



SAVE THE GIRL CHILD

It is known to all, consciously or subconsciously, that we live in a society where men are expected to head north and women south. In a patriarchy driven country, the societal norms engraved in stone deny most women the basic rights to learn, to make a life choice, to be free and sometimes even the right to live is taken away from them. Imagine a world with half of its population denied development. How can such a society grow?

What is the first step toward establishing an equity driven society? To give girls a chance to be born! And that is what Save the Girl Child project is all about... giving girls a chance.

So, why is such a project needed?

Four years ago, in one of our project villages, what our team experienced was shocking. A woman who was expecting a baby gave birth to two girls and the babies passed away due to ill health. However, upon enquiring the team discovered that they were poisoned and killed. It was this moment that laid the foundation of the project.

Upon returning, extensive discussions happened, a plan was laid out. With fidgety footsteps we decided to delve into such a cause, and thus began our pilot project – Save the Girl Child, an outcome of a profound partnership between Becker-Cordes Foundation, Rotary Club of Hagen-Lenne and Watershed Organisation Trust (WOTR).

With over two decades of experience of working with the rural community, WOTR has witnessed the challenges that women face, and their incessant treatment as second citizens or in most of the cases, servants.

WOTR strongly believes in breaking the set norms and envisions an egalitarian society; a society where men and women have equal freedom and opportunities to shape their lives.

But, how does the change begin? Well, according to us the key to the problem lies in connecting the dots between a woman's health and her status.

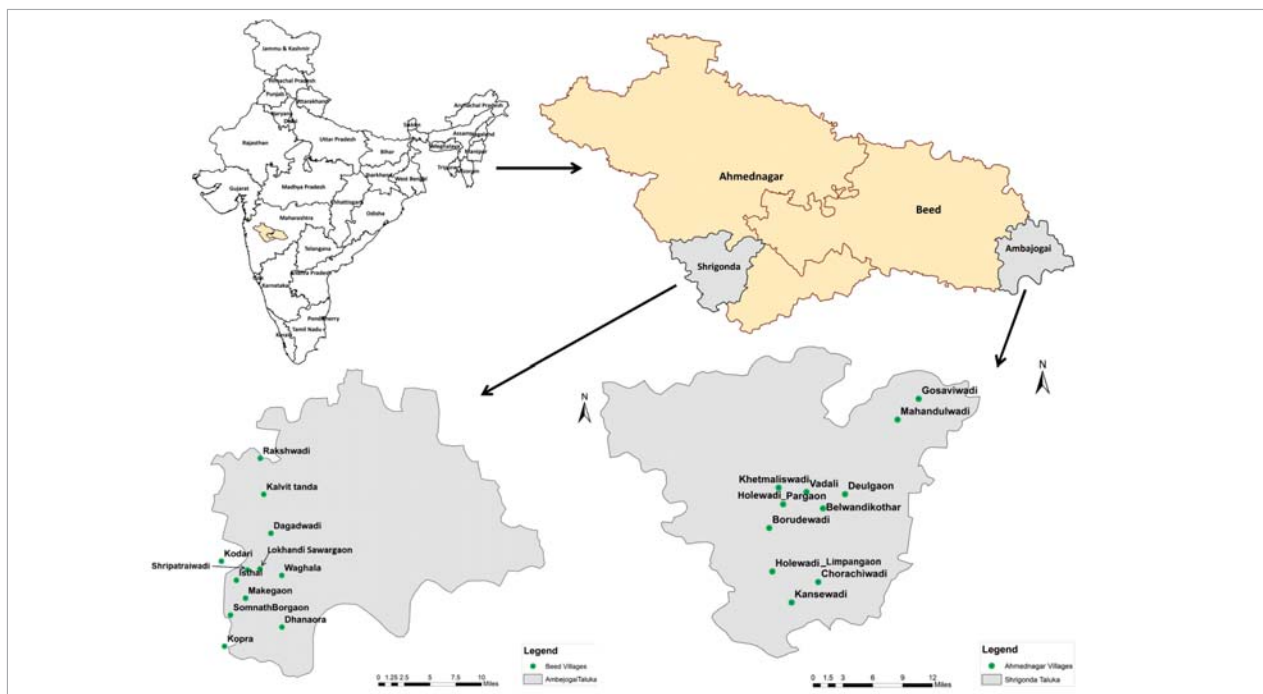
Frequent pregnancies in the pursuit of a son or repeated selective abortions leave a long term negative impact on a woman's health and lead to maternal morbidity and mortality. So, its like a vicious circle-poor status leads to poor health and vice versa.

This has effectively contributed in not only deteriorating women's health extensively but lowering the status of women.

An imperative need was felt to create awareness and educate the rural community on the importance of living a healthy and better life.

SAVE THE GIRL CHILD is our dream to build a society which rejoices the existence of women and men alike. It is a step taken towards empowering women and leveling the playing field.

Set in Beed and Ahmednagar regions of Maharashtra with an abysmal child sex ratio of 801 and 839 girls to 1000 boys respectively in 2011, the project engaged the community with direct interventions such as awareness campaigns and health camps as well as indirect interventions like awareness generation through appointed representatives from the community called promoters.





What we had in mind when we sat to do this?

1. To improve sex ratio.
2. To enhance status of women and girl child by involving men in reducing gender based violence.
3. To improve health status of women in the child bearing age and reduce maternal morbidity.
4. To improve nutritional status of children between 0-5 years of age.
5. To promote reproductive and sexual health of adolescent boys and girls.

What is the project all about?

Save the Girl Child strives to promote family planning while making the community gender sensitive with respect to improving status of a girl child and also the status of women. The project promotes health literacy, family planning, awareness and knowledge about human body, ill effects of early marriage, reproductive health problems, childcare and most importantly the issue of gender bias through gender sensitization workshops. The project involves women and men from all age groups.

Giving project a sustainable skin

Changing mind-sets is a challenging task. And this project seeks to do just that. When one sets out to change anything, the approach and strategy applied determine the basis of whether the effort put will succeed or not.

What's key to note is that 'Save the Girl Child' project led to devising a new approach for introducing gender mainstreaming and women empowerment component across the villages. What emerged from the field was a finding that economic emancipation of women is one of the effective ways to engage the attention, trust and cooperation of both, women and men. Thus, we selected villages where Self Help Group (SHG) activities had been previously carried out by WOTR.

Although, WOTR had its presence in the project villages, the challenge was to implement a project that threatens the roots of patriarchy. Needless to say, the project faced vehement opposition from a few, while disapproval from most.

However, as all of WOTR's projects have ensured community participation, so did this. To empower the community and to see to it that the project is carried forward in our absence, a comprehensive structure was designed for smooth and sustainable functioning of the project.



As the project seeks to empower women, we felt that it is imperative for women to lead the implementation process. This was the thought behind creating a structure that encourages women participation and leadership.

Therefore, two representatives from each village were appointed as health promoters to implement the project activities. These representatives, invariably women, were at least 8th pass and likely to permanently reside in the village (through marriage or choice).

The health promoters took charge of forming a Village Health Committee (VHC) in their respective project villages. Various village level meetings were conducted to discuss the project, obtain approval of the community and enlist the support of local leaders, administrators, elected representatives, and health functionaries.

The VHC consists of representatives from various sections. The committee comprises of 2 men, 2 women SHG/Samyukta Mahila Samiti (SMS) members, 2 health promoters, 2 Panchayat members, 2/3 adolescent promoters and one representative from Sampada Trust, WOTR's sister organization and the project's implementation agency.

Even though women health promoters are a part of VHC, they are extremely crucial to the functioning of the project. Their roles and responsibilities exceed beyond the duties of the committee.

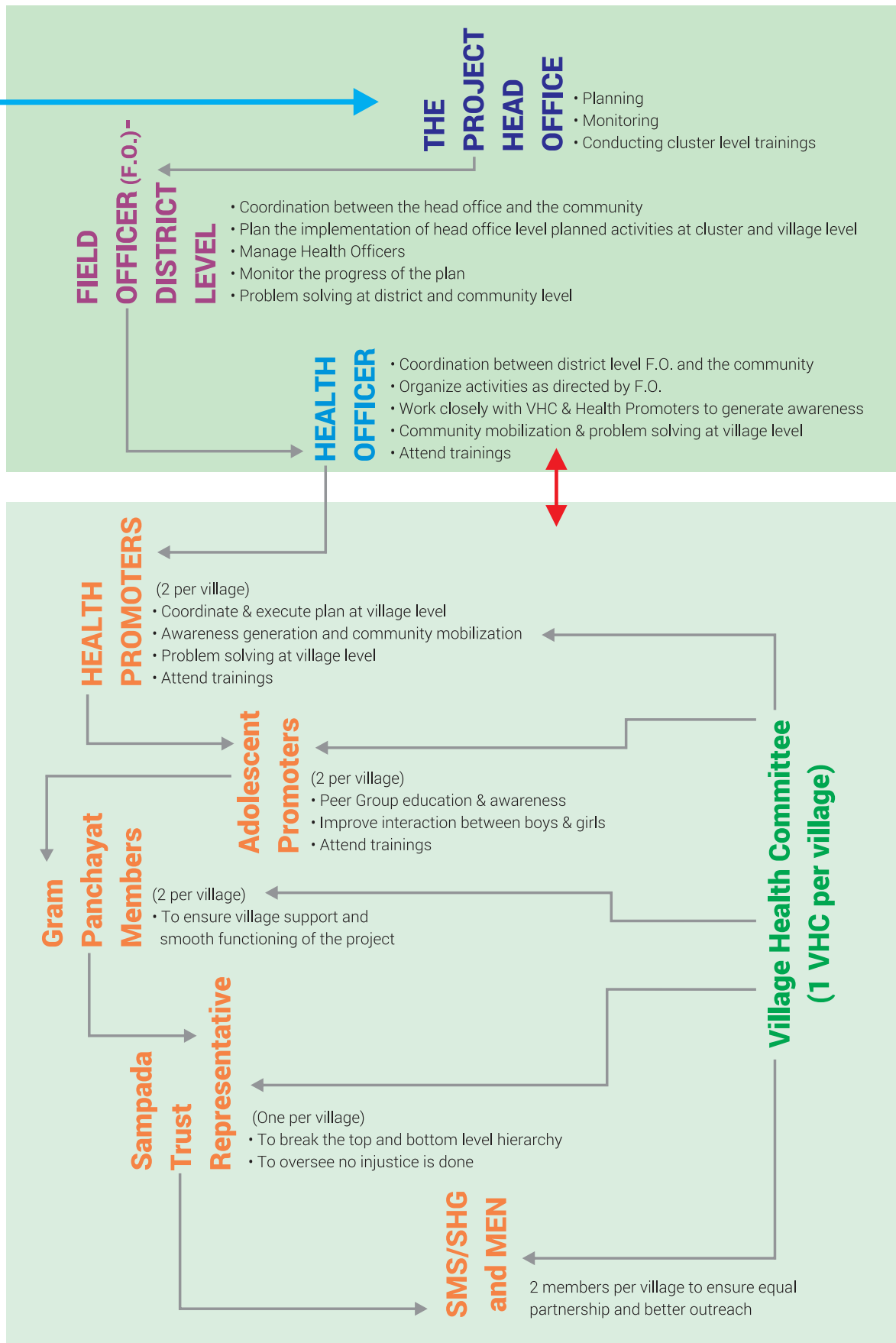
The health promoters are the key representatives of the implementing agency at the same time of the community. They

coordinate the project at village level, propagate the cause, informally and formally spread the knowledge gained from the trainings, encourage women and men to participate and ensure that the project lives even without the presence of the implementation agency.



All VHC members underwent trainings on family planning, sex education, gender sensitization, nutrition, health and hygiene, diseases common in villages and their treatment, as well as managerial trainings to coordinate, communicate, organize events, problem solving at the community level and accounting.

The formation of the committee reflects the participatory approach adopted for the project and that it is the people who have to identify and resolve their own problems.





WOMEN AND EMPOWERMENT

CONNECTING THE DOTS...



FROM AGAINST TO WITH



SUNITA SATISH YEDE, 31 Years, Health Promoter, Somnath Borgaon, Beed

An *Anganwadi* Sevika by profession, Sunita stood against the project on its onset. Child growth monitoring was *Anganwadi's* job and the way Sunita saw, the project usurped her responsibility and posed a threat to her job.

However, soon she realized Save the Girl Child was much more than that. So much so, that even as her family stood in opposition, she made up her mind to be a part of the project.

"I was married in 2002, and worked as a support staff in *Anganwadi*. When Save the girl child project team came to our village and conducted child growth monitoring session which we at *Anganwadi* used to conduct, I saw the project as a threat to my job and opposed it.

A rally for the project on health awareness was organized in the beginning, and that is when I realized how important the project is for our village. Gradually, I came to know that the project was much more than child growth monitoring and very important to build a healthy and equal society. I knew I had to be a part of it and so I did.

I took up the role of the project's health promoter alongside my *Anganwadi* job. Initially, I thought it would be impossible. Not only to handle two jobs, but to deal with the family. My husband was not very supportive in the beginning and had issues. He did not trust me and the project, because of his patriarchal mentality. But, my will to work was stronger than his will to oppose.

Of course, all health promoters were trained first. At the training, we were taught about human body, pregnancy and child birth, family planning, menstruation, etc. For all of us, who had never openly or even privately spoken about the issues that we as women face, to be taught all this by a male teacher was extremely awkward. However, our trainer, Prashant *Dada* made us feel very comfortable and slowly the awkwardness dissolved.

I remember my first session. I kept staring at the floor as sir was talking about a woman's body, periods, but by the end I was able to look in the eye and listen. By the next training I was confident that I was ready to inform and speak to the villagers about human body, health and hygiene.

We conducted haemoglobin and child growth monitoring camps. Sangita, another health promoter from my village, and I had to convince villagers to attend workshops for their benefit. I remember this one time when we walked through the village lanes till 10 pm convincing newly married couples to attend the workshop, we succeeded in convincing 7 couples and we had the maximum number as compared to other villages under the project.

Another workshop was conducted by doctors in WOTR's Darewadi training centre where we all were taught about common local diseases and their treatment. Each health promoter was given a medical kit with tablets to be given to the patients at minimal rates.

Women come to us and freely discuss their problems; like one of my friends came to me complaining about her husband's problem of scratching his private part. I asked her if her husband bathed in the open, she replied in yes. I told her to ensure her husband bathes in the bathroom and cleans his private parts properly and if that didn't work, I suggested an ointment. In five days, the scratching and the burning sensation disappeared and she thanked me.

The project has made me feel better about myself. I feel I can change things around me. I feel confident and am not afraid to travel alone anymore. I don't even have to ask for permission anymore."



AGAINST ALL ODDS



ASHA VITTHAL VIRGAT, 28 Years, Health Promoter, Makegaon, Beed

Asha symbolizes hope. And that is what our health promoter, Asha Vitthal Virgat, has brought to her family and the village. Her journey to discover herself began as a child, progressed as a wife, continued as an ASHA Worker but reached its destination with Save the Girl Child project. She reminisces and shares the struggles, the disappointments, the anticipation and the learnings en-route.

"It was 2013 when WOTR team approached me to take up the role of a health promoter for the project. After learning about the project, I agreed to join it but my husband didn't allow me as there was a 4-day training organized at Ahmednagar. My husband did not want me to go alone. However, I was very keen to go, so Shanta *kaki*, an elderly lady from the village agreed to accompany me. That is how both of us became the health promoters from our village.

At our first training, we were informed about sex education, family planning, gender discrimination, health, hygiene, nutrition as well as managerial and problem solving skills.

We were asked to make a list of adolescent girls, pregnant women, lactating mothers and children between the ages of 0-5 years. We were taught how to check infant height and weight, record keeping and how to convince a family with two daughters to not abort or kill the third one.

Upon coming back, I couldn't arrange a meeting as I was first a little shy to approach the disinterested villagers to participate in the project. But, then I thought about Prashant *Dada* who had trained us. Being a man he spoke to us comfortably about our bodies, menstruation and other problems women face.

With this in mind, I began my work with adolescent girls. Whenever I spotted a group of girls, I used to approach them and explain the project. I, then, enquired about their educational details and family background. I requested all girls to attend a meeting held on a Sunday telling them it was for their own good.

At the meeting, I spoke to the girls about the changes that occur in the body during adolescence and openly discussed menstruation problems. Some girls were shocked and didn't come the next time, while some informed at home and their parents didn't allow them. Gradually, when they realized this was necessary and nothing 'dirty' was happening, they gave the permission.

Next, a meeting with pregnant women and Self Help Groups was organized. We informed them about the importance of health, especially women's health, followed by a pad demonstration. Before, women in villages used cloth during periods. Once used, they did not even dry them in the open because of embarrassment and the cloth stayed wet and stinky. Because of this many women suffered from infections and some 25 from

uterus cancer in my knowledge. So once informed, they either moved to using pads or began drying their clothes outside in the sun.

As a health promoter, all of us had trainings once a month. At one of our trainings we were informed about common diseases in villages and educated on how to do the treatment. To provide these treatments to the villagers, we were given a medicine box. I was a little scared as it was a lot of information to take in and a big responsibility. What if I gave someone a wrong medicine? An exam conducted cleared all doubts about my capabilities.

I have treated many people since then, my father being one of them. Just a while ago, he got an asthma attack. As soon as I came to know, I rushed to him hoping that I could help. Upon reaching, my mother told me that he hadn't slept for three days due to pain.

I confirmed with the doctor who had trained us if the medication was appropriate for an asthma patient. Accordingly, I gave the dosage. That night my father slept peacefully. In the morning, he went around telling everyone that 'my daughter cured me and she is a doctor'.

My heart filled up with joy. My entire childhood stood up in front of me. When my mother didn't give me enough money for my education; father didn't pay any attention to me because all his attention was for my brothers; when my brothers had good Reynolds pens and I used to get a rupee pen upon crying, all those times appeared in front of my eyes. I remembered how I was always given a 50 page notebook with blackened pages to write on. But what's the point of writing which cannot be read? So I used to hide under the bench when my teacher used to check everyone's homework.

My father, who never had the time for me, feels proud about my accomplishments. When he approaches me for help before my brothers, I feel great. And for this I only have Save the Girl Child to thank for."



A WOMAN OF SUBSTANCE



MOHINI SANJAY MAID, 40 Years, Health Promoter, Kasewadi, Ahmednagar

A working woman who was married to a man less educated than her, made to quit her job, and bury her dreams under the load of traditions- as many women, this was Mohini's life. With shattered self-esteem and dissolved confidence, her struggle to build her own identity continued for a while.

But, the project turned things around and gave her what she was looking for – a chance!

"A B.Com graduate, I got married to a 9th pass when I was 25. Prior to our marriage I worked as an LIC agent. But, no one in my family was supportive. I was married to a man who did not approve of a woman stepping outside the house for work, and I was given in a house where no one understood the value of education.

There were times when I felt pangs of loneliness as no one in the house understood my desire to become something. It is sad that a woman has to struggle just to step out of the house and even thinking of a career is a crime.

Yet, I continued my struggle to be something. I remember when I got a job at the bank, no one was happy; they asked me not to take it up. I once again lost a chance to work. But, change began with 'Save the Girl Child' project and I got an opportunity to be something more than a homemaker. I became the health promoter.

Of course there was opposition. But, this time I had the support of the project team and I stood for what I wanted. Along with the awareness programs and workshops conducted, I feel the villagers and my in-laws saw the genuine effort, the stringent determination and willingness of the project team to lead us to a better and healthy future.

Activities such as awareness programs, rallies, medical camps, health and gender sensitization workshops and competitions like best kitchen garden and others to encourage our participation have led to some change in the way the villagers think, especially the way my husband thinks.

After years of being caged, the project has given me a platform to regain my lost confidence. Today when I work as a health promoter, not only do I have a job but I have a job with a purpose. I feel I am a little more than a wife and a daughter-in-law."





ENGAGING THE YOUTH

Right Time, Right Age, Right Guidance

Adolescence is a tricky phase to be in. This is when socialization plays its part and defines a person's personality. As teens bridge the gap between childhood and adulthood, while growing up it is important that adolescents get appropriate guidance and a platform to share their thoughts, issues, changes – physical and psychological, as well as their inhibitions and doubts.

Human body experiences many changes during this age, and if not addressed them openly, there is a high possibility that the child might head in the wrong direction. Usually, in rural India it is considered inappropriate for a girl to even talk to a boy, or amongst girls to talk openly about their attractions or problems

that a woman's body experiences. This leads to a lot of curiosity about the body of opposite sex and in future might lead to crimes such as rape or domestic violence.

When it comes to uplifting the status of women, this section is usually ignored when this age is the best to understand the dynamics of a woman and a man if educated properly. Which is why, under Save the Girl Child project, combined sessions for boys and girls were held, and information on male-female biology, menstruation process and its impacts on a woman's health, the concept of attraction and love, health and hygiene, was provided.

ARUNA PAWAR, 22 Years, Shripatraiwadi Adolescent Participant

Up until three years ago, Aruna had a great life. A respectable family with 3 daughters and an elder son, Aruna's parents never kept the girls aloof from education. But soon, things were to change.

One of Aruna's sisters ran away on her wedding day. Classic story: elder brother fixes marriage, sister has no say, the groom turns out to be a dominating and abusive one and the educated sister has no way out but to run for a better life. In a traditional society, the man is always right, and a woman, always wrong. Needless to say, Aruna's family too had to face utter humiliation.

It is Save the Girl Child project that turned things around. The project gave the depressed Aruna a hope to carry on with life.

"After my sister ran away, my family and I were always at the receiving end of foul comments from the villagers.

I remember on my way to college, boys used to ask me to run away with them; women in my village used to speak of me as the girl whose sister eloped. Our family was treated as an outcast for the longest time, and I went in to a state of depression.

Things changed with the project. My mother, Shobha, was selected as a health promoter from our village. With the project reaching out to more people, my mother and our family regained our lost dignity. As more villagers began attending the workshops, their perspective towards us changed.

The project addresses and involves people of all ages, even those rowdy boys who used to pass dirty comments attended the sessions, and the transformation in them was unbelievable.

I remember confronting them in one of the workshops. They understood their mistake and apologized. Not only that, the workshops very subtly addressed the issue of equality between



LET'S START WITH BOYS

"After the project came to our village, it took me a while to realize its significance. When I did, I immediately decided to become an adolescent promoter and work towards bringing change in self and other boys my age.

Before I joined the project, I had little knowledge about menstruation. In a workshop conducted for adolescents, I learnt about human body, how a baby is conceived, menstruation problems that women undergo, gender discrimination and the difference between attraction and love.

I realized that a woman's body undergoes so much pain and immense blood loss during periods. Additionally, they have to follow certain rules like sit, bathe, sleep and eat alone, stay away from people and not indulge in any religious activity.

All of this had been happening in my house with my sister. I decided that if I had to bring change, I had to start with myself. I

AKSHAY SAWANT TARALKAR, 18 Years, Adolescent Promoter, Shripatraiwadi

Since the day she is born, a girl is taught a list of things that she is not supposed to do. We draw circles of rules and boundaries around her, but forget to teach our boys the values of humanity, understanding, perseverance and equality. This is the case in most of the houses in India.

So, how do we move towards an equal society? By starting with our boys!

convinced my parents and sister to not follow these unfair orthodox rules, and began helping my mother and sister with domestic chores.

As a promoter, whatever is taught it is my work to spread the knowledge among my peers. I had to engage the village youth in to social action. Initially, when I tried talking to the boys, they used to shy away or get irritated. But gradually, they started paying attention and trying to incorporate what we discussed at home.

Workshops organized under the project helped us both, girls and boys, see things in a new light. We are not shy anymore to talk to the opposite sex. Girls, who used to be ashamed and shy to attend these sessions with boys, today communicate with confidence. Boys who used to look at girls only as a sex object, spending their time watching porn, and tease girls passing by, today treat them with respect."

women and men. When I step out of the house today, I see change. Boys helping the women in their family fill and carry water. They understand the problems we girls face better.

Yet another change is that the girls in our village have become confident and do not feel shy anymore to discuss what their body goes through. Through the project, a lot of girls have shifted from using cloth to using pads, and during periods experience more comfort and cleanliness than before.

So the way I see it, the program has provided us adolescents right guidance at the right age. Personally, it healed my depression and provided my family with support when we needed it the most. It fixed our broken lives by giving us a platform to express our problems."

MENDING THE BROKEN



A SON TO HAVE



SUREKHA NARAYAN HOLE, 32 Years, Program Participant

After her husband passed away, Surekha quickly adapted to the dull life of a widow- stay within the house, listen to all that the in-laws say, keep quiet and keep struggling to fend for the family- everything! She had always lived a life where men were more important than and less empathetic to women.

When she learnt about Save the Girl Child project, she was not ready to either be a part of it or send her children. She felt it was not good for them to attend workshops that openly provided information about sex education and gender sensitization. Her son convinced her to let him go and was the first one from the family to attend the workshop on biology, health and hygiene. The workshop helped her adolescent son gain some perspective and became the first man in Surekha's life to understand empathy.

"First, I was not so keen on sending my 15 year old son, Akshay, to the adolescent workshop, nor was he that keen on attending. However, upon the team's consistent request he decided to attend for namesake and return early.

As he came late in the evening, I was very angry and began yelling at him. My anger did not fade away his enthusiasm and he started telling me about all that he learnt at the workshop. He shared with me his recently acquired knowledge about human body and I looked at him in disgust as I had never indulged in an open conversation about such things with anyone.

The next thing that he said took me by shock. He told me, 'These rules that you follow during periods are nonsense. There is nothing dirty about it, you should stop following them. In fact you should try and rest because a woman's body is very weak at that time.'

I was so surprised and happy that my son at this age understood the plight of women when even grown men don't understand. After that I encouraged him to attend any workshops that were conducted for adolescents.

I have seen him grow in to a responsible and empathetic man. He helps his younger sister and me in the household work."

DISCOVERING THE OTHER SIDE

BALASAHEB JAGTAP, VHC Member

It is rare that a man who has deep patriarchal roots, and has stood against a cause that empowers women, has actually understood the need for and the importance of an egalitarian society. But, we have an exception!

A 35 year old farmer from Dhanora, Balasaheb Jagtap, vehemently opposed Save the Girl Child project on its onset, three years ago. He carried a stringent patriarchal opinion that restricted the role of a woman within the four domestic walls. For him, a woman's identity was limited to that of a wife, mother and sister. The project, however, altered his perspective and he realized that women could be much more than the three things he listed.



CHAYA DIGAMBAR SANGEKAR, 23 years, Program Participant

A child, irrespective of a girl or a boy, forms the future of a country. If not nurtured properly, the development prospects of a community appear bleak. Child Growth Monitoring constituted an important part of the project. One of the major reasons to monitor the health of an infant (0-5 years) was to study the difference that the villages made in nurturing a boy and a girl child. A session was conducted in affiliation with *Anganwadi* every month to monitor the child's growth. The parents were also provided with household remedies, information on the kind and quantity of diet as well as how to maintain monthly records of children growth levels.



"It has been 5 years since my marriage. My life before and after marriage has not been difficult as that of many women around me; however, we all are subject to certain misconceptions.

There are a lot of misconceptions revolving around menstruation. Women are considered to be impious during periods. They are expected to stay away from everyone in the house, sit, eat and stay separately, maintain distance from god or anything pious, as well as stay away from kitchen. My in-laws as well as my husband believed these things too.

It was the project that changed the way they thought. I no more have to follow any norms; my body is not considered dirty even for that period of time.

The project not only helped us get over such mistaken beliefs but the child growth monitoring activity conducted in our village improved the health of my child. My new born daughter, Priya, weighed a mere 6 kilograms for a year after her birth. We took a doctor's treatment but her condition remained the same.

BUILDING A HEALTHY INDIA



When Save the Girl Child project came to our village, it addressed the health and nutrition of infants. They educated us about the right time to feed, what to feed and what not to, even the kitchen garden seeds provided helped us ensure our kids ate a nutritious diet. Slowly, her weight began to increase and she came out of malnutrition.

Many kids under the project have fought malnutrition and won. Also, the false notions regarding menstruation have left homes."



"Three years ago when Save the Girl Child project was initiated in my village, I was completely against it. For me the roles of men and women were well defined- man as a breadwinner and woman always a homemaker. I imagined that this project was an attempt to undermine our culture and impose urban ways on us. And so at first I did not let my wife attend any of the meetings organized under the project.

It was the commitment of the project team and their constant visits to my home with an undying spirit that convinced me. I thought to myself- if these ladies have so much conviction in what they are doing, I should at least give them a fair chance to put across their point. After hearing them out, I decided to attend one of the village meetings on waterborne diseases.

During that meeting I learnt many common ways by which we fall sick during rains and I could relate those incidences with my life. I realized this project did not ridicule our beliefs. In fact, it taught us ways of making our lives better. I, then, went on to attend other training sessions under the project on gender equity and family planning. It made me understand the baseless notions of boy preference over a girl and the repercussions of not having enough women in the society. I also learnt how planning our families will help us in the future. All the activities have opened my eyes towards the hypocrisy in the Indian society towards women in the name of family honour and pride.

Today, my entire family and I participate in all the activities conducted in the village. I encourage others in my village to do the same. I realize that girls and boys are equal, that a woman is not just a wife, a mother or a sister and can be much more than that. I appreciate all the good work done under the project without disrespecting our beliefs."



HEALTHY VILLAGE, PROGRESSIVE VILLAGE

For a project that focused around health, the involvement and support of doctors was the most crucial factor. The ardent passion for the profession and the compassion for those in pain reflected upon the doctors who offered their complete support to the project and healed many lives.



Dr. Prakash Garud

Rotary Club of Ahmednagar Midtown

"A healthy life is the key to wellbeing. However, in rural India, health is often side-lined and we, doctors, are approached only when the patient's condition gets worse. The concept of prevention is better than cure still has to seep in many minds.

Of course, one of the reasons to avoid doctors is the expense incurred. We understand this, and so Garud Hospital in affiliation with the Rotary Club of Ahmednagar Midtown has conducted several medical camps offering free aid in rural parts of the district.

Save the Girl Child is such a project where we have gotten a chance to contribute toward bettering the health of villagers in Srigonda block. The camps conducted were extremely well organized and made the villagers aware about the various illnesses and to lead a life of caution and fitness. We made the villagers understand that if ignored, the illness will eventually grow and lead to something serious, demanding more of their time and money.

During the camps we observed that initially women used to hesitate to come forward for the treatment. The few that used to come were always accompanied by a male family member. However, over the period of time we not only saw an increase in the participation of women but also observed that they started coming alone for the check-ups.

A total of 23 health camps were conducted in which 2944 patients were diagnosed over the project period. Anaemia and cancer detection camps were also organized, the former witnessed participation of 7882 villagers, while the latter had 31 cancer patients referred Garud hospital. The patients who were diagnosed with illnesses, and a few with cancer, were referred to our hospital and we treated them for free."



Dr. Padmaja Garud

"In my 25 years of working with women, I have realized that a woman is the most important part of our society, she is the foundation of a family, a woman looks after the health of everyone in the family, but her health is completely compromised.

Reasons could be many, one of them being she is not given as much importance as the man of the family, not much time or money or effort is invested in ensuring her health. Many women do not openly discuss what ails them till their illness aggravates and passes the curative stage.

Hence, we felt the dire need to enlighten and educate women about their health and implications of neglecting their illness. It was essential to spread our knowledge to the community members, so that they can treat themselves at least for basic health problems and illnesses. And the project structure allowed us to do that.

There were 2 health promoters appointed from each village, so around 54 health promoters were trained about basic diseases and how to treat them. They were also informed about how to take care of the mother and child during pregnancy, what diet is appropriate for lactating mothers, how is a child born and that a woman is not responsible for the birth of a child, the importance of family planning and implications of aborting child on a woman's health.

We used to conduct trainings every 15 days after which it was promoters' responsibility to spread what they learnt and inform women in their villages to attend the camps.

Women came to me with various problems such as anaemia, problems arising out of abortion or during pregnancy, period problems, etc.

During the project and even otherwise, we get many patients who approach us for sex based sonography, but we explain them that a woman is equally capable of making a career and looking after the family.

In my career, I have witnessed many cases where a daughter even after marriage comes running for ailing parents while the son does not even care for them. We highlight the importance of daughters by sharing such experiences. We try to make them understand that a healthy woman means a healthy family."

REDEFINING MARRIAGE

IN CONVERSATION WITH THE NEWLY WEDS:

Shubhangi, 19 Years & Ashok Giri, 24 Years

Somnath Borgaon

As we began to interview the newlyweds, we were happy to see the wife taking the lead.

Shubhangi, began, "We got married when I was 16. For the first three years of our marriage, my husband and I were trying to have a baby. It was in the workshops organized under the project that I learnt about the implications of marrying at an early age.

We also learnt about what is the proper age for child bearing, how a baby is conceived and that a man is responsible for the sex of the baby. It was a relief to know that despite our attempts, we did not have a baby yet. I realized why even today it hurts when we indulge in intercourse.

The workshop highlighted the significance of family planning and informed us that having more children has repercussions not only on a woman's health but also on the economic security of the family. We learnt of ways to avoid child birth like use of copper-T, condoms, etc. All the things we have learnt will be extremely useful to us once we have children of our own and we can plan our life accordingly.

At the workshop we were also told that if we have intercourse on the fourteenth day when the periods begin, that is when the couple has highest chances of having a baby. Now that we are ready to have a baby, we are following these dates."

One of the reasons for providing family planning and sex education sessions to newly married couples was to improve the dynamics between the couple and provide them a platform to open up and share problems they usually don't. This helped them strengthen their marital bond.

Taking over from the wife, Ashok continued "We did not have that much information about human body, especially the problems that a woman's body faces. A woman never shares her problems, and a man never tries to know. The problem that a woman's body undergoes such as period problems and pain, pain during sex, these things couples don't even tell each other. This workshop helped us bridge the gap.

It is essential that the newlyweds have some knowledge about these things. Such workshops ensure that there is no place for misunderstanding between the couples. A person will do as informed once she/he understands that what is being told is for their betterment. Also, if a husband and wife understand each other's problems, know about each other's body, the relationship develops in to friendship.

We don't have a preference. A boy or a girl, we will welcome both with a warm embrace. Our children irrespective of their sex will receive proper education and chances to make decisions of their own."





WRITING A NEW CHAPTER

A project that bound over 9600 women to each other and to us has been concluded. Today, as we look back, we see change. Not much, but just enough to make a difference.

The villagers that kept us waiting in the sun for hours and never showed up, today arrive at our beck and call; the men who raised their voices against us, greet us with respect and integrity; the women who never stepped outside the domestic cocoon, today are driven by a sense of unity and the will to stand in man's shoes.

Of course, the idea of an equality driven society is still farfetched, but the willingness of the community to give change a chance has left us with hope.

The workshops conducted under the project enabled expansion of the community's knowledge based with respect to nutrition, cleanliness, family planning, etc. Rather than adopting curative measures, the awareness spread prompted people to take preventive steps for a healthy life.

Women realized the power of standing together, while inculcating the notions of self-appreciation and value. Interaction between women and men across all ages became more fluid and frank.

It takes decades for behaviours and habits to alter, but what this project has accomplished in a span of three years is commendable. Although the project has reached its end, the journey continues, a new chapter begins.

With an extensive experience of implementing Save the Girl Child, A Chance for Girls is our next step toward the ultimate vision of improving the status of women and giving girls a chance to be born. To be implemented in Aurangabad region of Maharashtra, this project is bound to be bigger and better. For with each passing day the passion to take the cause forward burns in our hearts and more and more women and men join our efforts...





I don't ask or wish for more,
Just bring me and her to the shore,
The fishes swim together,
The larks fly at par;

I don't ask or wish for more,
Just to sail and soar with fervour,
See the scarred scales and withered wings,
The still radiant equality dream;

It may surprise you to know,
I bleed; have flesh and a heart too,
Every time you strike or pull me down,
It bleeds red, grey, black and brown;

There will be a time & the time has come,
When I will speak up, stand, question and hurl,
Not with hatred, but with hope,
Not for battle, but for the just;

A Plea for parity,
A struggle for humanity,
They will call it a movement & a revolution,
A mark of change, enlightenment & egalitarian;

This is when I will call out and I am calling now,
A summon for my fathers, brothers, sisters to avow,
Be supportive, fair and brave,
For in this courage I see freedom & welfare;

And I don't ask or wish for more,
Just they understand that men and women are one soul...





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