

## Young women ready for social change

*Adolescent girls and young women from Chamoli district, Uttarakhand had never before been so confident and aware of their rights. A joint initiative of Mamta Samajik Sanstha (Mamta), Dehradun and Japanese NGO Terra People ACT Kanagawa (TPAK) with support from the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), has breathed a new life into them.*



Girls at the government school in Kandai, Chamoli/ Photo credit: Poorva Sagar/ OWSA

Life in the hills of Chamoli is not easy for nineteen year old Alka. Besides going to school, she helps her mother with household chores and has led a rather secluded childhood. But unlike other young women of the village who are hesitant and shy, she is bold and confident. As she tells me about her dream to become a medical practitioner some day - her tone is assertive. She is determined to make a difference to the way young women are perceived in her village. "Girls and boys should be treated equally", she says. "*Kushal Kishori Pariyojna* has filled me with the zeal to lead a healthy life and make informed choices in my day to day living",

asserts Alka with her eyes shining.

Nineteen year old Tanuja hails from Saiti village. "Now I am aware of my rights as a girl child." she claims. "Right to equality with boys, right to education, right to health, food and nutrition and above all, the right to be born and to live a normal life," Tanuja counts them on her fingers.

The lives of Alka and Tanuja have been directly impacted by a joint initiative by Terra People ACT Kanagawa (TPAK) and Mamta Samajik Sanstha – a local NGO, with support of Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). This project for "**Establishment of a health camp and mobile centre for health, hygiene and gender improvement among women in Northern India**" is popularly known in the local language as the *Kushal Kishori Pariyojna* (meaning "Scheme for able female adolescents").



Nestled among the Garhwal Himalayas, Kandai village in the Ghat Block of Chamoli district / Photo credit: Geetha/ OWSA

J. M. Singh, Secretary, Mamta Samajik Sanstha describes the initiative as one that reaches out to adolescents in the 10-19 age group, especially those who belong to tribal or BPL families in 40 villages of the remote Ghat Block of Chamoli District, Uttarakhand, India. "Through our programme, we want to make these young women aware of their fundamental human rights," says Singh. "To develop leadership qualities and life skills within them and integrate them into the mainstream of the society is our objective," he explains.

The Uttarakhand region is witness to a huge gender bias. Women are typically more hardworking than the men. As we drive up and down the hills, we spot many women hidden beneath heavy loads of grass that they carry from the forests as fodder for their cattle. Back at the village, we see men chatting or playing cards with their peers. "The main motivation behind the project was the gender gap in these hills", says Miki Asano, the Project Sub-manager, TPAK. "Women are unaware of their rights here", she adds.

The villages in Chamoli district of Uttarakhand are mostly inhabited by low income tribes. The terrain and climate make it difficult for agriculture and other economic activity. These villages are cut-off from the rest of the world for around 4-5 months a year due to rain, snow and landslides. Health facilities are few.

Education is the most precious dream of the girls. Most of the young women I met in the villages of Ghat travel several kilometers on foot just to reach the nearest school. Institutes for higher education are few and far between, and their dreams of earning a degree remain unrealised.



Woman carrying a heavy load of grass/ Photo credit: Poorva Sagar/ OWSA

Mamta Samajik Sanstha has over 18 years of experience of working in Uttarakhand, building the capacities and confidence of women from disadvantaged communities to better access facilities for health, education and sustainable livelihood.

By expanding outreach to 40 villages in Ghat block of Chamoli district, the *Kushal Kishori Pariyojana* during its two year programme, intends to draw out adolescent girls from circumscribed spaces into a journey of self discovery and confidence. It aims to provide them with critical information that can lead them into good health and nutrition; foster collaboration and cooperation, and create a thirst for more knowledge for better lives.

The project is premised on the belief that educating adolescent girls on various aspects of health and nutrition can have positive effects. As they grow up, healthy young women can better fulfill their multiple roles of production and reproduction - ensuring their families' health, and producing healthy offspring. Enhanced knowledge levels can lead to greater confidence and

heightened awareness for gender equality. Women are often responsible for producing and preparing food for the household, so their knowledge about nutrition can improve the health and nutritional status of the entire family.

Shakhambhari, the Project Coordinator, hails from Bairagna. Friendly and gentle, she captures the trust and confidence of the girls she visits. Eight months into the programme, she along with mobile team member Manoj and local volunteer Rukma, have organised adolescent girls' groups in the target villages. Two girls from each village have been selected as Peer Educators (PE) Or *Kishori Netas* (Hindi phrase meaning adolescent girl leaders) .

The first batch of 20 *Kishori Netas* have been trained at the Sanstha's headquarters in Dehradun. Training was conducted over three days and included sessions on developing life skills and leadership qualities. The Sanstha aims to train all *Kishori Netas* in four batches over the year.

Selection as a *Kishori Neta* fills the girls with a sense of achievement and importance. Back home from the training, they are eager to share their exciting journey with all their friends. They now organise fortnightly meetings with their peers in the village, sharing the knowledge and skills they have gathered. These meetings help girls interact with each other and discuss their problems and ambitions. They also share experiences of observing cleanliness and adopting healthy habits. The *Kishori Netas* are also given a small collection of books that offers scope for delving into worlds beyond known boundaries.

### The Mobile Centre and Health Camp: Serving girls at their doorsteps



Schoolgirls attend a poster session on gender equality at the secondary school in Kandai. British volunteers Dr.Andrew Hoyle and Dr.Rose, the school headmaster and a teacher look on / Photo credit: Poorva Sagar/ OWSA

Miki Asano(Left) illustrates techniques for oral hygiene with Manoj as interpreter/ Photo credit: Poorva Sagar/ OWSA

Mindful of the limited mobility that girls enjoy, the project runs a mobile centre that visits the 40 target villages. A series of bright, illustrative posters on health, hygiene, education and gender equality are set out on display. Shakhambari and Manoj initiate discussion on one poster at a time. Sessions are made lively yet informative through creative games and exercises.

The mobile centre along with regular health camps aim to fill some critical knowledge gaps amongst the target villages. For instance, it was found that although people had seen television advertisements promoting new brands of iodised salt, they had no idea of the importance of iodine in diets. They did not know that iodine deficiency can impact human lives at all stages, cause mental retardation; impede physical development and cause goiter (a swelling of the thyroid gland) and hypothyroidism, a condition marked by fatigue and weakness.

The sessions also educate the young girls on the need for protein, iron, and other micronutrients that support adolescent growth spurt and meet the body's increased demand for iron during menstruation. Knowledge about the importance of iron and mineral rich diets including green vegetables and supplements is lacking and therefore deficiencies can be found in a large percentage of the girls.

The district higher secondary school at Kandai overlooks the sleepy little village and across at countless hills of the Garhwal Himalayas. It takes us over an hour to negotiate the *kucha* (hindi word meaning ungravelled) road to the top. Watching a health camp in progress at the district school/ intermediate college, we notice that the girls, about 50 in number, are initially shy and questioning; but they quickly respond to smiles, songs and trick questions. When the *Kushal Kishori* theme song is sung, they sing along and are soon immersed in the programme.

The girls are educated on the importance of iodised salt and iron in the diet through an interactive session. Then they join with Miki Asano as she performs an easy action song that aptly demonstrate a handwashing technique. She goes on to illustrate an effective way to ensure oral health by brushing.

In the background, volunteer doctors review the health status of every girl, measuring height, weight, biceps and blood pressure and counselling them on diet and health issues. Iron and vitamin supplements and medication are prescribed where it is found necessary. After the consultation, each girl is given a card that documents her health status.

At the end of an exciting day, the girls are introduced to the *Kishori Netas* from their villages. As they disperse, they promise to attend the fortnightly meetings conducted by these *Netas*. They also agree to use the village library maintained by the *Netas*, including books, magazines, newsletters and other material on the subjects that have been discussed during the day.



British volunteer Dr. Andrew Hoyle (Left) examines an adolescent girl at a health camp, observed by a school teacher / Photo credit: Poorva Sagar/ OWSA



An adolescent holds up her health card/ Photo credit: Poorva Sagar/ OWSA

Travelling around the villages with the health camp, the doctors noted that around 80% of the girls are anaemic. They also observed that most of the health problems and diseases the girls faced are caused by ignorance. Therefore they conduct regular sessions on the need to drink adequate quantities of water, eat healthy food (vegetables) and maintain cleanliness and hygiene in daily lives. Some of the girls are administered iron tablets and vitamin supplements, prescribed medication, and suggested proper diets.



Full house at a life-skill fair, Ghat block, Chamoli district/ Photo credit: Geetha/ OWSA

A Life Skills Fair is organised at the Kasturba Gandhi Residential Girls' Hostel in Ghat. Guests include the Block Education Officer, the Principal of the District Inter-College, the ICDS Supervisor and 35 girls from about 18 villages. As the programme proceeds with pithy but creative activities, the girls warm up to the visitors and participate enthusiastically in the quiz, receiving some really unique gifts in the process. Soon we are conscious of other spectators - boys on their way home from school, young mothers with their toddlers,

and a wizened old woman – who, full of curiosity, are seen peering from the roof of the building. At the end of the proceedings, Singh does not forget to thank them for their participation and to acknowledge that young boys and men are important actors in the road towards gender equality.

Life Skills Fairs will be organised every six months, bringing girls together for a wider experience and honing their knowledge and skills.

## **Community engagement for sustainability**

The unique feature of the initiative is its approach of engaging local stakeholders in the activities. The programme garners support from the local government officials including school and administration officials, *aanganwadi* workers [*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.] workers, ANMs [Auxiliary Nurse Midwife – they provide basic nursing and midwifery care to women and children under the health system] and ASHAs [Accredited Social Health Activist] to take the programme ahead.

Efforts are also being made to integrate the project with one of the government schemes. This way, the initiative can be continued even beyond the project period – that is, beyond 2012, explains Singh.

The main challenge is to change the attitude of the parents towards their daughters. It takes a lot of time to build a rapport with the girls and their parents and convince them to participate in the initiative. But then it pays dividends. Many of the girls we met at the camp told us that their mothers had encouraged them to come.

Strategically, working with young women has yielded good results. Adolescence is the right time to infuse a woman with confidence and awareness so that she grows into a person of significance and repute, working to realise her potential while contributing to build a nurturing family, a strong society and a powerful nation.