



LAST YEAR IT WAS..

RISING UP TO “FLATTEN THE CURVE”: RESILIENT WOMEN, RESILIENT COMMUNITIES

Annual Update
April 2020 to March 2021

INTRODUCTION

The pandemic has taught each one of us something that we cannot forget. For us, at Swayam Shikshan Prayog (SSP), grassroots women leaders and networks shone a light on taking Leadership in Crisis. Rural communities, where SSP works, were doubly impacted this year by the health crisis and the economic lockdown. In response, SSP teams supported Sakhi Task Forces of few women leaders to organically evolve and respond during the COVID-19 crisis and emerge stronger. These Task Forces took the lead with local governments for COVID prevention awareness, ensuring nutrition and health services, rations and jobs under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA), food security and livelihoods for poor families and migrants.

The year 2020 was an inspiring year for SSP as we were inspired by how rural women acted in crisis to turn it into a development opportunity, helped their own communities and migrants who returned from the cities. The COVID pandemic has tested virtually everyone in some way, but especially the strength and resilience of women in rural areas. As the world struggles to come out of the pandemic, ‘Sakhi Task Force’ finds solutions and works with communities in solidarity. SSP facilitated various programs during the COVID situation and reached out to over three lakhs families across 15 districts in Maharashtra, Bihar, Odisha and Kerala in response and recovery initiatives.

EVOLVING A RECOVERY TO RESILIENCE STRATEGY

Our two decades of experience in turning “crisis into opportunity” to build community resilience in climate hit, drought prone regions is holding us in good stead. As a result, we have a strong network of women leaders – the “Sakhi Task Force” – that take on leadership roles in their communities. SSP has joined the national efforts and is working to empower grassroots women’s networks and communities through relief, recovery and building long term resilience to reduce the impact of the COVID crisis.

'SAKHI TASK FORCE' IN THE LEAD

Issues ranging from reverse migration and access to food, water, sanitation and health were taken care of by the well organised groups in rural villages. Sakhi Task Force ensured livelihoods and income generating activities for the vulnerable communities across these states. The migrants who returned from cities and other states had difficulty accessing food and relief materials. Women worked with local governments to provide access to COVID relief - free ration, link with Aadhaar and register for MNREGA for daily jobs etc.

SSP supported by UNICEF worked with the Government PRI system to facilitate a district wide COVID intensive, WASH sensitive community preparedness initiative across three districts of Osmanabad, Solapur and Latur considering the hazard profiles like drought, flood, distress due to lack of livelihood and food security. The project promoted community preparedness with Panchayats including women sarpanches and women leaders across 250 village. SSP teams closely worked with the Government to support vulnerable groups after the lockdown. Community level Sakhi Task Forces trained by SSP, worked to assess the gaps in food security, water and sanitation, MNREGA, Public Distribution System) to facilitate and ensure implementation of health, hygiene and social protection schemes to address needs of socially vulnerable groups impacted by COVID Pandemic. There were significant learning's at all levels, particularly on how to evolve joint mechanisms and communication protocols for ensuring inclusion of the socially and economically marginalised groups. This intensive exercise had important lessons on the role of women's groups as community facilitators to lead Social Sector Recovery –that resulted in huge increase in real time benefits access to vulnerable groups. It showed that collaboration at the grassroots -between local government, frontline workers and community leaders produces large dividends for the poor. It can leverage resources and

CONVERGENCE WITH LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Empowered women leadership was at the forefront while working with local governments to address issues of migrants and poor families on preparedness, health, water and livelihoods. The Sakhi Task Force demonstrated that dialogue and lobbying with local governments are more effective and 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 and are more likely to be trusted and perceived as credible by those communities.

Over 150 women leaders from Sakhi Task Force (STF) were in COVID-19 Sahayata Committees formed at Panchayat level in Osmanabad district to ensure smooth flow of actions between government and community. They lobbied with Gram Panchayats to take up village level issues such as cleanliness, institutional quarantine facilities, water availability, PDS distribution, health check-up, COVID testing and health services.

AGRI-ENTERPRISES DURING COVID-19

Vegetable Cooler paves a path of prosperity

In partnership with SSP, Sakhi Unique Rural Enterprise (SURE) and RuKart Technologies 'Sabji Cooler' - a solution to help farmers keep their produce fresh for longer - paves way in Maharashtra where lack of cold storages is a major hurdle for farmers, the initiative promises to be a game changer for women who are set to allot more of their land area to crop diversification and take vegetable farming in a big way.



The innovation of Sabji Cooler brings a significant change in the style of farming and helps them earn more. It is a chamber-like storage unit made of brick, runs on evaporative cooling applications without electricity. One such cooler is capable of storing about 100 kg vegetables/ fruits for 3 to 4 days. Link to the Janshakti news - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_gdWEykYFxi

Shailaja Narwade - Helping the Vulnerable set up Agri-Enterprises

During COVID pandemic, migrants returned home without a job and poor farmers were also affected for not being able to sell their produce in the market. Shailaja Narwade from Masla village took a different approach to address this problem. As an experienced leader and farmer, she worked with her group and Gram Panchayat to explore ways in supporting migrants and poor families. After negotiation with a local solar power company, they managed to get daily jobs for 40 migrants and rich farmers offered work for 30 migrants in their farm land.

Motivated by the action, Shailaja encouraged women farmers to prepare seed packets and price it for a better market. The response was overwhelming and many farmers purchased seed packets. They sold 1200 seed packets of vegetables and pulses to farmers in a month and made a good profit of Rs 1,47,000 (USD 1985). "Now we plan to make a seed bank with 2000 women to provide pesticide free, drought resilient seeds to the market", says jubilant Shailaja.



Women farmers from remote villages in Nanded have demonstrated that shifting from cash crops to food crops has multiple yields - nutritious food, viable farming and incomes all year round. 300 women farmers have converted about 300 acres (1 acre each) of their land into 'Sakhi Anna Suraksha Sheti' or 'One Acre Model' farming. Marginal women farmers were trained on water efficient farming and use of bio fertilizers. Traditional ways of farming, seed preservation and soil protection have led to greener farming, greater yield, and more self-reliance for families. By promoting sustainable farming practices, women farmers have also protected land and water sources to improve ground water levels. The COVID crisis robbed the poor and landless of their daily wage work, but also pushed them towards greater self-reliance. They started growing food and medicinal plants in their home gardens.

Women from Masla village in Osmanabad demonstrated that they are good learners and innovators in climate resilient farming. After the successful introduction of One Acre model in this village, over 100 women have adopted this model to ensure food security and nutrition for families. During the COVID crisis, these women farmers ensured and promoted chemical free vegetables and food grains for local markets and communities. From half acre to One acre, they have introduced bio fertilisers and bio manure to reduce the input cost, save money and ensure availability of healthy and nutritious food at the local level.



CLIMATE RESILIENT FARMING AND LOCAL FOOD SECURITY IN KERALA

In Kerala, STF took initiatives in disseminating awareness with Gram Panchayats, They also promoted kitchen gardens for food consumption since the market was closed due to the lockdown. Women leaders revived the village level market stalls and home delivered vegetables for local communities. As part of a new initiative, 600 Sakhi Farmers were trained on climate resilient farming practices. Training was conducted on Birds Eye Chilli, Tubers, Chinese Potato, Mushroom and Paddy cultivation for Sakhi Farmers in Kerala. To address local food security, 60 Sakhi Farmers from Wayanad took 25 acres of land on lease to cultivate traditional aromatic rice varieties of Gandhakasala and Jeerakasala using the organic method. Lands were prepared for sowing seeds and negotiation was done with Krishi Bhavan to get seeds from the government.

Women groups also identified 15 acres of waste land in Kottathara and created land cleaning and preparation jobs for 200 women from vulnerable families. Every employed woman receives Rs 8288 as wages from 28 days of MNREGA work (Rs 296 per day). This has brought their families much needed relief. Now women farmers are ready to cultivate aromatic and traditional varieties of rice on the prepared land. The groups accessed the Community Resilience Fund (CRF) to start cultivation, identified uncultivated land in Kottathara and took 29 acres of land on lease. In partnership with Kottathara GP, 52 Sakhi Farmers accessed MNREGA programme for land preparation and cleaning for farming.



In Nanded, Arogya sakhis assisted and monitored quarantine people households by daily home visits and providing awareness on COVID19 prevention and precaution. Over 7183 women and Families participated in home based awareness care meetings. Many online meetings were conducted for giving awareness on 'water conservation and budgeting', 'health and sanitation practices' and training on antenatal care, postnatal care, infant care and vaccination'

NUTRITION FESTIVAL

Lack of nutrition and changing eating habits cause concerns for women and girls in rural villages. To address this issue, women leaders and farmers from 15 villages of Nanded district organised Nutrition Festival with Health centers and front-line workers. In the event, it was learned about the benefits of locally grown organic vegetables, importance of diet and timely vaccination to improve the health status of rural women and girls. Over 145 people, including Health officials, Arogya Sakhis, adolescent girls, mothers and children participated in the event.

POSHAN MAAH 2020

Sakhis celebrated Rashtriya Poshan Mah, 2020 from 1st Sept to 30 Sept 2020. To demonstrate the importance of nutrition and healthy eating, information on proper diet was given to mothers, and children under the age of 6. The importance of eating greens, fruits, pulses and grains in different seasons was explained, while demonstrating by making a good meal. Families were given awareness on what crops to be grown in their field in various seasons.



WORLD TOILET DAY CELEBRATION

19th November celebrates toilets and raises awareness of billions of people living without access to safely managed sanitation. During pandemic times, there is no better cure than prevention. Arogya Sakhis celebrated the day by generating awareness, sharing information to create behavior change in bridging the gap between building toilets and their proper use and promoting health and hygiene practices in more than 50 villages in Osmanabad. Sakhis did door to door visits and gave awareness about toilet use, hand-wash practice and sustainable sanitation information.

Payal Kokate - Helping the vulnerable during COVID

A young graduate, Payal is an emerging young leader and role model for many. When COVID-19 struck, Payal as an Arogya Sakhi, knocked on doors, distributed masks 200 to the poor families and educated residents of the virus's deadly impact. With the lockdown impacting movement of goods, she helped link farmers to local markets, through her agricultural group. Mobilizing Gram Panchayat and affluent farmers, she ensured relief rations and food for the returning migrants. Payal is now combatting the high cases of malnourishment and anaemia in her village. Determined to improve the health of women and children, she counsels them on nutrition, hygiene and healthy habits. Connecting them with government health systems, she monitors their well-being.



STORIES OF COVID WARRIORS



SANTOSHI SURVASE

Latur Maharashtra

Santoshi a Krishi Samvad Sahayak was one of the first women in her village to adopt the “Women-led Food Secure Agriculture Model”. She has motivated 60 women farmers in her village to adopt the model. In addition, she helped them link their farms to agro-allied business ventures and as a result their average income went up by 30%. She started awareness and behaviour change campaigns much before the local Gram Panchayat did. Being an active member of the village level Corona Monitoring Committee she did house-to-house visits for over 250 families where she conducted sessions on prevention and care during COVID. She also identified and supported 35 highly vulnerable families with ration kits. With the help of her group members, she collected 500 kg grains and pulses worth Rs. 20,000/- and distributed 50 kgs of vegetables free of cost to villagers. She says “SSP encouraged me to become a farmer, an entrepreneur and most importantly a leader”.

Komal worked as project lead in the COVID-19 committee. She managed to list priority issues –ration cards, economic distress, lack of job cards and adequate work while involving key stakeholders - Gram Panchayat and Gram Sevaks to discuss solutions, and got sanction of the MNREGA work. She helped villagers submit job demand forms and enabled 20 women to get jobs under NREGA earning INR 200/day. “The current crisis is one for which neither the Government and citizens are fully equipped, nor know enough about it. Preparing and empowering the rural communities will go a long way in this fight”, says Komal.



KOMAL PAWAR

Osmanabad, Maharashtra

Jijabai an Arogya Sakhi from Madki village, Nanded has been instrumental in improving the health of many women in her communities. She has guided pregnant women, young mothers and their families to develop kitchen gardens and spread awareness on the need for consumption of healthy food for the mother and child. She also counsels adolescent girls on menstrual hygiene management.

When the COVID lockdown impacted the community, Jijabai started awareness campaigns, approached the affluent farmers to give jobs to the poor, mobilized women’s groups to stitch masks and distribute them in the village providing them with employment. On behalf of her Self Help group she distributed ration and essential kits to 15 poor women in her village. She approached the village level officials and helped 4 women avail benefits for construction of soak pits, she has helped landless women in completing documentation process to start poultry or goat farming. Now with Self Help Groups they plan to start packaging and marketing of turmeric in their village. As Jijabai recollects, “the steps we took to protect our village were indeed fruitful and there was not a single positive case found in our village.”



JIJABAI WAD

Nanded, Maharashtra

- Three lakhs women and families emerged as aware citizens members to create circles of protection in community after community across Maharashtra, Bihar, Odisha and Kerala
- Over 3000 women in Maharashtra and Bihar leveraged the economic lockdown to create local food economies and markets where once there were none. Defying convention they took on new roles as negotiators in Mandis and organized farmers into marketing collectives to sell essentialia
- Responding swiftly, women inspired ‘trust and unity’ with farmers and businesses, donating 35 lakhs worth dry rations to feed families, seeds to revive agriculture and loans to restore enterprises.
- Their persuasion triggered Panchayats to step up water security, anganwadi services in last mile communities
- Their work with Panchayats enabled 15,000 returning migrants and poor to secure job cards, ration cards and access pensions across 300 villages.
- Working hand in hand with over stretched ASHAs, Sakhis acted as an effective bridge between the villages and health systems. Over 25,000 women and children received safe immunizations and care.
- Distributed 1 lakh masks and 15,000 sanitary napkins in rural villages in Maharashtra; And distributed 3 lakhs soaps to frontline workers and communities and Gram Panchayats.
- ASHA workers tested 3 lakhs people during the ‘My Village My campaign’ across 250 villages.
- Working in tandem, strong local Panchayats and motivated women’s collectives in Kerala demonstrated how safe housing was key to social distancing and hygiene to keep COVID at bay.
- Tribal women’s collectives took a bold step to start their organic farming groups.



Empowering women powering agriculture

Hundreds of women in rural Maharashtra have taken charge of farming, playing a decisive role in ensuring food security for their households. Now women are finding new ways to make agriculture profitable & land is only resource here," Shailaja Narwade, a farmer and entrepreneur, Masla village. <http://bit.ly/2MD4s9T>

Women farmers came up with an innovative idea to combat the COVID led crisis by sowing seeds of entrepreneurship. 'Organic Farming' method has helped them to overcome perennial droughts and earn a livelihood, while COVID crisis gave opportunity to think out of the box" says Shailaja. Encouraged by the success, women started seed banks in the villages to market local seeds too, selling seeds worth ₹4.80 lakh, and earning a net profit of ₹1.47 lakhs. Link to the Hindu Business Line Article: <http://bitly.ws/aDEJ>

Sakhi farmers have been transforming the lives and environment of the village by their innovative approach to farming. Listen to the news published on this model - <https://bit.ly/3dyiiUx>

Grassroots women are making advances in reducing the impact of climate change and disasters. Women have accessed the Community Resilience Fund (CRF) and started innovative ways of resilient farming practices and alternate livelihood initiatives in Ganjam, Odisha. Watch the video - <https://bit.ly/3j6dgQi>.

SSP has featured in 'Co-creating Sustainable Livelihoods in India:

The India Livelihoods Collective (ILC) Compendium set directions for organizations to understand each other's projects and map avenue for collaboration to scale-up and replicate the practices. Vol-1 covers 45+ livelihood practices, and SSP is one of 26 organizations to be part of the effort to curate tangible solutions addressing various livelihoods challenges. Link: <https://lnkd.in/e4ZYtxt>.

New narratives for a 'new normal'

We have featured in an article by Sheela Patel and Suranjana Gupta, published on IIED website, which discusses how women at the grassroots level are generating practical responses to the coronavirus pandemic and how their effectiveness highlights the importance of including grassroots women in climate change planning. Link: <http://bit.ly/2Xffmox>.

Pulses For Planetary Change - Recognizing World Pulses Day

Growing pulses can improve the livelihoods and nutrition of low-income farmers, including women. Executive Director Prema Gopalan founded Swayam Shikshan Prayog (SSP) in 1998 to address malnutrition and health problems for rural women by establishing capacity-building programmes and promoting sustainable farming. Link <https://foodsustainability.eiu.com/>

Reaching Financial Equality - A Call to Action

Today, 247 million women 15+ are living below the extreme poverty line due to inequality and COVID-19. The time to take action is now. Women's World Banking, the World Bank, the Better Than Cash Alliance, United Nations Secretary-General's Special Advocate for Inclusive Finance for Development (UNSGSA), UN Women, and the United Nations Capital Development Fund organized Reaching Financial Equality for Women report, A 10-point action plan for governments and businesses to rebuild stronger after COVID-19 by prioritizing women's digital financial inclusion.

Ms. Prema Gopalan, Global Advisor to the Huairou Commission, Founder of Swayam Shikshan Prayog spoke on "Reaching Financial Equality: How Governments and Businesses can rebuild stronger after COVID-19 by Prioritizing Women's Digital and Financial Inclusion." Organized by Women's World Banking, World Bank, Better Than Cash Alliance, UN Capital Development Fund. Link here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hU3m446chB8>

Webinar with Consulate of Sweden

Prema Gopalan a part of Panel Discussion hosted by UNICEF Maharashtra and Consulate General of Sweden, Mumbai on 19th November 2020 Climate change with Children Climate and environment activists. The audience witnessed the great efforts put forth by young children to contribute to climate change and to save our planet earth. Ms. Prema Gopalan, Executive director of SSP talked about climate crisis and pandemic affecting lives as seen in rural Maharashtra as 80% of farming is done by small farmers owning less than 5 acres of land. Talking about women leading as change makers, they have convinced their family about sustainable one acre farming and by producing seeds by growing food grains and vegetables.

South Asia Regional Dialogue

At the South Asia Regional Dialogue in September, 2020, Prema Gopalan, emphasized that recognition and inclusion of organised grassroots women's leadership in long term resilience planning and decision making as well as their access to flexible finance, digital and technological skills in order to regenerate local economies that are affected by climate disasters and particularly by COVID - Huairou commission

Building COVID-19 Resilient Communities : A virtual lessons learnt workshop

The COVID-19 Pandemic, and the resulting humanitarian and health disaster required a rapid crisis recovery and resilience program to reduce the distress being faced by rural communities and to ensure that the spread of the infection was restricted. SSP and UNICEF jointly with the State and the Local Government supported the communities across 2700 villages for rapid and dynamic response and recovery.

SSP and UNICEF India jointly organized this workshop on Building COVID 19 resilient Communities on 16th March 2021 from 10:30 am to 1:00 pm. The workshop aimed to bring together the key policy makers from National and State level along with the village level change makers and discuss the critical learnings. Key State and District officials and UNICEF Representatives, elaborated on Maharashtra's coordinated efforts to improve access to social protection schemes and basic essential services during COVID-19 and a systematic approach for safe and secure food and livelihood opportunities for those in economic distress during pandemic. Grassroots women leaders were part of collaborative efforts to secure entitlements for the most vulnerable households, during challenging times. . Link <https://youtu.be/uDOdxigklvg>

DONORS AND PARTNERS AND PRIVATE SECTOR COMPANIES (CSR) WHO CONTINUED THEIR UNSTINTING SUPPORT TO SWAYAM SHIKSHAN PRAYOG:

UNICEF, Misereor, Azim Premji Philanthropic Initiatives (APPI), Habitat for Humanity India, European Union, Dalyan Foundation, Huairou Commission, Womanity Foundation, Global Fund for Women, Kamal Udwadia Foundation, Welthungerhilfe and DASRA . Their funding and technical support helped SSP achieve its mission of women's empowerment through impactful interventions on sustainable agriculture, livelihoods & entrepreneurship, enhanced access to water and sanitation, clean energy and environment and made nutrition and preventive health services accessible to women and girls. SSP's CSR partners - Great Eastern CSR Foundation, Avendus Capital, Shapoorji Pallonji Finance Private Limited and new partners like the Digital India Corporation have further led to increase in vocational skills and women's entrepreneurship. Under the umbrella of National Rural Livelihood Mission, SSP is partnering with the Government of Maharashtra for promoting women entrepreneurship and agriculture.

We at SSP are looking forward to empowering more women entrepreneurs and scale up the impact to 10 million people by 2025, while continuously strengthening women's leadership for inclusive and sustainable development, and reaching innovative, affordable health and well-being solutions through climate resilient development models. We would like to thank you for being with us on this journey especially in these uncertain times and we look forward to engaging with you through various initiatives in the future.



To know more write to us at: sspindia1@gmail.com or visit www.swayamshikshanprayog.org