

**video
volunteers** 
EMPOWERING COMMUNITY VOICES



GENDER LENS

CHANGING INDIA, ONE VIDEO AT A TIME



Photo: Naiade Plante

I TABLE OF CONTENTS

LETTER FROM THE DIRECTORS

Reflecting on ten years of working for gender equality

04

AMPLIFYING WOMEN'S VOICES THROUGH COMMUNITY MEDIA

The challenges and rewards of being a woman journalist in rural India

07

CHANGE THE GAME: A CAMPAIGN TO DISMANTLE PATRIARCHY

Starting conversations about gender discrimination in India

15



ISSUE IN FOCUS: GOOD GOVERNANCE

Women mobilise communities to claim their rights

23



ISSUE IN FOCUS: MATERNAL HEALTH

Using community media to monitor maternal health programmes

35



ISSUE IN FOCUS: VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Enabling women to speak with dignity about violence

45



ISSUE IN FOCUS: CASTE DISCRIMINATION

The double burden of gender and caste

59

Written by: Kayonaaz Kalyanwala

Inputs by: Jessica Mayberry, Stalin K., Jaeninne Norris, Nupur Sonar and Radhika Bijoyini.

Photo Editor: Alankrita Anand

Design and Layout: Vinod Kuriakose

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I A LETTER FROM THE DIRECTORS

Dear friends and supporters,

Community media is an immensely powerful tool in the hands of women; particularly if they have faced injustice or are used to being ignored and overlooked.

For the past 10 years, empowering women with a voice has been one of our most important goals at Video Volunteers. In fact, it was a group of women who used their voices to incredible effect, who inspired us to devote ourselves full time to Video Volunteers. One of our first projects together, back in 2005, was training former child brides in Andhra Pradesh to make a video about child marriage. Most women in that region had experienced child marriage and domestic violence, but the community never deemed these things important enough to discuss. “We generally don’t speak of the issues of women. But that is going to change tonight,” said Latha, one of the video producers before the screening.

These 11 women had started a totally new conversation. They had raised important questions, and the community collectively pledged to stop child marriage. Looking out at 700 faces rapt with attention, glowing in the light of a projector that was set up in front of the local temple, we both had a profound realisation: community video empowers people and entire communities to start conversations, to change perspectives, and to right historical wrongs like gender inequality.

Twelve years later, having published nearly 4000 videos either by or about women, we present to you this small book, which describes some of the most courageous and thought-provoking content our Community Correspondents have created on the issues of women. Our Correspondents – pointing their cameras in directions others rarely bother to look – have documented unusual, inspiring and heart-breaking stories on gender in India, which are organised here by theme. There are sections on maternal health, good governance, and violence against women, among others.

Interspersed throughout are profiles of women Community Correspondents, and reports from the gender discussion clubs we’ve been running in 67 districts, thanks to a grant from UNFPA in support of Khel Badal, our campaign to dismantle patriarchy. Over the last two years, we have obsessed over a few key questions: what kinds of conversations about patriarchy are needed today? How can we encourage men and women to have ever more personal, challenging and groundbreaking dialogues about gender?

As more and more women around the world speak up to share their stories, the urgency for such honest conversations has never been greater. We hope these women’s stories will inspire you, in just the same way as they are inspiring their communities.

Sincerely,



Jessica Mayberry

Stalin K.

I ABOUT VIDEO VOLUNTEERS

Video Volunteers is an NGO that amplifies the voices of marginalized communities in India, so they can report their own stories and create change in their communities. The problem VV addresses is that on any given day only 2% of media content relates to rural areas, where 70% of the population lives. This means that the poor are often excluded from development discourses, and bad decisions get made. VV's network brings tremendous diversity to the media, which is crucial to a vibrant democracy. **Over 4 million** people have been impacted by VV's work.



VV'S MAJOR PROGRAMS INCLUDE:

1. **IndiaUnheard - News by Those who Live It:** This is the largest grassroots video news agency in India. Our reports are carried by dozens of news channels and websites across India and the world.
2. **Community-led Change:** We launch hundreds of local action campaigns each year, creating a bridge between communities and local government.
3. **Surveys for Action:** Communities monitor progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals using hand-held devices.
4. **Campaigns:** VV runs campaigns on issues like gender, untouchability, forced evictions, education and maternal health. The campaigns use tools like public interest litigations, petitions, delegations to government officials, and high level partnerships to advance concrete advocacy goals.

NUMBER OF
CORRESPONDENTS **248**

NUMBER OF
IMPACTS **1318**

1 in 5 videos solves a problem

NUMBER OF
VIDEOS **6954**

NUMBER OF
DISTRICTS **199**

Our work has won numerous awards from the likes of Ashoka, The Knight News Challenge, Echoing Green, TED, Women's E-News, The World Summit of the Information Society, NYU Stern Business School, The Global Social Business Incubator, Edelgive Social Innovations, Junior Chamber International-Osaka, and the Waldzell Institute's Architects of the Future Program.

The challenges and rewards of being a woman journalist in rural India

AMPLIFYING WOMEN'S VOICES THROUGH COMMUNITY MEDIA



“To tell you the truth, I have no access to the media at all. There is no TV in my house. Newspapers aren’t delivered to our village. In my experience, only people with good salaried jobs watch TV and read the newspapers,” says Anita Oraon, one of 248 women and men currently working with Video Volunteers. Realising that she could provide vital information and news to her tribal community in Jharkhand, Anita jumped at the opportunity to join the network as a Community Correspondent. Having struggled to pay her own school fees and attend school as a child, Anita wanted to work on getting a proper school for the village first.

At VV we have focused on bringing the voices of marginalised groups like Dalits, indigenous communities, religious and sexual minorities onto the global media map. The motley crew of VV Correspondents includes farmers, teachers, health workers, land rights activists, conservationists, former housewives and social workers among others. These are not people associated with journalism as many know it. Rather than being disinterested observers of events, these reporters are engaged in changing what they see around them.



Mainstream media organizations bring wide coverage to VV’s work. We’ve been profiled by or collaborated with France 24, The BBC, IndiaSpend, Doordarshan, CNN-IBN, NDTV, Bloomberg News, The Economist-Intelligent Life, Himal South Asia, Business Standard, The Wire, First Post, MTV and News Laundry, among others.

WHY WOMEN?

Community media has proven to be an effective way of subverting the closed circles of the mainstream media. In the U.S. white men dominate most newsrooms, and in India, it is 'upper caste' men. Even with the changes that new media has brought, technology remains largely concentrated in the same hands as before. VV is

VV is adamant that women must occupy at least 50% of its platform. As of September 2017, women make up 57% of the network and 57% are Dalit or indigenous people.

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In 2015, the Global Media Monitoring Project found that women make up only 24% of the people heard, read about or seen in newspaper,

television and radio news *. In effect this means that half the world's population remains excluded from sharing their perspectives and stories on issues of vital global importance, from climate change to politics to science and technology to human rights. The road to ensuring a gender balance in our own network has been challenging but very fulfilling.

"One would imagine finding women to recruit as Community Correspondents wouldn't be too difficult. That many must be aching for opportunities to do something 'different' with their lives; to do jobs that allow them to claim their rights, earn, and hope for a better future. On recruitment drives I often get told that technology is hard for women to grasp, or that they won't be able to mobilise communities to bring change, or they won't come for a week-long training. I am told that travel in the field is tough, transport is scarce, few women own their own means of transport and depend on men to get around," says Radhika Bijoyini, who has

selected all the women (and men) in the VV network through painstaking discussions with social movements and activists.

We've brought many women into the network by doing recruitment drives that took only women candidates and by fighting prejudices in explaining that women from low-income, barely literate communities can be reporters.

A LEAP OF EMPOWERMENT

Women face far more barriers in terms of education, mobility and access to technology. Therefore, working as Correspondents impacts them in a far greater way than it does men. Over the years we've found that once trained, women stay in the network for longer than their male counterparts. Working as journalists increases their mobility and opens up spaces that women have been kept out of. The camera gives women the power to dictate the terms of the conversation; it makes people listen to them and answerable to them.

In time they are able to stake a claim in decisions taken in their homes as well as in community meetings and government offices. "I am now seen not as a rag-picker but as a journalist. People respect me now, and I love that. I'm not afraid to talk to government officials or in front of crowds at rallies or screenings, and that inspires other people too," says Maya Khodve, who was also elected to be secretary of the 800-member Journalists Activists Network of Nashik set up by local journalists – partly in response to the threats journalists and Right to Information activists face in Maharashtra.

“I am now seen not as a rag-picker but as a journalist. People respect me now, and I love that.”

* Global Media Monitoring Project, 2015, World Association for Christian Communications.



Photo: Najiade Plante

“When I interview women, they open up to me about things they would not share with a male journalist.”

CREATING A PLATFORM FOR WOMEN

Correspondents seldom work alone; they mobilise large sections of the community they are working with, preparing them to advocate for themselves. When the Correspondent is a woman, we see more women getting involved in visiting and talking to government officials.

Madhuri Chauhan, a Correspondent from Uttar Pradesh shares how a dozen women stormed the office of the district collector to get an illegal poultry farm shut down in their village. “When he refused to grant us an appointment to see the evidence of the problems the poultry farm was creating for the village, the women almost dragged him out with his chair. The women weren’t scared even though there were many police personnel present. He had to pay attention to our demands,” she says.

Far from being pigeon-holed into reporting on just ‘gender issues’, women in the network report on a vast array of issues: the conditions of local schools, corruption, sanitation, effects of mining on local communities, and state repression. With women being included in the narrative of these stories, they get a platform to share their perspectives. The resulting stories often show a very different side to what might be reported by outsiders or even male Community Correspondents.

For example, women working with VV in Kashmir are among the few women who have reported on the ongoing conflict in the state. Nadiya Shafi has documented the toll that this has taken on the people. As a Kashmiri woman, she has a unique level of access into homes to talk to women. “When I interview women, they open up to me about things they would not share with a male journalist. For example one woman

whose husband had disappeared, shared details of the sexual harassment she faced from police and military personnel when she was looking for him. I don’t think she would have been comfortable sharing this with a man,” she says.

Those who have been on the sidelines till now and told that their presence doesn’t matter, are beginning to take charge. Their stories are not just redefining who can make media and how, but redefining the very idea of what a woman ‘should be’. As Jahanara Bibi from West Bengal puts it, “There are these ideas that women should be demure, needn’t have an education, must bear with her husband’s wayward behaviour...If a woman never learns about the ways of the world, like men have a chance to, how is she ever supposed to be independent? I want to change how women perceive themselves, and each other.”

STORIES THAT BREAK SEXIST STEREOTYPES



Our Correspondents seek out and report stories of women who defy boundaries set for them by their families and society, such as the following:

CELEBRATING SUCCESSFUL WOMEN

Girls in Kashmir are training to become internationally acclaimed kickboxing champions playing in tournaments from Thailand to Argentina.

Mukesh Devi is Rohtak town's only female automobile mechanic. Taking on a job that is seen as an exclusively male skill in a place like Haryana, infamous for crimes against women, is no small feat.

CHALLENGING SOCIAL TABOOS

Janadai Nag is the first girl in her community to have broken

the tradition where menstruating adolescent girls have to hide in the jungle for the duration of their periods. She now cycles around advocating for others to do so.

Sixteen-year-old Rohit cooks and cleans at home, setting an example that traditional roles assigned to women and men are not immutable.

Community Correspondents are claiming women's right to pray. Women are considered 'impure' in many religions and are barred from entering places of worship. They have gathered women and held conversations with priests, breaking age-old practices.

In rural Uttar Pradesh women celebrate a festival where they worship their sons. Correspondent Gayatri Ambedkar made a video about it and started showing it to women, encouraging them to celebrate their daughters too.

In a 2015 survey, the International Federation of Journalists asked Indian journalists how they felt women were depicted in news reports.

22% VICTIM

17% SEXUAL OBJECT

14% FAMILY FIGURES

6% EXPERTS / LEADERS

3% HEROES

2% EQUAL CITIZENS

Source: Media and Gender in the Asia-Pacific Region, 2015, International Federation of Journalists.



DISCUSSION CLUB INSIGHT

SHIKHA PAHARIN | Jharkhand

JOBS, HUSBANDS AND SUBTERFUGE

“Girls see that their mothers have always been in the shadows and that their fathers barely acknowledge or value them. So this makes them want to stand up for themselves. I think that all of us at a particular age, especially unmarried girls, have an opportunity to break out of whatever mould society puts us in.”

Shikha Paharin's discussion club in Jharna Colony, Sahebganj district in Jharkhand has become a source of inspiration for many of its members. Tired of being bogged down by the restrictions placed on them by virtue of their gender, these women are starting life-changing conversations; some have decided to risk everything, resorting to subterfuge to live their lives on their terms.

“The women in my group are between 18 and 35 years old. Some are college students, and others are housewives. The younger girls have more radical ideas about the roles that women and men play in society and at home. For instance, the unmarried girls all said that they would marry for love rather than opt for an arranged marriage. How else would they trust their husbands and negotiate the freedom to work?, they asked the married women in the group, many of whom dismissed the idea of love marriages. The latter group felt that with arranged marriages it was easier for families to intervene if there was an incident of domestic abuse, or any other tension.

“The girls were quick to question this because earlier that day one of the members of the group had shared that her husband, who lives in a different city, would beat her and her eldest daughter every time he returned home. This woman had tried to get her family and her in-laws to intervene but they all told her to deal with it herself,” explains Shikha.

The members of the group were also divided on whether or not women should have jobs and if they do, should they expect the men of the house to contribute to household chores. “Some of the women felt that there was no need to burden themselves with the task of earning for the family. They also felt that no one should expect a man to do housework. Other women felt that this division of labour was unfair. They do want to work but they feel resigned to the fact that when they return home, the dishes and cooking will be waiting for them. When they ask me how we can change this I too feel at a loss for answers. But then that’s the whole point of this discussion club – to collectively find solutions,” says Shikha, who started doing odd jobs as a teenager to supplement her family’s income.

Some women have found a way out for themselves, by means fair and foul. One woman has found a job at a school as a supervisor of the Midday Meal Scheme. Shikha reveals how this woman sneaks out of her house without footwear to do her job. She is scared that her already jealous and suspicious husband is going to give her hell if he finds out that his wife is working. “But the biggest change that I see in her is her willingness to stand up for herself and to involve the police if he beats her up again. She didn’t have the courage to do that, let alone sneak out for a job, before joining the club,” says Shikha.

Another member of the discussion club, twenty-something Manisha Malto has had an encouraging family in that she’s been allowed to finish her school and go to college. But she didn’t like the fact that her father let her brother stay out at all times and never questioned the amount of money he spent. When Manisha asked for money she was told to earn it to understand its value. So Manisha found a job nearby but her father wouldn’t let her work. “The next thing we know, she’d run away and we assumed that it was with a boy. But she called a few weeks later to say that she’d found a well-paying job at a bike showroom in Ranchi. Her father has now made peace with the rebellion, and they’re all quite happy,” laughs Shikha.

Asked about how women only a few years apart have such different ideas about life, Shikha explains that what they see in their families has made them realise how they don’t want to live their lives. “Girls see that their mothers have always been in the shadows and that their fathers barely acknowledge or value them. So this makes them want to stand up for themselves. I think that all of us at a particular age, especially unmarried girls, have an opportunity to break out of whatever mould society puts us in,” says Shikha.



Starting conversations about gender
discrimination in India

KHEL BADAL: A CAMPAIGN TO DISMANTLE PATRIARCHY



The year 2017 began with millions of women and men taking to the streets across the world to assert that women's rights are human rights. In India, women marched to lay claim to public spaces, and the protests were organised under the banner 'I will go out'. The immediate trigger was a mass molestation of women in a club in Bengaluru, which male politicians later justified by the logic that if women stayed out in bars at night, they would be molested. Towards the end of the year, the '#MeToo' campaign¹ exposed gender-based violence in every corner of the world. The global engagement on gender issues seems to have reached critical mass.

The rampant prevalence of gender-based violence in India and other countries is a telltale sign of a world mired in gender inequality, and its root cause is patriarchy. And while violence is often called out and rarely accepted, there is much less of a movement to speak out against patriarchy. Therefore, "dismantling patriarchy" became the central idea behind Video Volunteers' campaign *Khel Badal* (Change the Game).

WHAT IS PATRIARCHY?

Patriarchy is the reason that women are paid less than men in most industries; they have limited mobility and opportunities; they are forced to shoulder the responsibility of family honour; the burden of proof of a sexual assault remains with the victim, not the perpetrator. As one woman shared in a group meeting, patriarchy is the system which ensures that a teenage boy is already programmed to see his mother as inferior and thinks nothing of slapping her.

DETECTING PATRIARCHY THROUGH VIDEOS

We started the campaign in mid 2015 by writing a manual that helped explain the concept of patriarchy and how one detects it in daily life. Inequality caused by patriarchy is so hardwired in us that we often fail to see it, but a camera is a great way to do that. Then, we trained 63 men and women to produce videos that exposed sexist cultural practices which dictate the degrees of mobility, access to rights like education, nature of work and so on that women and men have. From Rajasthan to Bihar, from Odisha to Haryana, over 150 such videos have been produced.

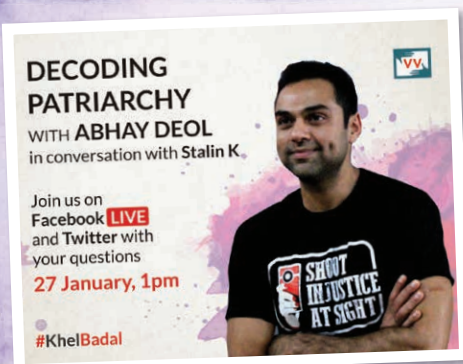


DETECTING EVERYDAY PATRIARCHY:

These are some of the normalised instances of patriarchy our Correspondents have documented:

- Boys are taught to not cry; girls to not swear.
- Girls play house; boys play with guns and cars.
- Menstruating women are considered dirty/impure in cultures across the world.
- After getting married a woman changes her last name to that of her husband's.
- Married women in India wear vermillion and bangles as signifiers; married men don't.
- Women pray and fast to find good husbands, keep husbands alive for a long time, and to have sons. Men don't.
- Women own less than 20% of the world's land.*
- A man is never asked how he juggles his job and family life.

* Monique Villa, 2017, Women own less than 20% of the world's land. It's time to give them equal property rights.



ONLINE ENGAGEMENTS

Patriarchy doesn't discriminate between the rural and urban; it affects everyone equally. Our Twitter chats and Facebook live sessions, in which thousands have participated, make this point. Organisations like Jagori, Sangath, Girls Count and Breakthrough share their learnings alongside individuals who fight their own battles with patriarchy.

We've talked about Bollywood and patriarchy with actor Abhay Deol; property rights for women; raising gender-sensitive children; and menstrual taboos among other things.

DECODING PATRIARCHY THROUGH CONVERSATIONS, ON-GROUND AND ONLINE

A power structure that is detrimental to half the members of a society can take root only when it is turned into a myth of epic proportions; when it has eroded logical reasoning. This is how patriarchy operates. To dismantle it, it needs to be analysed and questioned – to be decoded. Khel Badal does this through discussion clubs that Correspondents have formed in their neighborhoods. Some are with adolescents girls or boys, some with only married women, some with both men and women, some with health-workers. The groups meet at least once in two months where the videos produced for the campaign are used to start lively, introspective conversations. Correspondents created their discussion clubs based on their own comfort level. In the long run being confident with the group they were working with helped Correspondents encourage conversations between participants that were often difficult and sensitive. As of November 2017, 313 discussion clubs have taken place in 13 states of India. A total of 2086 people have attended these to understand and critique patriarchy. Simultaneously we have been generating discussions with

our online followers. We're not only encouraging them to watch or share video content but also to share their own stories, challenges and successes in dismantling patriarchy. This way, urban and rural women exchange experiences and learn from each other, bridging the digital divide. These conversations are vital to joining the dots to figure out exactly how and where patriarchy operates.

DISMANTLING PATRIARCHY AT THE GRASSROOTS

The gender discussion clubs have empowered their members to negotiate and challenge patriarchy in their lives – at home, at work, at school, in cultural and public spaces. They are publicly taking a stand.

Empowerment has been conceived of as a process of political mobilisation that transforms gender subordination and simultaneously overthrows oppressive structures. True empowerment results in a 'power within' (subjectivity and consciousness); 'the power to' (ability to exert control over material, human and social resources); and 'the power with' (the collective ability to tackle injustices). * ** Over two years we have gathered dozens of stories that capture the journey of change that communities as well as Correspondents are on.

* Naila Kabeer, 1999, Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment.

** Ruth Alsop, Nina Heinsohn, 2005, Measuring Empowerment in Practice: Structuring Analysis and Framing Indicators.

The first step in this has been that people feel more capable of harnessing their own power to change their lives. Laxmi Kaurav, a Correspondent recruited into the VV network specifically for the Khel Badal campaign, is challenging her own abusive marriage while she works on the campaign. In August 2017 she had to lie to her husband in order to come to Goa for VV's National Meet. With the threat of broken bones waiting for her at home, she said, "When things are bad, we sometimes lose our voice. But I have a voice and I must use it. I was scared of the consequences of my work some days ago, but now I feel a renewed sense of purpose."

Soria Banu from West Bengal explains how things have changed for the women who come to the discussion club. "When I asked the women if they felt that there's been a change in their lives because of the club, they said yes, there has been. Earlier they didn't speak up but now they demand their rights and question the restrictions placed on them. They know that girls are capable of doing what boys do. For example, they've started to go out alone. If there was a market or something at night, their husbands used to not let them go but now the women insist upon it and go," she says.

TAKING CONTROL OF SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS

Social institutions like schools, healthcare systems, government offices, and policymakers, among others are also influenced by patriarchal norms. It is impossible to bring true change unless these institutions reflect the change in attitudes. Men and women who have started questioning patriarchal diktats at discussion clubs are beginning to engage with these systems to make them more egalitarian.

After attending a few discussion clubs, 21-year-old Sonam Kumari from Bihar has negotiated going to college and teaching. "I convinced my parents that I could do something with my life too. I now go out alone to take tuition classes and simultaneously go to college. My mother treats me and my brothers as equals," she says.

“When things are bad, we sometimes lose our voice. But I have a voice and I must use it.”

Chetan Salve, who runs a club in Maharashtra, encourages men to discard the myth that vasectomies will emasculate them. He hopes that fewer women will have to have tubectomies (a much more invasive surgery), for family-planning purposes, as the norm is currently even in government health programmes.

Men at a discussion club in Balangir, Odisha have vowed to encourage women in their communities to participate more at village council meetings. "Patriarchy still runs rampant in these villages but I think in time it will reduce. The anti-mining movement here has slowly enabled women to come into public spaces and speak about their issues. I think that for a movement to succeed, it is necessary to have strong women's leadership. And often, sadly, our land rights movements are extremely

male-dominated and I'm trying to change that," says Satyanarayan Banchhor who runs the discussion club here.

THE POWER OF A COLLECTIVE

Remarkably, in many states the discussion clubs have become a support group, not only for members, but others in the community too. In Kashmir, club member rallied around Nafeesa (name changed) who had been abandoned by her husband only three months after their marriage. Nafeesa's husband threw her out on the suspicion that she had gone through his phone. Six months went by and the women eventually convinced Nafeesa that it was time for her to file for divorce if he wasn't going to take her back. It was this move that brought Nafeesa's husband around and he promised to take her back. Fearing he may go back on his word or start mistreating her again, the women urged Nafeesa to make her husband sign a written undertaking that he would do no such thing. She is now back in her marital home.

In Odisha, women stood in protest outside a hospital where the body of a woman who had been burnt by her in-laws was kept. The protest resulted in the culprits being caught and put in jail. Women in the discussion club in Madhya Pradesh talked about how alcoholic men in the village

were a nuisance. Jahanara Ansari shares how 50 women ended up gathering outside the Collector's office and demonstrated against alcohol consumption. "We made it clear that girls were being stopped from going to college as those under the influence of alcohol would harass them. Some of our husbands beat us up because of it. Now, the police come and arrest drunkards," she said.

Those who know the project well are certain they are seeing impact. While interacting with Community Correspondents at our national meet in August 2017 Dhanashri Brahme, National Programme Specialist, UNFPA acknowledged this work. "In my 20-year career, I've never seen video-based projects bring changes like VV is doing. I see many changes in the women [Correspondents] since I met them at their first Khel Badal training 15 months ago. Just as a flowing river cuts away at rocks without our being able to see it happen, so it is with gender transformations. You can't see the work, but you do see the eventual change," she said.

INSIGHTS ON THE CAMPAIGN

Along the way, we've had some insights and learnings as to what works on the ground.

We see that many discussion clubs have started a conversation between the gatekeepers of patriarchy and those attempting to break free of it. This is happening especially in those groups with both, men and women, and those which have two generations. For young girls the clubs are a chance to find allies; a space to voice these ideas of freedom, of wanting to work, finding their own life-partners and so on. The clubs give them the tools to have



these conversations at home where they can take control of their lives.

While talking about impacts, we felt that it was necessary to acknowledge both, concrete acts like a widow participating in her daughter's wedding against social norms, as well as attitudinal changes like men acknowledging the importance of consent. Rousing

the power within and then letting an individual decide when they want to take action to change their circumstances is important. This is because some instances of patriarchy are far easier to end than others. Getting a man to help with in household chores has fewer implications than a woman getting a job and earning.

Conversations still matter. Many groups are looking towards the future and talking about taking the clubs' conversations to schools and colleges. Though Correspondents currently get paid for holding the discussion clubs, most are ready to continue them without payment. This is a sign of the value they see in this. Correspondents also feel that the conversations reach far beyond the members of their clubs. People are telling their friends and families about them. As a result Correspondents who started with 15 members sometimes end up with 50 people in the room; they have come just to see for themselves why these clubs are so special. This multiplier effect will form the backbone of any long-term impact. And overall creating so many agents of change has been the biggest achievement of the campaign.

"The elders in the village ask how I can play with old traditions, and try to change them. I told them even if you are unable to change your thinking the next generation can and should. Only when we change can society change," says Shankarlal Raikwar from Uttar Pradesh.



CORRESPONDENT CLOSE-UP

YASHODHARA SALVE | Gujarat

A DIALOGUE BETWEEN TWO GENERATIONS

“In the eyes of society, a good woman is one who keeps the power of patriarchy intact. Any woman who challenges this, or decides to take her own path in life is a bad woman.”

Yashodhara Salve learned how to question the discrimination she faced as a girl at a very young age. Raised by her mother, in a house where her uncle and grandfather made all decisions, Yashodhara fought for everything from wearing pants to completing her education.

Today she runs a discussion club with twelve married women, a group of daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law. Over the decades, Indian popular culture, especially the movie and TV industries, have portrayed relationships between the two as one that is inherently confrontational. The mother-in-law is depicted as evil incarnate, and the daughter-in-law a ‘poor lamb’ who doesn’t dare question the treatment she gets.

And though often far-fetched, there is some truth in this portrayal. Women of the family often inflict the cruelty of patriarchy on one another: the pressure to bear a male heir; blaming a woman for the breakdown of a marriage; or to look the other way when violence happens.

“I do think that patriarchy continues to exist because both men and women help perpetuate it. In fact sometimes women are its worst agents because of their own need to survive. In the eyes of society a good woman is one who keeps the power of patriarchy intact. Any woman who challenges this, or decides to take her own path in life is a bad woman,” says Yashodhara.

It is in this context that Yashodhara is encouraging conversations between two generations through her discussion club. The older women bring their experience and explain to their daughters-in-law how they lived. As young women, they couldn’t wear slippers in front of their fathers-in-law; if he passed them while they were walking, they’d have to cover their faces and wait, even if they had a huge bundle of sticks on their head. They tell their daughters-in-law that they have far more freedom.

“They acknowledge facts like widows are treated terribly, and that girls can’t make decisions in their own homes even though they study, and often have jobs. So if practices have to be changed then we women have to support each other. And even in the couple of discussion clubs that we have had, the older women pledged that going forward they will not let their daughters-in-law face the traumas that they did. In fact one woman went so far as to say, ‘I will treat her like my own daughter now’,” says Yashodhara.

And they have rallied around each other. In early 2017 as the result of a discussion club meeting the women supported Daniben, a widow, to take part in her daughter’s wedding. Daniben who had raised four children by herself wasn’t allowed to attend the marriages of her first three children because widows are said to be inauspicious. However, at her youngest daughter’s wedding, Daniben welcomed the groom on the wedding day when he came to her house. “If anyone criticises us, we’ll fight for her right. She gave birth to the children, so it is her right,” said one member of the discussion club, as they tried to convince Daniben to break the discriminatory custom.

After hosting only two discussion clubs, Yashodhara had to leave Dhrangadhra for other work. “Even though we sat together only a few times, I think that there have been some changes. I am in touch with the women, and I hear that they got some money together, rented a place and started sewing classes. Other women have reduced wearing a veil at home and do it only outside. Even to do this much takes a lot of courage and inner strength for the women,” says Yashodhara.



Women mobilise communities to
claim their rights

ISSUE IN FOCUS:
GOOD GOVERNANCE





In the last 7 years, VV's Correspondents have reported approximately 7000 stories, of which 4000 were made by women Correspondents. Women and men are working together to create greater equality across generations. Of the 1300 videos that resulted in 'impact', nearly 750 were produced by women. Many women start off facing resistance from their families and scepticism from communities. Once they start covering stories from their communities and bring impacts, they become local problem solvers; people come to them for help in resolving all kinds of issues, from the lack of food subsidies and water, to non-functional schools and government departments. In doing so, they also enable other people in the community, especially women, to claim their rights. Some of our Correspondents have even been elected to positions of local governance because of their work as Correspondents. The presence of a camera makes people, especially those in power, pay attention to what these women have to say, and what their communities need.

SCAMMING TEACHER CAUGHT RED-HANDED

The women of the Kalyani Sashakti Samuh (Kalyani Empowerment Collective) had been successfully running the local school's Midday Meal Scheme in Simaria village for almost a decade. The government sanctioned Midday Meal Scheme is a major reason parents send their kids to school; they hope that they'll get at least one nutritional meal a day. The teacher who was authorised to manage the funds began embezzling money, and the women could no longer cook as their supplier hadn't been paid and refused to give rations. Reena Ramteke, a Correspondent from Gariaband, Chhattisgarh brought the women and ration supplier together to trace the missing money. They approached the block education officer and started an investigation that went on for a year. In the end, the scamming teacher was suspended and the school's midday meal was back on track, feeding a 100 children.



"Assuming that poor, illiterate women cannot tackle corruption is one of the biggest misconceptions these kind of cheaters [sic] have. They think they're up against helpless people. I think the teacher believed he had a very strong alibi, with all his fake paperwork. He probably didn't realise what lengths the women cooks would go to, to uphold their reputations...I've grown up battling too many people for access to education and the recognition of my worth as a woman; I had to support this group by telling their story. These women proved that it is possible to conduct regular, efficient programmes in schools, but you just have to have a process via which government schemes can be regularly monitored," said Reena.

WOMEN ONION FARMERS GET EQUAL WAGES

In 2010, Community Correspondent Rohini Pawar brought about the first of many changes in her community, paving the way for a more gender-just future. She found that men and women who worked as wage workers in the farms of Walhe village, Maharashtra were paid unequally. Women engaged in sowing seeds, planting saplings and reaping the crop were paid INR 60 a day, while men who primarily dig channels and canals, and plough the land were paid INR 125 a day. As she filmed, Rohini talked to the women about the importance of fighting for their rights. The women stopped going to the farms, leaving the landowners in dire need of workers, as the onion crop needed harvesting. In about 10 days the landowners started to buckle under the pressure – they increased the prices one by one and eventually agreed to a standard wage of INR 125 per day. As a result of this intervention, 600 women got wages equal to their male co-workers for the first time.



1400 PEOPLE SAVED FROM INFLATED ELECTRICITY BILLS

The government of India has been working hard to bring electricity to the most remote villages in the country. It also provides special subsidies to underprivileged families, like those living below the poverty line (BPL). In 2011 such subsidies were announced in Batiyagarh village, in Madhya Pradesh. But residents soon found themselves paying bills far higher than they'd imagined; the 30 units guaranteed free to every BPL household were not being adequately subsidised. Community Correspondent Arti Bai, who was also among residents unable to pay these inflated bills, found that 150 families were affected by the problem. "It was a challenge to convince my own community (to take action), but it was a choice that helped me later," said Arti who also works as a sweeper in a police station.

A Dalit woman entering the Electricity Department, Arti Bai was met with stoic silence. "The peon didn't even entertain my requests to meet the officer. He made up some excuses and made me leave," she says. The second time round, Arti went with six women and two men from the Dalit Vanchit Vikas Ghat (Development Collective for Excluded Dalits), compelling the official to grant them a meeting. "We showed him the video evidence of how his department was cheating the poorest communities. He was really cagey of my camera. He told me he didn't want any of these 'camera protests' and would help us in any way we wanted," said Arti. An investigation team was formed and four months later 1400 people were given corrected bills. Fifty-nine villages in Batiyagarh village council now have their electricity meters monitored on a bi-monthly basis to ensure that no further discrepancies creep into their bills.





DISCUSSION CLUB INSIGHT

BIDESHINI PATEL | Odisha

UNITED WE STAND

“Gender and mining are two things that are always on my mind. And on some days I feel restless, wondering when the oppression we face will end.”

“Gender and mining are two things that are always on my mind. And on some days I feel restless, wondering when the oppression we face will end,” says Bideshini Patel, a woman whose soft voice and gentle manner will almost fool you into thinking she’s timid.

Bideshini is one of the chief organisers of the Khandadhar Mahila Mahasangh (Khandadhar Women’s Union), one of the key organisations fighting to stop iron-ore mining in the Khandadhar hills in Sundergarh district, Odisha. Since December 2016 she has been running a gender discussion club with fifteen women who live in different villages within the area. The group is a mixture of housewives, students, an ex-village head, a woman who has held a position in Panchayati Raj Institutions and one who works for a political party.

“I had different reasons for asking the women to join the club. I have known some of them for a better part of my life and on hearing that they wanted to travel outside their villages and learn new things, I

asked them to join the club. Women such as the ex-village head and the party worker have had more mobility, but haven't been spared society's scathing judgement. The party worker often feels like quitting because people taunt her for travelling alone. I thought the club would be a chance for them to understand patriarchy better and give them more self-confidence. Another girl comes for the club from a remote village and she also wants to learn how to stitch. But her parents were against the idea of her traveling to work until I spoke to them a few times," says Bideshini.

Some of the women and Bideshini have already been close allies. Bideshini shares how before the discussion group had been formed, a few of its members, including Bideshini, had taken over a Shiva Temple in the village. "Women were not allowed in this temple. One day we saw that there was no priest, and so one of the women entered the temple and started praying. A priest came, grabbed her and shoved her out of the complex. In the chaos that followed, everyone from the priests to police officers present at the spot hurled vicious abuse at us for entering the temple. The police officer has since been transferred and after repeated meetings with the priest, we are allowed in the temple," says Bideshini.

While talking about dismantling patriarchy, the women of the group have become an even tighter support system for each other.

The circle widens to support and demand justice for other women in their communities as well.

"A few months ago, a horrible incident took place. A girl who had been married off in another village was being abused and tortured by her in-laws for dowry and also for being dark-skinned and older than her husband. When she came to meet me, I told her that I'd film her story. But she wanted to wait for a few days. In those few days, I got a call that her in-laws murdered her by setting her on fire. When the women in the discussion club found out that the police had made no arrests, many of them sat in protest at the hospital in Rourkela where her body was. The in-laws of the girl were arrested but not her husband," shares Bideshini.

Bideshini says that cases like this are rampant in Odisha and the cops do not cooperate. To give up the fight is not an option – not in the case of gender-based violence and not when it comes to mining. As one of the few women leaders of an anti-mining movement, Bideshini has a unique perspective on the issue.

"When it comes to going on rallies and standing face to face with police forces, the women are always pushed forward. But, when people from outside come to our area, when there is a press conference, or any place with a mic, the women are the last to be heard – if at all. I don't like seeing this. We're all in the same fight, to save our hills, then why should women not have



an equal chance to share their concerns with the world?" asks Bideshini.

The climate in Khandadhar is rife with tension at the moment. While the community has managed to oust the South Korean company, POSCO, from the area, the threat of mining is imminent again. This time it comes in the shape of the state-run Odisha Mining Corporation. No one knows what will eventually happen.

"This discussion group has become a life-support for me; it never fails to lift my flagging spirit," says Bideshini.

FORMER BOOTLEGGERS START A NEW LIFE

Sunita Kasera, a Correspondent from Karauli, Rajasthan helped 20 women, who had been bootleggers of illegal alcohol, start a new chapter in their lives. The women had attended a vocational training organised by the government and had been promised a grant of INR 3,000 to set up small businesses. The grant failed to arrive, and the women considered returning to the bootlegging life. Sunita visited the excise department with a video testimony of the women. “I demanded to see the documentation of the scheme. I was greeted with utter confusion. They were still getting over the fact that a woman had entered their office,” said Sunita. After a couple of hours Sunita was finally shown papers stating that grants had already been distributed. She was asked to follow up with the Social Welfare Department that was in charge of doing so.

Meanwhile, a senior officer started to send Sunita lewd text messages and calls. Sunita stood her ground and confronted him in a busy market place. She also got the local press committee, of which Sunita was the first female member, to demand an apology from the excise office. Her efforts came to fruition when the Social Welfare Department contacted her with the news that they’d like to distribute the money to the 20 women at a small ceremony. The women set up a tailoring shop with the money they got. The excise officer by this time had put in papers for a transfer, packed his bags and left Karauli.



NEW TOILETS FOR 90 FAMILIES

Rebeka Parvin, a Correspondent from Belgharia, a suburb of Kolkata, reported the appalling sanitation facilities in her neighbourhood in 2016. The tenement had just two toilets that were used by 90 families of the locality. The toilet had two unisex latrines, with no water, drainage system or electricity – a serious sanitation issue. The problem had existed for 20 years but because it is private land, municipal authorities were reluctant to fix the problem. The residents were also too poor to build their own latrines. The unhygienic surroundings became a breeding ground for diseases, threatening the health of the residents. Long queues outside the toilets, especially during the morning, meant many working residents and students got late to their destinations. Young girls often used the toilets at night because the mornings were so chaotic. After filming the evidence, Rebeka took four community members to the municipality officer to show it to him. They were assured prompt action and the officer visited the neighbourhood in a month, sanctioning the repair of existing toilets and construction of three new toilets.

The community now has three working toilets with two water taps, while two new toilets are under construction. A new street lamp has also been installed so that people can use the toilet at night as well.



A SCHOOL GETS TEACHERS FOR THE FIRST TIME IN TWO YEARS

In 2013, Community Correspondent Mamta Patra's video got four teachers appointed to the Satsuma High School in Sambalpur district Odisha. With no teachers in the school, kids had been coming and teaching themselves for two years. The school served 5000 children from seven to eight villages. "A relative of mine pointed me in the direction of the Satsuma High School. When he said there is a teacher shortage I thought they might be one or two hands short, I never imagined that there wouldn't be a single teacher on the school grounds. I particularly remember talking to Bise Patra, one of the 10th graders. There was this eagerness in him, a light in his big eyes, to do something great with his life. He had moved away from his parents house so that he could attend the school, but at that time feared failing his exams," recalled Mamta.

To get all the elements of her video, Mamta made several trips to the school, travelling five kilometres each way. This was an entirely new adventure since she wasn't used to travelling alone. It took Mamta multiple attempts to get an appointment with the circle officer who was in charge of hiring teachers. Five months after starting the process, she got a phone call telling her that four teachers had been appointed. "At first I was a little sceptical. I thought that I was being told this just so that I'd go away and not bother authorities. When I met those teachers in person, I realised for the first time the potential of my little video camera. I have worked in the development sector now for about 20 years (since 1994). But this is the first time that I feel that I can articulate people's actual needs and bring change," she said.



WOMEN WIN THE RIGHT TO WORK

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act is the only source of work and income for many rural communities across in India. In Uttar Pradesh, an Employment Officer repeatedly turned away women from Keshavpur village who depended on the scheme. He insisted that the women couldn't possibly work as hard as the men in the village. This attitude is perhaps reflected in the statistics that show that Uttar Pradesh has the lowest percentage of women participating in MNREGA in the country at 24% while the national average is almost at 55%.

When Community Correspondent Kesha Devi tried to get the women their right to work, she faced multiple hurdles. Fearing a backlash, the women themselves had refused to take action and Kesha Devi had to meet them several times to convince them about the power of collective action. Kesha was pressurised by officers to drop the investigation and discouraged from sending any applications to higher officials. Eventually about 20-25 women joined Kesha in making a video and sending an application to the village representative demanding work. They received work within a month.





CORRESPONDENT CLOSE-UP

SAROJ PARASTE | Madhya Pradesh

GRASSROOTS GOVERNANCE GETS A SHOT OF FEMININE ENERGY

“ I fulfil all my duties without the help of my husband. I wanted to help them do the same. Instead of being puppet leaders, I think we can use our power to empower other women too.”

In 2015 Saroj Paraste was elected as village head (sarpanch) of her area constituting three villages. Saroj's work as a Community Correspondent, which has got her community access to healthcare and clean water among other things, won the confidence of her people to elect her for the position. “At the time of my nomination I was very clear that I would not stop my work as a Community Correspondent, and people still supported me. It is a challenge juggling the two roles but I enjoy it,” says Saroj.

Soon after this she became the head of the block level governance body (Janpad Adhyaksh), which serves 69 villages. As one of the few women *sarpanches* who actually gets to do her job, Saroj has a unique perspective of how grassroots democracy works and the ways in which it fails.

In a system that has traditionally favoured men and ‘upper castes’, the rise in the number of women holding office is only recent. The Indian Constitution, through amendments, mandates that 33% seats filled by direct elections are to be reserved for women (50% in some states). Despite this, very few elected women actually get to do their job and use their power. It is mostly their husbands or brothers who take charge.

“Instead of women *sarpanches* it is their husbands or *panch-patis* who do all the work and show up for most meetings. These men won’t give over power to the women who were actually elected to do the job, and make most decisions on their behalf. The men come even for workshops or meetings, which means that women *sarpanches* get no information and understanding of what’s going on their communities. They remain token heads,” she explains.

It was because of this that Saroj was eager to hold gender discussion clubs with the women *sarpanches* and their husbands. “I fulfil all my duties without the help of my husband. I wanted to help them do the same. Instead of being puppet leaders, I think we can use our power to empower other women too. When I tried to organise a discussion club with the women *sarpanches* and their husbands I was met by a wall of resistance,” says Saroj. The men were reluctant to send their wives for such a discussion club. Saroj says that she did try to convince them, and some did agree to let their wives come, but never made good on their promise.

In stark contrast is Saroj’s own story, her husband does accompany her to many meetings, especially when they are far. But his involvement ends there, and unlike other *panch-patis*, Saroj’s husband sits in a far corner. And Saroj does still face sexism on the job. People often look to her husband during a meeting, expecting him to make decisions. Saroj says he points them in her direction saying, “My wife is your sarpanch, not I.”

Saroj hasn’t given up on the hope that one day there will be more women who will hold office and also have the power to do their jobs. “If my discussion club hasn’t panned out, it’s okay. I have started to have these conversations during our meetings at the block and village levels. A few times now I have refused to start a meeting until all the women *sarpanches* are in attendance. If women are in power, then they have the right to make decisions, not their husbands. It is a start, that more women have at least started attending meetings now,” says Saroj.





DISCUSSION CLUB INSIGHT

ANIL KUMAR | Uttar Pradesh

QUESTIONING MALE PRIVILEGE

“We’ve been saddled with this conservative way of thinking for generations now; this whole idea of masculinity, that ‘men don’t cry’...It has trickled down to every last one of us.”

“I think I also used to be a typical male before I started this work. I never did any housework earlier,” shares Anil Kumar Saroj from Uttar Pradesh. “Someone said to me, before all this talk about gender equality that I should do housework, if only for a day...So one afternoon I started doing the dishes and in about 15 minutes half the neighbourhood had gathered to watch me. My mother was quite annoyed that I was doing this when there was a perfectly capable daughter-in-law (Anil’s wife) in the house. But I think it’s good for me to do this, it has improved my relationship with my wife. I think I understand what she faces better.”

Anil is currently organising gender discussion clubs for men aged between 35 and 60 as part of Khel Badal. In the months since he joined the campaign he has produced videos exposing how gender-based discrimination starts at a very young age. His video that follows a school-going girl of 11 caring for her siblings, cooking and cleaning while her younger brother isn’t expected to do anything but play and study, has been a hit in almost every discussion club it

has been screened in across India.

“We’ve been saddled with this conservative way of thinking for generations now; this whole idea of masculinity, that ‘men don’t cry’...It has trickled down to every last one of us. Take for example the fact that women are still not allowed to participate in the funeral rites. They are still considered impure when they are menstruating. But why? It’s a perfectly natural bodily function,” he says

For members of Anil’s discussion club this is an opportunity to re-examine many of their own strongly held beliefs about who a man is and who a woman is; the roles they play in society; and the need to break out of the rigid framework these ideas are set in.

Over the past few months these are the conversations that the men have had at the discussion club. They share positive examples of the changes they are bringing in their own lives. He tells us about the doctor who now also helps take care of his children and shares housework with his wife; and about the man who is extremely proud that his daughter is a doctor in Mumbai. “Even the men who were hesitant to acknowledge that women and men should have equal rights, are beginning to admit that times are changing, and that ensuring that our daughters get the opportunity to move ahead in life is good for the entire family,” says Anil.

Anil strongly believes that these conversations will move beyond the confines of the discussion club. He shares all the videos he screens with his wife, who in turn talks about them when she visits the local self-help groups. “The conversations that have been squashed and denied for so long are beginning to come up to the surface now. The men in my discussion club share what we talk about when they go around the village. So I think that change is possible. Things won’t change themselves, we have to topple down the conservative thought process behind patriarchy,” says Anil.



Using community media to monitor maternal health programmes

Dr. Shalini Singh, www.dharmapal.com

Dr. Shalini Singh is a senior research officer at the Centre for Communications Programs, a research and training organization in the field of reproductive health and family planning.

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ISSUE IN FOCUS:
MATERNAL HEALTH





One woman dies every ten minutes due to pregnancy-related complications in India – approximately 45,000 a year. This number is so high, that no single woman's death is ever considered newsworthy. Yet with our vast network of women reporting from the districts where health services are worst, we are uniquely positioned to investigate many of these stories.

Although the government has put in place schemes to ensure that every woman has access to healthcare during and after pregnancy, our ground reports reveal that access to prenatal and postnatal care, nutrition and timely medical intervention remain dismal in several parts of the country. The leading causes of maternal deaths in India are infections caused by using non-sterile kits during delivery, home births without trained providers, eclampsia, postpartum haemorrhage, early pregnancies, anaemia and unsafe abortions. In early 2015, VV launched a campaign, with support from Oxfam India, to monitor maternal health in India through the tool of community-produced videos. We felt an urgent need to bring out more community voices on this issue, which gets only episodic coverage. Seventy-five Community Correspondents across four states – Jharkhand, Bihar, Odisha and Chhattisgarh – were specifically trained to examine gaps in the implementation of maternal health schemes, report on violations, and devise solutions to improve the state of maternal healthcare in the country.

Having a baby in a remote village of India means being pregnant with anxiety and a sense of helplessness. Without access to health infrastructure to monitor pregnancies and provisions for emergency care, it is a life-threatening situation for both the mother and the unborn child. Women who approach state-run health facilities are often turned away due to a lack of infrastructure and are forced to approach private practitioners. Most of them cannot afford their services.

Twenty-four-year-old Masahun Khatun from Phulvari village of Bihar's Kishanganj district was expecting her fifth baby. She was five months pregnant in June 2014, when she tripped and fell in the front yard of her house. Later that night, Masahun woke up writhing in pain and bleeding profusely. With no doctors at the nearest government hospital, Masahun was taken to a private practitioner, who performed an abortion; an incomplete one. Two weeks later she had to go back to the government hospital.

Since the hospital lacked the required medical facilities,

Masahun had to undergo a remedial procedure at her home, under the supervision of an auxiliary nurse midwife (ANM). ANMs are not qualified to perform surgical procedures. Her condition worsened over the next five days and she passed away.

During the three weeks that Masahun shuttled between private practitioners and state-run medical facilities, her husband, a daily wage worker, spent nearly INR 40,000 on her treatment. Navita Devi, the Correspondent who reported this story, also revealed that the lack of proper abortion facilities, trained medical personnel and access to public health facilities had claimed the lives of several other women in Phulvari village. The ones who survived, live with financial burdens and a trauma that never leaves them.

WHAT DO THE GROUND REPORTS REVEAL?

Since July 2015, VV has produced 101 ground reports on maternal health.

An initial analysis of the ground reports produced reveal that the schemes, although promising on paper, fail to reach their beneficiaries. In particular, they shed light on the state of implementation of the government's key maternal health programme, Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY). This is a cash transfer programme that incentivises institutional deliveries in order to reduce maternal deaths in India. Women delivering at government hospitals do not have to pay for any facilities and are given a cash incentive in return. The scheme also provides free antenatal check-ups, IFA tablets, medicines, nutrition in health institutions, provision for blood transfusions, and transport from



VV's partner White Ribbon Alliance, with whom we are producing a series of videos in 2017, is demanding respectful and dignified maternal healthcare. VV's videos stress the need for monitoring from the ground-up by village councils and local citizens' monitoring committees. We are also making positive stories to show examples of what's working. These steps will encourage more women to seek healthcare rather than be skeptical of it.

health centres and back. The ground reports testify that despite the JSY, access to prenatal and postnatal care, nutrition, and timely medical intervention remain dismal in several parts of the country.

NO AMBULANCE SERVICES & POOR INFRASTRUCTURE

Reports from the length and breadth of the country reveal that ambulances never reach villages on time to bring women to hospitals for delivery. One woman from Madhya Pradesh reported that she had to spend money on private taxis for both her deliveries. When women do make it to a hospital, they give birth in deplorable conditions at unhygienic and ill-equipped health facilities. Bharti Kumari reported on how the crumbling infrastructure at a government health facility posed a threat to the life of patients as well as health workers. Hospitals lack adequate medicines, equipment and sometimes even water.

OUT OF POCKET EXPENDITURE & ABSENTEE DOCTORS

Fifty percent of the stories report that women are being forced to pay for free services. For instance, Gyanti Kumari from Bihar's Siwan district reported that apart from making people pay for free services, the Rajapur Primary Health Centre also faces a shortage of medicines. Her report also revealed that an ANM charged pregnant women INR 50 per injection and INR 500 to cut their umbilical cord.

Mary Nisha Hansda's report captured the scene at the Godda district hospital in Jharkhand. When Paku Tudu

went there for her delivery, she waited for hours for a doctor to examine her, but eventually delivered in the presence of a nurse. Paku was not only charged for medicines but also for using the toilet at the hospital.

MISSING HEALTH WORKERS & LOCKED HEALTH CENTRES

While India's public health system grapples with a dearth of public health facilities, a shortage of human resources prevents existing health facilities from functioning. Women from Khatti village in Chhattisgarh told Correspondent Reena Ramteke that ANMs hardly ever visit the village, and that the sub-health centre in the village always remains locked. A sub-health centre is a state-run first care provider staffed by an ANM who is responsible for administering antenatal care to pregnant women. Other stories reveal that a shortage of health workers prevents even those with the best of intentions from doing their job. For example, Ahilya Devi services 14 health centers instead of eight, as mandated by the government guidelines.

When health centres are far away pregnant women have to travel long distances to avail medical services. Several testimonies reveal that many women cannot afford travelling to faraway clinics and forego check-ups altogether.

FORCED STERILISATIONS

The death of 15 women at mass sterilisation camps in Chhattisgarh caused global media outrage in 2014. The incident wasn't an isolated one; India has a long history of targeting and coercing men and women from poor communities into such procedures. Shambulal Khatik from Rajasthan reported how Kanku Bai was made to have a tubectomy after she delivered her baby. She was not informed of the procedure, nor was her family. As a result of the surgery in 2011, her health has deteriorated and she is now entirely bedridden. In West Bengal, at least 30 women from Kalpani village have had Copper-Ts inserted without consent. One woman reveals how she found out only when she saw her hospital discharge papers after her delivery.

NO CASH INCENTIVES

After going through the trauma of delivering in government hospitals many women still don't receive the cash incentive of INR 1,400 promised under JSY. These reports are endemic across rural India. Satyanarayan Banchor reported on one such instance from Bankheda village of Bolangir district in Odisha. A new mother, Puspanjali, did not get any money months after delivering her baby. "Why should we deliver at public health institutions when we neither get quality care nor the incentives that we are entitled to," she asked.



In 2016 VV started a new program Surveys for Action. Community members conduct surveys that monitor the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. With the SDGs, the Indian government has joined forces with nearly every government in the world in a commitment to end poverty by 2030. Yet, more than 40% of the SDG indicators lack reliable data to track progress.



JHARKHAND Street Survey

We surveyed 55 new mothers in Samlong, Kusai and Dibdih, three hamlet in the outskirts of Ranchi in Jharkhand



55 NEW MOTHERS

All from Below Poverty Line families in Jharkhand

report that the government has succeeded in getting women to give birth in hospitals. But crucial services are **still missing** or have to be **paid for**.

www.videovolunteers.org

**video
volunteers** >>>
EMPOWERING COMMUNITY VOICES

Video Volunteers gives a voice to the marginalised by empowering communities to create content and run social change campaigns.

WHERE DID YOUR DELIVERY TAKE PLACE?



PRIVATE HOSPITAL

36%

34%

 HAD NORMAL DELIVERY

66%

 HAD CAESARIAN

95%

 ULTRASOUND CHECK DONE

0%

 GOT GOVT TRANSPORT


GOVERNMENT HOSPITAL

60%

82%

 HAD NORMAL DELIVERY

18%

 HAD CAESARIAN

58%

 ULTRASOUND CHECK DONE

30%

 GOT GOVT TRANSPORT


HOME

4%

100%

 HAD NORMAL DELIVERY

Many poor women doubt the quality of care they will receive in a government hospital and choose to go private. And private hospitals have shockingly high rates of expensive caesarians.

DID YOU HAVE TO PAY?



GOVERNMENT HOSPITAL

40%

 PAID FOR GOVT TRANSPORT

46%

 PAID FOR MEDICINE

46%

 PAID FOR ULTRASOUND


PRIVATE HOSPITAL

100%

 PAID FOR PVT TRANSPORT

95%

 PAID FOR MEDICINE

80%

 PAID FOR ULTRASOUND

THIS IS SHOCKING

Because government services are supposed to be **FREE** for poor women

This survey was done by Video Volunteers' team of trained community monitors using an android survey app.

#SDG3 #MaternalHealth



COMMUNITY MONITORING & DATA GATHERING

- ✓ Fills the data gaps that stand in the way of inclusive growth and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals
- ✓ Empowers us with the information we need to create solutions and influence policy
- ✓ Promotes transparent and accountable governance

IMPACTS FROM THE MATERNAL HEALTH CAMPAIGN



■ MOTHERS AND NURSES GET CASH INCENTIVES AFTER THREE YEARS

To reduce maternal and neonatal mortality the Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY) gives a cash incentive of INR 1,400 to women who have deliveries in government hospitals, and INR 600 to the Sahiyas, government appointed social health activists who monitor antenatal check-ups, and the post-delivery care. Correspondent Halima Ejaz found that new mothers and Sahiyas had not been paid their cash incentives for over three years. For the new mothers this small sum provides financial security at a time when they can't work and earn. Halima has been a health worker herself and knows how the system works. She filmed video testimonies of the women and took the issue up with the Block Medical Officer in charge of Baghmara health department in Jharkhand. While clarifying that delays in getting reports from the ground often cause such problems, the officer made sure that the arrears owed to the women were cleared immediately. He also looked into other discrepancies in the implementation of the scheme, such as women having to pay for medicines they should have gotten for free. "I have deposited this money under my daughter's name," said one happy mother, hopeful of her daughter's future.

USING NEW STRATEGIES TO GET IMPACT ON MATERNAL HEALTH

We're always innovating new tools and methods. Correspondents can use to help their communities claim their rights, in addition to video advocacy. Since improving maternal and neonatal health is a key priority for the Indian government, we had a unique opportunity for dialogue.

- **Grievance Redressal Letters:** Correspondents create a written report of each video, and then submit it to a government official. They then follow up on the case to make sure the problems they report are solved.
- The opposition leader in the Jharkhand Assembly watched VV videos on the government maternal health programme. He pledged to make sure the government would devise an action plan to improve its implementation.

65,000 PEOPLE NOW HAVE AN AMBULANCE SERVICE

The Torsa River surrounds Kalpani village in West Bengal's Cooch Behar district from three sides. When the tide swells, its 6,500 residents are often left stranded for healthcare. When Community Correspondent Bikash Barman started filming the story institutional deliveries were at an all-time low. While the nearest primary healthcare centre is across the river, the district hospital in Cooch Behar town was an expensive ambulance ride away. If an ambulance deigned to travel to the village it would charge INR 400, while private taxis charged as much as INR 1400.

Bikash worked with the White Ribbon Alliance and took the issue to the local member of parliament who allocated funds towards buying an ambulance for the village. The travel time between Kalpani and the district hospital has now been cut by half.



VIDEO REVIVES HEALTHCARE IN RURAL MADHYA PRADESH

In August 2012, Community Correspondent Saroj Paraste documented how residents of Sakri Village, Madhya Pradesh had not been provided any services by the appointed auxiliary nurse midwife, and multi purpose health worker for two whole years. The nearest hospital is about 25 km away, worsening the effects of this absence. "There were a number of women who had had repeated miscarriages and a number of stillbirths," said Saroj.

Saroj got in touch with various authorities and was met with immediate and unflinching support at each level. "The block programme manager of the National Rural Health Mission was upset when he heard about this. He did carry out a small investigation but it took some time for more concrete steps to be taken," said Saroj. Soon an entire battalion of health workers descended on Sakri to make up for lost time. They found old records that confirmed that no health workers had visited the village in over two years. The video resulted in action being taken against the errant workers and has now ensured that the 137 families of Sakri, which includes 295 women and 66 children, receive the healthcare they require on a regular basis.





DISCUSSION CLUB INSIGHT

CHETAN SALVE | Maharashtra

ROLE MODELS OF CHANGE

“ We’ve been working on the destigmatisation of vasectomies and encouraging men to come forward instead of women. Between my wife and I, we’ve decided that I will have a vasectomy.”

Set between the borders of Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh, Nandurbar district in Maharashtra is home to thousands of Adivasi families displaced by the Sardar Sarovar Dam, the highest dam in India. The Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) has been active in the area for three decades, enabling the community to fight for their right to proper rehabilitation. Chetan Salve, a Correspondent with Video Volunteers, has been living in the area for 18 years and works with the NBA and the affected communities. For the past year he’s been running a discussion club with Adivasi youth in the area.

Chetan credits the movement for doing work to end practices of untouchability in the area and to reduce gender inequality. For example, he feels that women and girls in the area have more freedom here than in many other parts of Maharashtra or even India. Chetan explains how a movement like the NBA paves the way for a more equal society in some ways, especially for those women and men who are an active part of it. Some patriarchal practices however, continue.

“When we talked about the practice of women covering their heads or married women not saying their husband’s name, many members of my discussion club felt that this is the right way to act. It is tradition. Some said that times are changing and such practices should end. But there are other things happening here too. Practices like bride price and witch-hunting continue to adversely affect women in the community. And in time I want to talk about these with the group and even a wider circle,” says Chetan on how he has had to negotiate having difficult conversations with more palatable topics.

Chetan’s way of addressing these biases is to show these young men role models from their own community. “A lot of men do things like participate in household chores. Women go out and participate in public life. There are many women in the area who have been pillars of the anti-dam movement at this local level. I want to show them these possibilities. They should also understand that there’s no shame in doing housework, or even something like getting a vasectomy,” he says.

Compared to most parts of Maharashtra, Nandurbar district has one of the higher rates of vasectomies in the state with more men slowly opting for these. Societal ideas around masculinity and fertility, combined with the inadequate understanding of postoperative recovery times, means that in most parts of India women are more likely to go through sterilisation procedures than men, even though it’s a far more invasive process for women. Chetan further explains, “In an area like ours where healthcare, and roads are non-existent and where food resources are limited, there has to be a focus on family planning. We’ve been working on the destigmatisation of vasectomies and encouraging men to come forward instead of women. Between my wife and I, we’ve decided that I will have a vasectomy.” Chetan plans to film his own story to inspire more men in the community to have a vasectomy, instead of making their wives go through a sterilisation process.

On being asked about the degree of mobility a movement like the NBA affords women, Chetan says, “There is a focus on making decisions democratically and there is a firm belief here that women must be seen as equal stakeholders in all decisions regarding conservation efforts, such as compensation during rehabilitation efforts. There are women active on the field, and there are a few at the top leadership level as well.”

He tells the stories of women like Pillari Bai, Dedahi Bai and Githa, a village head, who speak with an eloquent fire that inspires people to stand up for their rights; who never hesitate to talk to government officials to have their demands heard; or to be at the forefront of a rally.

“I wouldn’t say that the movement is patriarchal. We see people for their individual merits and what they can contribute. For instance, we sometimes will not start a meeting before the women of a community show up for it. But yes, now that I think about it, maybe it has been our failing that we haven’t enabled more women to rise up in the leadership of a movement that is essentially a grassroots one,” says Chetan.

But he feels that there is hope to fix this. “If in 20 years, we’ve gone from three literate people in 33 villages to a few thousand literate girls and boys, surely other things can change as well. And that’s what we hope will happen,” he says.



Enabling women to speak with
dignity about violence

ISSUE IN FOCUS:

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN



The discourse around rape in India still revolves around a woman's honour. To be sexually assaulted means she has lost her honour; her family has been shamed. Survivors face a huge challenge in getting legal recourse because of this mentality. Police officials and medical practitioners often cause more trauma when a survivor comes to them for help. While reporting on violence against women VV's Correspondents focus not just on the incident but everything that happens after it. Correspondents have gone through extensive training on documenting the legal aspects of a case. They report on how difficult or easy it is to file a police complaint; how doctors treat the survivor; and how the legal procedures unfold. The road to justice is long and often there is no end in sight. However, Correspondents follow the story through, till a survivor or their families receive rehabilitation and compensation from the State, and legal action is taken against the culprits.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN SUB-CATEGORIES AND NUMBER OF IMPACTS



DOMESTIC VIOLENCE	36 REPORTS	6 IMPACTS
RAPE	14 REPORTS	2 IMPACTS
TRAFFICKING	6 REPORTS	2 IMPACTS
WITCH HUNTING	4 REPORTS	1 IMPACT
ACID ATTACKS	3 REPORTS	1 IMPACT
VIOLENCE BY AGENCIES OF THE STATE	3 REPORTS	1 IMPACT

A PRIVATE SHAME: TALKING ABOUT MARITAL RAPE

In early 2017 we asked Correspondents to initiate conversations about sexual consent within marriage in their communities. When asked about who had a right over their bodies, women said their husbands did. Marital rape is not a criminal offence in India. In fact, lawmakers and members of Parliament have time and again said that criminalising marital rape has the "potential of destroying the institution of marriage".

The interviews our Correspondents conducted exposed the burden that many women carry alone. "This is not something you tell people; not your mother, not your

sister. This is my private shame," said a woman from Jharkhand. Another girl narrated what her friend faced as a newly married bride: "Her mother-in-law told her, this is why he married her and brought her home."

This violent paradigm is so normalised that most married women see 'sex without consent' and sexual violence as part of their wifely 'duties' – a small price to pay for food, shelter and some measure of security. Not surprisingly, it is only when women find some degree of financial independence that they begin to question marital rape.



In a survey conducted by the United Nations Population Fund and the International Center for Research on Women, where more than 9,200 men were interviewed across seven Indian states, one-third of them admitted to having forced a sexual act on their wives. In the same survey, 60% men said they had used some form of violence to assert dominance over their partners.*

For instance, when Correspondent Babita Maurya interviewed a woman from her village in Raipur Durga Devi, Uttar Pradesh, she began by saying that she was living life on her terms because she had begun working after her kids grew up. But when asked about sexual consent, she dithered. While defiantly claiming her body as her own on one hand, she acknowledged that her husband had a right over her body. “When he wants to do it, he does it,” she said.

Asha Devi in her interview talked about how the men in her community slap and use cuss words before forcing themselves on their reluctant wives. A respondent remarked, “Women get tired working the whole day. At night the man takes charge of our bodies for his sexual needs.”

The imbalance of sexual agency between men and women is highlighted by Sharmila’s comment on the status of physical relations in her community. “A man does not come home for days and that is ok, but a woman

is questioned each time she steps out of the house alone. A man can have physical relations with four women and no one says a word. But when a woman waivers even slightly, society thinks of her as a fallen woman,” she said.

It is not unusual to see fights escalate or tension to simmer if a woman dares to say ‘no’ in these communities. The result is the woman puts out simply to keep the peace in the house or out of fear. Sharmila questioned this unequal status quo: “Men and women should have equal rights. Both are human beings.”

Questioning marital rape needs to start at the grassroots. VV’s Correspondents, who have frequently discussed marital rape in their discussion clubs, are powering a change in attitudes. And change is in the air. You can see it when Rekha Devi of Buddhipur village looks into the camera and asks, “I want to ask men, why do you behave like this? What are we to you?”

* United Nations Population Fund, International Center for Research on Women, in Huffington Post, Dominique Mosbergen, “India’s Marital Rape Crisis Reaches ‘Tragic Proportions’”, November, 2015



DISCUSSION CLUB INSIGHT

RAMLAL BAIGA | Madhya Pradesh

TALKING ABOUT CONSENT

“That day while talking, they felt that they ought to not behave like this. They felt that if they teased girls even after being in a gender discussion club, they were no different from anyone who didn’t come to the club.”

Ramlal Baiga from Madhya Pradesh is a member of the Baiga tribe. Working on VV’s Khel Badal campaign, Ramlal has taken on the challenge of helping young men between the ages of 15 and 26 steer between long-held cultural beliefs and a new way of doing things. With rampant deforestation in central India, where they live, the traditional forest-dwelling life of the Baigas is under threat. He shares his experience of organising discussion clubs with young men and how he sees small changes in them, like being able to look at things from a gender lens.

“The boys who come for the discussion club are a vibrant lot. Till now, we’ve seen a few videos – on the concept of honour; marital rape, why women follow a practice of not taking their husband’s name; and about division of labour based on gender.

“The thing about our society these days is that the younger generation has a different way of dressing, of behaving with each other than the older generation. For instance it’s becoming common for girls in these

parts to wear t-shirts and jeans that are tight, instead of wearing salwar-kurtas like they did. The concepts of shame and honour don't always have the same importance as they did even one generation ago. But the new generation does get caught between the old and new; the boys in my group represent this state of flux," says Ramlal.

Ramlal is heartened by the fact that the boys are beginning to observe little things around them. "One of them shared that he went for a wedding and suddenly, rituals he's seen often before, seemed odd to him this time. He noticed that in everything, from ceremonies to eating food, the men got more importance and the women stood behind. They're beginning to make these vital connections," he says.

Ramlal's discussion club has touched on the issue of consent a few times now. He says that the group's conversation on marital rape went around in circles for a while. Most participants felt that men had complete right over their wives bodies because by marrying her, they had in fact 'bought' her. Only a couple of boys strongly felt that both partners had equal say in choosing to have sex. Ramlal hopes that the conversation made the whole group re-examine these ideas. And it did seem to have some effect on them.

"During one session many of the boys admitted that they teased or passed comments at girls when they went out to school, to the market and so on. That day while talking, they felt that they ought to not behave like this. They felt that if they teased girls even after being in a gender discussion club, they were no different from anyone who didn't come to the club. They had to be better than that. A few days later one of the boys told me that even if a 'wrong thought' crosses his mind, he remembers the things we talked about at the discussion club and then re-considers his actions.

"Our society works on the premise of suppression, everyone is trying to do something or not do something because they fear what people will say. And we've internalised certain ways of doing things – girls do housework, boys don't and so on. So when the boys tell me that they contribute to household work now, it feels good to know that change is possible. I feel like I have an opportunity to make a change, even if it is the smallest change in the way someone thinks," says Ramlal.





DISCUSSION CLUB INSIGHT

SHANTI BARAIK | Jharkahnd

OUR BODIES ARE OUR OWN

“ Shanti says: “We watched a video from Uttar Pradesh where a man play-slaps his wife who is visibly pregnant. The discussion we had after watching this video was very interesting. Many women said that they don’t treat these small incidents as acts of violence. Equally, others felt that these small acts made way for other aggressions like marital rape. A few women shared that they didn’t like it when their husbands were aggressive in bed, but they never said anything about it because ‘he is the man of the house’; they felt that they had no choice in the matter. After a long discussion they felt strongly that they shouldn’t have to tolerate such behaviour. One of the women came and told me a few days later that her husband had stopped beating her up after she started attending the discussion clubs. I was happy that the conversation made us recognise that we are the only ones who have a right over our bodies, no one else. No one should be able to beat us up or force us to have sex. I think it’s high time that men, and more importantly, we women, realise that we’re not like disposable plates to be used and thrown at will. ”

IMPACTS ON VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

11 WOMEN START A CONVERSATION TO END CHILD MARRIAGE

“You all know why my finger is like this. My husband crushed it with a stick,” said Latha Gouri into the mic, holding up a finger that would never again straighten. She couldn’t bring herself to share another detail from that night, of how her husband had also made her eat faeces. Latha had left him and was trying to make a happier life for herself and her three-year-old son. But, she faced the shame that so many women who ‘fail’ at marriage do when they return to their father’s village. After being introduced to a video making workshop conducted by Stalin and Jessica, she found a new hope and a voice. “My friends and I have made a film we’re going to show you. It’s about child marriage,” she said, pointing to a group of 11 other women who all stood up, some laughing nervously, some looking proud. “Most women in our village – and all of us who made this film – were married off as children. But we’ve never spoken of that, because we generally don’t speak of the issues of women. But that is going to change tonight,” she said.

One man whose teenage daughter had come home from a bad marriage questioned his decision in the video. “Worms must have eaten my brain,” he said. Not wanting other villagers to hear him saying he was ashamed of himself, he had requested that his interview not be shown during the screening. But just before his section came up, he went up to Stalin and Jessica and said, “People need to know that fathers can admit mistakes. How else will we end this harmful practice?” In the post-screening discussion, people agreed that child marriage was wrong, and seemed to unite around a single reason it was so prevalent: the dowry increases as a girl grows older, and so financial pressure makes them marry young. One solution would be for the people of that village to collectively refuse to pay dowry. Child marriage was no longer an inevitability; it was a problem with a solution.



COMMUNITY SCREENINGS INSPIRE WOMEN TO END DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

VV’s Community Video Unit Apna Malak Ma (In Our World) produced a film on domestic violence. In 2008 it was screened in 39 villages. A hundred people from Bhalgamda village, in Gujarat attended one such community screening of the film. At one of the screenings, a 60-year-old woman, Kashiben, went to the microphone to urge her neighbours to take legal action against domestic violence. “If there is any violence against women in our village then we must take action against it – file a police case, and support that woman. This [violence] affects all our sisters and daughters. Harassment, mental torture and rape will not be accepted,” she said. Following the screening, at least three women sought legal help to file cases of domestic violence. In another village, Sonalben, whose alcoholic husband regularly beat her up, decided to stop the violence in her life. A day after the community screening, when her husband came home drunk again, Sonal went to the police station on the pretext of going to the toilet. On filing a complaint, police officers came and arrested her husband. Though Sonal herself went to get him released later, she told the community producers that he stopped drinking and beating her up after his stint in jail



CORRESPONDENT CLOSE-UP

LAXMI KAURAV | Madhya Pradesh

IN THE FACE OF RESISTANCE

“When my husband grabbed me, I threw the phone away so hard that it came apart. They had no way to confirm if I had actually called the cops or not, and they decided to call off our daughter’s wedding.”

“I wanted to become a doctor but my parents made me drop out of school in the eighth grade and I was married off at the age of 15 after a lot of family pressure,” says Laxmi Kaurav, a Community Correspondent working on Video Volunteer’s campaign, Khel Badal. For many of VV’s Correspondents, smashing patriarchy starts at home. As a young bride, when she saw how a relative discriminated between their daughter and son, Laxmi secretly wished she could expose this farce. “And now through this campaign, that’s exactly what I get to do,” says Laxmi.

Laxmi shares the battles that she’s been fighting at home to have a say in the matters that affect her and her daughter’s life.

The days following Laxmi’s first VV training were rough. The fact that she had gone to Mumbai for the training, stopped covering her head, and wanted to travel further than she did in her earlier role as an ASHA worker, outraged her husband who turned violent. “One fine

day I said enough is enough. He was standing there with an axe and I told him that if he wanted to hurt me, he should just kill me instead, once and for all. People told me that I was crazy, that'd I'd get killed for no reason. But that was the last time he was that violent with me," she says.

She says that she's tolerated the marriage for these many years for the sake of her children; to leave before they turn 18 would betray their trust. Societal pressure is another factor that keeps her in her husband's house. But Laxmi is slowly beginning to negotiate her plans for the future and in the process she's preparing her children to support her.

Our first conversation in May was at the end of a few tense months as Laxmi faced mounting pressure from her husband and other family members to get their 17-year-old daughter married. She didn't want to get married, and Laxmi didn't want her to either. After a looming depression, where Laxmi had stopped eating, and locked herself up in a room in protest, came a day when she decided to take one last gamble to stop her daughter's marriage.

Laxmi says: "I was reading the gender campaign manual and it said 'Khel Badal' (change the game) on the cover. I thought to myself that sitting here is no good, I have to play the game to change it."

And so, with a phone in her hand Laxmi pretended to dial 100 to the police with her family sitting near her. In the middle of complete pandemonium Laxmi spoke into the phone reporting a complaint for an under-age marriage. "When my husband grabbed me, I threw the phone away so hard that it came apart. They had no way to confirm if I had actually called the cops or not and they decided to call off the wedding," says Laxmi with a sense of victory in her voice.

While most family members have refused to talk to Laxmi, she stands by her actions. "When I was growing up, I had to hide and finish my ninth and tenth grade from home. As a young bride I helped my nieces go to school to get at least a basic education. I don't want them or my daughters to face the same limitations that I have faced in my life. After becoming part of VV I feel a new energy in me, a courage that I hadn't been able to muster up before. I know today that I wouldn't tolerate the violence and abuse I've dealt with in the past. Now I hope that I can help my daughter be what she really wants, a police officer," she says.



■ 19-YEAR-OLD ACID ATTACK SURVIVOR TURNS CRUSADER FOR OTHER SURVIVORS

In October 2012, four men threw acid on Chanchal Paswan (19) and her sister (15) while they were asleep on their terrace. When the girls were denied proper treatment at the district hospital in Patna, Bihar, and the culprits still roamed free three months later, Community Correspondent, Varsha Javalgekar, started putting pressure on the case by reporting on it. In the first instance, a change.org petition that garnered over 70,000 signatures helped put Chanchal's attackers in jail and got the family some compensation for the medical expenses. When the attackers were freed from jail, Varsha and Chanchal kept the pressure on the officials by holding press conferences and meeting with officials. Varsha, through her NGO, Parivartan Kendra, also filed a Public Interest Litigation in the Supreme Court. In December 2015, the Supreme Court ordered an increase in the sisters' compensation from 25,000 to 13 lakhs rupees each; it gave legal recognition to acid survivors as disabled, giving them the same rights and benefits; it also made it compulsory for private hospitals to give immediate treatment to acid victims.



Despite the many obstacles that came her way, including constant threats and harassment from her attackers, Chanchal was the face of defiance in a society that treats acid attack survivors with callous disregard. She became part of a campaign that demanded that the government do more to prevent such assaults, and punish the culprits. Chanchal underwent six surgeries and pursued a degree in political science while she advocated for the rights of acid attack survivors across India. She passed away in May 2017.

■ MINOR GIRL RESCUED FROM TRAFFICKING RACKET

A 14-year-old girl went missing from her village, Boriyo, in Jharkhand under mysterious circumstances. Some of Behulia Paharin's family members thought she had gone to visit her elder sister in a neighbouring village; others said she had left the village after getting a phone call. After hearing the different accounts, Community Correspondent Shikha Paharin suspected Behulia had been trafficked. She started filming video testimonies of Behulia's parents to show to police officers. Shikha succeeded in filing a missing person's report but officials took no action. The fact that two traffickers from the village had taken her to Gurgaon was confirmed only a few months later when Behulia managed to smuggle a letter back home. She was being held captive along with three other girls, and was being made to work as a domestic worker. Shikha then escalated the issue by submitting an application to the superintendent of police. News of the investigation gaining momentum in Jharkhand reached Gurgaon and Behulia's captors panicked. Behulia was returned to the village soon after.



MAN DEMANDING DOWRY BROUGHT TO JUSTICE

Soni Devi faced several years of domestic abuse because she was unable to meet her husband's and in-laws' demands for more dowry. Ultimately her husband threw her out of her house and sent her back to her mother's village, Mahua in Bihar. At the time, Soni already had two children and was pregnant with a third; she had no financial support. Surendra Sharma, a Correspondent, approached the local Women's Cell – police stations set up specifically for reporting violence against women, and got a lawyer appointed to the case. Soni's husband was served a legal notice after which the couple decided to reconcile matters. Soni's husband was made to sign a legal undertaking saying he would stop beating his wife before Soni went home with him.



COMMUNITY PRESSURE IN RAPE CASE ENSURES SUCCESSFUL PROSECUTION

A five-year-old girl who was deaf and mute by birth was raped and thrown in a bush full of thorns. The incident enraged the whole community of Jawala Budruk village in Maharashtra's Akola district, mobilising them into action. The community pooled together money for immediate hospital expenses as the girl was in a critical condition with several fractures across her body. The police however, refused to file a First Information Report (FIR). Community Correspondent Radhika Chincholikar mobilised about 200 people to stand in protest outside the police station, resulting in the complaint being lodged. Radhika was supported by other human rights organisations like Manviya Hak Abhiyan in pressuring authorities to make a strong charge sheet against the boy who committed the crime. Within a year he was sentenced to 10 years in prison; this is the first case in the area where the verdict has been passed this quickly. The Social Welfare Department awarded the family INR 4 lakh as per its guidelines. The girl passed away recently.





DISCUSSION CLUB INSIGHT

REENA | Haryana

WHERE SISTERS DO HOUSEWORK AND BROTHERS ARE BULLIES

“The girls in the group shared how they live under the constant threat looming over their heads; always scared that their brothers will stop them from going out, and criticise them. In fact they’d sneak out to the discussion clubs straight after college. They said that in most families they know that the women are slapped around on a regular basis.”

“I’ve always been interested in social issues. As a young girl I would read about such things. And that’s probably why I’ve ended up working in this field as well. While growing up things at home were often difficult. There was often physical violence and abuse at home when I was younger, and at those times I thought that when society changes, things will change for me too,” says Reena, a Community Correspondent from Haryana who has previously worked with the All India Democratic Women’s Association.

Haryana, a state in north India, conjures up a nightmarish picture of women’s rights and safety. The Haryana police recently released a survey in which 64% of the respondents said that they faced sexual harassment while commuting to and from work and college.*

Reena holds her gender discussion club in the small town of Rohtak where about 10 women and men – retired professors, school teachers,

students and other social workers – gather to talk about patriarchy and how it influences their lives. In the discussion clubs, the group has talked about the unequal distribution of work among boys and girls, and about domestic violence.

“The conversation we had after watching the videos was very honest and healthy. Some people in the group are already familiar with concepts like patriarchy, but I wanted to include them in the group because I felt it would lead to an interesting exchange of ideas. The group discussion is a good way to assess where we go next as a society. There are also young girls, students, who felt that this was the first chance they had to reflect on and acknowledge their own reality of inequality.

“The young girls shared how their brothers laze around and get to hang out with their friends while they barely get five minutes to relax. If they do have time off from chores, the girls have to choose between the need to study and the need to do something simple like watch TV. Their brothers come home and demand things just like their fathers do,” explains Reena.

The fact that young men turn into bullies, and protectors of female honour was a common thread that ran through Reena’s discussion club. “A middle-aged woman in our group who is a teacher, broke down as she wondered why violence was an acceptable way to make someone agree to your demands. It doesn’t matter if you’re an educated woman or that the perpetrator is someone you call your son; no one is spared.

“The girls in the group shared how they live under the constant threat looming over their heads; always scared that their brothers will stop them from going out, and criticise them. In fact they’d sneak out to the discussion clubs straight after college. They said that in most families they know that the women are slapped around on a regular basis,” says Reena.

The men and women in the group agree that this level of misogyny has been internalised. Even Hindu scriptures suggest that a man has every right to beat up his wife to keep her in line. How does change happen in this case? Do we keep turning a blind eye? It was the girls of the group who decided that they would try to change their lives by taking small steps. “If we have brains, then we shouldn’t use them just to think about what we should cook or how many clothes we have to wash,” they said.

“These young girls still don’t believe that it’s possible to make a drastic change but they have started talking about such issues at home. Of course, the girls won’t overtly tell their brothers off; there are gentle requests like ‘if you help do the dishes I get five more minutes to study’. While the men in the family don’t listen immediately I think they are forced to reflect on the situation. Our work may not show immediate effect but I think these are the small things that eventually make a larger impact,” says Reena.



* NDTV, 2017, Women Mostly Face Harassment During Commute: Haryana Police Survey

The double burden of gender and caste

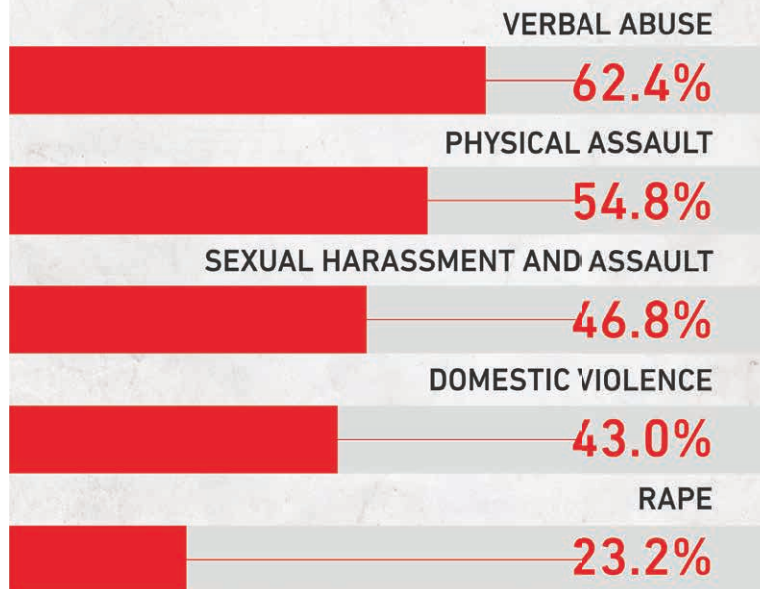
ISSUE IN FOCUS: CASTE DISCRIMINATION



To look at all violence against women merely from the perspective of patriarchy is deeply problematic. Doing so negates the systemic discrimination Dalit women face. The intersectionality of caste, class and gender leaves Dalit women far more vulnerable to discrimination, verbal, physical and sexual abuse than their 'upper caste' counterparts. These practices are rampant despite the presence of stringent laws like the Prevention of Violence against Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Act. The perpetrators of such violence are often men from 'dominant castes' who use violence against women to keep the entire community 'in its place'. The most likely offenders are landlords, police officials, doctors and teachers – often colluding with each other to prevent women seeking justice.

Thirty percent of VV's Community Correspondents are Dalits. While reporting on stories, Correspondents seek out the nuances of how systems like patriarchy and caste feed off of each other. They uncover stories that range from discrimination at village wells, and in temples, to rape and murder. Getting impact on issues related caste-based discrimination and violence has been extremely difficult for our Correspondents and their communities because of the entrenched nature of the discrimination.

A three-year study of **500 Dalit women's** experiences of violence across four Indian states revealed that the majority of Dalit women faced one or more incidents of



Source : Aloysius Irudayam s.j., Jayshree P. Mangubhai, Joel G. Lee, 2006, Dalit Women Speak Out: Violence against Dalit Women in India.

ISSUES REPORTED

WOMAN RAPED FOR MARRYING 'UPPER CASTE' MAN

When a Dalit woman married an 'upper caste' man, his family punished the woman for daring to have an inter-caste relationship. The man's father and four other men broke into their daughter-in-law's house and raped her and her mother. The women attempted to commit suicide but were rescued at the last minute by their neighbours. Meanwhile, the police station in Salem, Tamil Nadu, refused to file a case against the rapists. After a massive protest from Dalit rights groups, they filed a case of sexual harassment; an example of how law enforcement bodies downplay such caste-based violence. Mani Manickem, the Correspondent who reported the story is himself a Dalit and reiterated that such acts of violence are an attempt to 'teach' women of 'lower castes' their place in society.

AN ENTIRE FAMILY TERRORISED BY CASTE-VIOLENCE

"We have a hard time coming to school. The 'upper caste' goons threaten us with dire consequences for coming to study. They say they'll kill us on the spot," said Rani Kumari who studies in high school. Her entire family has been facing violent caste-based discrimination in their village, Balha, in Siwan district Bihar. The women of the family were particularly affected, bearing the brunt of abuse as they went about their daily chores in the fields or tried to get to school. Gyanti Kumari who reported the story explains the administrative apathy, "Everyone from the village council to the police officials have been mute spectators to the violence. My mother has faced such situations too, and I've made this video because I don't want another family to suffer in the same way."



DALIT GIRL BEATEN AT SCHOOL FOR REFUSING TO DISPOSE OF AN ANIMAL CARCASS

When the carcass of a dead puppy was found in a primary school in Uttar Pradesh, the principal forced a Dalit girl, Mansi, to dispose it. When she refused to do so she was caned. Mansi revealed that she is also regularly made to sweep the school premises. Community Correspondent Chanda Bharti found that the school discriminates against all the Dalit children who study there. Across India, such ill-treatment forces Dalit children to drop out of school.





CORRESPONDENT CLOSE-UP

GAYATRI AMBEDKAR | Uttar Pradesh

EMPOWERING A NEW GENERATION OF GIRLS

“A Dalit woman faces discrimination on two levels. At home she is treated as an unequal member of her family, and when she goes out to earn a living she gets mistreated and discriminated there too. In most cases this discrimination is normalised; she accepts it, not knowing anything different.”

“A Dalit woman faces discrimination on two levels. At home she is treated as an unequal member of her family, and when she goes out to earn a living she gets mistreated and discriminated there too. In most cases this discrimination is normalised; she accepts it, not knowing anything different,” says Gayatri Ambedkar, a veteran activist who has worked to empower her Dalit community, focusing on issues like domestic violence, and son-preference which leads to a skewed sex ratio.

As the only girl child growing up with male siblings, Gayatri understood gender-based discrimination at a young age. It was the small things, like being the only one who couldn't ride a cycle, that riled her the most. Her rebellious streak eventually led her to work with the All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch (All India Dalit Women's Rights Movement). Gayatri's work with Dalit women was recently recognised by the National Foundation of India, which awarded her a scholarship to continue working with women, especially Dalit and adolescent girls, who face violence and sexual harassment.

“When a girl is harassed, or raped she is the one who loses her mobility by being made to drop out of school and kept at home. The girl is made to believe that she has lost her honour. She has no social support, nor any proper legal recourse. With the help of some NGOs, I organised a series of camps at a school nearby to talk about these issues. We wanted to help the youth understand violence and how to deal with it. My end goal is to make sure that girls who face sexual abuse stay in school,” says Gayatri.

According to data from the National Commission for Women, Uttar Pradesh has the highest rates of domestic violence in the country. In 2015-16 the state recorded 6110 cases while Delhi reported 1179 and Haryana 504. Gayatri is a member of a district level committee that looks into matters of domestic violence. The committee documents cases that are brought to its notice and makes recommendations on whether the case should be mediated or if there should be legal proceedings.

Another issue that Gayatri has been working on is the lack of awareness about the laws that govern access to abortion in India. While the law prohibits sex-selective abortions, they are still rampant. Uttar Pradesh’s child sex ratio has fallen from 916 to 902 between 2001 and 2011. Through a grant she received from the NGO, CREA, Gayatri provides women vital information about access to safe abortion.

This is the wealth of knowledge that Gayatri brings to the gender discussion club she is currently running with 15 adolescent girls and women. “They are all conditioned to act a certain way even if they don’t really want to. When I showed them a video about how work at home is divided based on gender, many women agreed that it would be shameful to put boys to household work. If a man gives his wife a gentle slap and writes it off as a joke, there’s nothing further to say about it,” explains Gayatri.

Gayatri feels that it is often difficult to make people listen to or accept a new reality because violence is so accepted in her society. “A two-year-old child will learn from his father and will curse at his mother; this is the environment. But we need to look at every small act and call it out for what it is. Would a woman get away with slapping her husband and saying ‘oh it’s a joke’? Similarly if we normalise the fact that boys and men should also do household chores, it will stop sounding ridiculous,” she says.

“When I see the bigger picture, I have to say that things have changed a lot in the last 20 odd years. I feel this especially when I see the young girls in my discussion club, who I know will do things differently than their mothers,” explains Gayatri.



IMPACTS ACHIEVED

KEEPING THE CITY CLEAN BUT TREATED LIKE 'FILTH'

Public transport operators call Kantabai Yerode 'filthy' and refuse to let her board their vehicles. As a result, Kantabai and 49 of her colleagues – all informal waste pickers – walk miles around Nashik city, Maharashtra collecting recyclable waste from shops and garbage dumps. Women like Kantabai form the backbone of a system that is vital to fighting climate change. But most people who do this job are from 'lower castes' and are discriminated against. "Why do they do this? If we didn't do our work all the posh neighbourhoods of the city would be overflowing with rubbish," she said. To add to their problems, the women said that they have no legal paperwork with their proof of identity. This denies them access to welfare schemes and also makes them vulnerable to arbitrary extortion and intimidation by the police. Community Correspondent Maya Khodve, who filmed the story, is a former waste-picker herself and now advocates for the rights of her colleagues through her videos. After persistent follow-ups Maya managed to procure identity cards for all 49 women from the local municipality.



WOMEN STOP WALKING BAREFOOT TO END UNTOUCHABILITY

In 2010 Sunita Kasera captured on camera how married Dalit women in Rajasthan would remove their slippers and hold them in their hands as they crossed an 'upper caste' neighbourhood. While the community described the practice as a 'law', and a 'tradition', it was in fact an example of untouchability – a form of discrimination outlawed by Article 17 of the Indian Constitution.

VV launched a change.org petition using Sunita's video from Dangariya Village. Overnight, it had over 5000 signatures, which made the district magistrate of Karauli call a public hearing. In the presence of the superintendent of police and Sunita, he sent a clear message to the community that discriminatory practices would not be tolerated and issued the following statement: "Untouchability is a crime and its practice in any form is forbidden under the law. The district magistrate is vigilant and very sensitive to this issue. Strict action would be taken against those who practice this inhuman act, which denies dignity and equality to human beings. The district administration is thankful to you for highlighting such an issue being practiced as a custom in Dangariya and wishes you best of luck for your crusades against untouchability. Thank you."



This was one of the major cases highlighted by VV's 'Article 17' campaign to end untouchability. The campaign documented insidious practices of caste-based discrimination from across India. The public pressure was partly in response to VV's Director Stalin making an appearance on a wildly popular TV show, *Satyamev Jayate*, talking about untouchability. This prompted young urban Indians to write to VV seeking to contribute to the campaign. In 2014, we filed a Public Interest Litigation in the Supreme Court with 40 videos demanding that law-enforcement agencies play a more proactive role in stopping untouchability.

■ DALIT TEACHER FIRED FOR ENTERING TEMPLE GETS BACK HER JOB

Fresh out of the Video Volunteers training camp, Lambodar Takri started his journey as a Community Correspondent with a hard-hitting video about a Dalit woman who was being punished for breaking discriminatory taboos. Pushpanjali Suna had entered the village temple where Dalits were not allowed entry. As a result she was fired from her job as the anganwadi (child care centre) caretaker in Bharuamunda village, Odisha, and wasn't able to work for more than two years. The village anganwadi – a government run centre – was shut down too, denying young children a pre-school education, and a range of services like free food and healthcare.

Lambodar had heard of the story in 2010 but set out to find her in 2012 because now, as a Community Correspondent, he finally had a way to help. He took Pushpa's story to the child development project officer (CDPO) in charge of the anganwadi centres. He simultaneously shared the story with journalists in the print media to build additional pressure to get Pushpa justice. Pushpa's courage and Lambodar's persistent efforts brought the CDPO to the village where she explained to members of the village council, village elders, community leaders and other residents the importance of the Integrated Child Development Scheme under which anganwadis are established. Lambodar and the CDPO also explained that it was a crime to dismiss Pushpa from her job by virtue of her being a Dalit. Pushpa was reinstated as an anganwadi worker and was given her salary that had been withheld for the past two years.

"Discrimination on the basis of caste is widespread in my society. It is a structural evil. Pushpa's victory is a small step towards a society with no discrimination...The road is long but with more defiant women and men like Pushpa my children at least, will inherit a better world," said Lambodar.





DISCUSSION CLUB INSIGHT

SATYANARAYAN BANCHHOR | Odisha

MEN DISMANTLE PATRIARCHY

“The men in my group have found these conversations interesting and are beginning to realise that they have in some ways supported the system of patriarchy.”

Satyanarayan Banchhor, a Community Correspondent from Balangir district, Odisha has been documenting the struggles of his Adivasi community as they attempt to stop the construction of the Lower Suktel Dam on the grounds that it will submerge 30 villages in the area. He is the secretary and spokesperson for the Lower Suktel Budi Anchal Sangram Parishad, an organisation that has been advocating for proper compensation and rehabilitation for those who stand to be displaced. Over the past few months he has been holding gender discussion clubs for 16 men, aged between 18 and 30 year old in Kankara village. Here he talks about patriarchy in and outside of the protest movement.

He explains: “In the discussion clubs we’ve had together we’ve talked about gender-based division of work; about the small acts of patriarchy that unfold in houses; and about menstrual taboos that girls face. The men in my group have found these conversations interesting and are beginning to realise that they have in some ways supported the system of patriarchy. They could relate to the fact that

men do less housework but also felt that they do work outside the house. They felt that this was why they have far more economic agency than women. The men in the group felt that it was necessary to have these conversations at home to reduce inequalities.

“The discussion club has helped all of us expand our points of view. Even I have been able to bring about change in my family and myself. For example I never realised that my wife having to wear vermillion on her forehead, or not being able to say my name are little acts of patriarchy. I had to explain to the elders in the family that if Ram and Sita said each other’s names in the Ramayana, then it’s okay for my wife to say my name.

“In one of the meetings we started talking about the low attendance of women in the village council (palli sabha) meetings. These have historically been a male-dominated process and are only for the development of one village. Some touts and representatives of the village further discourage women from attending such meetings because it gives them more control over the proceedings, especially when it comes to giving out subsidies under different government schemes. However, after a few of our gender discussion clubs the men in the group have agreed that they will encourage more women to attend council meetings.

“At the same time, the women who have little say at a local level meeting are active members of the movement to stop the construction of the Lower Suktel Dam. The Mahila Mahasangh (Women’s Collective) has been at the forefront of the movement. In fact, even in the neighbouring regions, women have been instrumental in the anti-POSCO and anti-Narmada Dam movements.

“It isn’t that the women in the protest movements don’t face instances of patriarchy. But the greater good of the community that stands to be displaced and the need for a mass mobilisation come first. So in a way, the community’s self-interest encourages women to be part of the Lower Suktel movement in particular, and others in general.

“Patriarchy still runs rampant in the villages here but I think in time it will reduce. The local movement here has slowly enabled women to come out into public and speak about their issues. And I think that for a movement to succeed, it is necessary to have strong women’s leadership.” says Satya.





DISCUSSION CLUB INSIGHT

ROHINI PAWAR | Maharashtra

30 YEARS AFTER BEING MARRIED, WOMEN SAY THEIR HUSBAND'S NAME FOR THE FIRST TIME

“ I have worked on these issues for so many years and even I haven't talked about some of these things, like how our identities are tied to our husbands'. It feels great to be able to say some things out loud, no matter how small they seem.”

For the past seven years Rohini has used her video camera to bring change in a small village called Walhe, in Pune district, Maharashtra. Her videos confront practices like child marriages, the ostracisation faced by people living with HIV/ AIDS, wage inequalities between women and men, and the lack of healthcare facilities among others. Having started work as a Correspondent in 2010, Rohini is now the State Coordinator for Maharashtra.

Most recently she's started a discussion club with nine women including health workers and housewives; it is fast becoming the talk of the town. A space that is their very own to discuss and debate the nuances of patriarchy. She shares how the club has created a safe space for these women and turned them into agents of change as well.

Rohini wanted to throw open the conversation on patriarchy with an issue that the women could easily engage with. Many hadn't heard the word 'patriarchy' ever before; some believed that it was a good thing because it meant that the younger members of a family, especially girls and women, would remain protected. Rohini decided to start her discussion club by addressing the practice of women not addressing their husbands by their first name. This is a practice they have all dutifully upheld, and not once questioned – even Rohini.

"This custom indicates that a woman respects her husband and wants him to live a long life. A woman who doesn't follow it will be seen as cunning; a woman with no morals. The tradition is so deeply rooted that we hadn't given it thought until this discussion club," says Rohini. She wonders why the fact that men can call their wives whatever they like doesn't count as a sign of disrespect to the women. "Shouldn't it be equal," she asks.

But before starting the discussion club, Rohini wanted to test out the waters at her own home, like she often has. She showed the discussion club video to her husband and mother-in-law. "My mother-in-law and husband were quiet for a long time after the video ended. Then Prakash, my husband, turned around and told me to call him by his name from then on," she recounts. Rohini has often had to negotiate her desire to work in the community with her husband, who has often disapproved of it. Prakash has become supportive of it now that Rohini is a respected pillar of the community; by extension, he is too.

Armed with confidence, Rohini started her first discussion club. After watching the video the women tried an exercise to get the discussion going. Rohini asked each participant to say her husband's name in a variety of emotions – happy, angry, sad, loving and so on.

"During the activity, one woman was so shy she just giggled for the duration of the exercise; another decided to vent all her cumulative frustration against her husband and his family by cursing him. The look on their faces was ecstatic. I don't think I'll ever forget it," she says.

Still high on an adrenaline rush of having smashed an age-old custom, the women decided that they would actually try to say their husband's name when they got home. And they kept their word. Over the next few days Rohini got a variety of updates.



One woman's husband called Rohini to ask what ideas she was putting in the women's heads. His wife wouldn't stop calling out his name! Another club member decided to do it at dinnertime in front of her entire family. When her mother-in-law glared at her, she got scared and said that it was a mistake. Another woman said, "Rohini told me to do it." One participant's husband was less understanding and the situation ended in violence.

Rohini shares how women have tried to stop other practices like wearing vermilion on their forehead. "Why do only women have to show that they're married? I told my husband that if he'd wear vermilion, I'd do it too. He just laughed, and I've stopped wearing it since," she said. The other women haven't stopped completely, but they feel that they're in a better position to choose to not wear it on some days.

For many of the women, this discussion club is a safe space where they can share their opinions and aspirations. "We make an excursion out of each discussion club. We usually pack lunch and water, and go to a farm. I don't want the women to worry about who might hear what," she says. In the past few months, they have celebrated birthdays with cakes for the first time in their lives; they have danced and sung and talked about things they had never given a second thought to.

"I have worked on these issues for so many years and even I haven't talked about some of these things, like how our identities are tied to our husband's. It feels great to be able to say some things out loud, no matter how small they seem," says Rohini.

Rohini explains, "At one discussion club we were talking about the concept of honour and how it is related to clothes. Many women in my group haven't worn anything but saris since they got married. Most

are fine with it but some wanted to wear a salwar-kurta; they didn't dare." After much debating and discussion on the merits of choosing your own clothes – the morality related to saris and so on, Rohini smuggled her own set of kurtas to a discussion club so that the women could try them on.

The women have now decided to plan a trip to Goa so that they can wear jeans, and Rohini is certain that she can pull it off.

Asked whether things have changed in the five months since the first discussion club, Rohini explains how a wheel is beginning to turn. "Our steps have been small. Many women tried it a few times but then they stopped saying their husband's name. Some, including myself, do it but only when they are alone and no other family member is around. Only one or two continue to say their husband's name; now only one or two women wear vermilion on their forehead all the time," she says.

The women in the discussion club know that the changes they want to create in their own lives, the bargain for more agency over their mobility or choice of clothes, is a complex river to navigate. Buoying each other's confidence, they acknowledge that they're in this together. As Rohini explains, "Each one of us is a victim of patriarchy. I am too. But this club gives each one of us the confidence that change will come. And I know that it won't be limited to just 30 families, there will be a chain reaction when every woman at the club goes home and shares what we talk about and do. We're all in it together."

* Rohini's video documenting how she got women to say their husbands name got massive international coverage. The story was picked up by Voice of America, BBC, Reuters, Public Radio International, and La Van Guardia among other publications.



CORRESPONDENT CLOSE-UP

NADIYA SHAFI | Jammu & Kashmir

FEMINISM AND FREEDOM IN KASHMIR

“ We can talk about Azaadi from India or Pakistan but we also need to talk about Azaadi from stereotypes, from the limitations we face as women. That’s how society will be free.”

“Every house in Kashmir is the same. My sisters and I faced the same restrictions as other girls did. I studied so that I could have my own opinion of life, and contribute towards my society which is currently seeing the worst political unrest in the last 30 years. I have grown up in this conflict; so have other women around me. Families always remain concerned about the safety of their children and this feeling prevents most talented women from venturing out,” says Nadiya Shafi, a video editor and Correspondent with Video Volunteers in Kashmir.

Nadiya is a spirited young woman who has earned the reputation of a notorious rule breaker. She’s gone from being the first girl in her extended family to get a professional degree, to being one of the few Kashmiri women journalists reporting on the unrest in the state since 2016.

Though some people in her extended family have remained judgemental about the degree of mobility she has, Nadiya eventually decided that it wasn’t worth worrying about it. “People will find a million reasons to disapprove of you. I no longer feel the need to defend myself in anyone’s

opinion. My family taught me subservience and my work taught me how to be self-reliant,” she says.

Since 2014 Nadiya has covered issues ranging from problems faced by transgender people, and domestic violence, to documenting art and culture and lack of infrastructure like electricity. Her focus has been on documenting the toll that armed occupation has taken on the people, especially on women in the community. As a Kashmiri woman, Nadiya has a unique level of access into homes. “I sit with them for hours and get to know them before I even pull out my camera. These are women who have lost their children, their husbands and will in many cases never get the answers they seek,” she says. Women do not feel comfortable sharing the details of something like sexual violence in front of a man. Zuhaib, VV’s editor who often accompanies Nadiya on shoots, steps out of the room when these sensitive conversations take place. “They don’t open up in front of him,” she says.

“When I had started as a Community Correspondent, I wished that my own family would acknowledge my work. This has happened recently after people have come and told them that their daughter is helping so many people. But even today, when I go to cover tense situations, like where there’s been stone pelting or tear gas shelling, I leave without telling my family.

“One of the only times I’ve been scared for my life is while covering the protests that erupted after the death of Burhan Wani (an event which triggered the recent outbreak of violence and crackdown in Kashmir). I didn’t know if I’d get home that night,” says Nadiya.

Chants for ‘Azaadi’ or freedom are common in the Kashmir Valley. Nadiya says that the state’s need for self-determination goes hand in hand with women’s need for freedom. “We can talk about Azaadi from India or Pakistan but we also need to talk about Azaadi from stereotypes, from the limitations we face as women. That’s how society will be free, she says”

Nadiya feels that the fear of social censure runs deep in Kashmiri society. This judgemental attitude places restrictions on women’s lives and not necessarily Islam



as a religion. “My understanding of Islam is that it preaches equality. People don’t understand the complexities of our own religion, which is our way of life. They have turned it into an excuse to say that women can’t do this or that. This understanding has been an underlying theme in all of my discussion club meetings,” says Nadiya who runs two discussion clubs, one with women in Bandipora and another with men and women in Srinagar, the summer capital of Jammu and Kashmir.

Bandipora is a rural area. Once a crucial link in the Silk Route, today it is mostly in the news for clashes between militants and army personnel. A woman from the club here shared how boys have all the freedom to go out and do what they like, but a girl will have to answer a hundred questions before stepping out. If she does, she has to dress a certain way to not attract any attention. But on some days, even wearing an abaya (veil) will not spare her from the lewd comments that boys make.

Though Nadiya initially started a discussion club with housewives in Bandipora she felt an urgent need to get men and women to talk to each other. That’s why she started a second group in Srinagar with men and women. “Men and women need to understand each other’s perspectives on things like menstruation, and limited mobility for women. We don’t talk about these things in Kashmir. In a society where armed conflict has broken up families, talking honestly is the only way that men and women can support each other,” she says.

Her group in Srinagar includes young people studying social work. Nadiya says that though they were all initially hesitant, men and women are now both comfortable putting across their points of view. When new members join the group, others encourage them to speak up.

“During the first meeting, one of the participants had scoffed at the idea that men should do housework. A few meetings altered her perspective. I know that

some of the boys in the discussion club are also changing the way they think. And while they may not change fully, I think every member will pass on these ideas to their children,” says Nadiya about the impact that the discussion club is making on its participants.

Nadiya admits that it is difficult for a woman to carve out a space for herself. “But it is crucial that women play their role in every field so that things which remain hidden in current discourses are exposed. I feel that this work is my calling. I pick up my camera to bring out the reality of Kashmir, and I overcome the fear that comes in the way of this work. We can choose to live an unremarkable life or do something that will leave behind a legacy.” As of now, Nadiya’s legacy is to scope out how she and members of her club in Srinagar can start discussion clubs in schools. “I have faced limitations growing up and I don’t want the next generation to grow up with the same problems. They should have a chance to do more,” she says, dreaming of a more equal world.



Photo: Naïade Plante

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