

RURAL WOMEN-LED RESPONSE TO COVID-19



Background

Rural India is not insulated in the second wave of COVID. While it's important to stem the spread of COVID through widespread education and infection management including vaccination and home care, it is equally urgent that we look at the economic distress faced by wage workers, farmers and vulnerable households in the context of day to day survival.

Swayam Shikshan Prayog (SSP)'s rural women-led response to COVID efforts began during the pandemic in 2020 when its existing network of women leaders organized themselves into community based Sakhi /Women Task Forces (STF). Sakhis mobilized resources from rich farmers and delivered food kits to the vulnerable groups. STFs advocated with Gram Panchayats (GPs) to deliver COVID relief, access to health & social protection benefits at the last mile.

Among the learning that SSP has adopted in dealing with the second wave in 2021, is to empower grassroots institutions - GPs and women leaders to adopt holistic approach from response to resilience process - continuous outreach, education, assessment, prevention and build community resilience through improving food security, livelihoods and access to social protection for the most vulnerable groups.

Rural women-led response to COVID-19

Women leaders / Sakhis who have been trained on COVID prevention measures and long term approaches are taking lead in distribution of food relief kits, helping farmers for seeds and inputs, working with local government in running isolation centers, taking patients for hospitalization and mobilizing communities on vaccine drive.

SSP facilitated various initiatives and reached out to over four lakhs families across 15 districts in Maharashtra, Bihar, Odisha and Kerala. They worked in alignment with the Government health systems to speed up COVID recovery and resilience.

SSP's three key strategies to stop the spread of COVID-19:

- Build capacities of women to form Village Action Groups with knowledge on prevention and quarantine/control measures
- Equip local governments and frontline workers to coordinate mass awareness, food and medical relief and emergency services.
- Work along with the Health Systems to ensure readiness for vaccination and access to health services especially for women and children.



Setting up of Covid Isolation Centre

1. Distribution of Essential Groceries



Distribution of kits to vulnerable families

SSP has distributed 4,010 grocery/food Kits to the needy families of Latur, Osmanabad, Solapur, Nanded, Jalna, Ahmednagar and Aurangabad districts in Maharashtra; Gaya and Nalanda districts in Bihar and Kottayam and Wayanad districts in Kerala. Many thanks to Kaushalya Foundation and Smiles For All for the great support by providing SSP the materials to distribute 3,150 food kits to the vulnerable families. Smiles For All initiative is a volunteer-driven team led by a group of IIM Ahmedabad Alumni, for the food relief drive, to get food to those impacted by COVID.

In Wayanad district in Kerala, SSP team with women leaders and farmers have identified the most vulnerable communities from tribal and disadvantaged families. Women groups mobilized resources from the general public and distributed food kits for 65 Tribal families in Edavaka. Apart from this 300 kg of Tapioca cultivated by Sakhi farmers have been distributed to vulnerable families. 250 grocery/food kits were distributed by the SSP team to the most needed families with the support of Kaushalya Foundation. In Mundar in Kottayam district, SSP has created COVID awareness and mobilized people for vaccination. 250 grocery/food kits were distributed to the families in Mundar.

In Bihar, SSP team and women leaders created COVID prevention awareness across Nalanda and Gaya districts and 400 grocery kits were distributed to the vulnerable families with immediate need.

Vaccination Drive

Rural women have shown tremendous courage and leadership to stem the spread of COVID. Through meetings and house visits, women leaders have been mobilizing and motivating the communities to get vaccinated. Leaders joined the vaccine drive with local panchayats, creating awareness for registering the villagers to speed up the vaccinations to stem the pandemic. They have given scientific truths to counter the myth of communities against vaccination. Due to this drive in Maharashtra, more than 65,000 people got vaccinated and developed a feeling of safety among the communities. In Kerala, the leaders and Gram Panchayats worked closely to monitor the COVID situation, fumigate the places, identify patients, help the community to register and schedule for vaccination. 1,100 people are vaccinated under this drive. 40 Tribal families have been taken to the hospital for vaccination. As in the case of Bihar, over 1,000 people got vaccinated through women leaders' efforts in our operational villages.

Impact at a Glance



- Outreach: 500 villages across 15 districts across Maharashtra, Bihar, Kerala and Odisha states
- Impact: 3,000 grassroots women taking the lead as members of Sakhi Task Force.
- Total kits distributed: 4,075 needy families with food/grocery kits.
- Community contribution: Groceries, vegetables and dairy products mobilized by women leaders.
- Families assisted: 4 lakhs families through education programs on health services, COVID prevention, testing and drive to promote vaccination
- Over 17,825 farmers trained online on climate resilient agriculture for cultivation of food crops and distribution of agriculture sowing kits
- Over 5,196 rural women supported on micro - entrepreneurship to stabilize their incomes from diversified livelihoods –livestock enterprises.

2. Women Leaders Build Resilience



Screening carried out in the villages

Sakhi leaders moved door to door, identified symptoms, delivered masks, soaps and sanitizers. They mobilized women from vulnerable groups to be part of decision making. Apart from ration and medicine distribution drives, these village level leaders organized health campaigns at the village level to increase vaccinations and encourage families to follow COVID-19 protocols. SSP has partnered with the district and local administration to spread awareness on the infection, its spread, myths and the vaccine as a solution.

As the cases are rising every day and the poor people find it difficult to afford hospital care, Women have mobilized through Sakhi Task Forces in over 500 villages to address various issues in COVID. Ranging from relief distribution of essential food items to home isolation and livelihoods, these leaders are part of the COVID Sahayata Samiti of the Panchayat /local government to bring down the numbers and provide financial aid , if needed. Awareness on social distancing, distribution of masks and sanitisers are some of the initial steps taken by women leaders.

"It is unprecedented and we never expected that the COVID second wave would come to our villages. As we have the experience of last year in addressing the crisis, we are not taking any chances, as the situation could become worse", Jayashree Kadam, Jadhkot village.

Jyoti Sonkhambe from Dhapshed village in Nanded, faced strong refusal from villagers for getting vaccinated. She took it as a challenge and visited every house in her village, explained the benefits of vaccination. She has helped 134 people to get vaccinated. "Now, the fear has reduced and people understand the importance of vaccination. People come to me asking, when will the vaccine be available for the next dose", says Jyoti Tai. This is a great shift & women leaders are doing remarkable work, they are stepping out, putting their life at risk to convince as many as possible so as to keep their village and its people safe.

Respecting Frontline workers

Health workers are under pressure and working tirelessly to save the life of people at their risk. SSP team handed over 1,000 PPE kits to health workers of Ter rural hospital, Zilla Parishad Latur. "We are ready to extend our support to SSP to scale up their resilience efforts," says Mr. Abhinav Goel, Chief Executive Office, Zilla Parishad, Latur.

"Giving is a way of showing solidarity and taking care of the poor," Dr. Gangadhar Parge, District Health Officer, Latur, while receiving the 1000 PPE kits from SSP. The kits were handed over on 12th May 2021 at the Zilla Parishad, Latur.



Women leaders take lead in stem the spread of COVID

When Zinnar, a small village in Osmanabad in Maharashtra, saw a sudden rise of eleven COVID-19 positive patients, Jayashree Kale, a leader from the village, along with Gram Panchayat isolated these patients & followed safety measures to reduce the spread of the infection in the village. Leaders have been working in creating awareness on safety norms to be followed, helping people with contact tracing and getting fumigated and sanitized every house in order to save them from COVID.

"We will not put our community in despair. We have the will and experience in dealing with COVID", says Godavari Dange, a Grassroots Leader from Marathwada.

3. COVID Awareness and Local Partnership



Community isolation Center managed by women leader's, run by gram panchayat and technical support by primary Health Centre

Sakhi Task Force

Sakhi Task Force leaders closely worked with Gram Panchayat and local government to do door to door visit to identify COVID patients, taking them to primary health centers, run COVID isolation centers for those who can't afford health services, distribute masks and sanitisers and regenerate livelihoods through training and Community Resilience Fund support.

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3000 people are provided COVID awareness training by Sakhi leaders in Wayanad. Women leaders and Sakhis are taking the lead in COVID awareness in Nalanda and Gaya districts in Bihar. 30 Super Sakhis have formed WhatsApp groups in their villages and mobilized around 2000 families to provide COVID awareness, safety measures and relief support.

Social Security Schemes

In addition to disseminating information in their communities and educating vulnerable households about government entitlements, women went so far as to accompany individuals to local government offices to get identity cards made, fill applications to ensure and speed up access to entitlements. Furthermore, women leaders have been continually collaborating with village/ block/ district officials to ensure that beneficiary lists for government programs are updated to include names of eligible individuals or households missing from official records.

Women leaders in many villages have explored support measures and programs available under various government schemes as over 3000 vulnerable women and families received entitlements through their lobby & advocacy with local government.

COVID Free Village

"My mission was to declare my village as A COVID Free village," says Komal Karpe, a 21 year old young Panchayat President from Anthroli in Solapur, Maharashtra.

As COVID began to spread, Komal mobilized women and youth volunteers and educated every family on the COVID protocols. Komal immediately formed two committees in the village, one the 'Gram Suraksha Dal' and other 'Gram Dakshata Samiti' consisting of members who had the conviction to convince the villagers. The Gram Suraksha Dal consisted of youth volunteers and senior citizens. Second group consisted of govt officials and women leaders. These two teams conducted daily awareness campaigns on COVID protocol, COVID testing and awareness on vaccination, distribution of masks and sanitizers was executed with support from the GP. A three day curfew was imposed in the village twice and a fine was imposed for anyone breaking the rules.

With collective efforts and leadership shown by the villagers, Komal has made her village COVID free. "It is a remarkable work that Komal has done to keep her village safe, if we all could learn from her we can keep our country COVID free soon", Shri Uddhav Thackeray, Chief Minister of Maharashtra as mentioned in his speech.



Komal Karpe, Sarpanch, Anthroli village

4. Community Health



Women take lead in taking people in ambulance to the hospital

Rural Communities are not an exception from COVID-19. In the second wave, rural infection rates are rapidly on the rise. Yet, due to misinformation and stigma, rural families are reluctant to come forward for screening, testing and have shown hesitancy towards vaccinations. Rural health systems - Primary Health Centres or hospitals are not easily accessible, while frontline health workers' capacities are overstretched. For the rural poor, health information and access to health services and efforts on vaccination are urgently needed. At the same time, it is critical to address food and livelihood needs of the most vulnerable - wage workers, small farmers, landless women and women led families. With increasing demand for oxygen supplies in rural hospitals, four oxygen concentrators were handed over to the District Collector for the Rural Hospital in Ter, Osmanabad district by SSP.

Baseline Mapping

The baseline mapping was conducted in 96 villages of 5 blocks in Osmanabad. The main purpose of this baseline survey was to analyze the health status of the community in the context of COVID-19 pandemic. The baseline mapping was facilitated by women leaders who are trained by SSP. Findings from the mapping are as follows:

- Lack of employment opportunities in the villages drive people to move to cities for opportunity.
- Gram Panchyats established the COVID centers at village level with basic amenities such as water, electricity, sanitization etc.
- In each village, the Corona Helpline Centers are motivating people to use sanitizer and masks.
- Death rate in villages low as compared with total population.
- Collected COVID-19 status and details from every village. It includes death rate, vaccination status, +ve cases, food grain availability in the family, use of masks with maintaining social distancing, facilities provided in COVID centers started in villages, and local government institutions working on it.
- Migration rate of the villagers in search of the employment opportunity
- Lack of safe drinking water and drainage system
- The COVID care centers are working in some villages.

Women led Community COVID Isolation Centres

With the collaboration with existing COVID isolation centers, SSP provided quality masks, sanitizers, and nutritious food to those who cannot buy these products. These centers acted as a relief for poor and vulnerable families who cannot afford to go to private hospitals or buy medicines, foods etc.

"When you empower a woman, you empower the whole community." True to the saying, women leaders from Boramani village in Solapur have stepped up to support their villagers in times of crisis by providing free food to the patients at the COVID care centre that supports 16 villages. They are working closely with the Gram Panchayat to source groceries and vegetables for the centers. Women farmers have come together and are providing fresh vegetables from their own farm to help in these times of need.

As the cases are rising in many villages that are far from Solapur city, Mr. Desai, Block Development Officer, South Solapur consulted with a cluster of 16 villages and has started a COVID care centre at Boramani village which is centrally located. Having worked with the women leaders and their groups last year, the BDO sought their help as soon as they started setting up the centre.

"Last year, we offered our support in times of crisis. This year, the district has recognized how women's groups can lead in this crisis!! This example will motivate more women to come forward and save many lives in rural villages," said Shyamal Tai from the SSP-Grassroots Leaders network.

5. Regenerating Livelihoods



Demonstration of nutritious food

Digital Training on Agriculture and Livelihoods

Due to lockdown amid COVID crisis, families engaged in agriculture and agri allied businesses have lost the bare sustenance of their livelihood. Women were trained to use social media, form WhatsApp groups, in their villages to coordinate and stay updated on the new symptoms and vaccination. With COVID lockdown implemented and norms of social distancing brought in place, it has been a tough challenge for rural women to carry out training programs. To overcome this, SSP has been training women on digital literacy on how to use smart phones to conduct online training with ease. With these training, women leaders have been successfully carrying out training programs for the grassroots women farmers. To revive farming and agri allied livelihoods, women were trained on pre monsoon preparation of land, seed germination, seed processing and making of bio pesticides and fertilizers. Over 2,500 women farmers trained on various agriculture techniques and practices. District Agriculture Department, Krishi Vigyan Kendra's and Women Farmer Resource persons participated in these trainings.

In Bihar and Kerala, Women leaders are in action to regenerate livelihoods and farming to get income and food availability in the crisis period. In Wayanad district, 426 women farmers from 33 women groups, have started the pre-monsoon preparation to make the land for rice, tuber, vegetables and fodder cultivation.

Our Partners



Women Taking Digital Training a Step Ahead

For leaders, digital training to use Smart phones by SSP has been her gateway to help her community. For someone who never knew how to access a phone, Komal has come a long way. Komal Shinde a leader from Bhasvantwadi village of Osmanabad district in Maharashtra took keen interest in online training and putting those learnings to use.

She has created two WhatsApp groups, one for training villagers regarding the care and precautions to be taken during COVID and another to conduct online training for women farmers on pre-sowing for the upcoming Kharif season.

"I am successfully conducting online training not only for the women in my village but also for women in neighboring villages", says Komal. With such great efforts, it is not a wonder how they have managed to keep their village COVID safe, while neighboring villages are combating high cases of COVID.

Great salute to women leaders like Komal who are setting an example for others with their unending services and never-to-die attitude towards their village and its people. Komal is among the many resourceful leaders trained by SSP and are a part of SSP's grassroots women network.

The SSP team and the women leaders extend our deepest thanks for standing with us to support the Rural Women-Led Response to COVID-19.

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