

Community Resource Persons: Extending Boundaries

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Undergoing an intense and in-depth training programme, which provides the required exposure and awareness while enhancing confidence, CRPs emerge with the wherewithal to deal with various situations, having developed their articulation and facilitating skills.

Seema is a high-caste Thakur woman, and this is what she regrets the most. As far as she is concerned, being born to a Thakur family is a curse. It has restricted her freedom to such an extent that she is unable to visit her land or go to fetch water to the nearby well or hand pump. Societal norms are so rigid that she, being from the Thakur community, has had to always remain confined within the four walls of her home and to depend on her husband completely. She has three children and it has been difficult for her and her husband to make a living with the produce from the small piece of land that he has inherited from his parents.

Life has been restrictive for her husband as well. Being from a high caste, he could not work as labour to meet his family's needs. Seema's plight was no different from any other poverty-stricken woman of any other community; unlike them, however, she could not contribute to her family by working. When she joined the SHG and dared to step out of her house, she was prepared to bear her husband's wrath.

She would often come to the PRADAN office along with the other SHG members on some pretext or the other. She would extend herself to other SHG members and actively participate in Cluster meetings. She was selected as a Community Resource Person (CRP) by her Cluster members for her active role as a Cluster leader and for extending herself for the cause of the SHG and the Cluster. She would visit other villages; thanks to her veil, her identity was protected. Her fellow SHG members supported her and were with her when she decided to tell her husband about her first earnings as CRP.

Today, Seema, all of 34 years old, has visited many places without her husband and has gone beyond the boundaries of her home, village and even the district, and has stayed in some far-off places, while her husband takes care of their home and children because she is the main bread-earner of the family. This has been an amazing transformation for Seema. She has moved from being confined to the four walls of her

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home to working selflessly to motivate and create awareness among the women of her village and Cluster. With her strong will and determination, she has broken and challenged societal mould and norms.

BACKGROUND

Dholpur, in Rajasthan, is located between two big cities, that is, Agra and Gwalior. Barely 250 km from Delhi, Dholpur district is struggling to free itself from the shackles of the feudal society in which it is trapped. The district, once infamous for Chambal dacoits, is located in one corner of Rajasthan and is surrounded by two other states, making it an easy escape for anti-social elements, who continue their notorious activities in the area. There is a huge caste divide in Dholpur, and the women struggle to find and establish their identity.

When PRADAN started its operations in Dholpur 15 years ago and the team started going to villages to form SHGs, the professionals would often face the brunt of the community, which sometimes even dared them to enter their villages. Gradually though, the team has been able to mobilize the community. Initially, however, more often than not, SHGs would become defunct and the main reason would be the interference of men.

The team realized that the community in Dholpur had no trust in PRADAN and it would be difficult to do any work over a sustained period. As a strategy, it was decided to involve SHG members from Alwar district, where PRADAN had been involved in institution building. These members were invited to Dholpur, where they shared the experiences that had helped them as a community. This opened up a space, in which a sense of trust started building between the community at Dholpur and the PRADAN team.

During 2002–06, PRADAN implemented the District Poverty Initiatives Programme (DPIP), extending itself to other blocks and interior areas, promoting women's SHGs and Clusters, and grooming the Federation. Many SHGs and Clusters were formed during that time. Many bright women benefitted by being members of SHGs and its associated tiers, and by joining the Livelihoods programme. These women were assertive, socially motivated, and happy to extend themselves and share their positive experiences with others. The team realized that some of these women could be encouraged to become resource persons, to reach out to a larger number of families in the area.

The women were then chosen, trained and groomed to act as CRPs for scaling up the SHG and the Livelihoods programme, in the areas where the team was working. At present, more than 80 per cent of the SHGs promoted in Dholpur are formed, nurtured and groomed by these women CRPs.

Initially, CRPs were selected by the team; however, in order to bring in greater transparency, they are now selected through a screening process, which includes:

- ◆ Identifying potential CRPs at the SHG and Cluster members
- ◆ Forwarding their names to the Federation
- ◆ Holding a screening workshop at the Federation level
- ◆ Identifying some key skills—expressiveness, communication, participatory approaches, attitude, behaviour and belief
- ◆ Conducting a socio-metric process by the peer group
- ◆ Holding a detailed discussion and seeking the consent of the CRP

GROOMING CRPS

CRPs are the key persons for scaling up SHGs and the Livelihoods programme. PRADAN, therefore, has a stringent training programme for them. The training programmes provide the required exposure, awareness and also

enhance the confidence of the CRPs in various situations. Many women, who would shy away earlier, have developed the ability now to articulate their views well and have good facilitating skills. The training programmes also provide CRPs an opportunity for cross-learning. Their exposure to various stakeholders and the nature of the programmes contribute to their technical and soft skill development. Regular trainings are conducted for CRPs on group dynamics, facilitation and communication skills, and gender sensitization. Training programmes are also held to make CRPs aware of various issues and government schemes.

This wider understanding of various issues helps CRPs spread awareness of these issues among women. CRPs encourage SHG and Cluster members to talk about their lives and livelihoods, and the social and political environment around them.

CRP TRAINING PROGRAMME

- ◆ Concept, overview, basic premises (identification) and role of CRPs
- ◆ Orientation on participatory identification of the poor or the target poor for a project, Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) techniques and social mapping, wealth ranking (well-being ranking)
- ◆ Group processes and SHG overview
- ◆ Orientation and workshops on processes—systems, governance and management of SHGs
- ◆ Workshop on group development processes and facilitation processes
- ◆ Training and orientation on gender
- ◆ Training and orientation on Achievement Motivation
- ◆ Training of CRPs on Cluster development—concept, promotion and the role of the Cluster
- ◆ Leadership training—leadership concept, qualities of social leaders and the role of social leaders
- ◆ Training on Vision building for SHGs

State Rural Livelihood Mission (SRLM) and CRPs

Dholpur is part of the Rajasthan Rural Livelihoods Programme (RRLP). Under RRLP, the Rajasthan Grameen Aajeevika Vikas Parishad (RGAVP) approached the Federation Saheli (Sangh for Empowerment and Livelihood) for deploying CRPs in the state, for social mobilization and institution building. World Bank and RRLP officials visited Dholpur and met the Federation members, visited SHGs in the field area, and interacted with the CRPs. After the visit, RRLP and the World Bank gave the PRADAN team in Dholpur a proposal to evaluate whether the existing resources could be deployed in expanding the RRLP programme in Dholpur as well as in the other districts.

This was a new opportunity for the Federation as well for the CRPs, who would earn a significant amount during their engagement with RRLP. Yet, interestingly, the team was apprehensive because the engagement with RRLP would mean that CRPs would have to leave their home for 15 days at a stretch, travel to various areas and stay in unknown villages to promote SHGs. However, all apprehensions faded when Federation members unanimously expressed that they would be happy to engage in this. A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed between the Federation and the Government of Rajasthan, in which it was agreed that the Federation would deploy CRPs for eight trips of 15-day duration each in a calendar year. The CRPs deployed would, in turn, contribute Rs 100 per day to the Federation towards their engagement as CRPs in RRLP.

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Discussions were held in the Federation on the suitability of the CRPs because the agreement required the members to stay away from their families for more than 15 days at a stretch. Such members who were able to do this and were experienced in training and grooming SHGs were considered for CRP selection by the Executive Committee of the Federation. Initially, the Federation selected 50 CRPs. Of these, 20 CRPs were selected for Dausa district and 30 for Dholpur district.

A four-day refresher training, including PRA and Participatory Learning Approach (PLA) techniques, was conducted with all CRPs so that they could work effectively with the new developmental agenda. The CRPs were eager to learn new skills and sought each other's feedback in honing their skills when developing an understanding of the programme.

RRLP officials were also present in the training, wherein they shared the objectives, strategies and the target for the projects. RRLP district officials and the facilitation team members provided a list of villages and shared the logistical arrangements with the CRPs. A five-member team of CRPs was chosen for documentation. They were to be helped by a *munshi* (accountant).

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management norms, and provide training to the existing SHGs on best practices, identify book-keepers through SHGs and provide training on book-keeping, and also identify two or three active women volunteers and provide basic orientation during their 15-day stay in the village.

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SHG Promotion in RRLP

With this mission in mind, the CRPs set out for unknown destinations, leaving their families behind for two weeks, with the dream of organizing those women, who are left out, poor and unaware. One CRP recalled her experience, "We ate together, we slept together and we shared our concerns, sorrows and problems and we laughed together. We have become best friends now." Another CRP spoke of how they shared their responsibilities and tasks when preparing their meals and managing other logistics in the village.

Initially, the CRPs were assisted by the RRLP team, which would ensure that the logistics were arranged and the safety of the women was ensured. The CRPs stayed at the Rajiv Gandhi Seva Kendra (RGSK) in the villages to begin with. However, the women felt unsafe staying there because these RGSKs were far from all habitation. In one incident, in a village in Dholpur some miscreants went to the RGSK and started passing lewd remarks at the CRPs. The Federation and the RRLP teams and the village leaders were immediately informed and the villagers took prompt action. But the incident was cause to reconsider the safety of the women. The issue was discussed in the Federation; it was decided that women CRPs would not stay at the RGSK and that arrangements needed to be made for their stay in the house of a villager, who would

During the process, they would also ensure the participation of *aanganwadi* workers, school teachers, *sarpanches*, *sachivs*, etc., to get a better understanding of issues and build understanding with the existing institutions, which would then be able to support them to work in a more effective manner in the village.

Each team did PRA exercises, including social mapping, resource mapping and wealth ranking in the villages, and documented the whole process. This was handed over to the block unit. The CRPs educated the new SHG members about the norms of SHGs, the importance of regular and timely meetings, and regular savings and credit, book-keeping, etc.

The CRPs also focused on the larger development agenda of SHGs as a solidarity building and sharing platform for women. They shared with the members of the newly formed SHGs their own experiences and how their SHGs had played a role in building their confidence. They explained that being a part of the SHGs has not only helped them when they needed the finance but also has given them the space where they can freely interact with each other. The women spoke on various issues such as the *aanganwadi*, mid-day meals in the school, PDS and health, which would then evoke further discussions among the members on the issues that affect women. The CRPs shared that SHGs and Clusters

are platforms where a women could come together and extend support to each other and also work together to achieve larger goals.

In yet another incident, the CRPs showed their courage and strength when one of them was teased by high-caste hooligans in a village. The fellow CRPs immediately called a meeting in the village and created social pressure on the villagers, who reprimanded the hooligans. The CRPs made it clear that in no way would they tolerate such type of incidents and also sensitized the women in the village not to succumb to any such atrocities and to fight for their dignity.

Although the CRPs were not literate, they did have experience on their side. They were always surrounded by the women of the village, who would listen to their stories and feel motivated to form their own SHGs. All this had such a good effect that though each team had a target of forming eight SHGs, they would often form SHGs in the range 10–20 per village.

The experience of social mobilization and institution building with RRLP turned out to be worthwhile because CRPs were able to put forth their experience and were able to contextualize the socio-political environment in the village. Being from the same or nearby districts also helped CRPs in building a relationship with the women because they spoke a common language and had the same culture. The partnership with RRLP is continuing and, at present, 125 CRPs are engaged with RRLP in Bharatpur, Ganganagar, Dausa, Pratapgarh, Bikaner and Dholpur districts of Rajasthan.

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CRPs Journey to Western Rajasthan

The Federation was then approached by Mitigating Poverty in Western Rajasthan (MPOWER), an International Fund for Agriculture Development (IFAD)-supported programme of the Government of Rajasthan, for capacity

building of SHGs, promoted under the programme and also to provide support in the capacity building of the community facilitators.

In July 2013, the Federation organized a three-day training programme in Dholpur for the Community Facilitators (CF) recruited by several NGOs working under the MPOWER project. The training was successful; their exposure to the SHGs, Cluster and Federation helped them visualize a state in which the women are independently running and managing their institutions as well enhancing their livelihoods through promoting various livelihood options.

The Federation was approached next by the Centre for Microfinance (CMF), a resource agency in the MPOWER project. It proposed that the Federation deploy CRPs and help in training CFs as well as provide capacity building training to SHGs promoted by the various NGOs under the MPOWER programme.

This time, however, the districts were in western Rajasthan whereas Dholpur is in the east of Rajasthan. So a team comprising the Federation leaders and CRPs visited the area to understand the context, issues, challenges and opportunities in the area. The SHGs were grappling with the same issues that they grapple with in different stages of group functioning. The visit provided insights

and also an assurance that CRPs could contribute in strengthening the SHG programme with MPOWER, and thus the Federation accepted the proposal.

In August 2013, the terms of reference (TOR) were signed between the Federation and the CMF, to strengthen the SHGs under the MPOWER projects. In the first phase, 18 CRPs were deployed in a three-member team along with a *munshi* for documentation, with the objective of strengthening SHG group processes and building the vision of SHG members through training programmes.

This time, during the visit to villages in Jodhpur, the CRPs were quite confident and were ready with their training kits comprising pictures and material for conducting games, chart paper, etc. During the refresher training, one CRP asserted, "Training to ganne se shuru hoti hai, khel khilane se or skit karwane se bahenjiyo ko sahi samajh me aata hai; apni samiti ki ILS bhi bahut upyogi hai. Group ki mahilayein swayam neeyam banati hai. Bhashan se kuchh nahi team hota. (Training starts with the song,

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games and skits, which help the women relate better; our ILS—a pictorial handbook on SHGs—is very helpful. SHG members themselves make their norms. Speeches do not help.)" The CRPs also said that since they themselves were members of SHGs and have faced similar situations, the women found it easy to relate with them.

The process of training adopted by the CRPs was unique, both in terms of quality and content. The training programmes were held at the village level; each day, a CRP team would train two SHGs. Initially, the language was a little challenging for the CRPs; with time, they picked up local words and focused on connecting with participants. The CRPs would say, "Hum bhi aap jaisi bahene hain... hum bhi pahale kuchh nahi janti thi. Aaj SHG ke madhayam se hi hum yahan tak pahunche hai. (We are also like you...we too have faced similar situations and were unaware. Now, with the help of SHGs, we have reached this stage where we can extend and share our journey with you all)."

Institutions	No. of CRPs Deployed	Districts Covered	No. of SHGs Trained	No. of Families Covered
MPOWER (Rajasthan)	152	1. Barmer 2. Jodhpur, 3. Jaisalmer 4. Pali 5. Jalore	1,080	14,160
RRLP (Rajasthan)	125	1. Bikaner 2. Udaipur 3. Dungarpur 4. Jhalawar 5. Partapgarh	933	11,196
Total	277	10	2,013	25,356
Cluster Training under MPOWER	50	1. Sirohi 2. Jodhpur 3. Jalore	75	2,985

Many new games were designed by the CRPs during the training. Radha and Sashilata shared, "*Jab hamne 2-3 din tak lagaatar dekha ki wahan samooh khel se jyada seekh rahe hain team to hamne tapeli wala game wahan par naya suru kiya. Pachele hamne apas me raat ko charcha kari or pura abhyas kiya. Agle din woh game karvaya jise dekh mahilayein rone lagi aur phir samiti ne muddo par charcha shuru kari.* (When we observed that the women were learning more through games, we sat together in the evening and designed some games based on the issue and practised them. The next day we introduced the game and the women became so involved that they started crying. After the game, they discussed the issues in their SHG)."

The CRPs shared that it was more important to explain to villagers the meaning of an SHG. They described it as, 'being together, providing space to each member of the group and supporting each other in times of crises'. During the training programmes, they would ensure that SHG members could relate with each other and understand their responsibilities; once that was done, the women themselves would take on the onus of strengthening their SHGs.

After the training, one of the officials said, "We never expected CRPs to be of such high calibre. They exceeded our imagination and have done a remarkable job."

The work of the CRPs and the Federation has been widely appreciated by all partner-NGOs, officials from MPOWER and the resource agency, CME. The experience was unique and the staff said, "This is the first time that we are learning from the community; the way the CRPs have understood the issues and contextualized them is commendable."

Many shared that they have learned a new way of training and interacting with the community, "Here, the community itself comes up with the solution; the CRPs' role remains that of a facilitator or moderator."

THE WAY AHEAD

With the CRPs becoming exposed to different areas and places, they bring back new lessons from those places and work with these new ideas in their own village. For instance, when the CRPs went to the MPOWER project, they saw that in some villages, the villagers were doing works such as construction of sheds for goats and buffaloes, and land and water harvesting work, under MGNREGA. The CRPs shared this with the Cluster and Federation members, and have since approached the *panchayat* and the block administration in Sarmathura region for MGNREGA work.

At present, the Federation has 200 CRPs who, other than providing trainings and forming SHGs, are also the leaders; in the Village Committees and Clusters, more and more women are exposed to the work and are taking up leadership roles. They regularly groom other SHG members to take up leadership positions and are engaged in transformative roles.

With a pool of good CRPs, the team is thinking of working on issues of gender and governance. At present, the major focus of the team has been in promoting savings and credit, and livelihoods. Although there have been instances of women taking charge and working on the issues that affect their family and the village, the approach has mostly been incident driven. A systematic approach is being followed, wherein the Federation and the CRPs are being groomed to take on initiatives and work on bringing about a positive change in the self, fellow women and also in the larger socio-political scenario.