awareness."

Shoba Suri

Informal workers faced many challenges in the lockdown. Despite the restrictions, Nuzovolu facilitated ration cards for many families and helped them open bank accounts.



Source: Vishu Rita Krocha, "Nagaland: Livelihood of daily wage earners robbed amid Covid-19 lockdown", The Morung Express, July 20, 2020, <https://morungexpress.com/nagaland-livelihood-of-daily-wage-earners-robbed-amid-covid-19-lockdown>



Sources: "Saving livelihoods as well as lives", The Morung Express, August 5, 2021, <https://morungexpress.com/saving-livelihoods-as-well-as-lives>



Key lessons

- **Strengthening linkages between the state government and civil society organisations can help enhance efforts towards skilling and supporting home-based workers and helping them find markets. The training of trainers, and the role of master trainers, are crucial in this regard.**
- **During crises, community leaders and municipal bodies must collaborate closely to develop fast-track processes for delivering rations to households, or issuing identity cards to vendors that allow them to conduct business without disruptions to their livelihoods.**

MUTUM CHANU

THE COACH WHO EATS, SLEEPS AND BREATHES FOOTBALL

MANIPUR IS THE POWERHOUSE of Indian football. It has given the country players like Ngangom Bala Devi, Okram Roshini Devi, and Hemam Shilky Devi — all extraordinary, all have played for the Indian women's national team, and all were coached by the same woman — Mutum Surmala Chanu.

Mutum, 48, was born in Imphal West, the most populous of Manipur's 16 districts. Her mother died when she was only four months old, and her father, too, while she was in class seven, leaving behind her three older brothers and her. Money was difficult to come by. Only one of her brothers had a job, and Mutum recalls that saving up money for her education was a tough task. (She would manage to continue schooling eventually, and completed a Bachelor's degree in Arts.) If there was one thing that gave her hope back then, it was football.

Mutum was introduced to the sport at a very young age by her brothers. "Because of my brothers, I fell in love with football." For her, it is not just a game; it is a way of life. Which may be true for many other people in Manipur.⁸² The state has produced a total of 19 Arjuna awardees (the second-highest sporting honour of India) as of 2020, and makes up 38 percent to 50 percent⁸³ of India's National U-17 and senior women's football teams.

Not just football, but sports in general, are inextricably woven into Manipur's cultural fabric. This goes back to the late 1800s — a sports club culture began to develop when Manipur was invaded by the British and subsequently

became a princely state of British India. Neighbourhood clubs mushroomed across the state—all of them established and maintained by the local communities. These clubs are the backbone of athletic development in Manipur. There are over 1,000 small sports clubs⁸⁴ across the state, some 131 of them being football clubs. What keeps these clubs alive is the tradition of community volunteering—former professional athletes train the youngsters, pay for their meals, and provide them equipment.

It was at one of these local clubs that Mutum Surmala Chanu began her journey with football, in December 1989, when she was 12. At first, Mutum played with the men's football team at the SUN Club, as a women's team did not exist then. This deeply perturbed her. In 2007, she introduced women's football at her local club YWC Langthabal, and began training and teaching young children, mostly girls. It was not easy. "Our club has a big name, but I did not get any support when I wanted to develop the sport." She recalls that there was just always not enough money; the club did not even have a building. Mutum persisted and today, there is a women's football team at YWC Langthabal.

Her life as a professional football coach would begin much later. In the 1990s, Mutum played the sport professionally and pursued a training programme in Calcutta to obtain a diploma in coaching. After she completed that programme, she played for Manipur at the national level,

⁸² Unique Identification Authority of India, *State/UT wise Aadhaar Saturation, December 2020*, Government of India, 2020, <https://uidai.gov.in/images/state-wise-aadhaar-saturation.pdf>.

⁸³ Dipanjan Sinha, "It takes a village... A look at how Manipur is getting it so right with sports," *Hindustan Times*, November 2, 2017, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/more-lifestyle/it-takes-a-village-a-look-at-how-manipur-is-getting-it-so-right-with-sports/story-VN0ktbLqCqXwTW6Zg0zVUO.html>.

for more than six years. In 2006 she decided to become a coach full-time. "I was approached by the then Secretary of All Manipur Football Association who asked me, what are you waiting for?"

That was all the encouragement Mutum needed. Soon she got her 'C' licence certification, which means she made plans, organised, and delivered training sessions for players. With the certification, she was eligible to manage clubs and youth teams that competed in the state-level leagues. She started by training young girls in Imphal East, a district 15 km from her hometown. From there, she moved on to coach and lead the U-14, U-16, and U-17 Manipur girls' football teams. Eventually, she trained for a 'B' licence certification, learning how to develop playing styles and prepare teams.

Mutum had finally found her footing. Then one day in 2011, she received a letter that would completely change her life. It was from the All India Football Federation, informing her that she had been selected as assistant coach for the Indian Women's Senior Football team. It was not even her dream to coach the Indian team. "I was overjoyed."

Her family was delighted too, especially her brothers who had always encouraged her. "My story and picture appeared in the newspaper. My entire community was elated - it was a matter of pride for them." While Mutum had risen in rank, however, she did not forget the hardships of the local youngsters. She knew she had to help them.

Her selection as assistant coach came with a job at the police force, which helped her draw a stable income. Saving up from her monthly salary, Mutum eventually managed to have a gym built in her locality. True to the tradition of community volunteering, Mutum ensured that all expenses were taken care of - from making sure the young players had food to eat, to maintaining the gym.

In 2020, things suddenly came to a standstill with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. On March 24th, Manipur became the first state⁸⁵ in India's Northeast region to report an infection. By September, the state's Covid-19 caseload had crossed the 10,000-mark.⁸⁶ Manipur was struggling with the pandemic and Mutum's district, Imphal West, had reported the highest number of infections across the state.

"I train 57 players of different age groups. Most of them are from different villages. Suddenly, we were all stuck." She started making weekly plans, which included exercises that they could perform at home without any equipment, and shared them with her players via WhatsApp. Of the 57 players, five were in the U-17 national women's football team and were preparing for the upcoming World Cup. They could not simply give up on their training.

Mutum saw one solution. She called the five young athletes to her own house for the duration of the lockdown. "I told them only to worry about their clothes and that I would take care of everything else." She knew that they came from impoverished backgrounds. And so, from food to equipment and training, Mutum ensured that the athletes were completely taken care of. She thought of them as her own children, after all, and she wanted to see them succeed. Mutum conducted training sessions twice a day, closely supervised their exercise regimen, listened to them talk of their hopes and aspirations, and counselled them about possible careers. Inevitably, the experience of living and working together drew Mutum and the young athletes especially close to one another.

It was a trying period nonetheless. The monthly salary from the police job was her only source of income. And now, she had five more people to look after. She could not blame her own family for being rather sceptical, at least in

the beginning. They soon warmed to the idea as they saw Mutum's dedication to the welfare of the players. Her brothers took on all household expenses and lent her money, too. "They were not earning much either, but they helped whenever they could."

Mutum's efforts are not unrecognised. "They call and say that all that they have achieved today is because I looked out for them." With her help, a few of them have also got stable government jobs. They would sometimes send her money, or give some gym equipment for the local club.

And these players that she trained and cared for, are not the only ones who are thankful to Mutum. The entire

community looks up to her. "Families are sending their girls to me for training. They say they want their daughters to grow up like me," she beams. Mutum's next goal is to find sponsorships. Since 2007, no athlete in Manipur has received sponsorships although the state has produced numerous international players. She wants to help them but she cannot even afford to buy them jerseys and equipment; at least not every single one who needs them. "We need sponsorships and financial support to further develop women's football in Manipur."

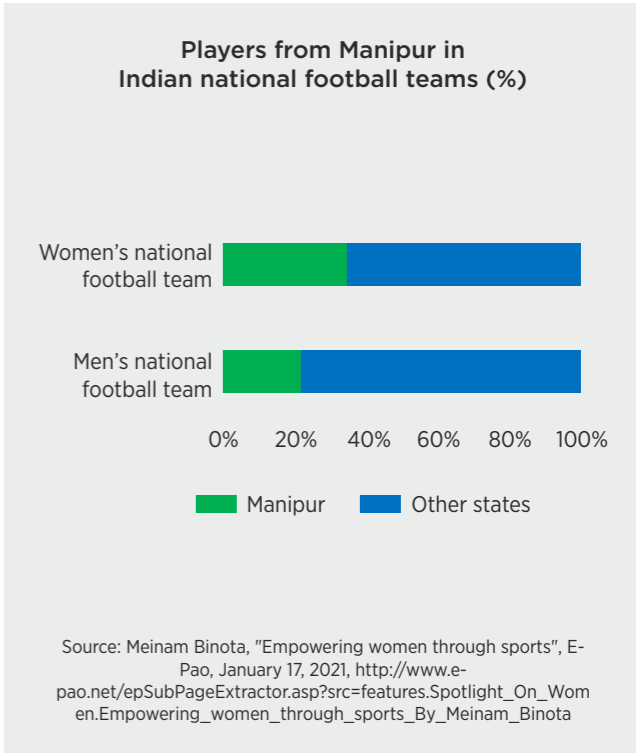
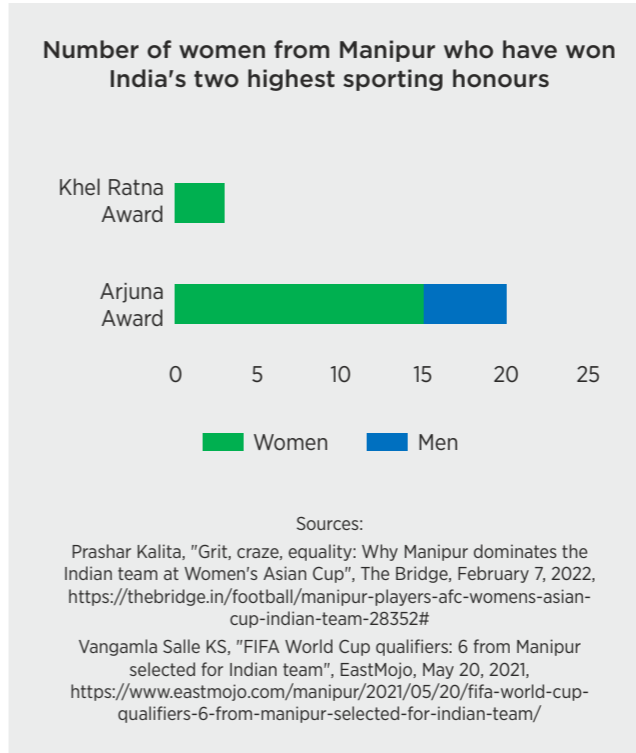
Anahita Khanna

Mutum called the five athletes to her own house. 'I told them I would take care of everything.' She loved them like her own children, and she wanted to see them succeed.

⁸⁴ Sinha, "It takes a village... A look at how Manipur is getting it so right with sports."

⁸⁵ Ratnadip Choudhury, Shylaja Varma, ed., "1st Coronavirus Case in North-East, Full Lockdown in Almost All of India: 10 Points," March 24, 2020, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/first-coronavirus-case-in-north-east-woman-who-returned-from-uk-tests-positive-in-manipur-2199615>.

⁸⁶ PTI, "Manipur's Covid-19 tally tops 10,000-mark with 260 fresh cases," September 26, 2020, https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/manipur-s-covid-19-tally-tops-10-000-mark-with-260-fresh-cases-120092601119_1.html.



Key lessons

- Sports are integral to community-building, health and welfare. It is important to sustain sports clubs and local teams - which are not only foundational for creating future athletes, but also for building athleticism and physical health across communities.
- A wide audience can be built for a sport when every effort is made to boost the infrastructure, participation and interest in the sport. There could be greater administrative and financial support for female athletes to bridge the gender disparity in sports in India.



BATSKHEM LYNGKHOI

PROTECTING UMSAW'S WOMEN AND CHILDREN

NESTLED IN THE WEST KHASI Hills of Meghalaya, a land where mountains, waterfalls and paddy fields abut upon each other, is the village of Umsaw. Over the past few years, Umsaw has seen a rise in instances of domestic violence and child abuse. Concerned by this trend, Batskhem Lyngkhoi has embarked on a journey to shape a better Umsaw for its residents.

Born and brought up in Umsaw, visceral childhood memories have shaped Batskhem, 43, into the community leader she is today. As a child, she saw other girls and women denied education and access to social institutions like the church. Some of these trends reflected the district's wider patterns. For instance, a mere 16.4 percent of women in the West Khasi Hills have received ten or more years of schooling.⁸⁷ Batskhem was deeply pained by how parents treated children, especially those with disabilities, or those who could not live up to expectations. She noticed that parents would verbalise their feelings in a way that would put the child down.

Khasi society is matrilineal, where inheritance flows from the mother to the female child. But while Khasi women may inherit the property or land, decisions on what to do with it—for instance, whether to sell it—are always taken by the male members of the family. This, she says, shows "how women's voices and the participation of women are being suppressed".

Batskhem began her work as a community leader in the year 2002. In 2004, the North East Network (NEN) recognised her work and began collaborating with her in various areas of the Khasi hills. Today, she is the secretary

of the women's group in Umsaw and a member of a larger group that includes 16 villages.

In 2018, Batskhem discovered she was a voice of change through her work with NEN. She received extensive training on handling domestic violence cases, and she realised should could bring about change in her community.

Even in her early days as a community leader, she says, the biggest impact was to the lives of the smallest members of the community. For instance, five children received the National Bravery Award from the Indian government in the early 2000s, and one child with health issues received support and services, including healthcare and financial aid, to make a full recovery. For this, Batskhem had to work with the Meghalaya Commission for Protection of Child Rights, the District Social Welfare Officer, and the NEN.

Batskhem has also been passionate about the issue of early cohabitation, where children as young as 14 would live together after being considered by Khasi society as married. She is instrumental in creating awareness in Umsaw and nearby villages on the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences law and in stopping instances of early cohabitation so that children can continue to focus on their education.

Today, Batskhem helps provide support to victims of domestic violence and child sexual abuse. She offers the first level of counselling, accompanies them to police stations and helps them file FIRs and complaints. Establishing this support network took time, as the police were initially hesitant to work with her. But given her

⁸⁷ National Family Health Survey 5 (2019-20), "Key Indicators: State and Districts of Meghalaya", http://rchiips.org/nfhs/NFHS-5_FCTS/COMPENDIUM/Meghalaya.pdf

dedication to the cause, they soon took note and now even seek her support with handling domestic violence cases.

Batskhem also works closely with other villages and their executive committees, the Dorbar Shnongs,⁸⁸ and has created a network across several villages to provide awareness on domestic violence, child sexual abuse and teenage pregnancy. Through the awareness activities, she is often able to identify and reach out to victims of domestic violence and child sexual abuse.

Domestic violence and child sexual abuse are issues of concern across India. Data from the first phase of the National Family Health Survey (2019-20) shows that a quarter of women assessed have experienced domestic violence. In Meghalaya, over 16 percent of married women in the 18-49 age group have experienced domestic violence.⁸⁹ Similarly, many young women have been recorded as having experienced sexual violence as children; in 2019-20, 6.7 percent of female respondents across India reported child sexual violence.⁹⁰ Disturbingly, the actual numbers can be expected to be much higher, given the taboos around domestic violence and child sexual abuse, the silencing of many victims, and the belief that such issues should not be taken out of homes to the open.

Batskhem's journey has not been an easy one, and she often had to walk the path of change alone. When she first became part of the women's group and other collectives, her extended family stopped talking to her. To close relatives, she was a woman of no character, who left her husband at home to travel to other cities. But she persevered. Today, Batskhem is the first person in her village to be contacted in case of an issue and remains an important voice in her village's Dorbar Shnong. When none of the all-male members of this committee can reach a decision, they turn to her.

Batskhem's community-wide efforts were useful during the Covid-19 pandemic. In the initial days of the outbreak, she joined a committee that included her husband-the village headman-to go door-to-door to spread awareness on the virus and precautionary measures. The committee provided rations to those who were struggling to survive and in some cases, Batskhem even provided supplies from her own home. When people were hesitant to allow a group of youngsters who had been studying in Tamil Nadu to return to Umsaw, Batskhem hosted them in a shed at her home.

Additionally, when the state government asked all villages to designate persons and vehicles to carry dead bodies, others in Umsaw hesitated but Batskhem volunteered, learnt the protocols on managing the bodies of Covid-19 patients, and trained other volunteers.

As a frontline worker, Batskhem realised she and the committee would need to handle the two sets of people they encountered in their village-those who did not to obey Covid-19 protocols, believing it to be a conspiracy and not a pandemic; and those who were afraid. Later, as vaccines were introduced, religious beliefs led to a high level of vaccine hesitancy. Batskhem went from house to house with Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs or community health workers) to encourage people to get vaccinated and even conducted door-to-door vaccination drives. Currently, over 75 percent of Umsaw is vaccinated, well over the national average.

Importantly, Batskhem's work related to domestic and child abuse did not stop during the pandemic. As people remained locked indoors during the initial months, spending each hour in proximity with other members of their family, instances of domestic violence and child sexual abuse continued to rise. Travelling to the police station was impossible, given the restrictions. So a

committee was set up in the village to address such cases and work on potential redressal and reconciliation.

Batskhem believes that her greatest success is changing the society's opinions around cohabitation, child sexual abuse and domestic violence. To assist in and strengthen her efforts, she reached out to and received support from NGOs and other organisations, the police, the Meghalaya State Department for Women, the social welfare commission, the District Legal Support Authority, and the District Social Welfare Office.

Politicians from her village and nearby constituencies have also recognised her work and want her to get involved in local politics through their platform as they have taken

note of the extent of her influence and work. But Batskhem is not interested in politics and does not want to create linkages with political organisations, which could explain why she has not received any financial assistance.

But Batskhem's journey has been fulfilling, and she has learnt the importance of humility, compassion, and never settling for what she finds to be unjust. "Without humility or compassion, you will not be able to help those suffering and in need of help. It is also important to be brave enough to raise your voice, not just in the household, or in your village, but also in front of the government and other stakeholders," she says. Despite facing several challenges, she is proud of being able to make a difference.

Sitara Srinivas



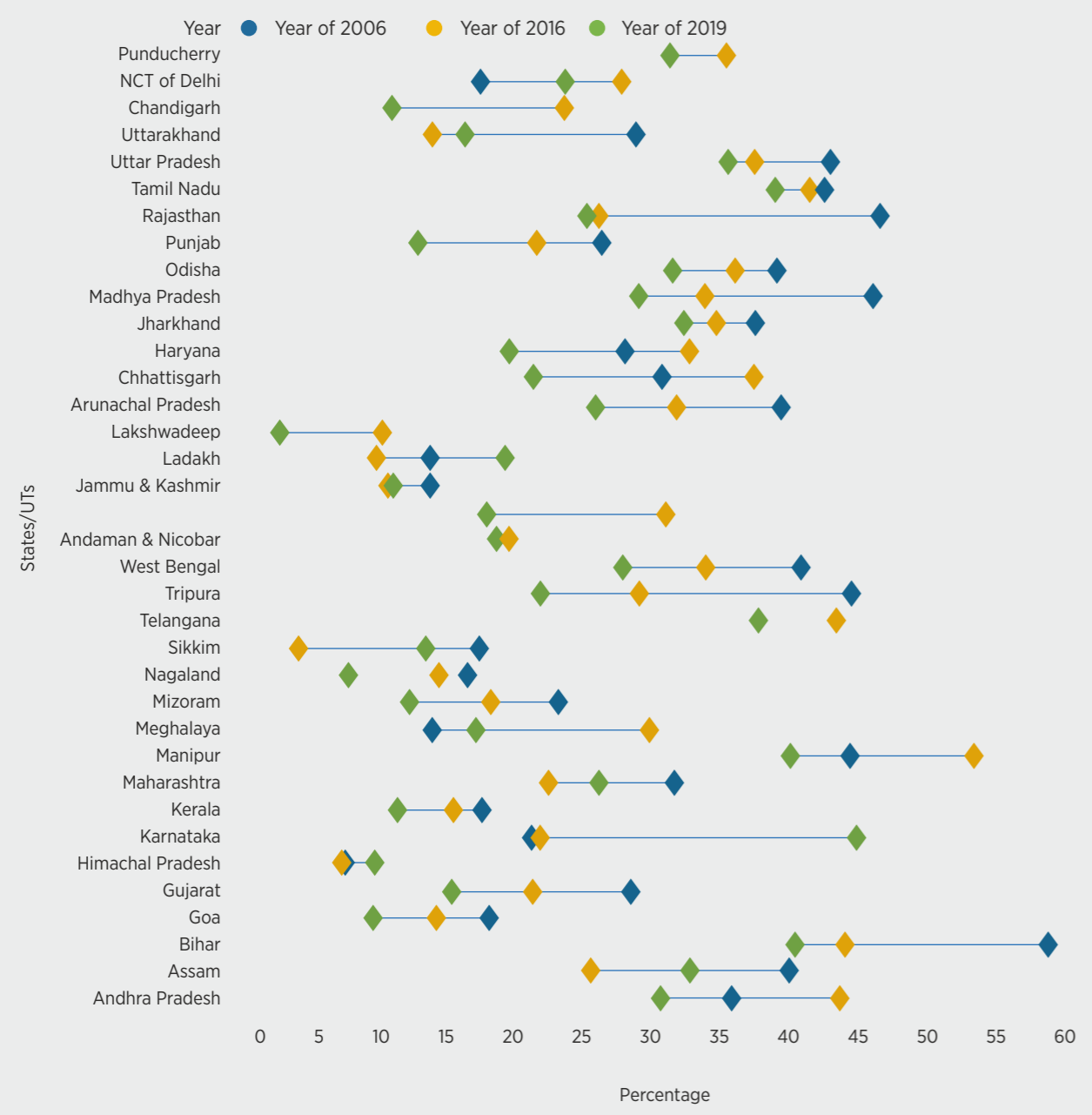
***Batskhem volunteered,
learnt the protocols on managing
the bodies of Covid-19 patients,
and trained other volunteers.***

⁸⁸ The Dorbar Shnong is the traditional village institution of the Khasis. It is composed of all Khasi inhabitants of not less than 18 years of age, and its function is to carry out prevailing customary and traditional governance and adjudication.

⁸⁹ International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS), "National Family Health Survey - Key Indicators: 22 States/UTs from Phase-1", http://rchiips.org/NFHS/NFHS-5_FCTS/NFHS-5%20State%20Factsheet%20Compendium_Phase-1.pdf.

⁹⁰ National Family Health Survey 5 (2019-20), "Key Indicators: 22 States/UTs from Phase-1", http://rchiips.org/nfhs/NFHS-5_FCTS/COMPENDIUM/NFHS-5%20State%20Factsheet%20Compendium_Phase-1.pdf

Trends in Spousal Violence in India: Analysis of NFHS
 Ever married women who have experienced spousal violence (15-49 years)



Source: National Family Health Survey
 Source: Shoba Suri et al, "Domestic Violence and Women's Health in India: Insights from NFHS-4", ORF Occasional Paper No. 343, Observer Research Foundation, 2021, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/domestic-violence-and-womens-health-in-india-insights-from-nfhs-4/>



Key lessons

- In order to respond effectively to domestic violence and child sexual abuse, community mobilisers must build strong collaborative networks with the local administration, police and CSOs.
- An equally strong network must be built within the community in order to raise awareness about violence against women and children, and help identify victims of such violence.
- In certain cases, village-level redressal and reconciliation committees could act as a first port of call for both victims of violence and community mobilisers.

KAMLI PATELIYA COMING INTO HER OWN



IT TAKES EXTRAORDINARY strength and commitment to accept a role that you had no prior knowledge of just to support your community. Kamli Pateliya's journey to become the Sarpanch of her village (i.e. the head of the Panchayat or village council) is the story of a woman who came into her own and went on to lead by example for many others.

Kamli, now 33, grew up in a large family, with four siblings and many cousins, in Kariyadeh village in Madhya Pradesh's Sheopur district. Kariyadeh is a small village, with a population of 1,200 and farming as the primary occupation.

When Kamli was young, the main issue in Kariyadeh was an acute shortage of water. Villagers would have to travel about 4 kms each day to collect water. Since she and other girls and women were unable to manage the large vessels of water, they had to carry smaller cans. To help ease these struggles, when she was about 15 years old, Kamli came up with a solution—using cycles, and she and the other women began to learn cycling. But she was always keen to do more.

Being the only woman in the village to have studied till class eighth, Kamli was made the Adhyaksh (president) of the local Gram Sangathan⁹¹ in 2014. After having led her Gram Sangathan for two years, she was urged by her community to stand for the Sarpanch election in 2016 as the seat was reserved for women. Kamli says this took her by surprise. "I didn't even know what a Sarpanch was or the duties that came with the position," she admits.

Others in Kariyadeh saw the situation differently and convinced Kamli of her ability to lead. It took her some time to settle into her new role, but she soon found her

footing. She recalls that it was during a training programme organised by Area Networking and Development Initiatives (ANANDI) — which partners with the Madhya Pradesh State Rural Livelihoods Mission (MPSRLM) to help strengthen the latter's interventions on gender equality⁹² — that she was "exposed for the first time to the trials and challenges of rural life, especially those faced by women". It was here she realised the true power of her position. Among one of her first decisions as Sarpanch was to arrange INR 5,000 as compensation for the family of a young boy who had died in an accident. Today, besides being the Sarpanch of her village, Kamli is also an active member of a Self-Help Group (SHG), a federation of SHGs, and a Cluster Level Federation.

Kamli has had a pivotal role in improving the lives of women in her village and the neighbouring areas. She helped initiate the Lok Adhikar Karyakram ("Gender Justice Programme") — a programme run jointly by the MPSRLM and ANANDI with the International Centre for Research on Women as a research partner — for women to overcome their inhibitions, share their problems, and become aware of their rights. She has also created different groups comprised of only women to address the problems that may arise in the village. For instance, it was through the work of one such group that she was able to address the problem of water scarcity. "I set up the construction of 17 tube wells, bringing the total to 50 in three years," she explains.

To help Kariyadeh's women earn a steady income, she encouraged them to farm vegetables for local consumption, and then set up a hat (market) in her Panchayat stocked with fresh produce. Kamli's efforts to empower women in her village has also been recognised by the state government,

NEELABH

⁹¹ A Gram Sangathan is the village-level organisation in the National Rural Livelihood Mission's design of the institution-building process for women at the grassroots.

which announced financial and resource support for Self-Help Groups such as hers, and noted her efforts at generating additional income by intercropping with orchards (intercropping is the practice of growing two or more types of crops in close proximity or in the same field to maximise the resources used for cultivation).

The Covid-19 pandemic strengthened Kamli's resolve to better the lives of those in her community. She helped local women produce sanitisers and masks to be distributed throughout the village, and at the entry points. To ensure that the migrant workers who were returning to the village could enter safely, she instituted quarantine centres where they could stay for 15 days. Additionally, to curb the spread of the virus, she ensured that the main roads connecting the village to the surrounding areas were monitored and temporarily closed to restrict the flow of people entering the village. To help the 60 migrant workers who returned secure an income, Kamli assisted in getting them job cards and secured them work through the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme.

Kamli's relentless efforts in spreading awareness regarding precautionary measures in the early days of the pandemic helped allay people's fears. Regular meetings were held to discuss the measures to curb the spread of Covid-19. During the lockdowns, she helped pregnant women gain access to healthcare by arranging ambulances to take them to the nearest clinics and

hospitals, and even offered financial assistance when needed. She ensured a clinic in the nearby Patoda village could function as a healthcare centre, and even arranged for all basic maternal and child-care facilities to be made available there.

To assuage vaccine fears in her village, Kamli volunteered to receive the first dose and instil confidence among others. Gradually, she was able to ensure that everyone in the village received both doses of vaccine. In addition to raising awareness on Covid-19, Kamli has also tried to educate people about diseases such as dengue and malaria, and undertake mitigation measures as well. This is evident through the fact that the population living in households and using an improved sanitation facility in the Sheopur district has increased from 16.5 percent to 48 percent between 2015-16 and 2019-21.⁹³ She has also helped villagers in processing their Ayushman Bharat cards so they can avail healthcare facilities in case of a prolonged illness.

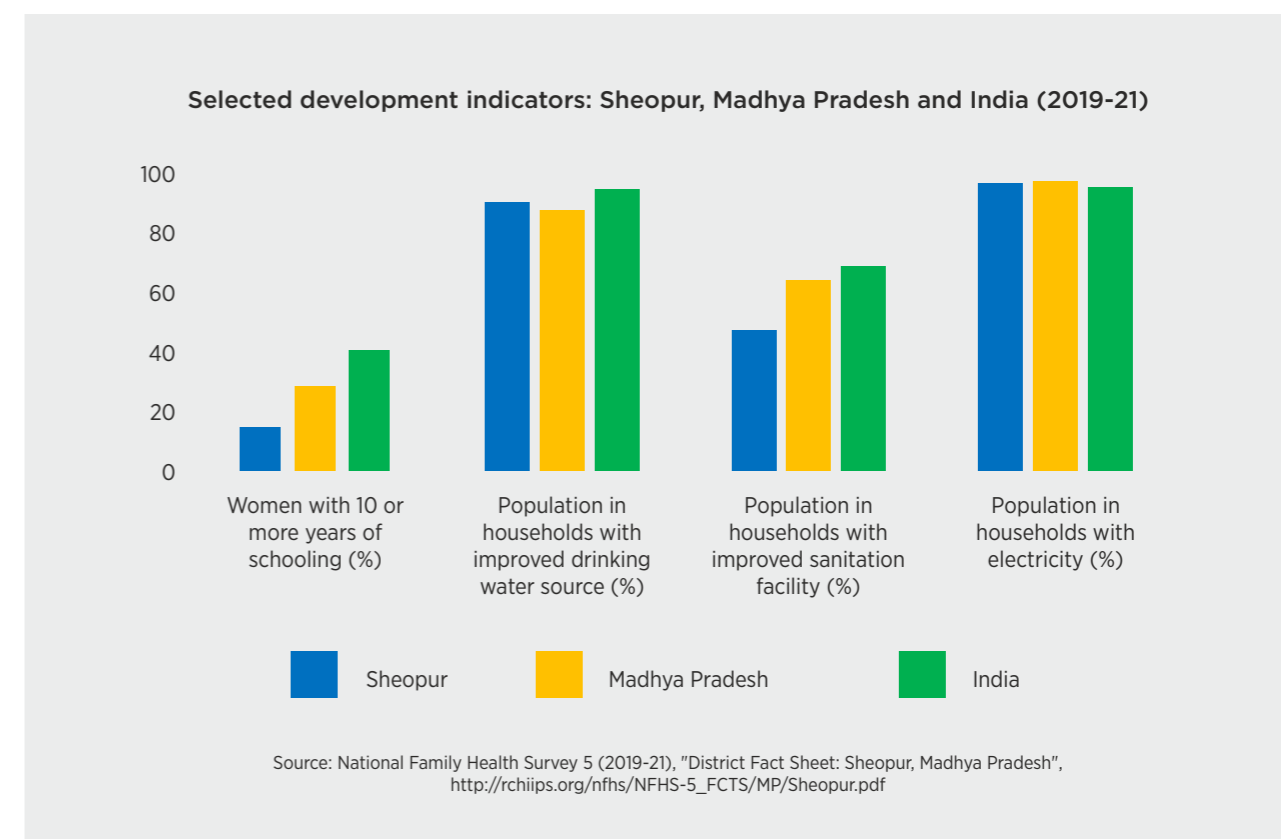
Although her term as the Sarpanch has ended, Kamli Pateliya continues to encourage, mentor, and empower the women of Kariyadeh. Having lived all her life in the same village, she has a deep connection with the place and its people and considers herself to be the daughter of the village. "I want my two daughters to complete their studies, have more agency and control over their lives than I did," says Kamli. Today she firmly believes that there is nothing a woman cannot do if she puts her mind to it.

Pratnashree Basu

Kamli's efforts to empower women in her village have been recognised by the state government, which announced financial and resource support for SHGs such as hers.

⁹² As part of this partnership with the MPSRLM, ANANDI works intensively in the Karahal Block of Sheopur where Kamli Pateliya lives and was a Sarpanch.

⁹³ National Family Health Survey 5, "District Fact Sheet"



Key lessons

- Elected women representatives or women community leaders could play a crucial role in strengthening livelihoods, while also improving families' nutrition levels, by promoting the farming of vegetables for local consumption and helping establish rural marts stocked with fresh produce.
- Rural communities must be sensitised on an ongoing basis about Covid mitigation measures, steps to protect themselves against more common and familiar diseases, as well as newer ways to access healthcare such as the use of Ayushman Bharat cards to avail of healthcare facilities for prolonged illnesses.



ANUSUIYA DIDI ON THE LONG WALK TO VICTORY

ANUSUIYA MARAVI WAS SIX or seven, when she first heard the sacred stories of her ancestors. She belongs to the Pardhan tribe who call central India their home, and her forebears were bards and musicians and painters. They were ancient keepers of myths. They travelled from one village to another, preserving the oral folklore of the Gond people over centuries. From her ancestors, she learned the magic of storytelling.

It is a skill that stood the 37-year-old in good stead when she ran for Panchayat (village council) elections in 2016. Over 45 days she travelled by foot from village to village in Dindori district in Madhya Pradesh, and wherever she went, she got people to listen to her. "I walked under the burning sun. But I did not walk alone, my power came from my didis (literally 'big sisters', and here meaning her fellow members in her Self-Help Group or SHG) who walked with me everywhere. They made me win."⁹⁴ She was elected Janpad Sadasya (block representative) for Samnapur.

Anusuiya didi, as she is known in Newsa village and beyond, has built a reputation for the work she has done in her community. People like to tell stories of her fearlessness and her willingness to work hard. Since the Covid-19 pandemic emerged in early 2020, she has been working tirelessly with the community, leading the efforts to set up quarantine centres for returning migrant workers and, when the supply of food rations had stopped, helping families access them by running a pick-up truck from her village to the Public Distribution System outlet.

It was truly a time of utter chaos. People lost their jobs and their earnings were greatly impacted, although the region was relatively affected less by the outbreak. There was a sudden surge in demand for work under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), a livelihood programme that guarantees a hundred days of employment in a year to all rural households. Anusuiya knew there was no time to lose. She collected documents from the families and coordinated with the Gram Panchayat to get job cards made for MGNREGS, so people could meet their basic needs. Madhya Pradesh, which received a large number of returning migrants in the ensuing months of the initial outbreak, issued 556,000⁹⁵ job cards in the months after April 2020. As already-scarce resources were stretched further, the elderly and other vulnerable groups were neglected as it became more clear that the pandemic was going to cause a humanitarian crisis. Anusuiya coordinated with the block office to get pension cards issued to the elderly—she managed to help 350 of them. Today, she modestly shrugs off all that she has done for her community.

Perhaps it is because she is aware of the odds that she herself has had to battle in her life. Her family's native home, the district of Dindori bordering the state of Chattisgarh, has a tribal population of 64.7 percent⁹⁶, according to the 2011 Census. Struggling with poverty and massive inequities, the district has long been beset by the Maoist insurgency. She is the oldest of four siblings, her father is a farmer and her mother stayed at home. When she was 16, her family, who

⁹⁴ A Self-Help Group (SHG) is an affinity-based group of 10-20 people, usually women from similar social and economic backgrounds, who collect money from those who can contribute and give the funds to members in need. Members may also save contributions and begin lending funds back to the SHG's members themselves or to others in a village for a particular purpose. Many SHGs are linked with banks and can deliver micro-credit.

⁹⁵ Harikishan Sharma, "83 lakh new NREGA cards since April, record surge in 7 years." *The Indian Express*, September 4, 2020, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/mgnrega-job-cards-coronavirus-6582331/>

⁹⁶ Census of India 2011, District Census Handbook, Dindori, (Directorate of Census Operations, Madhya Pradesh), https://censusindia.gov.in/2011census/dchb/DCHB_A/23/2336_PART_A_DCHB_DINDORI.pdf

were facing financial constraints, arranged for her marriage. Her early marriage forced her to stop schooling, and it is a regret she has carried with her in the past two decades. "That was no age for a girl to be married," she rues. Her younger sister had the opportunity she missed, and would eventually become a nurse.

Early marriage is not uncommon in Anusuiya's region. Data from the fourth National Family Health Survey⁹⁷ shows more than one-third of the women in the district getting married before the legal age of 18. This pattern is correlated to low literacy: only 13.6 percent⁹⁸ of women in the district have received 10 or more years of education, compared to the state average of 43.6 percent.⁹⁹

Anusuiya's life took a turn in 2005, when she joined the self-help movement in her village led by PRADAN (Professional Assistance for Development Action), an NGO that works in promoting collectives in the poorest regions of the country. There was huge resistance in the village when PRADAN first came to promote the formation of SHGs among women. People of the village were not familiar with the concept of SHGs, and thought they would lose all their savings if they joined such a group. Through a sustained campaign, the NGO managed to gain the trust of the women, including Anusuiya. Joining the movement spurred her to complete her education. She finished class 12 and went on to get a college degree, all while immersed in community work and raising two children. Her family stepped in: her mother-in-law took over the household chores like cooking and cleaning, while her husband, Dwarka Prasad Maravi, took care of the children and helped her with studies, too. Her husband is eight years older to her and a farmer. He values education and himself holds a Master's degree.

It is through the self-help movement that she graduated into the different roles she has taken on since. It took her

no time to emerge as a community leader, working with other groups in her block. In 2009 she was selected as a Community Resource Person (CRP) for her cluster of SHGs. Under the State Rural Livelihoods Mission, the state-level organisation responsible for mobilising women into SHGs, CRPs receive training on governance and management of SHGs, gender orientation, social mapping of the poor, and leadership training. As "CRP didi" Anusuiya took the lead on many issues—from livelihoods and income generation for farmers, to campaigning against gender-based violence—she steadily built a support base among the women in her community.

It has not been easy. Men have hurled abuses at her, accusing her of agitating their women to abandon their duties at home. As block representative, she works on various development issues, such as roads, and basic services like electricity, health, and water—but what has always been essential for her is to work towards gender equality. During her tenure, she openly questioned the practice of husbands, fathers, brothers, and sons, fielding their women kin as proxy candidates in the Panchayat. Not surprisingly, it did not go down well with the community.

But Anusuiya instinctively understands the power of the collective. "I always ask women to step out and find support outside of the home, to make friends. I was like a frog in a well before I joined the movement. This is how the lives of women are. We all have to leave that well even if men won't let us." She is the convener of Rani Durgawati Tejaswini Mahila Sangh, a federation of SHGs that has 6,000 members from Samnapur Block. A 2020 evaluation¹⁰⁰ of women in SHGs in seven states in India, including Madhya Pradesh, found that joining such groups enabled the women to boost household incomes, improved access to social schemes, and enhanced women's confidence in engaging with members of the community.

In many ways, big and small, she has been overturning gender stereotypes. "I believe that change has to reflect in my own life before I advocate it for others." She made sure that her daughter, now 15, received the same education as her son, 18. When the son was sent to the nearest town of Samnapur for schooling, the daughter also was, even though most people in the village preferred their daughters to study in the local school.

Truly she knows herself to be someone unafraid to break norms. Some years ago she bought a second-hand scooter for herself, and she still regularly uses it till now. She would drive it as her husband sat behind her. Needless to say, the village has not witnessed anything like it before. But it is only the practical thing to do, she says. As the scope of her work increased and she has had to commute to different villages and the block office on a daily basis, she had to find a way to save time.

Since 2020, she has been helping small and marginal women farmers in the region to improve their livelihoods. In 2021, as their incomes were further strained by the pandemic, the women came together to form Halchalit,

a farmer producer organisation (FPO). The FPO works on filling the gap in access to agricultural inputs like fertilisers and seeds, and providing credit and market linkages. Anusuiya tapped into her vast networks in the area to mobilise 900 women to join the FPO. Though the central government has laid out guidelines¹⁰¹ to promote FPOs in the country, there is little provision¹⁰² in the scheme for women farmers. The work done by a women-only FPO like Halchalit becomes even more critical in order to engage women who constitute a large but overlooked part of the agricultural labour force.

"I want to work on building the identity of women as farmers," says Anusuiya. Here as well, she leads by example. Her family owns five acres of land, half of which is in her name. She bought the land in 2011 from her own savings—an accomplishment that is rare, as women continue to be marginalised in land ownership in India. A 2018 report¹⁰³ by the Centre for Land Governance showed the gap is even more acute in large agrarian states like Madhya Pradesh, where women own a minuscule 8.6 percent of land, against the national average of 12.9 percent.

Anusuiya coordinated with the block office to get pension cards issued to the elderly – she managed to help 350 of them.

97 National Family Health Survey 4 (2015-16), "District Fact Sheet: Dindori, Madhya Pradesh", http://rchiips.org/nfhs/FCTS/MP/MP_FactSheet_453_Dindori.pdf

98 National Family Health Survey 4 (2015-16), Dindori, Madhya Pradesh

99 National Family Health Survey 4, (2015-16), "State Fact Sheet: Madhya Pradesh", http://rchiips.org/nfhs/pdf/NFHS4/MP_FactSheet.pdf

100 Anjini Kochar Bidisha Barooah Chandan Jain Geeta Singh Nagabhushana Closepet Raghunathan Narayanan Ritwik Sarkar Rohan Shah, *Impact Evaluation of the National Rural Livelihoods Project, International Initiative for Impact Evaluation, 2020*, <https://www.3ieimpact.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/IEI28-NRLP-NRLM.pdf>

101 Formation and Promotion of 10,000 Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs), Operational Guidelines, Government of India, Department of Agriculture, Co-operation and Farmers' Welfare Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare, 2020, https://agricoop.nic.in/sites/default/files/English%20FPO%20Scheme%20Guidelines%20FINAL_0.pdf

102 Shilpa Vasavada, "The 10,000 FPOs scheme ignores women farmers," *India Development Review*, February 25, 2021, <https://idronline.org/the-10000-farmer-producer-organisations-scheme-ignores-women-farmers/>

103 Bhasker Tripathi, "Lakshadweep, Meghalaya Have Most Women Land Holders; Punjab, West Bengal Fewest," *India Spend*, February 19, 2018, <https://www.indiaspend.com/lakshadweep-meghalaya-have-most-women-land-holders-punjab-west-bengal-fewest-54024/>

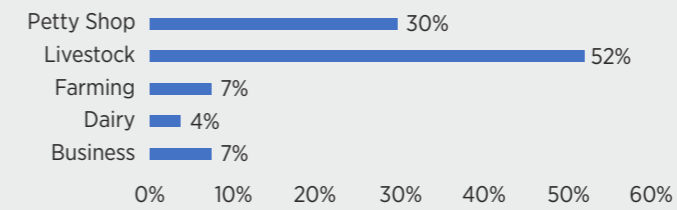
This is true in Anusuiya's village, where only two women own land. She was determined, however. "I did not want to depend on either my own family or my husband's family. Every woman should have the right to own land." For the next Panchayat election expected to take place in 2022, she is determined to run for the top position, that of

Janpad Adhyaksh (head of the block Panchayat). There is a lot she has learned in the last five years and she feels she is better prepared to apply all those lessons to make a difference in other people's lives. This time, too, she will be trekking on foot across the villages, with the didis who promised to rally behind her again.

Sunaina Kumar



Activities undertaken by members of Self-Help Groups under National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM)

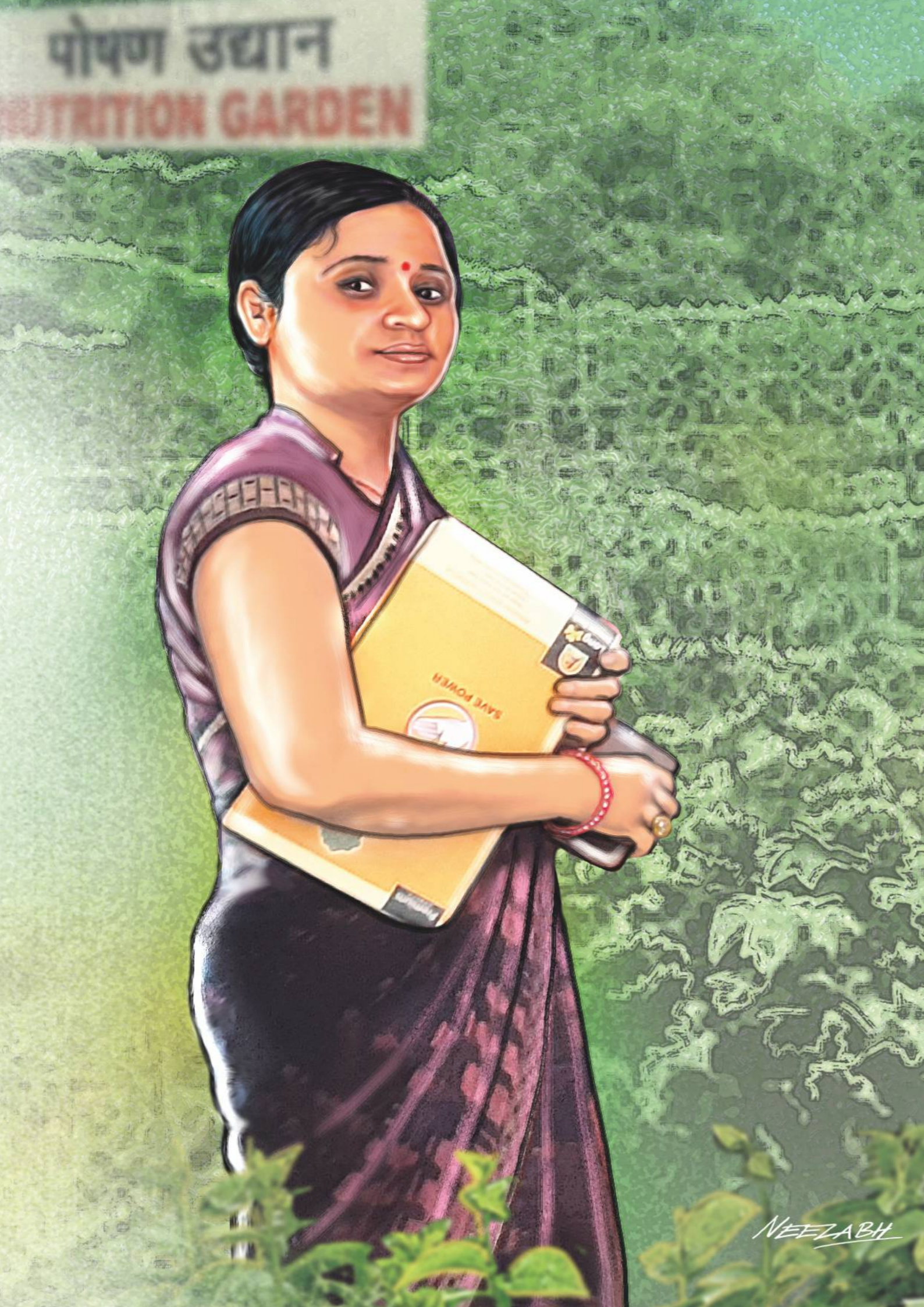


Source: MK Jain et al, Assessment of Village Level Federations in Madhya Pradesh, Atal Bihari Vajpaee Institute of Good Governance and Policy Analysis, 2020, http://aigppa.mp.gov.in/uploads/project/Report_Assessmnet_VO.pdf



Key lessons

- The self-help movement can have an impact on participation of women in politics at the grassroots, with greater investment by governments and civil society organisations (CSOs).
- The convergence of Self-Help Groups with government schemes such as MGNREGA and other welfare programmes, could strengthen these initiatives and ensure the equitable distribution of resources. CSOs and corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives of the private sector could play a significant role in acquainting women and communities with existing welfare schemes.
- Family support is critical for women to engage socially and work outside their homes. In cases where families are not supportive, CSOs could work towards the sensitisation of families.



SHIPRA SINGH PLANTING SEEDS OF CHANGE IN EVERY GARDEN

FIFTEEN-YEAR-OLD SHIPRA Singh could not wait to get to school every morning. A keen learner, she particularly looked forward to her Science class. Her schooling, however, was cut short after she completed class eight. She was compelled to drop out of school to get married. This is not particularly uncommon in the village of Lalpur in Madhya Pradesh's Shahdol district where Shipra was born and raised. Girls often leave school to either undertake care-work or get married at a young age. It would hardly be a surprise that the female literacy rate in Lalpur is a mere 23.2 percent-much below the national average of 65.5 percent.¹⁰⁴

The district of Shahdol is located in north-eastern Madhya Pradesh, and lies at the trijunction of three minor mountain ranges. The district has a long history dating back to the Gupta period, and today it is known chiefly as the site of the famous Virateswar Temple, built in the 10th to 11th century AD, and for being rich in minerals such as coal, fire clay and marble.

Shipra's parents, who have lived in Shahdol all their lives, are both farmers. Most households in the area earn their incomes from agricultural work, and the marginal farmers commonly belong to the tribal community of Panika.¹⁰⁵ In 2011, Shipra lost her husband, ten years into their marriage. Helpless and anxious, she could not imagine how she

would fend for herself and her two young daughters, then nine and two. "I did not allow the tragedy to demoralise me though." She decided to find some employment: "I requested a company that tied up with the Anganwadi to employ me as a Karyakarta (social worker). That gave me a small but much-needed income."

Shipra's passion for learning was not dimmed by her personal difficulties. She managed, in 2020 at age 32, to complete her schooling and pass her class 12 examinations, all while working as a Karyakarta.

Her own experiences as a young mother and the seven years she spent as a social worker attached to the Anganwadi, kindled a passion for caring for malnourished children and counselling pregnant women to educate them about pre- and post-natal care. Her cause would not have been lost on the people of Shahdol, where inter-generational food security and imbalanced diets are matters of grave concern.

The National Family Health Survey - 5 (2019-21) found that in Shahdol, 57.3 percent of children between six and 59 months are anaemic.¹⁰⁶ Similarly, over 56 percent of all women between the ages of 15-49 suffer from anaemia. Recognising the extent of the problem across the country, the government launched the 'Anemia Mukta Bharat'

¹⁰⁴ Ministry of Home Affairs, Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, "Primary Census Abstract Data Tables - Madhya Pradesh", Government of India,

<https://censusindia.gov.in/pca/pcadata/Houselisting-housing-MP.html>;

Ministry of Home Affairs, Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, "Literacy and Level of Education", Government of India,

https://censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results/data_files/mp/07Literacy.pdf

¹⁰⁵ Chetana Singh, "Socio-Political Profile of the Elected Tribal Leadership of Shahdol District", *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 72, No. 1 March 2011, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42761824>

¹⁰⁶ National Family Health Survey -5, District Fact Sheet (Shahdol, Madhya Pradesh - Ministry of Health and Family Affairs, 2019-20),

http://rchiips.org/nfhs/NFHS-5_FCTS/MP/Shahdol.pdf

programme in 2018 in order to raise awareness about anemia, increase the availability of iron-folic acid tablets for girls and women, and use strategic communication to bring about a change in behaviour.¹⁰⁷

Reliance Foundation too, is helping combat malnutrition and anemia both in Shahdol and across India. The Foundation's unique nutrition garden model called the Reliance Nutrition Garden (RNG) has been instrumental in promoting balanced diets by making fresh green vegetables available at home. Indeed, according to the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), nutrition gardens are an efficient means of improving household food security and eliminating micronutrient deficiencies.¹⁰⁸ They provide direct access to a diverse range of nutritionally rich food in a cost-effective manner; and their use helps decrease the prevalence of anaemia in women.¹⁰⁹

Shipra's dedication to the improvement of nutrition in Shahdol led her to become a POSHAN Sakhi, i.e. a woman working to strengthen the nutritional status of women and children, as part of Reliance Foundation's programme to help establish RNGs across the district. As a Poshan Sakhi, Shipra motivated and provided hands-on assistance to households - that had been identified by health workers as being malnourished or anemic — to set up nutrition gardens in their front or back yards. While the Foundation provided the necessary technical support, training for the Poshan Sakhis, and inputs such as seeds and fertiliser, Shipra and her fellow Sakhis built public awareness about the importance of nutrition gardens, mobilised households, and helped families establish and sustain their gardens. The Sakhis have also helped set up RNGs in Anganwadis and schools.

When the Covid-19 pandemic hit India in March 2020 and the country went into a nationwide lockdown, families were forced to keep inside their homes. Shipra—along with the help of the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), the local administration, and NGOs—led the malnutrition control programme by visiting individual households.

Her regular work was stalled and tasks that seemed routine became challenging and even life-threatening. "Earlier we could easily supply protein powder and medicines to women and children. However, due to the pandemic, no one was stepping out of the house so it became extremely difficult to provide the necessary supplements and medical care," she says. Despite being constantly exposed to the risk of contracting the virus, she continued to provide supplements in the form of protein powder, iron and calcium tablets to pregnant women. She also actively continued to counsel and guide villagers by helping some of them set up their own nutrition gardens and grow low-cost nutritious food in order to ensure a balanced diet during the pandemic. During the initial stages of lockdown, the nutrition gardens were especially beneficial as the Anganwadis were shut down.¹¹⁰ In Shipra's village, they not only made people more self-sufficient but also provided them financial security.

Throughout the year, Reliance Foundation continued to sensitise and train the Poshan Sakhis about the benefits of vegetable consumption, nutrition gardens, balanced diets, and how to conduct advocacy around these issues. Always a quick learner and skilled communicator, Shipra made it her mission to convince families of the importance of RNGs. During the winter of 2020, she distributed seeds of seasonal vegetables such as carrot, beetroot, and radish.

She gave them lessons on the value of using iron cooking utensils, not overboiling vegetables, and consuming iodine with salt, as well as nutrition-dense food like sprouts for breakfast during pregnancy. She also reminded families to utilise water efficiently and grow drought-resistant crops to reduce water scarcity. Her commitment to improving food security and maternal health could play a key role in breaking the intergenerational cycle of malnutrition in her district. Thanks to the interventions of Shipra and other Poshan Sakhis, over 4,500 households in Shahdol now have nutrition gardens in their yards.

Shipra has also been instrumental in helping protect her community from Covid-related risks. She supplied masks to every house in Lalpur, and educated people about the importance of sanitisers, masks, good hygiene, and physical distancing. "I was very scared of the exposure to the virus, but we had to take the risk because if I did not step out, creating such awareness would not be possible."

Her efforts to minimise the disruptions caused by the pandemic did not end there. She also coached aspirants for their entrance tests to the prestigious Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalayas—a network of central schools for

talented students, predominantly from the rural districts—and provided door-to-door counselling across Lalpur to make sure that students filled their admission forms. As a result of her efforts, four students got selected to Navodaya Vidyalayas.

Given her own experience of an interrupted education, Shipra feels strongly about the need for young girls to complete their schooling. During the pandemic, she ensured that the number of school dropouts was minimised by sensitising parents about the importance of educating girl children. Since Lalpur provides schooling only up to class eight, Shipra urged parents to send their daughters to schools in nearby Navodaya to continue their studies.

These efforts were crucial. After all, according to the Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+) 2019-20, the dropout rate in secondary education in Madhya Pradesh (23.2 percent) is much higher than the national average (16.1 percent) for both girls and boys.¹¹¹ An RTE Policy Brief 2021 reported that girls, who have had to take on household chores as schools were shut because of the pandemic, were hardly learning. Indeed, over the first year of the pandemic, majority of the girls (71 percent) were engaged in care-work at home in

Despite being constantly exposed to the risk of contracting the virus, she continued to provide supplements in the form of protein powder, iron and calcium tablets to pregnant women.

¹⁰⁷ National Health Mission - Poshan Abhiyan, "Anaemia Mukh Bharat - 6 interventions", Government of India, <https://anemiemukhbarat.info/home/interventions/>

¹⁰⁸ Agriculture and Consumer Protection Department, "Improving nutrition through home gardening", FAO, https://www.fao.org/ag/agn/nutrition/household_gardens_en.stm

¹⁰⁹ Shoba Suri, "Nutrition Gardens: A Sustainable Model for Food Security and Diversity," ORF Issue Brief No. 369, June 2020, Observer Research Foundation, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/nutrition-gardens-a-sustainable-model-for-food-security-and-diversity-67933/>

¹¹⁰ Meenakshi Sushma, "National nutrition week: How kitchen gardens are saving villagers from malnourishment", DownToEarth, September 7, 2020, <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/health/national-nutrition-week-how-kitchen-gardens-are-saving-villagers-from-malnourishment-73248>

¹¹¹ Ministry of Education, "Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+) 2019-20", Government of India, https://dashboard.udiseplus.gov.in/assets/images/pdf/UDISE+2019_20_Booklet.pdf

the 29 surveyed districts across India.¹¹² The Policy Brief also highlighted the lack of meaningful access to digital devices for girls.

Yet it is not only learning subjects like mathematics that suffered from the shift to digital learning. After all, schools also serve the function of being a safe space for girls, providing them with psychosocial support, menstrual hygiene facilities, essential care services, and nutritious food. Shipra's efforts to ensure that girls stay in school are thus directly aligned with initiatives undertaken by the state government, local administration, and NGOs over the course of decades to limit the rate of school dropouts.

Having lived in Lalpur since birth, Shipra has seen the changes that she has helped bring about. "Compared to the last decade, there is now significant development in

agriculture, health and nutrition." Her knowledge and support have proven invaluable for her peers.

Today, Shipra is firm that she will provide her daughters, Shubhra and Shri, the best possible education she can afford. She is teaching her daughters to become independent. "What is the point of teaching girls?" people asked. I faced that. I will not let it happen to my daughters."

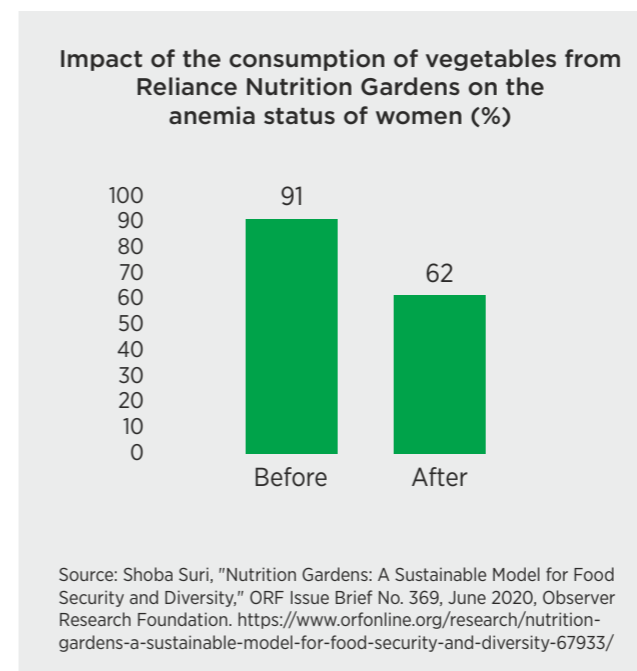
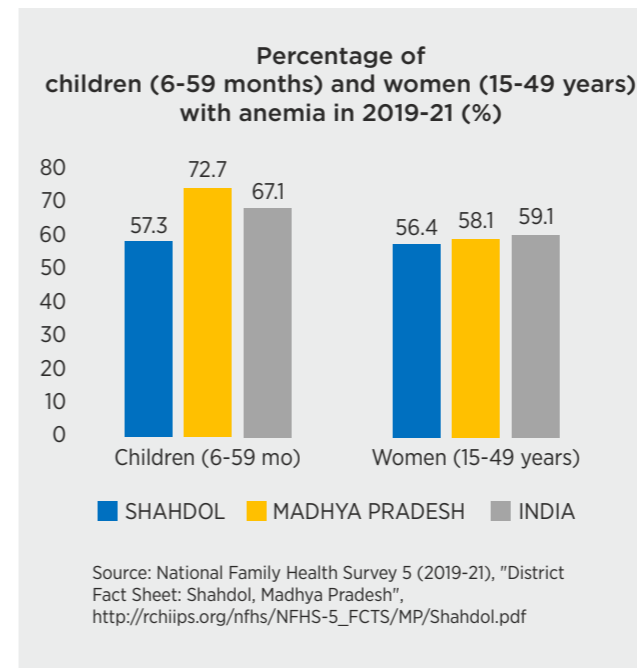
Shubhra, now 19 years old, has received an INSPIRE scholarship, which is provided by the Government of India to those who want to pursue their education in the Science stream but are unable to do so because of lack of financial means. She is pursuing a nursing course in Bhopal. And Shri, who is 12, has been admitted to a Navodaya Vidyalaya. All of Lalpur looks up to Shipra - for her work in their community, and for her indefatigable spirit.

Shruti Jain



112 Neha Ghatak, Achala S Yareseeme and Jyotsna Jha, "Gendered impact of Covid -19 on education of school-aged children in India", Right to Education Forum,

<http://rteforumindia.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/National-Policy-Brief.pdf>



Key lessons

- **Nutrition gardens are a proven and sustainable model for enhancing household food security and dietary diversity in order to combat malnutrition, and must be encouraged in malnourished regions of the country.**
- **Educating girls is among the best possible investments to help transform communities, and accelerate development and economic growth. In villages where schools offer education up to a certain intermediary level (such as class eight), the local administration, civil society organisations and communities must work jointly to advocate - or even help raise funds - for their transfer to other schools where they can complete their education.**



PONNA SWAPNA THE SARPANCH OF THIMMAJIWADI

AS THE OLDEST FORM OF LOCAL government in the Indian subcontinent, Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) have steered democracy at the grassroots for many decades now.¹¹³ While Panchayats (village councils) have existed in one form or another since after Independence, it was only in 1993 that they were given a Constitutional status. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment passed by Parliament was a revolutionary step in decentralising political power in the country. It resulted in the creation of District Panchayats, intermediate Panchayat Samitis, and Village or Gram Panchayats. As of 2019, there are more than 2.6 lakh PRIs in India, with Gram Panchayats having the highest number at 2.53 lakhs.¹¹⁴

Ponna Swapna, 42, is among those who lead decision-making at the grassroots across the country. She is the Sarpanch, or head of the Gram Panchayat, in her village Thimmajiwadi, in Telangana.

There was a time when women like Ponna would have had very little chance of getting a seat at the Panchayat. But the 73rd Constitutional Amendment of 1993 was a watershed: It provided that one-third of all PRI seats be reserved for women, thereby ushering a new era of female participation in the country's local governance. Today, as many as 20 states have raised the reservation for women in PRIs to 50

percent. As of 2020, there are about 14.53 lakh Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) in PRIs, which constitute 45.6 percent of total PRI representatives.¹¹⁵

Ponna was born in Domakonda, a village in the southern state of Telangana, to a family of marginal farmers. She got married at 19 to an agriculturist, and soon moved to Thimmajiwadi, a medium-sized village about 141 km from Hyderabad. It was here that her journey to becoming the Sarpanch began. She came across Saakshar Bharat, a nationwide literacy scheme launched in 2009 by the Ministry of Education to promote and strengthen adult learning.¹¹⁶ The programme's aim was to reach out to those women, especially in the rural areas, who had missed out on the opportunity to access or complete their formal education.

Ponna completed class ten, and went to college for one month. At that time, she was thinking of becoming a nurse. "But my parents stopped me in the first year of college and got me married." There are many women around her who would have similar stories to tell. Telangana currently has a literacy rate of only 66.54 percent, which drops to less than 58 percent for women.¹¹⁷ In Ponna's village of Thimmajiwadi, the female literacy rate stands at only 29.13 percent,¹¹⁸ as compared to the national female literacy rate of 65.46 percent.¹¹⁹

¹¹³ The Panchayati Raj is a three-tier system of local governance consisting of the village council or Gram Panchayat, the district council or District Panchayat, and an intermediate rural local government body or Panchayat Samiti that links the two.

¹¹⁴ Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India, *Basic Statistics of Panchayati Raj Institutions* (New Delhi: Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2019), 17, https://www.panchayat.gov.in/documents/20126/0/Statistical+handbook_MoPR+02082019.pdf/4988ca1b-4971-1f3b-54e7-980228eb47f9?t=1564729098415

¹¹⁵ Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseSelfFramePage.aspx?PRID=1658145>.

¹¹⁶ "Saakshar Bharat Mission, India," UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, <https://uil.unesco.org/case-study/effective-practices-database-litbase-0/saakshar-bharat-mission-india>.

¹¹⁷ Telangana State Profile, <https://telangana.gov.in/about/state-profile>

¹¹⁸ "Thimmajiwadi Population - Nizamabad, Andhra Pradesh," Census 2011, <https://www.census2011.co.in/data/village/571304-thimmajiwadi-andhra-pradesh.html>.

¹¹⁹ "Literacy in India," Census 2011, <https://www.census2011.co.in/literacy.php>.

Ponna resolved to do her part in making life better for the women in her community—beginning with giving them opportunities to complete their education. As part of the Saakshar Bharat programme, two coordinators were selected from every village to teach basic skills to the villagers. And Ponna was one of them. "Our village is very tiny and there was nobody who had passed the tenth class, except for me. So they chose me."

After receiving training, Ponna taught basic literacy to five adult women in her village. She taught them how to write their names. "Our duty was to teach them alphabets and writing. Ponna's most memorable recollection from the seven years that she worked as coordinator of the adult literacy programme was of teaching some 200 people how to sign their names. It was a big step, for people who, all their adult life have had to use their thumb impression as a substitute for their signature. But Ponna was unaware of how much of an impact she was making on the community. And in January 2019, Thimmajiwadi, home to 150 families and 724 people, elected her as their Sarpanch.¹²⁰ "It happened so suddenly." There were four candidates, initially, but two withdrew their nominations. "Her name was also Swapna. I won with a majority of 14 votes."

Today she believes that they chose her as village head because she had served them. After being elected Sarpanch, she had every intention of continuing to do the same. To understand her role and responsibilities better, she attended training programs organised by Reliance Foundation for Panchayat members. She learned about the basic functions of the Gram Panchayat, the government schemes to which her community was entitled, principles of women's leadership and community participation, and also how funds are planned and allocated.

Ponna then quickly set out to do her job. "Our first aim was to do good for the people." First on her agenda were provision of clean drinking water, stopping the practice of open defecation, eliminating breeding grounds for disease-carrying mosquitoes, and setting up drainage lines. She also led the Panchayat in fixing the street lights, building a compost shed, and streamlining the disposal of household waste. They have purchased a tractor and several drums for collecting garbage, they provide bins to every house for dry and wet waste, collect them separately, and take them to the compost shed.

Ponna and her team also got a Vaikuntadhamam or a crematorium built. Before that, when someone in the village died, the body was cremated either in the land where their house stands, or was taken to some other place. She and the Panchayat worked on creating a community park of about one acre, and planted trees along the roads. They managed to plant 400 trees for every one kilometre. They also acquired tanks for watering the plants. In all, they have planted some 20,000 trees across their village.

The ward members¹²¹ then set up a vegetable market for the farmers to sell their produce once every week. Earlier, people from the village used to go to another village for the market which cost them Rs 20. These days, nothing less than 50 vendors from six villages around them come to Thimmajiwadi to sell their produce; around 300 people from these places come to buy. Next on her agenda was to ensure that her community could access government welfare schemes. Her team worked to get the villagers acquainted with the Aasara pension for the elderly, the widows, and those with physical disabilities,¹²² as well as the Arogya Lakshmi scheme, a nutritional program to support pregnant and lactating women.¹²³ She also provided insurance to farmers and started distributing rations.

A year into her tenure, the Covid-19 pandemic broke out, and the people of Thimmajiwadi were filled with anxiety like the whole world was. It was her biggest challenge since being elected Sarpanch. She and her ward reached out to the community to create awareness about wearing masks and washing their hands frequently, and provided them medicines. The Gram Panchayat also provided food to the Anganwadi teachers and staff, even when the centre was closed. They provided loans of Rs 5,000 each to the families in the village to meet household consumption needs during the lockdown.

She was fully aware that the pandemic—and the government responses including the lockdowns—could end up reversing all the development efforts that she and her team have undertaken in the village. But Ponna was not one to lose faith.

By May 2021, as the vaccine rollout widened, vaccine hesitancy took deep roots in many parts of the country, including in the rural districts. In August, it was estimated that 1.35 crore people in Telangana were yet to take their

first dose.¹²⁴ "The villagers were very scared of getting vaccinated. No one came forward at first," Ponna recalls. She, along with ASHA workers, had to go to every single house to convince the families to get inoculated. They explained to the people how the vaccine prevents severe infections and deaths. "People are dying outside," they reminded the community. Eventually, they came forward for the vaccine. Today the entire village have received at least their first dose, and a majority have also received their second.

Although these are trying times, Ponna is still grateful. Throughout the lockdown, she was never alone. She had the support of the community, as well as organisations like Reliance Foundation. With three years of her tenure still left, Ponna already has a roadmap prepared. She wants to build a warehouse where farmers can store their grain, a playground for the kids, and a community hall.

Ponna has been an inspiration to her community and her initiatives as Sarpanch have helped transform lives. For her, though, she is simply happy to be able to serve her community.

Anahita Khanna

***She, along with ASHA workers,
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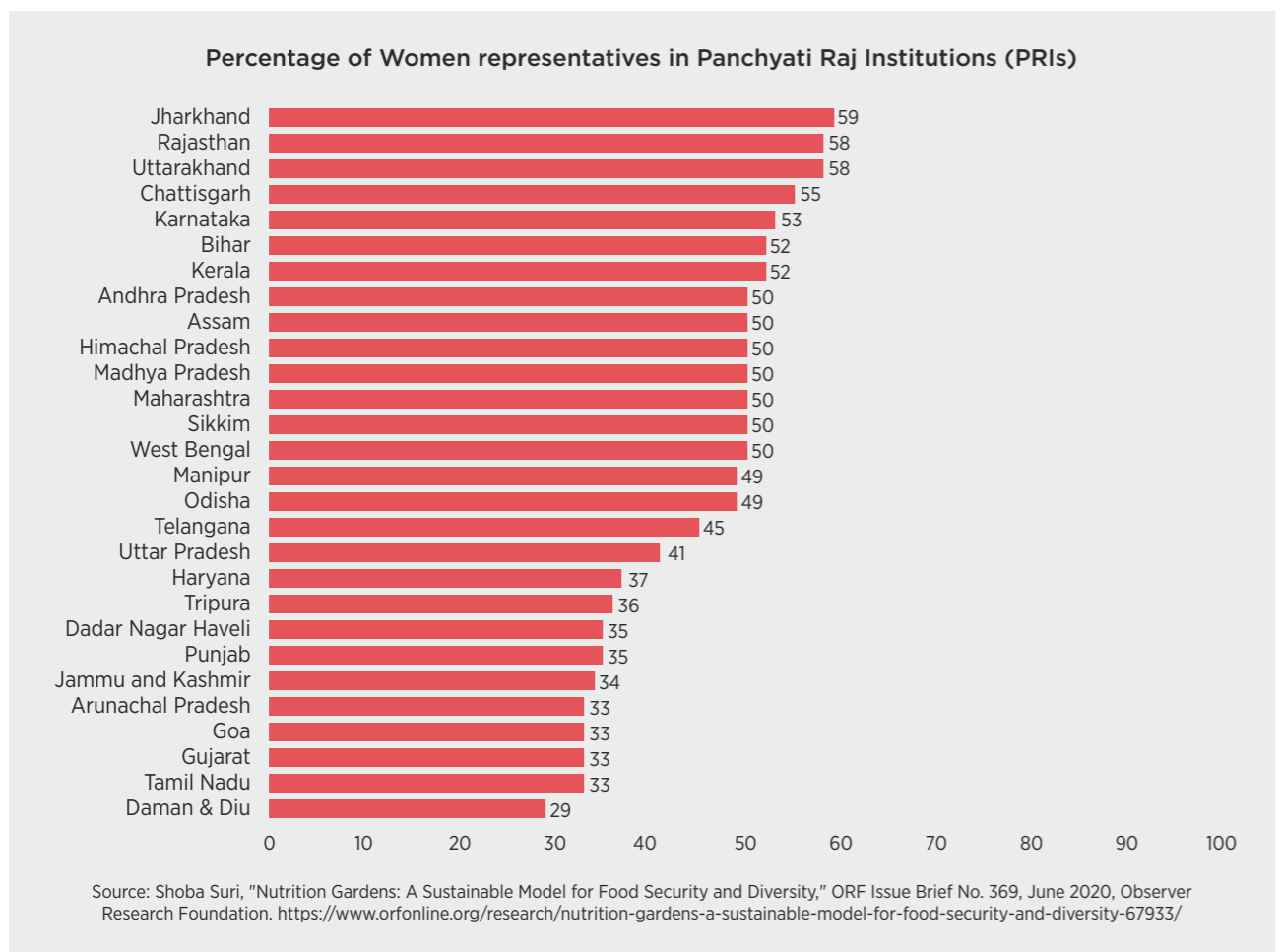
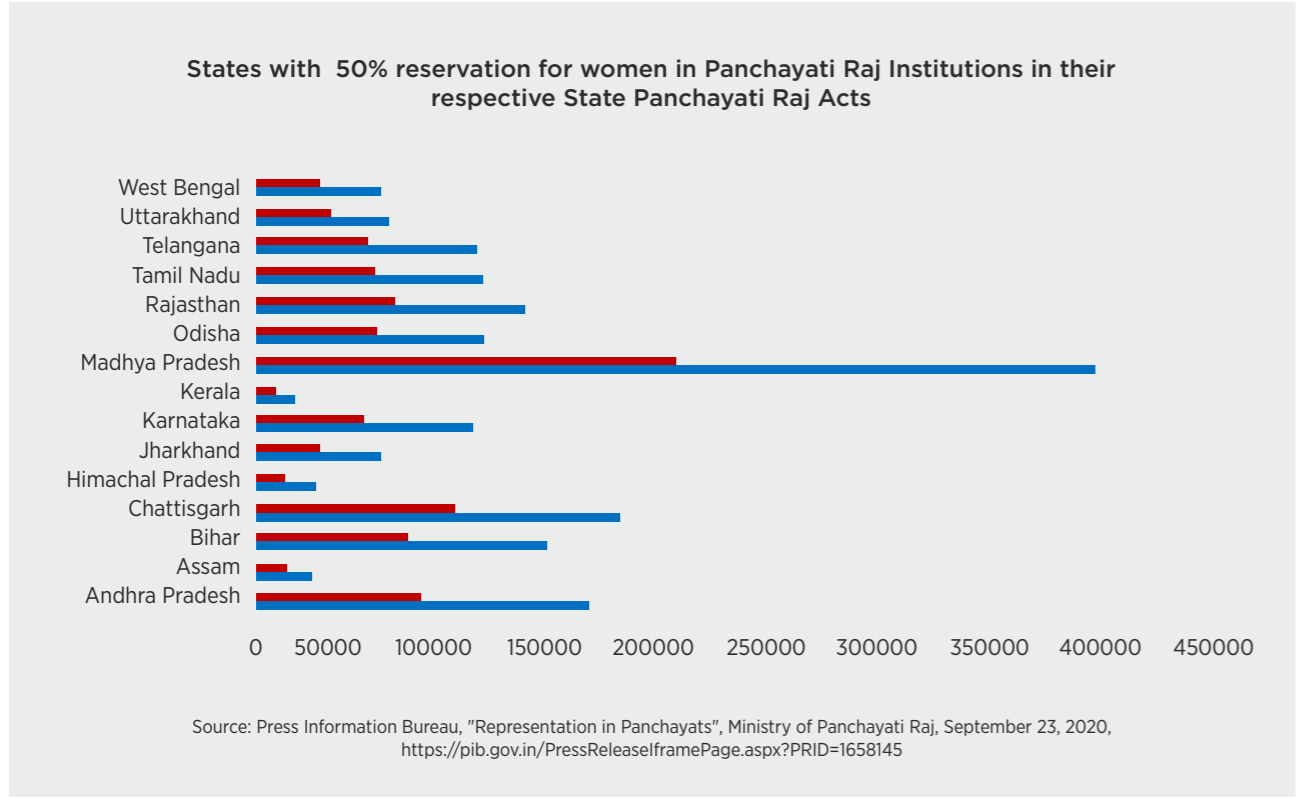
¹²⁰ "Thimmajiwadi Population - Nizamabad, Andhra Pradesh," Census 2011, <https://www.census2011.co.in/data/village/571304-thimmajiwadi-andhra-pradesh.html>.

¹²¹ Every Panchayat or village council in India is divided into wards, and each ward is represented by a ward member who is directly elected by the villagers.

¹²² "Aasara Pension," Warangal District, Government of Telangana, <https://warangal.telangana.gov.in/scheme/aasara-pension/>.

¹²³ "Arogya Lakshmi Programme," Department of Women Development & Child Welfare, Government of Telangana, https://wcdw.tg.nic.in/Arogya_Lakshmi.html.

¹²⁴ Amrita Didiyala, "Telangana: 1.35 crore yet to take their first jab as hesitancy remains a concern," *The Times of India*, August 25, 2021, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/hyderabad/1-35-cr-yet-to-take-first-jab-as-hesitancy-remains-a-concern/articleshow/85608208.cms>.



Key lessons

- **Adult literacy programmes (ALPs) must be recognized and actively promoted as a tool for empowering women in rural India. Local governing bodies could work with civil society organisations to conduct periodic literacy audits and needs assessments within communities, and conduct ALPs for identified target groups.**
- **ASHA workers play a key role in helping counter vaccine hesitancy. But the personal involvement of elected village representatives - particularly when they lead by example by getting inoculated themselves - galvanise vaccinations within the community, and provide a strong impetus for overcoming hesitancy.**



REMA RAJESHWARI IN SERVICE OF THE STATE

REMA RAJESHWARI, 42, WAS BORN in Munnar, a hill station in Kerala's Idukki district. A popular summer resort and tourist destination today, Munnar presents a panorama of green hills dotted with tea plantations and colonial-era bungalows.

Rema's father worked for the state revenue department and her mother taught at a school for the children of tea estate labourers. It was a struggle to make ends meet, and so the couple sent Rema to live with her maternal grandmother while they took care of her twin sister and brother. Although her grandmother was illiterate, she was a great storyteller, and it was through her tales that Rema first heard of the civil service. "Her father had worked as a butler's assistant for several British civil servants, and her accounts of their work and personalities made a powerful impression on me. At school, when asked what I would like to be, I said I wanted to become a Collector," Rema recalls fondly.

In recent years, Kerala has seen a marked growth in the number of women entering the civil service. Two-thirds of the state's District Collectors are currently women.¹²⁵ But Rema's plans to prepare for the civil service examinations after college met with stiff opposition from her family who wanted her to opt for a more conventional job and get married. So, she did an MSc in Computer Science and joined the Taj Group hotels as a systems analyst.

Rema travelled to Delhi in 2004. Her initial years in the city were fraught with difficulty and the uncertainty of beginning a new life. But she was able to find work as a copyeditor for an English-language magazine read by civil service aspirants. The job was crucial as it gave her unlimited access to coaching material for the highly competitive Union Public Service Commission exam while earning an income.

Rema's efforts paid off in 2009 when she cracked the exam and became the first woman Indian Police Service (IPS) officer from Idukki. She topped the IPS batch that year and in 2010 was assigned to the Andhra Pradesh cadre. When the state was bifurcated in 2014,¹²⁶ she was reassigned to the newly created state of Telangana.

The district of Mahabubnagar in Telangana, where Rema was posted as a Superintendent of Police, has long suffered severe droughts and extreme agrarian distress. It is the poorest and most backward district in the state.¹²⁷ Mahabubnagar has witnessed a vast number of farmer suicides since 2014,¹²⁸ and deprivation has driven the district's Palamuru labourers-famed for their expertise in construction work-to migrate to other states, leaving behind ghost villages and a lack of skilled labour.¹²⁹

Rema grappled with the challenges of agrarian crises, outbound migration, and crime. "With farmer deaths and

¹²⁵ Anand Kochukudy, "Women are now 2/3rd of Kerala DCs but one step forward in a state steeped in patriarchy", *The Print*, October 10, 2021, <https://theprint.in/india/women-are-now-2-3rd-of-kerala-dcs-but-one-step-forward-in-a-state-steeped-in-patriarchy/748359/>

¹²⁶ "About Reorganisation", Andhra Pradesh Reorganisation, <https://reorganisation.ap.gov.in/index.jsp>

¹²⁷ Suresh Krishnamoorthy, "Declare Mahabubnagar drought-hit: Collector", *The Hindu*, March 28, 2016, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/telangana/declare-mahabubnagar-drought-hit-collector/article7602445.ece>

¹²⁸ Sreenivas Janyala, "207 farmers allegedly committed suicide in Telangana in 4 months", *The Indian Express*, October 8, 2014, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/207-farmers-allegedly-committed-suicide-in-telangana-in-4-months/>

¹²⁹ K Amruth Rao, "Palamuru labourers migrate in hordes to far-off places in search of greener pastures", *The New Indian Express*, November 21, 2015, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/telangana/2015/nov/21/Palamuru-Villagers-Migrate-in-Hordes-to-Far-off-Places-in-Search-of-Greener-Pastures-845961.html>

migration, children are left in the care of their grandparents. Crimes against women and children multiply when there isn't a sizeable population of younger men," she explains. Additionally, when children are pushed into child labour and drop out of school, they often become victims and later perpetrators of crime. Mahabubnagar has the highest number of child workers of all districts in India.¹³⁰ Rema has led frequent police drives to rescue child workers and enrol them in school.

The experiences of girl children and women were even more harrowing; poor families would sometimes sell their daughters or force them into child marriage.¹³¹ Rema and her team fought tirelessly to curb these practices. Rema notes that her work with joginis—young women dedicated by their families to a deity and meant to be looked after by a temple, but who often become the sex slaves of upper-caste men¹³² — was eye-opening. "I started a community outreach programme for abused and traumatised joginis. We partnered with ministries and NGOs to rescue the women, train them and provide them independent livelihoods," she says.

When Covid-19 broke out in March 2020, Rema's initial concern was for the safety of her team in Mahabubnagar. Even as Rema activated contact tracing procedures across the district, she found that the police themselves had no masks and none were available. She had to request a friend in Delhi to send some, which arrived nearly a week later.

The biggest challenge in the early stages of the pandemic was for police personnel to coordinate with different government departments, she says. She worked nonstop to ensure that relief plans and the rollout were synchronised, and that police safety at the frontlines was addressed.

A further difficulty was to enforce the nationwide lockdown in Mahabubnagar. The police force reached out to the kaval kars (village guards) for help to maintain social distancing and halt the movement of people in and out of containment zones. "What we achieved together was a community-enforced lockdown," says Rema.

Raising awareness about the pandemic during the lockdowns presented a grave challenge. People had to learn to protect themselves against the virus, and to not ostracise those infected. Having conducted information campaigns in the past with a specialised team within the Mahabubnagar police force, Rema and her team began to produce short videos on Covid-19-related issues using simple, humorous storytelling. "We partnered with local media and cable channels to broadcast the videos. They played an important role in removing the stigma around Covid-19," she says.

A further challenge was to ensure access to food and provisions amid the lockdown even while maintaining social distancing measures. The police force used drones to control the crowds, which had never been done before in Mahabubnagar. Rema also led police efforts to manage the supply chain of necessary provisions. She created a decentralised system for approving the movement of farmers, essential care workers, and vendors of essential items. Additionally, she enabled the inter-state flow of supplies by setting up food banks for truck drivers along National Highway 44, which runs through the district.

In late March 2020, a congregation of the Tablighi Jamaat, an Islamic missionary group, at a mosque in Delhi caused a nationwide furore when reports emerged suggesting that the gathering had acted as a super spreader event.¹³³

Some of the Tablighis were in fact from Mahabubnagar, and allegedly contributed to the spread of Covid-19 in the district upon their return.¹³⁴ "The district is communally sensitive and we had to take additional precautions. We acted quickly to defuse any tensions that we sensed," Rema says.

Issues of identity underlay certain aspects of Mahabubnagar's migrant crisis too. Large numbers of migrants were trying to leave the district on foot to return to their homes elsewhere. And in May 2020, thousands of inbound migrants began streaming back into Mahabubnagar.¹³⁵ Rema supervised the development of camps along the highway so those leaving could rest if needed. But for returning migrants, entering Telangana became a hazard; maintaining law and order on the

borders became increasingly difficult, and trucks carrying migrants were stopped. "We took special steps, even deploying additional personnel, to protect and shelter migrants during their entry and quarantine periods," Rema notes.

Across India, the shadow pandemic of violence against women had reached alarming proportions.¹³⁶ Indeed, complaints of domestic violence had increased 2.5 times since the lockdowns began.¹³⁷ Incidents of domestic violence were rampant in Mahabubnagar as well. As a result, Rema launched and publicised a Whatsapp helpline for women, with about 20 distress calls received every day. A mobile safety van, managed by an inspector and three women officers, were then sent to the houses of all callers to counsel the husbands.

***She enabled the inter-state flow
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¹³⁰ K K Abdul Rahoof, "Kids of Mahabubnagar face extreme distress", *Deccan Chronicle*, June 27, 2016, <https://www.deccanchronicle.com/nation/current-affairs/270616/kids-of-mahabubnagar-face-extreme-distress.html>

¹³¹ K K Abdul Rahoof, "Kids of Mahabubnagar face extreme distress"

¹³² Balakrishna Ganeshan, "Joginis: The religious sex slaves of Telangana", *The News Minute*, November 12, 2019, <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/joginis-religious-sex-slaves-telangana-113033>

¹³³ Parimal Kumar, "30 per cent of coronavirus cases linked to Delhi mosque event: Government", *NDTV*, April 04, 2020, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/coronavirus-tablighi-jamaat-30-per-cent-of-coronavirus-cases-linked-to-delhi-mosque-event-government-2206163>

¹³⁴ "23-day-old tests positive for Covid-19 in Telangana, contracted infection from Tablighi Jamaat meet returnees", *News18*, April 07, 2020, <https://www.news18.com/news/india/23-day-old-baby-found-positive-for-Covid-19-in-telangana-infected-from-tablighi-jamaat-event-returnees-2568803.html>

¹³⁵ K Amruth Rao, "Lockdown 3.0: Marooned migrants finally start returning to Mahabubnagar", *The New Indian Express*, May 11, 2020, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/telangana/2020/may/11/lockdown-30-marooned-migrants-finally-start-returning-to-mahabubnagar-2141782.html>

¹³⁶ "The shadow pandemic: Violence against women during Covid-19", *UN Women*, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/in-focus-gender-equality-in-Covid-19-response/violence-against-women-during-Covid-19>

¹³⁷ Rishika Tomar and Pratap C Mohanty, "Tackling the shadow pandemic of rising domestic violence", *The New Indian Express*, October 19, 2020, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/opinions/2020/oct/19/tackling-the-shadow-pandemic-of-rising-domestic-violence-2212123.html>

¹³⁸ K Shiva Shanker, "Vaccination drive launched in Telangana", *The Hindu*, January 16, 2021, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/telangana/vaccination-drive-launched-in-telangana/article33589019.ece>

Finally, when vaccination drives began across Telangana in January 2021,¹³⁸ Rema visited the police stations and traffic points to encourage all police personnel to get vaccinated since there was some hesitancy. She estimates that 95 percent of the district's police force have now taken both jabs.

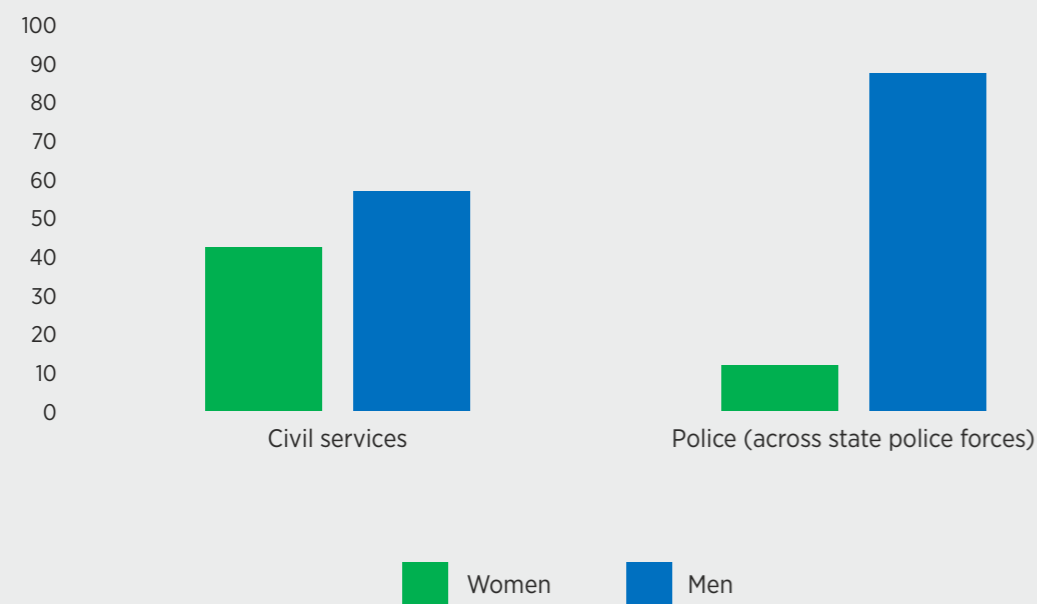
Rema says that her years in Mahabubnagar have made her a firm believer in the power of collaborative policing—the support of local communities is at the heart of pandemic management and initiatives to maintain law and order. Additionally, she says she is fortunate to have a team that

always believed in her. Her chief contribution, she says, is helping bridge the gap between the community and police. "People now feel free to approach us personally with their difficulties. That is a sign of trust."

In December 2021, Rema Rajeshwari was appointed as the first woman District Police Chief of Nalgonda in Telangana. In recent times, Nalgonda has known outbreaks of violence and the trafficking of drugs. Rema knows that there is much to be done. As she leaves Mahabubnagar to assume her new position, there is little doubt that she will continue to inspire hope, touch lives, and bring change.

Anirban Sarma

Percentage of women and men in the Indian civil services and police force



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Key lessons

- **Greater public awareness is needed about careers for women in the Indian civil and police services. This could create a groundswell of interest and help close the gender gap within these services.**
- **District police forces could play a crucial role in combating gender-based violence and helping rehabilitate victims of abuse. Linkages between the police, civil society and state ministries must be strengthened.**
- **State governments and police forces could work towards institutionalizing the idea of "collaborative policing". Communities must be engaged in efforts to manage pandemics and maintain law and order.**



LALITHA KUMARI THE HEALTH WARRIOR OF MADANAPALLE

LALITHA KUMARI WISHES SHE could have seen more of the world. In her 40 years, she has never stepped outside of Madanapalle, her birthplace. "I was born here, my parents were always here, and then after my marriage, even my husband moved here." Still, she has an attachment to the place which can only come from belonging. One by one, she lists all that it is famous for: it is the place of rich silk sarees and gently rolling hills, and where the national anthem was set to music by Rabindranath Tagore.

Madanapalle is a small town in Chittoor district in Andhra Pradesh. It is the largest revenue division in the state, an agricultural hub known for its mangoes and tomatoes. The tomato market at Madanapalle is among the largest in Asia. All of Lalitha's family have worked the farms, but her father, who has been the most influential figure in her life, worked as a mechanic with the state road transport corporation. He was a man who devoted his time to helping people in his community. She still remembers how, when her father died 15 years ago, nearly a hundred people showed up at his funeral—people that he had helped in some way or another. She considers that event as the one that set her on her current path. "I decided then to extend help to people as much as I can."

She started by educating herself, finding employment to support her family, starting her own Self-Help Group (SHG),¹³⁹ qualifying as a health resource person and aiding

hundreds of women by raising awareness on female health and helping them access health facilities.

She was 17 when her dream of completing her education and finding a job was interrupted as she was married to her uncle, her mother's younger brother. While there has been a decline in consanguineous marriages, the practice is still not unheard of. Data from the National Family Health Survey 2015-16¹⁴⁰ showed, for example, that 32 percent of marriages in Andhra Pradesh are between kin.

As a young mother, Lalitha supplemented the family income by doing needlework from home. But her mother encouraged her to continue her education. Though her mother was not educated herself, she was hardworking and ran a milk business from the cattle she reared at home. She told Lalitha that when a woman is educated, she can give her children a brighter future. In Chittoor, the female literacy rate is 67.7 percent,¹⁴¹ higher than the overall female literacy rate in Andhra Pradesh's 62.9 percent.¹⁴²

Her husband, who is a tomato farmer, had suffered a permanent injury on one arm in his youth. The injury left him unable to work as much as he wanted to, leaving Lalitha to partly shoulder the financial responsibility for the family. He supported her decision to complete class twelve, as did her in-laws, who are her maternal grandparents. She went on to complete her graduation from an open university which allowed her to study from home while taking care of her domestic responsibilities.

¹³⁹ A Self-Help Group (SHG) is an affinity-based group of 10-20 people, usually women from similar social and economic backgrounds, who collect money from those who can contribute and give the funds to members in need. Members may also save contributions and begin lending funds back to the SHG's members themselves or to others in a village for a particular purpose. Many SHGs are linked with banks and can deliver micro-credit.

¹⁴⁰ National Family Health Survey 4 (2015-16), India: A Report, <http://rchiips.org/nfhs/nfhs-4Reports/India.pdf>

¹⁴¹ National Family Health Survey 4 (2015-16), "District Fact Sheet: Chittoor, Andhra Pradesh", http://rchiips.org/nfhs/FCTS/AP/AP_FactSheet_554_Chittoor.pdf

¹⁴² National Family Health Survey 4 (2015-16), "State Fact Sheet: Andhra Pradesh", http://rchiips.org/nfhs/pdf/NFHS4/AP_FactSheet.pdf

When her father passed away in 2006, her son was one-month-old and her daughter was five. She was yearning to follow in his footsteps, to do work that would let her engage with people. She took up teaching in a primary school and around the same time, she heard about the Mission for Elimination of Poverty in Municipal Areas (MEPMA), an institution created by the state government that works on poverty alleviation and facilitates Self-Help Groups in urban areas of Andhra Pradesh. It falls under DAY-NULM, the Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana - National Urban Livelihoods Mission,¹⁴³ a scheme that aims to reduce poverty and vulnerability of urban poor households by enabling access to self-employment and skilling opportunities. NULM is implemented by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs.

The southern states, including Lalitha's, have been the most effective in widening the coverage and expanding membership of women in SHGs, providing a successful model for other states to emulate. Recent figures indicate that Andhra Pradesh has 819,980¹⁴⁴ SHGs in rural districts—among the highest in the country. There are 244,115 urban SHGs under MEPMA. Andhra Pradesh is ranked¹⁴⁵ the top state for implementation under NULM.

Around 2006, when Lalitha started her SHG, there was less awareness about these groups; today, every woman that she knows is a member. She was wanting to get a gas connection and was told by her neighbour that it would be easier to access as a member of an SHG, which in Andhra Pradesh are called podupu sangams (savings associations). She formed the Sri Lalitha Podupu Sangam with 11 other women, in order to access government schemes and shore up her savings, with each member initially contributing Rs. 100 a month. These days, they all contribute Rs 300.

All the members of the group belong to the Kuruma caste, a pastoral community found across the states of Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu. Lalitha says getting women of her own caste was essential when putting the group together. "Change should start from home and caste and community are home for us. There is unity and trust that exists within the same caste group and that is crucial since we are dealing with money." Indeed, repeated studies have shown that across the country, preference for the same caste has been a dominant factor¹⁴⁶ in how SHGs select their members.

The savings and credit access from Sri Lalitha Podupu Sangam have been beneficial for all of the group's members. One of the members used her loan to start a tea stall; another, to buy cattle. For Lalitha, the funds helped her husband pay off loans that he had earlier incurred for their farm, and to fund the education of both their children. Her daughter is now in college, studying biotechnology, while her son is still in high school. Her daughter's education has been her greatest priority. She has already set aside part of her savings for her daughter to do her post-graduation. With her own experience deeply entrenched in her mind—being married early, while her brother went on to study and later qualify to be an engineer—Lalitha is determined to not allow her daughter to be denied any opportunity.

In 2016, there was a turning point in her life. She was selected to be trained as a health resource person for MEPMA. She quit her job in the playschool, but there were things she had learned which turned out to be useful on the field. "My work as a teacher had trained me to instruct people on what to do and what not to do and that's what my job is." As a health resource person, she visits the homes of people in urban slums to raise awareness on

issues of female health and hygiene, and nutrition for adolescent girls and pregnant women, awareness on cervical cancer, and doing home examination for breast cancer. She is paid a monthly honorarium of Rs 5,250 and monitors close to 200 households on a daily basis. She differentiates the work she does from what Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs or community health workers) do. Her work is based on the close connection that she builds with the families. They see her as one of their own.

At any given point of time, she has an idea about what is going in each household. The work can be difficult some days. "Every time we go to a house, people expect we will bring new information to them and they are disappointed

if we don't. That's a real challenge for us. Most of our work is to convey information, but it is also to follow up and to connect families with health workers when needed."

When Covid-19 first broke out, her family was fearful of her going to the field every day. After all, Chittoor was among the worst-affected districts during the peak of the first and the second waves of the pandemic in 2020 and 2021.¹⁴⁷ Slowly her loved ones learned to be at peace with the idea that she can do her job and keep herself safe. But again, with the recent surge in January 2022,¹⁴⁸ their district has been having some of the highest infection numbers.

Lalitha was among 8,000 SHG members who received training by MEPMA in partnership with UNICEF in 2020.



She supervised the distribution of hundreds of thousands of masks and oversaw the management of quarantine centres and shelters for the urban homeless.

¹⁴³ Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana - National Urban Livelihoods Mission, DAY-NULM, Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, <https://nulm.gov.in/>

¹⁴⁴ DAY-NRLM, SHGs Under NRLM, Ministry of Rural Development <https://nrlm.gov.in/shgOuterReports.do?methodName=showShgreport>

¹⁴⁵ DAY-NULM, Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs,

https://nulm.gov.in/CommonReport/SparkMIS_Report.aspx?ComponentName=NULM

¹⁴⁶ M. Rajeev, "Caste Plays Dominant Role in SHGs: Study," *The Hindu*, January 1, 2013,

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/andhra-pradesh/caste-plays-dominant-role-in-shgs-study/article4259959.ece>

¹⁴⁷ Sreenivas Janyala, "Andhra Pradesh: Chittoor, East Godavari Hit Worst by Covid," *The Indian Express*, April 20, 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/andhra-pradesh-chittoor-east-godavari-hit-worst-by-Covid-cases-7280758/>

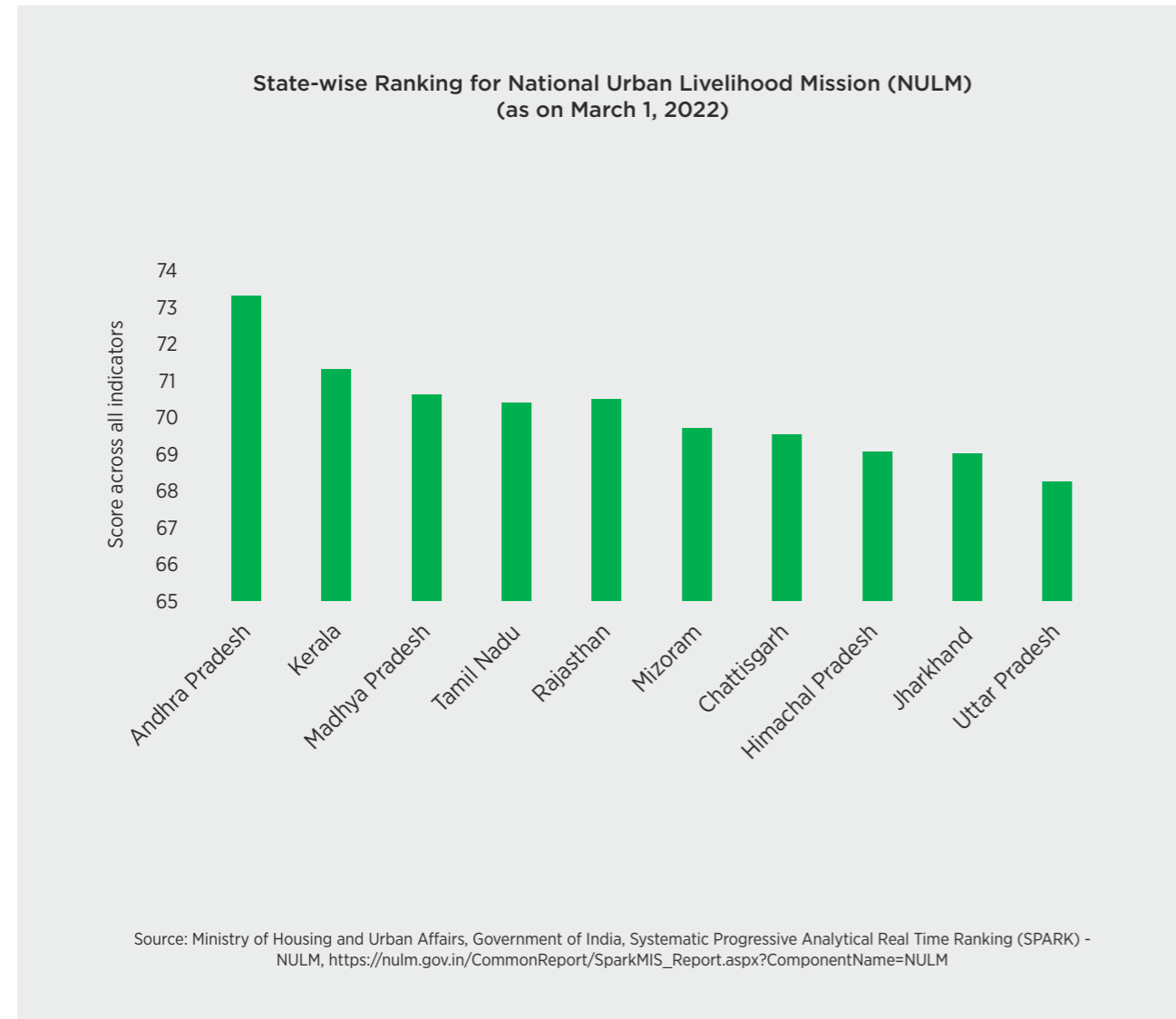
¹⁴⁸ "Vizag, Chittoor Lead Andhra Pradesh's Covid-19 Surge," *The Times of India*, January 9, 2022,

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/visakhapatnam/vizag-chittoor-lead-states-Covid-surge/articleshow/88783521.cms>

The training prepared them to take care of themselves and the community through awareness and readiness on Covid-appropriate behaviour, and personal and environmental hygiene. After she took the training, she supervised the distribution of hundreds of thousands of masks and oversaw the management of quarantine centres and shelters for the urban homeless. With the pandemic, her work has increased manifold. People turn to her for all sorts of needs, apart from health issues, when they run out of essential supplies or even to seek counselling for mental stress.

Now when she sees younger women from SHGs working on the field, she advises them to take care of their own health. She reminds them that if they are healthy, the better they will be able to help themselves, their family, and their community. One evening not too long ago, her daughter told her that she wanted to go out to the field with her. "You do so much to help people, I want to learn from you, she told me." Lalitha thinks that maybe one day, her father's legacy of lending a helping hand will be carried forward by her daughter, too. And that gives her hope and pride.

Sunaina Kumar



Key lessons

- There is a need to invest in programmes to reduce poverty and vulnerability of the urban poor, as most of the focus by governments has been directed towards the rural poor.
- Members of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) can provide crucial support to community health workers, like ASHA workers, as they are able to build trust and close connections within the communities.
- Socio-cultural norms play a critical role in the formation and functioning of SHGs, and should be taken into account when implementing social welfare policies.

YASHODA THE ENTREPRENEUR OF BYALAHALLI

STANDING TALL AT 45 METRES, the Kadamba is a large tropical tree known for its glossy green leaves and globe-shaped, scented orange flowers. Like most indigenous trees in India, it features prominently in Hindu texts such as the Bhagavata Purana - where the Kadamba is said to be Lord Krishna's favourite tree. It was under the canopy of the Kadamba that he is believed to have performed many of his divine acts.

When Yashoda, a 32-year-old entrepreneur in Byalahalli, was thinking of a name for her small organic cosmetics business, she was certain that she wanted it to resonate with the idea of nature. She waited for the right name to "come naturally to my heart." And it did. One day in November 2021, during an entrepreneur development programme at a small school in Deshapande Guttahalli, a village 29 km from Bengaluru, Yashoda found her brand name. As she stood chatting with other attendees under the canopy of a tree, she looked up and saw a beautiful orange bloom-the Kadamba flower. In that moment, Kadamba Naturals was born.

Yashoda's life and her journey leading to the launch of her business has not been easy. Born to a lower-middle class family, Yashoda remembers having a normal childhood with her parents and her brother; that is until their father, whose business had suddenly lost a lot of money, abandoned them. Yashoda was 10 at the time, and her brother, almost 9. Soon after, her mother fell ill. As their father was the only one with any income, the family of three was forced to move from the city to a village nearby.

With their father gone and mother unwell, the two young children did not know where to turn. They had begun to go

without food when neighbours came to help. "People helped us with food," recalls Yashoda, who then also had to stop her schooling. While looking after the family became her responsibility, her heart ached to study. "I wanted to become a teacher and help people." Later, a kind couple that they knew in the city helped them out. Not only did the couple rent a house for them in the village, but they also took their mother to a hospital and attended to all the bills. They also enrolled Yashoda and her brother in a nearby boarding school so they could complete their education.

It was kindness which Yashoda will never forget; it is the same kindness that Yashoda today thinks has helped her make decisions in her life. People around her like telling stories of her sense of compassion. She is resilient and faces challenges with grace. "Whenever I meet with a sudden difficulty, I always think of how I could overcome it."

In 2019 Yashoda married Muni Raju, a cab driver, and they moved to Byalahalli, a village 40 km from Bengaluru. Five months later, as the Covid-19 pandemic broke out, India went into a complete lockdown, like most other countries across the globe. She was pregnant at the time, and her husband lost his source of income as no one moved about. Her brother, who lived in the nearby village of Arehalli, had also lost his job.

They were only three in a sea of people who lost their jobs as the pandemic caused a massive economic fallout. According to the Covid-19 Livelihoods Survey¹⁴⁹ conducted in April-May 2020, 72 percent of adults in the state of Karnataka reported that they had lost their jobs during the lockdown. Worst hit were the non-agricultural casual workers and self-employed in non-agriculture sectors, with

149 Azim Premji University, Centre for Advocacy and Research and Gauri Media Trust, Covid-19 Livelihoods Survey, May 2020, https://cse.azimpremjiversity.edu.in/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/APU_COVID_Livelihoods_Survey_Karnataka.pdf



eight of every 10 losing their jobs. Across the country, data from the Consumer Pyramid Household Survey (CPHS)¹⁵⁰ of the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) showed that 6.3 million jobs or 1.5 percent of all jobs were lost during the first wave of Covid-19.

As Yashoda's household lost their regular income, they came under extreme financial stress. Even as they received ration kits from the NGO, Smile Foundation—which was distributing food and basic necessity kits to families in rural areas across 22 states at that time—they had other needs for which they did not have money.

In October 2020, Yashoda gave birth to her daughter, Diyanika. The new parents could not even afford to buy essentials for the infant. Yashoda decided to make her own bath powder and kajal for her baby using materials that she sourced locally. The powder and kajal worked well for her newborn, and neighbours who tried the products liked them instantly.¹⁵¹ It made Yashoda think: here was something she was good at—why not earn a living out of it?

She made the products at home and packaged them herself. What Yashoda needed next was mentorship. She found the guidance she was looking for in the community

mobilisation programmes that had started in her village. She joined a programme run by Smile Foundation, called Swabhiman,¹⁵² (self-respect) aimed at building the self-esteem of adolescent girls and women through innovative community activities.

Swabhiman included an entrepreneur development project that offered Yashoda training and seed money to launch her organic cosmetics business. It also introduced her to some women university students who could help with the marketing of her products. Thus started Yashoda's journey as an entrepreneur. "The Entrepreneur Development project really helped build my confidence to start this business," she now says.

Yashoda's family were initially skeptical about her venture. That did not stop her, and rather pushed her to try and persuade them about the soundness of her business idea. Today her entire family is on-board. Her mother takes care of her one-year-old daughter while her husband helps in packaging the products. Her father, with whom she has since reconciled, helps her source the raw materials.

Kadamba Naturals sells products that are entirely organic and handmade, including lip balm, kajal, bath salt, and tooth

powder. Her products are packed in glass bottles, steel containers, and cloth pouches which she stitches herself.

While her products are sold at one of the organic shops in Byalahalli, Yashoda would like to explore supplying to salons as well. With the help of the college women she met through the ED programme, she hopes to expand the reach of her products through social-media platforms. She would like to be able to employ a few women from her community and, in the process, help them become self-reliant.

Yashoda—or Manju as she is fondly called—is an inspiration to her community. Her enterprise has instilled confidence in the women of Byalahalli. "They believe that

they too can come up with unique ideas and work on their passion." They look up to her for other reasons, too. In the two years of the pandemic, in addition to having a baby, she studied for a Bachelor of Arts degree in English at the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU). She was surprised when, inspired by her, one of her neighbours applied for a higher education degree as well.

Yashoda will be the first to dismiss the admiration. "I just want to help people." She believes this is the most important lesson that her own life has taught her, and is eager to instil the same values in her daughter. She knows all too well how a helping hand can change someone's life.

Anahita Khanna

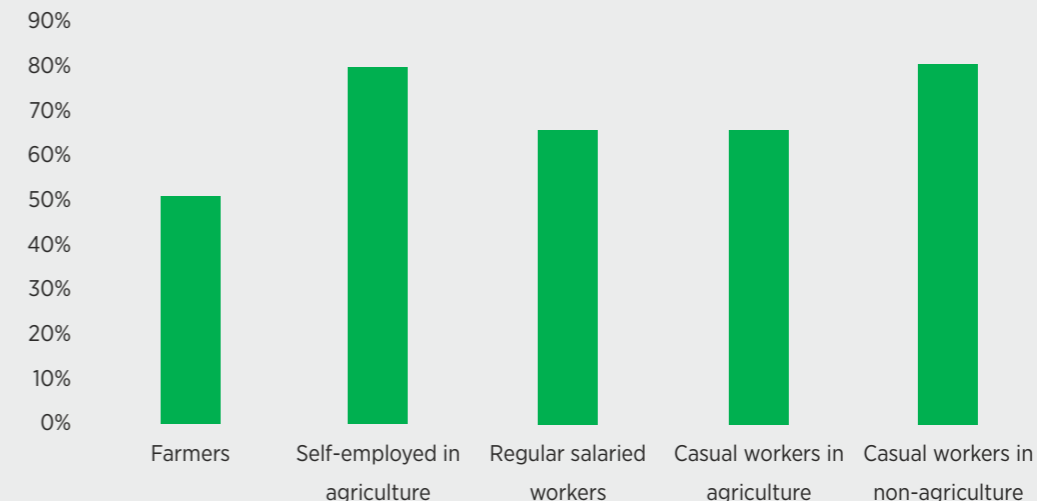
Yashoda's family was initially skeptical about her venture. That did not stop her, and rather pushed her to try and persuade them about the soundness of her business idea. Today her entire family is on-board.

¹⁵⁰ Jagriti Chandra, "Most disproportionate loss of jobs because of the first wave of Covid-19 was among urban women," *The Hindu*, October 4, 2021, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/most-disproportionate-loss-of-jobs-because-of-the-first-wave-of-Covid-19-was-among-urban-women/article36831134.ece>.

¹⁵¹ The use of powder and kajal for newborn children may be detrimental to their health. This practice is not recommended.

¹⁵² "Swabhiman," Smile Foundation, <https://www.smilefoundationindia.org/swabhiman.html>.

Percentage of workers in Karnataka who lost employment in March – May 2020 (as compared to the employment status in February 2020)



Source: Azim Premji University, Centre for Advocacy and Research and Gauri Media Trust, Covid-19 Livelihoods Survey, May 2020, https://cse.azimpremjiversity.edu.in/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/APU_COVID_Livelihoods_Survey_Karnataka.pdf

Key lessons

- **Efforts to promote women's entrepreneurship and help women identify livelihood opportunities - including productive home-based work - must be strengthened. This could help women support their families during crises or periods of widespread unemployment.**
- **Local governments, civil society organisations and the private sector could play an important role in helping the women of the community develop stronger market linkages, and market or distribute products more effectively.**



VAISHALI SHIRKE WOMAN, UNSTOPPABLE

VAISHALI IS A WOMAN OF MANY skills. She is an Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA, i.e. a community health worker), a field worker, a member of the Gram Panchayat (village council), and her days are always filled with tasks.

One of five siblings, Vaishali grew up in a large, middle-class family. Her early school days were spent in the village of Barsoli in Maharashtra. She wanted to do something different after graduating from class ten, and took up sewing lessons for six months, finding a real proclivity towards the craft. At the age of eighteen, Vaishali got married and moved to the village of Kadsure in the district of Raigad, a six-hour journey south-west of Barsoli. Kadsure is a mid-sized village, with 264 households and a population of over 1,200.¹⁵³ It is here, close to the coast and the Arabian Sea, that Vaishali would build a home for herself and her husband, and eventually, their two daughters.

In 2016 Vaishali became a field worker, or a field functionary as Reliance Foundation calls it. As an ASHA worker, she would go from one house to the next, helping women and children through pregnancies, building awareness about infant vaccinations, and counselling the families through any other issues they may be facing. Her work made her the ideal candidate for a field functionary—a role she was happy to take up in order to help her village. What she did not plan on doing, though, was to stand for election to the Gram Panchayat. "I didn't want to do it," she recalls. Fearing that politics would interfere with her job as an ASHA worker, she refused the villagers' request at first.

"What would I do if the people I wanted to help as an ASHA worker didn't support me? I couldn't let that happen."

But the community was insistent; even her opponent wanted her to run. She scored an overwhelming victory. "I'm grateful. Their faith in me means everything."

As an ASHA worker and a field worker, Vaishali has worked extensively with women. She believed that the women in her community have to stand on their own feet and be more independent. She formed six Self-Help Groups (SHGs)¹⁵⁴ so the women could help in supporting their households instead of being solely dependent on their husbands or fathers. It wasn't just about the money, though. "Social and emotional bonding is critical to community building. I needed them to understand that they could all depend on each other, whatever happens."

Through the savings group, the women were able to help their family's primary breadwinners. With the training that Reliance Foundation provided to around 20 villages on craft work, Vaishali imparted all that she'd learned to the women in her six groups. She taught them how to make items like cloth bags, sustainable paper bags, and purses. These skills came in handy when single-use plastics were banned in Maharashtra. Her taking initiative meant a great deal to the women of Kadsure.

"It helped that my family was supportive of me," she says. "They knew that what I was doing was important." The training that Vaishali passed on to her community helped

¹⁵³ Census 2011, Kadsure, <https://www.census2011.co.in/data/village/554333-kadsure-maharashtra.html>

¹⁵⁴ A Self-Help Group (SHG) is an affinity-based group of 10-20 people, usually women from similar social and economic backgrounds, who collect money from those who can contribute and give the funds to members in need. Members may also save contributions and begin lending funds back to the SHG's members themselves or to others in a village for a particular purpose. Many SHGs are linked with banks and can deliver micro-credit.

them save up and for some of them, to eventually start their own business.

With the training that the Foundation also provided on proper waste disposal, Vaishali was able to teach her community how to classify the various kinds of garbage. She also encouraged and educated the members of her community on the importance of repairing and maintaining toilets. This is a massive and important task, given the persistent challenges in sanitation not only in Vaishali's village but in many parts of India. Despite being one of the fastest developing economies in the world today, India continues to lag behind in water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) indicators. In 2019, Maharashtra, while performing better on WASH indicators than other states like Uttar Pradesh, for instance-had far more constituencies with high burden of poor sanitary facilities.¹⁵⁵ Reliance Foundation also helped support children's education programmes and improve sanitation facilities in primary schools in the village. In 2018, 28.2 percent of schools in rural Maharashtra did not have functional toilets.¹⁵⁶ Better sanitation facilities not only encourage students to attend school, but also enable them to perform better by keeping healthier with the help of good hygiene.

Vaishali and her team also involved themselves with other health issues such as menstruation. In many parts of India, menstruation remains a taboo subject and, according to NFHS-4, over half the women in the country's rural districts do not use hygienic methods of protection during their menstrual periods.¹⁵⁷ Vaishali's group provided sanitary napkins, starting with school children first, and came up with creative means of building awareness on menstrual health.

In early 2020, as the Covid-19 pandemic broke out, people in Vaishali's village — many of them contract workers — were afraid to go for work, and many members of the tribal communities in her village were understandably unwilling to move around nor allow others to come to their area, fearing the disease would spread to them as well. With no work, and an overwhelming fear of the disease, people were no longer able to earn. Vaishali stepped in. With the help of Reliance Foundation, she distributed grains, masks, sanitisers, and other essential items to the community. She helped build awareness of the pandemic and taught people preventive measures like hand-washing and physical distancing.

The Foundation also provided ambulances and had doctors-on-call for the village, with field workers like Vaishali acting as points of communication. As the community witnessed the cooperation between Vaishali and the Foundation, they grew less apprehensive about the pandemic.

But Vaishali's responsibilities did not end there. Realising that the disease could be brought in by those entering the village, she and her team worked on monitoring every person who were coming from outside. "We checked the temperature of every visitor. And if they came from outside Mumbai or Pune, they were immediately placed under isolation for a fortnight."

People did not exactly welcome the stringent measures, but Vaishali was firm. It wasn't that Vaishali and her team were unafraid. Maharashtra was one of, if not the worst-hit states in India.¹⁵⁸ While doctors and nurses were hailed for their efforts during the pandemic, ASHA workers, among the unheralded groups who have borne the brunt of both

the pandemic and people's misdirected anger, were severely neglected.¹⁵⁹ Overworked and underpaid, they continued to help battle Covid-19 in rural India. Indeed, the work done by the ASHA workers has been critical in managing the second wave in Maharashtra. Vaishali, with the help of the members of her SHG, would distribute vegetables and other food rations, as well as other essential items that people needed. They faced resistance during temperature-checks, from people who were terrified that a high temperature would lead to them to being taken away, but Vaishali's quiet, yet reassuring words helped. The early days were difficult, and reprieve was rare, but things got better. "Kind encouragement," she insists. "People don't respond well to anger. But kindness? Kindness brings understanding."

In any close-knit community, a leader's words can be akin to gospel. Winning the tribal community over meant convincing their leader first. His beliefs were the community's beliefs; his misconceptions, the community's misconceptions. Vaishali and her team approached him with the same kindness, helping him understand the situation and the benefits to taking proper measures against the disease. As the leader learnt, so did the community.

Vaccinations were approached similarly. Ignorance had made people fearful, and they had to be told why it was important that they get vaccinated. Increased immunity was just one aspect of it — the vaccine was imperative to their access to government schemes and transport. Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, ASHA workers have worked at the grassroots and helped promote the vaccination programme in the remote areas of India. With Vaishali's guidance, more people got themselves vaccinated.

The last two years have been critical to Vaishali's growth. "I've learnt a lot about who I am as a person, how my community can be helped, and so much more." In particular, she understood the importance of education. She and her community have also learnt the value of saving. Life can come to a standstill at any point, for reasons out of your control. "How do you sustain yourself in those times? I think we've learnt the answer to that by now," she smiles. "Community building, savings, keeping your surroundings clean and thereby keeping yourself healthy."

Kadsure has encountered many challenges, but leaders like Vaishali have kept the village and its community afloat. For Vaishali, it is simply that she loves her community. And nobody doubts that.

Noyontara Gupta

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**People don't respond well to anger.
But kindness? Kindness brings
understanding.**

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¹⁵⁵ Shagun, "India Lags in Drinking Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Facilities: Study", *Down To Earth*, October 01, 2019, <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/water/india-lags-in-drinking-water-sanitation-and-hygiene-facilities-study-67029>

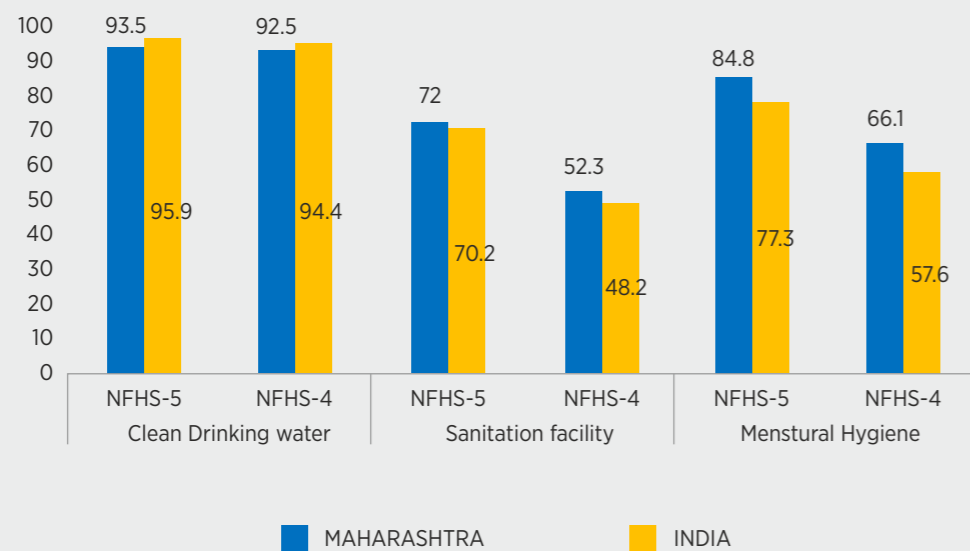
¹⁵⁶ Ankita Bhatkhande, "Learning in Rural Maharashtra Gets Better, but Still Short of 2008", *Hindustan Times*, January 16, 2019, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/mumbai-news/learning-in-rural-maharashtra-gets-better-but-still-short-of-2008/story-HdT5f2FDC6ZN59o1sOZjaM.html>

¹⁵⁷ "Menstrual Hygiene Day 2021: Major Challenges Faced by Rural Girls and Women during Menstruation", *DNA India*, May 28, 2021, <https://www.dnaindia.com/analysis/column-menstrual-hygiene-day-2021-major-challenges-faced-by-rural-girls-and-women-during-menstruation-2892326>

¹⁵⁸ Shilpa Jamkhandikar and Neha Arora, "India's Worst-Hit Maharashtra Eases Covid Curbs as Infections Abate", *Reuters*, August 3, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/india/india-reports-30549-new-coronavirus-cases-2021-08-03/>

¹⁵⁹ Patralekha Chatterjee, "Recently, ASHA Workers have faced violence. What makes them so vulnerable?", *GaonConnection*, May 2, 2020, <https://en.gaonconnection.com/recently-asha-workers-have-faced-violence-we-must-address-the-underlying-structural-reasons-that-make-them-vulnerable/>

Households using clean drinking water and improved sanitation facilities, and women (15-24 years) using improved menstrual hygiene methods (%)



Source: National Family Health Survey 4 (2015-16) and 5 (2019-21), <http://rchiips.org/nfhs/>



Key lessons

- The periodic training of Accredited Social Health Activities (ASHAs) is essential. The focused upskilling of ASHA workers could be institutionalised by local administrations as one of the first steps to be taken when there is a public health crisis.
- The close cooperation of ASHA workers and Self-Help Groups (SHGs) - or the membership of ASHAs in SHGs - should be promoted as it could foster a more holistic approach to community development.

MAHANANDA PHAD BANISHING MALNOURISHMENT FROM KASARWADI

ON THE BANKS OF the Godavari in Maharashtra lies Gangakhed, a city with a population of about 50,000.¹⁶⁰ It is the largest city in the district of Parbhani, and a vibrant hub for small-scale industries. The region is renowned for its production of edible oils, cotton and sugar, and Gangakhed has long housed a range of related factories, production units and businesses. With the growth of the township, schools and other educational institutes have mushroomed as well.

Adjacent to Gangakhed and living in its shadow is the village of Kasarwadi, a settlement of less than 150 households with a population of roughly 700. This is where Mahananda Vishwasrao Phad, 52, lives and works and has transformed the lives of many.

Although she was born in Maharashtra's Nanded, her father's job as a jamadar (officer) took them to different cities, before settling in Gangakhed. She soon began to work in an Anganwadi, a rural childcare centre, where she assisted pregnant mothers and helped take care of the children.

Eventually, Mahananda approached Reliance Foundation to learn new skills on leadership, livelihood generation and nutrition, and it was through this that she understood the meaning of public service. The Foundation trained and helped her establish a nutrition garden to provide vegetables to the Anganwadi in order to supplement the nutrition provided at the centre for children, and for pregnant and lactating mothers. The nutrition garden was

successful but Mahananda soon realised that just one such garden would not suffice; she advised every household in the village to build a nutrition garden to ensure a constant supply of fresh produce. Kasarwadi now has nearly 35 nutrition gardens.

Anganwadis are mandated to provide supplementary nutrition. However, due to the escalation of prices this is often a challenge. Adding fresh vegetables produced and sourced locally could supplement the nutrition offered by Anganwadis. Realising this, Mahananda reached out to women in her village to advise them on the importance of a proper diet and the advantages of a nutrition garden for children as well. More than 33 lakh children are malnourished in India, with over half of them severely so.¹⁶¹ Mahananda's efforts have ensured that there are no malnourished children in Kasarwadi.

Another issue that caught Mahananda's attention was the shortage of safe drinking water due to faulty taps. Easy access to safe drinking water ensures better health, improved standards of living, and a reduced burden on women and children who may be forced to bring water from long distances for their households. In addition, it is also a matter of dignity—everyone should have access to safe drinking water. But piped water connections remain a challenge for many states in India, including Maharashtra.¹⁶² Under Mahananda's leadership and with Reliance Foundation's support, multiple households in Kasarwadi now have access to water at their homes, and the community has been sensitised to clean drains

¹⁶⁰ "Gangakhed Population Census 2011-2022", Gangakhed Municipal Council City Population Census 2011-22, <https://www.census2011.co.in/data/town/802757-gangakhed-maharashtra.html>

¹⁶¹ "Over 33 Lakh Children Are Malnourished in India, Maharashtra Has Highest Number: Report," Scroll, November 8, 2021, <https://scroll.in/latest/1010035/over-33-lakh-children-are-malnourished-in-india-maharashtra-has-highest-number-report>

¹⁶² Aarti Kelkar Khambete, "Clean Drinking Water: Still a Pipe Dream for Maharashtra?," India Water Portal, March 30, 2020, <https://www.indiawaterportal.org/articles/clean-drinking-water-still-pipe-dream-maharashtra>

regularly in order to ensure proper sanitisation.

The Covid-19 pandemic presented new challenges for Mahananda, who continued to help her village despite fearing the virus. Mahananda approached the Sarpanch (head of the village council or Panchayat), the gram sevak (person who serves the Gram Panchayat by supporting various development activities), and Reliance Foundation for assistance, and began to educate the community on proper health measures during the pandemic, including cleaning their hands clean, using masks and sanitisers, and following social distancing protocols. Even her Self-Help Group (SHG) meetings adhered to the masking and distancing guidelines.

Mahananda was also wary of the disease being brought in from outside the village. Whenever anybody entered the village, they were immediately tested at the government hospital and told to isolate for 14 days. Her insistence on following these measures influenced the rest of the village and helped contain the spread of the disease.

All work in the village was halted during the early stage of the pandemic. The lockdown resulted in widespread job losses in Maharashtra, including for agriculturalists.¹⁶³ But in Kasarwadi, Mahananda's nutrition gardens helped sustain families.

Mahananda has also actively worked to improve sanitation and defecation systems in the village. In 2015, 57 lakh

families in rural Maharashtra did not have toilets.¹⁶⁴ Although circumstances have certainly improved in the years since, it is not uncommon for rural households to not have latrines. Under her guidance, defecation pits were built and people in the village were informed about the many benefits of keeping the inside and outside of their houses clean.

Mahananda's dedication to the community and her work in the Anganwadi spurred people to select her as the president of the Anganwadi Workers' Association at the Gangakhed Block level in Parbhani. Although she was unsure of taking on the position, she consented when she was told that it was what her volunteers wanted.

Although Mahananda has encountered some opposition from her family over the years, and particularly during the pandemic, she has persisted because she is committed to public service and cannot let the community down. Her family now supports her decision and has even started helping her with her household tasks. "I take care of them, and they take care of me," she says with a smile.

Mahananda says she has learnt a lot through her work, particularly about herself. "I'm a leader of a small village. That's how people see me," she says. Although she has been commended for her work, she wants to do more for Gangakhed.

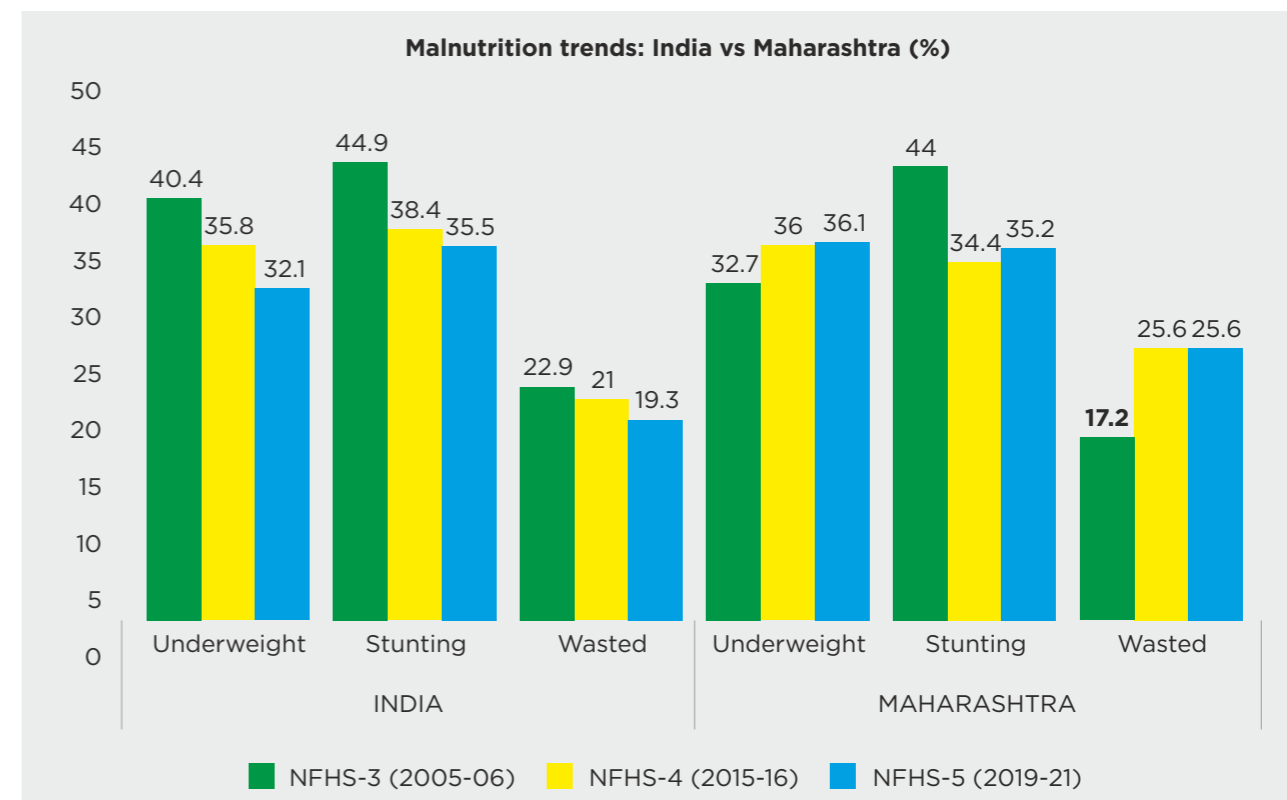
Noyontara Gupta

In Kasarwadi, Mahananda's nutrition gardens helped sustain families.

¹⁶² Aarti Kelkar Khambete, "Clean Drinking Water: Still a Pipe Dream for Maharashtra?," India Water Portal, March 30, 2020, <https://www.indiawaterportal.org/articles/clean-drinking-water-still-pipe-dream-maharashtra>

¹⁶³ "Lockdown Leads to Loss of Jobs, Maharashtra Govt Not Providing People Support: Devendra Fadnavis," The New Indian Express, April 12, 2021, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2021/apr/12/lockdown-leads-to-loss-of-jobs-maharashtra-govt-not-providing-people-support-devendra-fadnavis-2289150.html>

¹⁶⁴ Dhaval Kulkarni, "57L Families Don't Have Toilets in Rural Maharashtra: Sanitation Minister," DNA India, April 25, 2015, <https://www.dnaindia.com/mumbai/report-57l-families-don-t-have-toilets-in-rural-maharashtra-sanitation-minister-2069431>



Source: National Family Health Surveys 3, 4 and 5 (i.e. 2005-6, 2015-16 and 2019-21), <http://rchiips.org/nfhs/>

Key lessons

- **Women must be empowered to improve nutrition at the community level, address malnutrition, and help overcome gender inequities in the access and use of resources.**
- **Nutrition gardens play a key role in enhancing nutrition for families, improving dietary diversity and caloric availability, helping generate an income.**
- **Proactive and accountable women leaders at the community level bring sustainable change.**



BHAVNABEN PUROHIT

PAVING THE PATH TO INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT

BHAVNABEN PUROHIT, 33, WAS born in Gujarat's Rampura village to a family of farmers. In 2010, shortly after completing class ten, she got married and moved to Vijaynagar, a bustling, medium-sized village with a population of 1228 people in Patan district.¹⁶⁵

Married into a conservative household, Bhavnaben's first few months in Vijaynagar were spent chiefly at home catering to the needs of her family. But when she left the house on errands, or to shop at the markets that lined the state highway that ran by the village, she grew wistfully conscious of a wider world beyond. Less than two hours down the highway lay the famed 1000-year-old Rani Ki Vav or Queen's Stepwell—a magnificent monument about which she had heard so much. But she had never been to see it, and indeed, it seemed unlikely to her that she ever would.

Bhavnaben was restless and dissatisfied, and yearned for a sense of purpose. She decided to change her narrative by following in the footsteps of her mother, who had led a Self-Help Group (SHG). From SHG leader, Bhavnaben eventually became a board member of a farmer producer company (FPC), a hybrid between a private limited firm and a cooperative society.

Through her early interactions with other women in Vijaynagar, Bhavnaben was introduced to 'Mission Mangalam', an integrated poverty alleviation programme

that empowered rural women.¹⁶⁶ Launched by the Gujarat government in 2010, the programme focused on integrating SHGs into the investor value chain. With some help from the Gujarat Livelihood Promotion Company, the executive arm of Mission Mangalam, Bhavnaben established her own SHG in 2011 and embarked on her journey to empowerment.

SHGs are small voluntary groups of around 20 women from similar economic backgrounds who meet regularly to address common issues and support each other. They are also linked to local banks for low interest rate loans to facilitate livelihood activities. In 2011, with support from the World Bank, the government launched the National Rural Livelihoods Mission to alleviate poverty by mobilising poor rural women into SHGs and boosting the rural economy. Today, India has the largest number of women's SHGs globally;¹⁶⁷ as of January 2022, there are 7.3 million SHGs in the country with 80 million members.¹⁶⁸

However, Bhavnaben encountered some challenges as her SHG did not receive much support from the local women and soon became inactive. But this did not dampen her spirits. In 2018, she participated in the leadership and livelihood training programmes organised by Reliance Foundation in Vijaynagar. Bhavnaben did not let the lack of formal higher education deter her and proactively attended the sessions on business planning, women

¹⁶⁵ "Vijaynagar," *Indian Village Directory*, VillageInfo.in, <https://villageinfo.in/gujarat/patan/radhanpur/vijaynagar.html>.

¹⁶⁶ "Mission Mangalam," *Mission Mangalam Gujarat Livelihood Promotion Company Limited*, <http://glpc.co.in/showpage.aspx?contentid=136&lang=Gujarati>.

¹⁶⁷ Sunaina Kumar, "The National Rural Livelihoods Mission: Drawing Lessons from the First Ten Years," *ORF Issue Brief No. 478*, July 2021, Observer Research Foundation, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-national-rural-livelihoods-mission-drawing-lessons-from-the-first-ten-years/>.

¹⁶⁸ "SHGs Under NRLM," *Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India*, <https://nrlm.gov.in/shgOuterReports.do?methodName=showShgreport>.

leadership, management, bookkeeping, and government schemes. As a result, she was able to revive her SHG and several others in the neighbouring villages.

“I used to do nothing after my marriage. But after interacting with the Reliance Foundation team members, I realised that even I could contribute to something,” says Bhavnaben. Being able to revive her SHG boosted her confidence, and she managed to convince the local bank, which has previously been wary of lending to SHGs, to extend six loans of INR 1 lakh each to six SHGs under the Gujarat Mukhyamantri Mahila Utkarsh Yojana.¹⁶⁹ This, Bhavnaben says, is one of her biggest achievements.

It was amid the Covid-19 outbreak and resultant lockdown in 2020 that Bhavnaben faced her toughest challenge. Vijaynagar had no formal collection centre, but she was instrumental in establishing and maintaining linkages between farmers and the Banas FPC during the lockdown. She not only helped generate demand for the FPC products by connecting the farmers with the markets, but also ensured aggregation of agricultural produce and supply of inputs to the farmers through Banas FPC.

She helped Banas procure castor, cumin, and gram from the farmers, and helped the company sell fertilisers to the farmers. In turn, Banas provided her with the necessary equipment (weighing and stitching machines, stationery, gunny bags, furniture) and support to maintain stock. Moreover, Bhavnaben played a significant role in enlisting 50 women farmers as Banas shareholders.

Heartened by her enthusiasm, Banas invited Bhavnaben to their annual general meeting in April 2020 to acquaint her with the organisation’s work. Consequently, two months later, she was elected to the company’s board in acknowledgement of her contribution to the village’s development works and her dedication to the business during the pandemic. Additionally, Banas set up a

permanent FPC Center in Vijaynagar under her supervision. The FPC Center helped with the input supply to the farmers, aggregation of agricultural produce from farmers, and procurement and distribution of various products made by SHGs and its members.

Bhavnaben is a dedicated worker, on the job from 8 am to 6 pm daily. She runs a WhatsApp group for day-to-day communication and reporting on the FPC Center, including demand aggregation and coordination with the farmers. Under her guidance, a new village was also added to the Vijaynagar FPC Centre, which recorded business worth INR 25 lakh for 2020-21.

In recognition of her contribution to Vijaynagar’s economic development, in January 2020, Bhavnaben was also elected as the president of the Shri Ram Sakhi Mandal Self-Help Group Federation, a village-level association consisting of 10 SHGs. Under her leadership, several women in the village have undertaken social and economic activities, such as making handicrafts, face masks and liquid detergents.

Notably, Bhavnaben’s contribution to inclusive development extends even further. During the pandemic and under the aegis of Banas FPC, she was able to establish a rural mart in her tehsil, Radhanpur.¹⁷⁰ Sanctioned by the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development, or NABARD, rural marts provide market access and help in promoting entrepreneurship amongst SHGs. Bhavnaben provided a platform for all these women to promote their products through the mart. Her next goal, she says, is to get more SHGs involved in the rural mart.

Bhavnaben is an inspiration for the women of Vijaynagar. Not only has she encouraged them to pursue self-reliance, but she has also ensured that women-led programmes and activities flourish. “The people in my village always believed in me – that gave me more confidence to do good,” she says.

Apart from empowering women at the grassroots level, especially during the pandemic, Bhavnaben was also instrumental in raising awareness about Covid-19 vaccines in the community. She was one of the first people in Vijaynagar to get vaccinated and ensured that the women in her SHG received their doses as well.

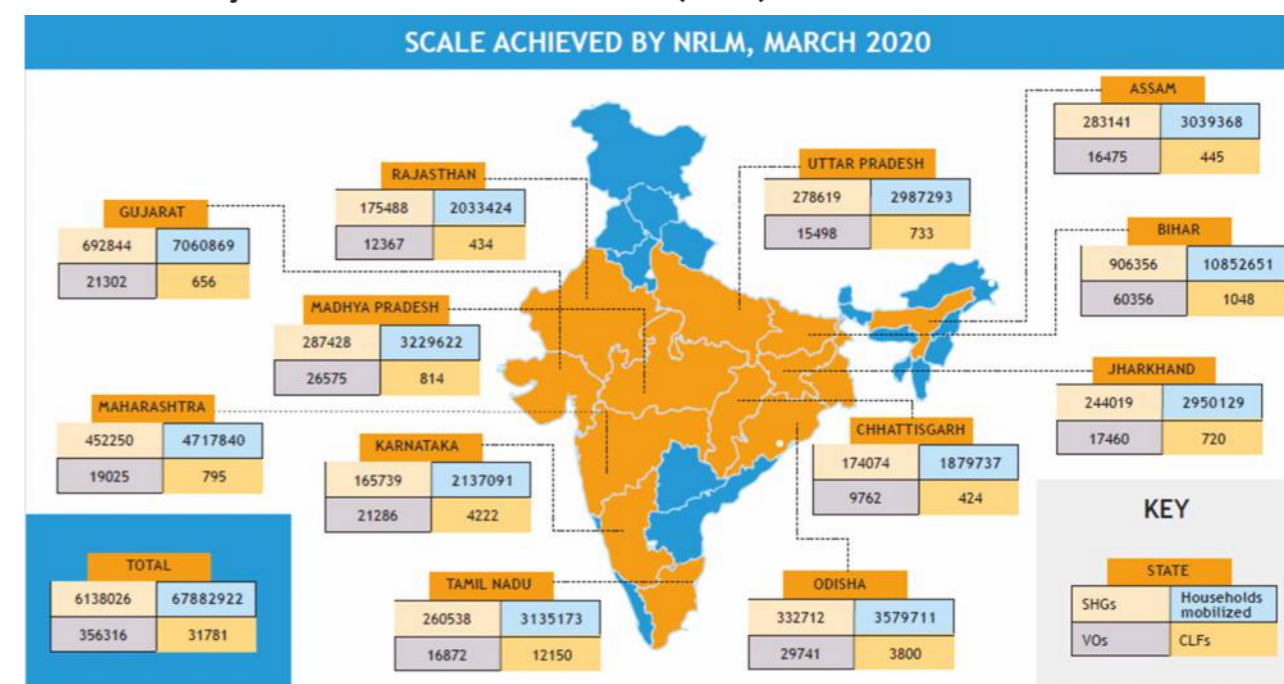
Bhavnaben attributes her success to her family, Banas FPC

for its faith in her, and Reliance Foundation for helping build her capabilities. Today, because of her efforts, the women in Vijaynagar have a voice, and their SHGs hold value. “Earlier, no one ever asked us if we had any ideas. We were never considered. But that has changed. Now, the village Sarpanch (head of the village council) asks me for suggestions on how to improve Vijaynagar,” she says proudly.

Anahita Khanna

During the lockdown, Bhavnaben was key in maintaining linkages between farmers and the Farmer Producer Company.

Scale achieved by National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM) as of March 2020



Note on Key: SHGs – Self-Help Groups; VOs – Village Organisations; CLFs – Cluster Level Forums
Source: Shouvik Mitra et al, Institution Building and Capacity Building in NRLM, World Bank, 2020, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/34721>

Key lessons

- With the pandemic disrupting every part of the agricultural supply chain, farmer producer companies (FPCs) could act as a valuable mechanism for connecting farmers, women in agriculture and Self-Help Groups (SHGs) to markets, and shielding them from the loss of livelihoods.
- The establishment of rural marts enable SHGs and women from the community to find markets for their products and generate a relatively steady income stream.

169 Reena Sharma, “Mukhyamantri Mahila Utkarsh Yojana: Apply Online, Registration,” PM Modi Yojana, <https://pmmodiyojana.in/mukhyamantri-mahila-utkarsh-yojana/>.

170 “Off Farm Development Department,” National Bank For Agriculture And Rural Development, <https://www.nabard.org/about-departments.aspx?id=5&cid=478>.



INDIRABEN NAGAR

WHEN 'SISTERS' STEP UP FOR CHANGE

INDIRABEN NAGAR REMEMBERS having a wonderful childhood. “My father, an office worker, wanted his daughter to make a difference,” she recalls fondly. As a child, she was an avid reader, devouring fiction and non-fiction alike. She maintained a diary – a practice she still keeps to this day. “Whenever something notable happens in my life, I pen it down.”

Born in Koyali village, Vadodra, Gujarat, she got married soon after completing class twelfth, and moved in with her in-laws in north Gujarat. Her father had made sure to tell her in-laws that Indiraben wanted to continue with her education; they gave her their unconditional support. It was in college that she became interested in the National Service Scheme (NSS), a programme launched in 1969 that aims to enrich the lives of students through community service. Indiraben began to harbour ambitions of becoming a community leader.

When Indiraben’s father-in-law passed away, she moved to Karodiya with her husband and mother-in-law. Karodiya is a small village in the interior of Vadodra with a population of about 10,000.¹⁷¹ A dusty bus journey of an hour and a half separates the village from the River Vishwamitri, named after an Indian saint, on whose banks the district of Vadodra is situated. Indiraben’s first impression of her new home, was overwhelmingly one of dryness, dust, languor, and oppressive heat.

As she settled into the community, she gradually made “sisters”—fellow women who had potential but were constrained. “Watching them spend their days idly and without an occupation, I felt the need to step in.”

She initiated a Self-Help Group (SHG) with a few women in her village.¹⁷² At the time, Reliance Foundation was conducting skills training programmes in their community and, in 2014, Indiraben’s SHG began to participate in these skill-building initiatives. The women of the community learned various micro-entrepreneurial skills like hairstyling and sewing. After they had been trained, however, the problem remained of where they would use those skills to earn some income.

The answer came in the form of Vajpayee Yojana, a scheme launched by the state government in 2020 to provide financial assistance to cottage industry workers in both urban and rural areas.¹⁷³ Reliance Foundation provided administrative support to Indiraben, enabling her to apply for subsidised government loans, through which she provided sewing machines to 20 women. The women were able to take up jobs such as embroidery, purse-making and the production of small, eco-friendly decorative items that they could do from their own homes. The early days were difficult and incomes were slow to trickle in, but the women were involved in productive tasks.

¹⁷¹ “Karodiya – Town”, Wiki Village, <https://www.wikivillage.in/town/gujarat/vadodara/vadodara/karodiya>

¹⁷² A Self-Help Group (SHG) is an affinity-based group of 10–20 people, usually women from similar social and economic backgrounds, who collect money from those who can contribute and give the funds to members in need. Members may also save contributions and begin lending funds back to the SHG’s members themselves or to others in a village for a particular purpose. Many SHGs are linked with banks and can deliver micro-credit.

¹⁷³ “Shri Vajpayee Bankable Yojana - IMD-Gujarat.gov.in”, Industries and Mines Department. Government of Gujarat, <http://www.imd-gujarat.gov.in/shri-vajpayee-bankable-yojana>

Their first big request came from Reliance Foundation – an order of 500 paper bags to be used to pack gifts for Diwali. Indiraben and her SHG continued to make and sell paper and cloth bags. By the time her group had sold 10,000 bags, she knew she was beginning to make a difference.

In March 2020, as the Covid-19 pandemic spread across the country, the entire nation watched the prime minister announce that India would go into lockdown. The phrase 'Do gaj ki doori, mask hai zaroori!' rang across the country. There was a shortage in the supply of masks, which had been declared as essential to the fight against the pandemic. Indiraben recognised the opportunity for her group to use their training in sewing to make cloth masks. It was, however, easier said than done, given the nationwide lockdown that had been implemented.

But Indiraben was audacious, and she committed herself to helping the community. She encouraged her group to work from home, recommending video tutorials that they could watch to make the masks with whatever cloth that was available. Making some samples herself, she reached out to Reliance Foundation in the middle of the night and demonstrated her idea to them. India went into lockdown on 22nd March; by the 28th, she received the group's first order of 10,000 masks. She arranged for vehicles and curfew passes for her group, and called up local shopkeepers to whom she had previously distributed paper and cloth bags. They opened their stores so Indiraben could procure supplies.

Within five days, the group had completed their order of 10,000 masks. These masks, purchased by the Foundation, gave the women an initial source of income, and were then distributed in and around Karodiya for free. The local media gave them attention, and as word spread, neighbouring villages were inspired by the efforts of

Indiraben and her group. Orders came from faraway places. "We even couriered 7,000 masks to Kachch, which is over 500 kilometres away." By December 2021, her group had made over 300,000 masks.

For the women of Karodiya, Indiraben has been a beacon of hope. Over 122 million people across India lost their jobs in April 2020.¹⁷⁴ While Gujarat suffered relatively low unemployment rates, it felt the impact, nonetheless.¹⁷⁵ The migrant workers of Vadodara, and casual labourers and farmers in villages, were all acutely affected by the pandemic and the consequent lockdown. Many single-income households were rendered helpless, with no source of income and many mouths to feed.

The efforts of Indiraben's group during the pandemic bore fruit – women who were earlier earning only about 1,000 rupees per month, now saw a significant increase in their incomes. For the first time ever, they could support their households with their own earnings. Indiraben saw her sisters becoming more independent: "These housewives began to believe in their own abilities."

No leader, Indiraben believes, can function without teamwork and she is "eternally grateful" to her group. Indiraben and her group continue with their work, making a variety of products – bags, masks, and jewellery—and selling their crafts at exhibitions. Community and sisterhood are important to her. "The kind of support I've received has brought me this far." A strong support system, built through mutual respect and affection, has shaped her into the person that she is. Her ambition drives her; her family sustains her.

Indiraben has a quiet confidence to her: "Dealing with Covid-19 has made me fearless." The pandemic brought numerous tribulations, and she and her group have emerged hardened warriors. "No matter what may come, we're up for it." She is full of dreams of what her community can do next—to continue being part of

Gujarat's flourishing cottage industry that spans various sectors.¹⁷⁶ As one of India's leading states in textile and handicrafts production, Indiraben's home state will have scope for more from her SHG.

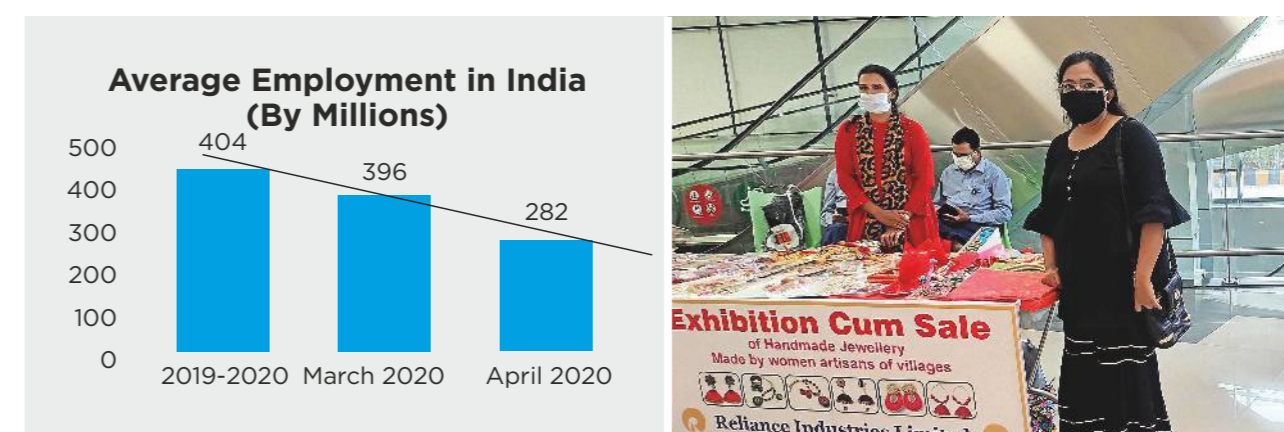
These days, Indiraben's group is receiving training from professors and students of Vadodara's Maharaja Sayajirao University on how to build an online presence, market their products, and expand their reach. This will do their group well, as 49 percent of women in Gujarat have a mobile phone that they use themselves.¹⁷⁷ Many in Indiraben's group are learning how to use their devices to expand their

enterprise using social-media platforms. The aim is for the group to become more self-reliant.

There are lessons to learn from Indiraben. The ability to mobilise a small group of rural women, and to seize an opportunity to make a crucial contribution across a large geographical area could serve as an example for aspiring leaders and entrepreneurs alike. Indiraben is also a model for believing in looking ahead. There is no doubt that her unwavering commitment to public service will have an impact on women and communities far beyond her village of Karodiya.

Noyontara Gupta

For Indiraben, no leader can function without teamwork. A strong support system, built through mutual respect and affection, has shaped her into the person that she is.



Source: "An estimated 12.2 crore Indians lost their jobs during the coronavirus lockdown in April: CMIE", The Hindu, May 07, 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/data/data-over-12-crore-indians-lost-their-jobs-during-the-coronavirus-lockdown-in-april/article61660110.ece>

Key lessons

- **Women must be encouraged to be financially independent – not just for their own benefit, but also because the loss of a partner's employment should not render a household helpless. Familial support and the sharing of household responsibilities are essential.**
- **As the use of digital tools becomes ubiquitous, digital literacy and connectivity must be strengthened across regions, communities and genders. Women operating home-based enterprises could leverage technology to build market linkages.**

¹⁷⁴ The Hindu Data Team, "Data: An Estimated 12.2 Crore Indians Lost Their Jobs during the Coronavirus Lockdown in April: CMIE", The Hindu, May 7, 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/data/data-over-12-crore-indians-lost-their-jobs-during-the-coronavirus-lockdown-in-april/article31520715.ece>

¹⁷⁵ Suraj Mondal, "Pandemic effect on livelihood in Gujarat", Dhan Foundation, <https://dhan.org/Covid19/Pandemic-Effect-on-livelihood-in-Gujarat.pdf>

¹⁷⁶ "Cottage Industry - Sector Overview", Mission Mangalam, Gujarat Livelihood Promotion Company Limited, <http://glpc.co.in/showpage.aspx?contentid=24>

¹⁷⁷ Ambika Pandit, "Sharp Rise in Bank Accounts Operated by Women", Times of India, December 14, 2020, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/sharp-rise-in-bank-accounts-operated-by-women/articleshow/79712517.cms>



And then there was hope

When many hues viral variants clawed
She stood up, a shield.
When pangs of emptiness gnawed
She nourished, she healed.

When despairing cobwebs hung pale,
She untangled well-being, care.
She led, exuding positive energy,
She responded like a rock, right there.

As the raging subsided to a lulled normal,
Some saw her, some did not.
Some remembered, some would not.
A face, many faces, one in a million, a million like her.
It mattered not.

There she had been. There she still was. There she would be.
Hope.

Jayashree B

A Note On Our Methodology

When we started this project in October 2021, our objective was clear: to cover, as far as possible, the geographical span of the country, and to bring out the stories of these women in their own voices. These 25 stories take the reader from the north of the subcontinent to the south, from west to east, and from the northeast to central India.

The Covid-19 pandemic, however, made it impossible to travel to meet them in person. Technology came to our rescue. Over the course of six weeks in 2021, we reached out to the first responders through extensive video interviews, and we are grateful to them for trusting us with their stories.

In a few cases, such as that of Sharada Majhi, a community worker in Odisha whose village has no internet connectivity, the interview was conducted over the phone. We also used telephonic interviews to get to know Mausam Kumari from Bihar's Siwan district, and Jagat Janani Biswas from Nadia in West Bengal.

Each interview was supplemented with secondary data gathered from government sources, academic studies, and reporting in the media.

Acknowledgements

At the very outset, a special word of thanks to the twenty-five women who shared their stories for this volume. Not only is *The First Responders* about them, it is a tribute to them and the many women across India who likewise stepped forward to help their communities through the pandemic.

This book would not have been possible without the generous support of several partner organisations: ANANDI, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Centre for Catalyzing Change, International Centre for Research on Women, Naandi Foundation, North East Network, PRADAN, Smile Foundation and UNICEF.

The team at Reliance Foundation, guided by Jagannatha Kumar and B Srinivasan, spearheaded this initiative to bring to the fore the untold stories of these inspiring women. Vanita Sharma and Jayashree B were the book's editors; Antara Sengupta, Carla Gomez-Acebo Botin, Deepa Tripathi and Ronisha Bhattacharyya supported its development; Neelabh Banerjee created the illustrations; and Sanjay Masand, Bonani Gupta Karmakar & team led its design and production.

The team at Observer Research Foundation, led by Samir Saran and Tanoubi Ngangom, helped bring *The First Responders* to life. Anirban Sarma, Shoba Suri and Sunaina Kumar were co-editors of the book, and led research and content development; Anahita Khanna, Noyontara Gupta, Pratinashree Basu, Shruti Jain, Sitara Srinivas and Swati Prabhu contributed chapters.



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