Report on the Women’s Initiative to Learn & Lead (WILL) program

Swayam Shikshan Prayog - December 2019

Introduction

Womanity Foundation supported Swayam Shikshan Prayog (SSP) in FY 2018 and now in FY 2019-20 to help develop its long-term strategy centered around women’s leadership and supporting its implementation at the organisation level and across its primary operating area in Maharashtra.

The central part of this strategy is to design, develop an institutional strategy and capacity building of SSP teams to facilitate women’s leadership and the growth of a network and integrate it with the sectoral programs that address key focus areas Agriculture, Enterprise, Food Security and Health, Water and Sanitation. A very important and crucial aspect of the aforesaid strategy is to strengthen grassroots women’s Shikshan or grassroots educational system by partnering with accredited institutions of learning.

SSP has requested service of Social Synergy Foundation (SSF) on engagement with Swayam Shikshan Prayog in FY18-19 to provide their expertise developing its long-term strategy and supporting its implementation across its primary operating area covering districts of Osmanabad, Latur and Solapur in Maharashtra. The central part of this strategy is to design, develop and manage a network of village-level women leaders and integrate it with the rest of its programs and internal organisational processes over a period of time. The underlying aim is to realize a deeper quality of impact through a permanent and participatory institutional presence in a cost-effective manner and over time move away from only a program-led mode of working.

Overview

Swayam (means Self) implies understanding of the women’s self, the variety of issues she and her community faces, and the solutions that evolved (and are evolving) to address these dynamic issues. On the ground these are a series of conversations between women leaders and their community, designed and structured as an ongoing action-reflection process of creating and implementing solutions while building their agency and leadership capabilities. Hence, it is critical for SSP to document these conversations systematically and periodically to transform them into organisational learning and memory. Typical journey of a woman from joining the WILL to becoming one among those who drive it, takes 7-10 years. Documentation of this long journey in physical forms and registers diminishes the utility of the data over the time. Hence, a simple MS Excel based documentation tool is developed, which is aligned with this process and takes great care in incorporating the qualities of agency and leadership which are difficult to represent on the purely analytical points. It embeds the relative significance of these two qualities in a measurable form that enables SSP to quantify the development of women over time against its investment (money, time, and effort). It helps SSP plan field activities (programmatic or otherwise),
monitor the journey of each woman, and generate various insightful reports such as progress card of each woman, village and block wise performance report, thematic reports on types of activities, and customized programmatic reports.

The idea of developing it on Excel and not to engage a technology vendor to build an application was also a conscious decision. Apart from the cost implication, the whole process of developing the tool was intensely engaging with the grassroots leaders and their field team, where features were tried and tested over multiple times, to ensure it fits their local context and women are able to own and drive it. In future, once the system is successfully piloted, and the women are comfortable with the whole process, a technology vendor can be engaged and built into an application.

The benefits of the tool significantly improve the ability of SSP to scale by enabling it to be flexible in testing intervention models (even through collaborations with various stakeholders). With the ability to track women and their development, each activity becomes a link in a chain to serve the development of women, even though the chain consists of separate and successive activities of different interventions.

The system act as an organisational knowledge repository as well as a planning and monitoring tool assisting leadership (both at field and HQ) in many ways.

1. The tool complements every process starting from understanding the development of women at an individual level. It captures all the intervention activities they participate in along with their performance in each one of them. This makes it both bottom up and targeted, as the planning is being conducted by the inputs from the village level group leaders and gradually moving up level by level (village to block to districts) and consolidating into a yearlong strategic plan. At every level it is women interacting with other women, to plan, act, review, and repeat. In this way, it helps in tying together all the efforts through various programmatic and non-programmatic activities into the development story of the women. These development stories can help SSP in better communicating its impact with the key stakeholders and leverage it to gain long-term commitment.

2. Its ability to capture the performance of the participating women down to each activity gives a window to understand the effectiveness of each intervention. The flexibility to generate reports with multitude of parameters (location, projects, activities, development levels and so on) aids in making retrospective comparisons between these parameters to discuss questions relevant to improve the effectiveness of the interventions. Internally, it gives insights to the women leaders in better understanding the learning and development process of women, in the process developing themselves to be more effective in leadership. Whereas, externally it opens opportunities for scaling through collaboration with stakeholders (governments, CSOs, and donors with sectoral interest or otherwise) and initiate a culture of evidence-based intervention.
3. The women centred design helps in reducing the clutter of managing various formats each with a different set of data points to a single uniform system and a small degree of programmatic customization. With empathy to the needs and abilities of women across all the levels, it maintains a balance between digital and physical tools. These tools (standardized diaries, activity register etc.) help them keep track of all the activities and participants without demanding a significant amount of their productive time. Additionally, involving women leaders at all the levels in the process of data collection and management helps in firming the understanding of SSP’s approach among them while moving them closer to the operation discipline and professionalism.

**Shaping new narratives of women’s leadership** - The major learning from SSP’s experience has been that the agency of women provides a new narrative to shape social and policy changes. Women leaders in SSP’s operational areas have facilitated changes from household up to policy levels, like on alternate farming practices, water, sanitation as well as intra-household relationships. Increasing women’s participation in local government Gram Sabhas, Panchayats, and various development program committees is essential for stabilizing and sustaining changes. In this process of participation, women alter the traditional patterns of intra-household relationships and administrative governance structures, sometimes without being aware themselves of the gradual process of change. Internally, SSP has tried to understand and shift such processes, by enabling women themselves to identify their needs, and to develop their localized solutions.

**Women’s development levels for SSP**
- **Level 0 – Participant** - Participation & participation in meetings, interactions outside family
- **Level 1 – Karyakarta** - Methodical approach, skills and activities on projects, mobility outside village
- **Level 2 – Entrepreneur** - Self-employment, record keeping and leading other women
- **Level 3 – Sakhi** - Participation in public forums, networking with key stakeholders
- **Level 4 – Leader** - Giving back to the community, emerge as a leader capable of changing mindsets
- **Level 5 – Mentor** – Organisational leadership in program planning and management at state, national and global levels.

The development of this leadership among women is the single most important strategy, outcome and impact of SSP’s work. The community led processes have been evolved in SSP’s operational areas over the last decade, when it made its shift from a technocratic approach to a community led approach. The shift itself was the result of a complex process of understanding the ripple effects of interventions on community relationships and power structures, and now form an essential part of all its work across sectors. These reasons for the exclusion from rights and entitlements and their vulnerability to food scarcity, poor nutrition and impact of climate change mean that the planning, management and review processes themselves have to be participatory. Formally structured as Women’s Initiative to Learn & Lead (WILL), the process provides the pathways, milestones, enabling systems and tracking of SSP’s women’s leadership program.
Structure to run the process and manage WILL

To ensure these processes run in systematic manner, we have clearly laid down the following functions, acronymized as MTLD (Mobilization, Training, Linkages and Data).

**Mobilization (M) – focuses on Participation and collectivization**
This team plans for the mobilization and enrollment of the women from the communities in the new district/state. Once they are enrolled, the team will ensure that they constantly meet and discuss their life, challenges and deprivations. All these interactions get captured and analyzed to create an understanding of the women’s self. This understanding is then shared with the Education team.

**Training (T) – Focuses on Education and Capability building activities**
Training team then plans the capability development workshops, activities and field visits to address the women’s needs. While conducting these activities, the team captures the responses and progress of the participating women and furthers its understanding of their learning and development process. The understanding of their development lets team run the capability development activities in response to the uptake by women in an ongoing manner.

**Linkages (L) – Focuses on access to public and private resources**
Based on the development of the women, Linkages team enables all sorts of access including developing projects with women for them to work with, channeling financial resources to execute the projects and various activities demanded by the women through them, encouraging women to go engage with multiple stakeholders to access multitude of resources they are entitled to and are needed for the development of their community.

**Data (D) – Focuses on Relearning through data and information management**
The team ensures the critical aspects of women’s agency development and wellbeing improvements are captured. These critical data help SSP in relearning the aspects of women’s self and their development process in an ongoing manner.

It is critical to remember that all women will not turn into a leader and some may remain in the domain they are most satisfied in. Once SSP takes this approach, it becomes easier to see the development of every woman. With this ability comes the responsibility on SSP to make sure that it pays equal attention to the development of women who are slow in their journey or are not aiming to become leaders. SSP will have to find ways to keep engaging such women at their pace and remain relevant to them at all times.
Roles and responsibilities of WILL team

To streamline the WILL process, following responsibilities are identified for each member of the team.

(a) Group Leaders
- Conduct registrations of the women to the SSP network
- Provide filled registration forms after each registration drive to cluster coordinator
- Share monthly activity and attendance summary with cluster coordinator
- Conduct survey and verify the responses using Women Diary.
- Provide filled survey forms after every baseline/midline/end line survey to cluster coordinator

(b) Cluster Coordinators
- Validate the data coming from the Group Leaders
- Building capabilities of the Group Leaders

(c) Functional Team
- Plan list of activities with Naseem
- Allocate the activities to Group Leaders and Cluster Coordinators and update the same in Master Sheet
- Verify the data coming from Cluster Coordinators and validate it with the activity they have conducted
- Work within the team to develop the consolidated timely reports and share with Naseem
- Review outputs and suggest inputs to Naseem
- Assign activity IDs and the weights/credits for each dimension

(d) WILL Lead (Naseem)
- Coordinate with leadership to breakdown projects into activities
- Allocate projects and non-project activities to functional teams
- Notify Data team to update the Master Sheet with new projects and activities
- Monitor output dashboard and discuss it with functional team
Three interconnected pieces of the documentation

Broadly, there are three sets of data being captured to document women’s journey, each with different frequency and purpose.

1. Registration data – This contains all the basic information about the women, filled at the time of registration to capture all the initial insights that SSP requires to know about the women.
2. Activity data – It is the data captured monthly, to assess the participation and performance of the women in each activity that she is conducted with her group.
3. Agency and Leadership Assessment – This is an annual exercise to assess the outcome of the activities each woman underwent during the year and how it has affected her agency. It has broadly two sections – Agency and Leadership. Agency parameters will be assessed for all the women. Whereas, for the Leadership parameters, the following process needs to be conducted first to identify women with leadership qualities. It will involve –
   a. Voting within each group to nominate up to 5 women as leaders. The votes will be casted by all the women in the group. This is to reduce subjectivity by the Group Leaders.
   b. The women leaders nominated by the group will undergo an evaluation of their Activity data to see whether they have cleared a minimum threshold in terms of participation and performance.
   c. Those women who clear the threshold will be evaluated on the Leadership parameters to see on which level they belong and based on that what support is needed to be provided.

Getting into newer geographies

As the process and functions are streamlined, getting into newer geographies is a perpetual repetition and replication of these process and functions in all the geographies that SSP wants to go to, without any dependence on the availability projects. This will require a cadre of women leaders who are comfortable shifting bases to other geographies. SSP will have to provide them with initial support for relocation so that these women can go to the identified geographies and replicate the process of MTLD.

Activating participatory processes - The participatory process activated by SSP have reached an effective level at present in its core areas. As a result of this, SSP is now internally creating learning platforms for its women leaders to take forward the next stage of leadership and transformative social change. Adaptive leadership of women works also as an outreach mechanism as participatory processes are essential to identify vulnerable target households, ensure affirmation from community influencers and community buy in to the selection of excluded households, encourage cooperation and improve the coordination with government systems. In this process, it is important to collaborate with the local government forums and mandated committees embedded in government programs across sectors.
These principles are -
- Leadership of women in households, communities and governance systems is critical for ensuring outcomes related to participation and behaviour change
- Participation of community and women’s groups is essential for programs related to access to entitlements and behaviour change
- Community resilience can be enhanced with shifts in attitudes towards the needs of particularly vulnerable groups.
- Alignment with communities and women leaders at multiple levels of government system has to be ensured for sustainable change

While all the aspects of these processes are still not fully understood in the organisation, they are nonetheless visible for evolving a nuanced understanding of the multiple contexts of women in which SSP operates. However, it would be important to understand that operations and management of such an approach is based on incorporating the local contexts of the women SSP works with, with whom generic approaches do not work due to the structured nature of their exclusion from decision making at family, community, markets and governance levels. Parallel to this, measuring the transformative changes due to increase in women’s participation and leadership demands effective system for impact measurement.

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<th>Levels of a woman’s agency and autonomy</th>
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<td>1. Control over her and her family’s health (<strong>Health</strong>): Safe drinking-water, sanitation, hygiene and nutrition for herself and her family.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Control over income and expenditure of the household (<strong>Income and expenditure</strong>): Sole or joint decision-making power over the prime income generating activity of the household and its expenses.</td>
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<td>3. Ownership and command over the assets (<strong>Assets</strong>): Ability of a woman to control her own current assets (productive and non-productive) and enjoy benefits accruing from them</td>
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<td>4. Undertaking usual movements (<strong>Mobility</strong>): Woman’s control in deciding if she wants to go out of her house and doing so.</td>
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<td>5. Participation is the community (<strong>Community participation</strong>): Membership in SHGs or cooperatives and being comfortable expressing herself in public</td>
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Addressing policy impact at local levels

**Shifting paradigm of women led development** - SSP has experience of implementing several innovative programs in its core areas as well as at national level, working in alignment with policy frameworks and priorities. SSP’s focus on working with and through women and their collectives has yielded significant changes. Women’s lives are impacted by multiple sectors, not all of which are aligned with women’s own priorities and needs. In fact, women and their collectives are mostly viewed as agents for delivery of development programs by policy makers. SSP has sought to shift this paradigm by considering women not just as agents but as individuals with potential, and as leaders of their families and community, through its focussed approach on empowering women to lead at every level. This has been based on SSP vision and direct learnings about the way development programs and market systems structurally exclude women from decision making processes. It has tried to drive specific outcomes in its agriculture, entrepreneurship, sanitation and nutrition programs from this changed approach.

**Positioning women leaders in policy implementation** - SSP’s women centered approach has the potential for catalyzing shifts at all levels through changing deep-rooted cultural practices and management. While a beginning has been made in bringing about sustainable changes in SSP’s programming approaches based on these experiences, the coming phase would necessarily be more focussed on women’s leadership and participation. This also makes such potential policy interventions more aligned with national and global trends. These include having women being recognized as farmers, their productivity being counted in economic indicators, their resilient practices being acknowledged, and their priorities being adapted into policies – from global, to national, regional and local levels. The fashioning of policies at local levels usually does not recognize women expect as recipients of benefits, and these further exacerbate women’s exclusion from decision making.

**Increasing inclusion and community participation** - Through its interventions in climate resilient farming, sanitation, water, nutrition or enterprises, SSP has attempted to demonstrate the effectiveness of women focused policy implementation in partnership with local government systems. While the results have not been even across all locations, its model of women led development systems has been recognized and scaled. In particular, inclusion of vulnerable households in development programs has been one of the major successes of SSP’s women led model of participatory planning and management of major national and state policies on water, sanitation and agriculture. As the organisation has entered a phase of major growth, the internal systems are being upgraded to scale the models and expand SSP’s role as a knowledge organisation working on cutting edge nationally and globally significant areas of women led climate resilience.

As women are at higher risk of vulnerability across any social or economic basis, they have innately had higher levels of their own personal strategies for survival. SSP has in its own way, by design and in unplanned ways, enabled women to better cope, recover, learn and transform. The large number of women thus transformed has increased over the last two decades, as their journey got enriched with learnings and innovations.
Achievements of SSP’s Initiative - Women’s Initiative to Learn & Lead (WILL)

WILL’s focus is on making Shikshan (training) as a central theme to nurture grassroots women empowerment & leadership and create a structure that will enable SSP to reflect on key learning’s and inputs from grassroots.

Since April 2019, we started WILL process pilot by firming up grassroots structure with core functions of Mobilization and collective action; Continues learning & education; Linkages to public & private resources and Reporting and data management.
- 5000 women are in WILL process from 50 villages where their learning process integrated through project inputs activities.
- MIS system is placed to track the project inputs, outcomes as women learning and empowerment and leadership development process
- Leadership development is integrated in WILL process.
- 379 leaders are identified through the leadership assessment tool to understand their learning needs and did their training.
- 379 leaders are leading the WILL process at village and block for projects outcomes and other women and community priority issues.
- Did 500 + women leadership assessment across all the other project area to identify the leadership stage and their learning needs
- Based on Kallam block leadership pilot, we finalized the leadership inputs (learning) process of empowerment, leadership, advance leadership, Facilitators
- SSP team did capacity building on women centric approach and core functions and on importance for scale up the impact.

SSP’s Plan for WILL in 2020

- Institutionalize the women centric approach for community resilience building
- Nurturing 2000 grassroots women leadership and empowerment of 40,000 women
- Strengthening the block, district and state level platforms to showcase the women leaders potential and create new partnerships.
- Strengthening the leadership evaluation process and enabling the grassroots team to bring forward new leaderships roles.
- WILL process, replicate it to other SSP geographies
- Strengthening fundraising functions to integrate with WILL
- Strengthening MTLD (Mobilization, Training, Linkages and Data) functions at organization level to scale up impact.
- Developing curriculum and tools and conduct assessments to measure the impact of leadership programs
In partnership with ILS LEDA an Italian NGO and LEF-Italia-Italian Coordination of the European Women’s Lobby, an European no profit organisation and Sakhi Social Enterprise Network (SSEN), India, SSP as lead organization will implement the European Union supported project "ISUDWOG - Inclusive and Sustainable Development for Women and Girls" in the Osmanabad district of Maharashtra state during the next three years. Global objective of the project is to strengthen the ability of civil society and its organizations to be influent in the socio-economic development, through participatory bottom up processes, strategies, and actions for the main benefit of women.

Specific objectives are:
1) To establish a permanent Alliance for Sustainable and Inclusive Development of Osmanabad, the ASIDO between CSOs and the other local public and private actors aimed at promoting inclusive, gender oriented, and sustainable development;
2) To increase the power and the participation of women in socio-economic life, also through strengthening or creating social enterprises;
3) To improve the access of women to the social and economic resources, facilitating a coordinated District Service System (OSS) operating in the framework of ASIDO.

The logic of the Action relies on the belief that women have an outstanding potential for contributing to the district and national development, but it is underestimated and shall be valorised. Nevertheless this valorisation depends on the existence of an environment enabling it, through a combined set of actions, such as strengthening capacities of women organizations, together with the other local actors, for elaborating and implementing appropriate sustainable and gender sensitive development strategies, building capacities and instruments aimed at increasing access to economy through improving the performance of the existing enterprises and cooperatives, creating new women social enterprises, and organising a coordinated District Service System (OSS) for rendering permanent this access.