

BRIEFING NOTE

Collective Action for Gender Justice in West Bengal

January - December 2014

In partnership with
Jamgoria Sevabrata &
Ford Foundation



SUMMARY

Building upon the strong relationships that Trickle Up has with women in our self-help groups (savings groups) in India, Trickle Up recently completed a one-year project to help promote gender justice. The project, funded by the Ford Foundation, involved the innovative technique of enabling women to use video to tell their own stories. This approach broke through the shame and isolation so often associated with these cases and also enabled more constructive dialogue around gender issues with husbands, the communities, and local officials and police. In fact, women were able to resolve several cases and report others to local authorities. The 12 videos and a gender justice manual that Trickle Up produced will help us strengthen our program throughout India and in other TU regions, explore new funding opportunities, and provide added value to our main strategic partnerships (including partnerships with National Rural Livelihoods Mission in two states in India). This focus on gender justice is very consistent with Trickle Up's mission to serve "the poorest and most vulnerable." In addition, it aligns with our broader recognition that poverty is multi-dimensional and that the economic strengthening and financial inclusion that is at the core of our approach also can be a foundation for meeting other needs of the women we serve.



BACKGROUND

In June 2013 the World Health Organization and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine released a report stating that physical or sexual violence is a public health issue that affects more than one third of women globally.

The report defines violence against women as a “global health problem of epidemic proportions” and called for a “major scaling up of global efforts to prevent all kinds of violence against women by addressing the social and cultural factors behind it.” Dr. Margaret Chan, Director General of WHO, joined the UN Secretary General and the heads of other UN entities in a call for zero tolerance for violence against women during the 69th World Health Assembly where seven governments, including India, declared violence against women and girls “a major global public health, gender equality and human rights challenge, touching every country and every part of society.”¹

Despite progress in establishing an international commitment to zero tolerance for gender violence, women and girls are still not safe in their homes and communities. In the wake of the case of the sexual assault and murder of a young nurse in Delhi in 2013, the Ford Foundation in India called upon several organizations, including Trickle Up, to submit proposals for how their work could promote gender justice. Trickle Up designed the project, Collective Action for Gender Justice in West Bengal, to strengthen Self Help Groups (SHGs) of women living in ultrapoverty as safe spaces in the community to build awareness around issues of gender violence and actively promote gender justice from a grassroots level. Trickle Up received a \$35,000 grant for a one-year project.

“Gender justice” means equal treatment and equitable value of the sexes. Gender equality is a fundamental human right that is guaranteed in international and regional treaties, conventions, and national legislation. As Oxfam notes: “Achieving gender justice is a matter of basic rights and also a key means of addressing poverty...Women form the majority of those living in poverty, and have fewer resources, less power and less influence in decision making when compared to men. They are exposed to various forms of violence and exploitation and, in addition, experience inequality because of their ethnicity, age, (dis)ability, nationality, caste, religion, or sexual orientation.”²



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1. Global and regional estimates of violence against women: Prevalence and health effects of intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence, World Health Organization, London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine and the South African Medical Research Council, June 2013.

2. Oxfam Policy Practice (<http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/our-work/gender-justice>)

PROJECT ACTIVITIES



It was our hope that SHGs would become a safe space for facilitating a dialogue and addressing issues of gender violence and other injustices.

The Gender Justice project took place within the context of livelihood development work that was already taking place in Purulia, West Bengal.

In response to pervasive issues of gender injustice that were observed across our project areas and the spontaneous responses by SHG members, we developed a project that would empower SHGs to actively promote gender justice. It was our hope that SHGs would become a safe space for facilitating a dialogue and addressing issues of gender violence and other injustices, and that through this process Trickle Up SHGs would begin to drive social change. We started work in Manbazar II Block, Purulia district, partnering with Jamgoria Sevabrata (JS), and targeting 600 ultra-poor women already engaged in TU's main program and supported by our main "Pathways" grant from the Ford Foundation. The project involved the following activities:

Awareness generation: Training on gender dynamics, violence against women and how to promote gender justice.

Developing case videos: Participatory video documentation of experiences among new and old SHGs in seven gram panchayats. The methodology consisted of mainly of video interviews of SHG and other community members regarding cases of gender-based violence.

Promoting SHGs as safe spaces: Through case analysis, discussion, and legal recourse information for victims of gender-based violence, community catalysts were engaged to identify what role the SHGs can play as a "safe space" to promote gender justice. In developing the "safe space" model, TU drew from the experience that SHGs have had in increasing access to safe child-birth through knowledge of policy provisions and supporting women in accessing related services.

Developing a gender justice toolkit: TU and JS refined and shared training materials, including participatory videos, with other gender-focused agencies and women's networks in West Bengal. These can be resources to organizations working directly with women subject to gender violence or engaging in advocacy and media work, bringing the stories of rural Bengali women living in ultrapoverty into broader discussions around gender justice.

PROJECT RESULTS

We have seen dramatic change at the individual, household and community levels in the areas where this project has taken place.

Through sensitization and video training within the context of savings groups, marginalized women have gained confidence, broken their silence and taken concrete actions to address gender injustice in ways that would have previously been impossible. This simple process has been documented and a manual has been tested that allows for this approach to be replicated.

This project has been an important confidence-building process for individual participants, and has prompted a shift in their individual perspectives and the perspectives of the broader community. The mere use of a video camera by women living in ultrapoverly is in itself a reversal of the existing power dynamic. Participants are not only already marginalized because they are women, they are further disempowered because they are the poorest of the poor – having no productive assets, and as a result no decision-making authority. As women use the video camera, they became the directors, rather than the subject. The video camera is a productive asset that gives the participant the authority to determine what is seen and what is unseen.

In this case, the participants chose to bring to light many things that were previously unseen or remained unspoken. They have gained agency – they can now choose to tell their story or to remain silent, whereas previously they felt they had only the option of remaining silent. But many women have taken their new-found agency even farther. The telling of stories where previously there was a culture of silence has prompted a response within the setting of the SHG. Women have initiated collective action to address issues as they are revealed.

This has opened up the possibility to address higher-level issues and forge increased solidarity with women in similar situations. As part of the grant project, SHGs have begun to build linkages with community authorities and with district-level administration, and as a result have increased the possibility of getting legal aid training and legal assistance and provisions for women who are victims of violence.

Working with these women has also shifted TU & JS organizational perspectives. As a result of this project, both organizations are better able to define the importance of gender justice in livelihood promotion. While the organizations' existing programs already focus on women's empowerment, this project has increased understanding of the potential for SHG members to address these issues, the special needs that result from systemic gender injustice, and ways to better promote gender diversity within their own staff composition.



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OUTCOMES

141 women community catalysts, 100 youth (including 48 adolescent girls), and 15 staff catalysts demonstrated increased knowledge of laws pertaining to gender violence, options for recourse, and major challenges associated with gender injustice in target villages.

1 short overview film and 12 video cases produced.

60 SHGs (48 new and 12 old) have adopted internal charters with specific actions for addressing gender injustice and violence in their communities, including informal sensitization activities.

27 SHGs have taken collective actions to address gender justice issues that surfaced in their group meetings and sensitization sessions.

60 SHGs have the contact number of the Protection Officer, the office and the Secretary of Purulia Legal Aid Services.

7 local Panchayats, including Manbazar police, tribal leaders and other Panchayat workers/health staff are aware of the role of SHGs in promoting gender justice. The Manbazar II Police Station has trained staff and community catalysts on the legal redress process and requested that JS conduct additional training to highlight how SHGs are promoting gender justice.

A draft gender justice manual was produced, incorporating video cases. The final manual and films will be shared with stakeholders and development organizations working specifically on gender issues. Additionally, project learning will be incorporated into our upcoming activity planning sessions with OLM and JSLPS to gauge their interest in incorporating this approach into our work together. JSLPS and OLM have a strong interest in empowering women and have expressed interest in further discussions around gender justice. The existing products have been tested and used with 60 SHGs, and have been shared with TU partners in their draft form.



VIDEO CASES

**Anjali's
Daughter
(Anjali Singh)**

Dire poverty and prevalent social norms compelled Anjali to choose early marriage for her daughter. SHG members collectively stop the marriage and ensure equal rights and provisions for boys and girls.

**Laxmikanta Stops
Drinking (Sajani
Hemram)**

This video highlights how regular discussion within the SHG about gender justice helped a member speak about her husband's habit of excessive drinking, domestic abuse, and its impact on the overall wellbeing of her family.

**Jaba Will Go to
School Again
(Jyotsna Singh)**

An SHG's collective action stops the early marriage of Jyotsna's daughter and allows her to enjoy childhood life and continue her studies. This video also captures how sharing in the peer group can help others make better decisions.

**Panmoni's
Struggle Continues
(Panmoni Baskey)**

Panmoni and her daughter face domestic violence, and their isolation hinders legal assistance and social support. Being united with SHG members is the first step towards Panmoni's wellbeing. She is not alone; there are women who support her. Though this case is still in process, it has given Panmoni hope that one day she will get her rights.

**Domestic Violence
Stopped, at Least
(Shibani Singh)**

This video captures the various issues that Shibani faced when she was isolated - her husband's alcohol abuse, extra-marital affair and physical abuse. It highlights the importance of solidarity among women, as her fellow group members stand by her side and convince her husband to ensure a better home situation. It also shows the importance of follow-up by SHG members to ensure a permanent solution.

**Case of Suktara
Mudi**

This film shows an SHG's collective action resulting in better food, better livelihood activity and a more peaceful life for Suktara, her children and her husband also.

Anita Baskey

This video points out the complexities faced by a victim of abuse. Anita fears that revealing her experience may worsen her situation. Gradually, she gains confidence, shares her story and receives some emotional support from her parents. However, she remains undecided about leaving her husband because of the potential outcomes for her children. This case remains unresolved.

Geeta Rani Mondal

Geeta's story is common among rural girls. Early marriage is a frequent practice among rural poor families, where lack of information and opportunities aggravate the situation. Decisions regarding marriage are taken by male heads of household. The video focuses on a peaceful intervention by SHG members, and also shows that the role of the SHG also lies in helping the family improve their situation. This combats some of the causes of early marriage.

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Lolita Singh This film demonstrates how an SHG helps one of its members improve her relationship with her husband. Earlier Lalita's husband was not supportive of her, and would not help her carry out livelihood activities. Through SHG support, he has become supportive and they now carry out the livelihood activities together.

Roshomoni Baskey Rosomoni faces her husband's alcohol consumption and physical abuse. Her SHG intervenes, and work with Rosomoni's husband and other community members to demonstrate that his spending on alcohol is affecting the wellbeing of his family. He is now engaged in a small business and Rosomoni is rearing livestock and performing agriculture activities that help them lead a better life.

Shyamali Singh Shyamali was initially hesitant to share her situation. Group-level awareness generation led her to tell her fellow SHG members about the physical violence that follows her husband's excessive drinking, and her SHG successfully resolves the issue through regular follow-up and interaction with the husband.

Shibani Bauri Shibani's husband and his family verbally and physically abuse her. She requests help from her parents, who take her back, but her in-laws lodge a case against her father and he is taken into police custody. Shibani joins an SHG. She learns about legal protection and provision for domestic violence cases, and SHG members help her to lodge a case against her husband. She is currently waiting for the verdict.



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