Impact of COVID-19 on Rural Communities

Resilient Women. Resilient Communities.
Rebuilding lives in a pandemic.

The Sakhi Task Force

- **Outreach**: 15 districts across Maharashtra, Bihar, Kerala & Odisha states in India.
- **Impact**: 1,500 grassroots women taking the lead as members of Sakhi Task Force.
- **Total kits distributed**: 18,320 needy families with food/ration & hygiene kits.
- **Families assisted**: 2,20,517 families through education & practices
- **Community contribution**: Rs. 35.64 lakhs + groceries, vegetables & dairy products mobilized by women leaders.
- **Ensured public distribution system reach**: over 30,000 families.
- **Assisted in MNREGA**: Over 2,050 persons secured jobs
- **Ensured vegetable gardens**: 1,441 families.

Approach And Challenges

Please click here to read more about our COVID-19 response initiatives:

- **Safety measures** ()
  - Household visits by Sakhi Task Force Members to create awareness on preventive measures.
- **Immediate food security** ()
- **Livelihoods** ()
A Ray Of Hope

In the midst of all this anxiety, a few of our initiatives are showing what's possible when years of working together has created a strong network of confident, resilient women who are empowered & ready to face any crisis head-on.

Water, Sanitation and Hygiene:

In 100 villages of drought hit Latur & Osmanabad districts of Maharashtra, a women-led water, sanitation & hygiene practices initiative has made hygienic practices such as handwashing a way of life. In spite of being in a drought-prone area, the intervention on water security, access & collection practices has resulted in enough water availability. Today, when something as simple & basic as handwashing is one of the most important ways of preventing the spread of the deadly CoronaVirus, our villages are leading the way in showing how rural communities can ensure water availability for this life-saving step.

#FarmFromHome
The one-acre climate resilient farming model ([https://swayamshikshanprayog.org/women-led-climate-resilient-farming/](https://swayamshikshanprayog.org/women-led-climate-resilient-farming/)) is even more important today. It is helping the small farmers not stay hungry. Families can continue to eat the healthy, the nutritious meals made from the vegetables that are grown in their own home-gardens or small farms. They do not need to step out of their homes to purchase the basic food necessary for the survival.

**Social Protection and Food Security:**

While working with local governments, SSP focused on prioritizing the needs of the vulnerable communities in the COVID situation. The empowered Sakhi Task Force (STF) mobilized the groups to monitor the quarantine centers, access to services by patients, distribution of ration supply for the poor & migrants, helping to get jobs under MNREGS are some of the steps taken by Sakhis. Sakhi Task Force is actively involved in identifying & ensuring free rations for over 50,000 families across three states. They monitor PDS shops to ensure access, work with Gram Panchayats helping to complete the procedures for new applications. Sakhis conducted surveys & identified the vulnerable families & lobbied with Panchayats to focus on immediate needs of the people (pregnant women, widows, mothers, elders, landless families).

**Addressing immediate needs:**
Daivshala is a powerful as well as trustful women leader of Sakhi Task Force. She is a member of Gram Panchayat, Corona Sahayata Committee from Kajla village, Osmanabad District. When she identified 11 families with differently-abled people are suffering, she took the matter in COVID19 Sahayata Committee meeting. After convincing the members, she mobilized Rs 25,000 & distributed Rs. 2000 to each of these families for their medical care. Due to her effort, the Committee distributed sanitizers from the balance amount to 35 families & lobbied with the Block Revenue Officer to get corn, wheat & rice for their survival.

**Working with Local Governments**

Empowered women leadership are the forefront in working with local governments to address issues of migrants & poor families on preparedness, health, water & livelihoods. The Sakhi Task Force demonstrates that dialogues & lobbying with local governments are more effective & powerful in crisis situations. Many of the support measures taken by the local governments are the result of women leaders’ collective action in COVID situations. Working with the Local level government to implement rapid response efforts has several advantages. Such an approach can improve the efficiency of these efforts by leveraging the meaningful connections local organisations have with the communities they serve. It can also improve effectiveness, as local groups have a better understanding of specific needs of local communities & are more likely to be trusted & perceived as credible by those communities.

**Partnership is the key**: 
Over 150 women leaders from STF were in COVID19 Sahayata Committees formed at Panchayat level in Osmanabad district to ensure smooth flow of actions between government & community. They Lobby with Gram Panchayats to take up village level issues such as cleanliness, institutional quarantine facilities, water availability, PDS distribution, health check-up, COVID19 testing & health services. As migrant workers return to their villages, rural India's dependence on MNREGA wages for survival is increasing. There is a sudden spike in people seeking work. Rekha Gadde, a women leader from Daudpur village in Osmanabad works with small & marginal farmers in mobilising & motivating sustainable farming in covid time. She empowers her community on land rights for women & new farming methods. In COVID-19 response, Rekha was nominated to the Village Corona committee, & is working with Gram panchayat members & ASHA workers on awareness building on covid related issues. So far she reached upto 356 families under this campaign.

Prevention, Safe Health & Hygiene :

The frontline health workers play a crucial part in prevention & control of the disease. It is extremely important that we complement their efforts & help them in this battle against COVID. In each village, The Sakhi Task Force & the gram panchayat committees play key roles in mobilizing communities to improve health & hygienic practices. SSP has conducted an assessment & prioritized the most vulnerable & poor in terms of access to services & facilities such as water, sanitation, hygiene, hand-washing & health services. The Sakhi Task Force in partnership with the local governments ensured safe water supply, hand washing, social distancing, use of sanitizers & hygiene practices.

Arogya Sakhis in action:
A little help goes a long way. Komal Pawar from Tirth Kurdh, Osmanabad was worried about possible malnutrition in her village. Diets of rural women are often too poor to meet their nutritional needs. Our Arogya Sakhis are leading the war against malnutrition. Height & weight of infants & children below 5 are recorded on a fortnightly basis. Even though the anganwadi centres are closed, door to door checkups are on. The aim is to prevent malnutrition before it happens. Kitchen gardens are helping many families receive proper nutrition. Kitchen gardens are practical, cost-effective & a sustainable solution for our food needs, says Komal.

**Generating Rural Economies – Agriculture & Livelihoods:**
COVID19 has disrupted supply chains & livelihoods, on one hand, & on the other – allowed organised groups to create new pathways to regenerate rural economies. Women leaders have embarked on preparing community level blueprints for job creation that view the return of migrants as a sign of hope – ‘They bring back skills from urban markets including digital skills’ says Manisha. Women farmers have stepped up their presence in local markets & businesses in essentials. They have formed vegetable marketing groups & dairy collectives resulting in a big shift of women from doing farming to becoming job creators in agri-allied enterprises.

**New skills changes the life of women:**
"We never imagined using our skills learned from training attended months ago. Now lamp wick making gives us additional income & recognition in this difficult time", says Vineetha. Sakhi leader from Kottathara, Wayanad. The lockdown has persuaded the women group to think positively & decided to make the lamp wicks & distribute them to nearby shops, temples, churches & houses. The group had been doing stitching work, decided to start lamp wick making, considering the shortage of tailoring jobs during lockdown. The group received 2 kg Yarn from SSP during the training in February 2020. They made a profit of Rs 500 as an additional income for their families.

“Our message is that being organized, having a strong grassroots network & our robust partnerships with the local government, allowed us to deal with the COVID-19 crisis & help our communities & the migrant workers.” Godavari Dange.

Godavari, Secretary of the Sakhi Federation, Maharashtra, leader from Swayam Shikshan Prayog India, & of Huairou Commission shared the experiences & learning of her federation, farm leaders addressed the COVID-19 crisis in the session on CBA14 setting the stage from crisis to climate resilient
learning of how her federation’s women leaders addressed the COVID-19 crisis in the session on “CBA14 setting the stage: from crisis to climate action” jointly organised with International Institute for Environment & Development (IIED) on 21st July, 2020. She emphasized the role played by organized grassroot’s women’s networks to address the issue of migrant workers & vulnerable community members, in partnership with the local government. Source: Huairou Commission & CBA14.

Lessons Learned

Women leaders formed the Sakhi Task Force & mobilised community contribution as food relief to vulnerable & poor families in rural villages. They are working with more than 500 communities & are now a part of the solution rather than a problem & looked at migrants as assets for the villages. Agriculture & agri-allied services are ensuring income for the poor during pandemic. There are new opportunities in food essentials like dairy, kitchen gardening, food grains & vegetables & women created local markets when there were none before.

Women are now leading micro-enterprises by investing money & taking loans from SHG groups & creating value chains of vegetables groups, milk collection, seed banks, etc without losing income.

Impact of COVID-19 on rural communities:

- Social Impact
  - Returning migrants adding pressure to an already strained system.
  - Fear of virus spread.
- Health Impact
- Agricultural Impact
- Economic Impact

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Agri Business

How women farmers are helping Marathwada cope with Covid-19

Radheshyam Jadhav Pune | Updated on April 06, 2020 | Published on April 06, 2020

Groups of five distribute foodgrains and soaps, and spread awareness on containing the pandemic

If there’s one saying that the women farmers of Marathwada believe in, it is — self-help is the best help.

The women have formed small groups to ensure that no one sleeps on an empty stomach. They are also helping the district administration contain the spread of the pandemic.

“The lockdown is having a major impact on women, especially women farmers and widows,” said Archana Mane from Ansurda village in Osmanabad. “There is no work, no wages, and very little foodgrain. The situation is worsening as those who had migrated to
cities are now back in the villages. We have joined hands to collect foodgrain and other essential requirements like soaps and provide them to needy women.” Archana and other women have approached big farmers in the locality to collect foodgrain and distribute it to needy families.

There are about 1,500 women like Archana who are working in groups of five with gram panchayats to ensure that villagers get sufficient foodgrain and also protect themselves from the infection. These women are part of the Sakhi Task Force (STF), formed in 300 villages across Latur, Osmanabad, Nanded and Solapur districts. The Swayam Shikshan Prayog has activated the STF, which is working with gram panchayats on home and community quarantine, detection of early symptoms and referrals to health centres. The task force has identified 5,000 households that are headed by women, or are landless, for ration and hygiene kit distribution.

“If supported, women lead the crisis action from the front. Our sakhis are educators and counsellors, and keeping up the social fabric or spirit with physical distancing,” Prema Gopalan, founder and Executive Director of Swayam Shikshan Prayog, told BusinessLine.

Jaishree Koli from Nagarsuga village said the women have voluntarily stepped out to help others. “We have to play a role in the hour of crisis and can’t just hope that everything will be right without any effort,” she added.

Disasters are not new to the Marathwada region. It has witnessed a devastating earthquake that killed 10,000 people in Latur in 1993, the memories of which still haunt the entire region. Drought is perennial and farmer suicides are frequent here. Now, the pandemic fear has gripped the minds of the people with the detection of a few cases.

“Poor farmers and landless labourers are worried about the future. We are telling them that whatever is the circumstance, we shall fight together,” said Archana.