

WOMEN RISING TO FLATTEN THE CURVE: 'SAKHI TASK FORCE' IN THE LEAD



Swayam Shikshan Prayog in COVID-19 Response

"Organised women's collectives at the grassroots have turned the COVID crisis into an opportunity. to regenerate rural economies and integrate migrant workers by preparing a blueprint for job creation," Prema Gopalan, Founder & Executive Director, Swayam Shikshan Prayog.

Rural communities have been hit hard by COVID crisis. Families are struggling with looming hunger & loss of livelihoods. At the core of SSP's approach is building robust partnership systems that enable grassroots women's networks to fight the impact of COVID. This update outlines SSP's COVID response initiatives in May- June 2020.

The issues ranging from reverse migration and access to food, water, sanitation and health are taken care of by the well organised groups in rural villages of Maharashtra, Bihar, Odisha and Kerala. Sakhi Task Force also ensured livelihoods and income generating activities for the vulnerable across these states. The migrants who returned from cities and other states had difficulties in accessing food and relief materials. Women worked with Local governments to provide access to COVID19 relief -free ration, link with Aadhaar and register for Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA) for daily jobs etc.

'SSP joined the national efforts to reduce the impact of COVID19 and improve the resilience of rural communities, particularly vulnerable women, migrant workers and poor households like daily wage workers in Maharashtra, Bihar, Kerala and Odisha. We facilitated women-led Sakhi Task Force (STF) to evolve strategies and address the crisis at local level during COVID lockdown period.

Immediate Response

- Responding to immediate food needs of migrants and vulnerable families
- Advocating for quarantine, health check-up and safety measures
- Working with local govts for quarantine, health check-up and safety measures



1. LEAVING NO ONE BEHIND- ENSURING SOCIAL PROTECTION AND FOOD SECURITY

While working with local governments, SSP focussed on prioritising the needs of the vulnerable communities in the COVID situation. The empowered Sakhi Task Force mobilised the groups to monitor the quarantine centres, access to services by patients, distribution of ration supply for the poor and migrants, helping to get jobs under MNREGS are some of the steps taken by Sakhis.

Sakhi Task Force is actively involved in identifying and ensuring free rations for over 50,000 families across three states. They monitor PDS shops to ensure access, work with Gram Panchayats (GPs) helping to complete the procedures for new applications. As an example, 2035 forms were filled in two talukas –50 villages and the Sakhis held negotiated with the block administration in Osmanabad, Maharashtra.

Sakhis conducted surveys and identified the vulnerable families and lobbied with Panchayats to focus on immediate needs of the people (pregnant women, widows, mothers, elders, landless families).

In Kerala, STF has taken initiatives in disseminating awareness with Gram Panchayats, They also promoted kitchen gardens for food consumption since the market was closed due to lockdown. Women leaders revived the village level market stalls and did home delivery of vegetables for uninterrupted supply of food items for local communities.



It was a hard time for the migrants from West Bengal who were stuck in Osmanabad village while crossing borders, during the nationwide lockdown. Nirmala, Savita and Chandrakala, mobilised entire village in Nilegaon, to help these migrant labourers, ensuring that everyone in the village gets free ration through PDS, they have shelter quarantine services as they worked tirelessly in negotiating with Panchayat and PDS officials.

Securing daily jobs for the poor

Komal Pawar from in Baswantwadi village, in Osmanabad worked as project lead in the COVID19 committee. Beyond call of duty, 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. Enabled 20 women to get jobs under NREGA earning INR 200/day. Due to the effort of STF, GP agreed to provide daily jobs for migrants. Around 400 such people got jobs under MREGS after processing job card applications in Osmanabad. Over 20 to 40 migrants and landless labourers per village were involved in work of water conservation. Women leaders held a meeting with the CEO and GPs to get work under government nurseries, tree plantation, drainage and road work.

Impact at a Glance



Outreach: 15 districts across Maharashtra, Bihar, Kerala and 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 and hygiene kits

Families assisted: 2,20,517 families through education and practices

Community contribution: Rs. 35.64 lakhs + groceries, vegetables and 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



2. WORKING WITH LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

Empowered women leadership are the forefront in working with local governments to address issues of migrants and poor families on preparedness, health, water and livelihoods. The Sakhi Task Force demonstrates that dialogues 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 STF were in COVID19 Sahayata Committees formed at Panchayat level in Osmanabad district to ensure smooth flow of actions between government and 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 and health services.



Launch of Sakhi Task Force (STF) Guide:

Supporting the courageous work of front line workers, SSP and UNICEF Maharashtra launched the Sakhi Task Force Guide for COVID19 Prevention and Control in Tuljapur, Osmanabad. The event was attended by the Gram Panchayat members, the frontline workers (ANM, ASHA, AWW), Sakhi leaders and SSP team.

3. COVID19 PREVENTION, SAFE HEALTH AND HYGIENE

With the COVID cases rising steadily, all the sections of our society must do their part to stop the spread of this disease. The frontline health workers play a crucial part in prevention and control of the disease. It is extremely important that we complement their efforts and help them in this battle against COVID.

In each village, The Sakhi Task Force and the gram panchayat committees play key roles in mobilizing communities to improve health and hygienic practices. SSP has conducted an assessment and prioritized the most vulnerable and poor in terms of access to services and facilities such as water, sanitation, hygiene, hand-washing and health services. The Sakhi Task Force in partnership with the local governments ensured safe water supply, hand washing, social distancing, use of sanitizers and hygiene practices. Infection prevention and control measures are crucial to stopping COVID transmission including where needed - distributed masks, soaps, hand sanitisers and personal hygiene items to the communities in villages.

4. REGENERATING RURAL ECONOMIES

COVID19 has disrupted supply chains and livelihoods, on one hand, and 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 and businesses in essentials. They have formed vegetable marketing groups and dairy collectives resulting in a big shift of women from doing farming to becoming job creators in agri-allied enterprises.

Main initiatives

- Mapping the landed and landless, skilled and unskilled
- Counselling migrants, procuring loans, jobs
- Advocating with local govts to generate employment
- Starting essential cluster enterprises to create jobs

"The current crisis is one which neither the Government or we as citizens are fully equipped for, nor know enough about it. Preparing and empowering the rural communities will go a long way in this fight." These words were put into action by Komal Powar, village leader from Tirth Khurd, Osmanabad. With her leadership and action, ordinary women who have so less, have risen up to face the crisis and give more. They contributed their rations, mobilised in kind and ran community kitchens and helped migrants and vulnerable families' to access COVID relief schemes.

Economic empowerment of women

During COVID-19 lockdown, keeping up the spirit and earning incomes, when most livelihoods were disrupted, women entrepreneurs were selling milk and distributing surplus milk to the needy. SSP's economic empowerment of rural women was based on group approach and market linkages. Janaki Suryavanshi is one such women farmer from Nagarsoga, Latur district. She sold about 30 litres of milk and earned Rs 700-800 per day. Janaki has enough cows to get manure for making vermi-compost. She got good yield and income this time due to adoption of a mixed cropping system. Despite COVID impact -so far 200 women have emerged as Dairy Entrepreneurs and 1,000 women- farmers as Milk Producers across Latur and Osmanabad districts.



Promoting Resilient Farming for livelihoods and food security, Nanded

"The enthusiasm and commitment helped the women to emerge as farmers for fast adoption of the natural farming method" says Revati Kangule, Loha Block. Worried about the kharif season during lockdown, SSP's farming and seed kit distribution has built hope for around 300 farmers who plan to grow vegetables and pulses in their piece of land. Women leaders in villages promoted kitchen gardening to combat food shortage and to ensure availability of essential vegetables for the family. Community and vegetable gardens play an important role in enhancing diversity to combat malnutrition too. the need of nutritional gardens to address malnutrition.

Climate resilient farming and local food security in Kerala

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 have taken 25 acres of land on lease to cultivate traditional aromatic rice varieties of Gandhakasala and Jeerakasala in organic method. This initiative will ensure food availability of poor families in crisis time. Lands are prepared for sowing the seeds and negotiation is going on with Krishi Bhavan to get free seeds from the government. They are also working with the local governments under the 'Subhiksha Kealam' programme (Food Security for all) declared by the Government recently.



New use of skills change lives

We never imagined using our skills learned from previous trainings. Now lamp wick making gives us additional income and recognition in this difficult time," says Vineetha, from Wayanad in Kerala. The lockdown has persuaded the women group to think positively and decided to make the lamp wicks and distribute them to nearby shops, temples, churches and houses.

Unmasking skills during COVID crisis

In Bihar Sakhis produced masks in collaboration with Gram Panchayat (GP) in four villages, to meet the market demand and earn quick incomes for survival. Over 10,000 masks have been stitched and distributed in Bhasinghpur village, Parwalpur Block, Nalanda, women Panchayat provided the material and generated INR15,000/- as an added income. "We maintain a good relationship with the Panchayat through our response in any crisis.", says Poonam.



Investing in Clean Energy Products

Solar will enhance livelihood prospects, improve efficiency in rural households. In Bihar, Sakhis who have invested their capital to sell solar energy products and started businesses locally. Solar energy also provides a multiplier effect by providing employment and entrepreneurial avenues to rural livelihood.

Lessons Learned

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

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



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