

# The Change in My Perceptions

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*Working on gender-related issues such as domestic violence and social discrimination that affect their lives and dignity has brought women closer to each other and has given them insights into how much they have suffered silently as well as how they are themselves the perpetrators of regressive customs and traditions*

When I look back and reflect on whether the training programmes, events and discussions that we organized for the women in the villages have had any impact on me personally or have brought about any changes in my team members, I realize that there has definitely been a shift—as if we have shifted gear from low to high. The change is perceptible in the manner of functioning of the team.

The team has been working on many fronts of governance such as the PDS, the Indra Awas Yojana and social security schemes; on issues of domestic violence (DV) and other women-related issues, however, the work earlier varied depending on the proclivity of the professionals towards these issues.

The impact of our efforts was limited to those areas in which SHGs and Clusters were strong, and where these had taken some action regarding issues of violence against their members. The protests were sporadic in nature, and mainly reactive rather than proactive. The women and even the team members had very poor knowledge about the different forms of violence. Apparently, no one had really thought about this aspect earlier.

Even when some members brought up their problems in the meetings, the issues were not given priority by the facilitator or other members. The issues were relegated to the background to be discussed separately when the facilitator was not present. When engaging with the community, my aim used to be to finish my agenda first, which could range from checking SHG accounts, organizing a Cluster meeting, facilitating a loan repayment, grading of the group or agriculture planning. It was only after all these had been dealt with that the personal issues of the women were discussed.

I used to share with my colleagues my concerns about issues, other than the credit and livelihood issues that we dealt with every day, that affect the lives of the women but I was not sure how I could engage with them, what my stance could be and how far I could become involved in dealing with these issues. The action plan and review meetings in the team focussed more on the output rather than the outcome.

These issues bothered us as a team yet we were hesitant to step in and become involved. However, one day in 2009, when we had just finished conducting the visioning of our Federation and Cluster across the three blocks of Padma, Barhi and Chouparan, the members of the Federation voiced their desire to focus on issues of violence against women.

The leaders of the three blocks clearly articulated their desire to work on issues of social discrimination and injustice—ranging from dowry to violence and other issues affecting the dignity and lives of women. They were aware of their power as a Federation and were confident that with the backing of members, they could influence their family, society, village, *panchayat*, police and other government institutions.

The members were eager to bring about a change in their lives. They wanted to live with dignity and the only way they thought they could do so was to work together, extend their support to each other and raise their voice collectively against any injustice.

The team wanted to work with women for their empowerment. During the perspective planning meeting of the team, the focus of the vision, the objective and the goal setting shifted; it was looked at from the point of view of women, which was different from before.

The most significant change that I see in myself and my colleagues is in our approach to our work. We devote more time to the Gender Equality Programme (GEP). The Hazaribagh team now focuses on evolving a methodology of engagement at the community level, which will result in the desired outcome. However, it

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has not been easy. The women who dreamt of an equal society were not large in number. There were only a few who were aware and were articulating a dream they had for the thousands of oppressed women, who were resigned to their fate. The majority not only believed in the existing social system but also propagated it. It was important to create awareness among them and to bring about a paradigm shift in our own thoughts and actions.

In order to reach out to the women, the team decided to build upon the community resource base, that is, the women leaders. A pool of facilitators was created from among the women leaders of the SHGs and the associative tiers. These women leaders were responsible for mobilizing and facilitating groups on issues of gender, governance, rights and livelihood.

These leaders attended various training programmes organized by professionals from JAGORI and PRADAN. The women gained a better understanding of gender, deepening their understanding of socialization, patriarchy and power relations. They were also sensitized about the violence against women—the different forms of violence, the mechanisms to deal with these forms, in their own lives as well as in society.

Four 'working committees', were formed at the Cluster as well as the Federation levels on Nyay Samiti, Adhikar Samiti, Rozgar Samiti and Mahila Mandal Sahyogi Samiti, to provide support and guidance on issues of justice, entitlement, livelihood and SHGs.

Because there was a need to increase and broaden the base of the leadership pool,

some structural changes were introduced in the Federation, which are, at present, in the nascent stage. In addition, training and capacity building of Community Service Providers (CSPs) and Community Resource Persons (CRPs) was undertaken, on the basis of their skills and competencies, to deliver services to SHGs and associative tiers. At present, there are three separate pools of resource persons: *Nyay Sakhis* for legal counselling and support, *Krishi Sahyogi* for agriculture support and *Sahyogi* for SHG-related functioning.

Resource Persons and Service Providers have been exposed to various types of training programmes, conducted by in-house trainers, as well as by bringing in expert institutions and professionals on aspects such as gender-related issues, legal issues, entitlements, *Panchayati Raj* Institutions (PRIs), etc.

Apart from this, theatre was also used as a medium for women to express themselves and to articulate their feelings on various issues. Tool kits were assembled and exercises introduced to create awareness about social issues such as discriminatory practices in society vis-a-vis the boy and the girl child, work distribution and assets, institutional mapping, and DV issues. These resources were meant to be used by women leaders in their day-to-day meetings. The team also motivated the women leaders to form modules on their own. The DV module and the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) module have been prepared by the women leaders, who were given training on these aspects.

The team also realized that just conducting training programmes would not bring about the desired change. The women needed a platform at the basic level, to discuss these issues further. SHGs could be the avenue through

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which training programmes could be conducted and where members could frequently hold discussions because they were from the same hamlets. The discussions could then be shared with the Cluster for cross-learning purposes.

Further, to reach a large number of people, we needed to disseminate information to women leaders of the Clusters and Federations. However, we were skeptical about whether the women would do what we were expecting them to. We decide to give it a try anyway.

This was the first step—what we thought was the need of the hour then. We trusted in their capability and, over a period of time, the methodology of our work began to change. Even the women leaders feel very motivated, and say that they now have a purpose, which they are carrying forward to the other women.

The issues of gender and violence, entitlements and governance were flagged, with the women leaders staging theatre performances and by organizing camps on various issues at the village and the *panchayat* levels.

To break gender stereotypes and taboos associated with women in society, women's football matches were organized in Cluster *adhiveshans*, and a women's football tournament was organized at the district level. It was a big achievement to see women coming out of their homes and playing football, which is viewed mainly as a male sport.

These training programmes, events and discussions not only brought changes in the women but also in me. I was shaken when I first heard the stories of these women. I had never realized the biases that women had to face in their homes. With no voice, no control and no decision-making power, they work

as labourers in their husband's homes from where they can be thrown out at any time on any minor issue. I struggle to describe these women—are they weak or strong? A person needs to be strong to bear so much discrimination.

The stories of brutality and violence began to surface soon after the first gender training of these women. It was perhaps because the women now had a platform to share their stories. They had, until then, thought that women had no choice but to suffer in silence. My concern about whether these training programmes would have an impact and whether the women would really understand the message behind them has dissolved when I see that the programme has touched them to the very core and they have embraced it with their hearts.

Gender training programmes, focused on issues of discrimination between a boy and a girl child during the whole life cycle, from division of work in a home to the ownership of assets, have triggered a tremendous response. The people now understand and relate to the issues of discrimination they had faced during their own lifetime; they are now aware that they are also guilty of perpetuating this discrimination with their children in their homes.

The discussions now revolve around what they can do to reduce or curb the discriminatory practices in their homes so that their daughters get what they deserve and the sons become more sensitive. The women have realized how they themselves were stopping their daughters from going to school and how they are biased toward their sons. They restrict their daughters to the home, so that they get help in household

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chores whereas they allow their sons to wander free. Many women have come forward to share how they have made positive changes in their lives after attending these training programmes. Many of them say that they are now sending their girls to private schools. Some of the women from Ankurhwa Cluster stated that they are now

sending their girls to Hazaribagh for higher studies in college.

They say that they have realized that their girls can opt for employment in future and could be independent and secure in their lives. Many women shared that there is discrimination during the birth rituals also. The practice of *Chatiyari* for the girl child is performed after the fifth day of birth with minimum celebrations as compared to the boy child's birth, which is celebrated on a grander scale six days after his birth. The whole village is invited, through the ritual beating of the plate. After the women have become aware, they have begun to celebrate the birth of their girl child in the same manner as the birth of a boy. They now see the discrimination that women face through their lives and have begun to share their experiences.

I feel very delighted when in Cluster meetings and other assemblies, women speak about the different forms of gender discrimination they face and how they are now working on eliminating it.

One such memorable story was that of the women of Jhapa village. They had tried to break some of the myths regarding widowed women. The practice in the village was that the widows were allowed to draw water from the well only after every other woman had finished taking water. They had broken

this trend in their village. They also started the trend of giving widows a chance to participate in the *parchan* (a practice of welcoming the new bride into the home) ceremony, which they were hitherto not allowed to be a part of. One woman had strongly stated, "*Pati mar gaya to mera sharir nasudh ho gaya kya. Ek to man mein bojh hai upar se samaj ka riti riwaj. Sab hum logon ko dabane ke liye*

*hi banaya gaye hain.* (Has my body become impure with the death of my husband? As it is there is so much pain inside and to top it the rituals and laws of the society suppress us)." This was supported by almost every member present in the meeting. Women, neglected in their home and in society, are now coming forward to raise their voice collectively.

A dalit SHG member shared with other members about the day some tyrants tried to molest her and she had somehow saved herself. She went to the police station the next morning along with a few women leaders. I had also accompanied them. The police registered the FIR but under very weak sections. We were not satisfied. The next day about 250 women leaders came forward to help her and finally a strong FIR was registered.

This is a very common practice in our society. The cases relating to violence and violations against women are easily dismissed, with police stations and other institutions usually turning a blind eye. The women are treated badly in offices and harassed in many ways so that they drop the case. Even when they try to mobilize the authorities for quick action, the case is registered under weaker laws to favour the men.

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Patriarchal society finds it difficult to accept that a woman would dare to go to a police station to complain or lodge an FIR against a bunch of village hooligans, and that too for an attempt to rape. In this case, even the political leader had instructed the police to somehow dismiss the FIR. The women went forward and surrounded the police station in protest. They demanded to talk to the DSP, who was responsible

for any cases pertaining to atrocities on those belonging to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. The DSP came to the site and finally the women were able to lodge the FIR. Change is possible. It requires a great deal of perseverance.

The training programmes, the regular discussions in various forums and the empathetic relations that have developed among them have helped women to collectivize. This is not limited to one or two cases. It is increasing and continually evolving. The collectives were already present and mobilization around issues and the empathy for other women is the main cause for the change that is taking place.

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time my team members and I have spent with these women are helping us to evolve. The more I interact with them, the deeper is my search for answers. My colleagues too are in the same boat. The resonance between us also helps me understand women-related issues better.

I now see that patriarchy plays a role, not only in our field area but also in our homes and localities. On my visits home, I have voiced my concerns about discrimination to my parents. I realized that earlier I used to think the difference in treatment between genders was

natural but with my increasing awareness, I began to notice the discrimination in my home as well. It is happening everywhere and in every house. One of my colleagues once said, "Where do we begin to pull the chords so that equality can be brought in the whole society. At least, I will try to bring about change in my home first."

Listening to the problems of gender discrimination and violence, I realize that we need to find solutions together. It is difficult work and we have miles to go before we reach a society of equality.