

Series: Best Practices in Engaging with Men and Boys in India

Experiences of Samajdar Jodidar Programme Enhancing Male Participation for Improving Gender Equality in Maharashtra, India

Men's Groups in Sangola are Constructing New Norms

Samajdar Jodidar Programme Implemented by Astitva in Sangola Block, Solapur District, Maharashtra in partnership with Centre for Health and Social Justice

A region with a strongly entrenched caste system where "at every level the upper caste Maratha community has dominated over non-Maratha communities and women." An area where the Samajdar Jodidar project started off with a massive setback that split the animators. "Caste has been our biggest challenge and it came up in a terrible way in one of our earliest experiences in the project," says **Shahji Gadhire, head of Astitva**, the local partner organisation in Solapur district's Sangola block that implemented the Samajdar Jodidar project in the area with the Centre for Health and Social Justice (CHSJ).

The project had just begun when in a shocking incident a Dalit woman was raped by a Maratha youth in a project village. The animator of the village, belonging to the Maratha community, refused to support action against the youth and preferred to resign rather stand with the group. Following the incident Astitva undertook a review of all 20 animators, replacing some of them. The animators were selected carefully resulting in a combination of eight strategically chosen Dalit animators and a Muslim animator, among others; all the animators eventually stayed with the project till the end.

Sonalwadi Sets the Gold Standard for Joint Ownership of Property

Despite a tumultuous beginning, the Astitva-implemented programme in Sangola block counts among Samajdar Jodidar's most sterling impacts. The village of Sonalwadi in Sangola, with 313 families, proudly considers itself a model village. It was the first project village to achieve 100 percent joint ownership of property between husbands and wives. **Astitva's secretary Sunita Vijay Dhanawade** says, "Though a GR on joint ownership issued by the Maharashtra government in 2003 was a supporting tool, a law by itself does not bring about change without the addition of community inputs." So what were the ingredients for Sonalwadi's success? Its men's group members explain:

- It is a small, cohesive village with few Maratha families (the socially and economically powerful Maratha community is found to be more resistant than other communities to sharing property with the women) and they too were persuaded
- An year or two of sustained, intensive dialogue by group members with other groups in the village, key caste leaders and those in influential positions to gain their support
- The Mahila Gram Sabha passed a resolution to this effect; there were also discussions on the issue several times in the gram panchayat and the gram sabha
- Cooperation of the Gram Sevak ensured
- Linkages made with the Block Development Officer and other block level officials who were asked to implement the GR
- Animator Siddaram Dada Borde and his wife both were sarpanch at different times and have a strong influence in the village, they were able to prevail upon everyone to complete the 'register' of joint ownership

- Group members led by example, registering their own property jointly with their wives and displaying the register to others



Pic captions: All homes in Sangola project villages prominently display the nameplates of joint ownership

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ग्रामपंचायत सोनलवाडी

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Pic Caption: Sonalwadi's register of home owners is proudly brought out for visitors

Sonalwadi's success is replicated in all the other project villages in Sangola where 80-90 percent households are joint property now. In **Gaudwadi village** for instance, 90 percent of homes are owned jointly, the remaining ones being those where there is dispute over who is the legal wife. Other than a few Muslim households, the 650 families in Gaudwadi are from the OBC and ST communities and there are no Marathas at all. **Animator Shashikant** says that backing from **group member Popat Ram**, who was **Sarpanch** at the time, played a significant role in achieving joint ownership.

What has been the impact of joint ownership? The community in Sonalwadi declares that the village has become *tanta mukt* "free of violence (against women)." They cite the case of a man who had thrown his wife out of the house being shown the register of joint ownership. After this incident the women in the village realised their power and the village has become a secure environment, assert community members. They say husbands who had earlier expressed the fear that giving their wives property rights would mean that women's behaviour towards them and their parents would become aggressive also agreed that there has been no harm done at least.

The women in the village recently got together and ensured that alcohol has been banned here. Group member Jagdish says that there is openness and mobility of women and girls, earlier they did not even wait at the bus stop to board a bus, instead a male family member would halt the incoming bus and then call them out of their home.

"This was a common feature in all Samajdar Jodidar villages which has now changed," says another animator, **Nasirmullah**. He adds that another sign of the change is that while earlier women did not have access to village libraries (vachanalaya) which are quite popular in Maharashtra, now in the project villages at least special effort has been made to have women and girls' participation in the libraries. When the men's group in Hatkar Mangewadi came to know that SHG members in their village had discussed that they were keen to visit the well-equipped village library but were deterred by the presence of only men and boys there reading newspapers and magazines and hanging out, they took up the matter in the village and now two hours daily are reserved for the women.



Pic Caption: The library (Vachanalaya) in Hatkar Mangewadi now has regular presence of women

Popat Ram says Sonalwadi has gone from being one where women and girls would not come out of their homes to one where the village girls now travel 40 km to study and women are active in many groups.

Astitva facilitator for the project, Dutta Gulig who was earlier the animator of the village, adds, "Where once not a single woman participated in gram sabhas, now more than 100 women attend the meetings. The Samajdar Jodidar group members made efforts to raise awareness about constituting a Mahila gram sabha too, they campaigned for it with the active support of a group of women who had been mobilised by Astitva earlier in another project, loudspeakers were also used in the campaigning and a Mahila gram sabha with 110 members was finally constituted in the village in 2014; it has been meeting regularly since then taking up issues like interference by *sarpanchpatis* (husbands of women sarpanches). About 250 women are also members of a village SHG named Swayam Sahayta Group, the SHG is supported by Samajdar Jodidar group members to regularly organise health camps where the hemoglobin of women and girls is checked and iron tablets distributed."

As the women in Gaudwadi village started participating in public activities, it did not seem feasible to keep them out of entering the 3-4 temples in the village any longer. It was orchestrated by the women and men's groups that the final barrier would be removed when the village would be playing host to an international delegation from South Africa brought by CHSJ on an exposure visit in November 2014 which was to include a woman too. The Samajdar Jodidar group meetings were always held in the large courtyard of the Hanuman Mandir and when the international delegation arrived it was escorted to the temple by half the village with music and fanfare and along with the international woman delegate the other women too entered the temple, and they have not looked back since then.

The men's group is a support to the health service provider at the village sub centre. Kambli, the multi-purpose health worker at the sub centre says, "It helps me a lot that the group members meet me very regularly to check on what is required for improving the health of women and children, like the vaccinations for children upto five years and for pregnant women, organising immunisation camps and checkups etc." Dutta says the groups in all the project villages ensure that the ASHA visits regularly.



Pic caption: Group members in the Gaudwadi health sub-centre

BOX Animators in Action – From Reviving Romance to Promoting the Eating of Eggs

Sachin Bhuse, animator of Devkatevadi village: I was always interested in social justice and gender issues and took the opportunity of becoming animator when Astitva came to my village. I realised that it is much more effective to raise gender issues in the community as a group rather than as an individual. It took a lot of convincing for the community to acknowledge that they were practicing gender discrimination in almost every area of life. Group members also found it difficult at first to practice gender equality. Though they agreed there was need for ending gender stereotypes they were unable to break the barrier and would discuss that they were simply unable to pick up the kitchen knife and start chopping onions at home.

I took the lead by becoming a role model for domestic work, serving my wife water when she returned home, cutting vegetables and doing domestic work in such a way that others in the community could also see me. My mother and wife supported me as I constantly communicated and shared with them all that I was learning in the animator trainings. There has been a lot of change in my thinking. Earlier, though I thought my thinking was advanced I looked upon women and girls as being weak and not proper persons like us, when I would see a girl in a public place I would wonder why she was there because girls were not supposed to be outside. I now started discussing with my wife about her health issues, earlier I would leave it to my mother as I did not think I had a role in these things; now my wife and I have become closer and she says she feels she can share anything with me. Going against tradition I insisted on being with my wife when our child was being born. Earlier people would laugh at our closeness, but gradually they became intrigued as they saw the strong trust between us and that we never quarreled. They would ask how we had become 'ek dil' (one heart) and I would say just look deep into your partner's heart where you will find a lot of love for you, you just have to find it.

Rao Saheb Aldar, animator of Karajewadi village: Often people come to me for advice, and I find good intentions travel far. My brother's daughter was married into a family in another village which was very traditional, she was not allowed to go out of the house or meet outsiders; for example if guests came she would bring water to serve them till the door but would not be allowed to enter the room where they sat. She had been educated upto Class 12 and her husband started sharing about his financial dealings with her, to which his mother objected. My niece shared all this with me as I used to speak to her quite openly. I advised her to win over her mother-in-law by persuading her that it would benefit all of them if she helped her husband in his work. In two years time my niece started completely handling the financial aspects of her husband's work and her mother-in-law is fully supportive.

Praveen Bajirao, animator of Manegaon village: Initially, I became an animator for the remuneration we were getting and also because this was a chance to become associated with an organisation. Our community is Maratha dominated and there used to be strict check on the women, they would not be allowed to go out even to the shops. The animator trainings helped to change my thought process. I never realised previously how much work women did at home. The training taught also us that we must first change ourselves, only then can we think of changing others.

I initiated many personal changes, at home women in the family would cook, clean utensils and serve us, even when I went for a bath I would order them to bring me the towel; all this stopped and I started doing the work myself even though I had to hear many negative comments about it. I formed the group by first bringing in likeminded men who were willing to listen and would not object when issues of gender equality were raised. Gradually the group became so motivated that if ever a group member dropped out for some time because of personal reasons or spoke about doing so, the others would dissuade him by discussing the importance of the group's work, its potential for bringing social change

and the need to remain in the group. We were raising issues in the community like toilets in the schools for girls, why playgrounds were being used only boys, forming teams of girls and making sure sports material was available to them and about increasing the participation of women in gram sabhas. We started seeing a big difference in our village on these issues compared to other villages that were not part of the project.

Ram Hari, animator of Hatkar Mangewadi village: Mine was a very challenging village, the project's managers also used to say this. There was lot of domestic violence in the village and many social norms restricting women. Only one married woman had the courage to go out of the village, the women and girls in our village were not allowed to eat non vegetarian food, though they had to cook it for the men. A small girl was beaten by her mother for eating an egg. It was a sensitive religious issue but we started challenging the practice though we were not able to take it up as a campaign. There has been some progress at least in families of group members where the females are now eating non vegetarian food. Earlier, one would not see even a single woman or girl at the state transport bus stand, now the change is tremendous and women are coming out confidently to join gram sabhas. With the help of Astitva we also started working with health providers in the village. **Box END**



Pic caption: Laxmi and her husband Vikram at their kirana store

It Takes a Village

Discussions are held on underage marriage and promoting acceptance for marriage of choice. The village communities now take it upon themselves to deter underage marriages Dutta says, citing the recent example of a village group which intervened when a sugarcane farmer pulled his daughter out of Class 7 and arranged her marriage. "The family was persuaded by the whole village to put off her marriage and let her continue her education and she now cycles 5 km daily to school." In some villages parents' groups have been formed to ensure that the girls do not drop out after Class 7, and from a minuscule number of girls studying earlier now an estimated 70 percent of them continue their studies in the Sangola project villages.

Dutta says underage marriage of girls is no longer the norm in the Samajdar Jodidar villages, quite unlike what he sees in other villages in the area. Abhijit Das, Director of CHSJ, says, "The project has proven that individual aspiration for change can become a collective desire that influences long-held social norms. Be it breaking the norm of early marriage of girls, sharing property or not tolerating violence against women and girls, these communities have shown there is reason to believe that when a large enough number of people go against a norm then it no longer becomes socially acceptable or appropriate, practicing the old norm then becomes a breach of behaviour and a 'new norm' is constructed."

Group members in Hatkar Mangewadi say they remember a time not long ago when it was common to see a man throw his wife out of the house in the middle of the night and if anyone tried to intervene they would be roundly abused by the man and others too for interfering. "Now, with years of Samajdar Jodidar's campaigning, awareness drives and support to women's groups the situation here has changed completely," they say, citing a recent example. A drunken man who dragged his wife out of a film screening that had been organised in the village and started beating her saying she should be cooking for him at home instead, was stopped by everyone present and a group of women supported the wife by filing a case of domestic violence against the husband, which is going on. The women are confident that the whole village is behind them. "Such instances send a powerful signal that violence will not be tolerated," say group members.

There is now space in Hatkar Mangewadi for the women to aspire to something more. Deepa, the wife of Mangewadi animator Ram Hari who works as a daily wager in the fields, started her college studies after marriage and now has a Dalit Foundation Fellowship which requires her to be out on trainings for 2-3 months at a time. "My husband's thinking changed after he joined the project and became the animator in 2010. Since he is Class 10th fail everyone was stopping him from letting me go up to college level but he continued to support me. He drops me on his bike when I go for my work; there are many women whose husband's do not leave them even for a day because they are insecure but he is not like that, he takes care of the child when I am away. We trust each other completely," she says simply.



Pic Caption: Deepa, a Dalit Foundation fellow, with her daughter in Hatkar Mangewadi

Samajdar Jodidar has shown that mutual respect and trust between a couple can be a partnership that is of gain to both. Laxmi, 36, says their family income has more than doubled since her husband Vikram was persuaded by group members to let her step out of home and help him run their *kirana* (small groceries) shop. With Vikram being physically challenged it was difficult for him to go out to purchase goods for the store and their income was small. "Now that I supervise the purchases from the wholesalers, the loading and unloading of goods and other things the business is doing well. He would never have agreed to my participation in the business as he felt a woman's place is in the home, if it had not been for the influence of the group," she says.

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