



SINGLE, YES BUT NOT ALONE

A tale of strength
through solidarity

SINGLE, YES... BUT NOT ALONE

Dedicated to the memory of Uma Joshi who laid the foundation for *Ekal Nari Shakti Manch* to give voice to single women during the relief and rehabilitation work in the 2001 Gujarat earthquake. She also organised the disabled forum and a forum for human rights.

Her work lives on, drawing strength from her courage and vision...

Ekal Nari Shakti Manch

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ActionAid is a global social organisation working in India since 1972 with a mission to end poverty, patriarchy and injustice, and to ensure that every person enjoys the right to life with dignity. Every year, in partnership with over 300 grassroots organisations and networks, **ActionAid India** reaches out to over 6 million people from marginalized and socially excluded communities belonging to 25 states and 1 Union Territory of the country. Its efforts are dedicated towards building a sustainable and socially just future, built by the people and for people.

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When good work is done, they say we all have done it

- Lao Tzu

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FOREWORD

ActionAid has been working with single women for around two decades now, organising and empowering them for claiming their rights and entitlements. It is important to mention here that ActionAid's initial understanding on the plight of single women emerged in a rather unanticipated manner, out of its humanitarian intervention in response to the *Super Cyclone* in 1999 in Jagatsinghpur, Odisha, and then the 2001 Gujarat quake. It is in Gujarat that we deepened our work with single women. ActionAid was there at *Ground Zero* almost immediately after the earthquake to respond to the relief and rehabilitation needs of those affected. A disaster response collective titled '*Sneh Samuday*' (translating to English as 'Caring Community') was formed, whose initial objective was to protect the rights of the most vulnerable – children without adult protection, single women, disabled people and the elderly abandoned. The *Samuday* ensured their rehabilitation by strengthening their capacity to care within communities and also to access rights, including State relief. After sometime, the *Samuday* evolved into three verticals, one of which was for single women. It was named '*Ekal Nari Shakti Manch*'. In the years to come, this *Manch* played a critical role in the formation of a national-level organisation, i.e. the *National Forum for Single Women's Rights*. Today, this Forum is a formidable force, influencing national policies in favor of single women. Its footprints can be traced from the 12th Plan to the *National Policy for Women – 2016*.

The following pages attempt to capture the long journey that the *Manch* has travelled ever since it was born... the journey that was full of challenges and also achievements... with single women and for single women!

Insights that ActionAid gained from this work also had a huge influence on its overall thinking and programmatic direction. Single women became an important part of the organisation's gender lens. Over the next pages, you would also see glimpses of the consistent efforts of ActionAid India and its various ally organisations towards ensuring rights, entitlements and a life of dignity for single women in diverse contexts – such as the Muslim women served *Triple Talaq*, the wives of farmers who committed suicide in Maharashtra, the wives of men who have disappeared in Kashmir, the landless single women in Odisha, the single fisher-women in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh, the women branded as "witches" in Madhya Pradesh, the homeless single women and the deserted tribal women in Andhra Pradesh etc.

Needless to mention, policy advocacy at all levels on single women's issues and

their rights has been an important component of ActionAid's efforts all through. For ActionAid India, the definition of single women goes beyond the conventional and includes all widowed, divorced and separated women (all ages), and the never-married women (18 years and above). ActionAid is acutely aware that single women are extremely vulnerable on all fronts – social (within family and outside), economic, political and cultural. We believe that strengthening the position of single women strengthens all women as it makes possible options outside an oppressive home or marriage.

Single women constitute nearly 15% of the total female population in India and their proportion among women has been growing fast since the Census in 2001. The population of women has increased by 18.3% in the latest Census (2011), but that of single women increased by 39.11% in the same years. Likewise, the number of never-married women above the age of 35 has seen a 66% increase.

Taking forward its advocacy efforts, ActionAid India, in the month of June, 2016, in collaboration with the *National Forum for Single Women's Rights*, held intense deliberations around the *Draft National Policy for Women – 2016* (released by the *Ministry of Women and Child Development*, Government of India) with a specific focus on single women's issues. The demands and suggestions emerging from there were then submitted as concrete recommendations to the Ministry.

Single women today are a powerful force in India. Their politics and strength expressed in the form of the National Forum, and advance holds immense promise. And ActionAid India stands firmly with them in solidarity with their struggle for justice and dignity.

The road ahead for single women undoubtedly is not going to be an easy one! But then, haven't there been challenges in the journey traversed thus far! And then, haven't we seen them crossing all those, and bravely so, hand in hand with each other, towards a better future! Yes, a better future awaits us all. And each effort on this front is taking us a step closer to that better future.

Sandeep Chachra
Executive Director
ActionAid India

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We are extremely delighted to present to you this publication, comprehensively documenting the struggles and successes of numerous powerful women... the women who may be single but are not alone! And towards making this huge effort possible, our special thanks are due towards the following comrades and colleagues:

Ginny Shrivastava, a renowned social activist, for her continued support to our work with single women and endorsement of the same which also forms part of this document;

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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

AA	<i>ActionAid</i>
AIDS	<i>Acquired Immuno-Deficiency Syndrome</i>
APDP	<i>Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons</i>
ARUN	<i>Association for Rural and Urban Needy</i>
ASDS	<i>Agriculture and Social Development Society</i>
BMMA	<i>Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan</i>
CBO	<i>Community-Based Organisation</i>
CEDAW	<i>Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women</i>
CRPD	<i>Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities</i>
CWS	<i>Centre for World Solidarity</i>
ENSM	<i>Ekal Nari Shakti Manch</i>
FIR	<i>First Information Report</i>
FLLRC	<i>Forum for securing Lives and Livelihoods Rights of Coastal communities</i>
GO	<i>Government Order</i>
GSAPS	<i>Gujarat State AIDS Prevention Society</i>
HDI	<i>Human Development Index</i>
HIV	<i>Human Immuno-deficiency Virus</i>
IAY	<i>Indira Awas Yojana</i>
ICDS	<i>Integrated Child Development Services</i>
IEC	<i>Information, Education and Communication</i>
IMHANS	<i>Institute of Mental Health And Neuro-Sciences</i>
IPC	<i>Indian Penal Code</i>
J&K	<i>Jammu and Kashmir</i>
LAM	<i>Lok Adhikar Manch</i>
MDMS	<i>Mid-Day Meal Scheme</i>
MGNREGA	<i>Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act</i>
NAC	<i>Notified Area Council</i>

NGO	<i>Non-Governmental Organisation</i>
NREGA	<i>National Rural Employment Guarantee Act</i>
PDS	<i>Public Distribution System</i>
PTSD	<i>Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder</i>
RENAM	<i>Rashtriya Ekal Nari Adhikar Manch</i>
RTI	<i>Right To Information Act</i>
SDO	<i>Sub-Divisional Officer</i>
SHG	<i>Self-Help Group</i>
SLL	<i>Special and Local Laws</i>
UN	<i>United Nations</i>
UNICEF	<i>United Nations Children's Fund</i>
VAS	<i>Viklang Adhikar Sanghatan</i>
WGWLO	<i>Women's Group on Women and Land Ownership</i>

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The wholesale kite *bazaar* of Ahmedabad, Gujarat, with its narrow alleys that allow for only single-file walking, is sparkling and brightly lit. It is close to 9 PM but all shops are open and buzzing with activity. Naseema (*name changed*) is fearlessly walking home through the busy streets despite the late hour. Recollecting, she says, “I couldn’t have done this a few years ago. I used to be scared to venture out of my house alone even in the day, for fear that I would be misjudged or that people would gossip about me, given that I am single and vulnerable. But my life is a changed one today. I’m not afraid of the world anymore. I believe in my own inner strength.”

This transformation in Naseema’s life has been possible because of her participation in the *Ekal Nari Shakti Manch* (ENSM), a movement of single women facilitated by ActionAid India.

Naseema’s life-story is characterised by pain and suffering. Married off at a young age, she gave birth to a daughter shortly after. Her husband and in-laws unleashed violence on her after this. “They were so angry that I gave birth to a girl that they took her away from me and did not even allow me to feed her. I remember pleading with them to let me see my baby at least to feed her, but they were unyielding. As months went by, things got worse. I was continuously beaten, battered and abused,” recalls Naseema, displaying the wounds that might have healed but have left deep scars, not just on her body but on her psyche as well. She then left her marital home and returned to her parents. Life as a single woman was one of misery and stigma. But she continued to endure it, thinking it was her lot and in the hope that things might change one day.

But her cup of woe was not yet full. Before she could come to terms with the fact that she might never be able to see her daughter again, the riots of 2002 took place. She shudders at the memories of one terror-filled night when her life was to yet again take a turn, making her wonder whether she was born just to suffer. “That night, when the riots broke out, all members of my family ran in different directions. I ran to my neighbour’s house for protection because I had grown up there and was very close to them. I was

sure they would help. But that night, when I sought refuge at their home, the same person who I considered my brother assaulted me sexually and physically. His father urged him on. Were these the same people I knew?” she wonders.

She somehow escaped and reached a relief camp that had been set up at a short distance from her house. She was reunited with her family there. Even after over a decade since the riots, Naseema shudders and recalls, “My husband, my neighbours, my in-laws – each of them in turns contributed to making my life unliveable simply because I am a woman. My single status made my problems even more severe. I even contemplated suicide while I was in the camp and was almost insane with grief. But today, we, the women of ENSM, have learnt how to fight back. There is strength when people come together and today, I know I have my own place in society which no one can take away. When I return home alone like I’m doing tonight, my neighbours respect me rather than looking down on me, because they know I must have been out on some urgent work.” Her eyes shine with courage and strength when she says this.

FINDING HER OWN FEET...

Naseema has been able to successfully challenge and silence the forces that had come together under the garb of society to fill her life with violence and terror. The same society that had once deprived her, today respects her rights as a woman and approaches her for advice and help. Naseema too ensures she is available to answer every call for help.

As she strides purposefully towards her house, we, the readers, need to journey on and look deeper into the world of single women, and how ENSM achieved the impossible. It turns out to be a very challenging one but at the same time, also one that transforms our perceptions of single women being helpless and dependent on male-dominated society.





SINGLE WOMEN IN INDIA

Although gradually changing for the better, a large section of the Indian society is still influenced by the patriarchal order. This is so since gender disparities have been deeply ingrained in the fabric of Indian society. The dictates of a text as ancient as the *Manu Smriti* (the most important and most studied ancient legal text among the many *Dharmasastras* of Hinduism) impinge negatively on the human rights of women¹. A woman is seen as having identity only under the shadow of her father, husband or son. She is not allowed to own property. Even divorce and remarriage are considered as taboos. According to a verse in the *Manu Smriti*, "... a woman is not capable of living independently..." and therefore, "... she is to be kept under the custody of her father as a child, under her husband as a woman and under her son as a widow...". She has no life of her own.

There is a clear dis-equilibrium in the human development of males and females, starting right from their birth. Well, gender disparities start to hound women even before they are born, with India registering high rates of female foeticide and infanticide.

According to the 1991 Census, there were 945 girls for every 1000 boys. In 2001, the number dropped to 927 girls per 1000 boys. In 2011, the number came down further to 919 girls for every 1000 boys. The major cause of fall in the female birth ratio in India is considered to be the violent treatments meted out to girl children both before and after their birth².

The commodification of women's life is visible from the fact that there is a profitable market of sex-selective abortions in India, and that foetal sex determination and sex-selective abortions by unethical medical professionals has today grown into a Rs. 1,000 crore industry³.

A woman continues to face violence at every stage of her life continuing right up till her death in a variety of forms as domestic violence, sexual harassment, rape and discrimination at various levels.

Nationally, 8% of married women have been subjected to sexual violence, such as forced sex, 31% of married women have been physically abused in a way defined as 'less severe', such as slapping or punching, while 10% have suffered 'severe domestic violence', such as burning or attack with a weapon. Also, 12% of those who report being physically abused also report at least one of the following injuries as a result of the violence: bruises, injury, sprains, dislocation or burns, wounds, broken bones or broken teeth and/or severe burns. With regard to emotional abuse, 14% of Indian women will have experienced this at some point in their lives⁴.

A total of 3,37,922 cases of crime against women [both under various sections of IPC (*Indian Penal Code*) and SLL (*Special and Local Laws*)] were reported in the country during 2014. These crimes have continuously increased during 2010-2014 with 2,13,585 cases reported in 2010, which increased to 2,28,649 cases in 2011, further increasing to 2,44,270 cases in 2012 and 3,09,546 cases in 2013.

In addition, the literacy rates between men and women have always been skewed because women are denied education and the opportunity to eke out their livelihoods. Male members control the family economy while women's work continues to be either underpaid or not paid at all. All these have led to the feminisation of poverty in India.

Moving on to the status of women in our 'Temple of Democracy', i.e. the Parliament, the situation is no better either. Women have a poor 11% representation in the *Lok Sabha* and 10.6% in the *Rajya Sabha*⁵.

The primary identity of an Indian, male or female, is citizenship whose basic definition offers a promise of quality and justice within the nation's democratic constitutional framework. Repeatedly however, this promise is undermined by the masculinity of nationalist ideology, the fiction of citizenship and the malleability of law. Instead of offering an alternative space, the nation often simply functions as an extension of the family, caste, and community structures, and defines women as belonging in the same way as their structures. This definition of belonging is contradictory, implying both "affiliated with" and "owned by." The first interpretation connotes voluntary, participatory membership; the second a secondary, functionalist and symbolic status. And both are constantly overlooked because social and political order is defined through women's ownership by and place in structures of family and community⁶.

As we can see, the basic human rights of women are repeatedly violated and a woman's rightful place in the society, be it legal, social or any other, is denied to her. Her health, nutrition, education and livelihood needs are neglected. She has to constantly fight for access to even her basic needs.

Further on, talking of the plight of women who are single, life has been and still continues to be one of further struggle, humiliation and deprivation. We keep hearing stories of widows even in the present day being forcibly sent to holy places to live out their days in prayer, frugal meals and misery for the rest of their lives. Mathura, Vrindavan and Varanasi, the holy cities of India, host thousands of such widows who are abandoned and deserted by their families. These women are bereft of their rights to property (marital as well as parental), family and other citizenship rights.

Well, such practices are visible in every religion and society of India, with Muslim women being no exception either. Widows there are forced to observe *iddat*⁷ post widowhood which inflicts untold horrors on them. The process of *talaq* (divorce) too, as is well-known, is loaded against the woman. A widow, by the diktat of religion, is not allowed to remarry, wear colourful *sarees*/clothes and *bindis*, or participate in any social or religious

ceremonies. She is considered to be "not complete without a husband" to participate in any activity that is auspicious in nature.

Before we delve deeper into the world of single women, it is extremely important to understand that single women are not a homogenous category. Beginning with the local diversity in which they are located, single women are found in several vulnerable contexts in our society, and belong to different categories – widows, unmarried, separated, disabled, divorced, abandoned and deserted. And because of this diversity, the issues they are burdened with are diverse too. For example, the problems of farm widows are different from those of the widows of fishermen who die while at sea, and the issues of widows in conflict-torn areas are different from those of the widows affected/infected with HIV. The stigma, derision and disrespect, however, are common across the spectrum. All of them, without any exception, face the same fate at the hands of the society and the government alike.

Given the diversity of issues faced by each category of single women, there cannot be one single policy to take care of the needs and rights of all single women. Their issues are part of a complex web, the threads of which touch the social, political and economic fibre of our society, and have historical and traditional roots. Unfortunately, they are generally lost in the maze of women's rights in general when they should, in reality, be an integral, yet distinctly visible part of the women's rights discourse.

A report titled '*Are We Forgotten Women?*' released by the *National Forum for Single Women's Rights* looks at the challenges of being a single woman in the present-day India. It begins with social myths and misbeliefs, elaborating on how single women are victims of superstitions that brand them as witches and harbingers of bad luck and misfortune to the villages or the localities they live in, such as droughts, famines, epidemics etc. The report points to the severe challenges that single women face while accessing inheritance rights, housing, social security schemes, maintenance, custody etc.

This unacceptable situation surprisingly prevails even in an age of progress, and while India is aiming to stand up and be counted as one of the world's largest growing economies. Paradoxically, this situation exists in a societal culture where women are traditionally regarded as manifestations of divinity.

Stemming from the inferior position accorded to single women is also their lack of adequate economic security, which is a result of their lack of capability to earn sustainable livelihoods. Single women's issues perfectly hold up the hypothesis that what is not recognized is ignored.

Politically too, single women are a marginalised group. The concept of single women as women needing distinct and holistic support is conspicuous by its complete absence. That single women are individuals in their own right is not recognized politically. There is absence of political discussions on the plight and rights of single women. The lack of a policy climate in their favour is equally stark. Clear policy articulations – taking cognizance of the myriad of contexts in which single women are located, the challenges faced by them and their rights – are the need of the hour.

Ginny Shrivastava, a national-level leader and a social activist championing the rights of single women, throws light on the lack of adequate recognition of single women and the ongoing efforts for a clear definition for single women. She says, "It has been our (i.e. the activists working on the rights of single women) consistent demand that the government must define the term, 'single women', in a manner that all single women, and not just widows, can avail all benefits of pensions, child support, housing, skill training etc. The category, 'unmarried', also has to be defined as a woman who has not married till the age of 35 and might be likely to remain single. We need a category of 'never married'. The definition of a single woman must be 'a woman who is not living with another person in a marriage or marriage-like relationship'. This definition must address common-law relationships as well as a lesbian without a partner." She further adds, "Even where divorced women have a court divorce certificate, the reality is

that husbands do not pay. In the case of separated women, it is difficult to prove that separated women are indeed separated. In Rajasthan, there is a procedure where the *patwari*, the *Gram Panchayat* secretary and one more person must submit in writing to the SDO (*Sub-Divisional Officer*) that the woman is living separated from her husband for more than three years, and the woman should be given a certificate that she is separated. It is only by displaying this certificate that she can get her monthly pension."

Dr. Amrita Patel, an academic and a women's rights activist, emphasising on the need to have clarity in the definition of single women, says, "The notion of who exactly is a single woman is deeply embedded in patriarchal norms and social practice. Single women are faced with vulnerabilities on the primary situation that they don't have a man with them."

"If a woman is married and then she is either deserted or abandoned or divorced, she is taken as a single woman and also if the husband is missing or dead, the nomenclature of single woman is used. But clarity in definition is lacking. In many single women movements in India, widows are the ones who have led the movement. Never-married women face the most harsh social stigma and ostracization. But the policy framework recognises the never-married women as another separate family unit only after they are above a particular age. The position of "adult women", irrespective of marital status, has to be theorised as well as put in schematic provisions. Counting the single women with clear definition is the first step. The ambiguities in definition need to be sorted out in policy and thereby, in schemes. The entitlements framework in the country is basically based on the concept of "family" as a unit and thereby, bypasses the single women," she adds.

ActionAid and its ally organisations in several states of India have set out to change the situation. The narratives in the succeeding sections are all about how the social capital and the politics for their rights were built by single women themselves in Gujarat, through ActionAid's support, in a journey that began in 2001.



SOME UNANTICIPATED INSIGHTS

ActionAid's understanding on the plight of single women in India was not the result of any studies or formal analysis. It emerged in a rather unanticipated, yet deeply evocative manner out of ActionAid's intervention to provide humanitarian support in Kutch, Gujarat, after the earthquake in 2001.

The earthquake that had struck Kutch brought about widespread loss of life and property, killing between 13,805 and 20,023 people, injuring another 1,67,000 and destroying nearly 4,00,000 homes⁸. ActionAid was on the ground immediately after the quake. It identified the most vulnerable groups and communities to work with, and those were women, children, disabled and the elderly from marginalised groups such as *Dalits*, Muslims and tribals.

A community of care entitled '*Sneh Samuday*' was established as a social organisation for responding to the relief and rehabilitation needs of earthquake-affected people in 194 villages of Bhuj, Anjar, Rapar, Bachau and Gandhidham *taluks* of Kutch. *Sneh Samuday* was the name given to the disaster response collective to indicate a *Caring Community* for camaraderie. Social cleavages were to be broken, and the vulnerable and marginalised had to build solidarity and strength to face the situation that was full of challenges. It needed to transcend gender, age, caste and religious barriers. The objectives of *Sneh Samuday* at its inception were to protect the rights of the most vulnerable survivors of the earthquake – children without adult protection, single women (including widows), disabled people and the elderly abandoned or not cared for by families. *Sneh Samuday* worked to ensure the best possible rehabilitation for them by strengthening their capacity to care within communities and also to access rights, especially relief from the State.

In due course, *Sneh Samuday* progressed into the formation of three verticals

namely *Lok Adhikar Manch* (LAM) – to look into the rights of the marginalised communities in quake-affected villages, *Viklang Adhikar Sanghathan* (VAS) – an organisation of disabled people to address their rights, and *Ekal Nari Shakti Manch* – to enable the women who are single to fight for their human rights.

more questions than answers

The community had been severely traumatised by the catastrophe, and grief and sorrow had engulfed entire families, rendering them incapable of functioning normally. In any state of distress, it is a known fact that children are the worst affected, followed by women. And this was true in Kutch too.

ActionAid's work in the villages, therefore, began with the setting up of day-care centres for women and children (as part of *Sneh Samuday*) as non-threatening spaces for them to visit and avail assistance from. For this, locally available spaces were identified and converted into day-care centres where women and children were encouraged to come and spend their days. Food as well as trauma counselling were provided to them through the centres.

However, day-care centres were not the sole objective of the intervention. It was rather a strategy to gain entry into the communities for other activities as well. AA envisaged reaching out to the unreached through these day-care centres to ensure they were not left out of the rehabilitation processes and that they get their rightful dues, just like any other community members.

Quite unexpectedly, these day-care centres eventually went on to become live hubs of learning for both ActionAid as well as the community. The wealth of information that emerged from these hubs was to set a path for ActionAid which it had not traversed before. Through in-depth

conversations, and interactions between women and counsellors, and among the women themselves who shared their plight with each other, a hidden yet horrific social problem came to the fore. Much in the way of peeling layers of skin off an onion, ActionAid teams on the ground unravelled the realities that single women lived with.

And the power of the process lay in the fact that there were no deliberate attempts to make the women speak, more so since the problem itself was not known. It used to be some stray conversations most often that would spark off debates and discussions.

While the problems of women in general were already known to a large extent, what emerged starkly from this process was the harsh reality of India's single women, something that the ActionAid teams were in many ways unprepared for. The quake, by rendering thousands of women single, had exposed the underbelly of the patriarchal society of India which inflicts severe injustices on single women, marginalises and subjugates them, and dominates their every move. The unjust system within which they live ensures their voices are stifled and as a result, they cannot protest.

While this problem was not new, the earthquake had merely exposed it in all its ugliness. The tremors had not only torn the earth asunder but had also added numbers to the already existing large community of single women, and had ripped open a façade which showed the world in all its stark harshness and the real plight of the already existing large community of single women in India. This included among others, severe issues of exclusion, tyranny and deprivation.

ActionAid was to be faced with the somewhat astounding reality that the life of a single woman in India is one that is unprotected by society, unrecognized adequately by law and completely ignored by policy. And when poverty is added to this situation, the life of a single woman is one that is totally sans any kind of social security net. The other understanding was that even the little recognition that was accorded to single women was

limited to widows. This was established by the fact that the only allowance granted to single women by policy is widow pension. By inference, this means that only widows are regarded as single women while the Kutch experience had revealed several other categories besides widows, each with their own attendant needs and issues – unmarried, divorced, deserted or separated, who had neither societal nor constitutional recognition or identity, and yet were in need of both.

The day-care centres of Kutch, therefore, that were envisaged as places that women could come to for getting relief, paradoxically created a conundrum for ActionAid teams and opened up much wider issues. What had begun as a relief and rehabilitation programme threw up several unexpected issues that the community was looking to ActionAid to solve, even as they emerged. Single women were under intense scrutiny of an essentially patriarchal society, a society that was hitherto isolated from any influence of progressive social thinking and modernity. While on the one hand, they were policed more vigorously in the name of protection, on the other, they were more vulnerable to all forms of exploitation, including sexual exploitation, often from their own families and immediate community. They were deprived of their rights to property, entitlements and status, and were at the mercy of *jati panchayats*⁹ and other “conscience-keepers” of the society who made decisions about their well-being or the lack of it. In Kutch, women had been victims of domestic violence, sexual abuse, child marriage and forced asceticism post widowhood.

The discussions also raised expectations. ActionAid had long since moved from being a service-based organisation to a rights-based one. That they were engaged in providing services was an immediate humanitarian response and not one that they could continue indefinitely. And yet, the needs of the community were vast and genuine, especially the needs of single women who came to avail assistance, and whose needs went far beyond food, shelter and clothing.

an unjust world | split wide open

The quake had rendered thousands homeless. While the government swiftly put in relief and rehabilitation processes, international relief was also pouring into Gujarat, almost in a deluge. But this, in no way, ensured that relief was assured or equitable for everyone. Discrimination ruled the day, and the privileged classes cornered all the relief while the backward classes, those that ActionAid was working with, were deprived of all relief. Their losses and damages were not even assessed accurately. This resulted in inadequate or no compensation for them. Even in cases where compensation was given, women were kept deprived, with their families usurping all benefits, and in several cases, even driving the women out of their homes.

The reasons for this were evident. Kutch is a highly caste-ridden society and the region is dominated by the *Darbars*, considered to be the highest in caste hierarchy after the *Brahmins*. They are followed by the *Patels*, *Jains* and *Ahirs*. *Dalits*, *Kolis*, *Vaghris*, *Paradhis*, Muslims and above all, single women (who overarch all the communities) are the most oppressed and worst-affected groups.

These groups are dependent on daily wage labour with some of them also engaged in sheep and goat rearing. They live mostly in remote hamlets called *vandhs* which are not officially recognized by the revenue department and thus, are deprived of electricity, safe drinking water, schools, health centres and even PDS (*Public Distribution System*) centres.

According to Ravi SK from ActionAid, “Barring *Dalit* representatives in the reserved seats in *Gram Panchayats*, these marginalised communities did not participate in local governance systems. Well, on the ground, even these representatives from marginalised communities did not amount to much. Most of them were unaware of the complexities of governance, and hence were dominated, side-lined or threatened by the dominant caste politicians and leaders. And if that wasn't enough, the earthquake hit and further marginalised them. Since their ability to claim rights to relief and rehabilitation was already weak in an exploitative society, ActionAid had to

focus on organising them.”

With this scenario, Kutch provided a dynamic ground to start the social transformation process with all the challenges and social complexities abound. Since the marginalised needed to be organised, the idea of an overarching platform namely the *Lok Adhikar Manch* was born with an aim of deepening governance and people's power over all matters concerning them. And *Sneh Samuday* was to provide the spirit of working together and caring for each other.

The most marginalised among the marginalised, disabled people and single women too had to be mobilised and capacitated to understand rights and to internalise the spirit and courage that rights education must bring in. Women who were single were organised into the *Ekal Nari Shakti Manch*.

There had already been efforts in the country to understand and address the issues of widows and single women on the ground through a policy response by Jean Dreze, Martha Chen, Leela Gulati and Ginny Shrivastava in Rajasthan – a path-breaking work of organising single women into collectives. The *Ekal Nari Shakti Manch* in its early stages learnt a lot from their work.

caring for single women

The day-care centres were being viewed with hope by the community of single women as one-stop centres that could not only give them daily needs such as food and clothing, but also help them get back on their feet. In many ways, these expectations provided ActionAid the logic and the rationale to stay back even after the relief operations came to an end. What remained to be done was strongly related to human rights issues and directly in line with ActionAid's approach, i.e. taking sides with the poor and the marginalised.

Change is never easy and in this case, ActionAid had been compelled to recognize that it was dealing with a community that was completely

disempowered. The rights-based approach would take time to resonate in the community, accustomed as they were to situations of suppression and tyranny. They were apathetic and resigned to their way of life and did not hope for any better. It was extremely difficult to talk of rights to these demotivated communities. They were initially looking to ActionAid only to 'give' them relief, and it was to take very long for them to understand the difference between dole and rights.

The opportunities that it offered to ActionAid, however, and the potential that the space held for change were invaluable; it opened up opportunities for advocacy in the voice of women themselves. It opened a powerful road to change but a road that was long and arduous since it meant changing the mind-sets, attitudes and behaviour, and not only in the larger community but also among women themselves. It meant strengthening and educating the women to understand and demand their rights. It meant building capacity in women to understand complex concepts as policy, democracy, human rights etc. and putting them to work for their own good. And it also meant devising simple methods to do this as the community was largely unlettered. The task was undoubtedly tough but it had to be done because the community was demanding it.

Women were faced with issues of access to earthquake relief with some male member of the family trying to take control of it. They did not know how to get it from the State; or how to claim the property of the husband. They were observing taboos associated with widowhood, facing violence within the family, looking after dependent children, dealing with the trauma of loss of husband, parents etc. But they had no voice, no exposure to the outside world and to government systems. They could not be mere recipients of State and NGO (*Non-Governmental Organisation*) relief work. Instead, they had to play an active role in rebuilding their lives – inter alia, redefining their own life.

Since women had to be organised, the *Ekal Nari Shakti Manch* in its rudimentary stage tried to enlist women through a process of deeper

discussion. The mobilisation, thus, made its beginning from the one-stop centres.

a movement waiting to happen

Data points to the severity of the problem of single women. According to the 2011 Census, women form 48.9% (587 million) of India's 1.2 billion population; out of which 73 million are single women (forming 21% of India's population and 12% of the female's). There is a 40% increase in the number of single women in India as compared to the last Census figures, with numbers rising from 51.2 million in 2001 to 73 million in 2011. This includes widows, divorcees and unmarried women, and those deserted by husbands.

In terms of numbers, widowed women lead the single women category followed by those who never married.

An article points out that "... single women in India outnumber the population of Canada. The women as counted by the census represent those who are legally divorced, separated and widowed. There is no official estimate of abandoned, deserted and unmarried women, multitudes of whom live invisibly, often at the mercy of callous family customs and beyond the reach of public welfare."¹⁰

However, the civil society space as well as the political space for issues of single women were largely empty. And what ActionAid did in Kutch was to but sow the seed for a movement by bringing single women together and spotlighting their issues. It was already apparent that there was a grave need for such a movement. The earthquake was but the catalyst that ignited the spark for it. It was also furthering the mission work of ActionAid, that of working with women and girl children for assertion of their rights as human rights. The Kutch work received additional impetus, therefore, as women's rights being the larger mission. And the rapidity with which it spread, the response that it received from the aggrieved, single women who had

discovered immense strength within themselves to take it forward just reinforced what ENSM was waiting for to happen.

the seed is sown | single women come into their own

Hansa Ben Rathore wears her hair short and sports a large, bright red *bindi* on her forehead. She walks with a spring in her step; her eyes are bright and active. Her face, however, turns sombre when she recalls the day of the earthquake with a shudder, “It was early in the morning and my husband, who was an accountant, had gone to check on a construction he was overseeing. I was washing clothes outside my house; my 9-month old son was asleep in the house. I suddenly felt the earth trembling and rumbling.” Tears spill out of her eyes even a decade after the earthquake destroyed her life, “I stood up unsteadily, knowing something was very wrong and ran into the house to pick up my son. My son and I survived but before I knew it, my world was destroyed because my husband, my father, my sister and her baby died in the quake. My mother and I were both widowed on the same day. My travails as a widow began then.”

Hansa Ben then came in contact with ActionAid through the one-stop day-care centre. And over the years that followed, she also played a key role in the formation of ENSM and the mobilisation of single women under it. Later, when the *National Forum for Single Women’s Rights* was formed, Hansa Ben became part of the Forum as a core committee member.

Sehjo Singh from ActionAid says, “Hansa Ben and Naseema strongly demonstrate that ENSM was a step in the right direction for ActionAid. The unseen, unheard community of single women just needed the platform that ENSM gave them. While forming ENSM under *Sneh Samuday*, there was a doubt in us about whether we were diluting the focus of women’s issues by segmenting out single women’s issues. But as time went on, we realised that we were actually placing focus on a neglected area, something that had not received any attention despite the fact that these women badly needed extra

support.”

Regardless of the fact that a space for single women as well as redressal mechanisms were sorely needed, it was not easy to establish one. Women who needed help the most were the most resistant, even after the need was established, because they were often the most brutalised and tortured.

“When women visited the day-care centres with their children to receive counselling, nutrition and other kinds of relief, they were in such severe trauma that for a long time, we could not even talk to them. It was easy to give them food, medical help and other material need that they required. But trying to talk to them was to open up wounds that were causing them unbearable anguish. They would cry; they were suicidal and it was difficult to reach out to them. Gradually, they began to open up and tell us their life stories. As it emerged, the issues of single women were the most severe and their struggles extremely horrific. But even after they had related their tales, efforts on our part to help them to act came to nought.” says Sushila Prajapati from ActionAid.

Kanku Ben recounts with anguish as she shows her mutilated hand, “How could we stand up for ourselves? We were not even used to speaking at home and were only expected to work all day. Our other job was to bear children. Speaking meant the danger of being punished, sometimes brutally. I was regularly beaten up by my husband and in-laws. One day, they broke my hand. And my only fault was that I had given birth to only daughters. I remember the months of pain that followed because I couldn’t get any medical help for my broken hand. I always wondered why they ill-treated me so much when I used to try so hard to please them. I worked in the fields all day and when I returned home, there would be no food for me and I had to go to my aunt’s house and eat. I would get beaten for that too because they used to suspect I carried away something from the house for my parents.”

Post the quake, it emerged that the most common problems faced by single

women were homelessness and deprivation of property and other rights. Constant subjugation had rendered them voiceless and the lack of awareness resulted in a state where they often did not know they were entitled to a portion of the family's assets, be it land, house or other household materials. Sushila adds, "The trauma of being single was often even greater than the trauma the quake had caused. Besides being traumatised by the destruction and devastation caused by the quake, they also had to cope with widowhood with all its attendant problems. Adding to their misery, several of them had been cast out of their marital homes and deprived of their share of compensation. The day-care centres threw up all these issues."

The stage had now been set for change through the day-care centres. However, the main actors, the women for whom they had been created, had to be coaxed and motivated to come and use them. Initially, for ENSM, there were huge challenges and even small breakthroughs were hard to achieve. The team had to not only deal with the trauma that the earthquake had left behind but also with the age-old traditions and societal opposition that were unyielding.

"I went reluctantly at first because of opposition from home and also given my own scepticism that the worst had happened to me. I was also extremely drained emotionally. Wherever I looked, I saw grief and sorrow, both at home and outside. It used to be an effort to even feed my child every day and do the regular tasks. How could my life ever become better? What would I get by visiting the day-care centres? I went there very reluctantly when the counsellors called me," says Hansa Ben. After going for a few days, she says she began to feel better. Slowly, she began to spread the word and also persuade her neighbours and other women, who had suffered similarly, to accompany her. Her long-time associate, Javi Ben, further adds, "We were oppressed in the most inhuman ways. When there were men around, even in the hottest weather, we had to cover our faces. We couldn't answer nature's call at will and had to wait till it turned dark or had to go before daybreak. Till we came into ENSM, we didn't know a better life was

possible."

Gradually, the numbers swelled and women began looking forward to coming to the centres. In time, the discussions widened, larger issues began coming to the fore and the daily travails that women were undergoing came sharply into focus. As time went on, ActionAid found that these problems, while they were merely more severe in times of disaster, were actually the daily lot of single women. It was evident that these women were in need of much more than just the immediate relief that ActionAid had come in to give.

"Policy advocacy and community empowerment is at the core of ActionAid's strategic priorities. In the ENSM intervention, our real work began only after the relief phase was over," says Sehjo. Therefore, even after the relief work ended, ENSM continued to work on single women's issues.



Photo: Florian Lang | ActionAid



MOVING TOWARDS PERMANENT CHANGE

ENSM was not a narrow programme working towards providing relief to single women. For sustainable change, ENSM had to negotiate space for itself at policy levels; it had to address the issues that began at the grassroots such as domestic violence and harassment of single women, and right to food, livelihood and existence itself. More importantly, it had to deal with bureaucracy and procedures that had failed people when it came to relief and rehabilitation. Access to entitlements became an important area of focus.

It had to, therefore, work at several levels. So while at its inception, it served to provide programmatic direction to ActionAid, as the programme matured, important elements and contexts were added on i.e. awareness building among women on housing and other rights, collectivising and strengthening them, addressing violent cultural practices such as witch-hunting, rights of women who were engaged in caste-based sex work, farm widows etc. It also served as a space where policies and entitlements could be discussed, accessed and demanded.

Working on the ground, rapid assessments in the community showed that there was no knowledge of laws and a very scanty knowledge of the schemes available which women could use. There were no clauses that excluded single women, which then meant they were eligible for benefits under all Acts and schemes as the *Indira Awas Yojana* (IAY) or any others, on par with the rest of the community. But their ability to negotiate for these was conspicuous by its absence and when society at large itself was working to keep single women oppressed, no Act or scheme would be adequate to bring change. Also, women themselves had been victims of oppression for so long that they were resistant to and apprehensive of change. The foundations of oppression and deprivation had to be challenged, and that is what ActionAid set out to do. The first task was to bring about awareness

among women and systemic change in the community at large.

The Kutch intervention, in recognition of the magnitude of the problem, worked in two distinct phases – immediate relief post the quake, combined with small systemic changes within the immediate vicinity of women, and thereafter, sustained work with the communities to empower and equip them for lives sans deprivation and discrimination.

The first set of strategies aimed to achieve change of mind-sets among the communities and a sense of self-worth and the realisation that the Constitution of India had guaranteed every woman equality in every way, as it had to all citizens. It often meant very small changes such as encouraging Javi Ben and others of her ilk to fight against the dehumanising act of masking their faces, or not being allowed to wear coloured clothes. All these might have been symbolic but they were visual and powerful enough to motivate more women to adopt the same symbolic changes. The second phase was one of enforcement and actualisation of the understanding they had got in the first phase. And those were more complex and difficult to achieve, and needed a lot of capacity-building.

strengthening ENSM

ENSM over the next few years also spread to other districts of Gujarat where ActionAid had presence. The strategies of working with single women post the relief phase had become clear – women needed to be trained in leadership, made aware of laws, policies and schemes; they needed to understand and participate in governance; they needed to be trained to take up their issues themselves – from addressing property rights to violence against women.

The biggest learning that the initial years of ENSM were to provide

ActionAid was that while the broader rubric of women's rights is the same, single women's problems and contexts are varied. The rights of single women needed a different and distinct understanding and approach. To elaborate, it needed an understanding of the issues that challenged them the most and the facilities available within the system to address those issues.

"Problems which had been festering within communities for generations had been exposed by the quake. To withdraw and leave the communities to face those problems yet again without equipping them with the strength to change them was not an option. Solutions had to be found, particularly for single women who had neither societal nor familial support. Therefore, the team, along with the women leaders who had emerged during the relief phase, reached a consensus that a dedicated intervention for single women must continue. ENSM must have its own identity, objectives and strategies to continue the work that had begun. And inclusion and awareness emerged as the most needed strategies," says Sehjo.

no templates and yet

There were no prescribed templates available and therefore, the processes adopted were organic and dynamic. Regular interactions with women also helped the ActionAid team to understand specific issues of single women. Spontaneous responses to problems evolved, even as they emerged on the ground during the relief and rehabilitation work. The uniqueness was that the responses were found in consultation with women, owing to the close contact that the ActionAid team had developed with them. Some clear programs were set out to build capacities of women.

Inclusion and leadership

Inclusion was the first and the most important strategy. By strengthening women and leaving out the larger community, ActionAid foresaw that adversarial positions could get created. On the other hand, by drawing in all stakeholders and addressing the situation holistically, buy-in could be ensured for the rights of single women. An important part of the intervention, therefore, was ActionAid's efforts to neutralise the forces that

were perpetuating undesirable practices and traditions, and those not allowing women to progress. Keeping that in mind, the elders in the community, peer groups, religious leaders, *jati panchayat* members etc. were drawn into the discussions around single women through different means such as IEC (*Information, Education and Communication*), community meetings, through *Gram Sabhas* and other gatherings.

ActionAid also saw that by creating leaders and role models, the change would spread through a ripple effect as well as create a ground-swell of work and awareness at local levels. The ripple effect would span across other states and not just in a narrow area, and what is more, it would create strong voice for policy change at the local and national levels. Among the women who regularly attended the informal meetings at day-care centres, leadership was very evident in several of them. Women, who hitherto had not ever been given the opportunity to voice their opinions in their homes and neighbourhoods, were emerging as voices of opinion. Balu Ben is one such woman. Belonging to the *Wagri* tribe, she shares her story, "I have four children. My husband left all of us a long while ago and remarried. I have struggled very hard to make a life for my children and myself. With no support at all, I had to stitch clothes and do other petty jobs."

ENSM gave her the right platform. "I am 65 now but I feel for other women who are going through the same problems that I went through in my younger days. My grand-daughter was being harassed by her in-laws. I did not hesitate to go to the police and complain about them. The police helped to solve the quarrel. If I didn't know that this facility was available, she would have suffered like me. *Ekal Nari* has made me strong and aware of my rights," she adds.

Women like Balu Ben, Hansa Ben and Javi Ben, who emerged as leaders, addressed the communities and their peer groups, and sensitized them to the issues of single women. "We first began by encouraging our peers to let us shed empty customs like not allowing us to wear *bindis* or attend auspicious occasions. Some of our members were not even allowed to attend

the marriages of their own children. We attempted to change the immediate society around us since small changes were more easily achieved than larger ones which we did not even know how to tackle,” says Hansa Ben. “We went to *Gram Sabha* meetings and other community gatherings, and shared our innermost feelings with the community, appealing to them to let us live like them. Initially, we were met with strong opposition. But that changed gradually. Often, if some people in a gathering agreed with us, they would convince the rest,” she adds.

As time went on, the need to bring the affected persons into alliances or groups became evident. This need arose because it was important to build collective strength which was vital for bringing pressure on officials, and demanding better facilities and entitlements. ENSM was strengthened over time with leaders who emerged from the community.

Awareness, allies and solidarity

Awareness was as important as leadership, since creating leaders who were not aware of what they were fighting for and what weapons they had in hand might have resulted in futile confrontational situations. While the women and children visited day-care centres, the counsellors and outreach staff of ActionAid sensed opportunities and used the day-care centres as platforms to spread awareness among them on their rights and rightful place in the society. Since all women were suffering from similar issues either at home, within their families or with official procedures in getting compensation, the day-care centres helped them come together as strong solidarity groups and create collective strength. This was to later help women in bringing pressure on authorities and demanding better services from them.

Javi Ben says, “When we women met in the day-care centres, interaction with our counsellors and with each other opened our minds to the fact that a better way of life was possible. We discussed each other’s problems and often realised that many of the traditions we were following were so meaningless. And most of them were directed at women. Men didn’t have

to follow any rules; only the women had to. It then slowly dawned on us that the society was actually being cruel to us. Even worse was the fact that women themselves were doing injustice to other women.”

consolidating on initial gains

Each activity, be it trainings, workshops, seminars, consultations or public hearings, led to an overall common end – empowerment and strengthening of capacity of single women to make a firm place for themselves in a society that had been unjust and even cruel to them. It taught them to fight back with strength and conviction. These activities also took them, one step at a time, towards a destination of courage and independence.

The trainings were theme-based and covered a wide range of topics, and were oriented towards building awareness in women. Some of the themes covered were:

Legal awareness

Trainings around legal issues consisted of building awareness among women on their rights and on how to access them. They were equipped with information on the right way to register complaints, the required procedures to follow before seeking legal redressal and above all, how to seek help on issues such as physical violence and harassment which most women had experienced at some time or the other. Understanding of the *Domestic Violence Act* was provided to women leaders. Likewise, based on the understanding that financial independence held the key to real empowerment, the trainings also focussed on creating awareness on property rights, and women were encouraged to enforce their rights in this direction. Local lawyers were called in as resource persons to these trainings and very frequently, these lawyers were immediately approached by the participants for some advice, indicating that most women were challenged by some or the other legal issue.

Gender trainings

ActionAid teams conducted gender workshops, trainings and exposure visits. This helped in increasing the sensitivities of women on various issues related to their own lives as well as the communities around them. These included girl child education, the rights they held under the Constitution, and the irrelevance of rituals and social taboos which impede the lives of widows. Over time, women were also encouraged to participate in local governance and social gatherings which were hitherto disallowed to them, and where required, women were also helped to claim compensation, property etc.

Gender trainings facilitated a process wherein women discussed among themselves, the ways in which patriarchy was perpetuated in the society in order to ensure male supremacy and thereafter, causing the violation of women's rights. ENSM offered them the space to debate issues they could never have voiced within their own homes or communities. It often came as an eye-opener to them that the life-cycle of a woman is characterised by discrimination, which begins even before the birth of a girl child and continues all her life. Women were shown, with data, that declining sex ratio, rising crimes and violence against women, lack of ownership rights over property etc. are the result of gender discrimination. This created in them, the determination to not only avoid perpetrating any kind of discrimination, but also fight it pro-actively by staying together.

Champa Ben Koli, 60, living in Deselpar village of Taluk Rapar, is a widow with 4 sons. She worked very hard to bring them up single-handedly by taking up daily wage labour. All 4 sons are now married and live with their families while Champa Ben lives alone in her house and continues to work for her living.

To help her nephew and his family who had come down to Deselpar village for work, Champa Ben moved out of her house and started living in a hut outside her house. Her nephew, however, took advantage of this and tried to take away her house. Adding to this problem, her sons also began to blame her for the loss of the house. Together, they all threatened to kill her.

In a helpless situation, Champa Ben decided to approach ENSM leaders for help. 10 members of ENSM visited Champa Ben's sons and the village sarpanch who promised to intervene. After three days of negotiations and interaction, Champa Ben's sons realised how much injustice they had inflicted on their mother and apologised and also gave a written commitment to ENSM leaders that they would give bajri and Rs. 100 each to their mother. The sarpanch also promised to help. Champa Ben is now a happy woman and an active member of ENSM.

Rights-based trainings

Building rights consciousness of women – drawing from the Constitution of India and CEDAW (*Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women*) and women's rights perspectives – had to be coupled with educating women on key laws and policies impinging their lives. In 2005, MGNREGA (*Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act*) had just come in; women needed to know about it and likewise about the RTI Act (*Right To Information Act*).

Women were, therefore, trained on ways to use the RTI Act, on provisions under MNREGA as well as the entire process for seeking employment, getting registered, availing job cards, applying for work and getting receipts, provision for unemployment, and central guidelines regarding payment and transparency. Complex issues that impacted the *Right to Food* such as corporatisation of land, globalisation and liberalisation, and their impact on the poor were simplified and explained to women during rights-based trainings. These issues also impeded their livelihoods in that communities lost land, which was acquired from them in the name of industrialisation, and this affected women disproportionately. Knowledge on PDS, the gaps under it, and how women could address them, and on the *Mid-Day Meal Scheme* (MDMS) and the rights of their children to food also helped to empower them with awareness and knowledge on their rights under the Constitution.

An example of the empowerment process is the meeting organised in Rampar, Anjar taluk by ENSM. Housing around 40 Muslim families, most of them fisher-folk and other daily wage labourers, the village was home to all

kinds of issues with the community being deprived of benefits under PDS, ICDS (*Integrated Child Development Services*), MDMS etc. At the meeting, Sakina Ben, a Muslim lady, complained of discrimination on the basis of caste and religion. She also brought to the notice of ENSM members that around 25 children from Muslim families were not getting the benefits of ICDS and MDMS in the schools. The *sarpanch* too had refused to take action. At the meeting, the helper of the ICDS centre was summoned by ENSM members. Unable to provide an answer, she apologised publicly followed by a promise that she would take care of the children. Sakina Ben has gone on record to say, "We have the collective strength of ENSM with us. This gives us the courage to raise issues and to get them resolved."

These are just a few examples of what the process of collective thinking and action achieved for ENSM. While each event and example by itself is significant, what is of greater importance is the fact that collective action was proving to be invaluable to the members of ENSM and that each success they achieved convinced them that single though they were, they were important and integral to a healthy society. They were now also convinced that they had the power to effect change.

Trainings on Domestic Violence Act

Domestic violence emerged as an all-pervasive scourge that was the daily lot of women in general and of single women in particular. Dedicated trainings were held to educate women on the provisions of the *Domestic Violence (Prevention) Act, 2005*, and how to use the Act for their protection. Women were given information on the documents required to file an FIR (*First Information Report*) as well as how to approach authorities, the proofs required (such as medical test reports) which would prove that domestic violence had indeed taken place. The overriding focus was to impress on women that they did not have to tolerate domestic violence and must speak out against it and courageously fight it.

Bhani Ben Dala Bhai Bagda, 32, living in Kadol village, taluk Bhachau of District Kutch says, "Married for 17 years, my life was full of horror. I have 3 daughters and 2 sons. Each time I gave birth to a daughter, my in-

laws used to torture me physically and verbally. I then went to an ENSM meeting and shared my pain. The leaders of the group intervened and helped me by speaking to my in-laws. Things, however, became bad once again and this time, I decided to do something permanent. I approached the President of the Lok Adhikar Manch, Soni Ben Buchiya, and spent a month with her. Along with ActionAid, she helped to get me emotional and moral support as well as shelter, food and clothes. I got employment as well. ENSM helped by yet again speaking to my husband and in-laws, and convincing them to treat me better. They have changed now and I am living happily. All women need such a place they can go to and share their sorrows and get help."

Leadership trainings

When women came into ENSM, they bloomed as it were and began to display great qualities of leadership.

However, leadership comes with responsibility and the emerging leaders had to be sensitised to the issues that their peers were combating and on how to deal with them with compassion. In order to channelise this strength and enable these women to bring larger benefits to their peers, leadership trainings were held. The focus of these trainings was on helping women to learn inter-personal skills, internalise the traits of a good leader and also how to sustain their movement without bias or favour. They were taught values such as empathy, compassion and solidarity, as well as the principles that governed collective strength and the need to use it for larger good rather than for narrow gains.

powerful use of collective strength

Solidarity among the poor and marginalised is key to any social mobilisation since that is what brings strength into their struggles. "They need us and we need them," as Ginny says. Single women should become part of other struggles too. Alliance of the marginalised brought strength to the struggles of ENSM. It participated in and used platforms as public hearings, campaigns and protest marches to bring the issues and

perspectives of single to the context of social action activities. The objective was also to expose members of ENSM to the power that they held in their own hands, to participate and change the world around them.

To quote an example, a public hearing was organised by ENSM in coordination with the NGOs and CBOs (*Community-Based Organisations*) working on the issue of HIV/AIDS in Gandhidham, Kutch District, in 2006 on the occasion of *AIDS Day*. Around 300 people participated in the public hearing, and key decision-makers such as officials from the police department, the local general hospital, *Gujarat State AIDS Prevention Society* (GSAPS) and key leaders of ENSM were on the jury.

The public hearing heard cases of 12 persons who had suffered while accessing medication and basic facilities from the government. They also shared the problems that arose from stigma and societal attitudes towards HIV-positive people, among other issues. A charter of demands was also presented to the jury.

The impact of the public hearing was strong enough to get immediate resolution on several issues.

Similar public hearings were also held on other themes such as violence against women and land issues. Campaigns and rallies were also held around special days and occasions such as *International Women's Day*, *World Food Day*, *World AIDS Day* and others. The rationale of holding such events around these occasions was that it helped in bringing several stakeholders together as well as bringing media focus on to the work of ENSM, thereby giving their issues the much-needed public attention. It also helped in increasing the self-confidence of members. Each step was taking them closer to becoming self-reliant and empowered. The campaign for ration cards is one such example.

using knowledge for action

Based on exposure to other campaigns and learnings, ENSM initiated a campaign on the issue of access to ration cards. A study covering 1700 families of 5 *taluks* was conducted with active participation from ENSM members. The findings revealed that among those who did not possess ration cards, a majority belonged to marginalised communities and that the authorities were apathetic towards this problem. After strong lobbying from the members, 1275 applications were made and submitted to the concerned authorities, and ration cards were issued.

Mobilisation of women was rather a grassroots-based activity where they sat together and discussed the options available to them. Those discussions helped them to critically examine state policies and identify gaps. In addition, it also helped women to become familiar with the concept of rights and entitlements. This, in turn, gave them a better ability to recognise the obvious gaps and to articulate them. Knowledge of these entitlements also helped them create pressure when things didn't go right. As Balu Ben says, "We did *rasta roko* protests and even stopped the Collector's car once when we didn't receive our compensation on time. We learnt how to write letters and memorandums to make our demands. Initially, we used to be scared to even interact with the officials. But once we learnt that it was our right to demand, we realised there was no cause for us to fear. It was for the officials to satisfy our demands."

Manju Ben, 40, has been living in Bhuj for over 30 years now. A single woman and a mother of 7 children, she is a daily wage labourer and earns barely Rs. 40 a day. Life is full of struggle for Manju Ben. The meagre rations that she gets from the PDS is a boon.

It was only while attending an ENSM meeting that she got to know that she was entitled to 35 kg of food grains at subsidised rates. Additionally, she was also surprised to know that all along, her entitlement was being claimed by someone else. Enraged, she and the ENSM leaders decided to protest. They submitted a letter of complaint to the concerned authority. An

enquiry was held and the fair-price shop-owner was served a notice and action taken against him. As a result, she is now getting her fair quota and more importantly, the shop-owner has been made to give her the grains she had lost for two years. She is now an active member of ENSM and is doing her bit to bring in more members.

de-constructing the symbols that once subjugated them

“I was not allowed to be present at my own son’s wedding. I had to also stay away from all the preparations and was not even permitted to touch the bride’s *saree*. It was extremely hurtful. I am a widow but that does not make me such a bad woman that I will wish ill for my son,” says Vijaya Ben. “We now discuss these problems in our groups and realise how meaningless such customs are. We now wonder how we tolerated them for so many years,” she adds.

Women were actively encouraged to discard myths and taboos, and demand that they be treated with dignity. Their perspectives were also built on the various socio-economic and political aspects as gender, the social traditions disrespecting women, women’s right to property etc.

It is important to note that while changing social customs, symbols have a powerful impact. And in the case of widows, this is even more significant because widows are powerful visual symbols of exclusion. This is owing to the various societal rules that dictate they wear white clothes, and eschew the use of *sindoor*, colourful bangles and all other means of beautification, among others. Widows stand out even in a crowd simply on the strength of the symbols of widowhood they are forced to adopt. This creates mental trauma for them as well as a lifelong sense of inadequacy.

ENSM set out to change this by first doing away with negative symbolism. They observed occasions such as *International Day of Widows* by getting together and discussing the futility of clinging on to meaningless symbols

that create anguish rather than enrich. At the end of each of these meetings, as reverse symbolism, they pledged to begin wearing colourful clothes, *sindoor* and bangles. Additionally, they determined that they would attend the weddings of their children, cradle ceremonies, naming ceremonies of the grand-children and in fact all auspicious occasions in their own homes as well as neighbourhoods, and play the important roles they were entitled to, as mothers, sisters or mothers-in-law, or as important stakeholders of society.

ENSM had developed a spirit of democracy in its functioning with capacity-building and with exposure to other groups of the marginalised. ActionAid firmly believes that the poor and marginalised have to be in the forefront of all social transformation processes, including in the leadership of the organisation. In the functioning of ENSM, autonomy and collaboration work in harmony ensuring greater levels of democracy and decentralisation. At the district and state levels, decisions are taken autonomously, depending on local contexts and needs, while at the policy levels, be it state or central, collaboration is the rule.

ENSM expands its footprint across and beyond

ENSM, as we know, first began in Kutch district. However, barely a year later, in what was a parallel process, when communal riots shook Gujarat in 2002, and Muslims, particularly women, were brutally attacked and subjected to the worst forms of human rights violations, ENSM was quickly able to identify that the women affected by riots were victims of the same issues as the single women in Kutch, by force of cultural, societal and religious practices.

It also influenced ActionAid and its ally organisations towards thinking through and strategising on the rights of single women. While single women continued to be the main protagonists of the movement, ActionAid

and the community went deeper and unearthed the particular issues that challenge different categories of single women at different levels.

The insights gained from the work in Kutch and later in Ahmedabad (following the riots) in **Gujarat** provided direction and thinking to the programme design of ActionAid. Single women became part of its gender lens and social issue analyses.

ActionAid India's ally, *Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan (BMMA)*, is a national rights-based, secular, non-party political movement of Muslim women with a membership of over 1 lakh women and men spread across 15 states. It strives to develop the leadership of Muslim women for a life of dignity and equality as per their rights in Islam and within the Constitution.

As established by the *Sachar Committee Report*, the Muslim community is lagging behind on all human development indicators. Whether it is education or livelihood, housing or personal law, health or security – the community is struggling to lead a meaningful, safe and dignified life. Poverty, educational backwardness, lack of economic options, communal violence, caste-based discrimination within the community, discriminatory family law and continued apathy of the government have all contributed to the marginalization and degradation of the life of the community. And Muslim women are the worst sufferers in this scenario, with the practice of *Triple Talaq* further adding hugely to their woes.

“My husband was an alcoholic. He beat me up regularly and demanded dowry. He also did not maintain the family. One day, he beat me up very badly and went away, leaving my children and me alone. Then, I got a letter from the Jamaat saying that my husband has given letter of divorce.

When all attempts to bring him back failed, I started working as a housemaid and raised my two children by myself. Now, my children are grown up and studying in college.

The main reason for women's suffering is that it is so easy for men to give divorce and then marry again for more dowry,” says Sarammal, 43 (from Tamil Nadu).

Needless to say, the minority within minority, Muslim women, have been at the receiving end of all violence, deprivation and apathy of both the community and the State.

BMMA was formed in January, 2007, as a platform for Muslim women to address these anomalies and demand justice by assuming the leadership of not just Muslim women but the entire Muslim community. Muslim women thus emerged to demand equal citizenship for the community to lead a life which ensures social, economic, legal, educational and political equality, and which safeguards human rights, security, equality, justice and peace. Currently, BMMA is doing a campaign for the abolition of *Triple Talaq* as it is unjust, unfair and also a violation of a woman's Quranic rights.

“I met my husband through a matrimonial portal. Everything was good for 2-3 months. After 3 months, however, my in-laws started mentally harassing me for dowry. Their demands were increasing day by day. They started beating me up and asked me to leave the house. I then went to my mother's house. After 7-8 days, my husband apologized and took me back. But then again, he and his parents started abusing and harassing me. Then, I left the home again.

While I was staying with my brother, I received a speed-post from my husband saying that through this letter, he is divorcing me. In the meanwhile, I lost my mother and elder brother. I had lost my father in 2009. I am 25 years of age and staying with my brother and sister-in-law.

On receiving the speed-post, I was in a state of shock. Then, I decided to challenge the divorce and filed a petition in the Supreme Court against this type of divorce. The Court has accepted my petition,” says Afreen, 25 (from Rajasthan).

BMMA is trying to help several women like Sarammal and Afreen, who have suffered *Triple Talaq*, to get back to their regular life.

In the farmer suicide areas of **Maharashtra**, ActionAid began organising single women to access their rights and entitlements from the State and also support them to undertake economic activities around farming. The Vidarbha region of Maharashtra has witnessed a large number of male farmers committing suicide, leaving almost an equal number of widows under debt, dry farms, and the responsibility of children, their education and marriage. Poverty is looming large in the lives of what they call 'farm widows' – firstly, because they had not been in the forefront of farm management, and secondly, since education and awareness are low or absent in an already low HDI (*Human Development Index*) region.

Kisan Mitra, a network consisting of ActionAid, *Apekha Homeo Society* (an ally organisation of ActionAid) and several other civil society organisations has been supporting single women to access from the government, compensation, institutional credit, educational support for children, and economic support to improve farm yield, to rear goats, for kitchen gardening etc. to add value to their earnings. Single women in the Vidarbha region are organised under the name, *Ekal Mahila Sangathan*.

"I am a single woman but can take care of myself since I am not alone," says Lata Dhadase firmly.

Her husband had set himself ablaze, unable to repay a debt.

Lata was married to Padmakar who owned 3 acres of rain-fed land in Rasulabad village in Arvi taluk of Wardha district, Maharashtra. "We did not have a good crop continuously for 3 years. In 2008, my husband took loan to buy good seeds and fertilisers thinking that these would be helpful in getting a good crop. He believed that he would get good income and would repay all the loans in one single instalment," recalls Lata.

However, this was not to be. The input cost had risen so much that instead of being able to repay the loan, Padmakar incurred further loss. On losing all hopes, he committed suicide. Lata was left with 2 children and an old mother-in-law to take care of. To make matters worse, even the relatives and villagers tried to bully her.

"I understood that I have a right over my husband's property and though it was sad to lose him, it was no sin, only when I joined the Ekal Mahila Sangathan in 2014. I also came to know that there are a number of single women in our village who are facing similar problems," shares Lata. "I decided to organise them and help them get what rightfully belonged to them," she adds.

Today, Lata has taken control of her life. She has taken up a job as Anganwadi worker and has assumed all responsibility of her family. She is also making efforts to resolve her financial problems by starting a group enterprise of leaf-plate making.

But more importantly, she has become a leader of the sangathan in Arvi taluk. Fighting against all odds and overcoming all obstacles created by the villagers who believed in patriarchal values, she conducted an exclusive women's Gram Sabha to bring the problems of single women to people's notice. She has also taken lead in organising farm widows from nearby areas to demand payment for 100 days of employment for farmers in their own land under MGNREGA from sowing to harvesting. She was one of the single women who met the Chief Minister of Maharashtra and submitted a memorandum.

Lata has also helped members of the sangathan in getting the widow pension which is called Niradhar pension in Marathi, meaning pension for those who have none to protect them. "I don't like the term, Niradhar. All of us can protect ourselves. However, I still help them get it as it rightfully belongs to them," shares Lata.

“Had Ekal Mahila Sangathan not come in my life, I would have remained a vulnerable, subdued, neglected and victimised widow. Thanks to the sangathan that though I am single, I know my potential and am able to overcome my inferiority feeling and achieve something in life,” says Lata as she signs off.

Sakhi Manch, a collective of single women in Osmanabad, Maharashtra (organised by *Paryay*, an ally organisation of ActionAid), has been fighting for the rights of single women, and has been consistently advocating with the district administration and the *Department of Women and Child Development* for entitlements for these women.

Thanks to *Sakhi Manch*'s strong efforts, several women have now started receiving benefits of the various government schemes. In addition, realising that just receiving some financial support from the State may not be enough and that it is important to also create some longer-term income-generating opportunities for these women to have a stable life, *Sakhi Manch* continued its advocacy efforts on this front too.

And the sustained efforts by *Sakhi Manch* did pay off, with the district administration of Osmanabad announcing a special provision of Rs. 20 lakhs in the district budget exclusively for single women to start income-generation programme through poultry.

A couple of years ago, these single women were a completely ignored group and were not counted in as beneficiaries under any government programme or scheme. But today, just within two years since these women started their *sangathan*, they are empowered beings, leading a transformed life.

Paryay has been giving highest priority to the issues of single women and has been organising them through collectives to assert their rights. In another instance, an *Ekal Mahila Adhikar Parishad* (Single Women's Conclave) of single women was organised on December 27, 2015, in Kallam block of

Osmanabad. Around 600 women from different villages of Kallam and Washi blocks were present at this conclave along with concerned authorities from the Department of Women and Child Welfare. During the meeting, several women shared their situations, the problems they face etc. being single.

It was noted that there are various legal provisions available for single women but since they are unaware of those, they are not able to avail the benefits. For e.g. the government of Maharashtra has come up with a policy titled, '*Ghar Dokhanchhe*' (House For Both), which means the wife has an equal right over the house as the husband and that her name should be there along with the husband's as owner of that particular house. However, many women are not aware of this policy and hence, if the husband dies or there is divorce between them, the wife is asked to leave the in-laws' place.

Needless to say, when it comes to single women, safe shelter is a major need. Therefore, *Sakhi Manch* decided to keep the right to house/shelter as its top priority.

Apart from this, several other resolutions were passed at the conclave, including:

- Each *Ekal Mahila* to get house under *Indira Awas Yojana* or *Gharkul Yojana*
- Ensured food security to each *Ekal Mahila*
- Ensured right to employment at the place of her stay and within her own village
- Free education up to class VIII to the children of *Ekal Mahila*
- Women's hostel and support centre in each of the blocks
- Separate budgetary provision for economic upliftment of *Ekal Mahila*
- Provision of Pension of Rs. 2500 to *Ekal Mahila*

The Maharashtra state programme of ActionAid has also worked with persons with psycho-social disability, mainly the women from low-income groups, the poor and homeless, people with physical disabilities, sexual

minorities and care-givers within the mental health system. The project was executed in Mumbai and Pune for 7 years till 2010.

As we all know, persons with psycho-social disability are considered as lacking “capacity”, and not being seen as capable of taking decisions about their own care and treatment. Consent from psychiatric patients is mostly not taken. In society at large, they are seen as not being capable of taking major life decisions. Therefore, the persons labelled with mental illness, and more significantly the women, live a life of stigma, discrimination and exclusion. And this stigma is all-pervading, stopping them from exercising the simplest forms of human rights, and preventing them from living a dignified life.

ActionAid’s project dealt with individuals accessing services of *Beggars’ Home*, Pune, and *Family Court*, Mumbai.

Beggars’ Home is a custodial institution and houses residents who are old, physically and/or mentally disabled, people with neurological trauma or deficits, women who are going through domestic violence, women from sex work, migrants, labourers working in the unorganised sector and the homeless population. While the mental health of these individuals is already compromised (due to the different kinds of stressors they faced as a result of poverty, street life, trauma of arrest etc.), their stay in the custodial institution and the unavailability of redressal mechanism for the injustice and oppression they experienced only add to their distress and psycho-social disability.

Family Courts, on the other hand, are special courts set up to deal with matrimonial matters (such as divorce, child custody, maintenance, restitution etc.). Couples from various socio-economic strata come to the *Family Court* to take important decisions about their marital relationships. But this journey from a private life to a public space like the *Family Court* may not be an easy one for many, and has dense emotional undertones. In many cases, litigants show severe forms of psychological distress and

disability which needs to be addressed.

Unfortunately, however, the question of mental health and well-being remains unaddressed by these institutions. There are no services which specifically focus on psychological distress of people accessing those services. Hence, once again, unless the component of mental health is woven into the services, those will continue to remain less effective and the rights of individuals with psycho-social disability remain unaddressed.

These institutions are also legal penal institutions. For example, with respect to the *Family Court* work, civil laws, including marriage laws, have a section on unsoundness of mind which, if proved positive, results in nullifying the marriage. People with mental illness tend to lose their civil, political and economic rights, and experience stigma and discrimination.

Therefore, through work with the court, ActionAid aims to sensitize the system to the politics of diagnosis and to the mental health issues involved in laws that govern the *Family Court*. Overall, it aims to help the system uphold the dignity and rights of people with mental distress.

It is important to note that initiating mental health work in such institutions is a challenging task. These health services, if initiated, have to strike a fine balance between providing the necessary psycho-social support to people with psychological distress and yet not create any labelling, stigmatizing and discriminatory consequences of the same.

ActionAid, through its Maharashtra state programme, supported *Bapu Trust* to undertake service programmes and advocacy work with respect to custodial institutions, including *Beggars’ Home*, mental hospitals and jails. In December, 2005, the *Bapu Trust* started a mental health programme in *Family Court* with ActionAid’s support.

Till date, *Bapu Trust* is actively involved in national law-making on mental health on the principles of *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with*

Disabilities (CRPD). As a result of it, very recently, the *Rajya Sabha* passed the *Mental Health Care Bill*.

Bapu Trust is also taking a lead at the international level, with one of the *Bapu Trust's* trustees and an acclaimed activist, Dr. Amita Dhanda, actively contributing to the drafting process of the convention, particularly on topics of legal capacity and force. The *Bapu Trust* actively led and participated in a study circle on the CRPD, created materials for advocacy, and was engaged in a range of activities leading up to the revision of various laws in the country, particularly the *Mental Health Act* and the *Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act*, among other related civil and criminal laws.

In **Odisha**, single women are being organised in Ganjam district since 2010 to access homestead land. As a result of the efforts of single women's collectives, ActionAid and the district administration, 2388 single women have been able to receive homestead land from the government.

Koili Gauda, 50, a resident of Mundamarai village in Dharakote tehsil of Ganjam, lives with her old mother. Like many others, she also wanted to marry and settle down. However, poverty on the one hand and the illness of her father on the other did not allow Koili to realise her dreams. For the past 25 years, she has been running her life selling Sal leaves. Though she lives in her parental house with her brothers, they do not support her. She is made to stay in a small room with her mother. She cooks and sleeps in the same room.

Koili's brothers turned a deaf ear when she asked them for her share in the paternal property. When asked on whether she ever lodged a complaint, she says, "I do feel like sharing about my woes with others, with the Sarpanch and the ward member, but couldn't do so since I am illiterate. My conscience also bars me from doing any such thing that can go against my brothers. I cannot see them disturbed. Regardless of what my situation is, they are my brothers. We have come out from the same womb after all."

Expressing her excitement on hearing that she would now be given a land patta, she exclaims, "It is like starting a new life altogether. At this age, I could not even dream of getting a patta for homestead land. But now, I have it and I don't want to lose it. With all my strength, I will labour hard and make a house. The patta would help me live with dignity."

The *Women Support Centres*, set up at *tehsil* level and headed by a nodal officer, are intended to provide all possible support to single women in getting legal rights to land and in linking them with other social security schemes.

"The *pattas* which are being given to single women would not only enable them to get a place for their house but would also ensure that they lead a dignified life," says Sunita Sethi, nodal officer, *Women Support Centre*, *Dharakote tehsil*, in a confident tone.

"It was like getting back my eye-sight"

Jhunu Sahu, 35, lost her sight when she was 3. In addition to being visually challenged, she lost her parents at a very young age. She now lives with her brothers and sisters-in-law in Mundamarai. Though they help her in her daily routine, Jhunu doesn't feel very good about it.

"Every day, I have to depend on others, starting from brushing my teeth in the morning to going to bed at night. I feel like I'm a burden on my family as I need to seek their support at every step. Though I feel sorry about it, yet, with a Rs. 300 disability pension a month, I'm left with hardly anything to help my family," she laments.

On being informed that she was being offered a land patta, Jhunu could not control her happiness. "I have never been this happy in my life. I can now give something back to my family," she said, adding that once she gets the possession of it, she would apply for residential certificates, BPL (Below

Poverty Line) card etc. and would also draw the attention of the concerned authorities to consider her under IAY.

Though she cannot see, her voice speaks for her vigour for life. "The patta has opened up several opportunities for me, enabling me to get the benefits of various other government schemes. A land in my name is nothing less than an eye for me to see," says Jhunu jubilantly.

Narasingha Jena, Revenue Inspector, Mundamarai, also has words of praise for this initiative. "I have been associated with the initiatives of ActionAid and the district administration to give *pattas* to single women. I must say that during my long tenure, this has been a unique work that I have done. I am very happy that single women are getting land titles. This would certainly work for them as a legal arm to get residential proof, caste certificate, ration card, voter card, BPL card etc.," says Jena.

Recognising the fact that mere inclusion of single women in land distribution schemes would not adequately address their vulnerabilities; and that support towards house-building and sustained livelihood opportunities to them are essential too, the 2388 single women who received homestead land titles have been linked with housing schemes too. The total amount sanctioned for single women under these housing programmes equals nearly Rs. 75 crores. 847 single women out of these were also linked with the national food security schemes.

These ground-level experiences, in collaboration with the *State Resource Centre* of the Department of Women and Child Development, also fed into the draft state-level policy that was made for single women.

The Odisha government has now started a similar initiative in Koraput and Mayurbhanj districts as well to ensure land titles to single women.

In addition, ActionAid has been actively working in Erasama and Balikuda blocks of Jagatsinghpur district of Odisha since the time the *Super Cyclone*

hit the state in 1999. The project was started in response to the rehabilitation needs of cyclone victims, especially widows, destitute orphans, the uncared aged and persons with disabilities. The initial focus of the project was on the protection of the most vulnerable survivors, ensuring the best possible rehabilitation for them, strengthening caring responsibilities and influencing the State policy with regard to these groups, particularly in the context of disaster.

Looking at the need of a longer-term response for these vulnerable sections emerged *Sneha Abhiyan*, a campaign towards ensuring the empowerment of women and children, and raising voices against patriarchy. The *Abhiyan* was implemented by ActionAid in collaboration with the Government of India, the government of Odisha, Nature's Club, UNICEF and other local NGOs. The state government initiated 35 temporary tent shelters (*Mamta Gruhas*) in Erasama and ActionAid took over the management of those. Subsequently, ActionAid also constructed 4 *Mamta Gruhas* in Astaranga (District Puri), 2 in Mahakalapada (District Kendrapara), 2 in the Paradeep NAC (*Notified Area Council*) slums, and 1 more in District Jagatsinghpur.

Under *Sneha Abhiyan*, 801 orphaned children and children at risk, 638 widows and other single women at risk, and 209 aged persons were identified and taken care of. The programme also focussed on longer-term rehabilitation through education and livelihood-generation.

In an attempt to recreate the community spirit, each shelter was supervised by a *Sneha Karmi* (community care volunteer) who, in most cases, used to be a young local girl. And one woman in each shelter was identified as the 'link mother'.

But the *Mamta Gruhas* were only short-stay shelters. By July 2000, most of the inhabitants had moved back to their communities. At this point, *Sneha Committees* were formed in each village. Each committee consisted of 9 to 11 members including 3 village elders, a link mother, the *Gram Panchayat* coordinator, a teacher, an *anganwadi* worker and a community care

volunteer.

Today, *Sneha Abhiyan* is established as a women's organisation and is well-known at the village and block levels as an active people's organisation. It is now a registered body trying to weave a new identity. And ActionAid continues to be still active in the district for women's land and resource rights.

In **Andhra Pradesh-Telangana**, *Gramya Resource Centre for Women* and *Pilupu*, ally organisations of ActionAid, are strongly campaigning towards a definitional clarity of "single women". V. Rukmini Rao, a leading women's rights activist and the head of *Gramya*, elaborating on the efforts in this direction, shares, "The main issue around definition is that the State recognises widowed women as single and has made them eligible to receive pension. The discussion at the state-level civil society revolves around including divorced women in the category of single women too. A proof could be produced to indicate divorce; it could be legal document or an agreement signed in the community through caste and family elders that divorce had taken place. Then, the woman would be recognized as single. We are campaigning towards recognising single woman status for separated women as well whose husbands have disappeared and are not supporting the family in any way. In such cases, no paper trail exists. Our demand is that in rural areas, the *Gram Sabha* through the *Sarpanch* should certify the status since they would know the ground reality. Based on this, benefits can flow to the concerned woman. In urban areas, it would be the municipal ward members who undertake certification."

"We are also demanding recognition of unmarried single women above 30/35 years who are supporting themselves and family members. We have come across a sizable number of unmarried single women in *adivasi* areas. Issues raised by officials in the case of unmarried women as well as young widows are that they may get married. In such cases, it is our view that pensions may be stopped once they get married," adds Rukmini. Well, they are not only demanding pensions but also access to livelihood resources and

training to improve livelihoods as well as access to credit for single women. In case of government training programmes etc., usually the age criteria prevent older single women from benefitting. Therefore, they are demanding that in the case of single women, the age bar be increased.

Rukmini also shared about the ground-level interventions by *Gramya* and *Pilupu* on single women's issues. "In Nalgonda, we have organised 500+ women of all ages from 20 villages. The idea was also replicated further and is being implemented by *Pilupu*. 200 women have so far been included and supported. In my capacity as Managing Trustee of CWS (*Centre for World Solidarity*), I worked together with partner organisations in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, and brought them together to form two state-level federations. We organised two training programmes for them and they are now in the process of developing their own leadership. I am making efforts to bring together single women's organisations with the support of NGOs across Telangana. I will be expanding our work to Mahbubnagar, Medak, Warangal and hopefully one other district this year. ActionAid's support would help to strengthen advocacy at the state-level further," says Rukmini, adding, "To take up national-level advocacy, I am working closely with Ginny Shrivastava and the *National Forum for Single Women's Rights*. To date, about 1,25,000 women are affiliated to the forum. The national forum has provided support to *Gramya* and CWS for organising state-level trainings. Last year, with their support, we expanded our work in Khammam district and this year, we plan to use it for Warangal."

The advocacy on single women's issues has been taken up by the national forum with central as well as state governments. At the state-level, they have also taken up several initiatives with the *State Commission for Women*, Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. The national forum has also started a nation-wide survey of the housing status of single women which *Gramya-Pilupu* are carrying out in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana.

In addition, in Visakhapatnam, there are ActionAid interventions with focus on single fisher-women. Also, the group of single *Koya* (tribal) women,

deserted by non-tribal men, from East Godavari and Khammam (formed as *Natwan Sangham*) is being supported by ActionAid's ally, *Agriculture and Social Development Society* (ASDS). These interventions focus on the aspects of livelihoods, violence, social security, and dignity and identity of single women.

Another ally of ActionAid, *Association for Rural and Urban Needy* (ARUN), runs a shelter for the homeless named *Aman Nivas*. Several single women stay there; they do not just get a physical place to live in and protect themselves but also friends, psychological support, counselling, nutritious food, health-care and also several developmental opportunities to start their lives afresh.

Srilaxmi, 32, from Kasturipatnam, Vizag, was at the Ganesh temple near Secunderabad station the whole day with her son crying, when someone known to Pragathi, a social mobilizer of Aman Nivas Shelter Home, informed her about the same towards the late evening and asked her to take them along since they had no place to go.

Pragathi then got them to the Namalgundu Home. There, Srilaxmi narrated her story — that her husband, who was a pujari at a temple, was removed given his several bad habits, following which they had to face various problems. Then, one day, Srilaxmi's husband introduced her to someone saying she would have to work as a cook for him, and sent her along with him.

Everything went off well for a week but after that, the man started harassing her. He then informed her that she had been sold to him by her husband for Rs. 20,000. On resisting the harassment, she was badly beaten up and physically abused by him. She also thought of committing suicide but the thought of her son stopped her from taking that extreme step. Then, one fine day, she ran away along with her son and came to Secunderabad.

It was not easy for her to get over what all she had to go through. The Home team counseled her and motivated her to move on. She, thereafter, started

working as house mother at Lalapet Home. After a few months, however, she fell ill and came back to Namalgundu Home. After that, she did not want to go back to the Lalapet Home. She was then supported by the Home team to get a job at an organisation, Bhoomika. She is now happy working there and has also sent her son to the Veda Pathshala.

In **Karnataka** as well, ActionAid has been actively working towards strengthening single women's identity and has been demanding for their rights. Strong efforts are being made to address the stigma and discrimination attached to them, and the resultant social exclusion that they are subjected to. Along with its ally, *Swaraj*, ActionAid's Karnataka state programme has been holding intensive interactions and public consultations to politicize the various forms of oppression and violence against single women. As a result, nearly 75 such incidents have so far been effectively dealt with (from 15 villages and 8 slums of the working area).

In addition, the campaign led by the larger network of *Pension Parishad* (that ActionAid too is a part of) has been able to successfully influence the State to extend pension benefits to women oppressed by the institution of marriage, to *People Living with HIV/AIDS* and to transgenders. As a result, the state of Karnataka now has two new pension schemes — '*Manasvini*' for the women who are deserted and those unmarried till the age of 45, and '*Mitri*' for transgenders.

ActionAid's **Tamil Nadu** state programme has also been actively working with single women, especially in the fisheries context in association with its ally, *SNEHA*, and also as part of the *Forum for securing Lives and Livelihoods Rights of Coastal communities* (FLLRC). The consistent advocacy efforts have resulted in considerable gains being made on the fronts of rights and entitlements for fish-vending women, for example, allowance from the State during the lean season when fishing in sea is banned.

Organising single women has also been a priority for ActionAid in its **Madhya Pradesh** state programme. While the context of issues faced by

single women in the said state is different from that of other states (for instance, cases of caste-based sex work, sexual violence, witch-hunting etc. that are widely prevalent in Madhya Pradesh), the alliance continues to be around the common thread of single women's human rights.

Witch-hunting as a social practice whereby a woman is persecuted, harassed mentally, psychologically and physically, and in many cases, even murdered in the most heinous ways, is widely prevalent in several regions of Madhya Pradesh. Property-related matters and refusal of sexual advances have been found to be the main causes behind branding women as "witches" (through bribing "witch-doctors" called *Ojhas*). These women, as a result, are blamed for any misfortune or ailments befalling a community or the members of it and are brutally tortured.

ActionAid's long and close association with a local grassroots organisation in Sidhi district, the *Gram Sudhar Samiti*, exposed a number of cases of women suffering the brunt of "witch-hunting". In addition, ActionAid and its allies also conducted a study to make visible the prevalence of witch-branding of women as one of the heinous crimes against women. A report titled *Towards a Central Act: Witch hunting in Madhya Pradesh And Chhattisgarh* was, as a result, brought out, aiming to analyse the reasons for women being branded as "witches". It also looks at the issues of witch-branding from the point of view of domestic violence since the perpetrators, in most cases, have been found to be people from the family itself.

Gauravi, the *One-Stop Crisis Centre* for gender-based violence in Madhya Pradesh, has also been actively supporting the victims of witch-branding.

Moving on to **Jammu and Kashmir**, even the conservative estimates suggest that almost 70,000 people have been killed in the conflict and more than 8,000 people have disappeared in the Valley in the last two and a half decades (JKCCS, 2015), leaving tens of thousands of children orphaned and many women widowed. Women whose husbands have disappeared are termed as 'half widows' in the Valley. It is estimated that there are almost

1500 half widows in the Valley (APDP, 2011).

One of the consequences of the conflict has been its impact on the psychological and economic well-being of people. A high exposure to traumatic events with a fearful and insecure environment is known to be strongly associated with a high prevalence of mental health issues including depression, anxiety, *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* (PTSD), drug addiction and other severe mental health disorders. Mental illness is also known to be caused by factors such as poor socio-economic conditions, gender-based violence, malnutrition among children, and inaccessibility to health services, among others. The armed conflict in Kashmir has compounded the situation for the worse by also adversely affecting economic and livelihood opportunities, especially for poor and vulnerable populations.

A study conducted by ActionAid and *Institute of Mental Health And Neuro-Sciences* (IMHANS) in 2015 showed that 11.3 percent of the adult populations have developed severe mental health disorders in Kashmir. And this prevalence is much more among those who are directly affected by conflict — if any of their family members have been killed, tortured or disabled or have disappeared etc.

In addition, the government structures to deal with the high rates of mental illness in Kashmir are very limited and urban-based, and are mostly absent in the rural landscape. ActionAid and IMHANS study also found that among those suffering from mental health disorders, only 12.6 percent reported being able to access any medical treatment for their illness; and only 6.4 percent had sought treatment from mental health professionals. It must be noted that the inability to seek treatment also worsens the situation, and the illnesses that were mild, preventable and/or treatable drift to severe stages, also deteriorating the psycho-social functioning. Besides, the mental health issues just do not remain limited to the persons who suffer from them but also lead to inter-generational trauma through a cycle of increased stress in families, declining socio-economic conditions, health-care burden, anger, breakdown of families (therefore, support system), and inability to take care

of children, marital issues, domestic violence and so on. In worst case scenarios, this also leads to social isolation, and affects the economic productivity of people suffering from illness and their care-takers.

It is, therefore, very important that the people affected by conflict are enabled to start their lives afresh, and the impact of their experiences and exposure to violence is reduced. What is also important to realize is that mental health interventions are now being looked at as initiatives for peace-building, justice and reconstruction. It is important to break the cycle of violence and trauma, develop an interface between community and service systems, as well as help in institution-building, strengthening social support systems in communities, and re-integrating people suffering from mental health issues into the society.

With these considerations, ActionAid started its work on psycho-social issues in Kashmir in 2003 and continued it for 13 years. The psycho-social project was a community-based intervention on mental health with its main focus on building resilience and coping capacities of families under trauma going through mental health issues. The main objective of the programme was to provide care and support to the people experiencing mental health issues. This work was intended to create and demonstrate a community-based model for mental healthcare.

During the last 13 years of its intervention, ActionAid has reached out to almost 80 to 100 villages every year through its programme. The execution of the project was done in collaboration with local allies in J&K that have a long presence and experience of working in Kashmir. With growing experience, ActionAid evolved a comprehensive community mental health programme comprising promotive, preventive and curative dimensions of treatment to address mental health issues of people in the immediate and longer terms in ways which helped promote mental well-being and addressed mental health issues. Broadly, the intervention included providing care and support to trauma-affected people through psycho-social care-givers; counseling; psychiatric care and referral services;

providing livelihood support to normalize psycho-social functioning of the people affected by violence and trauma; creating awareness and building capacity of the community and grass-roots level government workers in addressing stress, trauma and psychosocial care; and building capacity of the local community to demand the various government schemes and entitlements. The idea was to create an environment where those who are affected by conflict can meet to ventilate and share their experiences to focus on restarting new ways of life afresh.

In the 13 years of work on psycho-social issues in Kashmir, ActionAid has reached thousands of people, mostly women, who were experiencing mental health issues. During the project cycle of 2014 and 2015, ActionAid provided counseling to 2,583 persons suffering from mental illness. Out of these, 1,505 (58.3 percent) had suffered from mental illness because of experiencing conflict-related traumatic events. Among them, 66.6 percent had developed a mental illness because of the loss of family member(s) to conflict (killed or disappeared). Almost 19 percent were those who were either personally tortured or any of their family members were tortured. Injuries, detention, property damage, friends/relatives getting killed, witnessing encounters or dead bodies etc. had also triggered mental illness in many cases.

In all this, women bear the brunt and are most affected. 61.3 percent of the conflict-affected people who were provided counseling during 2014 and 2015 were women. Qualified and trained counselors provided home-based counseling to these women and facilitated psychiatric treatment for those who needed it.

In addition, ActionAid has also helped the families who were poor and vulnerable and affected by conflict with opportunities and resources to build or enhance their livelihoods. In total, more than 2,500 families were provided with livelihood units under the project. This has not only helped these families to improve their incomes but has also acted as Occupational Therapy to help them cope with their mental issues, and develop social

dignity and a sense of empowerment. Most of these people covered were widows who had lost their husbands to conflict.

During 2014-15 project cycle, a total of 302 persons/families were provided livelihood units. 55 percent (172) of these were women and nearly half of them (85) were widows because of conflict. ActionAid's work also focused on facilitating their access to government schemes, especially the widow and old age pensions. During 2014-15, applications for 718 people were filed with the government, including for 227 women.

The most important factor in this entire process is that single women's issues have been mainstreamed into other ActionAid programmes, i.e. whether it is single women farmers, single *Dalit* women or Muslim women, or women living with HIV/AIDS, their issues are addressed with special focus within ActionAid programmes. And needless to say, all these efforts – small or big – are going a long way towards contributing to further strengthening ENSM.

Photo: Salina Wilson | ActionAid





IMPACT - STRONG AND VISIBLE

ENSM is a testimony to ActionAid India's sustained efforts to engage with single women through the human rights-based approach. Beginning at local, grassroots levels, the learnings have been integrated into national-level policy and advocacy efforts to further strengthen the rights and entitlements of single women. A constituency, which was hitherto unheard and unseen, is now recognised at several levels, including by the Government of India. Women are now federated and linked to national-level groups where they contribute to policy discussions. For example, in the state of Odisha, women, along with the state office of ActionAid, engaged with the government to ensure access to homestead land rights for 2388 women in Ganjam district. They also supported the process of policy research which fed into the policy for single women in the state. And much has been drawn in terms of insights from the work in Ganjam district.

Changes are very much visible at both policy and systemic levels. At the policy level, there is better recognition and access for single women for their rights and entitlements, while at systemic levels, societal attitudes are slowly changing and are becoming less harsh

and stigmatising.

It begins with a very basic requirement – distinct identity for single women which hitherto was severely

wanting. This gap has been addressed through ENSM and as a result, several single women have been able to get their identity papers. This, in turn, has helped them to get widow pensions, work under NREGA and several other benefits. Farm widow compensation, benefits specifically meant for women living with HIV and several other little known and lesser used benefits have been accessed by women owing to increased awareness and the ability to complete the sometimes very complex documentation required.

The process of empowerment has resulted in single women coming together to fight injustice fearlessly and with collective strength. Beginning by retaliating against injustice at home, women have become strong and aware enough to demand their rights and entitlements at official levels too. They back their demands with the right documentation, and use existing schemes and entitlements in an informed manner.

To cite an example, the Government of Gujarat had passed a GO (Government

Voices of strength

"Ekal Nari Shakti Manch is not only an organisation but a home and parents for victims of violence." – Bhani Ben Dala Bhai Bagda (village Chhadvada, Bhachau block, Kutch)

"To put a police officer behind bars in a power-driven, corrupt system marred by inertia was unimaginable. Ekal Nari Shakti Manch, however, made it possible." – Hina Akbar Hingorja (village Adesar, Rapar block, Kutch), a victim of rape by a police officer)

"I am an elected member of the Gram Panchayat in my village. Ekal Nari Shakti Manch and ActionAid not only helped me to dream but also strengthened me with knowledge and the courage to try to participate in local governance." – Sakina Haji Isa Mathda, a woman with disability and an elected member of her village Panchayat, Devaliya

"To get my 20 acres of land back from the local land mafia that had grabbed it seemed unachievable. Sneh Samuday and ActionAid helped me in my struggle by strengthening my resolve and helping me to fight for my rights." – Diwali Ben Hari Bhai Suthar

"Sneh Samuday gave me opportunities and also the platform because of which I have successfully come out of my kitchen where I used to stay confined, and have been able to make a difference in my own life as well as in the lives of others." – Jivoa Ben Kama Bhai Koli, Kutch Kaushalya Award winner and former president of Ekal Nari Shakti Manch

Order) to replace widow pension with skill training in 2003. In 2013, however, the government had to reverse the order. And ENSM played an important role in getting the decision rolled back; state-wide protests were organised and attention was drawn to the issue through the involvement of media and civil society activists. In addition to rolling back the decision, the government also revised the widow pension amount from Rs. 660 to Rs. 950.

ENSM has also succeeded in reducing the levels of discrimination, and the practice of meaningless traditions and taboos associated with single women. ENSM members have frequently come together to insist that their fellow members be allowed to participate in auspicious occasions as weddings, cradle ceremonies and other similar occasions which were traditionally denied to them. *Jati Panchayats*, which were the forerunners for injustices meted out to single women, are now neutralised, and in several cases, champion the cause of single women and ensure that the communities treat them better. ENSM members have also found representation and voice in *Jati Panchayats*. Muslim women have found the courage to fight unjust practices such as *iddat* and the indiscriminate use of *talaq*. They have worked with elders and religious leaders and enlisted their support, and have been able to provide relief to several women who were victims of harassment within their marriages.

“My husband and in-laws used to inflict severe violence on me, demanding dowry. When the suffering became intolerable for me, I decided to get separated from my husband and returned to my parents’ home.

Through ENSM’s support, I filed a case against my in-laws in the court, asking for maintenance. My in-laws, from their side, created huge pressure on me to withdraw the case, but I stood firm. This resulted in a Jati Panchayat meeting being called leading to the announcement of social boycott of my family. A penalty of Rs. 20,000 was also imposed on my family. And all this just because I dared to file a case against my in-laws!

With ENSM’s support, I sat on a hunger strike opposing the resolution

passed by Jati Panchayat and demanding that strict action be taken against the caste leaders for their unlawful decision. Following the immense pressure created by ENSM, the administration was compelled to get into swift action.

On the 7th day of the hunger strike, the District Collector ordered an inquiry and an action against the caste leaders. The caste leaders then came to meet us and assured us that the resolution passed in the Jati Panchayat would be immediately withdrawn. A police case was also filed against the leaders.” – Jaya Ben Dhawad (Gandhidham taluk)

The story of Sakina Ben, 42, from village Dudhai, Bhuj district, is in no way any less inspirational either. Sakina Ben was married off at an early age of 13 as a second wife to Karim Khan, 35. At the age of 16, she was already a mother. And by the time she turned 25, she was a mother of four.

After Karim Khan died of tuberculosis, she was expected to observe *iddat*. Amid the pain of losing her husband and the responsibilities of her four children, she observed *iddat* for a little over a month and then broke it since she had to also work to feed her family. She subsequently moved to her mother’s place who herself was a widow.

In 2001 came the earthquake and she lost everything she had, adding further to her woes. That is when she came in contact with ENSM. Over time, she internalised rights consciousness and started demanding for rights and dignity for single women. Joining ENSM, she took up the issue of PDS, mobilised other women around it and ensured that it was made functional for single women. This was her first victory.

Engaging herself deeper and longer with ENSM, Sakina Ben gradually became a leader herself. She also took up the causes of 35 disabled persons, *antyodaya* cards and government schemes. Also, 25 widows got widow pension because of her. Women victims of domestic violence were helped by her too. She made the local ENSM as a platform that women could come to if there were any incidents of domestic violence against them. Due to her

leadership and dynamism at working with the community addressing women's rights issues, she became the district-level president of ENSM too.

Sharing about the bitterness that widows in our society are subjected to, Sakina Ben recollects that before joining ENSM, when her daughter was to be married, she was kept completely isolated; she was not allowed to take part in any preparations for or ceremony of her daughter's wedding. But after coming to ENSM, she realised the need to resist and raise voice against these taboos. Thereafter, when her son and her second daughter got married, she actively participated in all ceremonies. She also mobilised other women around this issue and made them realise that no mother can bring bad luck to her children just because she is a widow. She taught them that complete independence doesn't just mean economic independence but also includes breaking shackles of all forms of social indignity.

"Alone, we may not have the strength to fight against unjust systems, but together, fighting as an alliance of the marginalised definitely helps. Once the capacities of the poor and the marginalised are built, they should take up their cause themselves. Leadership should come from them. Change begins with us and we can certainly bring it about," says Sakina Ben with her eyes sparkling with confidence. Isn't she a powerful symbol of courage of conviction?

enlisting friends | neutralising negative forces

Walking the talk, the community, along with ActionAid's support, has put in place, strategies to enlist the support of the extended community. As social institutions like families, caste *panchayats*, religious leaders and their institutions are the primary stakeholders and have a huge role in perpetuating the negative practices and blind beliefs which continue to challenge single women and deny them their rightful place in society, they have been addressed with care and sensitivity.

"It was important to make friends rather than adversaries of them because the communities at the end of the day had to stay together. We would per force withdraw one day and so, we placed a lot of emphasis on convincing them through discussions and consensus that single women deserved better. Very often, it was women of the households who were adding to the miseries of single women. They saw sense very soon. Thereafter, they were able to also convince the men," says Sushila.

Gomti Ben Chavda, an ENSM leader, has reason to be proud of herself. Her consistent efforts resulted in two women getting included into the Gandhidham Jati Panchayat.

Gomti Ben, at an ENSM meeting in Gandhidham, strongly raised the issue of vulnerability of women and the injustice faced by them, given patriarchal ideologies ingrained into the societal mind-sets. She mentioned that as a result of it, women are not involved in decision-making – neither within their families nor in the larger society. On that note, she brought up the issue of non-representation of women in Jati Panchayat as well. She, thereafter, put forth a proposal to demand women's representation in the Gandhidham Jati Panchayat.

Subsequently, a group of 5 women, under Gomti Ben's leadership, decided to attend the meeting of the all-male Jati Panchayat. When the men opposed their presence at the meeting, Gomti Ben confidently went on to share her concerns; mentioning that while the decisions of Jati Panchayat affect women in several ways, there is no representation of women in the said body. Her advocacy efforts finally resulted in the committee deciding to include two women members in the Jati Panchayat.

"It is a great victory for us, especially considering the opposition we had to face. When we approached members of the all-male traditional panchayat, they did not even listen to us. After a long debate with them and the pressure that women of Gandhidham block brought on them, women were included in the panchayat," says Gomti Ben. Subsequently, two more villages, Nakhtrana and Dudhai, also gave representation to women in their Jati Panchayats; with Nakhtrana Jati Panchayat going a step ahead and selecting a woman as the president.

Gomti Ben's efforts, inspiring though they are, did not yield results overnight. She had to work amid multiple challenges. The primary challenge in her case was her single woman status. Additionally, she was a Dalit, thereby making her a victim of dual marginalisation. But hers and the lives of others like her were to change with the formation of Sneh Samuday and ENSM, and their inclusion into it.

Gomti Ben is a happily married woman now. She and thousands of women like her have now transformed from being suppressed, tyrannised single women to empowered individuals with strong identities, capable of demanding and getting their place in society and becoming role models for others. In this process, they faced societal opposition, were derided and humiliated and yet, they continued to persevere.

Representation in various forums has enabled the critical numbers required for bringing pressure at various levels – from district to state to national – to collectively work towards bettering schemes and entitlements. Numbers have made a critical difference even while demanding policy changes at national level. ENSM, which started as a special initiative during the relief and rehabilitation phase post the earthquake in 2001 in Kutch, has been federated into a national forum known as RENAM (*Rashtriya Ekal Nari Adhikar Manch*) with membership from ENSM chapters from 13 states.

The success of the programme came from the fact that all challenges coming in the way were addressed through discussions, dialogue and consensus, and by drawing from the collective wisdom of the community. The very people who were creating problems became allies and contributed to change when a process of dialogue happened with them. As they say, when the effort is right, impact has to show through; and in this case too, it did.

ENSM - getting form and structure

ENSM is now a formally registered organisation in Kutch, and has a presence in 12 districts of Gujarat as well as a membership base of over 8000 single women. Having begun in Gujarat, it is now active in several states of India. There is a structure to the organisation which begins at the

very grassroots and progresses, pyramid fashion, from *taluk*, district and state levels up to the national level.

Committees are formed at each level with fair representation from single women from the various categories – widows, separated, divorced and deserted women, in recognition of their diverse needs. Further, equal representation is given to the different communities as Muslim, tribals etc. Some members from the lower-level committees, i.e. *taluk* committees, find representation in the district-level committees and so on. At the national-level forum, a few members from each state ENSM represent their respective states, thereby ensuring all voices are heard.

Monthly meetings are held at *taluk* levels to share progress, discuss problems and take measures to resolve them. These meetings are also used to broaden the membership base. ENSM meetings are also platforms for spreading awareness among new members on social issues that challenge them and sustain the movement beyond the founder members. The emphasis is on mitigating domestic violence, encouraging women to fight for land rights and abolishing ill traditions. There is an increasing demand from women who are not single to become members. ENSM, while not discouraging them, has decided to keep its focus directed on to the issues of single women.

networking | finding linkages

Networking and linkages have been an integral part of ENSM's work, and members look for opportunities to contribute to the discussions and initiatives for single women through as many avenues as possible. In this direction, some examples are as follows:

ENSM is a part of the state-level struggle in Gujarat against the government policy on corporate farming and also the *Women's Group on Women and Land Ownership* (WGWLO) network. 850 members have made applications for getting land from the government across about 60 villages.

ENSM, as a part of the *Gujarat Social Forum*, held a seminar at the *World Social Forum* entitled 'Another World is Possible' held in Mumbai in 2004. ENSM brought the focus on to single women's issues in the context of natural and man-made disasters. Members of ENSM shared with the audiences, their problems and how they became more vulnerable during the quake and the communal riots, also sharing how they faced those collectively through the ENSM platform.

At the 7th *National Convention for Women* held in Kolkata, around 3000 women from 21 states came together to share their work and strategies for strengthening women. Ten members of ENSM also actively participated in this convention.

Looking back, it has been an uphill task all through for ENSM. Their work has seen several challenges and change took time in coming for many reasons, some of them being as follows:

The issues of single women, wherever recognised, are still viewed through the lens of marriage. Only widows are perceived as being single and needing support, whereas the reality says that divorced, unmarried and deserted women have the same, if not more, severe problems.

Affected women themselves are resistant to change for fear of repercussion from their families and communities at large. Women are reluctant to raise their voice in *Jati Panchayat* meetings fearing retaliation from the community.

Fighting for access to property rights sometimes even poses a risk to the lives and limbs of single women. Families who deprive women of their rights to property fear that giving it to them would involve financial losses. Desertion of women and violence against women for participating in public activities was and continues to be a risk.

A constant challenge was one of keeping single women's issues as the

central focus and forcing change in their lives. The risk was that policy-makers would relegate it to the back-burner, and not see that specific rights and an enabling environment were required for single women. For example, an unmarried or a separated woman is not entitled to pension because it is called 'widow pension', even though her economic needs are no different from that of a widow.

Officialdom does not accept the representation of women, single women in particular in a majority of Indian villages, since women fighting for their rights are not received with comfort. This is so since they challenge the machinery when lapses or corruption happen or when they try to delay the process of dispensation of benefits under the various schemes.

Despite single women contributing to family income through both paid and unpaid work, and often being the main bread-winners for their families, they face ostracism and disrespect from their families, who enjoy their earnings but do not respect them. For women trying to change these equations, there is a risk from their own families and the communities around them.



SINGLE WOMEN CREATE A NATIONAL PLATFORM

Alliance of the marginalised is central to any mobilisation, and this mobilisation also could not remain isolated to Kutch or for that matter, Gujarat. There were mobilisations for rights of single women taking place across the country, women's rights activists, academics and those working directly with single women like Ginny Shrivastava of *Aastha Sansthan*, Udaipur. It was a community of practitioners located in their own spaces of social action. The marginalised and those working in solidarity with them had to come together at some point. And that point came; and it is very lucidly shared by Ginny, who also shares what role ActionAid played in this whole process of "coming together":

"I think ENSM began to have a role at the national level when in April, 2008, a small meeting was held at the house of Abha Bhaiya in New Delhi to talk about the need for a national platform of single women's organisations. Sushila Prajapati of ActionAid attended from Gujarat along with representatives from Rajasthan (myself), Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh and Abha representing Jagori Grameen from Himachal Pradesh. In that meeting, it was rightly decided that 5 women could not form a national platform and so, a larger meeting was necessary. Sushila volunteered to host a larger meeting to discuss the idea of a national platform. So, in July, 2008, a meeting, organised by ActionAid, was held in which there were 60 people present, 59 women and a man (Subhash Mendhapurkar from SUTRA, Himachal Pradesh). Single women leaders and representatives of supporting NGOs from Gujarat, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh (ActionAid contact) attended. It was decided there that a national platform was needed, and that it should be single women-led (and not NGO-led). It was felt that single women knew how to work and lobby in their states but they didn't know how to run a national platform since they didn't know what structures made up the central government. So, it was decided that a training would be organised. 5 single women leaders – from states where there were active

and well-organised single women's organisations – were selected for the training, i.e. from Rajasthan, Gujarat, Jharkhand, Himachal Pradesh; and 3 single women from states that were still in the beginning stages of organisation or from those that had not started yet (Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra). SUTRA, Himachal Pradesh, volunteered to host the training programme which was then held in September, 2008.

ActionAid was very much involved in getting the National Forum for Single Women's Rights started.

Once the national forum was formed in October, 2009, the structure was that there was a National Committee of 3 single women leaders selected by the state organisation/state forum. This National Committee was the leadership group of the national forum. Among the first selected 3 leaders of ENSM was Hansa Rathore who was a strong pillar of this leadership group. She took a lot of responsibility in the work of the national forum – in large Advisory Committee meetings, in joining delegations of single women leaders who met senior bureaucrats and ministers of the central government etc. She also went to other new states as a resource person to share experiences to help new states get organised. ENSM has continued to send strong women to the national forum leadership group; Sharifa Chippa is presently the treasurer of the Executive of national forum. There was one woman who herself was HIV-positive, who attended for over a year – helping the rest of the members understand the issues of single women living with HIV/AIDS."

At the national level, however, leaders from different organisations from the various states across India collaborate for collective leadership. This sets the stage for enlisting political support for policy-making as it evolves from the core leadership group. Collaboration also helps in cross-fertilisation of ideas and a stronger advocacy agenda. And leadership is of women from the

community and civil society. This is in line with ActionAid's philosophy of keeping its own identity low, and enabling strong visibility and identity for its local ally organisations and leaders.

voices reach the Planning Commission

ENSM's biggest achievement and that of the national forum's has been the difference it has made at the national level. The then Planning Commission of India recognised the issues of single women in 2011 and emphasised on the need to place a special focus on them. And in 2012, single women's issues were included while drafting the *12th Five-Year Plan (2012-2017)*¹¹. The Planning Commission also proposed special considerations for single women, particularly for those who are single by choice, under various government schemes in the 12th Plan. In addition to reserving a certain percentage of jobs for single women under centrally-sponsored schemes, the plan panel proposed promoting and strengthening federations of single women at the block and district level. The Planning Commission proposed that schemes like IAY and MGNREGA should earmark a percentage for single women. This was a shift from the position where single women were categorised broadly under family except in the case of a widow or a legally separated woman.

In April, 2015, a delegation from the *National Forum for Single Women's Rights* also had a meeting with the Union Minister for Women and Child Development, Ms. Maneka Gandhi, demanding that low-income separated and divorced women be given social security and other benefits being given to widows by the central government¹². "This large section of Indian women certainly needs the attention of the central government," said Sharifa Chippa categorically from the delegation (Ms. Chippa is from the ActionAid operational area in Gujarat).

The delegation also met with the Principal Secretary (Women and Child Development) and discussed the need for a special Witch-hunting Bill, given the fact that several single women face atrocities committed by the society, simply because of rumours that they are "witches". Ms. Nirmal

Chandel, President of the forum, pressed for allotment of land to the landless single women so that they get a place to live and for pursuing a livelihood.



NEW BEGINNINGS FOR SINGLE WOMEN

At the conclusion of this narrative, it is pertinent to revisit the main objective of the intervention for single women. While provision of relief services after the quake and communal riots was undoubtedly the seeding of the movement, the objective was much larger than the provision of food, shelter and clothing. The larger objective was to begin a process where women would begin to think of what citizenship and being part of a democracy really meant. The objective was to awaken in them a process whereby they would believe that they could be part of development, and that their individual homes and lives could be impacted by larger developmental processes.

The ActionAid teams had seen that women lived lives completely denied of life outside their homes – the social, political and economic lives. Their lives were in fact rife with internal issues which came from being confined to their homes, being tyrannised by their families who had abrogated any kind of responsibility or commitment towards their betterment and viewed them as child-bearing apparatuses and workhorses. That they were individuals and were entitled to the same rights under the Constitution of India was something that society and their families did not acknowledge or allow them to access.

Women on their part, having been born into subjugation, grown up tyrannised, and married into domination and torture, did not expect or believe there could be any better. Lack of education prevented them from getting a view of the world outside their homes. Voiceless, faceless and void of identity, their lives were filled with deprivation and derision.

Diwali Ben Parbat Bhai Vaghela, 30, and her sister-in-law, Santok Ben Kara Bhai Vaghela, are residents of Vijaynagar, Anjar, and belong to the Devipujak Vaghri community (till recently a Scheduled Tribe), a community more backward than the Dalits. They make and sell brooms as this is the traditional occupation of their tribe.

It was on February 19, 2006 that Diwali Ben and Santok Ben had come to Adipur from Anjar to sell their brooms. Around mid-day, when they were sitting under a tree and counting the amount they had earned upon selling their brooms for the day, a constable in a police jeep approached them. The constable got off the jeep and began beating them with a lathi for no reason. He dragged them to the police station accusing them of theft. After several hours and more torture, physical and mental, the police forcibly took away the money Diwali Ben and Santok Ben had with them, took their signatures on blank papers and set them free, threatening them with action if they disclosed what had happened to them. Badly wounded, they reached Anjar and went to the government hospital with the help of women leaders of their Self-Help Group (SHG). The medical reports revealed they both had fractures and severe injuries.

The doctor at the hospital, however, refused to admit them and treated them as out-patients. The Anjar police station refused to accept their FIR and asked them to go back to Adipur police station to register an FIR. Severely wounded, both women visited the Bhuj Civil Hospital and were admitted for treatment. However, they were then forced by the police to leave even that hospital.

Desperate for help, they approached ENSM which began a protest and informed the police by telefax. They also organised a rally (by taking prior permission). Around 300 women participated in the peaceful march, and a memorandum was prepared which demanded that an FIR be lodged immediately, the erring police officers be suspended and the compensation and medical treatment for Diwali Ben and Santok Ben be provided free of cost.

Despite the efforts of ENSM, the case is still pending and the FIR has not yet been lodged. Women participating in the rally too were hit brutally and injured badly. The efforts are on, however, and ENSM members have

several assurances from senior officials that action will be taken. This case is a strong demonstration of the collective strength that the members of ENSM have developed and the courage in them to take on the might of the administration, when the cause is right.

What ActionAid and ENSM did was to lift the veil. Almost like peeling the cataract which renders the eye opaque, ActionAid teams helped women peel the opacity from their psyches which had been created by years of societal oppression. What women then saw was a wondrous world they did not know existed. They then realised they lived in a country which had a vibrant democracy that granted the same rights to everybody. They learnt that there were policies, schemes and programmes that guaranteed them benefits of various kinds which could make their lives more meaningful. It only meant reaching out and accessing them. As mothers, they realised there were facilities to ensure safe motherhood and safe childhood for their children. Most importantly, they saw that the routine violence they were subjected to was not something they had to bear, and that they could fight it – through law, through officialdom and through community support. They could fight it with strength, and what is more, fight it on their own too. They also saw the strength that numbers brought with them. ActionAid had used ENSM to build the critical mass that movements require. By staying together and fighting each other's battles together, women saw that even the society that had at one time intimidated them so much was backing off. This helped them surge forward.

Women also saw that outside of their homes too (which were already filled with violence and harassment) was a world that could be good and bad, all at once. Corruption, discrimination and unfair practices were to confront them at every turn. But the difference was that they were now equipped to fight back. They knew the basic laws that protected them despite being completely unlettered. This began with the earthquake rehabilitation policies/GOs from the perspective of single women. And ActionAid's long-term investment in building the capacity of single women to build independent lives for themselves played a critical role in making this possible.

As Ginny says, "In 2001, after the earthquake in Kutch, a group of 10 women widowed by the quake and an ActionAid worker came to Rajasthan to learn from *Ekal Nari Shakti Sangathan* (which had been formed in 2000 in Rajasthan), and formed ENSM. To bring about a significant social change, even though it has taken 15 years, it is 'rapid social change', especially because single women in all these centuries had not come together to solve their problems. ActionAid's concern for single women is a sincere and a long-term one. It is wonderful that ActionAid has seen the inner strength and ability of low-income single women and catalysed them to become agents of change – not only for themselves but for the society as well. The national forum too is helping single women to come forth and organise themselves."

The pressure that was built at the national level can also be credited to the collective strength they displayed while lobbying for special recognition for single women. That there was a policy blackout when it came to issues of single women was brought home forcefully to the authorities by a collective of single women. This led to the specific inclusion of single women in the 12th Plan of the Planning Commission. Membership in the *National Forum for Single Women's Rights* built confidence and self-esteem among the women of ENSM. As they met and interacted with other women who had traversed the same route and had triumphed, their confidence levels also soared and they came home with renewed energy and resolve to make a bigger difference. It also opened up policy space for the issues of single women. Building an organisation of single women has, thus, come a long way and reached its intended milestone in the history of realising rights of single women in India.

Here is what Ginny had to say on what direction ENSM needs to take in order to sustain the gains already achieved:

"It was reported in a General Body meeting that the Manch now works in 12 out of the 33 districts of Gujarat, and 18 blocks. As of September, 2015, ENSM had 10,514 members. Outside Rajasthan, Gujarat was the

first state to get single women organised. However, other states have a much broader spread – Himachal Pradesh – 7 out of 13 districts, and 13,815 members (August, 2015); Jharkhand – 20 out of 23 districts and 45,294 members; Rajasthan – all 33 districts and 48,105 members.

ENSM is very strong in Kutch. It should now work to strengthen and expand its work in the non-Kutch areas of Gujarat as well as the rest of India. It is important to broaden the membership base of ENSM as there is strength in numbers. Low-income single women would subsequently get strengthened and would not feel alone when they are part of a group of women with similar life experiences.

It is important to understand in-depth, the problems of different sub-groups of single women, i.e. single women with disabilities, aged single women, single women who are victims of violence and single women with dependent children. This will help sensitise the leaders for advocacy, outreach and other activities at local levels. ENSM has already held a special convention of Muslim single women. The Manch can join other Muslim women's organisations in bringing changes to the cruel and oppressive customs and laws that concern Muslim women.

Single women must be linked to the Livelihood Mission skill-training programmes as well as the training programmes of other NGOs where possible. ENSM must also place focus on networking with organisations that deal with particular issues, for example, women's land rights etc. ENSM must also become part of national campaigns such as Right to Food, Mahila Kisan Adhikar Manch, Pension Parishad etc."

Amrita Patel, congratulating ActionAid, mentions that ActionAid's work has indeed gone a long way in adding to the larger body of work on understanding the issues of single women. "This should be used for advocacy at national as well as the state levels. Evidence-based research leading to policy advocacy should be the approach and the activities of the organisation at state-level in this matter could be strengthened. Political will is also a strong input and in this regard, the organisation could take up

advocacy. Engaging with the state-level policy-makers and government officials in a more sustained and focussed way would go a long way in putting the single women discourse on the main agenda," adds Amrita.

Rukmini Rao also has words of encouragement and some rich suggestions on the way forward for ActionAid. "ActionAid has played an active role in promoting the rights of single women for housing and kitchen gardens in Odisha. While it has been supporting grassroots work quite well nationally, it should work towards strengthening its advocacy efforts at all levels. It should consider working closely with the national forum. If support can be provided for additional training for state and national office-bearers, it would be most useful," says Rukmini, adding, "ActionAid could also carry out studies on the status of single women on issues as access to land rights, access to social security schemes and MGNREGA among others. We should ask for special schemes for single women and for their inclusion in all other social welfare measures, aiming towards universalisation of social security. Linking with UN organisations such as *UN Women* would also be of help."

Taking a step towards recognising issues of single women, the union government's *Draft National Policy for Women – 2016* suggested several enabling factors such as legislation, economic reform and other measures to facilitate the process of aiding single women. ActionAid, in collaboration with the *National Forum for Single Women's Rights*, contributed to the draft policy with further inputs and informed perspectives on the rights of single women [[Annexure VI](#)].

Serving as bedrock of the intervention is the question of sustainability. ActionAid and its allies, and most importantly, the women who have been impacted, keep concerns of sustainability as the first pre-requisite. "We want to continue the good work that has begun. As women who have tasted independence and liberty, we cannot see our sisters being pushed back into lives of poor quality. We have to be strong and ensure that these early gains do not go away. So, we will ensure all our lives that we stand strong and that all women around us, regardless of caste or creed, benefit from our strength. We must continue creating leaders," says Balu Ben.

ENDNOTES

- 1 <http://www.yourarticlelibrary.com/political-science/manus-opinion-on-the-status-of-women/40145/>
- 2 <http://www.census2011.co.in/sexratio.php>
- 3 <http://unicef.in/PressReleases/227/Female-foeticide-in-India#sthash.Y8jynveD.dpuf>
- 4 http://www.ideasforindia.in/article.aspx?article_id=105#sthash.R0qrqjt2.dpuf
- 5 <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Women-have-only-11-representation-in-Indias-Parliament/articleshow/26384347.cms>
- 6 *Towards a Feminist Politics? The Indian Women's Movement in Historical Perspective* (by Samita Sen)
- 7 Upon the husband's death, or divorce, or the termination of marriage contract through Khul'a (divorce at the instance of the wife), or the annulment of the marriage by some other manner, the woman has to remain staying in one house for a specified period of time. Until this period expires, it is not permissible for her to go elsewhere. The act of passing this period is called *iddat*.
- 8 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2001_Gujarat_earthquake#cite_note-USGS-6
- 9 An organisation representing a clan or a group of related clans in northern India
- 10 <http://womensenews.org/story/equalitywomen%E2%80%99s-rights/100108/indias-single-women-resist-stigma-demand-rights>
- 11 <http://www.slideshare.net/PlanComIndia/womens-agency-and-child-rights-in-the-12th-plan>
- 12 <http://www.ndtv.com/india-news/ngo-meets-union-minister-maneka-gandhi-to-see-benefits-for-single-women-756397>

ANNEXURE I: TABLE OF NETWORKS AND COLLABORATIONS BETWEEN ENSM AND OTHER ORGANISATIONS

S. NO.	NAME OF THE PLATFORM	SOCIAL GROUP/THEME	LOCAL/SUB-REGIONAL/REGIONAL/NATIONAL
1	<i>Anna Suraksha Adhikar Abhiyan</i>	Right to Food and Livelihood	Regional
2	<i>Zamin Bachao Andolan</i> (Initiated)	Right to Land and Livelihood	Regional
3	<i>National Single Women Manch</i> (Initiated)	Women's Rights	National
4	<i>National Right to Food Campaign</i>	Right to Food and Livelihood	National
5	<i>Saurashtra Kutch Network on Violence against Women</i>	Women's Rights	Regional
6	<i>Women and Land Ownership Rights of Women</i>	Women's Rights	Regional
7	<i>BAAG</i>	Child Rights and Land Rights	Regional
8	<i>Viklang Adhikar Manch</i>	Right to Dignity	Regional
9	<i>Dalit Vanchit Adhikar Sangathan</i>	Right to Dignity	Regional
10	<i>Mahila Swaraj Abhiyan</i>	Women and Governance	Regional
11	<i>National Fisher-folk Federation</i>	Right to Livelihood	National
12	<i>Lok Adhikar Manch</i> (Initiated)	<i>Dalit</i> , Tribal and Muslims	Local
13	<i>Viklang Adhikar Sangathan</i> (Initiated)	Right to Dignity	Local
14	<i>Campaign against Fascism</i>	Peace and Human Security	National
15	<i>WE CAN Campaign</i>	Women and Girls' Rights	Regional
16	<i>Zamin-Rozgari Adhikar Andolan</i>	Right to Livelihood	Regional
17	<i>Gramin Mazdoor Sabha</i>	Right to Livelihood	Regional
18	<i>GSNP+</i>	PLWHA (People Living With HIV/AIDS)	Regional
19	<i>KMVS and Abhiyan</i>	Women and Land Rights and Governance and Single Women	Local

ANNEXURE II: PROVISIONS UNDER THE CONSTITUTION OF INDIA FOR RIGHTS SPECIFICALLY AIMED AT EQUALITY FOR WOMEN

- ⇒ Article 14, the right to equality, which grants equality before the law, and equal protection by the law for women;
- ⇒ Article 15 (1) prohibits discrimination against any citizen by the state "on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them";
- ⇒ Article 15 (3) also allows for special provision for women and children by enabling the State to make affirmative discriminations in favour of women;
- ⇒ Article 16 guarantees that no citizen shall be discriminated against in matters of public employment on the grounds of sex;
- ⇒ Article 42 directs the State to make provision for ensuring just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief;
- ⇒ Article 51 (A) (e) to renounce any practices derogatory to the dignity of women.

ANNEXURE III: SPECIFIC ACTS AND LAWS THAT PROTECT WOMEN'S RIGHTS

- ⇒ Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961 (28 of 1961)
- ⇒ Commission of *Sati* (Prevention) Act, 1987 (3 of 1988)
- ⇒ Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956
- ⇒ Eve-teasing (New legislation)
- ⇒ Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986
- ⇒ Sexual Harassment (Sec. 509, Indian Penal Code)
- ⇒ Domestic Violence Act, 2005

ANNEXURE IV: *THIS FEISTY WOMAN FROM MARATHWADA IS CHANGING THE FATE OF THOUSANDS OF SINGLE WOMEN*

(<http://drought.dnaindia.com/ground-zero/feisty-woman-marathwada-changing-fate-thousands-single-women>)

This feisty woman from Marathwada is changing the fate of thousands of single women

By Aparna Shukla and Yoshita Sengupta | Photo(s): Manoj Paateel | Thu, 2nd, Jun 2016



“I told them to pay our dues or the fire will ruin everything it touches,” says Sunanda Bhanudas Kharrate dramatically, standing tall, draped in a saree and with bright red sindoor, spread a little above her forehead.

She was recalling the mashaal (fire torch) yatra to Osmanabad's collector's office, which she led, to demand the unpaid MGNREGA dues of hundreds of single women like her. "When I went there, about 30 guns were pointed at me. This is it for me, I thought," she claims. "I told the Tehsildaar, 'If you clear the dues today, the fire will burn out; if you don't then I can't guarantee what it will touch and destroy,'" she adds.

Sunanda for several years worked as a labourer in farms and at MGNREGA projects, before finally joining an Osmanabad-based NGO named Paryyaay. Today, the little over-the-top and flamboyant Sunanda is the leader and voice of over 750 single women in Vashi and Kallam in Osmanabad, Maharashtra.

In the few years of working with a structured NGO, she has managed to get 1000 aadhar cards and more than 1500 ration cards made for single women, over and above getting them water, MNREGA jobs etc.

Her biggest achievement, however, was to lead a three year-long struggle and get the government, for the first time in history, to sanction a separate budget for single women. "The (Rs.) 20 lakh that the government has sanctioned in the latest budget would be utilized to help single women start small businesses. These women don't even have houses. They don't have land on their names and they have children to take care of. It's about time they get their rights," she says.

A single woman herself, Sunanda lost her father at the age of five and has been fending for the family ever since. "I started working as a child. From getting food on the table, to securing the future of my family, I did everything by myself; without a support system," she says.

Her family married her off at the age of 16. However, she never went to live with her in-laws. "My husband would call me and insist that I take a share in my brother's 30 acre-land. I would be baffled," she recalls. Why should I take his land? For you? You married me for money, she'd ask him. "Sit, stand up, get me water; we (women) are treated as mere properties. That was not what I wanted; I had decided that at a young age. I didn't feel the need to depend on anyone, but myself," says Sunanda, whose husband is now married to another woman and has two kids.

Why does she wear a mangalsutra and apply sindoor, we ask? "When I didn't wear the sindoor or the mangalsutra or these two dozen green bangles, men would look at me like I'm a food item. When I would sit in the bus, men, as old as 80, would touch me inappropriately. I endured all of that. It's very dirty and it's something that is never going to change. No matter how many more Sunandas come and go. I have decided to be what they want me to be and fight the system from within. My only agenda is to make single women stand on their own feet and I will continue to work towards it all my life," she signs off.

ANNEXURE V: *WOMEN TRANSFORMING INDIA* | TOP 12 CHANGE-MAKERS



<https://blog.mygov.in/announcing-the-winners-of-the-women-transforming-india-contest/>

The *NITI Aayog*, in collaboration with *MyGov* and the United Nations in India, had organised the '*Women Transforming India*' contest. The primary aim was to make heard lesser-known stories that celebrate the indomitable spirit of women who have made a difference. The contest was launched to mark the celebration of *International Women's Day, 2016*.

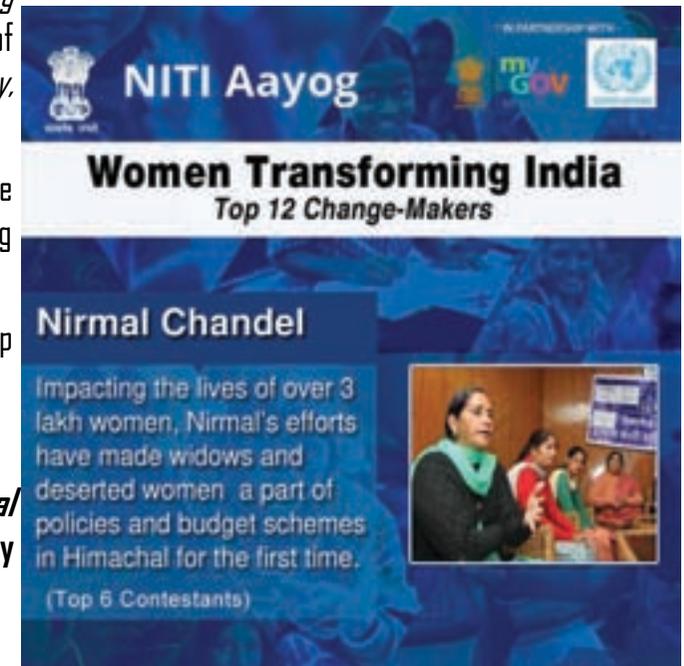
Citizens were invited to nominate inspiring success stories of women change-makers, in the form of essays. The focus of these stories was on women breaking new ground, empowering communities and/or challenging stereotypes in areas inclusive but not limited to economic, social, cultural, and health and environmental issues.

From nearly 1000 entries, 25 entries were shortlisted and put to poll on *MyGov* from April 16 to May 22, 2016. The top entries were then presented for evaluation to an eminent jury constituted by the *NITI Aayog*.

Post evaluation, the jury declared six winners and six runners-up.

Ms. Nirmal Chandel, President, *National Forum for Single Women's Rights*, (also State Coordinator of *Ekal Nari Shakti Sangathan*, Himachal Pradesh) was selected as one of the top 6 '*Women Transforming India*' by the NITI Aayog.

The winners were honoured at an awards ceremony held on September 9, 2016 at Teen Murti Bhavan, New Delhi.



ANNEXURE VI: SUBMISSIONS TO *MINISTRY OF WOMEN AND CHILD DEVELOPMENT, GOVERNMENT OF INDIA*

Following the release of *Draft National Policy for Women – 2016* by the *Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India*, in the month of May, 2016, inviting comments on the same, the *National Forum for Single Women's Rights* and ActionAid held intense and exhaustive deliberations with all relevant stakeholders, with a specific focus on single women's issues and demands.

Subsequent to these discussions, the following documents were developed jointly by the Forum and ActionAid:

Section-wise suggestions vis-à-vis single women to be factored in under the various sections of the Policy

Draft of a separate comprehensive section in the Policy on '*Rights of Single Women*'

In case a separate section on single women isn't possible to be included in the Policy for some reason, two draft paragraphs (one long and the other one briefer – for the Ministry to choose from), one of which could be adopted by the Ministry

These documents were then duly submitted to the ministry for their consideration.



actionaid

20 June 2016

Dear Friends in the Ministry WCD,
Government of India,
New Delhi

We are sending suggestion for how to make the Draft National Policy for Women 2016 even better! The suggestions came from a national consultation of people working with Single Women for the past several years. It was organized jointly by ActionAid and the National Forum for Single Women's Rights.

We are sending you 4 documents.

1. A draft of a proposed separate sub-section under "Priority Areas" which we have titled "Rights of Single Women"
2. A note of suggestions of the importance of a separate section, and alternatives
3. A note of suggestions to empower Single Women for their rights, for all of the sections of the Draft Policy
4. A chart of Census data for 2001 and 2011, with notes

We look forward to working with your Ministry in the years to come – making the Policy come to life!

On behalf of all friends who drafted the material we are sending you,

Sincerely,
Dr. Ginny Shrivastava – National Forum for Single Women's Rights
Ravi S.K. – ActionAid

Attachments - 4

1. Proposed Separate Sub-section on Single Women
2. Single Women In the Draft Policy
3. Whole Document Section-wise suggestions for Single Women
4. 2001 and 2011 Census of India Single Women Figures

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Section-wise suggestions vis-à-vis single women to be factored in under the various sections of the Policy

Housing

Housing registration should be done at the time of marriage registration. It has twofold benefits: Both the registrations should be made compulsory to establish the identity of the woman after marriage. The rights of the land/house will then be shared by the man and the woman equally from the time of marriage which will guarantee that the woman won't face any trouble when she's subjected to vulnerable situations.

Single Women can be given a house/flat to live in till she dies, and the flat is then transferred to another single women. In this way, nobody gets the possession of the house but can still have a secure and safe shelter to live with dignity.

Housing loans could be given with a "deferred repayment" policy, so that the Single Women could have their house and repay later in life when they had saved money to make the re-payment

The government needs to make a law that requires all big builders of multi-storied multiunit housing complexes, to make modest living accommodation units for Single Women in 25% of the floor space of the complex. (Just like private schools reserve 25% of the seats in their schools for Weaker Section children.) The high paying residents will benefit from the proximity of many Single Women living on the property – household work assistance, child care, beauty parlour, sewing and stitching, etc. The Single Women will benefit from getting appropriate housing to rent or purchase, as well as employment opportunities.

Health

Sections (viii) under Health, add – with a special attention and provision for interventions with Single Women, since they suffer a lot of mental stress from the marginalization and discriminations against them. (Section on National Mental Health Policy (2014). There should be provisions made for the counseling of single women because most of them undergo a trauma due to the attached stigmatization, depression and discrimination attributed by the society.

Bamasha Card – in the name of women, and get free services, loans, medicines, suggested for the whole country, just like Rajasthan

Education

There is a provision for distance education in the Policy. However there is no mention of the fees of such education which should be incorporated and moderated because it is not possible to pay high fees.

Distance learning shouldn't only be available for university level study, but distance learning for 8th, 10th and 12th standards too, so that the woman can resume studies from

the point she's left them. A separate point in the National Policy should be included for the distance education of the single/marginalized women.

There should be efforts to bridge the knowledge gap for women. If they want to resume their studies, then there should be bridge courses to enable them to study further.

Scholarships for the children of Single Women, and for Single Women themselves when and for the level of education necessary must be made available. Children of Single Women must get scholarships / fellowships for higher education.

Economy

Point ii) under "Raising Visibility" under the Economy section ... Ensuring *at least Minimum Wage Payment levels (add this)*, pay parity, satisfactory conditions of work are critical subjects for insecurity for women particularly in the informal employment.....

Agriculture

Unpaid agriculture work is also unpaid work along with home work and care of family members Work

Equality between men and women's wages a must!

(v) Land distribution of public land, a certain percentage of land should be reserved for Single Women. 30% should be reserved for Single Women

Krishi Mitra model from Kerala should be studied and perhaps replicated nation-wide. Women Farmers must be included as Krishi Mitras wherever possible

Industry

Gender stereotyping should not be used in conducting courses for women. Non-traditional work for women should be included in course lists for training of women in skill development

Service sector

Include more women in Police, Postal Services, Armed Forces, and this will open livelihood opportunities for Single Women too. Employment in these sectors can provide many jobs for Single Women

Violence Against Women

Devdasis and Witches – not much about these problems are included in this Policy. Needs to be there, to bring empowerment and rights to these women too.

Social Security / Violence Against Women

Maintenance laws – and alternative of government fund for payment, and government responsibility to get the money out of the husband.

Family Court system needs to be looked at, and improved. Cases take too long.

A Court for Single Women's Cases, just like SC / ST courts should be established. Land rights – Land rights in Succession Laws exist for Single Women, but brothers-in-law still take their land, resulting in land alienation of Single Women's land. The relatives wanting to occupy the land legally owned by Single Women use Psychological blackmail to get possession.

Hindu Succession Act – The legal right of daughters to father's land, regardless of whether she is divorced, separated or widowed, must be clear. At the moment it is Problematic. Other relatives subject her to emotional blackmail to give up her land rights.

We suggest that the National Policy for Women 2016 should state that divorced Single Women have land, property rights to ½ of all jointly used property and items.

If a Single Woman is living on land for which there are no land ownership papers with her, the law should be that she cannot be displaced until there is some compensation arrangement / rehabilitation alternative. In urban areas it also is a big problem – coming to the Smart City time.

There is a law for "Maintenance" for separated and divorced women, to be paid by the husband. But husbands never pay. Legislation is needed such that when a Family Court awards Maintenance to a women, the monthly amount will be paid from a central / state fund of the government – and the government will recover the money from the separated/divorced husband.

Pension schemes for Single Women must be universal – all Single Women are eligible unless they pay income tax.

Proposing a Separate Section in the *National Policy for Women – 2016* on "*Rights of Single Women*"

The Need for a Separate Section

In the original Draft Policy, the special mention of Single Women is under "Emerging Issues". In many respects, the issue of Single Women is not "emerging" – there have been widows and Single Women around for centuries!

The number of Single Women (approximately 15% of the female population of India) is so large that a separate section is warranted – over 87 million women!

The National Policy for Women 2016 will be read by many people in various government ministries, and in civil society organizations, in companies and the corporate sector,

by media people – and information is needed in the Policy to spell out (a) who Single Women are (b) why there is a need to work with them (c) the special policy direction for programmes and action needed to address the kinds of marginalization and vulnerabilities they face. Then, the recommendations for work with Single Women included in the various sections and sub-sections of the Policy will be understood.

Suggestion on Where the New Section – “Rights of Single Women” - Should Come

Suggest that this new section (drafted below) should come **under Section 5, i.e. “PRIORITY AREAS”, and come after Sub-section V., i.e. “Violence Against Women”**. Hence, it would be **Sub-section VI.: “Rights of Single Women”**. The Sub-sections following that would be re-numbered accordingly.

Proposed Draft of the New Section on “Rights of Single Women”

VI. Rights of Single Women

In order to enable Single Women to claim their rights and benefits from empowerment initiatives, the society will have to change the perception of Single Women as being helpless, vulnerable women who are in need of welfare and protection. Single Women are strong women who survive and bring up their children in spite of the marginalization that society lays upon them. Measures will be taken to facilitate the empowerment of Single Women, and to remove the “pitiful” and “helpless” stereotypes of Single Women wherever they exist.

Resources and efforts will be made available so that Single Women can organize into Mutual Help Groups to support each other in accessing rights and entitlements, and remove the feeling of isolation, of being alone. Single Women are all too often not wanted by their marital nor by their natal family members, thereby leading to an extremely insecure and vulnerable life for them, in addition to the feeling of being alone and the problem of not knowing where to go in order to live with dignity and livelihood security.

The definition of Single Women that will be accepted in the country -- Those women who are not living with another person in a marriage or a marriage-like relationship. Single Women include:

Widows

Legally divorced women

Unmarried (all females aged 18 or more, regardless of age)

Separated – a woman who has been living without her life partner for 3 years or more. Certification and necessary process may be as under:

In villages, and where possible, a self-declaration statement verified by 2 local government workers (e.g. teachers, nurses, *anganwadi* workers, postmen)/ elected representatives who know the situation of the woman resident of the *Gram Panchayat* in their work area. The concerned government officer gives the

certificate of "Single Woman".

In cities/towns, a self-declaration verified by 2 neighbours who verify, in writing, to the Ward Councilor. On recommendation of the Ward Councilor, the concerned government officer gives the certificate of "Single Woman".

Missing husband/"half-widow" (no contact for 1 year)

A missing person FIR is registered; and 1 year from the date of FIR registration, the woman is entitled to get a certificate from a concerned government officer certifying her as a "Single Woman". In rural areas, if no FIR has been filed, the *Sarpanch* and 2 other village residents or government workers (e.g. teachers, nurses, *anganwadi* workers, postmen) who know the situation (the village people know for how long the husband has not been in touch with his wife) give, in writing, that the woman has not had any contact with her husband/partner for 1 year or more. The concerned government officer, after receiving this documentation, will issue the certificate of "Single Woman".

The numbers of Single Women are so large that it is necessary to make special laws, policies, rules and schemes to facilitate their empowerment and well-being. According to the 2011 Census, there are 8,79,80,285 Single Women in India, and 2,68,88,926 Female-Headed Households. The numbers of Single Women are growing fast; in 10 years, the female population increased by 18.3% but there was a 39.11% increase in the number of Single Women. The number of Never-Married Women over the age of 35 has seen a sharp increase of almost 66 %. Single Women make up 14.97% of the female population of India.

To enable equal participation of Single Women in all walks of life, resources will be made available for Single Women to organize for mutual help, to undergo skill-training programmes, to live in decent affordable housing, to live at every age and stage with necessary social security to insure a life of dignity.

Legislation will address problems faced by Single Women, including making it possible for Single Women to have land and property in their own names, and receiving the maintenance that the law provides.

Lesbians and trans-sexuals living without a partner will also be considered as "Single Women"; and they will be eligible for all government benefits that Single Women are eligible for, such as skill-development, housing, social security benefits etc. which enable them to live with dignity.

Legislation which removes lesbian, gay and trans-sexual relationships from the category of "illegal actions" will be supported.

Violence against Single Women takes many forms – physical, mental and sexual. Single Women suffer from all three, even while living in the home of a natal or marital family member. When Single Women have the support of a collective, the chances of dealing effectively with violence are increased.

If, for any reason, a separate section is not possible/accepted, then, at least a paragraph like the following must replace the draft Clause (v) under Section 6,

i.e. “EMERGING ISSUES” (Page 17 of the Draft Policy):

v. To recognize special needs of Single Women including widows, separated, divorced, never-married and deserted women. Single Women can transform the society if their potential is released. Since at present, Single Women are marginalized and vulnerable, if the State invests in their empowerment and in all ways enables them to claim their rights, they will be able to take advantage of the social, educational, economic, health and political entitlements that are due to them. This process will involve special training programmes, opportunities to work collectively, and accessing appropriate social security resources. Single Women, numbering about 15% of the female population of the country, have for too long remained suppressed. This Policy will enable them to come forward, and take their rightful places as strong and active agents of change, and contributing citizens of the country.

And if, for any reason, the above paragraph is too long or is otherwise not found acceptable, and a separate section on Single Women is not possible, at the very least, the following draft statement must replace the draft Clause (v) under Section 6, i.e. “EMERGING ISSUES” (Page 17 of the Draft Policy):

v. To recognize special needs of Single Women including widows, separated, divorced, never-married and deserted women. Comprehensive social empowerment mechanisms will be designed to enable Single Women to claim their rights. These mechanisms will include organizations of single women which will enable them to work with the government in addressing their vulnerabilities, creating opportunities and improving their overall conditions.

The statement existing currently in the Draft Policy under “EMERGING ISSUES” is not the best because it talks about “social protection” when the whole Draft Policy is stressing on “Claiming Women’s Rights and Empowerment”! Single Women don’t need “protection”, they rather need to claim their rights and be empowered! Also, the current draft Clause (v) in the Draft Policy does not even give a hint to the importance of “Organization of Single Women” in the rights-based empowerment approach. Therefore, there is a need to re-write and expand the existing draft statement. However, we do appreciate that a separate point was made to highlight Single Women in the Draft Policy and to include Single Women in the various sections of the Policy – under Health, Education, Economy etc.

SOME STORIES THROUGH PICTURES

STORIES OF STRUGGLE...

OF STRENGTH...

OF TRIUMPH...

OF SINGLE WOMEN...



Shakuntala's husband, Manulal, committed suicide by hanging himself from a tree in front of his house. The family would farm on 12 bighas of land, of which 2 bighas was their own and the rest was on contract. Manulal was under a debt of Rs. 50,000.

According to Shakuntala, he was under depression for very long. Finally, on seeing even the crops getting destroyed by the unseasonal rain, he lost his last hope and ended his life. The family got Rs. 30,000 as compensation for the death of Manulal.

Shakuntala is left with two sons and two daughters.

Photo: Mansi Thapliyal | ActionAid



Durga with her four children at the farm in Kharoch village where her husband died.

Durga's husband, Bachilal, died of shock on seeing their crops having gotten destroyed as a result of unseasonal rains. They had 6 bighas of land which was on contract.

Her husband had borrowed money from the local moneylenders and owed them an amount of over Rs. 1 lakh.

Photo: Mansi Thapliyal | ActionAid



Belpatri with her son, Rakesh, and daughter, Rekha, next to the tree where her husband strangled himself



Sharifa Banu is a widow, working in a plastic processing factory to feed her 4 children.



Farida Sheikh is a widow with two children, currently living with her mother in Jamalpura. Her husband died of brain hemorrhage a few years ago. She makes around 6 dozen garlands out of threads everyday which earns her Rs. 50 to cover her living costs.



Munsuri (Rajasthan) sleeps on the streets after her husband remarried and abandoned her. She faces several threats everyday including men proposing her for sex. She has two teenaged sons who used to attend a learning centre run by an organisation supported by ActionAid.



Sashi Jani, from Usta village in the Ganjam district of Odisha, is a widow with two sons and a daughter. Following Cyclone Phailin, she lost an acre each of paddy field and vegetable field. The cyclone also left her house partially damaged. On the fateful night when the cyclone hit, she was alone at home and the roof of her house got blown away with the heavy winds. She then started living with her neighbours.

Phailin, as we know, left behind a huge trail of destruction, knocking down lakhs of homes, affecting nearly 90 lakh people and destroying paddy crops worth Rs. 2,400 crore. Following the cyclone, ActionAid India provided relief and rehabilitation support to those affected.



Nani Ben, from Vasodara village in Sanand block of Ahmedabad, Gujarat, is a widow and has a daughter.

After Nani Ben's husband, Baldev Bhai, committed suicide (in 1989), she lived with her in-laws for seven years. They, however, were against their granddaughter being sent to school and wanted her rather to stay at home and learn household chores. Following some disagreements, Nani Ben, who wanted to get her daughter educated, moved back to her family's home with her daughter. Since then, she has been fighting for her share in her late husband's land. With no financial means to fight the case, Nani Ben also tried to resolve the issue through the Gram Panchayat but her in-laws continued to deny her her share on the grounds that she doesn't have a son.

Nani Ben's daughter is now married.

Nani Ben lives with her parents and at times, works as a daily wage worker. She receives widow pension from the Gujarat government.



Kamala Ben, from Sukidevi village in Santrampur block of Panchmahal district, Gujarat, is a widow with 2 sons and a daughter.

Kamala Ben's father-in-law, after the death of her husband, Yashvant Patelya, decided to divide his agricultural land. Her husband's four brothers received more shares of land than her, on top of it, her share hasn't yet been transferred to her name. Her father-in-law will only transfer the land into one of her son's name when he turns 18.

Kamala Ben has been granted permission to farm on the land where she grows rice and wheat crops.



Jami Ben, from Lekhamba village in Sanand block of Ahmedabad, Gujarat, is a widow with 3 daughters (all married).

Jami Ben's husband, Raghu Bhai, died some years ago due to heart failure. After his death, Jami Ben's in-laws asked her to move back to her mother's house and to hand over their granddaughters to them. Jami Ben refused to give them her daughters and moved out of her in-laws' house along with her daughters.

She asked her in-laws for a share from her husband's land they refused since she didn't have a son. Her brothers-in-law, though willing to allow her to cultivate land on the family farm, refused to give her any share. When Jami Ben expressed her unhappiness over this decision, an argument broke out, resulting in both herself and her daughters being beaten up.



Shanta Ben, from Sukidevi village in Santrampur block of Panchmahal district, Gujarat, is a widow with 2 sons and 2 daughters.

After her husband, Ramesh Bhai Khant's death in 2003, Shanta Ben asked her father-in-law, Sarabhura Khant, to give her a share from her husband's land for farming. Her father-in-law refused since he wanted the land only to be in his grandsons' names once they turn 18. He didn't transfer it into Shanta Ben's or his granddaughters' names.

In 2011, a partition was held and Ramesh's 3 brothers and 1 sister received their share of the land. Shanta Ben's share is still in her father-in-law's name. He gives her permission to do farming but she has to wait until her sons turn 18 for them to have land in their names.



Dai Ben, from Rasulpura village in Sanand block of Ahmedabad, Gujarat, is a widow with 3 daughters.

After the death of her husband, Jayaram Bhai Koli, in 1997, Dai Ben continued to live with her in-laws. Life, however, was full of struggles for her and her daughters. Her husband had left behind a house and some farm land but that wasn't in her name. Her daughters, considered to be a burden on the family, were not allowed to go to school.

When Dai Ben asked for a share in her husband's property, she was denied that since she didn't have a male "heir". Her brother-in-law, Narain Bhai Koli, also took her and her daughters' names off the land records. In 2000, Dai Ben discovered a women's forum and shared her story with them.

The forum spoke to Narain Bhai Koli and shared with him the legal repercussions he might have to face if he didn't give Dai Ben the land she is entitled to. As a result, in 2002, Narain Bhai transferred 10 acres of land in Dai Ben's name where she now cultivates paddy and wheat crops.



Amba Ben, from Ranela village in Santrampur block of Panchmahal district, Gujarat, is a widow with 2 sons and 3 daughters.

Amba Ben's mother had 7 acres of farm land where they cultivated paddy and wheat crops. After the death of her mother in 2004, Amba Ben wanted to change the land records into her name legally. She then learnt that her mother's farm land was not in her name but in her neighbor, Rama Ben's name. When Amba Ben confronted Rama Ben on this, Rama Ben refused to speak to her. Amba Ben went to the Gram Panchayat seeking their help in getting the land back in her name. They informed Amba Ben about a women's forum with the help of which she filed a case against Rama Ben.

Amba Ben is hopeful that she would get justice in the case.



Rajan Ben, from Vasodara village in Sanand block of Ahmedabad, Gujarat, is a widow and has a son.

In 1989, Rajan Ben's husband, Shanti Bhai Patel, fell ill and died. The cause of his death is still unknown. Shanti Bhai's family refused to give their son's widow a share from the 15 acres of ancestral farm land. Rajan Ben's son, Mukesh, was only 6 months old at the time of her husband's death. Both of them were thrown out of her in-laws' house. Her own mother and brother too refused to take them back.

Luckily, her husband's brother, Nagar Bhai Patel, welcomed them both to his house. Rajan Ben was, however, treated as a servant there, following which she decided to leave her brother-in-law's house as well after a few months of struggle.

She then took up a job in a nearby factory as a daily wage worker earning Rs. 50 a day, living at the factory site for almost an year with her young son. When Rajan Ben got to know about the women's forum, Mahila Sangathan, she went there and shared her story with them. Encouraged to fight for her rights, with the help of the forum, she filed an FIR against her in-laws.

In 2010, with a court case verdict in her favor, she was allocated 3.5 acres of farm land. She now cultivates paddy and wheat crops, and hopes to get her son educated so that he can have a better life.



Tegi Ben, from Baldana village in Bavala block of Ahmedabad, Gujarat, is a widow with 2 sons and a daughter.

Tegi Ben's husband, Amer Singh Bhai Solanki, his brothers, Butta and Hari, and sister, Savita, had inherited 4.5 acres of farm land upon their father's death some 25 years ago. During a family financial crisis, Butta borrowed money from a village moneylender on the name of Chandrakand Bhai who asked Butta for land papers as security. Butta signed the papers without knowing what was written on them. Although Butta kept an account of payments made over the years, he was still paying interest and the debt hadn't been cleared.

In 2002, Tegi Ben decided to go herself to the Gram Panchayat to pay the land tax and it was there that she learnt that the land was no longer in the family's name. They had been farming all this time on the land without knowing this. When Tegi Ben returned home, she informed Amer and Butta who weren't that interested in fighting for their land. They believed that there would be little point in fighting against Chandrakand Bhai who was wealthy and powerful. When Tegi Ben, not wanting to give up so easily, discovered a women's forum, Bavala Mahila Sangathan, in 2004, she approached them for assistance.

The sangathan took up the issue and advised Tegi Ben to file for joint ownership of the land and get her name on the land record. Teji Ben succeeded in getting her name on her husband's land record and as a co-owner, contested a sale deed by obtaining a certificate of objection. When she went to collect the documents at Tehsildar's office, she was stopped by officials. She, however, did not give up and made it a point to return to their office to speak directly to Tehsildar who promised Tegi Ben to help her get her land back. He advised her to take the issue to the village administrator, following which he would send a notice to Chandrakand Bhai. Once this happened, Chandrakand Bhai transferred the land over to the Singh Bhai Solanki family name.

Photo: Srikanth Kolari | ActionAid



Pottu Manikkam is a widow with 2 daughters and 2 sons. She lost her house in Tsunami. After Tsunami, the government authorities forced her to shift out of her place. This brave woman, however, didn't move out, asserting she's a fisher-woman and that she belongs to the sea. Pottu, in no uncertain terms, made it clear that she wouldn't move out of the seashore, come what may.

ActionAid India provided her Rs.15,000 to rebuild her house and she's living on the beach.



The financial situation in a majority of Muslim households in the 60 villages of Ilayankudi Panchayat, where ActionAid and Wind Trust work, is highly vulnerable. Community men often migrate abroad in search of jobs. Women at home are not allowed to go outside to work. "We, 18 women, have broken these barriers.

Wind Trust and Slum Level Federation (SLF), Ilayankudi, helped us in setting up the silk reeling unit." says Saboor Beevi proudly. She is a widow from the Ilayankudi taluk with two daughters and a son. She is now able to earn a good sum of money, all thanks to the silk reeling unit.

"We were provided with some initial financial support and also the encouragement to speak with the district officials in this regard. About 15 of our members were trained by the Central Silk Board on the complete process of silk yarning." says Razia Begum, Secretary of the silk reeling unit.

"With support from the District Collector, a grant of Rs. 13.04 lakhs was released by the government to set up the unit. Our 18-member team produces 200 kg of silk per month. One kilo silk is sold at Rs. 2900. Reeling, winding, cooking the cocoons, wastage separation, marketing and administration are the various activities that need to be carried out. We are happy to employ other vulnerable women. This industry has not only given us economic stability but also an identity," adds Saboor, with pride in her eyes.



Susheela with her son during a community meeting on land rights. This Koraga woman from Udupi district in Karnataka is a single mother and was never married to her son's father. Among the Koragas, this is totally acceptable.



Established in 1972, ActionAid India helps over 8 million of the country's poorest and most disadvantaged people in 25 states and 1 union territory of India through 12 regional offices and 2 field offices.

ActionAid India is part of a global federation and a full affiliate of ActionAid International that has presence in over 40 countries of Asia, Africa, Americas, Europe and Asia Pacific, and works towards furthering human rights for all and defeating poverty.

Since 1972, the poor and the excluded have been at the centre of our discourse and actions here in India. In 2006, we were registered as an Indian organisation called ActionAid Association. We are governed by an independent General Assembly and a Governing Board. The General Assembly comprises individuals having expertise in fields, areas or activities of concern to ActionAid; and preference is given to members from the poor and excluded sections or those who represent the interest of the communities with which the ActionAid works, i.e. community representatives and pro-poor civil society representatives.

Our Vision: A world without poverty, patriarchy and injustice in which every person enjoys the right to life with dignity

Our Mission: To work in solidarity with the poor, and participate in their struggle to eradicate poverty, patriarchy and injustice

Overall Goal: A just social order brought about by the dispossessed claiming their right to dignity and identity through enhanced democratic participation and structural transformation

Our Theory of Change: We believe that an end to poverty and injustice can be achieved through purposeful individual and collective action, led by the active agency of people living in poverty and supported by solidarity, credible rights-based alternatives and campaigns that address the structural causes and consequences of poverty

Solidarity, camaraderie and sisterhood with the poor, the powerless and excluded women, girls, boys and men will be at the core of our struggle against poverty and injustice.

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“

She has to have four arms,
four legs, four eyes, two hearts, and
double the love...

... There is nothing "single"

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