

Gender Training in Samnapur: Moving beyond Markets, Changing Mindsets

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Realizing that economic upliftment does not necessarily bring about equality in society and that true equality could come about only when patriarchy and subordination of women are questioned and countered, PRADAN is working to create awareness through its Gender Approach, to bring about a change in the mindsets of the people regarding gender roles

The construction of the female identity in the development sector has undergone a change over the course of time. It has been a major challenge for professionals, policy-makers as well as activists, to incorporate gender within the fold of development. In a strongly patriarchal society, where subordination of women is the norm, it is often tough to work for the upliftment of women or bring about a change in the mindsets of the people regarding gender roles.

The solutions offered for the upliftment of women are an extension of the capitalist mindset and in line with the modernization theory that financial productivity and independence liberates women. Whereas this can be partially true in the short term, the correlation is not sustainable in the long run. If the sole reason for a woman being treated equally in society is her income-generating ability, it would create a dependency. Such conditional change in women's status is return-based rather than ideological, and falls rather short on the inter-sectionality of its coverage.

At a time when economic productivity acts as a commonly accepted measure of development, the Gender Approach taken by PRADAN's team in Samnapur, sets an example of sustainable and equitable development for women. This sustainability is derived from the efforts being made to change the patriarchal, exploitative set-up by creating agency, ownership and a sense of entitlement among women.

Samnapur is located in Madhya Pradesh's Dindori district, mainly populated by indigenous tribals, with the Gonds as the major tribal group. Tribes such as Baiga, Kol, Agariya, Pradhans along with Hindus, Muslims, and Other Backward Classes make up the rest of the population. The terrain of the area is irregular with undulating topography, low water retention and a depleted water table, leading to rain-fed agriculture and erratic incomes.

Madhya Pradesh ranks low among Indian states, in terms of determinants of gender equality, as well as other development indicators. As per the Gender Development Index¹ (GDI), calculated in 2006, Madhya Pradesh ranked 33rd of 35 states and union territories in India. On the Gender Empowerment Measure, it ranks slightly better at 21, partly due to the high participation of women in the legislature. Almost 40 per cent of the women are illiterate. The Gender Literacy Gap for Madhya Pradesh was 31, only behind Haryana, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh.²

In conversations with the local women of the area, domestic violence emerged as a common problem. The women are still wary of talking about it, even amongst themselves; their mobility is largely restricted, with most women not being allowed to step out of their homes.

Given such a setting, some voices that are emerging from within the community, after the gender training, are heartening. The Gender Approach that the Samnapur team is taking, when conducting interventions, has brought about an openness in the thinking of

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those involved. There continue to be hurdles with some women withdrawing into their shells due to familial and social coercion; however, all in all, the incorporation of this gender-based perspective in PRADAN's efforts has deepened its impact

and outreach.

SHIFT TO THE GENDER APPROACH

Gender training first took place in Samnapur (in the Mahakaushal Cluster of Madhya Pradesh) in 2011 through the UN Women's Gender Equality Program. The training was conducted by PRADAN, with support from Jagori, to nine teams in and around the area (including the Samnapur team). Whereas PRADAN's core area of work had earlier included women and their empowerment, the programmes were more about reduction of poverty, providing livelihoods, and other income-generating and savings activities. Although the discussion on gender did take place among practitioners and was even forwarded through gender-sensitization training for the villagers, the trainings mainly focussed on inequality and were mostly in order to allow for easier mingling and acceptance of the Federation and its activities. Whereas the programmes did create some benefits for women, they remained tools to meet targets set out for the creation and running of the Self-Help Groups (SHGs).

Earlier, the overall approach was to help increase the income of the households, and the SHGs were a tool to help women finance their needs. The focus has now shifted from increase in family income to whether the woman gets

¹UNDP for Ministry of Women and Child Development, GOI (2006)

²Gender Development Indicators: Issues, debates, and ranking of districts, Preet Rustagi, Center For Women's Development Studies

to have any spending power. In fact, once the women were included in the scope of income-generating activities, the men started using them merely as a resource to earn income and not as shareholders in the household income.

Since the training by PRADAN and Jagori, there is awareness among women of the socially constructed, systemic subordination of women. The local women and practitioners now understand the hierarchal power relations that create injustices for women; they have now begun challenging the norms. This awareness has created a shift in the approach that PRADAN takes when working with these women and has brought changes to how women approach their problems.

The process of bringing about this change in approach involved work on many aspects—trainings, broadening of ideologies (of both the practitioners and the *didis*), understanding the connection between social justice and gender justice, and the coming together of Federations. PRADAN, along with Delhi-based NGO Jagori, designed modules and tools to promote awareness of gender inequality and for training Community Resource Persons (CRPs). Chosen by the members of the Federation and the practitioners, CRPs were to be the contact point for the women and the practitioners, and were to be responsible for conducting trainings and planning in the community. CRPs were also trained in basic counselling and facilitation so that they could help women facing serious problems.

The gender trainings were regular and repetitive so as to have the maximum impact, and were conducted by the CRP, in the presence

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of practitioners from PRADAN. These sessions were open to all and specifically included the women involved with the SHGs and the Federation. The women were able to relate more to and identify with the training conducted by the CRP, rather than professionals. Whereas the women from the Federation are often receptive to training given by professionals, when people external from the community address them, the impact is relatively more distant

and lecture-like. CRPs, thus, also act as close confidantes and guides to women, who are often hesitant to speak, especially about matters as personal as gender.

The modules designed by Jagori laid a strong foundation for the training and created a base for women to grasp the nature of the issue. The trainings included a variety of games, ice-breakers and role-play exercises that showed the women, the visible and invisible ways that gender manages to create deprivation for the girl child and women. For example, in the game of Kamal-Kamli, the women track the progress and opportunities for two children born at the same time (one boy and the other girl) and talk about the various changes that occur at definite time intervals in the lives of these children. Two women, representing the boy and the girl, start off at the same spot and take steps forward depending on the opportunities, or the lack of them, faced by the children. The game acts as an experiential and observable histogram of the gender inequality in the area. Apart from the games that help open up women's minds and increase their willingness to share, the training also involves an introduction of various essential concepts such as patriarchy, land rights for women

and fair distribution of work. Additionally, forums for strategic discussions have been created within the Federation, aided by women—local champions, who can uphold and fight for these issues in the village.

Within the Federation, there are mandatory forums that are structural in nature. These strategic forums have been put in place to create thematic leaders and structures outside of PRADAN, with an objective of creating a self-sustaining system. Four such forums have been created, namely, Aajeevika Manch (Livelihoods Forum), Adhikar Manch (Rights and Entitlements Forum), Samaanta Manch (Gender Equality Forum), and Sangathan Manch (Savings and Credit Forum).

As the training by the CRPs continued at regular intervals, those Federation women, who are keenly receptive to the ideas and show a strong willingness to work, have been put in charge of each of these forums and are called *Sakhis* (companions). Two *Sakhis* have been assigned for each of these forums, to oversee activities related to each of these issues. On various occasions, this new structure has shown great promise and has helped women seek justice within and through their own community. For example: The *Adhikar Sakhi* checks on the proper delivery of the mid-day meal scheme, *anganwadi* services, PDS entitlements, etc.

In Chapwar village of Jadasurang *panchayat*, the PDS dealer regularly overcharged the villagers on the pretext of transportation costs, refused to return the balance of the money paid by the villagers, and did not give the correct amount of grain to certain families. Eventually, the women organized themselves under

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the guidance of the *Adhikar Sakhis* (Anusuya and Sukwariya *didis*), and the men and women united to protest against the dealer. The *didis* managed to get the contact number for the Collectorate, made complaints to the District Collector against this injustice, and ensured that the people received their dues.

Not only is this an example of the people rising up against the rampant low-scale corruption, it also places women at the helm of the protest, by organizing it and talking to bureaucrats. The

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EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN

The women in Samnapur, especially the ones who have been a part of the gender trainings, now show a distinct boldness. They confess that, earlier, they wouldn't talk much even to each other, let alone to outsiders. Their involvement with the SHGs and the subsequent gender training has helped them recognize themselves as a community, encouraged them to share their problems, and inspired them to work together towards bettering their lives. Whereas the SHGs gave the women the confidence to step out and talk to other women, the gender training has broken their beliefs of being inferior or subordinate to men. As of today, the women of Samnapur have saved girls from being trafficked, helped widows get remarried, and even chased away

a rapist 'godman' from the area. The impact has been manifold; and change is visible in some areas.

Violence: Domestic violence was such a common occurrence in these areas that there were minimal discussions or complaints around it. It was considered a right of the husband to discipline or reprimand his woman, symbolic of male dominance, and the culture of treating wives as one's personal property rather than as individual entities. Women would be beaten up for talking to men, talking too much in the house, not doing their 'duties' properly, and sometimes simply because the husband was not in a good mood. Whereas domestic violence still continues in the area, the women themselves acknowledge that the number of cases of domestic violence has reduced significantly, especially with women connected to SHGs. Discussions around the issue have emerged, allowing people to recognize this violence as problematic, rather than accepting it as part of a woman's life.

Earlier, apart from accepting violence against themselves, the women also chose to not interfere when they knew that violence was taking place. After the gender training workshops, the women slowly started to speak up about the violence. CRPs became involved in supporting and helping such women. When the violence was extreme and the victim asked for support, the women of the Federation would collect, confront the man, and warn him about the consequences of his actions.

In instances of trafficking and sexual violence, the women have taken groundbreaking action. Geeta *didi* from the Federation shares her story. One day when she was walking to a nearby shop with her husband, one of the men from the village who she called *mama* (maternal uncle) called her aside and touched her inappropriately. She was walking ahead of

her husband. Women are taught to keep silent on such matters; with the new awareness, however, Geeta *didi* created a scene and filed a case against him.

The wife of the accused was the Sarpanch of the village and Geeta *didi* was under a lot of pressure and was the object of snide remarks for taking legal action against a man of the same village. Initially, the women were hesitant to support her; eventually, as many as 400 women gathered and showed support for Geeta *didi* and others, who had also had similar experiences with the man. Geeta *didi* is still fighting the case and is resolute about getting justice.

In a society where women are regularly discouraged from making a hue and cry about such harassment, especially from family members, Geeta *didi* took a stand for herself and the women around her. She says, "Ever since the gender training, I have realized how systematically men control every aspect of our lives. If I cannot even raise my voice against a man violating me physically, what is the point of the training?"

Family: Confined within their homes, the women did the bulk of the household chores of looking after the children, the elderly and the family cattle. They did some work in their small patches of land, in addition to fetching water. The women, although involved in farming, did not receive recognition as farmers nor did they get any portion of the money earned from it. The ownership of land was passed on to the men of the family and the women accepted the practice, considering it as a part of the socio-legal rights of men.

These problems continue in the area; however, conversations have begun to emerge around the subject and that is a positive step in the direction of gender equality. Women's social

identities are not as 'farmers' despite the fact that a majority of the work is done by them. Most agricultural policies target men farmers; there is rarely any mention of women as farmers. Nonetheless, to themselves and to the people around them, many women have started recognizing their identities as farmers. The Mahila Adhikar Kisan Manch (MAKAM) has been set up to address the problems of women farmers and help them establish their identities.

Ever since the PRADAN gender training, the women have begun to question those practices within their homes that earlier seemed normal to them. Traditional gender roles are often tough to break out of, and whereas women continue to do most of the household work, some of them have managed to convince their husbands to contribute. Men have also begun to help in the tedious task of fetching water if their wife isn't home, although it may partially be due to the introduction of the 'water wheel'. Nevertheless, both through mechanization and awareness, there has been a reduction in drudgery for women.

Almost all the women in the Federation meeting shared that they have started eating as and when they felt hungry rather than waiting for their husbands. The usual and unspoken norm is that the women must be the last ones to eat, and only after their husbands have eaten. The underlying assumption to this tradition is that your husband is your God (*pati pameshwar*) and women must not serve 'un-kosher', or *jootha*, food to them. Women have begun to laugh now at the suggestion of their husband's divinity and have started to consider them as equals.

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The women are also extending the ideas of gender equality to their daughters. As Urmila *didid* recalls, "One of my brothers-in-law went to the city and came back with two packets of chips for my sons, and nothing for my daughter. Even though a woman is supposed to not talk in front of her brother-in-law, I fought with him for treating my kids differently."

Mobility: The men in the village were hostile to the formation of groups, women's training programmes, etc. They often picked on and taunted women, who stepped outside their homes, calling them names, de-motivating and even threatening them. During the early days of SHG formation, *didis* would come to the meetings escorted by the men of their families, and would follow whatever decisions the men took for them. Women would rarely talk to each other, and had little or no say in decision-making in the household. In village matters too, women had almost no say. Women themselves believed that they were incapable of making any major decisions, and held back their opinions.

Joining an SHG was a major contributing factor in expanding the radius of women's participation and mobility. Not only did it help in creating savings, it also gave the women a sense of community, belonging and togetherness. Most women members faced mental and physical pressure when they began stepping out of their homes. The other villagers were suspicious of their activities until the SHG started lending money to those in need and they could see a tangible economic benefit.

The discussions and training sessions attended by members of the Federation, helped in

developing the ability to share their views, interact with new people, especially those from outside the village. As the women pointed out, they felt extremely self-conscious when speaking with educated outsiders, bureaucrats and even policemen. Whereas membership in the SHGs did help instill confidence in the women, the transition remained incomplete because the day-to-day practices of gender subordination remained unquestioned.

Citizenship: Despite the numerous policies for women and children, women had little idea of what their rights were. Participation in the *gram sabha* was chiefly for the men. The women, for a large part, did not even know what the *gram sabha* did, or what it was meant for. They had some vague idea of the working of the institution, which they had picked up from training and orientation programmes they had attended over the years, from overhearing conversations of the men, and from government awareness programmes. However, none of these pieces fit to make women aware of their rights.

Their involvement in SHGs introduced to them certain ideas of entitlement and gave them the courage to claim proper delivery of schemes such as PDS, MDMS, *anganwadi* centres, etc. Gender training included aspects of health and nutrition, and helped women understand these through a gender-based perspective. The women also conducted a survey of *anganwadi* centres, Primary Health Centres (PHCs), etc., and came up with a Citizenship Report, highlighting the problems and needs of the area.

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zeal for claiming their rights. They have become more aware of their nutritional, social, political and legal rights. In case there are any discrepancies in the entitlements that the villagers receive, the women, along with the concerned *Sakhis*, get together and protest. This is in stark contrast to the

past when the women recall taking whatever came their way and accepting injustices rather than fighting against them.

Most of the people in the villages around Samnapur had given up on MGNREGA (due to the delays) and were convinced that they wouldn't receive the payments due to them. After the training renewed their sense of ownership, the women became actively involved in claiming their payments. They talked to the officers—quite an unthinkable act for them earlier—filled the necessary forms and kept making trips to the concerned offices until they received their dues. Not only did this help them financially, it also gave the women encouragement to work harder for their rights.

THE PRACTITIONERS

The beauty of the approach is in the universality of it, and the way it bridges the distances between the practitioners and the beneficiaries. Since the gender training, the day-to-day activities of the practitioners are being scrutinized under their very own lens of inequalities. The PRADAN practitioner, Ambuj, is married and comes from a patriarchal family, like most of us. He shared that his mother cooks at home and it hasn't ever been questioned. Now, suddenly, he has begun to wonder why he and his father have never taken over that task. He adds, "Whenever possible, now I try to help my wife but I still struggle with breaking out of the normalized patterns.

Ever since we've taken up this approach, I question every act of mine, and when I see it not fitting the gender equality I am working for, it worries me."

While this introspection is often a tough process, it is indicative of a major change taking place in the thinking and is a step out of the comfort zone that one tends to get limited to. To bring about the kind of social change that is desired, this creation and recognition of the problematic is essential, unavoidable and heartening. The Gender Approach, taken by the team at Samnapur, has not only clearly benefitted the women and broadened their scope of thinking and imagination, it also distinctly reflects in the working of the team.

As one of the practitioners, Aziza Ansari, puts it, "We are still doing the work that we did earlier. Only the lens has changed. Now, we are doing the same work through a gender lens, and suddenly, it isn't just a job, it's an inseparable part of our entire life and their (the women's) entire life. We didn't even realize just how much we were missing out on."

LIMITATIONS

Outreach: PRADAN's major involvement continues to be with the women that are connected to it through SHGs and the Federation. The women, who are a part of these SHGs, typically belong to a certain class. As per an approximation, the participants in the SHGs are largely women from middle-income families. Women from the low-income families usually do not have the capacity or propensity to save, neither are they able to regularly attend the meetings (SHGs have strict rules in terms of attendance) due to household duties. These women usually face severe inter-sectional exploitation and do not

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have the agency to step out and participate in such activities. Alternatively, women from the few higher class/income families do not feel the need for such participation, and often, choose to stay away from identifying with the relatively lower classes.

Whereas gender training in the villages was open to all, one cannot be sure as to what may be the direct impact on the non-SHG women of the area.

These approximations on participation are mere speculation and derived from the practitioners' experiences, and my personal observations. No specific survey or research has been done on this; maybe, undertaking such a step would help understand our reach and our target groups. It may also allow us to recognize our limitations as an organization and to chart out possible ways of interacting with groups that are not yet part of our interventions.

Land rights: The issue of land rights is a major hurdle. It is connected to economic wealth and capital ownership, which are often the determinants of power in a society. It is, therefore, unsurprising that there continues to be resistance to overturning male-dominant land ownership and succession patterns. The women themselves are also hesitant to claim such blatant ownership, first, due to the prolonged conditioning in a deeply patriarchal set-up and, second, due to the fear of social ostracism.

Approximately, 84 per cent of the land in the area is owned by men. Even when the land is in the name of women, they have little control over it. Some other women would like to transfer ownership of land to their daughters; however, not having land in their own name makes it tough for them. To extend land rights to their own daughters is a big challenge even

for men, and invariably leads to fights at home, taunts from relatives, and social pressure and threats from other villagers.

These violent reactions to women's rights pose another problem for gender equality. The degree of sustainability of the programme seems low, especially compared to the momentum it initially generated. Women, who formed the initial batches of PRADAN's gender training (CRPs), had a tough time being understood and accepted by those around, including other women. Their views sounded radical within the existing set-up and it led to extreme backlash of the community, resulting in a number of women dropping out soon after. PRADAN began to have group trainings for CRPs, to be able to address this situation, and arranged regular meetings where they could meet people with similar problems and give each other support. Nonetheless, social pressure continues to push women away from understanding their rights and fighting for them.

Legal aid: Not only are social pressures tremendous, the solution of legal action is often so tedious and long-drawn that most women choose to skip it. Legal aid is insufficient; courts are far away, police put pressure to drop cases, fighting a case is expensive; these are all impediments that are often tough to overcome. Hence, even when women may want legal justice, given the current judicial system and its drawbacks, it's an uphill task.

PRADAN team coordinator, Krishna, says, "We regularly face ethical and moral dilemmas in cases of violence. We are not sure of the level of intervention we can maintain, and whether we are even capable of entirely supporting

women, if they do take legal action. Our intervention stops at making these women aware of their rights and helping them raise their voices. Once it becomes a legal case, or even a social outcry, as outsiders we are still figuring out how to extend our support or carry it forward."

Age old taboos and practices: Taboos around menstruation are still strong and even though women are transgressing them in their personal spaces by cooking during their periods, etc., it is yet to become a public change. Dowry is another issue that seems to be deeply entrenched. Even the women who have received gender training are open to accepting dowry when their sons get married. Their argument is that since they brought dowry when they were married, they are entitled to receiving it as well. Thankfully, the trend of dowry isn't as extravagant and demanding in the tribal areas as in other populations, but the ideological problem still remains.

CONCLUSION

Gender is an omnipresent structure of power, often invisible, yet tangible if one learns to recognize it. Women are often entrenched in patriarchy and gender to such an extent that they become active practitioners of patriarchal practices, even resistant to arguments of inequality. PRADAN's efforts at questioning these norms and helping women break out of them have been seminal, yet a systemic change in ideology takes time. Whereas a handful of women can lead by example, for the impact to be experienced by every woman in the village undergoing exploitation or discrimination due to gender, it will take time and continuous effort.