



Retrospective  
**20 Years**  
Journey  
in  
West Bengal

**act:onaid**

End Poverty Together



# STORIES OF TRANSFORMATION

Real People | Real Stories | Real Change



## IMPACT OF KOLKATA REGIONAL OFFICE

### AREAS OF IMPACT

### NUMBERS

Number of Landless families received land:	2210
Numbers of homeless access to AAY Card:	2057
Numbers of deserted aged person got access old age penion:	2633
Numbers of person got identity card (Beedi, Un-organised labour, Fish worker....)	18687
Numbers of Children enrolled in school/ supported	25059
Numbers of Child marriage case stopped	774
Numbers of people got access PDS	19242
Numbers of RTI filed by people from community	630
Numbers of Violence cases addressed by Women Collective members	2723
Numbers of trafficking rescued	164
Numbers of Adolescent Girls in group	1989
No. of families reached directly during disaster.	5297
No. of Block / Municipality / Borough	106
No. of Village / Slum covered annually	750 to 1200



Forming  
Collectives



Accessing  
Entitlements



People's  
Movement



Children's  
Rights



<b>Topics</b>	<b>Page</b>
<b>Infographic Highlights</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Content</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Foreword</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>ActionAid: A journey of 20 years in Bengal</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Makhu Hembram: Nurturing Hope Through Agriculture in an Arid Land</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Kanaklata Murmu:Cursade against Injustice</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Mariam Toppa : Spearheading Land Rights Movement</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Swapna Sardar: Economic Development ushering Social Change</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Tuktuki Mondal: The Homeless Girl Who Became a Teacher</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Taposhi Moira: Organizing Domestic Workers for Realizing their Rights</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Halima Khatun: Bringing Hope for Girls in her Community</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Sumit Dung Dung and His Dream Journey to Engineering College</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Rakhi Thapa: Women Leading Demand for SAHAY PRAKALPA</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Nitu Das: Driving in the Fast Lane on New Livelihoods</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Souvik Kar: Aspirations of a Sponsored Child</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>PGPS : Raising Demands for Justice &amp; Equality at Home and Work</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Joyshree Mahali : Sharing Experience - Motivating Peers</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Tuktuki Khatun: Felicitated by the President of India for Resisting Early Marriage</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Acknowledgment</b>	<b>26</b>



It is now more than four decades that ActionAid started its journey for promoting and supporting struggles for rights of the most underprivileged communities in India and two decades in Bengal. We applaud all our allied organisations for the relentless efforts to contribute for an empowering journey of securing rights for the poorest of the poor in our state.

As on date 50 thousand women and men are collectively standing together and taking forward various struggles to claim rights such as land for landless, protection from child marriage, child labour, trafficking and violence, accessing right to work, right to education and right to food.

There are thousands of stories where these struggles in solidarity with the survivors of violence and injustice have been remarkably successful in the face of great odds but many a times there were huge disappointments too.

Today we collectively reflect and remember those great moments in our 20 year journey and reconnect with all friends and co travelers and celebrate. We present some glimpses of this enormous work in the form of these *Stories of Transformation*.

We salute the exceptional commitment and dedication of these women, men, girls and boys from the most disadvantaged communities. Hope the stories would re-ignite our sense of social responsibility towards a just and equitable society.

In Solidarity

Chittaranjan Mandal  
Regional Manager

# ActionAid: A journey of 20 years in Bengal



ActionAid India has been working with poor and marginalised people since 1972. Presently, the organization is active in 25 states and one Union Territory reaching out to over 6 million people every year belonging to the most marginalised and excluded groups. We partner with local civil society organizations (CSO), community-based organizations (CBO) and people's movements to collectively address poverty, inequality and injustice. ActionAid India is part of an international federation, working with over 15 million people in 45 countries for a world free from poverty and injustice.

Focus of ActionAid's work is on the rights of India's most marginalised communities: Dalit and indigenous people; rural and urban poor; women, children and minorities. These groups face acute obstacles in exercising control over resources and access to basic social services. ActionAid works to equip them with knowledge about their rights and develop capacities in them to demand their constitutional entitlements.

It is now for more than two decades that ActionAid's West Bengal Regional Office in Kolkata has been promoting and supporting struggles for the above cause. These rights-based endeavours have been grounded through partnership with local CSOs and CBOs. There are many powerful community collectives especially the women's collectives that have emerged in these long years.

These community collectives are spread across the state - from Cooch Behar to Sundarbans, from homeless/slum dwellers in Kolkata to traditional fishing communities in East Midnapur; from remote tribal community in Ajodhya hills to closed tea estates in Alipurduar.

This volume is dedicated to the indomitable spirit of leaders of these amazing struggles and the women and men who have brought their ingenuity and courage to the cause of justice and equality for the last 20 years in West Bengal.

To mark this event, a two-day celebration (14-15th December 2016) at Raja Subodh Mallik Square, Kolkata will bring all co-travellers of our wonderful journey together.

### Makhu Hembram: Nurturing Hope Through Agricultural Collective



Sounds of explosions at nearby stone quarries occasionally puncture an otherwise calm hilly landscape. The sun is slowly setting down and hot, dry winds still making you feel uneasy. But for a group of tribal women, it was the routine time to tend their vegetable garden they have grown collectively.

“The vegetable plants need to be watered every day as the land is very dry. It was actually a barren land that had never been cultivated before,” says Maku Hembram, 55, a member of the Women's Collective in Tetulbandhi, a remote tribal hamlet in West Bengal's Birbhum district.

“These plants need little extra care. They need to be staked. Otherwise, the stems will break and cause the fruits to touch the ground and rot before ripening,” she adds while removing grime off a tiny plant, full of tomatoes,

grown using organic methods.

Churamani, another member of the collective, pitches in and says, “We started farming on this land in 2013 and so far we have been able to grow a variety of vegetables. We are very happy because our hard work has paid us well. We have been able to sell our crop in the market after meeting our own family needs.”

The 12-member collective was set up as part of ActionAid India's intervention in the area, where the majority of the population belongs to the Santhal community, an indigenous tribal group, that is disadvantaged in all socio- economic terms.. Typically, they are landless agricultural labourers. But farming in the area is mostly dependant on the monsoon rains. Moreover, due to the drought prone arid nature of the land, agricultural work is scarce in most part of the year and generally, is inadequate to support a family. Even those people who own land, cannot cultivate, as those are very small in size and require heavy input cost. These challenges often force these people to work in hazardous working conditions in stone quarries and crusher units that have mushroomed over the years.

In the form of fragmented wasteland holding, ActionAid identified a hidden opportunity that could be explored to help restore their deteriorating livelihood situation to some extent. Through extensive consultation, the locals also realized that their unused individual small patches of land can actually come to use if they combine those into one big collective resource and start cultivating collectively using organic farming methods.



Twelve women came forward and set up a collective in the village of Tetulbandhi. ActionAid organized training programmes for the groups on participatory planning, decision making, crop choice and preparing organic manure and other bio inputs. With continuous support and guidance from the project team, the collectives have not only gained necessary skills on agriculture, they also learned leadership skills. Women were motivated to take the lead. As part of their contribution, the male members of the families ploughed and cross ploughed the land several times. Then, several types of vegetable seeds were sown.

At the beginning of the initiative, the groups spent about Rs 16,000 as input cost that included purchase of seeds and a pump set to water the field. By the end of the year, the group headed by Maklu, was able to earn about Rs 25,000 by selling surplus produce after meeting their family food needs - which was the primary focus of the collectives. In the following year, they added few more vegetables along with paddy. This time their income increased to almost Rs.50,000 which was equally shared among the members.

“For us, it was like a new beginning. We never thought of having our own farmland and working for ourselves. The day when we first saw the plants bearing fruits, we could not control our emotions. It was really a memorable day for all of us,” Maklu recalls.

“  
**I am engaged in a work which is in my own control. Besides, arranging nutritious food for our children .. we can also motivate others the emulate our effort.**

”  
**Makhu Hembram  
Tentulbadhi, Birbhum**

Makhu, Chunirani and another 30 women have developed into skillful agriculturists. They are now able to provide advice to other women in the formation, operation and managing collectives. Gradually, these women have discovered themselves in position of decision making not only in their respective families, but also in their villages. This is a shift from the traditional scenario where women’s contribution in agriculture is rarely acknowledged in the country.

Later, two more women collectives were formed in different villages through similar community consultations where Makhu, Chunirani and other members played pivotal role in the consultation process. Similar economic results were seen in these collectives as well.

An experiment that started with a small group of marginalized women, have gradually covered larger number of women – thereby proving them with a ray of hope to break the shackles of deprivation and win respect dignity and economic emancipation.

## Kanaklata Murmu: Cursade against Injustice



“Everything is based on mobility, one's whole development as a person is based on the person's capacity to move from place to place. But women in our society are constantly facing restrictions, whether in their parents' home or in that of their husbands,” observes Kanaklata. “Even if they are beaten by their husbands, they need his permission to file a police complaint against him! Then why are we surprised that women do not get justice?” she adds

Such clear piece of mind coming from a Class VII drop and heralding from disadvantaged village like Kumari in Manbazar II block of Purulia district should not surprise many who know Kanaklata Murmu.

Belonging to the Santal Community herself, Kanaklata experienced exploitation of women all around her. “Husbands beating up their wives and throwing them out of homes is just one example” she says. “Previously women used to resign to such treatment as fate. But now we have come to understand that the food that we were getting in our husband's home does not come for free. Every woman toils hard to keep her family going. It is her hard earned right to live there as an equal and with dignity” she says putting things in perspective.

Quick grasp of ground truths and urge to fight for justice came naturally to Kanak. These traits were sharpened by her long association with partner organizations of ActionAid Association as grass root mobilizer since 2006. The different training programmes, exposure to concepts and ideas further honed her inherent qualities.

“Through these programs, we received information about various government programmes for poor people like us. We realized that accessing these schemes were our rights. We learnt about our rights as human beings, as women,” she clarifies.

Gradually Kanaklata evolved into a position where residents of Kumari village began considering her worthy enough to lead them, to give them confidence to face adversity, to stand up for their rights.





Supports began to trickle in with significant results coming through her leadership. “Her activism has actually produced results on the ground. For instance, she has been able to secure regular pension several elderly widows in villages here, something no one had done earlier.” clarifies Kasturi Devi, one of her colleagues. “Whenever things go wrong for people here, they feel they can count on her to act independently and with wisdom, keeping their best interests in mind” she adds.

She mobilized local women to challenge the existing local systems of justice delivery, where the men of the village sat together and took decisions on local disputes, including those occurring within and between families. “What struck us about this process was that the verdicts that emerged from these arbitration sabhas, were often faulty and did not consider the issue from the women's perspective” remembers Kanaklata.

As alternative, about 40 to 50 women organized their parallel group to meet at least twice a month at the village level and once a month at the block level to provide a hearing that was inclusive. “We found that when men took decisions they would keep women out of the process, but when we took decisions we involved everyone,” clarified Kasturi.

Efforts of women's groups touched other aspects of community development The SHG she had started became involved in monitoring the mid day meal and revealed that a lot of food grain meant for the children was being siphoned off. “We decided to complain about it to the BDO,” recalled Kanaklata. “However, when my husband came to know about this, he was extremely angry and told me to back off” reminiscences Kanak. “But then something very unprecedented happened. Members of the community intervened and told him that she was doing the right thing and should continue her efforts” she adds.

She led protests and even confronted the corrupt official directly, making it a dominant issue in the ensuing elections where the person was defeated and removed from office. Mass petition led by Kanaklata Murmu has led to installation of drinking water tube well in the village. Mass mobilization has also helped the villagers access MGNREGA jobs. In an adjoining work site, half the labourers working are from her village. “Everyone in our village has a job card, and has accessed work through the MNREGA scheme. Now we are demanding work for longer periods,” reveals Kanaklata.

Beating educational and economic disadvantage, the mother of two teenage girls has been fighting and winning battles against injustice thereby inspiring many others to take up the challenge and establish their rightful place in society.

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**Even if women are beaten by their husbands, they need his permission to file a police complaint against him! Then why are we surprised that women do not get justice?**

”

**Kanaklata Murmu  
Manbazar II, Purulia**

## Mariam Toppa : Spearheading Land Rights Movement



It is not often that we locate a senior citizen as mover and shaker to bring about social change and development in their communities. But nothing ordinary can be associated with Mariam Toppa – the 61-year-old woman from a tribal community. However, dire necessity often brings out the fiercest fighters from within docile homemakers and converts them to living inspiration for others to emulate.

Mariam is one of the 62 families living in Kutialerbose village in Petla Gram

Panchayat of West Bengal's Coochbehar district. Despite living on this land for more than five decades, they were yet to receive the land records legalizing their possession. Constant fear of eviction perpetually perturbed the families and like any mother, Mariam increasingly became concerned about the future of her children. The situation became unbearable for the lady when she discovered that due to absence of land records, their families were being deprived from the benefits of all governmental schemes.

“Children are going hungry and we are not being able to access the food items being provided through governmental schemes for us. Education of our children was being hampered, while the government was making all efforts to bring the light of literacy reach our hutments. It was such an agony. And all because we did not have land titles to establish our bonafide” recalls Mariam.

During such desperate times, the villagers made several attempts to apply for land records but did not succeed in acquiring them. At this point, Mariam came in touch with Pramila Bahini (Women's Brigade), a collective of marginalized women formed with support ActionAid and its partner organizations – that has been working on the issues of securing women's rights 72 villages of Coochbehar with effective membership of over 8000 women.

Mariam contacted Pramila Bahini and also mobilised her fellow women to join the collective. Mariam took the initiative, and under her leadership the group applied for land and made continuous follow ups with the local land and revenue authorities under the guidance of the collective.



Simultaneously Mariam started working towards establishing the community's access to Government schemes including employment through the MGNREGA scheme, widow and old age pension. However neither the local Panchayat, nor the Block Development Officer (BDO) could allot work to them. Not being disheartened by this rejection, they approached the District Nodal Officer of MGNREGA and sought his intervention villagers of Kutialerbosh got 14 days of work for the first time. It was a huge boost to the morale of the struggle women that effectively strengthened their resolve to push for land entitlements with renewed vigor.

In 2015, Mariam and her fellow village women formed another group called Petla Adibasi Bhumihin Samity aimed at launching fresh movement for land titles under the aegis of a formal entity. This time, the administration took up their case with priority. The process got further accelerated when the Additional District Magistrate of Coochbehar was informed about the issue during a visit to their village. In December 2015, names of the applicants were notified for land title (patta) under Nijo Griho Nijo Bhumi scheme for homestead of landless. Finally in February, 26 landless families of her village received land patta in the first lot. It was cause of celebration for the village.

“

**It was because of our constant efforts that we received the land titles and that too in the joint name of their spouses**

”

**Mariam Toppo  
Petla  
Coochbehar**

But Mariam's struggle was far from over. The women are continuing their struggle for ensuring homestead entitlements for rest of the families in the village. Their demand now has expanded to the inclusion of rights to agricultural land – a sustainable source of livelihood for the people.

“Today, women are being respected. It was because of our constant efforts, land titles have been received by these families that to in the joint name of their spouses,” says Mariam.

The confidence in the leadership of Mariam has encouraged the women to challenge existing discriminatory and unjust social customs such as child marriage, human trafficking, violence against women. The developmental needs of the community through children's education have also come up as a major focus of their activities. In order to ensure that no child drops out of school, Mariam and her group are constantly engaging parents, especially those of the migrating families.

Mariam has now become a role model for the entire community. What people admire in her is the fact that in spite of all odds in her life like poverty, landlessness, social exclusion and even old age, she is living a life dedicated to the wellbeing of others.

The struggle of Mariam and the group have even been acknowledged by the NITI Aayog, and published in an online contest featuring stories of **women who are making a difference.**

### Swapna Sardar: Economic Development ushering Social Change



“There is no tool for development more effective than empowerment of women”. A homemaker belonging to the tribal Munda community in a remote island of Sundarbans amply justifies this often quoted comment of erstwhile UN secretary General Kofi Annan.

“We can sense the increasing recognition and respect for women since we initiated our collective effort to earn livelihood with support of ActionAid” articulates Swapna Sardar of Purba Dwarakapur village under Patharpratima Block. “We were encouraged to start by taking possession of vested lands for crab cultivation. The we took the same land on lease from the local administration to expand our initiative” she adds. The entrepreneur had traveled a long distance from being the shy homemaker.

Other than domestic responsibilities, sometimes she used to assist her husband in collecting crabs. The couple also used to earn by catching tiger prawn spawns in nearby Sibua River. The practice was banned by the government due to environmental concerns. “This ban on spawn collection severely shrunk the family income to almost half. Even arranging two square meals a day was proving to be a challenge” she recollects.

In 2013, ActionAid and its local partner began facilitating the process for formation of Purba Dwarakapur Marine Fisherwomen's Collective. Swapna associated herself with the group along with other 44 fellow women practicing crab culture. The various training programmes helped the women to develop their skills.

Gradually Swapna evolved not only into a proficient crab farmer but also as a leader of the women's collective. “Now we have acquired 5 acres of government land through the Block Administration where a pond has been dug and fencing erected with help of funds from MGNREGA. We are now recognized land holders and entrepreneurs” she says. “Presently we have set up a crab culture unit in the area and are operating with technical and marketing support from Marine Products Export Development Authority (MPEDA).

“I believe that involving women in the collective has caused many positive changes in our area. We have successfully enhanced awareness on issues like gender equality, children's education, preventing child marriage, toilet usage” she says. “ ActionAid has been a partner in all our missions, lending moral and material support” she adds.

### Tuktuki Mondal: The Homeless Girl Who Became a Teacher



Tuktuki Mandal has grown up on the pavements of the Ballygunge Station Road. She was raised by her maternal grandmother as both her parents abandoned her as infant.

In 2003, while in Class VII, she participated in a street programme organized by a partner of ActionAid at Ballygunge. There she gave a stellar performance in the quiz section of the programme. Given her background, the remarkable participation and leadership skills caused the organizers to take note of her. Thus began a long relation with ActionAid and its partners.

“I have experienced extreme torture during eviction. All my mark sheets, books and copies were taken away by the police. I was a part of the district Kabadi Team, my certificates of Kabadi were also lost. As girl growing up in the pavements and continuing education, life was really hard and spiked with vulnerabilities” she recalled.

Tuktuki was admitted at residential home that enabled her to continue her studies. She worked there as a part-time intern at the life skill unit of home. After completing her higher secondary, she left the home and got married in 2011. With her husband's support she continued her education. “My husband has played an important role and has encouraged me to continue my education” remarked Tuktuki. “Social work has always been of interest and I wanted to work with an NGO” she recalls.

Her dream materialized as partner organization of ActionAid placed her as a teacher at the Park Circus activity centre under an intervention programme for the homeless children. Tutuki is very popular among the children as she can relate or connect with the issues and challenges of the children she teaches.

“I can always understand the vulnerability when a mother is working outside leaving her child alone on the streets under open sky. That was the vulnerability I grew up with and today my motto is to reduce it through my work” says Tuktuki confidently.

“I acknowledge the support received from ActionAid and its partner organizations in moulding my destiny, right from the day we met in the pavements of Ballygunge” says a grateful Tuktuki.

## Taposhi Moira: Organizing Domestic Workers for Realizing their Rights



When introduced to her employer for the first time, Taposhi was merely ten years old. As her elder sister spoke to the employer about nature of work, salary, little Taposhi was just trying to get the feel of the big house in a big city. The awestruck child was too young to understand that her future was being bargained !

“What I only remember is that whenever my sister visited me once in three or four months to take my salary, I used to cry a lot and beg her to take me home” recalls Taposhi “But somehow my elder sister used to convince me to stay back and life continued as usual” she further adds.

In the first place where she was employed, the work consisted of running errands for the household including helping out with cooking, helping to carry bags from market. Taposhi never objected in any of the commands and tried to perform to the best of the abilities of a ten year old. She managed to survive in this job for three years.

“There was no allocation of food for me. I was given only the leftover foodstuffs remaining in their plates after the members of the family had finished their meals. Being too young, I too, never objected eating leftovers and gradually that evolved into the practice” she remembers.

This was not the end of the maltreatment meted out to her. The girl was not allowed to use the toilet of the household. As a result she had to defecate in the open drain. “It was a terrible embarrassment that I had to encounter each day. But there was no recourse. I suffered in silence”. elaborates Taposhi recalling those harrowing days.

During those days, I used to suffer from boils surfacing on my body. These boils were extremely painful and sometimes even induced fever. But the employers never took me to a doctor” she continues narrating. “But, finally they decided to release me because of the infections”she says.

In the next job, she was responsible to look after a small child. One day she reprimanded the child for indiscipline. Her infuriated employers summarily dismissed her for this audacity. She continued as care giver in the following job. The child was extremely disrespectful to her and even inflicted physical injury on Taposhi. But fear of losing the job forced her to endure all humiliations.

Her next employer was a generous soul. He treated Taposhi well and even arranged to get her admitted to school as she expressed her desire to get educated. However, his three daughters were not that keen to help her. They tried to impeded her academic progress.



Despite such opposition, Taposhi continued her education till Class VIII. Interestingly, she was drawing a salary of Rs. 50 per month in this household.

At 19, she was married off. Post marriage she continued her profession of a domestic worker. Mixed experience of working for different employers contributed to her realization that ultimately it is a story of exploitation. Somewhere latent and in other cases blatant.

The course of her life took a dramatic turn when she came in contact with social activists working with ActionAid supported programme to organize and capacitate domestic workers. Sitting on the rail tracks, she started listening to the discussion in the meeting. It dawned upon her that problems faced by women working as domestic workers were almost same for all. She developed an inclination of attending the meetings and gradually turned from a silent listener to an active participant. She started giving opinions fetching from the treasury of her experiences.

“

**ActionAid has always encouraged me to devote efforts towards organization building. Organization and unity are our main strengths**

“I was the first to volunteer from our locality to participate in a training programme conducted by ActionAid” informs Taposhi “It was in 2015” she adds.

”

**Taposhi Moira  
Dhakuria  
Kolkata**

“Attending the training cleared a lot of concepts. I realized that just like people working in factories, we were also workers. But were not recognized as such. I also understood that forming organizations and fighting for our rights were of utmost importance in order to improve our condition. It was the first time that I was listening to such ideas. Ideas that completely shook me from slumber and catapulted me to action. Later I learnt about the Labour Department of the Government that can be used to further our cause ” narrates Taposhi.

“I took up the responsibility of contributing to the organizational work. Attendance in different information camps and training programmes organized by ActionAid further capacitated me with knowledge and skills to understand issues and underlying politics better. The confidence to express ideas in a structured lucid manner has also developed. I picked up the skills of public speaking” she continues elaborating the change in her life.

“Members of ActionAid have always encouraged me to devote more effort towards organization building and taking lead in unifying other women to struggle for our demand. As secretary of the organization of domestic workers - Paschimbanga Griha Paricharika Samilty, we have successfully negotiated with employers to address issues like summary dismissal without notice and bonus of domestic workers” she informs with confidence.

The transformation in Taposhi's life have in turn altered the course for many others and will continue to do so in future..

### Halima Khatun: Bringing Hope for Girls in her Community



Uttar Mamudpur is a village located in the remote Sundarban regions of Hingalganj Block. Disadvantaged location and religious and social restrictions have deprived the people, especially girls from accessing development.

Halima Khatun grew up in this village – fighting poverty but still continuing her education. Her bidi worker father and mother toiled throughout the day to run the family. But still, they supported her quest for education until she moved to attend university in Kolkata.

“When I left village to attend University, it was nothing short of a rebellion” informs Halima “It was accompanied with a lot of sharp criticism and rumoring in the village” she adds. “It was quite natural, I suppose. As I was the first girl to do so. No girl before me have ever ventured out to attain University education in the village“

While in college, she got involved with the issues of fisher women in the area . It was her initiation into social work. She closely experienced condition of Muslim women in remote villages and that in turn kindled her desire to work with the severally disadvantaged women from her community.

The opportunity arrived in 2009 when ActionAid started its intervention for Muslim women in the district and Halima became associated with the programme. She formed the Barasat Hingalganj Muslim Mahila Samity, an organization for Muslim women and joined the movement of ensuring their rights and entitlements.

Super cyclone Ayla plundered Sundarbans towards the beginning of her initiative here. It threw up new challenges. With destruction of livelihood, men were forced to migrate in search of work. Helpless women were left back in the destroyed villages to fend for themselves. Halima stood by them as a rock - providing much needed support.

“The backwardness of these villages are hard to believe. Most of the families belong to the ‘Below Poverty Line’ category. Yet they do not have voter card, ration card. They are not even aware of the process to get these entitlements. The practice of going to school is so rare that expecting awareness of rights seems extremely remote” Halima explains the profile of the community in which she works.





When we started our work, women never dared to speak up against injustice. They lived in the shadows of perpetual fear. Fear of headmen and the influential who always made it a point to preserve patriarchy and deprive women of their dues” she recalls. Then gradually things began to change. Awareness slowly took root among the women who started raising their voice” she adds further.

Her actions antagonized powerful vested interests in the society. Threats were issued against her from religious congregations. She received calls threatening her with dire consequences including physical and sexual violence.

“I deserved this treatment, they said” informs Halima. “As I was instigating women to raise demand their rightful dues. I was encouraging them to come out of the houses and explore the world outside. It was nothing less than total rebellion in the village” she adds.

“Despite such opposition, a lot of women have responded to our call and came out. Life has changed for them with greater awareness of their rights and internal desire to achieve them. I have always received support from ActionAid in these endeavors” she says.

“Attitudes of my past adversaries have also changed. They see me in media reports regularly and claim that I am pride of my village. I just shrug off this adulation that is just hypocrisy”.

Life has changed for Halima too. She is now married and blessed with a child. But the domestic life has not extinguished the fire within. She continues to lead and inspire many more to join the struggle and mainstream of society.

However, the women who looked up to her for guidance and support are skeptic. Will Halima continue to be beside them with same vigor? - they ask

“Why not?” retorts Halima. “I have seen Mary Kom. Did her motherhood throw up any hurdle in the way of realizing her dreams? No, it didn’t. Then why should it be different for me?” she asks back with confidence, a trait that makes her stand out in the crowd.

“My association with ActionAid changed the course of my life that in turn helped to change the lives of so many like me. The numerous workshops and training programmes have helped us to understand issues from a new perspective” she informs. “I really hope that it continues inspiring, supporting and churning out many more Halimas from each disadvantaged village in the our county” she wishes.

**“  
I will continue my work for  
the disadvantaged women  
in my community.  
Commitment to my  
personal life will never be  
and obstacle**

**”  
Halima Khatun  
Hingaljanj  
North 24 Paganas**

## Sumit Dung Dung and His Dream Journey to Engineering College



Sumit had been a meritorious student throughout his career. But without encouragement and support many such bright stars have extinguished before realizing their full glory. Sumit's father secretly nurtured this fear for his ward. Supporting a large family of seven children and allocating resources for education of Sumit was an uphill task for the tribal worker in Mechpara Tea Garden.

Despite such obstacles, Sumit continued his education in Ekalavya School for tribal children. The boy who never stood second in class did justice to his reputation and secured 96% in the Madhyamik exams. In the higher secondary examinations too, he scored 73%. The school was immensely proud of the achievement of their star student

However, after completing the higher secondary examinations, it seemed that it was end of the road for Sumit. With withdrawal of support after completion of board exams, the prospect of a bright career seemed to meet with an abrupt end.

It was at this point of time that he contacted Block Level Selection Committee under Legacy project supported by Action Aid. His performance graph and family background made him an ideal candidate for award of scholarship. This scholarship enabled him to continue graduation in the university level. He secured admission in B.Sc (Mathematic Honours) Course from Siliguri College, North Bengal University.

“The scholarship leased new life into my educational pursuits” says Sumit. “Sans this support, there was no way to continue my education” he acknowledges gratefully.

During career counseling programme supported Action Aid the selection committee and counselor advised him to sit for Joint Entrance Exam. He was reluctant due to his financial condition as he did not even have money to submit for the Examinations. The selection committee extended support by proving the finances and purchasing him the required books to prepare for the exams.

Rest, they say is history. Sumit successfully cleared the entrance examination and secured chance to pursue engineering in Durgapur IIT College and is now a student in the second year.

“I don't have enough words to thank ActionAid for their support” says Sumit. “Even verbal expression of gratitude is not enough. I would like to contribute back by supporting other underprivileged children like me to realize their dreams” he says the budding engineer..

## Rakhi Thapa: Women Leading Demand for SAHAY PRAKALPA



Closure of Duncuns tea garden in 2015 submerged the workers in a catastrophic crisis. The only alternative left with them was to break stones on the riverbed. The meager were not enough to support families – thus driving them into further desperation. Tribal labourers, especially the aged among them were the worst sufferers. Reports of starvation deaths came in from the closed gardens – one after another.

This critical situation helped in the emergence of some dedicated leaders from self help groups who joined hands and formed Chay Bagan Bacho Committee (CBBC).

CBBC leaders from different gardens rushed in to organize relief work with support from ActionAid and other CBOs as part of an emergency response. The situation was shared with Block Medical Officer – Madrihat leading to immediate arrangement of medical relief to Gargenda, Dhumchipara and Huntapara. CBBC involved women Self Help Groups (SHG) in their activities and continued orientation of community women on their rights and entitlements. ActionAid contributed significantly by providing support in CBBC's activities and movements .

CBBC member Hemlata Beck of Dhumchipara T.G assumed a proactive role to organized CBBC members to start pruning, green leaf plucking activities and selling them in a systematic way to enable them to earn Rs. 100 each day. SHG organizer Rakhi Thapa and other members of her Ganga SHG from Huntapara organized women under the umbrella of CBBC to assert for their rights and to protest against corruption.

Giving in to their demands, the food inspectors visited the gardens to investigate the quality of materials distributed in ration. Immediately quality of materials improved. This was their first success. This achievement boosted their morale and also contributed in more women joining in. Huntapara CBBC demanded for Sahay Prakalpa in the closed gardens. They conducted meetings in different gardens to gather mass support for this demand. Eventually, a petition was submitted before the BDO. A continuous stream of activities including follow up, interaction with Government officials ensued leading to implementation of Sahay Prakalpa in these gardens. The community of Huntapara , Gargenda and Dhumchipara started receiving cooked food under Sahay prakalpa once a day. SHG members involved in the preparation of food which also ensured some income for the distressed garden women. A list of vulnerable individuals was shared with BDO to demand cooked food for them.

“We are grateful to ActionAid who empowered us with awareness to access our rights - leading to benefits of Sahay Prakalpa in the closed gardens” says Rakhi Thapa.

### Nitu Das: Driving to the Fast Lane on New Livelihood



Workers in the unorganized sector are often disadvantaged from lack of alternative skill sets that keeps them tied down to the same trade despite poor income and other work condition related issues. Without skills mobility to look for alternative livelihood is just a distant dream.

“My mother used to sell vegetables on the pavements. I started accompanying her after school and gradually picked up the trade skills” says Nitu Das a street vendor from the Sealdah Market area in her early thirties. “Then I was married off, quite early. My husband was also street vendor. He shifted to catering service and I remained back in this trade” she continues.

However lives of street vendors are tough. Most of them do not possess vending license and thus exposed to violence from different quarters. They conduct daily business under constant fear.

“Many a times during eviction raids, police have thrown my entire stock on the road causing huge loss. But we have no recourse. We are unauthorized occupants in eye of the law” rues Nitu. “Dangers of conducting business on streets are even more pronounced for women who are vulnerable to abuse. I had to face such situations too” she adds.

“I was increasingly becoming desperate to leave this profession. But since being educated only till Class VII and not knowing any other skill to earn, I was stuck. The condition of the family was also such that I could not afford the luxury to sit at home” she says putting things in perspective.

It was just during such desperate moment that ActionAid came up with its programme to support workers in the unorganized sector – including street vendors like us. Alternative skill development was one of the important components of the project. I enrolled for the driving training provided with full financial support from ActionAid. We could not have arranged the fees, if we had to pay for the training” she informs. “The skill has prospect for job and also to be elf employed” she adds.

Nitu completed the training and was successful in the driving license examination. On her own accord, she landed a trainee driver's post where she can gain experience while earning.

“In addition to livelihood skills, we have been made aware on various issues like rights and entitlements for workers in the unorganized sector by ActionAid. All these will definitely help the participants in beginning life afresh” opines Nitu.

### Souvik Kar: Aspirations of a Sponsored Child



Patharpratima Block in south 24 Parganas belongs to the Sundarban region which was devastated by super cyclone Aila in 2009. Already disadvantaged with development deficits, the devastation broke the economic backbone of the region.

“Due to dearth of work in the village, my father had already migrated to a different state in search of work, we were left to fend for ourselves” says Souvik Kar a student, who had experienced those trying times. “But Aila further aggravated our predicament” he explains. “I was too young and my mother at that time had to fight hard to make arrangements of two meals” he recalls.

ActionAid was already active in the area through different initiatives aimed at empowering them with awareness and linking people to government schemes and facilities. The need of these initiatives began to be felt more after the natural disaster.

Sundarban Jagaran Mahila Mahasangha (SJMM) was formed with support of ActionAid. Sourav's mother joined the movement. Through constant follow up with appropriate authorities, work under NREGA gradually began to flow in to the village providing the residents much needed relief.

Luckily for Souvik, he was already being provided vital support as a sponsored child under Action Aid Programme since 2007. “It was the support of ActionAid that enabled me to continue my education. But there were other children in Sundarbans who dropped out of school after Aila and joined the work as child labour” he reminisces gracefully.

Sourav did not dishearten his parents and support providers. He continued his academic pursuits diligently and in the Secondary Examinations, he secured second rank among all candidates in the Patharpratima Block.

Apart from academics, he is an active member of the adolescent group of the village supported by ActionAid. The group advocates intensely against child marriage and trafficking.

Souvik, who has seen the struggle of people from Sundarbans since childhood and his aspirations are linked with his experiences. He wants to be a doctor and hopes to open a medical facility in his village which is still deficient of medical facilities.

“I owe my success to the people of my village. Starting a hospital in the area is my way of returning their debt” says Souvik narrating his aspirations.

## PGPS : Raising Demands for Justice & Equality at Home and Work



“We have no rights, no dignity. We are not even allowed to use toilets at households and not given proper treatment. If we are sick and absent for a few days, we lose our job. All this needs to change. We want a contract before we are engaged in a service and hourly pay. We want paid leave and sick leave, apart from bonuses according to government rates,” said Bithika Roy, who has been working as a domestic help for the last 15 years.

“The government should legally recognize us and set up welfare boards. We are a vital part of the household and if we all do not come for work one day, you know what happens?” said Roy.

Challenging traditional relations between employer and employee, domestic workers have started voicing their demands for justice and equality in workplace. And days are not far when a domestic worker would enter into formal agreement with employers – just like any other employee in an organized sector.

This new found awareness is direct fallout of collectivization and joint programme launched under the auspices of Paschimbanga Griha Paricharika Samiti (PGPS) – an association of Domestic workers supported by ActionAid.

As a young organization, the membership has crossed 5000 domestic workers, and this collective strength has given them the confidence to challenge the existing workplace relations to win demands of dignity, respect and justice. Action Aid and its partners have provided material and moral support to the organization beginning with its formation. Let us visit a few of these stories.

Kalpana Poddar from Dhakuria has been working as a domestic worker. Her employer threatened her with dismissal if she missed work due to illness or any other reason.

“I was not treated well and they kept increasing my workload. I wanted a raise as I was working on the same salary for over two years” recalls Taposhi, a woman in her mid forties.



“The employer threatened to dismiss me. At that point I informed them about my membership with PGPS and informed them that I was not alone. Before dismissing they have to give adequate notice period to look for another job” said Taposhi, narrating her experience. “The conviction in my argument forced the employer to increase my monthly remuneration Four monthly holidays were also sanctioned. I feel strong and confident” she said.

“The conviction in my argument forced the employer to increase my monthly remuneration by Rs. 500. Four monthly holidays were also sanctioned. I feel strong and I feel confident” she said.

Association with PGPS has also helped members to extract better work conditions. Nilom Singh, a women in her late fifties, was diagnosed with diabetes and she needed to use the toilet more frequently. As general practice, domestic workers are not allowed to use the toilets in the employers' place and thus Nilom resorted to taking medicine to controll urge to urinate. This began causing damage to her kidney.

“**We are not even allowed to use toilets and treated unfairly All this needs to change. We want a contract before we are engaged in service**”

Nilom Singh shared her problem in the organization. ActionAid conducted awareness workshops about the health ailments they would face in such similar conditions and other health issues. PGPS members accompanied Nilom to visit the employer and share her problem. The interaction was very successful and the employer understood the issue and promised to help. Presently, Singh is undergoing treatment with partial support of the employer. Her health condition is also improving.

”  
**Bithika Roy  
Dhakuria, Kolkata**

In states like Gurajarat, Karnataka domestic workers are recognized. They have welfare boards and fixed minimum wages. In Bengal they are demanding these benefits .

In addition to workplace condition, ActionAid has been conducting awareness and training workshops for PGPS members on issues like accessing legal aid free of cost for victims of domestic violence.

“We are now aware of Domestic Violence Act in our state and the authority to be approached to seek redressal” says Bithika. “We are even aware about process of filing First Information Report at police station for complaint” she adds.

The collective effort of women's organization has been successful in reducing incidences of domestic violence in the community. Men are also encouraged to join the meetings in order to promote mutual understanding and dialogue – thereby promoting resolution of disputes through peaceful means.



## Joyshree Mahali : Sharing Experience - Motivating Peers

“My suspicion was converted to strong belief when I heard this man speak to his accomplice” says Joyshree. “They were discussing my transfer to Delhi, where I would be sold off for a handsome amount. I was shocked, but still did not lose courage and kept on the hunt for a scope to access his mobile phone.” she recalls her harrowing experience.

Yes, Joyshree was brave enough to maintain presence of mind and on the first chance of accessing the mobile phone of his abductor, she contacted Childline to seek assistance for rescue. Childline mobilized resources and one of the Midnapore partners of ActionAid became involved in the operations that ended successfully with her rescue.

“I remembered the helpline number of Childline that was given to us during an awareness campaign organized in our school. I took part in the quiz competition under “Beti Zindabad” campaign and also was awarded a prize” remembers Joyshree. I forgot all about the program but, the number was somehow etched in my mind. That saved me on that fateful day” says a grateful Joyshree.

Joyshree's ordeal began with her discovery that the intense financial duress of the family could cause discontinuation of her education. She desperately searched for a part time job – but to no avail. At this point of time a stranger offered her a job for two months in town in lieu of handsome remuneration. She naively followed the person and found herself trapped in a house in Kharagpur for four days with imminent risk of being sold off. Luckily for Joyshree Mahali, the 17 years old from Sankrail Block, West Midnapore, the local police including SDPO intervened as she was rescued.

However, her struggles did not end with the rescue and restoration her family. As a student of Class IX, she is no longer considered as a child in her society. Spending four nights outside home with unknown men attracted immense social stigma. This coupled with the trauma associated with the experience of a trafficking victim further broke down the girl. She was also required to attend legal proceedings as witness as her parents already registered FIR and police was trying to arrest the accused. To make things worse, acute poverty in the family, the root cause leading to the incidence was still unaddressed.

ActionAid maintained close touch with the girl and provided continuous and comprehensive support services to Joyshree and her family. The leaders of the community alliance formed under auspices of ActionAid also extended vital support in ensuring her reintegration into the society.





All members of the family were provided psychological counseling to help them overcome the trauma. An interface was organized with local Panchayat to link the family members with MGNREGA work and help them explore other livelihood opportunities to support that family and the education of the girl. A lawyer was appointed for legal support in the case registered under Immoral Trafficking Prevention Act.

ActionAid continued its advocacy and campaign initiatives in the village on the issues of child marriage and trafficking. Community members were mobilized to form a task force to prevent such incidences. Through constant engagement, involvement of local police, PRI members and school teachers were ensured in the task force thus making it effective.

Meanwhile, Joyshree resolved to share her experience with other adolescents. She became one of the ambassadors of awareness on trafficking and began playing a crucial role in the campaign. Her deliberation in group meetings helped reduce the stigma of trafficked girls and motivated her peers to join the campaign against child marriage and trafficking.

“I joined in the 'Beti Zindabad' campaign where we received training on leadership, preventive mechanisms to resist trafficking, child marriage and other discriminatory practices” informs a resplendent Joyshree. “Now my efforts are directed towards empowering my fellow village girls by leveraging this opportunity provided by ActionAid and disseminating relevant information about existing beneficial schemes while making them raise their voice against child marriage and trafficking” she elucidates.

As a student of class XI and an active leader, Joyshree motivates and encourages girls from her community to fight against all the discrimination against girls and women. She leads by example. She participated in the school level football tournament in an attempt to break stereotype gender roles and encouraged other girls to join in.

From one to many - the torch of awareness and empowerment spreads out. The resolve and commitment demonstrated by Joyshree and many others like her have helped to create a movement in the villages against social evils. The transformation in life of a single individual has in turn lightened up the innumerable souls.

“

**I wish to share my experience and make other girls aware of the effects of these social evils so that they can also resist these practices.**

”

**Joyshree Mahali  
Sankrail, West Midnapore**

## Tuktuki Khatun: Encouraged by President for Resisting Early Marriage



“Voicing the first opposition was extremely difficult. My parents are orthodox and believes that only way of leading a secured life for a woman is through marriage” said Tuktuki Khatun, the 15 years old from Murshidabad, who was congratulated by the President of India for her efforts in resisting child marriage in her community.

“When I first protested, my father became very angry and slapped me. But that did not weaken my resolve. I continue to protest” Tuktuki continued. “At the end I narrated the whole incident to the Adolescent Reflect Circle supported by ActionAid” she says.

The members of the circle led by Tuktuki’s friend Anjara Khatun went to meet Tuktuki’s parents and discuss the issue. “The meeting remained unsuccessful as my parents remained adamant. The next day was scheduled for visit of the family of the groom to finalize marriage plans” she said.

Meanwhile, the members of the Adolescent reflect circle informed the District Social Welfare Officer of the incident, who in turn mobilized Police support and stopped the marriage.

“In the groups we learnt about ill effects of child marriage and early pregnancy” said Tuktuki. “We learn to mobilize support and resist pressure from family in order to ensure our future” she added.

The act of tremendous courage of this teenager to resist and win against social pressures was acknowledged by the then President of India. On January 2015, Tuktuki along with another girls from Murshidabad, Munija Khatun was invited to the Presidential Palace in New Delhi and the first citizen of the country congratulated them for their effort and urged them to keep the flag flying high.

“It was a life changing experience for girls like us who had never traveled outside our village” said Tuktuki expressing her emotions. “The President spoke to us with a lot of warmth and encouraged us” she recalled. “The accolade in turn have encouraged many more girls to the practice”

Anjara and the other girls in the Adolescent Reflect Circle have made it a point to intervene in any case of attempted child marriage in the village.

“Everybody including my mother is happy for me. But my father is still angry. It was the first time that something happened in the household contrary to his opinion. I suppose he will take some time and understand that times are changing” she hopes.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

ActionAid Association wishes to acknowledge the contribution of the following partner organizations for their support in making these stories of transformation worth sharing and also for the developing this compendium. The organizations and associated stories are:

<b>Makhu Hembram</b>	<b>Surul Centre for Services in Rural Area (CSRA)</b>
<b>Kanaklata Murmu</b>	<b>Jamgaria Sevabrata</b>
<b>Mariam Toppa</b>	<b>Gitaldaha Bikash Samity</b>
<b>Swapna Sardar</b>	<b>Digambarpur Angikar</b>
<b>Tuktuki Mondal</b>	<b>The Calcutta Samaritans</b>
<b>Tapashi Moira</b>	<b>SRISTY for Human Society</b>
<b>Halima Khatun</b>	<b>Paschim Bango Muslim Mahila Sangathan facilitated by Bagmari Mother and Child Development Mission (BMCDM)</b>
<b>Sumit Dundung</b>	<b>Rural Aid</b>
<b>Rakhi Thapa</b>	<b>GODHULIBAZAR NORTH EAST SOCIETY FOR EMPOWERMENT OF THE PEOPLE (G-NESEP)</b>
<b>Nitu Das-</b>	<b>The Calcutta Samaritans</b>
<b>Souvik Kar</b>	<b>Digambarpur Angikar</b>
<b>PGPS-</b>	<b>Paschim Bango Griha Paricharika Samity- Sramik Sahayata Kendra –Consortium of three NGOs- Sristy For Human Society , SPAN and Pratikar</b>
<b>Joyshree Mahali</b>	<b>Suchetana</b>
<b>Tuktuki Khatun</b>	<b>Association for Social and Health Advancement ASHA)</b>

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