



CHANGING NARRATIVES

**EMPOWERING WOMEN AND YOUTH
TO CREATE GENDER JUST SOCIETIES**



ऑक्सफैम इंडिया
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Members of a women's group, Sukaro Bai, Budhia Bai, Devaki Bai, and Beso Bai of Jargaon village, Chhurra block, Gariyaband district, Chhattisgarh

Inside Cover:

Women of Jargaon village, Chhurra block, Gariyaband district, Chhattisgarh using the handpump repaired using a government scheme

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FOREWORD

Oxfam India's Gender Justice programme aims to address structural and deeply entrenched gender inequalities and beliefs resulting in subordination of women and girls, and enhance women's access to services and entitlements by state and non-state actors. The programme attempts to bring a positive change in the states' policy and programme environment that would lead to its acceptance at an institutional and community level.

Oxfam India began its interventions in Chhattisgarh under the theme of Gender Justice in 2014. In Chhattisgarh, the issue of domestic violence needs to be viewed from a larger multi-layered perspective of migration, displacement, forest dependency, industrialisation, privatisation, witch hunting, human trafficking and bonded labour. Women and girls have borne the brunt of this dichotomy between growth and progress. Violence in the private sphere becomes a 'non-issue' for the society as well as most women.

With this challenging context, the Gender Justice Programme started with a three pronged strategy - to extend support to survivors to help them regain self-confidence and rebuild their lives; to engage communities, especially boys and men, on the issue of prevention of domestic violence, patriarchy, and unequal power relations in society;

and advocate with the government for the effective implementation of Prevention of Women Against Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA), 2005.

This booklet captures the variety of approaches that are adopted by the programme to build a support system for survivors, both at the preventive and redressal levels as well as at the individual and institutional levels. The approaches, coupled with a few stories of change, present the 'changing narratives' in the lives of survivors in particular, and all women and girls in general.

Oxfam India will continue with its commitment to strive for a violence free life for all women and girls, and to create a gender just society.



Nisha Agrawal
CEO, Oxfam India





“हम बनाएंगे नयी पहचान
राज करेंगे युवा, महिला और
सियान”

(WE WILL CREATE NEW
IDENTITIES, WHERE
THE YOUTH, WOMEN
AND LEADERS WILL ALL
FLOURISH)

“We felt like the female monkey, who is made to dance to the tune of the damru (small drum-like musical instrument) by the madari (street performer). We were surrounded by 150-200 men from 15 villages at the meeting. When one woman was asked to sit, another one was made to stand up. When one of us stood up, they would all clap.”

The *adivasi* (Gond) majority village of Kamraj situated next to the forests in Chhurra block, Gariyaband district of Chhattisgarh was particularly problematic and aggressive with a history of atrocities towards women and girls. Alcoholism had become such an epidemic that even women and children had come under its influence. The women’s group formed by Oxfam India’s partner Lok Astha Seva Sansthan, with support from other members of the village, had helped in ‘raiding’ houses producing alcohol (from mahua flowers) and banning its production by imposing a fine of Rs.5000 on those who made it. Though alcoholism reduced as a result, a few people continued to make alcohol at home, and never paid the required fine.

Aiming at stricter implementation, the three *Nyay Samiti* (Justice Committee) members, Devati Bai (52 years), Prem Bai (45 years) and Savitri Bai (65 years), decided to file an FIR (First Information Report) against them. This angered people, especially those producing alcohol, who demanded that the complaint be taken back. Poornima Nagesh (25 years), an activist working with Lok Astha, was also targeted as the person instigating the women against the society. After the Excise Department (where the complaint was forwarded) aided by the police raided the village, the women including Poornima started being harassed and threatened. Over a period of eight to nine months, the women faced tremendous pressure to apologise for their action. The men felt that the women had disgraced the entire community by asking the police to intervene in their village’s matter. The women were asked to either pay a fine or leave the village. A member’s husband was also beaten up for supporting them. When Devati Bai’s father-in-law passed away, the men of the village refused to attend the funeral ceremony if Devati Bai was present. However, her husband stood by her and declined to invite

them instead. Funeral ceremonies in tribal villages are very important occasions where the whole village participate. Hence, by putting in such conditions, the men tried to undermine or damage the relationship between Devati Bai and her husband.

To further question and intimidate them, a *Maha Sabha* of *Jati Panchayats* (Caste Councils) was held where more than 150 men were called from 15 neighbouring villages. The women were surrounded by these men in the meeting, asked questions, and publically alleged; however they held their ground. Supporting them were the village health worker (or ASHA) Jamini Priya, the village mukhia, and Poornima's father and uncles. Directly challenging the authority of the elderly men of the *Jati Panchayats*, the women refused to sign the apology or pay the hefty fines (of Rs.10,000-20,000) imposed on them. When a second meeting was called, they refused to attend. Instead, with Lok Astha's support, the women went to the State Women's Commission and the police again. The Women's Commission called the men twice to their office and told them to honour the women for their good work. Initially they refused to do so and even demanded that the women pay back all the expenses incurred by the men on this case. They felt that by doing so they would be bowing down to women as a whole. When the second intimation came from the Commission, they began to get nervous and agreed to honour the women. The matter has now been taken to the court where the women are expecting these men to apologise and also honour them for their work as directed by the Commission.

The husbands of these women have stood behind them like pillars. Thakurain Bai's husband said, *"We always wanted to stop alcoholism, but couldn't do anything. So when these women stood up, we supported them. If we could not do something, let them go ahead and achieve it."*

"We want our village to change, that's why we don't want to stop our work or get intimidated. We will continue till we see improvement in this village", says Devaki Bai, the head of the Justice Committee, with renewed conviction.

*From top left – Devati Bai, Poornima
Nagesh, Jamini Priya, Savitri Bai, Thakurain
Bai (Sarpanch), Prem Bai (village Kamraj,
Gariyaband)*



When Oxfam India started work in the state in April 2014 with partner CSOs Lok Astha (Gariyaband) and Nivedita Foundation (Janjgir Champa), the only reason for domestic violence, as articulated by the women, was perceived to be alcoholism. The women believed that violence would stop if men stopped drinking as alcoholism which is rampant in most villages in the state tends to impact women at many levels: it results in direct physical violence under the influence of alcohol; high economic burden as men do not work, and women have to struggle to meet the needs of the family; increases her physical burden as she works both in the house and at the farm on her own; lack of social order as even children come under its influence leading to nil or limited development in the villages or communities themselves. However, the power dynamics perpetrated by a patriarchal system which defines gender roles and societally allows men to abuse their wives even under the garb of alcoholism, was difficult for the women to comprehend at that time.

Oxfam India's Gender Justice programme in Chhattisgarh recognised the socio-cultural influences behind violence against women and aimed to reduce its acceptance through three strategic approaches.

- Advocate with various state government institutions for better implementation of the Protection of Women against Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA), 2005.
- Advocate with various state government institutions for better implementation of the Protection of Women against Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA), 2005.
- Transform society from within by involving both youth (adolescent girls and boys) and men in reducing the acceptance of violence in their communities.

As the first strategic approach, Lok Astha and Nivedita Foundation formed women's groups in each village, a space which the women could safely access. Two or three leaders selected by the members of the women's groups, formed the *Nyay Samiti* (Justice

THE CHHATTISGARH CONTEXT

Due to its traditions and culture which are largely egalitarian and even 'pro-women', the tribal majority state of Chhattisgarh still has better gender norms than the national average.

	Chhattisgarh	India
Sex Ratio (females per 1000 males)	991	940
Under 6 sex ratio (females per 1000 men)	969	919

Census 2011

However, as a result of changing social and cultural norms due to connectivity with urban societies and exposure to mass media, economic policies of the state government which has resulted in large scale migration for livelihood and also brought in 'outside' influences, and political instability due to insurgency, these norms are continuously slipping. Consecutive Censuses have shown a decrease in the sex ratio, while crimes against women are on the rise.

While drinking is a societally acceptable practice in most tribal societies, alcoholism aided by state-sponsored alcohol sale, is on the rise. In many villages, even children have come under its influence. With communities adopting patriarchal societal norms and decline in more egalitarian social and cultural practices, women are increasingly facing violence both at the family as well as the community level. This situation is compounded by the lack of manpower and/or awareness of various laws and provisions by government institutions, which could have provided the necessary space or support to these women.

Committees) in Gariyaband, and Vigilance Groups in Janjgir Champa. The Justice Committees/Vigilance Groups were strengthened by providing extensive trainings on various laws and legal rights, understanding gender roles, discriminations and inequalities as perpetrated by patriarchal social norms, and informing them about the roles and responsibilities of various government departments like State Women's Commission, Women and Child Welfare Department, police, Protection Officers etc.

In most cases, these committees became the first point of contact for women in distress. They spearheaded settlement of disputes in their villages especially those related to domestic

conflicts and violence against women. In Janjgir Champa, the Vigilance Groups also kept an eye out for any trouble in the village. The aim of the committees was to provide a feminist perspective to social justice, which could help propel changes in these villages. In both regions however, the women through their emphasis on societal improvement, have become village leaders in their own rights.

Like the women of Kamraj who realised that alcoholism was just a garb for perpetuating violence and that violence could take much larger and dangerous forms, these committees in other villages too provided women with the strength and conviction to stand up to all forms of violence.





Anita with members of Vigilance Group (village Orekhera, Janjgir Champa)

Anita Rathia (23 years) got married at the age of 18 like most girls in the region. For the first six months of her marriage everything was good, after which the physical violence started. Anita's husband was addicted to alcohol. He did not do any work but would start drinking from morning. She would get beaten up for no reason, sometimes even for a simple task of taking out his dried clothes. He would not even listen to his parents. He would fight with anyone who came in support of Anita. Anita stayed with him for four years despite the abuse, hoping that he will change. But when her in-laws thought it was better for her to go back to her maternal home, she did not resist.

The Vigilance Group of Orekhera village, Dabra block in Janjgir Champa district got to know about the case when Anita's in-laws arrived at the village to drop her off. The women of this committee did not allow them to go back to their village and demanded that they return all that was taken from Anita's family at the time of the wedding. The in-laws threatened to call police and also the *Jati Panchayat* from their village but these women refused to change their stand. When the *Jati Panchayats* of both the villages asked the group to leave the matter to them, they told them that only women can resolve a matter related to other women. Over the next two days, and in the presence of elders from both the villages, the women negotiated the entire dowry given to Anita during the time of her wedding to be returned. Not only that, her in-laws also agreed to give Anita Rs.75000 as 'alimony'. The success of this case for the Vigilance Group is that as per the customs of the region, dowry is not returned if couples separate, and 'alimony' money is practically unheard of. The women allowed Anita's in-laws to leave only after the dowry and alimony were given to Anita.

Orekhera's Vigilance Group has not stopped at only cases of domestic violence, but has successfully put pressure on the community to ban alcohol production by threatening men with police action if they are found producing or selling alcohol in the village, and also made people aware of the various government schemes available for them. They keep an eye out for any kind of trouble that might start brewing in the village, and now do not hesitate to go to the police if required.

Earlier nobody was interested in attending Gram Sabha or had any knowledge of various schemes. Now people are not only aware of laws and schemes, but demand their implementation in the Gram Sabhas. The village now acknowledges their good work and support the committee in whatever they decide to do.

As many of these women confess, approaching police for help was never a consideration. All disputes were settled within the village either by the *Jati Panchayat* or by the village *Panchayat*, both of which have largely men as members. These men, hence, would address issues and settle disputes from their perspective only. Even when police or any 'outsider' including government officials came to their village, the women would leave the area or stay indoors, at home. This behaviour posed a problem for the police as well leading to mutual distrust and fear.

On the side of the state machinery, the various departments including the police were neither aware of the various laws nor had information on their respective roles and responsibilities. In such a situation, when a woman in distress took the courageous decision and approached the police, it was likely that she was not given the right advice or legal support. More often than not, she was asked to reconsider and sent back

to her village where she continued to suffer in silence. Chances are rare that she will approach a legal authority again.

Given such a scenario where both the communities and the government agencies tend to undermine each other, it was imperative to bridge the gap between the two. Following the second strategy, Lok Astha and Nivedita Foundation held awareness campaigns through posters, rallies, street theatres, and trainings to inform people of the laws, and the departments responsible for their implementation. In Gariyaband, Information Centres were opened in select women's homes where brochures and booklets on topics related to women's and child rights were kept for people to read. Contact numbers of members of Justice Committees and key officials like Protection Officer, State Women's Commission etc. were painted on the walls of all homes. Women and youth were taken on exposure visits too. Regular interface with the police

were held in both districts where cases of violence were resolved instantly which helped in breaking the barrier of mistrust from both sides. The Protection of Women against Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA), 2005 requires that shelter homes be made available for women facing abuse, and also provide her with support such as counselling, medical and legal aid. In Chhattisgarh, where the Act has received limited state support, there are no such government support mechanisms for women in distress. The concept of Women's Support Centres arose from the need to address this gap. One Women's Support Centre, hence, was opened by each partner CSO in their respective districts with the aim of providing shelter to women in critical need. These Centres also provide counselling to women facing violence, and inform them on their legal rights.

Sujata (name changed) was pregnant with Kishor's (name changed) child when she learnt that he was having an affair with another girl who was pregnant as well. Kishor married the other girl and not Sujata. When Sujata approached the village council (samaj) with her issue, they asked Kishor to take care of her as well.

The neglect and abuse started soon after. Kishor tried many times to get Sujata to abort the child. When that did not happen and Sujata delivered their son, he would treat her badly in the house, did not give her food and ignored her for days. If she complained, he would get violent and beat her up. After she approached the Justice Committee of Jargaon, they brought her to the Support Centre at Gariyaband for counselling. This infuriated her partner who did not allow her and her few months old child to eat for five days.

The Justice Committee again brought Sujata and her son to the Support Centre in a precarious condition of dehydration and malnutrition. Her son was severely malnourished and had become ill with pneumonia. At the Centre, she and her son was given shelter, medical care and legal aid for more than a month. Kishor came twice to

the Centre to bring back Sujata but was aggressive and hostile towards the staff. He even threatened them with violence which made Lok Astha take cognisance of Sujata's as well as their staff's safety. Lok Astha counselled Sujata to file a DIR (Domestic Incident Report) against Kishor at Chhurra Police Station. When the police insisted that the 'domestic matter' be resolved within the family, Sujata filed a DIR at Gariyaband instead. The Protection Officer here recognised Sujata and her son's relationship with Kishor despite no legal sanction of marriage and helped file a DIR.

The matter was eventually taken to the court. The court, on hearing the case, acknowledged the need for such Support Centres and gave judicial approval to keep Sujata and her son at Lok Astha's Support Centre instead of the government owned Nari Niketan in Raipur which usually is in a state of disrepair. Sujata stayed at the Support Centre for three months where she and her son received all the medical care that they required. Post counselling by Lok Astha and under pressure from court, Kishor finally apologised to Sujata in the presence of the judge and promised never to neglect her like he did. Both Sujata and her son now stay with Kishor and his wife.

Apart from recognition of Lok Astha's Support Centre by the judiciary, the key achievement of Lok Astha in this case has been the PO's acceptance of the need to file a DIR which only married women can file against their husbands or his family.



The socio-cultural and geographic contexts of both the districts differ greatly and therefore the issue and nature of violence against women. Gariyaband is largely a forested region with limited exposure to urban societies. Violence against women here is mostly related to emerging new social hierarchies and norms. On the other hand, Janjgir Champa bordering Odisha, has many power plants which has resulted in higher 'outside' influences. The cases of violence here differ in nature with increase in sexual assaults, trafficking, molestations etc.

To get the state to take cognisance of these growing transformations, and urgently implement the PWDV Act, Oxfam India had to extensively engage with government institutions and agencies such as Department of Women and Child Development, State Women's Commission, Police Department, lawyers and judges, and Department of Health through regular meetings, workshops and consultations at the state level. Oxfam India also engaged with media,

educational institutes, and other civil society organisations and departments to create awareness on the issues of domestic violence and violence against women and girls. As a state level initiative, Oxfam India collaborated with the Police Department to develop and display four posters on domestic violence, Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act 2012, legal rights of citizens when arrested, detained, and during interrogation) across all police stations and chowkies in the state.

The continuous state level engagements and initiatives by Oxfam India helped our partner organisations to also push their work at the district and block levels. Government institutes at the district level supported the work of Lok Astha and Nivedita Foundation by responding rightly to the issue of violence against women. In Janjgir Champa, the police now accept all cases that are brought to them while in Gariyaband, the Protection Officer and even the


CASE 1

In one of the villages next to RKM Power Plant in Sakti block of Jangjir Champa, a 21-year-old youth tried to sexually assault a 16-year-old girl from the same village. When an FIR was filed after consultation with the samaj and as guided by Nivedita Foundation, the police were reluctant to arrest the accused as he belonged to a rich family and was employed at the plant. This was despite the severity of the crime (as the victim was underage) and also the fact that he and his brother were repeat offenders. In a week's time, a police interface was held in the block where her case was also presented. Even though the suspect was on the run, the police asked for his immediate arrest. In the accused's absence, his brother-in-law was arrested as he had helped him get away. The matter is now in the court, and the youth has been charged both under section 376 of IPC and POCSO.

Initially both the father and the girl were hesitant to talk about the incident and let the village know about it as the community would have maligned the girl's character instead. Post rigorous counselling by Nivedita Foundation, both were convinced that it was necessary to approach the justice system to stop such crimes from being committed at all in future. As the girl's father mentioned, if such cases are presented in front of the samaj or Panchayat, all they do is fine the accused and let them go. This hardly acts as a deterrent and the assaulter continues to pay the fine and commit such crimes.

CASE 2

Rajni (name changed) is trained to be a nurse. She got married five years ago and has a four-year old son. In the five years of her marriage, she suffered a lot of violence both from her in-laws as well as her husband due to dowry related demands. Rajni says her husband used to get influenced by his family.



He would regularly take all her monthly salary and spend it on himself or give to his mother. Many times, her in-laws held her hands while her husband kicked her senseless. He would also get young men to steal her scooter or harass her on the roads. One day, she decided to leave and go back to her parent's place. That day, her father-in-law kept her child away, and she had to leave without her son.

At her parents' place, she narrated her ordeal to Nivedita Foundation's employee who asked her to visit the Counselling Centre at their office premise. There, she was encouraged to file an FIR. At a police interface the next week, the police asked her father-in-law to return her son immediately. However, the case has now upturned as Rajni's husband was found hanging in his room. Rajni is still fighting out the case in the court for the custody of her child.

Details withheld as both the matters are sub-judice.

police seek out Lok Astha's counsel in complicated cases.

In both these districts, one can see an increase in the reporting of cases and interactions with the police which reflects the change in societal behaviour, the growing confidence amongst women in stepping out and accessing justice as well as success in advocating for the correct implementation of the PWDV Act by those accountable for it. In Gariyaband, since the implementation of the Act

and before Lok Astha's intervention, there were nil DIRs registered which have now increased to 65 in just two years while the Support Centre has already dealt with 35 cases so far. In Janjgir Champa, 38 cases came to the Counselling Centre, while the Protection Officer registered an increase of 1-2 DIRs every month. The Justice Committee and Vigilance Group members now attend interfaces with the police and interact with the Protection Officer on their own.

The five *mukhias* (leaders) of the village did everything in their power to subdue the five women. They were branded as *tohni* (witches), and a hefty fine of Rs.5000 was imposed on people who were found interacting with them. These women were ostracised from all social functions and meetings, and people were forbidden to go near them. To the extent that their own relatives refused to visit or talk to them.

Jargaon is a forest fringe village in Chhurra block, Gariyaband district of Chhattisgarh which like many other villages here, was plagued by the issue of alcoholism and alcohol making. The five middle-aged women in question, Devaki Bai, Sukaro Bai, Beso Bai, Budhia Bai and Janaki Bai, are all members of the women's group. These women were in the forefront of a campaign 'raiding' people's homes and banning them from drinking, making or selling alcohol in the village. They had also started raising their voice against the lack of development in the village, and the tactics of the village *mukhias* to constantly fine people, and use the money for their personal activities.

As the women got stronger, it raised the hackles of these men who resorted to various ploys to subdue the women. During the marriage of Devaki Bai's son, nobody from the village came to attend or offered help. Children were asked not to eat the mid-day meal in the village school as it was cooked by the 'witch' Beso Bai. When Sukaro Bai went to collect her widow's pension, she was treated as an untouchable and with disdain. Individual land title claims under Forest Rights Act (FRA) of all five women were rejected by the *Panchayat*. There was tremendous pressure on them to hand over their farm land to the *mukhias*.

In many rural patriarchal societies, women who have the confidence and the ability to raise their voice or express their opinions, or are single and widowed often face societal violence in the form of regular harassment, and/or are branded as 'witches' in order to suppress them. In this case also, the five

women were not only vocal with their opinions but were also widows who owned land (excluding Devaki Bai whose partner passed away only last year). With support from Lok Astha, the women approached the Chhurra Police Station who took cognisance of the complaint but did not register an FIR. So, they complained to the State Women's Commission as well as the Commission for Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes. Under pressure, the police jailed the five *mukhias* for 24 hours while the two Commissions asked them to apologise to the women and to approve their land titles under FRA respectively.



"We felt humiliated during the process and nervous taking a stand against the mukhias and the whole village. Even the women were against us; they felt we had spoilt the atmosphere of the village by not listening to the village elders. But we continued despite the pressure because we had to stop their evil hold over the community and help our village develop", says Devaki Bai.

These five women along with other members of the women's group have not only been able to stop alcoholism, but have helped others get job cards and ration cards, worked on deepening the village ponds, and build canals and roads under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGA). Under schemes meant for Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), they have got electricity to their hamlet as well as got their hand pump cleaned and repaired. They have also helped in getting delayed payment for NREGA and old age pension released.



Seeing the work done by these women for the community at large, and their knowledge about schemes and laws, people now have stopped calling them tohni and fully support them. But these women won't stop here. Along with the apology from the five *mukhias*, they have a charter of demands which they want them to sign. These include: no cursing or harassment of women, nobody should be asked to leave the village, women should not be called at night, all should be given jobs if available, FRA mapping should be done and all schemes made available to all, and fines should be abolished.

The camaraderie between the five women is easy to see. *"We feel brave and confident now because people have realised we are right and the government is also on our side. If you are weak, they will always try and subdue you. We are old but we can still stand up for our rights. Now people know that if they get involved with these five women, they are as good as dead"*, laughs Budhia Bai.

The ordeal faced by the women of Jargaon is a reflection of the changing gender norms in many tribal societies in Chhattisgarh where 'male hegemony' is slowly uprooting a more egalitarian way of life. So apart from intimate partner violence, these women now have to face violence and suppression at the community level also.

Taking the third strategic approach, youth and men's groups were formed to address the growing patriarchal social norms. To get access to men's space and mindset, the groups were approached from the aspect of livelihood and village improvement through implementation of various government schemes. Whereas the youth groups constituting adolescent girls and boys, one of the key focus groups of this programme, were trained on building their understanding on gender roles, and identifying gender based discriminations and inequalities in their families and society. Gender norms were challenged and broken by questioning them through various activities involving swapping gender

roles. It was felt that if societal outlook has to change, it has to change from within. The youth would become the influencers who could bring change within their families as well as their communities thereby ensuring that the next generation of women face less violence than their mothers.

The youth groups, especially in Janjgir Champa, are actively involved in publicising information and messages through songs, slogans, theatre or street performances which they develop themselves, rallies etc. In many villages, they have taken up village-improvement work. In these villages, they are looked upon as people who can bring the change that their elders could not. By participating in cultural activities that challenge gender roles, and cycle rallies led by girls during the '16-days of activism' campaign in December every year, these groups have managed to break down many gender stereotypes. Earlier, the girls were restricted from stepping outside their villages but now these groups have even travelled to

Raipur to participate in various events. The boys on their part now help out in household chores. From being looked

upon as problem makers, the youth are now seen as problem solvers in their villages.

"If we don't change ourselves, especially how we behave at home, then how can we ask others to change. We are now a group of ten educated youth; we have to change our society and village, so that the number can become 100", says Om Prakash Sarthi (26).

Ask them about gender roles and societal discrimination based on gender, and they will eagerly share their perspective. The Adarsh Yuva Samiti (boys) and Kishore Balika Samiti (girls), the youth groups of Kanwali village in Sakti block, Janjgir Champa district are a vocal lot and brimming with hope and enthusiasm to do



Members of Kishore Balika Sangathan,
Akoljamora village, Janjgir Champa

something good for their village. Mansa Sidar (22) and Vishal Kumar (22) are the groups' artists who write poems, plays, posters and slogans on gender based violence and inequalities. They also choreograph dances, *nukkad nataks* (street theatres) and organise inter-village competitions on such themes. The groups have also held rallies to drive home the message on women's rights.

They supported the women's group in the campaign for stopping alcohol production in the village and now help in identifying cases of violence in their neighbourhood. They are also spearheading development work in the village. So far, their work has included building stairs in the village's main pond, repair of village assets such as the transformer and handpump pipe through *shramdaan* (volunteer labour work), creation of a cremation ground, etc. They have also helped in getting released NREGA payments for 121 people and old age pension for 75 people. A woman lacking resources was assisted in availing treatment through the group's own savings. These groups, especially the boys who are school/college dropouts, did not have any constructive guidance before and would while away time doing nothing. Post involvement with Nivedita Foundation, the youth are full of ambition: to get more children educated, to help improve the condition of their village, and also explore marigold and sunflower farming as business ideas. Unlike youth from other villages who feel the need to migrate for jobs, they want to stay and work in their own village.

"When we had joined this group and used to go for meetings and trainings, our parents were suspicious of us. They thought we were up to no good. But now, they are the first ones to push us to go help out in the village when there is an issue that needs handling", Vishnu Kumar laughs heartily.

When asked if there has been any change in the village, the girls are eager to point out that harassment of girls by boys has reduced while gender roles,

especially in their families, are not that strict anymore. Alcoholism has reduced while alcohol production has stopped. People don't fight within the house or even outside that much anymore. Even though it's limited, parents have started sending their daughters out of the village, thereby increasing their social mobility.

However, the biggest change as pointed out by the boys, is the recognition of their work by the village elders who earlier never involved them in any decision making process. Now the *Gram Sabha* does not start without their presence and the Sarpanch always asks for their opinion before taking any decisions related to their village. According to Pappu Sidar (24), president of the boys' group, the village elders feel that the youth are bringing in new ideas that are required in the village, something they have never been able to do.



Adarsh Yuva Samiti (boys) and Kishore Balika Samiti (girls), the youth groups of Kanwali village in Sakti block, Janjgir Champa district, Chhattisgarh

*Members of Kishori Balika Sangathan,
Akoljamora village, Janjgir Champa*





These stories are evidences of the changing narratives both within and outside the village boundaries. From being shy, fearful and hesitant, these women and youth have taken enormous strides in standing up against deeply entrenched community practices that inherently led to domestic violence and societal disorders. They have challenged growing patriarchal norms that restricted women's mobility and encouraged community-level violence, and have formed strong bonds with

other women who have stood by each other like pillars during the worst of times.

The adolescent boys who were looked upon as trouble makers and lacked resources to engage themselves with, are now leading the effort to not only improve their villages, but also force the community to question social norms by reversing gender roles and traditional divisions of labour. Girls on the other hand are now gaining the confidence to step outside more



whether it is for higher education, cycle rallies, or cultural performances.

The changing narrative is also noticeable in the men of the community; be it the small groups of men who understood the changes that these women wanted to bring in and have stood firmly by them, the husbands who have given up alcohol and violence and contribute to household work, or the village elders who once vehemently opposed many ideas and work these women did but

now encourage them wholeheartedly.

Nowhere can these changes be as clearly seen than in some of the project villages of Gariyaband where these women's groups organised sporting events that challenged all conventional gender norms. As part of the campaign, the men were asked to compete in games traditionally played by women like fugri and matka race, while women from various villages competed against each other in kabbadi, a physical game played only by boys and men. In some villages, the women did not even bother to inform their husbands or families of their participation. In villages where the idea was opposed sharply by the village mukhias or the sarpanch, the women still went ahead with organising as well participating in the event. When the competition heated up, these very men came forward and cheered for the women or presented them with awards. In Parsa Pani, the Patel (village leader) now insists on creating a team of women kabbadi players.



The women and girls of Tohmidabri, Gariyaband, with the trophy for winning the Kabbadi competition

In Jargaon, where the women were branded *tohni* and ostracised, the whole village came forward to watch and support these women. In Kamraj, a funeral ceremony was postponed to allow the women to continue with the event. In Bhaisamora, the husbands gave their wives shirts and pants to wear, so that they could play well and win. Moreover, in all the villages

where these competitions were held, the men and boys also participated amidst loud cheers and shouts of encouragement.

Many social narratives were upturned during the events in a single instance: assertiveness and freedom in the choices made by the women, the villages' acceptance of these women's choices and decisions,

Members of women's group, Parsa pani, Gariyaband



recognition of women as leaders and decision makers, change in gender roles without feeling humiliation, challenging the decisions of village leaders, and breaking cultural norms by encouraging wives to wear men's attire.

Societal and attitudinal barriers are thus being broken. Many are yet to be broken. The tremendous

efforts and work done by Lok Astha and Nivedita Foundation in a short time has helped in creating the right base for more changes in the future. These women know what changes are required to make their lives and villages better, and they also know how to get it. The confident and free strides, the twinkle in their eyes, and their open laughter tell it all.







*Women and girls playing kabbadi,
Tohnidabri, Gariyaband*

About Project Partners:

Lok Astha Seva Sansthan

Lok Astha started in 2006 to work on natural resource management and effective implementation of the Forest Rights Act. Subsequently, their work expanded to include gender justice, particularly violence against women especially amongst Dalits and tribal women. Currently they are working in 70 villages in Gariyaband district of Chhattisgarh where women leaders have formed 'Sangwari Mahila Manch' with their support.

Lok Astha is a registered body under Chhattisgarh Societies Registration Act, 1973 (44 of 1974). It is also registered under Foreign Contribution Regulation Act of 1976.

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Nivedita Foundation

Nivedita Foundation started work in 2006 with a rights-based approach to develop and strengthen women's leadership and collectives to help them access justice on their own, and to create pressure groups for effective administration of justice.

Nivedita Foundation supports a state level women's collective called Chhattisgarh Mahila Manch (CMM) which is an active, powerful and effective organisation of voluntarily motivated and dedicated women and activists aiming to fight for their rights, and also helping in reducing acceptance of violence against women. From providing medico-legal support to counselling, the CMM helps the women evolve as leaders, and contribute in the decision making process.

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About Oxfam India:

Oxfam India is a human rights organisation that fights poverty and injustice by linking grassroots programmes to local, national and global advocacy and policy-making. Under its Gender Justice theme, Oxfam India addresses the issue of gender based violence with special focus on domestic violence through various programmes and campaigns. It aims to bring changes in policies for gender equality by engaging various government departments, building capacities of women and improving access to formal and informal justice systems for survivors of violence.

The programme is co-funded by Oxfam GB, Oxfam India, The Asian Circle, Oxfam Australia and Oxfam Hong Kong. Oxfam India is a member of a global confederation of 21 Oxfams and is registered as a company under Section 25 of the Indian Company Law.

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