

RURAL WOMEN LEADERS STEER COVID RESILIENCE INITIATIVES

Swayam Shikshan Prayog

Key Highlights

The COVID-19 pandemic has taught all of us many lessons and brought to the forefront inspirational stories of survival, leadership and courage at the frontline. Since the COVID-19 pandemic last year, SSP team together with the grassroots women leaders extended their leadership and team skills to work with Gram Panchayats to draw up a comprehensive COVID Recovery Plan to resolve the multiple challenges of sanitation, hygiene, food security, COVID prevention and treatment. Displaying exemplary leadership, SSP teams and the Sakhi networks used this monumental crisis to establish an identity for themselves, firstly raising the economic bar which had a spill over effect on their families as well.

Women leaders have been working extensively with the government to address the needs and access to social protection schemes and services. For creating COVID free villages, Sakhis joined hands with the primary health care cadres to push for and ramp up testing and vaccine implementation in 15 districts across Maharashtra, Odisha, Kerala and Bihar.

COVID response projects implemented by SSP since last year have helped local communities mitigate suffering and financial turbulence by provision of medical aid, food supply, cash assistance, house repair, livelihood recovery support etc.



SBI distributed INR 10 lakhs for 20 women farmers under Mudra loan program to start vermi-compost production.

Women Farmers receive loans onsite

August 26, 2021 was a historic day for us and our Sakhi network!! Santoshi Survase, a small farmer from Mamdapur, Latur district, Maharashtra, spoke her mind, and her voice traveled far. She said, "If banks were to give loans to women they would achieve their dreams!!"

All this was triggered when Mr. Rajesh Kumar, Chief General Manager, LHO, State Bank of India (SBI), Mumbai heard Santoshi's appeal, recently on social media. He took immediate steps to fulfil her dreams and that of women's groups to start collective businesses. "It is a matter of pride for SBI to provide loans to women farmers and we are committed to providing loans to as many women as possible", says Mr. Rajesh Kumar, CGM, SBI.

To show solidarity and support, the SBI officials sanctioned loans on site after they assessed the applications. SBI distributed INR 10 lakhs (INR 50,000 each for 20 women farmers) under Mudra loan program to start vermi-compost production.

Since the economic lockdown, more than 10,000 women farmers have taken the lead to do collective marketing of pesticide-free essentials - grains, vegetables, pulses and milk to reach nearby cities. Link to the program video: <https://bit.ly/3DX0Tkq>

1. Relief for COVID-19 hit families



Distribution of kits to vulnerable families

A survey was conducted by women leaders and SSP team in August 2021 to identify poor and vulnerable families for food kit distribution in Maharashtra. Priority was women headed households, widows, single women, differently abled and migrant families. We verified this list with Gram Panchayats and finalized the selection. With the support of Kaushalya Foundation Smiles for All, selected families have received food kits/grocery to address the immediate need. In August and September, 135 families supported.

In Wayanad district, Gram Panchayats and SSP leaders closely monitored COVID situations; cleaned many places in the villages using fumigation, identified patients; motivated for vaccination registration. Over 1100 people got vaccinated during this period. With Kaushalya Foundation's support, SSP distributed 250 food kits to women SFG members of Kottathara and Edavaka Panchayats. 200 Food kits were distributed to selected COVID affected families including scheduled caste, scheduled tribe, differently abled, widows, and mentally challenged with support from Habitat for Humanity India. Women's Groups of Edavaka in Wayanad district mobilized 60 food grains kits from the general public and distributed them to Agraharam tribal colony. 300 kg of tapioca cultivated by Sakhi Farmers Groups members were contributed to vulnerable families. 40 tribal families were taken to the Government hospital for RTPCR and Antigen test.

Bindu Ravindran sets an example for other tribal families in her neighbourhood in Wayanad district

Bindhu Raveendran, a tribal woman from Kuruma community from a low income family with 5 cent land and was not able to meet her children's education and home expenses from her daily wage labor. Subsequent floods and torrential rains in 2018 and 2019 as well as COVID caused severe damage to the family's income. Bindhu decided to start goat rearing as she was the member of Sakhi Farmers' Group since 2018. She accessed Rs 25000 from community resilience fund and bought 4 goats and a cage. Since the fodder was collected from other land it was not sufficient for the goats, she cultivated fodders for this in her small piece of land. By selling the goat and compost, she earned a regular income and bought a smart phone for educating her girl child. She also started selling tea at a newly emerged tourist spot. She purchased a scooter for selling the tea in a faster and convenient way. From the income earned, she repaired her house and constructed a new toilet. Her income increased to Rs 8000 per month and the community recognised her as a good entrepreneur from the tribal community.

New Initiatives

Jagratha Samithi

The SSP team with women leaders were participated in meetings related to COVID organised by the government. In Wayanad district, members of ward level Jagratha Samithi are part of government promoted group and women leaders are part of the committee. Leaders were given special care to life style diseases, differently abled, mentally disabled and other patients. Medicines distributed to patients with ASHA workers support. Panchayath volunteers are active in distribution of food and medicines to children in child care centres and to pregnant women.

Break the Chain Campaign

With the leadership of Tribal department and tribal volunteers, leaders visited all colonies coming under Kottathara Grama Panchayath in Wayanad and could be aware of the need of hand washes and Personal hygiene. As part of this program, distributed buckets, cups soaps, and hand wash to the colony members.

Partnership with CSRBOX

Under the CSRBOX's ongoing COVID 2.0 Response Project, SSP have supported 22 underprivileged households who were severely affected due to the impact of COVID pandemic across four districts in Bihar and Kerala with an average of Rs. 20,000.

2. Community Health



An Arogya Sakhi Training Program in Nanded district

Awareness and Vaccination Drive

Maharashtra: Women leaders created Whatsapp groups and shared relevant information on safety measures against COVID to prepare people against the pandemic. Vaccination campaign was held with online registration and helped families with the vaccination process. In each village, with the help of Village Task Force leaders, right information was disseminated on COVID prevention care and control. This was done through whatsapp and social media and used audio/videos for this purpose.

Village Task Force leaders continued their engagement in visiting the poor and vulnerable houses in the villages for awareness on vaccination with PHC and health workers. Leaders actively participated in the training with PHC Centre Health staff and Doctors on how to reach awareness among people on vaccination.

Bihar: Community meetings, Self Help Group (SHG) meetings, farmer club meetings and teen group meetings were organized by 54 Community leaders to create awareness about third wave and antidote to 2000 families and COVID. Leaders discussed about the COVID crisis and how to work with local government. There are 25 members of Sakhi Task Force who are working for promotion of energy products and COVID vaccine awareness. The leaders goes door-to-door to make families aware about COVID vaccination. Over 500 people who were initially hesitant were also vaccinated during this period.

Community Isolation Centres

People from all walks of life visited Isolation centres to get information on health, check-up and medical facilities as well as identification of women with illness and link with doctors. Regular meetings were held with Primary Health Centre (PHC), doctors and health committees to achieve 100% vaccination. Awareness meetings were organized on COVID safety and vaccination and Primary Health Centres were involved in meetings with village task force leaders and para-medical staff.

Kerala

COVID Vaccination Drive and COVID Data Collection: As part of promoting COVID Vaccination and awareness, SSP team collected COVID data at village level. SSP gave information on current situation of COVID from time to time through Whatsapp to Sakhi Farmers and groups. As part of the vaccination drive, SFG leaders facilitated the online registration process for vaccination and gave special attention to Tribal families.

Chlorination: 280 wells were chlorinated with the help of the health department. They supplied the bleaching powder and our group members distributed this bleaching powder to houses and to help them to chlorinate water.

Awareness Creation: Under the leadership of Junior Health Inspector and Health Nurse from Health department, ASHA workers, Tribal Volunteers and ward level committees distributed awareness materials to household. SSP facilitator with the support of Edavaka Panchayath committee distributed stickers to all houses and gave awareness to the public.



3. Regenerating Livelihoods



Training for Farmers in Ahmednagar district

COVID relief for marginalized farmers and communities

Through MacArthur Foundation supported program, SSP covered 50 villages in Osmanabad district for support small and marginal farmers and vulnerable families. We selected 50 leaders and provided training on digital platforms such as WhatsApp, Zoom and other communication mediums in COVID situations. We organised training on sustainable agriculture practices through these digital platforms to farmers in Maharashtra. Formation of farmers groups was done to promote organic farming methods and food security. We identified small & marginal farmers to create 15 to 20 members group at village level to support and train agriculture inputs and practices on sustainable farming.

Convergence of Government Schemes - Various farmers were connected with different line departments to access support schemes for farming. In this period, 6 farmers from 5 villages got an amount of INR 3 lakhs under agriculture scheme.

Laxmi Mil Collection Centre

SSP team conducted a survey in 32 villages from 4 blocks to get the details of the livestock, milk production, availability of cow/buffalo and existing collection centres etc. in Latur district. Purpose of the survey was to identify the potential of opening Laxmi Milk Collection Centre at village level.

Meeting with Farmer Producer Groups

In Bhoom and Paranda Block, 393 women from 27 producer groups participated in various farmer producer groups meetings. Many Producer group members actively participated in meetings and training. Purpose of this meeting was to mobilize women to become entrepreneurs. Discussion points in the meetings were on various aspects of producer groups, diversified livelihood options and linking agriculture into agri entrepreneurship, finance and market.

Women's Initiative to Learn & Lead (WILL)



Leadership is the key to facilitating changes through innovation! SSP has launched the Leadership program with WILL in Latur, Osmanabad, Solapur and Nanded districts in Maharashtra where 100+ grassroots women will be trained in leadership skills and mentoring support. These women will take the leaders and mentors role by creating an enabling ecosystem for women to lead change and show their full potential for empowering communities on economic and social development thus building resilient communities. The WILL process allows women to learn and lead by finding local solutions for Global challenges. Women are equipped with digital and financial skills to mobilize govt resources for their communities.

World Entrepreneurs Day

"Across the tough, drought-prone and suicide-ridden regions of Marathwada, these women entrepreneurs have walked the talk and created wealth from literally nothing, opening up many pathways for others to follow," says Prema Gopalan, Founder Director of SSP. Our hope is that the eco-system for rural women entrepreneurs becomes stronger and swifter in enabling and recognizing grassroots women business leaders as the engines of growth for India.



4. Climate Resilient Agriculture



SSP organised training for farmers on pest control methods and making of low cost natural solutions to mobilise farmers into bio farming. Demonstration of making bio pesticides and reducing the cost in farming and consuming good food was the focus of the training. 433 farmers from 35 villages of 4 blocks of Osmanabad district participated in the training under the European Union supported project.

Trainings on vegetable gardens were focused on to address food security and nutrition for the rural families. The training helped farmers to cultivate vegetables for household consumption to improve nutrition. More than seven types of vegetables were introduced in the training. The training was conducted at village level and discussed the concept of vegetable garden and its importance, cultivation system, selection of vegetables, health benefit, season wise cropping, annual vegetable requirement, etc.

"Nari Shakti Mahila Utpadak Gat"

High pulse yield in Osmanabad and Lohara blocks of Osmanabad led women from 15 villages come together and start a dal business in the year 2020. Women set up units in each of the villages to be run by Nari Sakti Women Producer Group. The membership fee of INR 200 collected from each member was used for buying raw materials from two villages and processing machines were bought for five villages and 450 women farmers joined the Producer Group. The women have started producing completely organic pulses and cereal crops. Through extensive marketing, the women have managed to sell 10 quintals till now. "Now our aim is to create our own brand by producing a maximum number of dal ", Say the women of the Producer Group. Additionally, the women of the Producer Group have received a large number of government schemes under the Department of Agriculture, ATMA, PoCRA.

Nutrition Security for vulnerable families in the wake of COVID

Taslim Sharukha Pathan, the 24 years old homemaker, studied until 8th standard and hails from Vetawadi village in Sillod block of Aurangabad district. She was working as a farm laborer till six months ago when the SSP team visited her village and selected her as one of the village leaders in the GIZ and Welthungerhilfe supported MH Nutrition Project. Gradually, Taslim learnt about the programs and started working for the vulnerable households in the village. Along with the GP and SHGs in the village, she conducted awareness programs on COVID protocol, wearing masks, following hygiene practices, testing, awareness on vaccination, etc. In her village, women used to work as labourers in the farm and were focusing on cash crops and rarely cultivate food crops. She has formed three producer groups with women doing the same businesses and been providing onsite training and hand holding support.

Today about 20% of the farmers have turned to organic farming owing to the health benefits. They have started eating vegetables from their own farms or kitchen gardens. They are doing seed processing, germination and making bio-fertilizers themselves and earning an additional income by saving on agricultural expenses.



5. Digital Awareness



Product Awareness in Market Stalls by Sakhis in Bihar

Nitu Kumari leads the path for rural women entrepreneurs in Nalanda on using the online marketplace

Hailing from Salalpur village in Nalanda District, Nitu Kumari came a long way to become a successful technology enabled entrepreneur woman. With four daughters and a son and her husband's job as a driver in a school, it was difficult to run the family and education of their children.

In Feb 2020, Nitu Devi participated in an entrepreneurship training facilitated by SSP. She learned on business plan, product selection, and customer behaviour and marketing techniques in the training. When she decided that something should be done for her family for a good living, she opened a grocery and cosmetic store called Nitu Shringar & Kirana Store in March 2020 with a capital of INR 20,000 which she took as a loan from the Self Help Group.

At this time, COVID pandemic spread across the villages and a lock-down was declared and her husband lost his job. But her grocery shop continued at her home and the sales were increased. This small shop became a hit and support for the entire communities in the village. Nitu got a good name and income. She got respect in her village as a entrepreneurship trainer and groomed many other women on business. She promotes eco-friendly and clean energy products such as solar lights and lanterns, sanitary pads, organic fertilizers and LED bulbs and very active as a Sakhi Task Force member to support people to overcome the COVID crisis.

Motivated from the business, Nitu learned how to promote business online. She has launched her online business after creating a web-page on GaavKhoj and shared the link with all her customers in her neighbourhood. The new venture has helped her in increasing the sales and earning more income and outreach to new customers. Now, she earns an average income of INR 5000 and supports her children's education. She is active in online business promotion, creating web pages and training other women to become tech savvy and utilize the digital space for business.

In the COVID-19 crisis, we have seen how difficult it was to go out and buy and sell goods. A lot of businesses that had not kept themselves updated were shut down. In view of this learning, we promoted digital education to the Sakhis and the villagers on a large scale. As a first step, we trained Sakhi task force to create WhatsApp groups, Zoom and Google meet, its technical aspects on sharing information, posting videos, create and join meetings etc. Now 55 villages have created Whatsapp group with 1000 members in various groups. Through this WhatsApp group, we also keep posting about the schemes of the government continuously giving information to the people, due to which people are able to do farming on time. We are also training villagers to do business online by creating web pages and connect with customers.

Gayatri Devi, The Digital Sakhi!

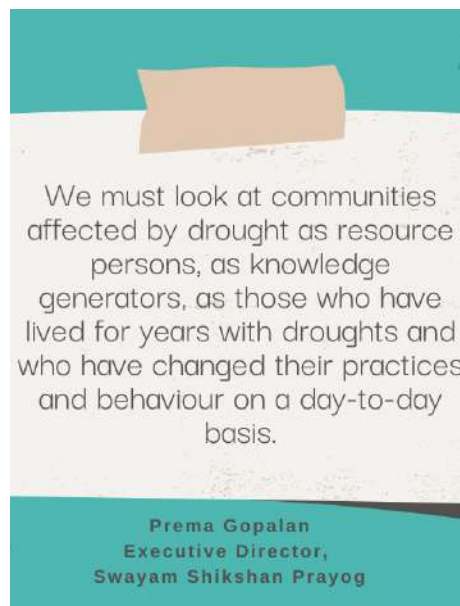
“With limited knowledge of technology, it has been a tough challenge for us to reach out to individual customers to continue our business during the COVID crisis. Digital training by SSP has been the gateway for me to reach my customers even during the crises.” says Gayatri Devi from Kandha village in Gaya district of Bihar. “With digital technology, I am able to successfully conduct online training, receive online orders from the customers and digital transactions have brought in much ease in continuing my business.” says Gayatri. She has reached out to 250 customers, sold products worth INR 24,000 including organic manure, solar products, sanitary napkins etc. and has earned a profit of INR 5000 in the last one month. SSP's online training has gone a far way to help these rural women entrepreneurs to earn a living using technology.

Events

3-Day Training Program on “Socioeconomic Drought Management through Community Engagement”



SSP in partnership with the National Institute of Disaster Management, India hosted a training program on 'Socioeconomic Drought Management through Community Engagement' from 14-16 September, 2021 to build capacity and resilience of the community for mitigating impacts of drought. Government officials and grassroots leaders discussed how collaborative efforts can be strengthened to scale impact.



The SSP team and women leaders extend our deepest thanks for standing with us to steer the COVID Resilience Initiatives.

Our Partners:

Ashoka Innovators for the Public, Avendus, Climate Fund Managers, Crypto Relief, DASRA, Digital India Corporation, European Union, HSBC, Habitat for Humanity India, Huairou Commission, Kaushalya Foundation, Smiles for All, Kamal Udwadia Foundation, Kamal India Foundation, Shapoorji Pallonji, MacArthur Foundation, Misereor, NSE Foundation, Oxford South Asian Society, Roddenberry Foundation, UMED-Maharashtra State Rural Livelihoods Mission, GIZ, Welthungerhilfe, Womanity Foundation

To know more write to us at:

Email: sspindia@gmail.com Phone: +91 8605016700

www.swayamshikshanprayog.org

Climate Change & Food Security

Huairou Commission hosted a session on food security with women farmers from SSP in August 2021. Grassroots leader, Vaishali Pawar, shared her experience on the benefits of organic farming and gaining land rights in Maharashtra. Listen to her speak - <https://bit.ly/3b6qrPo>



Malan Raut, Micro-enterprise finalist for the CII Foundation's Woman Exemplar Award 2021

Combining farming with #social work and awareness to help women leave the confines of their homes and regressive social norms to carve their own identity, Malan is a source of inspiration and pride for her community in Latur District of Maharashtra. Presenting Malan Raut, Micro-enterprise finalist for the CII Foundation Woman Exemplar Award 2021 - <https://bit.ly/3jxSwEe>

