

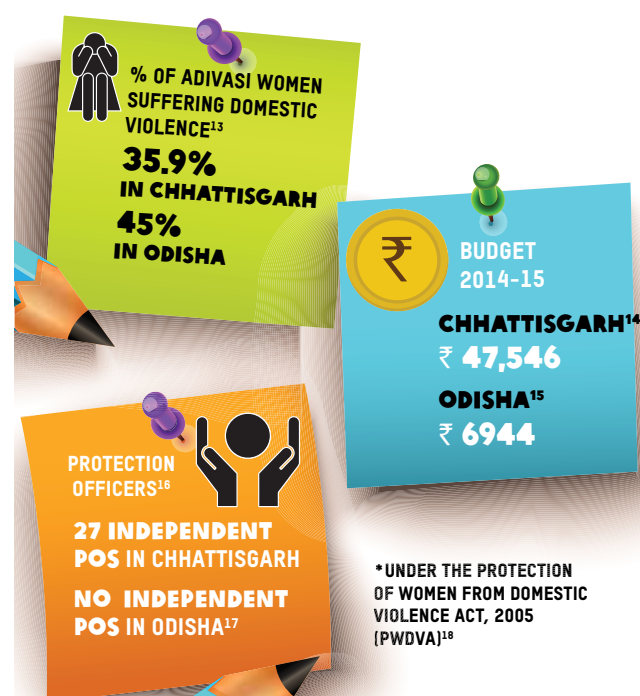
Oxfam India¹ is part of a global movement that, among other issues, works against social acceptance of Violence against Women (VAW), which is one of the most pervasive and least recognised human rights violations across the world. Through its Gender Justice programme, Oxfam India works towards enhancing access of marginalised women, especially Adivasis, to formal and informal justice systems to end violence in their lives. In the context of ending violence against women in the tribal belt, Oxfam India joined hands with organisations in two of its focus states – Odisha and Chhattisgarh; Oxfam India works in six states². The two states have a significant share of India's Adivasi population – 9.2 per cent and 7.5 per cent³ respectively. In Odisha, Oxfam India joined hands with the Institute for Social Development (ISD) in 2008 to run women support centres, and to provide counselling and legal support to victims of domestic violence. In Chhattisgarh, a partnership was forged with Lok Astha Seva Sansthan (LASS) and Khoj-Sajag⁴ to set up women support centres and Nyay Samiti (or Justice Committees) at the village level to prevent and redress gender based violence.

The National Family Health Survey-3 (NFHS) data reveals that the incidence of domestic violence is highest among Dalits and Adivasis⁵ in the country. An alarming 43.7 per cent of Adivasi women experience physical or sexual violence perpetrated by their husbands. As against the national average, 35.9 per cent Adivasi women in Chhattisgarh and 45 per cent in Odisha are subjected to domestic violence. However, domestic violence against tribal women cannot be segregated from the wider context of discrimination and must be seen from the lens of social, economic and political exclusion faced by the Adivasis. Some of the challenges faced by the entire community includes land dispossession, displacement, naxalism, limited access to education and health facilities, lack of economic opportunities, and access to justice.

Thus, in this spectrum of problems confronting both men and women, violence against women, particularly in the private spaces, such as domestic violence, is sidelined as a 'non-issue'. Contrary to a flawed perception that Adivasi women are economically independent, the ground realities are in stark contrast. Though studies have indicated that workforce participation of women in tribal areas is much higher than their non-tribal counterparts, the workplace is mostly sex-segregated⁶. There is a marked difference between the wages of men and women in tribal areas⁷.

The sanskritisation of the Adivasi culture has brought with it subordination of women and introduced the patriarchal system in an otherwise largely equal society⁸ – now, men have an overarching dominance in political power, status, access and control of natural resources, privileges, and decision making. Further, increased male dominance within household decision-making has resulted in an unfair and burdensome allocation of labour to women, which has consequently forced them into subordinate roles⁹. This has predictably also been accompanied by a vicious form of domestic violence against Adivasi women.

The extent of gender based violence varies from region to region and among different Adivasi communities. There is also the influence of other cultures that has contorted some of the age-old cultures and traditions of the Adivasis. For instance, the tradition of Karsu Pendul¹⁰ followed by Koya Adivasis, in Odisha, has now become an excuse for bigamy or for desertion of families¹¹. Similarly, 'Churi Pratha'¹² in Chhattisgarh has become an exploitative means to control women's sexuality.



However, that is one of the factors responsible for the current predicament of Adivasi women¹⁹. Another factor is alcoholism. Culturally, alcohol consumption is widely accepted within the Adivasi communities. Though the causes of domestic violence are far more deep-rooted, major social and economic problems faced by Adivasi women have been an offshoot of alcoholism²⁰. For instance, demand for alcohol is met by the household income, which in turn, manifests in economic violence eventually depriving women of basic necessities; it also becomes an excuse for physical as well as sexual violence.

Despite the large number of cases of VAW, the two state governments, have failed to address the issue – either financially or on the personnel front²¹. Keeping in mind the dismal uptake of the PWDVA and the unique socio-economic context of the region, Oxfam India partnered with organisations in Odisha and Chhattisgarh. Oxfam India and its partners – ISD, LASS and Khoj-Sajag – are spearheading interventions within the community to end VAW. Apart from strengthening women and youth groups and creating awareness regarding domestic violence, Oxfam India along with the NGOs have set up women support centres and Nyay Samiti (or Justice Committee) in Odisha and Chhattisgarh.

WOMEN SUPPORT CENTRES IN ODISHA AND CHHATTISGARH

In Odisha, the Women Support Centres (WSCs) have been set up in three districts — Kandhamal, Khurda (Bhubaneswar) and Cuttack. ISD²², the Bhubaneswar based NGO, has been running support centres in Kandhamal since 2009 and in Bhubaneswar and Cuttack since 2014. These centres are located at the district police headquarters. Each support centre has two trained counsellors and a programme coordinator to supervise and monitor the work.

In Chhattisgarh, Oxfam India partnered with Khoj-Sajag in 2014 to set up a Women Support Centre in Mahasamund district. The support centre in Chhattisgarh is based out of the organisation's office at Pithora block in the district.

Majority of the cases received by the WSCs are of domestic violence — of the 586 cases addressed between October 2009 and March 2015, 218 cases were related to domestic violence. The counsellors at the Centre provide counselling and, if needed, assist the women in accessing necessary legal recourse.

The challenge is however to get *Adivasi* women to the centre. Since the centres started, only 129 *Adivasi* women approached the Kandhamal support centre for assistance and only 36 women registered complaints within a year of setting up the Mahasamund support centre. In order to mobilise women to approach the WSCs, training, and awareness camps, workshops are held to build their understanding on VAW.

As a part of this strategy, Women Empowerment Committees (WECs)²³ are formed to provide community-based redressal to women survivors, guide the women to the support centres, and spread awareness regarding gender based discrimination, VAW and legal rights of women. There are many cases where the survivors have reached out to other victims of domestic violence, supported them and referred them to the centre. *Adivasi* women perceive court settlements time taking so the counsellors try to mitigate the issue at the WSC where instant justice could be

delivered. Most women approaching the WSC feel that the centre has provided them a space to negotiate a safe living environment.

Once a woman approaches the Women Support Centre, a notice is issued to the husband (or whoever is the perpetrator of violence) to appear for a joint counselling session. "Both sides of the story are heard and attempts are made to resolve the differences to the extent possible," says Meena Kumari Sahoo. Meena is a counsellor at the Women Support Centre in Kandhamal.

In some cases where the husband has deserted his family, like in Gayatri's case (Kondh *Adivasi*), a financial agreement is drawn. Twenty-year old Gayatri's husband started living with another woman. She was thrown out of the house along with her five-year old son. The husband refused to support her, or their son, financially. Backed by her family, Gayatri approached the WSC at Kandhamal to seek support for maintenance.

"The counsellors, along with the police, met my husband and persuaded him to transfer a monthly maintenance into my bank account. The counsellors helped me open a bank account as well," recalls Gayatri. She now gets a monthly allowance of Rs 1500 out of his monthly income of Rs 4500. The centre also helped her son get admission in a residential school where his tuition and accommodation fees were waived.

In case the woman has been thrown out of her house and has nowhere to go, the counsellors get them medical treatment if required, help them access short stay homes or shelter homes and inform them of state sponsored or private rehabilitation programmes. The counsellors are members of various forums at the district level which allows them to coordinate with all relevant stakeholders. The police department has started recognising the role of the Support Centres as the number of cases being referred to the Centres through the police stations has shown an increase. This is a reflection of the success of the Support Centres.



Counselling session at a Women Support Centre in Kandhamal, Odisha.

NYAY SAMITI IN CHHATTISGARH

Nyay Samiti (or Justice Committees) have been formed at the village level to address and prevent gender based violence. In Chhattisgarh, Oxfam India partnered with Khoj-Sajag and Lok Astha Seva Sansthan (LASS) in 2014 to form these *Samitis*. While Khoj-Sajag work in 10 villages in Pithora block in Mahasamund district, LASS works in 16 villages in Chhurra block in Gariyaband district.

The focus of the *Samiti* has been on making *Adivasi* women aware of their rights and taking collective actions to claim those rights. The need for a community-based intervention like *Nyay Samiti* arose from fear and lack of trust—that *Adivasi* have for institutions like the police. This is true for both Chhattisgarh and Odisha.

Furthermore, the lack of respect and biased attitude towards women complainants has discouraged women to come forward to file complaints at the police stations. Moreover, *Adivasi* women prefer to settle matters within the community.

The *Nyay Samiti* comprises women selected from within the community. Though the organisational structure of the two *Samitis* by LASS and Khoj-Sajag are different, they play a crucial role in identifying the *Samiti* members. The *Nyay Samiti* organised by LASS comprises two women from each village; a total of 32 women at the block level that is formed into a federation. Khoj-Sajag, on the other hand, has formed a five-member *Nyay Samiti* in each village. So far, the *Nyay Samitis* have been constituted in 26 villages in Chhattisgarh comprising a total of 82 members.

"It wasn't easy to get women on board. They were reluctant but after a few trainings, they were ready to take the responsibility. Over the months, they have become more confident. They didn't get support from family members and villagers initially but now they acknowledge them," says Lata Netam of LASS. The members meet twice a month with the women of the villages. Apart from the women, effort is made to engage with all the stakeholders like the government (Department of Women and Child Development), police, judiciary, lawyers, members of caste panchayat and panchayat, men and youth, so that they know and understand the intention of *Nyay Samiti*.

The selected members are trained on issues related to gender based violence, patriarchy and the PWDVA. "It turns out that they have more knowledge about the Act than the POs. It so happened that during a public event, the *Nyay Samiti* members shared the stage with the PO and *Janpad* member. When a member addressed the public on VAW, they had more clarity than the PO



A few of the Nyay Samiti members from Gariyaband district in Chhattisgarh

on the PWDVA. This even the PO acknowledged publicly," says Hemnarayan of LASS.

The *Nyay Samitis* were formed in September 2014. A lot of stress is laid on sharing information regarding the different forms of violence and the legal recourse to end such violence. When a case is brought before the *Samiti*, a counselling session is held for the couple and the matter is solved after reconciliation.

Twenty-six year old Ganga belonging to the Kamar *Adivasi* community was married with three children. Under the influence of alcohol, her husband used to physically abuse her. He did not work while she toiled in the fields to make ends meet. "He would spend all my earnings on alcohol," says Ganga. One night, he threw her out; Ganga approached the *Nyay Samiti* members in Gariyaband the same night. The members went to her husband and explained that violence against Ganga will not be tolerated and she would take legal action. They explained the legal rights Ganga has and the role *Nyay Samiti* can play in ensuring justice to Ganga. He surrendered before the *Nyay Samiti* and promised to improve his ways. Today, Ganga is living with her husband. He is working hard and earns a decent income for the family.

"The *Nyay Samitis* are evolving into social pressure groups in the villages," says Bharat Ram Thakur, *sarpanch*, Tonhidabri panchayat. Since the acceptance of violence is very high in these parts, the *Nyay Samiti* is active in spreading awareness about domestic violence and PWDVA as well as counselling families. "The cases handled by us have been resolved as men in our community are under constant watch and scrutiny. Fearing social exclusion, men do not falter or repeat their mistakes," Says Mangali Bai, a *Nyay Samiti* member from Thuhapani village.

However, if the mediation conducted by the *Nyay Samitis* fails at the village level, the case is referred to the federation at the block level which is linked to the *Sanghwari Mahila Manch*, a block level forum of women initiated by LASS²⁴. Efforts have also been made by Oxfam India to strengthen the *Sanghwari Mahila Manch* by building their capacities in respect of legal provisions, ways of handling cases, taking up the issues, building an understanding of the issue and guiding in addressing those and by developing transparency and accountability in the forum. The critical issues are directly referred to the Women Support Centres.

The *Nyay Samitis* in Khoj-Sajag also function in a similar manner as its counterpart in Gariyaband. Since they have a WSC, the cases which remain unsolved at *Nyay Samiti* level are referred to the Centres. The court is the last resort if matters are unresolved by the *Nyay Samiti*.

The *Samitis* function in an inclusive and holistic manner and this is increasingly being recognised by the caste panchayats and the community. These *Samitis* have also started taking up other issues that impact the community such as health, education, and social security.

Notes

- 1 Oxfam India is part of a global movement working to fight poverty, injustice and inequality; in India it works in six focus states
- 2 Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh, and Assam
- 3 Census of India 2011
- 4 The partnership with Khoj-Sajag was from June 2014 to June 2015
- 5 Findings of the 2005-2006 National Family Health Survey III
- 6 Since *Adivasi* women are not skilled, they are a part of unskilled labour force. In many families, women are the bread earners, while their male counterparts aren't. Women in these states are a classic example of triple burden of work coupled with non-recognition of their role as bread earner which is set aside as unpaid care work
- 7 Social Statistics Division, Women and Men in India – 2014, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India, 16th Issue
- 8 Some new trends in the *Adivasi* community are son preference, gender based discrimination in education, food, health, marriage, female feticide, child marriage, dowry deaths, atrocities related to dowry. These were unheard of among the *Adivasis*, except perhaps child marriage that was always prevalent
- 9 Agrawal, Bina, *A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia*. New Delhi, Cambridge University Press, South Asian Edition, 1996, P. 42-44
- 10 According to the tradition, a man abducted a woman he wished to take his wife, with the help of his friends. He then paid compensation to the father of the woman and the marriage was formalised
- 11 Ch. P. K. Mohapatra, 'The Koya', Tribal & Harijan

- Research-cum-Training Institute, 1992 - Gond (Indic people) – page 45
- 12 In Chhattisgarh, the widow, among tribal families, was forced to cohabit with the brother-in-law in order to keep the property and custody of children within the family
- 13 Findings of the 2005-2006 National Family Health Survey III
- 14 Notification from Directorate of Women and Child Development Department, Raipur, Chhattisgarh; Serial No. 318 and Serial No. 10428 issued on 17.4.2014 and 23.2.2015 respectively. This amount includes the money allocated to the directorate for training and advertisement
- 15 Government of Odisha, Demand for Grants (Plan), 2016-17 | pg. no. 25| The Budget for PWDVA, for 2014-15, according to the document is Rs 25 lakh which divided between 30 districts per month comes to Rs 6944
- 16 Neither the POs nor the existing cadre entrusted with additional responsibilities have been trained on the Act
- 17 In Odisha the district programme officer of ICDS has been given the dual charge of protection officer
- 18 For further reference see Oxfam India's Policy Brief No. 14 Implementing the PWDVA: Safeguarding Women from Domestic Violence https://www.oxfamindia.org/sites/default/files/PB-Implementing-PWDVA-Safeguarding-Women-from-Domestic-Violence-261015-ENG_0.pdf
- 19 Bagchi, Suvojit Subsidised food sold to buy alcohol in Chhattisgarh, The Hindu, Updated: September 21, 2013 16:27 IST
- 20 As per the National Family Health Survey 3, a staggering 52% men in Chhattisgarh consume alcohol while in Odisha, the figure is lower, but still an alarming 40%. Prevalence of alcohol consumption among men in Chhattisgarh is higher than in all states barring the state of

Arunachal Pradesh. The NHFS study indicates that women with husbands who consume alcohol and get drunk very often are much more likely to experience domestic violence than women whose husbands do not drink. However, oddly enough, 19% and 30% of women have also experienced physical or sexual violence in Chhattisgarh and Odisha, respectively, by husbands who do not consume any alcohol. It is important to note that the findings and figures of the NFHS and NCRB are not limited to the tribal population, but are reflective of the entire population of the state.

- 21 The budget provision of 2014-15 had been made for Rs 25 lakh. Within this, mobility support of an amount of Rs 20,000 has been released in favour of 30 Protection Officers. [Source: 'Status Report on Implementation of PWDVA 2005 in 2013-14 and 2014-15' compiled by State Resource Centre for Women (SRCW), WCD, Odisha]. According to a PO in Kandhamal district, she received Rs 200,000 in 2014-15 for the implementation of PWDVA out of which the expenditure was nil
- 22 Institute of Social Development is also working with various educational institutions and the tribal communities by building their understanding on gender based violence, especially in the districts of Rayagada, Kalahandi and Kandhamal
- 23 In Chhattisgarh, these committees are known as both justice committees and vigilance committees; differently by the partners
- 24 *Sanghwari Mahila Manch* is a district level sangathan initiated by Lok Astha Seva Sansthan (LASS) to mobilise women of the district and to enable them to raise and address their issues by themselves, thus, assert their rights from not only government, but also from their families and communities

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