

Stories of Pain and Suffering

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Promoting SHGs for credit and savings and livelihoods is one important way of empowering village women; what is equally important is for women to be able to express and share their pain and struggle in their lives.

Providing for safe spaces where the women can do so is a big opportunity for healing and resolution

‘AND HER LIFE STORY BEGINS’... I THOUGHT AS I LOOKED at the newborn baby girl in Sadar Hospital in Araria. Sujita *didi* had called me early in the morning. “*Didi beti janmi he. Aap ayiye dekhne ke liye.* (Didi, a girl has been born...come and see!)” She insisted that I suggest a name for her and I named her Bhavna.

It has almost become routine to be woken in the mornings by phone calls from the *didis*, asking me to visit their village. Every day, I ride on my scooty and follow the beautiful zig-zag road leading to my destination Masuria, a riverside village. This village is one of the three villages of Gerki *panchayat* in Araria district, and has 1,200 households. The majority of the households are Kulhaiya Muslims, and a few belong to the Barhi and the Tiyar communities as well.

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I have been visiting this village since 2015, and the women here are very close to my heart...I play with them, sing, dance, share food, laugh, fight and cry with them, which makes me feel like one of them. I always discover a new aspect of their world. Unwittingly, I, somehow, have become a witness to their stories of pain and struggle, as well as of joy and happiness.

I hear and see the tragedy in their lives; their unspoken pain breaks my heart and I just want to shout out to the world, "Look at these women, see their pain, see their tragedy. See how they are married off so early in their life, doing hard tough chores daily, going through multiple miscarriages, whispering amongst themselves about forced sex, crying about triple talaq, being a widow or single woman, or old and deprived, going through many sexual diseases, undergoing immeasurable brutality daily and the list goes on."

In this article, I want to share some stories of these women, each belonging to a different class, caste, religion, age and marital status. I want to tell of their struggles in their everyday life. And I also want to highlight their relationship with patriarchy, violence, marital rape,

discrimination, gender, dowry, early marriage and my experience with them in Masuria.

In my initial days in Masuria, I faced many difficulties in connecting with the community. They rejected me, believing me to be a swindler who had come to the village for money. For them, I was a girl riding a scooty, not wearing a *dupatta*...they could not relate to that and they wondered why I came to their village at all. They would see me and begin to shout out instructions. I would hear them yell at me to wear a *dupatta*.

My initial exposure to the whole Kulhaiya community was quite unsatisfactory. My first impression of them was that they were aggressive, dominating and very vocal. They did not even hesitate to ask about my sex life. One day, when I had just started to interact with some of the women in one of their homes and tried to get to know them, a man (about 25 years old) came and asked me, "Who are you? Why are you here?"

It was a question that had been asked of me several times, I answered politely. Then he suddenly responded, "*Hamare yahan auroton ko ghar se bahar nahi nikalne dete hai, jo aurat*

bahar nikalti hai wo besharam hoti hai (We do not allow our women to go out, one who goes out is shameless)."

I asked him, "Do you mean that I am *besharam*?"

That day we got into a long discussion—five women and that lone man. Through the whole discussion, he continued to give instructions about what women should do and what they should not do...from wearing a *hizab* (a head covering) to not talking in front of *paraya mard* (men from outside), and he related it to *allatalla* (God) and *gunah* (crime); all the other women, which included his mother, wife, sister and in-laws, heard him in silence.

Later, when the man left, his wife Shama told me, "*Didi aap hi ka zindagi achha hai, hum log to jahannum mein ji rahe hai* (Sister, your life is better, we are living in hell)."

I was quite angry as I made my way back to my office. How could that man tell us what we should or should not do? But this is the reality. I remembered my own childhood days when I was always stopped from doing certain things and the reason given was that I was a girl. I was taught to be a good girl and not to be a

I could relate to her and how she had been feeling for the last 10 years. For her, this village was a completely different world. She had left her identity and all that she was familiar with, for a man who had not come home for the last one year. I felt a sudden pain in my heart. She said “*Didi humko ek dost mili aaj* (Sister, today I have found a friend in you)”

characterless girl. That day, I felt close to the women I was working with.

Masuria village is divided into three main hamlets—Khikharmani, Rahariya and Pharsadangi. Every hamlet has approximately 300–600 households. Of these, only 14 households in Rahariya are Barhi, who think of themselves as upper caste and have distanced themselves from the Kulhayia Muslims and have named their hamlet Parheshpur *tola*, which comes under the sub-hamlet of Rahariya. Khikharmani has 60 households of the Tiyar community and they have named their hamlet Choudhary *tola*. The whole village is situated near the Bakra river and experiences floods every monsoon.

My earlier engagement in the community was confined to promoting SHGs; and I failed to do so because the community rejected me. I was turned away from one door to another and they assumed that I must have a hidden agenda for coming to their villages. So, I decided to concentrate only on two SHGs, comprising the Barhi and the Tiyar communities. I believed that these two SHGs would then further promote more groups in the area.

I was disappointed that I could not help create an SHG with the Kulhayia Muslims; therefore, I just talked to whoever I found in the village, not with the intention of promoting an SHG but to get to know more about them. I believe that spontaneous connections and friendships are the best, and so it was when I met Sabana *didi*, a ravishing young lady from Khikharmani. I met her in the market. One morning, she stopped my bike and asked me for a lift. I asked her if she knew who I was.

She replied that she had seen me many times in her villages. That day she took me to her house, she served me very delicious food and we talked for hours. Her name was once Jasmeet Kaur, and she was born and brought up in Punjab. While working in a cloth factory, she had fallen in love with Akram. She had eloped with him from Punjab some 10 years ago and no longer had any connection with her family. Now, she was called Shabana and her husband Akram had migrated to Delhi. “*Hum bohot akele hai didi, mera kahin jagah nahin, ghar ka yaad karke ab to aasu bhi nahi nikalte* (I am alone, I don’t have any place. I can’t even cry remembering my home),” she said with a stoic face.

I could relate to her and how she had been feeling for the last 10 years. For her, this village was a completely different world. She had left her identity and all that she was familiar with, for a man who had not come home for the last one year. I felt a sudden pain in my heart. She said “*Didi humko ek dost mili aaj* (Sister, today I have found a friend in you).”

We became friends. Immediately after that, I went to attend a group meeting in Choudhary *tola*. Aruna *didi*, a very vocal member from the group, was very angry with me, “*Didi, aap Hindu hoke Mohammadan ke ghar khana khake aaye* (Being a Hindu, you ate in a Muslim house)?”

Aruna *didi* was forty years old. She was very dear to me because she was the first one in the *tola* who understood the concept of an SHG. I asked her, “*Khana khane se aur mere Hindu hone ka kya rishta hai* (What is the connection between being Hindu and having food with Muslims)?”

Mira *didi* replied, “*Woh log bakra khate hai* (They eat meat)!” Then there was a round of discussion on Muslims, what they were, how they were, and then followed a complete hate speech from the group. After hearing Shabana *didi*’s story, I was very emotional.

Gradually, the expectation is that these women emerge as grass-roots entrepreneurs, managing a specific component of the rug supply chain

I couldn't take this round of discussions. This group was the first group I had promoted. The group consisted of 15 members from the Tiyar community and I had attended every meeting for the last two months and in each meeting, we had discussed about unity and the need for women to come together.

I asked the group that if they all had similar thoughts about women from the other community and if yes then why did they need groups? I told them, "You can save money in your home also. I would prefer not to come to your group." As I said that, I got up, and left for my home.

It was dark outside and on the highway. I was feeling sad, I had put in so much effort to form the group and it had been two months of hard work. I felt that all my effort had been wasted. I could not understand how I could work with the community where a large population was Muslim and I worked with the minority who had secluded themselves from the society. After two weeks, Aruna *didi* called me and informed me that they had formed a group in Khikharmani. When I visited the place, I was happy to find that Shabana *didi*

was also a member of the group, and my first group in the Kulhaiya Muslim community had been formed.

It was a rainy day in the month of July and it also was the day before the local *panchayat* elections. The whole road was crowded and campaigning was going on from door to door. I rode my red and white scooty on the same road, to attend the SHG meeting. Every day, I used to cover my face while riding the scooty and that day was also the same. The road-side travellers, as usual looked at me. Young girls stared at me like they did every day, and as every day, I heard their voices. "Ei dekho chhori gari chalaisi (Look a girl is riding a scooty)!"

My scooty stopped where the road ended. I headed towards Farhana *didi's* verandah. When I approached the group, everyone greeted me, "Sallam Wallai-kum *didi*," and I responded "Walle-kum salam *didi*."

I saw Nahida *didi*, wiping her tears. I asked her, "*Didi* what happened to you? Why are you crying?"

Upon being asked, she cried out loud, and Fatima *didi* stopped her "Are *chup ho na tum* (Keep quiet)!"

Nahida *didi*, a 17-year girl, with her baby boy on her lap, continued to weep, "*Meri zindagi barbad ho gayi didi* (My life is ruined)."

"Let's talk, *didi*," I responded.

All of us 18 members sat on a rug. Farhana *didi* frowned and said, "*Hum aurat ka zindagi bekar hai didi, mard ko khush karo to khushi aur dukhi karo to dukh* (Our life is of no use, if you please your husband, you are happy and if not, your life is a misery)."

There was a sudden silence in the group. Only Nahida *didi's* weeping could be heard in the verandah. Her baby also started crying with her and in the whole commotion I could not understand why.

Farhana *didi* started again, "*Mard log bahar rehne se hi humlog khush rehte hai, abhi election ke samay sab log ghar aa gaye hai* (We are happy only when the men have gone out. But due to the elections, they have all come back)."

Her statement made me curious and I asked her why it was so.

She replied, "*Nahida pet se thi aur uska bachcha mar gaya, uska pati usko jabardasti karta hai didi* (Nahida was pregnant and her child died, her husband forces himself on her)."

My heart cried for her! I had never heard such a statement before. Nahida got married at the age of 14 and now she had a two-year-old baby. She is a very thin and small. She was still an adolescent and here she was, playing a very adult game in her life.

Oh! My heart cried for her! I had never heard such a statement before. Nahida got married at the age of 14 and now she had a two-year-old baby. She is a very thin and small. She was still an adolescent and here she was, playing a very adult game in her life.

Wahida *didi*, her mother-in-law, scolded her “*Aisa sabke saath hota hai, tu rona bandh kar* (It happens with everyone! You stop crying!).”

Israti *didi*, a very silent member of the group, said, “*Mard jab bhi bahar se aata he, humko pet se karke jata he aur wo bhi ladki* (Whenever the men come home, they make us pregnant and that too with a girl).” Saying that, she starts to laugh! I could not understand how in the same situation, two women could have such different emotions. I took out my diary and opened it to a page with a poem on it.

I asked Nahida *didi* to read it. She wiped her tears and read aloud...

कभी तुम्हारा सही गलत लगा
कभी तुम्हारा गलत लगा सही....
तमाम उम्र यु ही गुजर जाती है
तुम्हारे सही को गलत
और गलत को सही साबित करते
करते...

While I was returning, Nahida *didi's* face appeared before me continuously, and I reached home with a heavy heart and mixed feelings. The next day, while crossing the village, I decided to meet Nahida *didi* to see how she was doing. She greeted me with a smile and hugged me as if nothing had happened to her the day before. I asked her if she was okay now. She replied, “*Didi pati ke sath to sona padega hi, man ho ya na ho, ek bachcha mara to dusra hone me thori der lagti hai* (One has to sleep with one's husband even if one wants to or not. So what if one child has died; it doesn't take much time to have another one).”

With a smile on her face, she made tea for me. One day, Nahida *didi* had told me that she had not met her husband before her marriage although he was her relative. “*Humko apna mard se bohot dar lagta hai, didi. Woh aate hi to hum kaanpte hain* (I am very afraid of my husband. I start trembling in his presence).”

She is trapped; she knows what happens with her is wrong but she is afraid to recognize it. She does not want to say it aloud; if she screams, society will not allow her to. It was really hard to see their plight. I thought about it.

I wondered what I could do and I realized that I could only be a good listener!

Like Nahida, I have encountered many other girls in the village, who got married very young. “*Jab ladki kurta pehnegi samjho uska shaadi dene ka umar ho gaya* (When a girl starts wearing a kurta, it means the time has now come to get her married),” Imrana *didi* told me when I asked her about Salma, her 12-year-old daughter, whose marriage to her cousin was fixed; I was invited too for the wedding. I had taken an initiative to form a young girls group in the village. All the girls in the village were interested in the idea; and within a month, almost 16 girls had joined the group. Salma was a very bright girl and was a member of the group.

“*Didi, humko shaadi nahin karna* (I do not want to get married),” Salma had once said she wanted to become a police officer. Everyone had laughed at her because her aspirations were different.

Nigar, another girl, had told her “*Yeh sapne bekar hai, sirf shaadi hone ka sapna dekho* (These dreams are not good, only dream of getting married).”

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Salma had become very angry at that time. However, she got married at a very tender age. Her dreams were crushed. After Salma's marriage, five more marriages took place within a month. The group size kept getting smaller and dwindled to four within a few months and my interest in the young girls' group also began to disappear with time.

One day, Salma called me and cried for an hour. Her in-laws had beaten her. She wanted to escape. "Didi, humko aap le chalo, hum aapka sab kam kar denge (Please take me along with you, I will do all your work)."

I had no answer for her that day. Salma is now a mother of a three-month old boy, and like everyone else, she has buried her dreams deep in her heart.

"Mard ke maarne se, hum logo ka sarir ka gunah jharta hai, didi (When a husband beats his wife, it reduces the sins of our body)," Naima didi said with a faded smile.

I asked her who had told her that. "Ye Hadith me likha hai (It is written in the Hadith, a practical interpretation of the Quran)," she replied.

I was in Saira *didi's* verandah. I had gone there in the morning for a *rabi* vegetable training. After the field demonstration, we sat in Saira *didi's* verandah for an after-meeting chit-chat. Saira *didi* showed me her burnt hand, "Didi, dekhiye kal rat ko kya hua (See what happened last night)."

I saw that four fingers of her right hand were burnt. One day, her husband had asked me, "Tum isko kya sikhate ho, iska jubaan

aajkal bohot tej ho gaya he (What do you teach her? Her tongue has become quite sharp)."

In reply, Saira *didi* had told him, "Jitna tumhara hath chalega, utna mera jubaan (The more you use your hand on me, the more I will raise my voice)."

I have known Saira *didi* for the past two years. She is only 24 years old and is already a mother of three children. I remembered



Salma in the playful mood just before her marriage

She had not wanted to get married, but she had to get married. After her marriage, her life was beautiful for a year; then everything faded after that

her from a group training. I asked the group to tell me any one thing, they were afraid of.

Saira *didi* had replied that *talaq* made her most fearful. “*Mere ko ek talaq par chukka hai, didi, agar aur do parega to mera zindagi barbad* (I have already got one *talaq*; if I get two more, my life will be hell).”

After she said this, I found out more about *talaq*. Of the 30 members in the group, almost everyone was fearful of *talaq*. “*Mard ko kya tension, ek ko talaq dia to dusra din usko naya bibi milega* (Men have nothing to lose. After divorcing one woman, the next day he will get a new wife),” said Sanobar *didi*.

Sanobar *didi* is the third wife of her 50-year-old husband. He had divorced her also for another woman. Now she lived with her three girl children in her parents’ house. “*Hum ma-bap ka bojh hai aur meri betiya meri bojh hai* (I am a liability for my parents and my girls for me),” she said with tear-filled eyes.

That training on *rabi* vegetables was the my first step to get close to them. After that, they often

spoke of their pain to me. And, looking at Saira *didi*’s hand, I became emotional again. “*Hum to man mein tassalli de rahe hain ki mera sara gunah jhar gaya* (We are reassuring ourselves that we are getting free from our sins). Saira *didi* laughed. I often wondered how they could be so calm in these situations. If I had been in their place, my hopes for life would have been lost. I derived strength looking at these women. I had the strength to stand up with them.

That day Saira *didi* told me about her childhood days. Her aspiration had been to become a nurse. She used to go to a Madrasa and had done Maulbi from there. She wanted to administer injections to the people. She had not wanted to get married, but she had been married. After her marriage, her life was beautiful for a year; then everything faded after that. “*Humko apna pati se mohabbat tha, ab nafrat hai* (I loved my husband; now I hate him).” She continued, “*Aaj kal humko dard nahi hota hai, didi, man ka dard ke samne sarir ka dard kucho nahi* (Nowadays, I don’t feel pain. The physical pain is nothing compared to the mental agony),” cried Saira *didi*. After two years of her marriage, her

husband married another woman called Afsana *didi*... who was also a member of the group. “*Uska jab man tab bistar badlega aur jab man lathi* (Whenever he wanted, he would change his partner and whenever he wished, he would beat),” she cried out loud.

I could not stop my tears that day; I was so pained. I had gone there for an agricultural meeting. My aim was to increase the number of women farmers and I had been successful too. By this time, more than 100 women had come to the field and participated in improved agricultural techniques. Somewhere, however, I was not satisfied. After hearing her story, I could not be happy simply by giving her ideas on how to increase production. It was not enough.

There was another incident in the village. Soni *didi* called me early one morning because they had organized a meeting in the village. I, along with one of my colleagues, went to Rahariya, for the meeting. When we reached the village, we found that the group was sitting in Soni *didi*’s verandah. Soni *didi* started the discussion, “*Didi, Gudiya didi ko uske bhesur bohut burhi tarah se peeta hai, wo abhi hospital mein*

Gudiya didi was in bed for five months. Whenever I went to the hamlet, I stopped at her door... sometimes just to say hello and sometimes to sit and talk with her. Some members of the hamlet also joined me

hai (Gudiya *didi* has been brutally beaten by her brother-in-law. She is in the hospital).

Kiran *didi* added, “*Pura nanga karke mara hai* (He tore off her clothes and beat her).”

It took us a few moments to come to terms with the whole situation. We asked the group to tell us as much as they knew. What I understood from the discussions was that Gudiya *didi* was brutally beaten up by her brother-in-law and his sons at night. Her husband had migrated and she was alone in her house. It started out as a small fight about food; within a few minutes, it turned into a big fight. When the neighbours reached the spot, they found Gudiya *didi* lying on the ground bleeding and all her clothes torn off. Nobody moved to help her, as her in-laws were very powerful in the hamlet. The group members were disturbed by the situation and expected me to do something.

“*Bhesur hoke kaise peet sakta hai* (How can a brother-in-law beat the woman)?” Janki *didi* frowned.

I asked her whether it was important who had done the beating? “*Pati to hath uthata hi*

hai, par woh paraya mard hai (Our husbands can hit us but this man is a stranger).”

I got the sense that the group was disturbed because the violence was perpetrated by a *paraya mard*. We discussed the situation through the day, “*Aaj tak humlog kabhi bhi is tarah ke charcha nahi kiye the. Aage se humlog is tarah ke ghatna kabhi nahi hone denge* (We have never discussed such type of issues. From now onwards, we will not let such incidents happen again),” Soni *didi* said at the end of the meeting and the group agreed.

Later, I discussed the situation with my colleague and came to the conclusion that we had moved at least one step as a community and had come forward to sit together and discuss these issues; we still had miles to go, however.

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Sunita *didi*, who is very emotional, always cried out seeing Gudiya *didi*'s condition.

She said, “*Pati ke maarne se hum log sahte rahte hai, sehte gunga ban gaye hain* (We endure our husbands beatings; we've borne so much, we've become dumb).

The women had begun to talk about the violence, “*Sirf maar ka dard hi dard nahi, muh ka boli se jo dard hota hai, uska kya* (The pain of physical beating is not the only pain; what about the pain from the abusive words they say to us)?” Munni *didi* asked.

Some days, Farhana *didi*, Nahida *didi*, and Israti *didi* from the other side of the road would join us. Having tea with them had become my habit. Sometimes, the discussions would get intense and sometimes, we would just laugh out loud.

I have learned many things in these years. As a professional, sometimes, my role was very clear to me...to unite the women, who had a common agenda; I got stuck somewhere while doing it...I was getting stuck in outputs, numbers and figures. The women have formed village organizations in Khikharmani and Rahariya, and now the whole village is saturated. Gudiya *didi*, Saira *didi* and Nahida *didi* were

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active members of the Village Organization (VO).

“Mere saath jaisa hua aur kisike saath na ho (I hope no one else has to go through whatever I endured),” Gudiya *didi* said aloud in one of the VO meetings.

Saira *didi* urged, *“Pati ka maar mat saho, didi, awaaz uthao* (Don’t endure your husband’s beating, raise your voice).”

Everyone nodded.

On another note, Nayra *didi* was happy that her potato crop this time had tripled. She told her husband proudly, *“Maine kiya he ye kheti* (I did the agriculture).” Now, she has become a volunteer member of the groups and is guiding women on agriculture.

We talk about a just and equitable society for women; however,

these women suffer so much discrimination that it is difficult to know where to begin to help them. Where should I start and where should I go...? I wonder what my role is. Every day, I would go to the village with an agenda; when I reached there, I would find another situation to deal with. There are miles to go...!

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Trishagnee Boruah is based in Araria, Bihar



Nayra didi with her family members in her potato feild