

Women's Movement against Liquor Shops: Towards Creating a Better Society

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Identifying addiction to alcohol as one of the prime reasons for gender-based violence, the empowered women of SHGs collectively protest the presence of illegal liquor shops and move the administration and police to act in their favour

"You have come from Jhalda-II?" asked a very surprised Additional District Magistrate-General (ADM-G) of Purulia when he saw the women from the poorest block of West Bengal arrive at his office at the end of the working day on 20 November 2013. "Why have you come so far? Your faces are pale—have you eaten anything all day?"

One of the women stepped forward to make the introduction. "We are from the Kangsabati Nari Maryada Mahasangha, a Federation of 202 womens Self Help Groups."

The ADM-G interrupted, "You are from the SHG Federation? Who is the President, the Secretary or the Treasurer?"

There was silence for a few seconds and then one of the women politely told him, "We don't have such things. We have 2,595 members and one Board Member from each of the 23 Clusters. We have come here today because we want to stop all the liquor shops in our area and we need your help and support to make it happen."

The ADM's first response was, "It's not possible to stop all the liquor shops. Are you talking about illegal shops?"

The representatives of the Kangsabati Nari Maryada Mahasangha then explained to him their journey and struggle. Their journey had begun at the end of 2007 when the women of Jhalda-II Block had first started coming out from their homes to form Self Help Groups (SHGs), with the help of PRADAN. Awareness about their common struggles inspired the women to work together and support each other.

The area they live in (famous for the 'Purulia arms drop case' in 1995) borders the forest; it has undulating terrain and low soil depth, and experiences drought almost every other year. The people largely belong to the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs). Communications and other services in the area are poor, literacy rate is very low (especially women's literacy) and the community is driven by a few influential persons. In this male-dominated socio-economic condition, the women are the biggest sufferers, both within the family and in society.

Before PRADAN's intervention, many SHGs had been formed through *panchayat* initiatives, and almost all the SHGs were run and controlled by male members. Women members in the SHGs had become the means of receiving grants and subsidies from various government departments and organizations. Yet, women did not have any say in their own savings, and financial indiscipline became a common practice for most of them.

Although there were some women in the SHGs six years ago, it was beyond the imagination of the community that the women of the village would have a platform to discuss their issues and have any say in matters of the community. The idea of forming SHGs as a women's platform that would encourage weekly savings and credit was a new concept.

The women themselves were hesitant to come forward and the men were not ready to allow the women to participate in the meetings. After many discussions and deliberations, some of the women took the initiative to form SHGs and this inspired the others. The weekly savings and credit in SHG meetings were

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not only financial transactions but helped create mutual trust and inter-dependency among women members. Gradually, the women gained confidence in their ability to run SHGs and began to trust each other enough to work together as a collective for creating a better society.

The excessive liquor consumption by the men and its impact on the well-being of families and the village was a subject that came up often in their discussions. SHG members spoke about their anguish in the meetings:

"Matal hole to uhara karur kotha bhabe na. Baccha gulan ki khabe? Sangsar ki kore choilbe? (Drunken men are not concerned about anyone. What the children will eat? How will the day-to-day affairs of the family be taken care of?)"

"Saradin khate lute anbo, ar uhara sei takay mod khabe—na dile dharabe. (We work hard all day and earn something; and the men use that money to drink alcohol. And if we refuse, they beat us up.)"

"Taka na thakle ghorer chal niye bhati jabe. (If there is no money at home, they take rice from the house and sell it to go to the local liquor shop)."

"School jawa chhila gulano ekhon mod dhoreche. (School-going children are also getting addicted to alcohol.)"

"Moder jalay uhader jami gulano bikain gelo—uh jaldi morle tobu bhalo hoito...bou-chila chas kore khato. (They are selling their land because they are addicted to alcohol—if they were to die, it would be better for the

family...at least their wives and children could cultivate those lands...)"

"Amra bhaibchi chas-bas barhabo, ar uhara din-rat mod khaye pore thaikche. (While we are planning on how to improve our agriculture, they are drunk most of the time.)"

"Ei didir ki ekhon bidhaba howar boyos hoyeche? Moder jalay ehar samir jibon gelo. (Is this the age for a woman to become a widow? Her husband just died due to alcohol addiction)."

These words, discussed in the SHG meetings, were familiar to almost all the women members. In five years, nine Clusters have tried to stop illegal liquor brewing and selling within their villages. The women have smashed some of the illegal shops; they have organized rallies in the villages and have gone on a deputation to the police. The administration has not quite supported the women and the only action that has been taken is the destroying of some illegal shops and the arrest of a few persons immediately after the deputation. Unfortunately, the women's protests only have an impact for a few weeks after which the men find their liquor vends again and also make jokes about women and their anti-liquor movement. The efforts of the collective to minimize violence against women cause other forms of violence against women, which inhibits them from moving forward.

The situation in Supurdi village (a forest-fringe tribal village where most of the families sell fuel wood daily) was no different. One incident, however, has changed the mind-set of the women of the village.

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One of the SHG members and her husband used to sell liquor within the village; this did not change even after several warnings from other SHG members. On one afternoon in November, 2012, a woman came out of her hut shouting, "Amake didira bacha, ami agune jole-pure morli (Save my life, I

am going to die of burns)." Some of the SHG members rushed to the spot and found that the woman had burns all over her body. Her husband refused to help her, quite fearful of a police case despite the assurances by the SHG that they would save him from the police. They tried to impress upon him how important it was to save his wife's life. She had a six-month-old child! It was a difficult situation for the women in the village because they did not know what to do. Some of the women ran to the *panchayat*, asking it to arrange for a vehicle to take the woman to the hospital, which the *pradhan* did.

After the initial treatment at the Block Primary Health Centre (BPHC), she was referred to the district hospital. Although the men of the village tried to arrange for the money for the treatment, it was the SHG women who came forward to give Rs 12,000 from their SHG savings fund. The woman stayed in the hospital for a month, and during that period, they brought her powder milk, arranged for cow's milk for the child, took care of her child and also helped the family in household work. The sensitivity and magnanimity demonstrated by the rural tribal women are quite rare in our society.

The women, however, did not forget the cause of the incident—alcoholism. The day after the incident, they called a meeting of all the

men and women of the village, in which they resolved that from then on nobody would be allowed to run any illegal liquor shops in the village and also no one would be allowed to create any disturbance within the village after consuming liquor. Some of the villagers were not ready to accept the resolution. The Cluster then took the help of the police a few times to stop the illegal liquor shops.

Murguma is a neighbouring village of Supurdi and the women of that village started forming SHGs since early 2013. They showed interest in the details of the incident in Supurdi because they too faced similar problems in their village. Approximately 150 SHG members of Murguma and Laxmipur together decided to pull down and destroy the illegal liquor shops; they did so with the help of the police force on the afternoon of 20th September 2013. The liquor shops, however, soon re-opened. Even though the police arrested the vendors every time they re-opened their shops, the vendors were released within a few hours, and the whole purpose of the drive was defeated.

In the meantime, on 15 and 16 March 2013, 162 SHGs of Jhalda-II Block organized the first SHG Mahadhivesan with 2,200 members. At that overnight event, the Kangsabati Nari Maryada Mahasangha, a block-level Federation was formed. The Federation Board Members were selected by the Cluster-level sub-groups during the overnight event. It was also decided and agreed upon by all the members that the Kangsabati Nari Maryada Mahasangha would act as a platform of solidarity for SHG members, provide an identity to thousands of women and work for creating a better society.

At 11 a.m. on 12 November 2013, 1600 women congregated at the Kotshila police station. The people at Kotshila market were surprised to see these amazing women collect under the banner of Kangsabati Nari Maryada

Mahasangha. This had already been decided on 4 November 2013 at a Federation meeting. During the meeting, one of the Federation Board Members from Supurdi village spoke of the ongoing struggle of trying to shut the liquor shops in Murguma. They requested the Federation to take up the issue and help them close the liquor shops permanently. They described how the police would arrest the liquor shop owners and then release them within a few hours. They said that this was frustrating.

As the members pondered over how to solve the problem, common to all the women of the Kangsabati Nari Maryada Mahasangha, one of them suggested, "Let us take out a mass rally towards the Kotshila police station and the Block Development Officer's (BDO's) office, so that they understand the strength of our SHGs and then be compelled to take action against the liquor shops."

The Board Members agreed to the proposition and called an urgent meeting, to discuss the issue with all the members. The members agreed that they would not create any disorder for the administration. "We have to politely convince them of the rationale behind our movement and draw support for the same," was their conclusion. The date and time was fixed through consensus.

On 11 November 2013, most of the Clusters conducted village-level meetings and some of them called the Office-in-Charge (OC), Kotshila police station, to take an appointment for the deputation and meeting. The OC anticipated some disorder on that day. He started taking action against illegal liquor selling and said he was busy and would not be available at the Kotshila police station the next day. PRADAN then talked to the OC to help him understand that the purpose of the meeting was that the Administration and the

Federation could find a way to work together to solve the problems of the people.

Thousands of women reached the police station the next day. Overwhelmed by the crowd, the police agreed to support the women and shut the illegal liquor shops. The women insisted that the police accompany them to the BDO. The police were reluctant at first but one of the women stepped forward and said “*Aj ei didi-ta mar kheyechhe, amader hajar-hajar didira roj emon mar khay—apni amder sathe jaben na?*” (This woman has been beaten by her husband this morning. This happens daily to thousands of women—you don’t want to accompany us?).” The woman was able to emotionally convince the police to escort the 1,600 women to the BDO’s office.

The BDO spoke to the representatives, heard their grievances and responded gently. When they received this response from the BDO, the members felt supported and encouraged. Bubbling with high energy, the members prepared a long list of illegal liquor shops and submitted it to the BDO.

Responding to the unusual outburst from the women, the BDO, together with the local police, took prompt action and the Excise Department began raiding the villages from the very next day. The media also came forward to cover the news, and that helped spread awareness to many others of the big initiative by the women’s collective. The Federation leaders also contacted Mr. Shantiram Mahato, the SHG minister, West Bengal, and took an appointment to discuss the issue with

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him on 17 November 2013. Representatives from Kangsabati Nari Maryada Mahasangha met the minister and presented him with an application, seeking support for their cause.

Under pressure by the mobilization of women, the officials from the Excise Department agreed to meet with the members of Kangsabati Nari Maryada Mahasangha on 20 November 2013 to discuss the issue. Around 100 members assembled at Jhalda to meet the officials, which unfortunately,

on the eve of the meeting, the Excise Officials decided not to attend. This incident angered the members. After much deliberation, they decided that if the Excise Officer would not come to them, they would go to him.

It was afternoon then; 21 members went to Purulia to meet the ADM-G, who agreed to support them and suggested they meet with the Excise Department as well. The DM talked with the Superintendent, Excise Department and advised him to help the women. The members then went to the Excise Department and shared their concerns with the officials. The women not only got a commitment from the officials that they would visit all the illegal liquor shops of the area but also an apology for not meeting them at the appointed hour.

SHG members have realized their own strength and have understood the impact that they can have by working together. Within 15 days of the movement, the Excise Department has started raiding the liquor shops in 14 villages and have arrested four people.

At the same time, many members are facing threats from their men and are being taunted in their villages. The men challenge the women, saying that they will not be able to do anything and that they should restrict themselves to attending SHGs. The women are now sharing ideas on how to stop violence against women. In Simni village, the women said, "*Tora amader grame ene onek otyachar korechis, ar natun kaoke korte dibo na—amader grame biha bandha kore debo, ki kore tora bangsa barhabi bara.* (You men have brought us to this village and have committed a lot of violence against us. We will not allow it any more. We will stop all the marriages in these villages. We will not allow another generation of children to be born)."

Some of the women have become demoralized by the challenges whereas some have become more aggressive. In this tense environment, it requires courage and maturity to laugh about the threats that the women are facing. "*Tui chinta koris na, jodi andolan korte giye moris tobe tor nam-e mondir korbo ar protti bachhar 2,500 didi niye mela korbo.* (Don't worry, if you die in this movement, we will build a temple in your name and organize a fair every year with our 2,500 members)."

Regular discussions are taking place among the women on how to sustain the movement. The women have conducted meetings with the MLA, the *gram panchayat pradhan* and other relevant stakeholders. Sometimes they draw support from the women of other villages, to conduct meetings with the men and respond to threats. The institution leaders conduct meetings in specific villages, where the resistance is quite high.

For PRADAN to be co-travellers with these women and share their struggle for what they believe in is a unique experience. This movement requires that the women remain united. The objective of the movement is to not only stop illegal liquor brewing and selling within the villages but also to stop the adverse effects it has for the family and society, where the woman is the biggest sufferer. The practice of consuming liquor by men and their behaviour after that is largely connected with the different forms of gender-based violence within society and family. Through this movement, the journey of the women's collective for creating a better society carries on...