

CREATING NEW IDENTITIES

A PHOTO JOURNEY OF LOK ASTHA'S WORK ON GENDER JUSTICE
(2014-2017)



ऑक्सफैम इंडिया

OXFAM

India



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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 re-build 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 Protection of Women against Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA), 2005.

This booklet attempts to capture major interventions undertaken by Lok Astha Seva Sansthan, a partner organization in Chhattisgarh, during the last three years. This is a photo journey of their various interventions and the learnings from them.

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



A handwritten signature of Nisha Agrawal in blue ink, written in a cursive style.

Nisha Agrawal
CEO, Oxfam India



“Hum to ladenge, hum na daregne
Gharelu hinsa atyachar hum na sahenge
Jahan hak na mile tera mera, leke rahenge.”

“We will fight, we will not be scared
We will not tolerate domestic violence
If we do not get our rights, we will take them.”

Lines from a song developed by LASS



When Lok Astha Seva Sansthan (LASS), Oxfam India’s partner, started work in Gariyaband district of Chhattisgarh on Gender Justice in April 2014, alcoholism in the community was looked upon as the only cause of domestic violence. Increasing structural violence due to rising patriarchal social norms such as subjugation of women in the community, branding them as witches, harassment, lack of inclusion in community level decision making process, lack of social or economic mobility etc. were not considered violence at all. They were accepted as part of life as more egalitarian tribal social norms started disappearing.

To help women recognise the socio-cultural influences behind such violence and to reduce its acceptance in the community, three strategic approaches were taken:

- Empower women and create community-level leaderships to address social issues impacting their lives, and provide survivors of violence with spaces within community through community-based formal and informal mechanisms to help them access justice.
- Advocate with various state government institutions for better implementation of the Protection of Women against Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA), 2005 at the district level.
- Create attitudinal change and transform society from within by involving both youth (adolescent girls and boys) and men in reducing the acceptance of violence in their communities.

Lok Astha worked in 16 villages of Gariyaband where despite many challenges, they have been able to achieve all the above. This photo-journey of their three years’ work highlights their achievements – of creating and empowering women’s groups to access justice by challenging all gender norms, recognition of Lok Astha by the government for their work, and youth and men’s groups who have supported these women in upturning many patriarchal social norms.

Growing patriarchal social norms and declining egalitarian tribal traditions resulted in increasing violence against women, both within the family and in the community. To address this, Lok Astha formed and strengthened women's groups constituting all women as members in each village. Through multiple meetings, these groups were made aware of societal dynamics that perpetrate violence. Individual leaderships were encouraged and two or three leaders were chosen as Nyay Samiti (Justice Committee) members. The Justice Committees soon became the support system which a woman in distress could readily access, and also the rallying point around which social and personal issues were discussed and solved.





Extensive trainings were held on understanding gender norms, various forms of violence against women, societal discriminations and inequalities in the name of tradition and culture, patriarchy and its impact, and the various laws that a woman in distress could access. Exposure visits to different states and government institutions were conducted to help the women overcome their fear of government agencies and outsiders, and also to explain the institutions' roles and responsibilities. The aim of these trainings was to make these women leaders in their own right, so that they could stand up for each other when needed.



The Justice Committees were formed to challenge the traditional male-controlled justice system of caste councils or jati panchayat and to provide a feminist perspective to issues. These women began with a campaign against alcoholism and alcohol-making, which had become rampant and often led to physical, mental and economic violence against women. JCs also helped resolve cases of domestic violence in the villages, taking legal recourse whenever required. This led to their recognition and acceptance within their communities and also influenced women from neighbouring villages. Where earlier they were not allowed to participate, they are now called to resolve disputes in their villages. They have also been invited in tribal circle meetings both at the district and block levels.





The Justice Committees also work as vigilance groups, monitoring and addressing village-improvement issues ranging from implementation of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), release of old age pension, help people get job cards or ration cards, entitlements under Forest Rights Act, education, health and cleanliness etc. In Jargaon, the members accessed various government schemes to get electricity to their hamlet for the first time and also get their hand pump cleaned.



One of the focuses of the trainings and exposure visits provided to the Justice Committee members was to understand the roles and responsibilities of various stakeholders involved in the implementation of the PWDV Act including state women's commission, women and child welfare department, police, health institutes, judiciary, and media. The aim was to empower them to seek help from these sources whenever required. Now the Justice Committee members do not hesitate to approach these institutions to get justice. For example: The mukhias of Jargaon were asked by the state women's commission to apologise to these women for harassing them by branding them as tohnis (witches). In Maliyar, the child welfare committee approved the education of four orphaned children (as shown in pic) and one boy with disability at the Ashram Shala in Chhurra.





Violence as perpetrated by men due to a patriarchal system makes subjugation of women an accepted social norm. To break this system from within, it is necessary to change attitudes of men so that violence can be stopped at the root itself. To access men's space, Lok Astha started by providing information on various government schemes which they could access to enhance livelihood as well as improve their villages. Men's groups were then formed and through meetings were made aware of gender roles, patriarchy and violence. Some of these men who once were alcoholics and beat up their wives, now help in household chores and encourage the women to attend meetings or travel outside.



For the message to reach a larger audience, dissemination of information and creating awareness was critical. Apart from using posters, street theatres, and rallies, one of the ways adopted by Lok Astha was to paint all walls with phone numbers of Justice Committee members and important government officials or departments such as police stations, state women's commission, protection officers etc. This worked at two levels: it not only gave women the knowledge and strength that help was at hand, but also deterred men from resorting to violence.

अगर कोई महिला घरेलू हिंसा से पीड़ित है, या
आपके आस-पास में कोई महिला घरेलू हिंसा से
पीड़ित है, और इस हिंसा से मुक्ति पाना है, तो
सहयोग के लिए इस नम्बर पे सम्पर्क करें

- न्याय समिति की महिला -
- श्री मति कान्तीबाई - 7692907237
- सामाजिक कार्यकर्ता
- द्रौपदी पटेल - 8963952691
- स्पॉट सेंटर - 07706296838
- गरियाबंद



The idea of opening Information Centres to act as libraries came up so that both women and men could access information on laws related to women's and child rights and gender equality and schemes related to health, livelihood, land titles etc. These centres were opened in the homes of one of the Justice Committee members with numerous books and brochures. Posters explaining traditional gender roles, types of violence, trafficking, child abuse, laws etc. were also put up. While in some villages, men were threatened by such centres, in other villages, these Information Centres were inaugurated by the Sarpanch themselves reflecting the acceptance of Justice Committees' work.



'16-days of activism', an international campaign held every year between 25th November to 10th December, has become an important platform for Lok Astha to strengthen their advocacy at all levels. Public meetings with government officials are held to understand the status of the implementation of the PWDV Act and identify the gaps. Youth and women led rallies are held from village to village with the message of gender equality and prevention of violence against women. In the year 2016, adolescent girls participated in cycle rallies spreading the message of freedom and challenging gender stereotypes.





Leading the message on gender equality has been the youth, especially during the '16-days of activism' campaign. Through their performances including traditional dances, folk arts like panwani, forms of theatre which used men to play women's roles, skits, songs etc., the messages of gender based discriminations and violence were driven in.



Sports has always been seen a male domain, with 'softer' games like matka daur and fugri played by women, if at all. Lok Astha challenged all gender norms and stereotypes when they proposed kabbadi competition for women, and matka daur and fugri for men. Despite opposition from village elders and families who supported traditions, the Justice Committees and women's groups enthusiastically took the idea forward. The events attracted everybody including the village elders who came to watch and support the women and men of their respective villages. This event showed that many 'traditions' can be successfully challenged and broken. Sports as medium of messaging as well as breaking gender stereotypes was used for the first time in 2016 during the '16-days of activism' campaign.





The PWDV Act requires states to provide support mechanisms such as shelter homes, counselling, medical and legal aid that a woman in distress can access. Due to limited state support to the implementation of the Act, these mechanisms are currently not available. To address this gap, a Women's Support Centre was opened at Gariyaband where women could take shelter during emergency, get legal and psychological counselling, and medical aid when required. The work of the Support Centre at Gariyaband was given judicial approval by the district court during the hearing of a case.

Government institutions at the district and block levels were continuously engaged through various meetings and consultations to make them aware of the need for implementation of the PWDV Act. This also involved making the relevant government bodies aware of their roles and responsibilities. District and block level conventions have helped Lok Astha generate awareness on the issue of domestic violence, create important linkages with government departments, and also increase visibility of the organisation's work in the district. The success of such engagements can be seen in the increase in the filing of DIRs where prior to the project, there were no DIRs filed.





All disputes in villages are resolved by Jati Panchayats as people especially women fear approaching the police ('outsider') for help. The police on the other hand, often do not provide the required legal support due to many reasons: not aware of the laws, changing stances of the vulnerable woman, looking at it as a domestic issue to be solved at home, the notion that women tend to bring false cases etc. Through regular meetings, Lok Astha constantly engaged with the police, both at the district and block levels, to advocate for the implementation of the PWDV Act, and also provide them with directions on how to handle such cases. Public interfaces were held where cases were presented and solved instantly thus reducing the fear of police from women's mind.



One of the successes of constant advocacy at the state level by Oxfam India is the collaboration with the Police Department on dissemination of information on four topics through posters across the state. These topics are: domestic violence, Protection of Children against Sexual Offences Act, legal rights of citizens when arrested, detained, and during interrogation. This helped in increasing Lok Astha's engagement with the District Collector and the Police. Not only that, both Police and the Protection Officer now actively seek out Lok Astha's counsel in many complicated cases.





The youth are looked upon as the influencers who can bring attitudinal changes in their own homes as well as the society. Groups of adolescent boys and girls are trained on subjects like superstitions, traditions of dowry system and child marriage, recognising gender based discriminations, and types of violence in a patriarchal society. Perceptions were challenged and gender norms broken by questioning them on gender roles through activities. Like women's groups, they are also taken on exposure visits. Girls are also trained on life skills such as cleanliness, menstrual hygiene, handicrafts training etc. Now while boys help out with household chores, girls travel as far as Raipur to participate in events. Only by empowering the next generation can violence be removed from the roots.



If there were successes, there have been challenges too. Resistance have often been strong from men and village elders not only for the women's groups but Lok Astha's employees as well. In a particularly harrowing case in Kamraj, Poornima Nagesh, along with four members of the Justice Committee, was harassed and threatened with murder by men who felt that she was influencing the women against village's established traditions and norms. Attempts were made to malign her reputation in front of a Jati Maha Sabha attended by over 150 men from 15 villages. With support from her parents, the woman Sarpanch of Kamraj, and Lok Astha, she is now helping these women take this case to its rightful conclusion.





In the short span of just three years, Lok Astha has upturned many patriarchal traditions and challenged deeply entrenched social norms through diverse and uncommon approaches. It has helped build a space for women to access justice easily. Governance mechanisms have been compelled into action and made accountable for their roles. And men are being pressured to change their attitude and societal narratives to create new identities for everybody. Leading this change is Lata Netam, the Director and Founder member of Lok Astha who was awarded the State Level Honour "Nari Shakti Samman" conferred to 'Eminent or Outstanding Institutions or Organizations and Individuals working towards improving the condition of women, especially those at the margins of our society and empower them to take rightful place in society.' Recommended by the District Programme Officer and recognised by the state government, the award simply confirms the tremendous work by Lata Netam and Lok Astha in just a few years.



Achievements	Impact
No. of Justice Committees formed	16
Justice Committee members trained	32
Adolescent girls trained	563
Youth and men trained	344
No. of cases addressed by Justice Committees	25
No. of cases addressed by WSC	35
No. of advocacy initiatives / interfaces	12
District level conventions	1
No. of villages – 16 days of activism	16

Future Plans:

Lok Astha plans to continue work at strengthening village level institutions especially the Justice Committees so that they are able to access justice and reduce the acceptance of violence on their own. Though they have always involved the Gram Sabha in various discussions and decisions, Lok Astha plans to work more closely with the Jati Panchayat as they are the key informal or parallel justice system for the communities. To stop all forms of violence completely, the focus in the coming years will be on extensively training the youth on gender roles, equality and rights. Lata Netam will continue to be involved with various government bodies at the district level as President of the Sexual Harassment at Workplace Committee, and members of Bal Mitra Committee (looking after implementation of POCSO) and ICDS Nirakshan Dal.



Oxfam India is a movement of people to end the injustice caused by extreme inequality and poverty and ensure that no one gets left behind. 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.

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