

Kushal Kishori Pariyojna: Awakening the spirit within

A JICA sponsored initiative is enabling women to take the control of their lives and in the process is ushering an era of gender equality in a traditionally conservative community.



Gender Resource Sub-centre at Sherpur/
Photo credit: Geetha / OWSA

One is confronted by a quaint sight upon entering Sherpur village's Gender Resource Sub-centre. The high point of the building is a semi-open courtyard; un-plastered walls with evocative posters advocating for the gender equality, education of girls, health and hygiene. An asbestos roof provides shelter from the vagaries of nature, over a *kachha* (unfinished) floor. What makes this otherwise unremarkable section special is the reason it is used for.

“This is the space where our girls can just be girls,” says Beena Walia, Chief Co-ordinator, Mamta Samajik Sanstha. “This is a safe and free space where they sing, dance, and share lives, hopes and aspirations. Yes, this is the space where the girls, who otherwise lead lives of hard work, poverty and discrimination, can come and just be girls.”

Beena's statement reveals the basic principle that informs the ‘**Adolescent Girls Self-Sufficiency Support Project**’- a woman's recognition of her own strength and ability is the precursor to healthier life styles and greater contribution in the community. **This is a joint initiative of Terra People ACT Kanagawa (TPAK) and Mamta Samajik Sanstha – a local NGO, with support of Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA).**

The project, which is locally known as the *Kushal Kishori Pariyojana* (literally translated as the scheme for able adolescent girls), has been running since 2009 in 20 villages of the Vikasnagar Block, Dehradun in the state of Uttarakhand.

Strategy for change



Kaori Takeuchi (left), Project Manager, TPAK talks to girls at the Gender Resource Sub-centre, Bairagiwala village, Vikasnagar/
Photo credit: Poorva Sagar/ OWSA

Through work spanning almost two decades, Mamta Samajik Sanstha had tried to make inroads into a community that is socially conservative and economically backward. Women, the poorest minorities in the area, live in a severely oppressed and very difficult situation, legally, socially, and economically. A majority of young girls are anaemic, and have no wherewithal to withstand the whims of a demanding life. Most drop out of the school by the 5th grade, either due to a lack of finances, household responsibilities, or social norms and expectations.

“Eventually we came to the realisation that the problems were too widespread and endemic for us to have any lasting impact alone,” says Beena. Now, this collaborative project innovatively focuses on adolescent girls between ages 10-19 years of age, and aims to equip them with enough knowledge, skills and confidence to impact their own future while influencing the lives of families and communities.

“The reason we decided to work with adolescent girls through

the initiative is two-fold,” says Kaori Takeuchi, Project Manager, TPAK. “At that time there were a number of schemes benefiting adult women, but the adolescent age group had largely been ignored.”

“The second important aspect of our strategy was the selection and training of girls to be Peer Educators (PE). We strongly felt that to empower women, we needed to infuse women’s lives at an early stage: adolescence - and nurture their thirst for knowledge, creativity and leadership.”

Lessons to last a lifetime

Both Kaori and Beena believe that the genesis of social change can always be traced back to women. “Therefore, the project aims to improve the overall status of women, be it in terms of health, literacy, familial life or work,” says Kaori.

As training and activity hubs, the GRCs are key components of the programme. Mamta Samajik Sanstha runs a well equipped Gender Resource Centre (GRC) at Premnagar, where it regularly organises residential programmes.

Every village has a Sub-gender Resource Centre (Sub-GRC). The idea behind the Sub-GRC is to establish ownership, create a centre that ‘belongs’ to the village community so that once the project winds up, the community continues to implement the work.

Some Sub-GRC are located in buildings offered by the community; others are located in the same building as the village *Anganwadi* centre [*Aanganwadis* are Government sponsored non-formal schooling centres for children in the 0-6 age group. They also act as child-care and mother-care centres]. At times, the sub-centre is also run in the GRC coordinator’s house.

Each Sub-GRC comprises of one GRC coordinator, two peer educators, one instructor and around 20 to 30 girls. In addition, there are four sector coordinators who are responsible for mobilisation in five villages each.



Adolescents follow the stitching instructor (centre) intently at sub-Gender Resource Centre, village Seesambara, Vikasnagar/ Photo credit: Atrika Hazarika / OWSA

Gender Resource Centre at a glance

The GRC aims to build the leadership capacity of young Peer Educators (PEs) as catalysts for change, and to provide members with training for livelihood creation, health and hygiene awareness and life skills – awareness through rights based approach.

To intensify the activities of the GRC, a sub-centre has been set up in each village. Each GRC is maintained by a co-ordinator who in many cases is a former ASHA [Accredited Social Health Activist] or an ANM [Auxiliary Nurse Midwife]. GRC Co-ordinators are further supported by four sector co-ordinators who mobilise the community in five villages each.

It has around 20-30 adolescent girl members. The group elects two peer educators (PEs) from amongst themselves who receive training and then impart it further.

To ensure results, quarterly meetings of staff members, coordinators, PEs and instructors are held to review progress and provide course correction where necessary.

Peer Educators are trained on various life skill programmes at the main GRC at Premnagar, Dehradun and are responsible for leading change by further training girls in their villages. Currently, 1200 adolescents are enrolled in this programme with 40 peer educators.

Members attend sessions for two hours in the afternoon, six days a week. They are trained in stitching, *adda* work (shawl making), *dari* (carpet making and other crafts). The girls are also offered the option of training in personal grooming and

beautification; skills that build abilities and confidence so that the girls can move along on a path of financial independence as they grow older.

“I am a beautician and have trained in the GRC at Dehradun” says Poonam Pal 23, now an instructor at the Sherpur village sub-centre. “I now train other girls in my village. I feel that there is much demand for these services and I can help these girls become independent, just as I am today,” she claims.

Similarly, Neelam, a 23 year old sector coordinator shares about her work, “Since last January, I have been educating girls about the benefits of the project and I also spend time visiting villagers to increase enrolment.”

In the beginning, the sector-co-ordinators say, it was a struggle to convince parents to send their girls to the Gender Resource Sub-centre. It took persistence to convince them about the benefits and importance of the programme. But it kept becoming easier as parents realised the relevance of the skills being imparted.

Healthy lives, healthier mindsets

Besides livelihood skills, health and hygiene is another focus area, as it remains a cause of concern for women in this region. Given that the observance of simple steps and clean habits can cause avoidable infection and disease in the villages, girls are offered practical tips for nutritious and balanced diets, clean hands, dental care and regular health check ups. Given that many girls are from extremely poor backgrounds and may not be able to afford healthy food to meet the critical requirement of iron in their growing bodies, free iron tablets or iron syrup are dispensed once every week.

The project has developed linkages with government doctors. Sometimes TPAK volunteers and experts from abroad also pitch in to provide training, conduct check ups and offer free and timely health advisory.

PEs play an important role in bringing the focus on to this important aspect in their homes and villages. They implement the learning at home; they also inform friends and relatives in the village about their experience thus encouraging them to follow suit as well. The inexpensive and practical tips are easily absorbed by the village folk.

PEs are trained to conduct regular checks of the salt used in the village homes. They encourage the use of iodised salt as it is known that the normal food intake is insufficient to meet the iodine requirement of the body. Iodine deficiency can limit physical and mental development, and cause goiter (a swelling of the thyroid gland) and hypothyroidism, a condition marked by fatigue and weakness.

Not just preaching to the choir

Most female empowerment schemes fall short in acknowledging and leveraging the role that men can play. In fact, women’s rights will remain an uphill struggle until men buy into the arguments for gender equality. Recognising this fact, the project lays due emphasis on building awareness and support among men. It does so through enlisting the support of male coordinators, who conduct meetings in every village and encourage parents to register their girls in the programme.

“We try to make men understand that both sexes need to have equal access to opportunities, resources and rights,” says Beena. She goes on to explain that for this very reason, the Gender Resource Centres were so named.

“It is important for us to promote the well being of the entire community,” says Beena. “Though we primarily work with women, we do realise that both men and women need to be equally gender sensitive for the society to prosper.”



Poonam and Bobby from Sherpur village display a shawl made by them at the sub-GRC/ Photo credit: Attrika Hazarika/ OWSA



Girls from village Bairagiwala proudly hold bags stitched by them at the sub-GRC/ Photo credit: Poorva Sagar/ OWSA

Despite the fact that the initiative is quite young, impact can be witnessed across the board. Several of the members have gone on to be recruited by the state or district governments as ASHAs [Accredited Social Health Activist] and ANMs [Auxiliary Nurse Midwife – they provide basic nursing and midwifery care to women and children under the health system]. Others have been recruited as vocational instructors through the GRCs. Still others plan to launch their own micro-enterprises; from beauty parlours to handicrafts outlets to tailoring shops in their villages.

While the tangible influence in terms of job opportunities created and skills imparted is easy to register, more important perhaps is the internal transformation that the project has inspired. The recognition of their abilities and the opportunity to hone them has imparted the girls with an invaluable sense of self. A confidence that will help in ensuring that these young girls grow up to become strong, independent women, leaders - really of their own destinies, their families and ultimately their communities. And till that happens, it is simply enough that they have a space where girls can just be girls!



Read about the TPAK-Mamta-JICA project in Chamoli, Uttarakhand
<http://southasia.oneworld.net/fromthe-grassroots/young-women-ready-for-social-change>