



Strengthening Women's leadership in Chitrakoot, Uttar Pradesh

SIX MONTHLY REPORT (April – September 2018)

BY SOUTH ASIA WOMEN FOUNDATION INDIA

Introduction

South Asia Women Foundation India (SAWF IN) registered in 2015, was created to strengthen indigenous feminist philanthropy as well as voices and leadership of and for women and trans* people in claiming their rights.

SAWF IN envision a world where all women live free of fear and experiences of violence and discrimination, irrespective of class, caste, ethnicity, gender, religion, language, sexual orientation and disability, where women freely can access and claim their rights.

Working with diverse women's rights activists and organisations under the Women's safety, rights and Violence thematic area, SAWF IN uses two programmatic approaches - The first is through the Legal Fellows Programme, under which SAWF IN supports female lawyers at the district level with financial and technical resources. The second focuses on supporting women's groups providing legal aid support and legal awareness training to women in their communities. .

SAWF IN has been supporting Diya Welfare Society, based in Chitrakoot towards developing Dalit women's leadership, to work towards eliminating violence against women in their villages.

Diya Welfare Society founded in 2011, by a women's rights advocate Mamta Soni. Born in lower caste Hindu community, Mamta was forced out of f schools and married at the age of 14 years. After being subjected to years of emotional and psychological abuse, she had her calling, when her dear friend and neighbour was burnt alive for dowry.



Mamta Soni with women leaders from Laina Baba purwa village

She started her journey with women's rights organisation like Vanangana and government educational programme Mahila Samakhya, and worked across the state of Uttar Pradesh, establishing herself a strong advocate on women's rights in Bundelkhand region. She nurtured determination to fight her own battles at the personal front, completed her education and started Diya Welfare Society in 2009. she is an inspiration to many women today.

Women's status in Bundelkhand region

The area of Bundelkhand, rooted in patriarchy and feudalism, is also one of most marginalised and difficult areas for developmental work.

Families do not prioritise girls education and dropping out from schools is common, even if schools are located at a favourable distance. Marriage is inevitable, often adolescent girls are forced into early marriage, without any consent and choice. Mobility of women is a challenge, especially for those living in villages, where transportation is neither frequent or safe. Thus women are dependent on the 'men' of their families for accessing cities for work, health care, education

With high prevalence and social acceptance around violence against women, women do not formally



report the crimes and succumb to the 'culture of acceptance and silence'. Women and young girls live a life of inequality and fear.

In fact very few organisations work in the area towards women's empowerment, rights and justice. Diya Welfare Society was a welcome step in for many women, especially Dalits, in Chitrakoot, one of the main districts in that area.

As part of the **Strengthening Women's leadership in Chitrakoot, Uttar Pradesh Project**, supported by Vanilla Moon, under guidance of SAWF IN, Diya welfare society has been working in five villages –

Sangrampur, Harsauli Purwa, Laina Baba purwa, Shivrampur and Baihaar, across three gram panchayats (local governance units in villages) in Chitrakoot district.

These villages are located in the periphery of the main city and are resided mainly by Dalit (socially and economically most marginalised) communities. The High caste families residing here are quite influential and they are the sarpanch (village leader) or members of the panchayat samities or gram sevak are from these communities.

Main form of livelihood is based on agriculture. Dalit families work as labourer in fields of the higher caste. Also the Dalit families are still live in mud houses without electricity and private toilets in all five villages. Women often go out to open areas for defecation and are subjected to abuse.

Activities undertaken in six months:

- Five Dalit women from every village, thus 25 women were selected for leadership building. They were nominated self help groups in the villages or recommended by village elders. Some of these leaders have been associated with Diya Welfare for some years. Some are absolutely new.
- Trainings and capacity building on understanding women's equality, societal discrimination on the basis of gender, caste, religion and debriefing violence against women have been undertaken. Special session on feminist leadership building and knowing government schemes were also given.
- Diya is also investing in feminist leadership building so that they can become peer support network women and girls, supporting them to lead a life free of fear, discrimination and experiences of violence.
- Each leader has mobilised a group of 15-20 Dalit women in their village, who attend the monthly meetings and participate in trainings on diverse issues like gender discrimination and rights, patriarchy, domestic violence, sexual harassment, right to choice and consent, and understanding panchayati raj's governance structure

- 6 trainings have been completed with the 25 women leaders and 80 women from villages. Over 30 monthly meetings took place, apart from smaller sessions and discussions, in the reporting period.
- Diya has also been supporting women survivors of violence with counselling and case work. The women leaders become first point of contact for the victims. Today the leaders counsel and intervene on their own. They only consult with Mamta from Diya Welfare, if required.
- In six months, 8 women approached with her problems. They are also following up on the 3 older cases of violence.
- Cases reported have been on marital disputes between partners, domestic violence, forced marriages and dowry. Women leaders also support women in their every day life struggles apart from cases. Like Sumitra, from Baihaar supported women labourers getting payment for work done under MGNREGA.
- With five of the most vocal women leaders, Mamta has also invested in building a core group to manage the peer network. She plans to invest in strengthening this group in the next six months



Women leaders talking to another women who is sharing about her domestic problem

However, reporting of violations is challenging as there is a lot of backlash against women who invoke the formal legal process. Mamta works with a part-time lawyer for these cases, but several cases have been withdrawn because of family and community pressure

Outputs in six months

5

Core group of women leaders



25

women leaders across five village



80

women part of village level groups

- Increased information on women's life concerns and rights amongst the village women
- Negotiations on increasing mobility decisions have started
- Increased information on government schemes and services
- Women leaders have an identity in their villages today

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Stories on women leaders

Sumeeta (name changed) lives in a small village, of Chitrakoot district. Sumeeta is quite a well known in her village today, but this wasn't a easy journey for her. Her daughter was murdered for dowry at a very young age. being illiterate and not well informed, She couldn't do anything. Her husband settled the case with her daughter's in laws for a good sum of money.

When she got associated with Mamta from Diya Welfare Society, she started knowing about women's life and their problems. She understood that women's problems are not her personal issues but rather a social concern. Slowly she got acquainted about violence against women issues and laws. Women from her village, and across approach her for help.

Today everyone in her village knows her by her name. Her husband, who once resisted her from joining Diya's meetings, is one of her biggest supporters. Any one coming to the villages makes it a point to meet her. Government officials too. she is part of village education committee too. She made it her mission to help women who are in trouble.

Karabari Devi (name changed), moved into her village after her marriage at the age of 14 years. She was young and completely known about life. She got engrossed into building her family, while her husband was working as a migrant in Punjab. When he returned back, adjustment was a concern and physical beatings become common on her.

Mamta from Diya had started coming to her village for meetings and Karabari started to join in. soon she started to talk about the rights and equality. She intervened for women needing help. Her husband disapproved the same and threatened her and Mamta to stop the sessions. Karabari came to rescue with other women leaders to protect Mamta. Her husband did not bow down, neither did she. She continued to attend meetings whenever she could and finally her husband gave in.

Today, she is known as one of the strongest leader in her village group and also has been active in providing counselling support to women across all five villages. She also has a lot of ideas to develop the village group into strong women's network across the district.



Some takeaways from last six months

- 80 women across five villages regularly attending all meetings.
- 25 women leaders coordinate the discussion. 5 of these leaders are part of the core planning group with Mamta from Diya.
- Some of these leaders are part of panchayats samities and village communities – they are laying vital role of representing women's voices
- 6 trainings have been completed on various issues like understanding discrimination and violence against women; citizen rights and access to government services; gender gaps in education; inheritance rights for women and feminist leadership building
- A peer support network in cases of violence and discrimination against women and girls has been formed.
- Over 8 new cases have been received by women leaders in the last six month. The leaders are regularly following up with the survivors and keeping a track.

- Mamta has already started building alliance with district administration to gather impact to this project outreach. She is part of the Health Advisory group
- She plans to start exposures for women leaders to the administration offices, invest in building their negotiation to access services from them
- Women leaders have also started encouraging women to participate in panchayats meetings and be informed of decisions.

Challenges and learnings

Working on women's rights is in itself challenging. As soon as women start asking questions and stop accepting everything around them, they become *house or family breakers*. Their life and dignity becomes vulnerable. Diya has started to **build a community support network**, which will include all women from these five villages, supporter men and boys, and young girls , with panchayats leaders should be formed. Interaction with men and boys in the community on understanding domestic violence and building advocates to support women leaders too has been initiated.

Moving forward

For the next six months Diya Welfare plans to

- ▶ Build and strengthen the core group of the peer support network
- ▶ Complete planned trainings with women leaders
- ▶ Reach out to more women/girls from each village to join their village level group and participate in monthly meets
- ▶ Support more women in five villages to share their experiences of violence and encourage them raise their voices. This would result in more sharing of violence cases
- ▶ Women leaders will regularly attend village planning meetings, gram sabhas and also volunteer for village committee.
- ▶ They will also start building alliances with district and block administration to gather more support for women violence survivors.
- ▶ 50 women leaders from 5 villages will be given a platform to share their experience of training and case-based experience. This will be a yearly event and will be organized at the district level.



Women group meeting at Baihaar village and Harsauli Purwa



Thank You

We thank Vanilla Moon for their generous support and encouragement to work on women's equality and justice in a remote and marginalised district of Chitrakoot.

Their support has been influential in bringing over 80 women together to understand their rights and raise their voices to stop violence against women.

We wish to invite Vanilla Moon to our villages to meet these leaders and encourage them in their journey of a life of dignity and respect.

- SAWF IN & Diya Welfare Society Teams