

# Sustainable Development: The Role of Women's Collectives

SANTOSH KUMAR

*Recognizing the strength of collectives, PRADAN works with SHG members to encourage women to step out of their homes and work for a shared and common purpose of identifying and resolving village issues, thereby leading to development as also to an increase in individual confidence and standing in their villages*

One day, during a Cluster meeting, I heard a statement which grabbed my attention, as it did of the other members of the SHG. *"Hum samooch khaali apan khatir ta nahi banaye hain, baki gaon ke manayi ke bachcha bhi ta hamare bachcha jaisan hau* (We have not formed this group just for ourselves. The other children of the village are like our children too)." This statement was made by Neeta Singh, an SHG member, who had come to seek help from the group.

During the meeting, the women discussed the status of the *anganwadi* of Phuljhar village. This small village is a part of the Bakhul *panchayat*, in Deosar block, Singrauli district, Madhya Pradesh. There were allegations about the *anganwadi* worker that the food that the children were getting was not proper—in quantity as well as quality—and also that the *anganwadi* was open only once a week on Tuesdays instead of on all the prescribed days.

Another issue the SHG faced was that the member, who prepared the food, was from their own group. It was difficult for them to go against their own member. They, therefore, decided that before taking any action against her, they would try to make her understand the difficulties that her actions were causing. And if she didn't agree, they would then lodge a complaint with the higher authorities.

The members of the Vidya Mahila Mandal (of which the *anganwadi* worker was a member) and the Saraswati Mahila Mandal were entrusted with the task of talking to her. And it was decided that in the subsequent Cluster meeting (monthly meeting), they would take the decision about whether they needed to file a complaint against her.

In the next Cluster meeting, the members of the Vidya and Saraswati Mahila Mandals shared that the *anganwadi didi* had not agreed to open the *anganwadi* daily, to serve food to the children, and she was not afraid of any steps taken against her by the other members. The members of the SHG then decided that they should go to the *Jan Sunwayi* of the Collector. They withdrew the money for the fare for three women, who volunteered to go to the Collector's Office.

This was first time that these three women (Sonmati Singh, Neeta Singh and Janak Kumari Singh) had visited any government office. They gathered courage and entered the building and began walking without knowing where they had to go. None of them was literate enough to read the signboards outside the offices, which had the name of the official and their designation. However, they met with the Collector and gave him the complaint against the *anganwadi didi*.

They came back confident and proudly announced that they could now go to any office and talk about anything. Bubbling with enthusiasm, they shared with the group that the Collector (Shashank Mishra) had promised them that he would forward their application to the concerned department and that their complaint would be addressed within a few days.

However, by the next monthly meeting, there had been no progress. The members of the Vidya Mahila Mandal visited the *anganwadi* twice during the month and found it closed both times. In the Cluster meeting, the members decided to go to the Collector's office once again with their grievance. This time, two members (Neeta Singh and Munni Singh) volunteered to go.

They met the Collector and informed him that there had been no progress on their complaint. The Collector was furious at his officials and assured the women that he would look into the matter and that they would not have to come to his office again. And he kept his promise. The *anganwadi* worker was removed, even though, that was not what the group had asked for. They had just wanted change in the current status and smooth functioning of the *anganwadi*.

Although this problem in the *anganwadi* had been there since its inception, no one had looked into it. The women's initiative brought about the change.

In an incident, SHG members in Bakhul village identified a problem, discussed it and made the action plan for it. One day, Janak Kumari Singh, a member of the Sankarji Mahila Mandal was going for a Cluster meeting. Because she was early, she decided to go to see the (MDM) being served in the school nearby. She found that the rice had many stones in it. She angrily asked, "*Etek kankad churaibe bachcha sab ke khana me* (So many stones in the children's food)?"

The helper in-charge of cooking the food responded that she could not help it because this was the rice they procured from the PDS. The PDS shopkeeper was the son of the President of the MDM committee; therefore, they had to use rice from his shop for cooking the MDM. The helper also explained that she gets the rice in the morning and did not have enough time to pick all the stones because she needed to have lunch ready as per the timings of the school.

By that time, other members of the Cluster had gathered in the *panchayat* hall. The Cluster

meeting started with a prayer. Everybody was silent after that. Janak Kumari placed a poly bag full of stones and another poly bag containing rice to show the members the quality of rice being served to children in the school. The women started a discussion on what could be done to deal with the problem. A member suggested that they should talk to the helper. But the member who had raised the problem said that the helper could not be blamed for this because the rice was given to her in morning and she did not have enough time to clean it.

The members then decided to talk to the President of the MDM. They also realized that they would have to deal with the PDS shopkeeper because he was supplying the rice. They went to meet the President of the MDM committee but she said she was not responsible for the MDM. The women met the PDS shopkeeper and discussed the issue with him. At first he said he could not do anything about it. When the SHG members said they would raise the issue in the *Jan Sunwayi* and the *gram samwaad*, he agreed to supply rice on time so that it could be cleaned properly.

Earlier these very women, who found it difficult to talk to strangers, were now getting together, discussing and dealing with village-level issues.

In a Cluster meeting in Gajrabahra village, the women decided that they should have access to and information about government programmes. Many members realized they were not aware of their entitlements in programmes rolled out by the government periodically. They wanted to visit village-level institutions such as the *gram sabha*, PDS shop, *anganwadi*, Primary Health Centre (PHC) and school, to check their functioning. The decision came after the discussion among themselves that they could seek to improve

the conditions in their villages only through active participation in the village development activity and for that they had to ensure that the village institutions were functioning well.

According to Cluster members, representation in the *gram sabha* and the *gram samwaad* could lead to women's development. This was discussed in the Cluster meeting because of the problems that they faced on a daily basis. For example, because the PDS shop was not working properly, the people would not get their ration in the correct quantities; similarly, the *anganwadi*, which was meant to function daily, was not open every day.

They decided to visit these places regularly. Phulkunwar Singh, an SHG member, who volunteered to visit the Health Centre and the *anganwadi*, shared that the *anganwadi* worker and the ASHA workers said that the women of the village do not come to PHC nor do they send their children to the *anganwadi*, which is why the *anganwadi* remained closed on some days. Phulkunwar *didid* brought up the issue in the Cluster meeting. She added that the government provided them with many services but the villagers did not access them or seek them out and that is why those services were dwindling. She reminded them that it was their right to avail of those services.

A member from another SHG, Bitti Singh, who had visited the school, shared that the teachers were complaining about the absence of students. They were very happy that the women of the village were coming to the school and asking questions about the quality of education. Bitti *didid* suggested that everyone send their girls and boys to the school. One member, Bhagwaniya Sahu, of Lakshmi Mahila Mandal of Gajrabahra village said, "*Hum punche ta na padh paini par apan beta, beti ke padha sakat hai* (We did not get to study but we can make sure that our sons and daughters are educated)."

The women agreed that they needed to talk to other members of the community about sending their children to school; once the school was fully functional, they could ask the teachers about the quality of the education.

In another village, Jaththa Tola, the women of the collective decided that they should work to conserve the little forest area that was left. Due to deforestation, there was erosion of soil from the nearby mountain which adversely affected the farms in the lower catchment. Chhoti Yadav spoke about the need to protect forests; otherwise the coming generations would face problems. It would affect their livelihoods from agriculture and forests, and they would also have less rain. They would even not have any *datoon* (toothbrush). She was also worried about how they defecate if there were no forests.

The members deliberated on how to practice conservation. They realized that only the villagers could check deforestation. The members divided the responsibilities among the women of the collective. They kept vigil and if they found anyone cutting trees, they would persuade them to stop. They have succeeded to some extent. Their main focus, so far, has been to save the current forest and not on planting more trees.

Keeping in mind the health of the soil and of the people, they discussed about using organic methods for agriculture. The SHG members have started making organic fertilizers, insecticides and fungicides. These initiatives have spread to other villages also. Villagers, who could not afford chemical fertilizers and medicine, have access now to organic fertilizers and medicines. Even those who can afford costly chemicals are shifting to organic methods after understanding the adverse effects of the chemicals on health.

Village-level institutions are now beginning to function better because they are under the scrutiny of the women's collective. Members are now aware of the issues that affect life in their village and have information related to their rights. A sense of volunteerism has developed among members, following the discussions on platforms such as the Cluster and the SHG. They understand that their personal issues are not really personal but affect the whole village, and that they need to come forward, take ownership and work together to better their lives.

Members have also been given training with continuous follow-ups, and discussions are held in the meetings. They are becoming familiar with government programmes and are aware of their entitlements. They have realized that by uniting, they can bring about change in the village. Training programmes in different areas such as the *gram sabha*, health, Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), MDM, PDS and Right to Food have contributed to their awareness. They work now not only for themselves but for other residents of the village also.

In 2016-17, PRADAN is planning more training programmes, considering the beneficial results of the earlier ones. The objective of the training modules is to create awareness about the rights of the people and their duties to bring about change at the grass-roots level.

Sustainable development is defined as "development that meets the needs of the present, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." (definition from "Our Common Future", also known as the Brundtland Report). Women's collectives are working towards this. They discuss the kind of development in which they can avail of current services; and if they are not getting these, demanding that

they do is their right. They are also thinking and talking about resources, forests, health of the people and education, which are all very crucial subjects for the future development of villages.

Evidently, these stories reveal that women's collectives are determined to participate in the sustainable development of the villages. They are talking about meeting their present needs, without compromising the needs of the future generations. This approach is clearly visible from their work in various fronts such as organic agriculture, education, forest conservation and health.

### **Strengths of the Women's Collectives**

The foremost thing that the women recognize in their meetings is that the collective has helped them develop the habit of thrift. Some see it as freedom from local moneylenders because they no longer have to be in debt or be obliged to any moneylender. They have a share in the return of interest as well. They now have easy and timely access to loans. Members also say that earlier they had to ask their husbands for money to buy every little thing they needed; now they have easy access to money. They meet according to the timings they set for themselves, depending on what suits all of them. The collective gives them the platform to get in touch with other community members, to discuss village problems and act upon them. Because they are the part of a collective, they think their voice is heard in the public sphere. And because members are many, they have access to information from different sources and ideas generated by them. They have access to varied perspectives, ideas and information to bring about change in their lives.

*Women's collectives are determined to participate in the sustainable development of the villages. They are talking about meeting their present needs, without compromising the needs of the future generations. This approach is clearly visible from their work in various fronts such as organic agriculture, education, forest conservation and health*

As a community, they follow improved livelihood practices and are more planned and prepared. Their risk-taking capacity has increased, resulting in active experimentation of new techniques and practices.

There is a noticeable change in the personality of the members because of their interactions with many stakeholders. They go to different forums, participate in training on different themes and meet concerned members of institutions.

There has also been a shift in the position of women in the family owing to the increase in their knowledge related to livelihoods and government programmes. Women get recognition for their contribution to village development work although sometimes it is discouraged by family members because of the fear of the risks involved. In some families, women play a part in village-level work even though they do not get the consent of their *maalik* (master, in this case the husband). Villagers have started noticing the development work done by the women although some encourage it and others do not.

### **Challenges and Initiatives of PRADAN Professionals**

Many challenges await women's collectives and PRADAN professionals working with them. Issues that arise are complex, not just black and white issues, and their solutions are never simple. The literacy rate among the women of Singrauli district is approximately 36 per cent. This almost equals the lowest 'female-literate' districts of the country. Most of the women have no education and are hesitant about participating in village-level meetings or

about going somewhere. Many of these women think that they have very little to contribute.

Some women are reluctant to be part of collectives because they think it requires some basic education. PRADAN professionals have a tough time convincing them that collectivization is the only way to understand and resolve their problems, be it economic, social, political or environmental. Continuous discussions, however, on these topics in different platforms such as SHGs, village-level Clusters and, most important, during training programmes, have brought about a change in the thought processes of the community. Many community members have evolved as leaders. Today, a pool of dedicated leaders can be seen and their dedication is contagious.

There are many challenges in forming collectives. In the villagers' prior experience, many have come and looted money from them. So, it is hard to win their trust. Another challenge is the lack of banks and, therefore, a lack of bank literacy among villagers. Villagers often quote their experiences of having debts with banks whenever they become linked with them. Some people also believe that if they were to take a loan from banks, and they are unable to pay it back on time, their lands will be seized.

There are stereotypes about government programmes as well: "If MGNREGA work is done on our land, the government may seize our land in the future." Through continuous training and discussion, however, things are becoming clear and the villagers are moving ahead.

*PRADAN professionals have a tough time convincing them that collectivization is the only way to understand and resolve their problems, be it economic, social, political or environmental. Continuous discussions, however, on these topics in different platforms such as SHGs, village-level Clusters and, most important, during training programmes, have brought about a change in the thought processes of the community*

The other challenge is the villagers' engagement with various government officials. The villagers do not recognize or accept that their rights are their entitlement. They see themselves merely and only as receivers. But with increasing awareness, the villagers, led by the women, have started extending themselves and are availing of and sometimes even demanding their rights. However, some members are still stuck and do not participate in the activities of the collective due to family pressure or because of the prior experiences with the officials.

In the existing social structure, women are not supposed to speak up in the family or in community matters. The decisions are mostly taken by men. So, when PRADAN professionals work with the women with the objective of bringing change in the family and the community, it is resisted and discouraged by the men.

The final decision of inclusion in the collective is mostly taken by the men of the family. It becomes important, therefore, to make men understand the importance of women participating in village affairs. This has been often shared by SHG members, who have gone to other villages voluntarily, to form new SHGs.

Most men care only about the monetary benefits coming from the formation of these collectives. It takes time and effort to engage them in any discussions on building a perspective of village development through the collectives. This appeals to only some of them. It, therefore, becomes hard to bring the



whole village into the SHG fold. It takes patience and dedication to hear their problems and facilitate them in the search for solutions.

PRADAN works with the objective that many community problems can be solved when the community comes together, identifies the problem, shares the common vision and works to find a solution. The important first step, therefore, is to bring the community together.

Some of the villagers don't want to be in collectives because they think meetings take up a lot of time. If they were to utilize this time in other livelihood activities, it would be more beneficial for them. Some of them think that to be a part of the collective would mean that they have to go out of the village for training; that is restricted by the elders of the family. It is forbidden in most homes to leave the village for anything except household chores and health problems.

Important, therefore, it is to seed the idea in the community that personal problems of livelihood are connected with social and political problems. That the dysfunction of village level institutions can be effectively addressed by the collective must be impressed upon them.

It is not that the collective always succeeds or gets positive responses. Sometimes, the members have to bear abuses and threats. In Kasaiya village, when they protested against the PDS shopkeeper because he was giving less grain than their entitlement, he didn't listen. He told the villagers to do whatever they wanted. The women protested in front of the *sarpanch* but nothing happened.

*Important, therefore, it is to seed the idea in the community that personal problems of livelihood are connected with social and political problems. That the dysfunction of village-level institutions can be effectively addressed by the collective must be impressed upon them*

Sometimes, people have to stand up to their neighbours, who may be involved in malpractices. This is a very tough decision to take because it creates a lot of tension and could result in the souring of relationships. Villagers may then just let the situation be.

## Conclusion

Women of the collectives play a very crucial role in village development activities by participating in village-level institutions and strengthening them by creating more collectives, by increasing their outreach and making others feel their presence. Women are benefitting because it gives them confidence and a different perspective about village development. They raise new issues that need to be discussed. They talk about the changes in people's lives and are also concerned about the sustainable use of resources and their conservation. After the formation of the collectives, the women are more informed about government programmes/policies and their own rights and entitlements. Their knowledge of livelihood activities has also improved as they participate in related trainings and workshops.

Groups existed earlier as well, but their focus was mostly on livelihoods, savings and credit. Now, the focus has shifted to rights and entitlements. The PRADAN team recognized that every village has problems and the villagers work on them individually. A need was, therefore, felt to build the vision in the community about what kind of works could be done through collectives. For this, many visioning exercises were conducted at the village level. The community also felt the need for a federated body to deal with the larger problems.

Being a part of the collective has also improved the status of women in their families. They now have a say in the decision-making processes in their families; however, it is still a long way for this to become widespread. Women, who are a part of collectives, recognize the changes in their behaviour and confidence levels. They say that they have developed certain skills of communication because they get more chances now to communicate with other people, especially outsiders. They get to know more about the conditions of their neighbours, the villagers and those in other villages. The scope for peer-learning has increased. A feeling of solidarity has developed within the village. They know that they are strong enough to challenge and seek information from institutions, which are not working properly.

This is, however, not the case in all the families in the village because there are many

challenges. It also cannot be said that all women, who are part of women's collectives are doing well and are part of the change in the village because there are still challenges in coming out of their homes and becoming a part of any training or visioning exercises for the community. Some of the women limit themselves to group meetings, and savings and credit activities.

In the coming years, the focus of the team will be on building the leadership of those SHG members, who participate less in the public forums. This will help increase the leadership pool; these leaders will then be equipped with information that may prove useful in finding a solution for a problem identified by the community. The increased leadership pool will also be beneficial in increasing the strength of the community by adding other members from areas where such change has not taken place.