



Critical Stories of Change

No Country for Daughters? Confronting Patriarchy In India's Heartland

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2013

Glossary

AA/AAI	ActionAid India
BDO	Block Development Officer
BPL	Below Poverty Line
CBO	Community Based Organisation
CHJK	Chahat Hai Jeene Ki
DM	District Magistrate
ICDS	Integrated Child Development Services
JS	Jago Sakhi
JSSS	Jago Sakhi Seva Sansthan
MDM	Mid Day Meal
MGNREGA	Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act
MP	Madhya Pradesh
MTP	Medical Termination of Pregnancy
NGO	Non Governmental Organisation
OBCs	Other Backward Classes
PCPNDT	Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques Act, 1994
PMO	Principal Medical Officer
PWDVA	Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005
RTE	Right To Education
RTI	Right To Information
SDM	Sub-divisional Magistrate
SDO	Sub-divisional Office
SC/ST	Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes



Foreword

Dear reader,

What you would find in the pages that follow, is a rare attempt to stop for a moment, take a breath and understand in some depth are “efforts” of social change that we are all engaged in, and see how it has affected the communities lives, as they are lived.

There are hundreds of partner social organisations we are collaborating with at present, and many more who have done us the honour of making us part of real, substantial and sustained change in favour of the marginalized and the excluded. At ActionAid India, we derive our inspiration and strength from the ability of the impoverished and excluded people to lead the change, working in partnership with formations of community based organisations and other social movements in their struggles for justice, equality and a life of dignity.

There is, as you may imagine a plethora of amazing stories of perseverance, courage and ingenuity of individuals, groups, villages and urban poor communities, challenging the complex structures of exclusions, poverty and patriarchy. We try our best to get many of them reported in our various publications and platforms, yet the big picture of the journey through time, often escapes us all. While data, log frames and reports contain within them ideas of ups and downs of change, very often the collective narratives of the roads less travelled are not put in one place, nor are failures, despair, fear and backlashes put on record in a “success story” driven world.

The ‘Critical Stories of Change’ is an attempt to address this and put forth a learning record of peoples’ journeys of change. They are ‘critical’ because they try to locate the critical factors which made change possible and ‘critical’ because they do not try to gloss over the difficult and painful parts. In an attempt to document the struggles and experiences of such undaunted and unfazed communities; their leaders –



women and men, who worked against all odds to challenge the unjust and inequitable structures, it seeks as much to document the failures, strife and discordant notes, along the way. 'Critical Stories' also recognise changing political factors and actors outside of us who directly or indirectly contribute to the transformative potential of such change processes

We hope that these documented experiences will provide a real picture and give worthy insights for all of us. We also hope that the stories will inspire all readers to strengthen their commitment to a just and equitable society.

I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to Women Feature Services for agreeing to support us in this learning initiative. We owe a special thanks to Ms Pamela Philipose for so wonderfully recounting this story, **No Country for Daughters? *Confronting Patriarchy In India's Heartland.***

Happy Reading!

Sandeep Chachra,
Executive Director, ActionAid India



Background

Critical stories of change

Critical stories of change is a series of stories describing the role ActionAid Association International plays in changing the lives of people living in poverty. But in their openness, self-criticism, detailed analysis and celebration of the active role of others, the stories are far removed from self-congratulatory ‘good practice case studies’. Critical stories of change are full of life, and are intended to impart the insights, advice and confidences of a friend. ActionAid International often makes claims for its work and achievements. Yet, in the struggle to address the causes of poverty and injustice, ActionAid is often one of many players. What ActionAid rarely gets to know is the significant nature of its contribution and the factors that contributed to the outcomes.

The stories are the product of a facilitated learning process and aim to explore how change (both positive and negative) happens from the perspectives of different stakeholders. These are stories that explicitly link ActionAid and its partners’ grassroots work to a rights agenda and hopefully capture the full complexity of ActionAid’s development interventions and experiences: from the perspective of poor people, partners and organisation(s) and other stakeholders involved, as well as ActionAid itself. The documented lessons and experiences will hopefully provide insights for all those engaged in the struggle against poverty and injustice.

Acknowledgements

In challenging weather conditions – Dholpur received unseasonal rains when we were there – Itishree Sahoo, Monitoring and Evaluation Manager, ActionAid, remained unflustered and we could complete the tour of Dholpur and Morena without disruption. I thank her for that. Unfortunately, Malay Kumar, chief executive, Prayatn, was out of town, although I could catch up with him later. Prem Ranjan, AA Programme Manager, Gujarat and Rajasthan, provided me with an important overview of the initiative, while Prayatn staff played an important role in helping me access the various CHJK villages. Devendar Singh, Project



Officer, CHJK, made all the arrangements well into the night, for which he has my gratitude. Others in the Prayatn team who lent logistical and other support included Sapna, Pallavi, and Rajani. I need to especially acknowledge the contribution of Asha Singh, legal advisor to Prayatn, who has been associated with the initiative from its inception. Not only did she organise the Morena leg of this effort, her understanding of the issues involved provided me with useful background information. The assistance of Razia and Rema, two women who emerged from the local community and are doing good work at the grassroots – I particularly recall their spirited songs, some of which they had composed themselves – was of great help.

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No Country For Daughters?

Confronting Patriarchy In India's Heartland



“We knew we had to adopt a broad, multi-faceted approach and understand better the innumerable biases women experienced.”

–Asha Singh
lawyer and feminist activist

“The happiness you get from the sight of seeing wave upon wave of girls going to school is greater than what you get in a temple!”

–Shobha Srivastava
Child Development Programme Office (ICDS),
Dholpur district

Introduction

We had just entered Nagla Bhadoriya village in Rajasthan's Dholpur district, and she was walking up the central lane of the village. She came up to us with a bright smile on her face even as the children of the village ran excitedly behind her. The baby she was expecting – her first – could arrive at any time she said and, no, she did not know whether it would be a boy or a girl. Would she prefer a son, we asked. She looked towards the sky and said that she would be happy with any child that the Almighty gave her. Did she say this because this was her first child and she was under no pressure to have a son? Would she have said this if she had already given birth to three daughters and knew that her husband's family desired a son at any cost? Would she have said this in the presence of her mother-in-law? These were questions that we could not pose to her as strangers...

Census 2001 proved to be something of a watershed for India because it revealed the precarious status of the girl child in the country, with the child sex ratio standing at 927 girls for every 1000 boys, down from the 1991 figures of 945:1000. But that was not all. It also revealed that some pockets in the country had seen even sharper declines, in some cases registering readings of less than 900 girls. Among them was the Rajasthan district of Dholpur, with a child sex ratio of 860:1000. Its neighbouring district, Morena, across the border in the state of Madhya Pradesh notched an even lower ratio of 829:1000. Each figure freeze-framed a disturbing social reality: the deeply entrenched devaluation of, and biases against, women and girls.



Responding to what was clearly a national crisis the Government of India in 2003 amended the existing Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Act of 1994. It was renamed the Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Prohibition of Sex Selection) Act (PCPNDT Act) and brought new medical technologies that involved pre-conception selection under its ambit. The use of the technology that had expedited sex selective abortions – the ultrasound machine – was also sought to be regulated under the Act.

The months that followed the Census revelations were also busy for ActionAid (AA) in terms of its work on this issue. It had just adopted a rights-based approach in its second Country Strategic Paper and women's rights figured high on its agenda. In 2003, the Dholpur-based Prayatn, in a partnership with Mangalam Seva Samiti and Disha Foundation, undertook a project to understand the underlying causes for the declining sex ratio in the district with AA's support.

The next year saw AA commissioning an important national level study, 'Planning Families, Planning Gender', that looked at sex ratio declines in five

districts located in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Haryana, Punjab and Himachal Pradesh. The study provided a nuanced understanding of what was really happening on the ground, including insights into the scenario in the districts of Dholpur and Morena.

Both these districts rose from the ragged geography of the Chambal ravines and had many common characteristics, including a feudal past and a deeply hierarchical society. But arguably their most striking aspect was the cultural valorisation of masculinity and the simultaneous devaluation of the female gender. The renowned scholars behind the study understood well the crucial role played by the family in furthering discriminatory practices against women. Their close reading of the data revealed that in both Dholpur and Morena severe skewing against girls, which was discernible even with the second child but got sharply accentuated by the third child. This indicated the systematic and targeted neglect of those daughters considered expendable. Generally, it was also found that girls were subjected to far greater neglect than boys, whether in terms of what they were fed or how promptly they received medical attention when ill. According to the study, of the five districts visited,



Morena and Dholpur went the farthest in the conscious neglect of daughters.

The authors of the study, ‘Planning Families, Planning Gender’, maintained that the situation pointed to something more than ‘daughter dis-preference’, it amounted to ‘daughter-aversion’

Apart from discriminatory household practices, what was also clearly apparent to these analysts was the steady rise in the incidence of sex selective abortions in both Dholpur and Morena, even in the rural hinterland, as was obvious in the data that only three per cent of families in the two districts had just two daughters. This, they maintained, pointed to something more than ‘daughter dis-preference’, it amounted to ‘daughter-aversion’.

Many of the leads provided by this study went into the initiative evocatively entitled, ‘Chahat Hai Jeene Ki’ (the will to live, CHJK), which began in 2004. Anchored by Prayatn, in partnership with AA, it set out to address the issue of the declining sex ratio through the lens of gender discrimination.

Malay Kumar, chief executive, Prayatn, recalled that moment, “From Day One, it was clear to us that despite the steep decline in the sex ratio, no one – at least in northern India – seemed concerned. Besides this, the sex ratio was seen only as an indicator and nobody was looking at the root cause of the phenomenon.” Kumar was convinced that addressing the declining sex ratio in the region needed a long-term initiative with – as he put it – “manifold approaches and multifaceted strategies”. CHJK came to reflect this broad-based perspective.

Asha Singh, legal advisor to Prayatn, who was part of the research team for ‘Planning Families, Planning Gender’ and has been associated with CHJK since its inception, was already well-acquainted with the ground realities. She remembered being struck by the fact that in every village she visited, there seemed to be many more boys than girls. She also noticed that discrimination began with the second daughter and that both the mother and her newborn faced a backlash. A woman giving birth to a third daughter would be ‘made to pay’ – almost from the minute of delivery. While the child would be denied the mother’s milk, the mother herself would be deprived of the care she needed and would be asked to work almost



immediately after childbirth. It was by drawing on such observations that the initiative took shape. The approach testified to the advantages that informed research and scholarship could bring.

Initially any articulation of these sensitive concerns at the community level was fraught with complexities

The two districts CHJK focused on – Dholpur and Morena – lay literally in the heart of India in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, respectively, both with very poor indices in terms of human development especially those related to gender empowerment. Being two contiguous districts they shared a common cultural background and had a proven historical track record of female infanticide. Two other districts in Rajasthan – Jhalawar and Karauli – were also brought indirectly into the

initiative which sought to reach out to 22,000 families belonging to various caste groups including dalits, tribals, OBCs – like Meenas and Kushwahas – as well upper castes, including Brahmins and Rajputs.

The challenge was to bring about behavioural change among a very mixed population. Most AA initiatives sought to transform external realities. This one also involved ushering in change at the psychological and sociological levels. It had to negotiate community attitudes, traditional norms and practices as well as something as amorphous as notions of personal honour.

Elaborated Prem Ranjan, AA Programme Manager, Rajasthan and Gujarat, “We understood the importance of the PCPNDT Act, but we also felt we needed to go beyond it because the very efficacy of the law hinged on attitudinal change. We realised that unless patriarchal norms were confronted, things would remain the same. After all, this was the region where historically infant girls were killed in extremely brutal ways and where women were accorded a secondary status. Therefore, we felt that we needed to challenge the very idea of women as the inferior gender.” These were the foundational principles on which CHJK was based.

Initially, any articulation of these sensitive concerns at the community level was fraught with complexities. Ranjan pointed out that at first even talking about the issue was difficult, “We were, after



all, invading a personal space and attempting to influence family behaviour. This needed a team with the necessary knowledge to articulate the important issues.”

The first challenge was in preparing the field teams in rights based work. They had to understand why women were confined to the bottom tier of society. Issues like patriarchy and the social construction of gender needed to be comprehended as well as the structural causes for violence against women.



“In our early trainings we always emphasised that just articulating one issue would not have the desired impact. That change had to happen within the family and that women would have to actively claim their rights and access to education and employment,” recalled Ranjan.

But all the training still did not prepare the CHJK team members for the initial reception they got from the community. Rajani Jain, Livelihood Coordinator, Pratyn, remembered that initial rebuff, “The women themselves would slam the door on our face. They would accuse us of coming to spoil their family life and create disharmony in their households.”

This forced CHJK activists to rethink their approach. “We had to seek out ways to win the confidence of the community. Not only did we indicate to them that we were in this for the long haul, that ours was a long-term intervention; we also indicated that we would help them with the other problems they faced, like enrolling a child in school, getting a ration card, and the like. Slowly,



they began to trust us and became more receptive to what we had to say,” explained Rajani. There were really no shortcuts. “We had to keep faith in the community and believe that it had the capacity to change, we had to keep persisting,” Ranjan added.

The rationale for various behavioural patterns within the community needed to be understood. For instance, the very families that today cheerfully send their daughters and granddaughters to school would argue, ‘padhegi tho bigdegi’ (If she studies, she’ll be ruined). The fear of a daughter bringing dishonour was ubiquitous, every family with daughters lived under that fear. The local expression was ‘naak kategi’, literally meaning that one’s nose would be cut off – a form of exemplary punishment in the old days when local landlords could punish anyone who contravened norms by cutting off his or her nose. If a girl was sexually harassed, for instance, it was her family that would have to bear the dishonour; it would be their nose that would be cut off. This led many families to justify taking their daughters out of school and keep them at home until they were ‘safely’ married.

Recalled Asha Singh, “When we began talking to adolescents, we discovered that while the boys were given their space, the girls had none, not even recreation worth the name. Not only were they pulled out prematurely from school, they would be married early and become mothers in their teens.”

Not just adolescence but every phase of a woman’s life was marked by discrimination. “This was why the CHJK consciously adopted a lifecycle approach in its programmes. We felt that such an approach would systematise our own approach,” Ranjan pointed out.

The biases were then mapped out through interactions with the community: the discriminatory practices of the pre-birth phase, the lack of rights during the childhood years, the pressures that mark the post-puberty phase, the lack of agency of the adult woman and the lack of entitlements of the elderly female members of the family. This exercise provided clarity in terms of envisaging a rights-based approach to the programme.



Organisation And Cadre Building

Building bridges with the community required a platform and that was how Jago Sakhi (Wake Up, Friend, JS) came about. Its name was a clarion call to the community to awaken; its role was to anchor a movement for women's rights, particularly in the project districts. Once JS became operational, a year or so into the initiative, it provided a forum for people to meet regularly and address, through the various programmes drawn up, the genuine grievances of the community. The need for a committed cadre of village activists, who knew the issues and could be a bridge between the CHJK teams and the community, was quickly felt.



Explained Prem Ranjan, “An early effort was to develop cadres. We believed that if they came from the community, they would remain in the community –and therefore they would potentially have more impact than paid professionals. A small honorarium was envisaged for them and their travel expenses were covered but, at the same time, it was not a ‘salary’. They could still believe that they were social activists working for an important cause and not for the money. That created a certain power in them. They felt they were doing the right thing for the community, and the community in turn too looked upon them in that way.”

The moral authority of the cadre that emerged from the community was important to underline because they, in a sense, were the protectors of the rights of girls and women within the home and society. It was they who were required to intervene when daughters were discriminated against. Over the years, JS cadres learnt to monitor the implementation of the PCPNDT Act. When news of a family considering sex selective procedures came to their notice, they would first approach the couple





and gently try to dissuade them, but if they still did not listen they would threaten deploying the law against them.

Many of these cadres were driven by curiosity to join JS. Initially they would just stand outside the door of the room where a JS meeting was being held, listening to the discussions taking place. Said Brijender Singh of Puraini village, “I am a farmer and usually busy with my agricultural activities. Once I heard that some JS members were meeting in my village I was interested to learn what they were talking about. After hearing them out I thought to myself that they seemed to be talking sense – if there are no girls left in our villages then we will all suffer.” Brijender then began attending

the meetings regularly and slowly he became one of the more active of the JS community cadres. He gave it all his energy. “I remember participating in our first raid on doctors conducted in 2005,” he reminisced.

Another member, Ramlal Singh, revealed how he used to fight with his wife whenever she wanted to go and attend a JS meeting. Resistance from the men in the family could have proved to be a great dampener for this initiative. There was, in fact, an instance when a local newspaper published the photograph of some women from a village at a rally. When their husbands came to know of this, they threatened to break the legs of their wives if they dared to go out and participate in such public events. A very effective strategy to counter this, therefore, was to bring men themselves into the JS in a concerted manner. Said Rajani Jain, “From the beginning, we did not limit the CHJK campaign to women although, initially, it was the women who dominated our meetings. Slowly the men began to get involved and that made all the difference. Not only did this mean that our women activists could also come out of the house more freely, the men could access spaces like doctors’ clinics with much less inhibition.”



So, how did these dynamics play out in JS member Ramlal Singh's family? Said he, "Once I was convinced about the importance of this campaign, I myself began participating wholeheartedly. Today, my wife and I have been able to stop child marriages. We have also prevented girls from dropping out of schools by talking to their parents about the various government incentives that now exist for girls to study further, like the distribution of laptops and cycles."

The effort was to build leadership skills and analytical abilities. JS cadres would meet at Prayatn's Dholpur office once a month and the sharing of experiences proved useful

In the same way mothers-in-law who had earlier objected to their 'bahus' leaving the house for meetings and events, were also brought into the campaign. "Interestingly, today we have both mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law as members, and they decide between themselves who should go for the meeting each time, since someone needs to be at home!" smiled Rema, a process coordinator with JS.

None of this would have happened without regular trainings through workshops, and capacity building and knowledge imparting exercises. The effort was to build leadership skills and analytical abilities. The JS cadres would meet at Prayatn's Dholpur office once a month and the sharing of experiences on these occasions proved useful because they imparted an understanding to every cadre why certain actions worked and others were less successful. They also helped cadres bond with each other and undertake missions that were sometimes sensitive, like participating in sting operations as potential clients or in holding protests against those clinics that contravened the law. Said Mahala, a Jago Sakhi cadre, "Once, we confronted a doctor with a request for a sex-selective abortion. He refused at all costs, but we still tested him by knocking at his door for a long time. We continued doing it until he practically begged us to go."

For ordinary village women to find the courage to take on a doctor required a high sense of ownership of the process. Their involvement impacted their own life choices. Sumitra of Umaria ka Pura village, revealed her experience of educating her daughter, "When my daughter was studying in Class 12 a marriage proposal came for her from a family in



Dholpur. Her father insisted that she agree to the marriage but she wanted to study more. Her father got very angry over her refusal. He kept telling me, ‘If our daughter keeps studying we will not be able to get a match of equal status for her’. But my daughter was adamant and got her way. She went on to graduate and recently got married.”

What was interesting about Sumitra’s account was that it revealed that her own sympathies lay with her daughter. As a JS activist and mother, she wanted her daughter to study. This revealed the process of conscientisation that an organisation like JS could bring about within the community. Also, the very fact that she was confident enough to talk openly about such a sensitive family issue was also striking. JS members, initially, were extremely inhibited about exposing the tensions and problems within their respective families because the notion of ‘family honour’ was very strong. It could be overcome only through a process of regular sharing of experiences as a group.

The importance of education for girls and its link with gender discrimination was an issue that often came up in discussions. According to Rajani, the early emphasis placed on girls’ education did

bear results, “Today, we can proudly say, that this initiative helped ensure that all the girls in the project villages are in school and many are now in college. A decade ago this was not the case.” The JS also took several collective decisions that helped the community. For instance, it was decided that only the ‘baaratis’ (the bridegroom’s party) would be fed during marriages as a way of curbing the expenses incurred by the bride’s family.

According to Ranjan, decisions like these emerged from the community itself through a process of discussion, and were not imposed from above by the CHJK team. Similarly, many of the songs that were composed and the programmes that were envisaged emerged from the community and reflected its lived experiences



Village Republic Of Children

Initially, three categories of stakeholders from the community were identified in each village. The first were the adults who joined the JS and who planned and participated in its programmes. The second category significantly was that of the girls from the community in the age group of 14 to 18 years. They were brought together as the Kishori Manch (adolescents' platform). Each project village also had a Bal Manch (kids' platform), comprising children below the age of 14.

Razia Begum, a JS process facilitator, believed that children were the strength of CHJK. "In each one of our villages we have these little children who have a much broader view of the world and an understanding of why boys and girls are equal, than their counterparts in other villages," she said.

Razia's words came back to us when we visited the Bal Manch in the village of Ratan Ka Pura in Dholpur district. Its 45 children included 20 girls. Each one of these children had faced deprivations at every turn. Although they did not have even a fraction of the facilities or care accorded to children growing up in privileged urban pockets

of the country, without a doubt they had the drive and desire to understand their circumstances and learn how to overcome them. When asked what they wanted to be, most of them said they wanted to be teachers or principals, but what was striking was that the girls in the group also wanted to be professionals – young Sadhana, who was studying in Class Six, even nursed the ambition of being "an inspector". Joining the Bal Manch, which meets twice a month may have spared 11-year-old Jeetra and 12-year-old Pradeep from becoming tobacco addicts. They said they used to chew 'gutka' though they have now given it up because they know how harmful it is and also because all the other children teased them about it. Joining the Bal Manch has given Praveen Kumar Tyagi a dream of getting people to salute him. When his youngest brother – who had lost both arms to polio – demonstrated how he could write by holding pen to paper with his teeth, all the children of the Bal Manch looked on with pride, which must have been very self affirming for the young boy.

Finally, it was about windows being opened for young lives on the periphery. The children know



that they have the right to life, safety, education and development – and they even know how to define each right. They can argue, for instance, that their right to food “samay pe” (on time), for instance, is part of their right to life. They understand that boys and girls are equal, that girls must be allowed to study like boys; they have come to realise that child marriage is wrong and that discrimination is a bad thing.

“One of the central ideas behind CHJK is the right of a child, girl or boy, to a fulfilled life, which is why we believe the Bal Manch is an important component of this intervention, with village children being able to understand the meaning of their ‘adhikar’, their rights,” Ranjan pointed out. He added that while most projects treated children’s participation as a token “add on”, under CHJK it was understood that it was important to work with collectives of children who were encouraged to think for themselves, express their thoughts, and take initiatives on their own. There have also been many instances of young children from the Bal Manch speaking out from within their families when they felt something wrong was happening around them.



These collectives of the very young have also unleashed creativity in the campaign. The songs they sing are about hope and change, about taking on the world, about lighting up the darkness, about awakening people. “You just have to tell our Bal Manch kids to put up a play on a particular theme, and they will be able to do it in a few minutes,” stated Razia Begum proudly.

Malnutrition among these children was a huge concern and Razia Begum understood well that one of the objectives of CHJK was to address issues of their physical well-being as well. “As part of this initiative, we encouraged expectant mothers in our villages to register themselves in the local anganwadi, and if they faced problems in doing this, we ourselves intervened,” she said. She has



also been directly monitoring anganwadis. Among them is one run by anganwadi worker, Rubina Khan, in the village of Nagla Bhadoriya. Khan began to keep a record of the number of boys and girls in the village after Razia and others talked to her about gender discrimination. Said she, “Today,

my anganwadi makes it a point to celebrate the birth of girls in the village. We put up balloons and everybody contributes a little rice, milk and sugar, and we make a special ‘kheer’ on such occasions. We want everyone to know that the arrival of a little girl is to be celebrated.”

Pressures Of Growing Up Female

To be an adolescent girl in districts like Dholpur and Morena meant facing restrictions of all kinds as the world closed in and the relative freedoms of childhood were increasingly denied to them. In the old days, the onset of puberty meant the immediate withdrawal of the girl from school and prospect of marriage loomed large. The ‘Planning Families, Planning Gender’ study had pointed out that the burden of sexuality on families reflected in the “twin practices of low age at marriage and restrictions on the appearance and movements of young women”. It noted that through early marriage, parents of a daughter sought to transfer the burden of her sexuality on to her in-laws.

It is this unrelenting logic of being a “burden” on their family that the Kishori Manch in the project villages sought to dispel. The idea behind it was to provide a forum for young women to understand their legal rights and reproductive rights, resist discriminations, and discuss issues of mutual concern together. Explained Rema, process coordinator, who has helped to set up many of these fora. “We wanted to give adolescent girls a sense of their own self-worth so that later, as adults or as mothers, they could take the right decisions.” Of course, this was a process of trial and error. Initially, programmes would be introduced without grounding them in local experiences or explaining their relevance, but over time, connections were made and clarity achieved.



Many of the girls in the Kishori Manch had, in fact, already been part of the Bal Manch and had been exposed to some of the ideas behind CHJK. But there were concerns they faced as teenagers that needed attention. In large parts of rural north India, for instance, issues like menstruation remain shrouded in secrecy and shame. When we asked Reena, a member of the Kishori Manch of Pyare ki Madhiya village in Dholpur about puberty, she was frank. “When we were growing up our mothers did not tell us anything about periods. Whatever information we got was from our friends – especially those in our Kishori Manch. Slowly we learnt that these were not things to be ashamed about but were a part of growing up,” she stated.

Initially, it was difficult to get the conversation within the Kishori Manch going, according to Rema. “The girls would sit silently and listen to what we had to say, but ventured no comment themselves. It took time to break the ice, to get them to articulate intimate thoughts. Over time they not only spoke up during JS meetings in front of the adults, they got involved in local issues. There are many instances of our ‘kishoris’ persuading parents who have withdrawn their daughters from school after the Class 10 to reconsider the move.”



A notable impact of the Kishori Manch was that many of these adolescents were able to keep studying. Today, Reena is doing her final year of graduation in sociology and now wants to do her B.Ed (Bachelor of Education) since her ambition is to be a teacher. In Umaria ka Pura, we caught up with Rachna who was doing her B.Sc (Bachelor of Science) in nursing in Gwalior, which involved a daily commute of two hours. She vowed that she would help fight sex selective abortions when she became a professional nurse. Ten years ago, most of the girls in Umaria would drop out before high school. Today, the ‘kishoris’ in this village state that they will get married only after finishing their education and finding a job.

It was interesting to talk to the girls of the Kishori Manch of both Pyare ki Madhiya and Umaria ka Pura villages about marriage and their expectations



of it. Young Vandana Kushwaha of Umaria village clearly spoke for many when she said that she wanted a husband who would respect her. “I want someone who does not drink, gamble or chew tobacco,” she said, as others around her nodded in agreement. When asked whether she wanted her husband to cook for her, there was laughter, but she replied coolly, “Why not?” Intriguingly, when the conversation got around to whether it was okay for daughters-in-law to eat with the rest of the family, there was hesitation. Feeding everybody and then eating oneself was seen as one of the responsibilities of the daughter-in-law and it was a deeply entrenched norm in this region.

Two ‘kishoris’ at Pyare ki Madhiya village had just got married and they had been able to negotiate an independent space for themselves within their husbands’ families. Sharada, a new bride, was doing her Masters and her husband’s family, she claimed, had not objected to her desire to become a professional. The sense of self-confidence she projected can be attributed, at least in part, to her exposure to the Kishori Manch in her natal village. “We learnt a lot. None of us got married before we turned 18 and, what is best of all to my mind is that all of us in our Kishori Manch have become friends

for life – we will always stand up for one another!” The challenges of married life may not have caught up with Sharada as yet, but she was also firm that if she were to give birth to daughters in the future she would only welcome them and try and convince her husband’s family that girls are equal to boys in today’s world.

Mamata, another member of the Pyare ki Madhiya group, was in Class 10. While she was undecided about what she wanted to do in the future, there was no doubt in her mind that she too would seek a job. At that time, though, she was excited about her Wendlido, a martial arts form for self defence that was introduced to the Kishori Manch girls in all the project villages through regular trainings sessions under CHJK. “In these trainings we are told how to distinguish between a ‘good’ touch and a ‘bad’ touch and to be alert to those who could sexually harass us. We have been given useful tips, like throwing a handful of mud into the eyes of the assaulter or slipping away from under one’s ‘chunni’ if someone tries to catch you by holding on to it,” explained Mamata. She went on to exhibit some expert Wendlido moves with her Kishori Manch friend, Bimlesh, who was doing her B.A. (Bachelor of Arts) final year and had just got married. The two women



maintained that because of their training they did not fear going out at night as a group, even if they were not accompanied by men. “We know the basics of how to protect ourselves,” said Bimlesh, who,



incidentally, wanted to join the police force and has her husband’s approval to put in her application.

As process coordinator, Rema has tried to convey that violence against women is a continuum. Sex selective abortions is only one aspect of the violence against the female gender, which is why it is important to understand a woman’s right to her bodily integrity, “By giving them training in Wenlido we wanted them to realise that their body was their own and nobody had the right to violate it.”

Bringing In The Boys

The question then arose that if young women had to be free of sexual harassment, shouldn’t the older boys in the village also understand this principle. Initially, the CHJK intervention, while it reached out to the adults, children and adolescent girls, did not envisage any programmes for the adolescent boys. However, during the mid-term review one of the concerns that had emerged clearly was the need to bring young men into the process. An external observer, Dr Kanchan Mathur of the Institute of Development Studies, Jaipur, wrote, “Since they (adolescent boys) often are the perpetrators of the

violence it is extremely important to sensitise them on issues related to gender-based violence and masculinity.” That suggestion, which had emerged in internal discussions earlier as well, was seriously pursued. “It was a move that needed to be made and around 2009, the ‘Yuva Manch’ – collective of young men over 14 years of age – was instituted in the project villages,” Ranjan explained.

Bringing in young men, many of whom had been part of the Bal Manch, brought a new energy to CHJK. It also revealed the specific problems and



frustrations of the male youth growing up in India's hinterland with hardly any support structures, few resources and fewer prospects of achieving their potential. Interacting with some of the members of the Yuva Manch in Umaria ka Pura in Morena district was educative. Many of them were studying in college but couldn't count on their education alone to get decent jobs. One among them had drifted into politics as a mobiliser of crowds, but the ambition of most of the 20 men was to join the army. Over the years, Umaria had managed to send 18 men into the army, and the precedent has had the effect of encouraging boys emerging into adulthood to dream of joining them. But this was easier said than done.

The toughest part, the Yuva Manch youth explained, was the rigorous training required. They didn't have the requisite facilities for running or necessary equipment like good running shoes. Since dairying was the predominant occupation in the village, they could set store only on milk, ghee and local produce

like 'channa' (chickpeas) to provide them with the nutrition they needed for such training.

Adolescence was quite obviously a period of anxiety for both young women and men in rural Dholpur and Morena. For the former, it was much more related to internal circumstances like family expectations; for the latter it was the burden of their

own expectations that seemed to weigh heavily on them. But setting up the Yuva Manch did have important social impacts. Many years of exposure to the CHJK programme had provided them the general understanding that early marriage was unacceptable. There

were many instances where brothers had intervened and ensured that sisters were not given away as underage brides. Responsible social behaviour was also clearly internalised. Argued Ravindar Kushwaha, 20, of the Yuva Manch at Umaria who is presently doing his M.Sc. in Maths in Morena, "We know that youth are often responsible for



crimes against women, but if we don't want women in our own families to face such violence, how can we behave in that way with other women?" His argument may have been cast in traditional terms, but the transgression implicit in such behaviour was clearly recognised.

Where the Yuva Manch of Umaria seemed to have made a significant difference was in intra-family behaviour. Ramdas Singh Kushwaha of Umaria, now in the second year of his B.Sc, explained how he had taken on his father over his alcoholism. "As a child I would be scared as every time father would turn up drunk at home and beat up mother. Through our discussions I realised the harm that excessive intake of alcohol was doing to our community. I remember, when I was around 15, father came home drunk and as usual picked a fight over money. It was dark, we had just come back from the fields. When he persisted in being aggressive towards mother, something snapped within me. I took him on and told him that from now on such behaviour would not be tolerated in the household. When he didn't listen, I physically overpowered him. Ever since that day, father has been more careful and has now given up drinking."

Around 20 per cent of the men of Umaria were known to be alcoholics. They would buy their supplies from a 'thekedar' (bootlegger) who would vend 250 ml pouches at Rs 20. The Yuva Manch along with JS activists decided to end alcohol sales. They tried to reason with the vendor but he kept insisting that it was his livelihood.

It was the voices of children and young people that gave a decided resonance to the anti-alcoholism campaign. After all, it was their well-being that was being jeopardised by such behaviour

"We told him that his livelihood was putting our livelihoods in jeopardy because alcohol meant money down the drain and that it was far better for him and us if he took up another occupation," narrated Neeraj Kushwaha, another Yuva Manch member. But shutting down the local vend proved difficult. It was only when the youth petitioned the district collector on the issue and he sent his men to take the thekedar into custody, that things changed.



The community mobilisation of the Yuva Manch of Umaria against alcoholism was one among many such struggles against alcoholism in the various project villages. The link between alcoholism and domestic violence was discussed, as indeed practices like gambling and its adverse impacts on family income leading to situations like the withdrawal of children from school.

The JS even came up with a penalty to be imposed on both the sellers and consumers of alcohol with

incentives given to those who spoke out. There was also an instance when the bridegroom's party turned up drunk for a wedding. The bride's family, with the support of the larger community, firmly indicated that only the sober among them would be fed.

It was the voices of children and young people that gave a decided resonance to the anti-alcoholism campaign. After all, it was their well-being that was being jeopardised by such behaviour.

Strengthening Stakeholders

While CBOs like the JS, the Yuva and Kishori Manch and the Bal Manch were obvious stakeholders in the CHJK process, there were several other players that impacted an issue as complex as the declining sex ratio.

“We realised that if we were to bring about attitudinal change, if the law was to prove a deterrent, then we would need to increase awareness about it, and bring multiple stakeholders together,” Prem Ranjan observed. The JS identified no less than 19 stakeholders, including the state government, the local administration, the

health administration, the PCPNDT committees, sympathetic doctors, panchayat representatives, the educational department and schools; the police department, the media, lawyers, the judiciary and other civil society groups.



The process of reaching out to these stakeholders through information sharing, seminars, workshops and joint programmes has certainly had its moments of frustration, but there have been conspicuous successes as well. An initial attempt at such bridge building was with the Rajasthan state government. In 2006, Prayatn had commissioned a study to assess the efficacy of the PCPNDT Act in all the districts of Rajasthan and had made several important recommendations. The study was shared with the state government and, in 2007 one of its recommendations – the setting up a separate structure to oversee the implementation of the PCPNDT Act within state – was accepted. Whether that structure proved effective was another matter, but the state government had at least been forced to recognise that it lacked even a framework to address the issue of the declining sex ratio in the state.

While CHJK wanted government agencies to be more receptive to the needs and problems of the community, ensuring that this happened was extremely difficult. In 2008, however, a useful model was instituted that broke this impasse. Explained Asha Singh, “The community had gained the confidence to articulate their issues by this time and no longer needed us as intermediaries. So we initiated the Government Community

Interface (GCI). The intention here was to get the community to represent themselves to government officials through village level meetings.” According to her, it was a win-win model. On the one hand, villagers, especially women, were always hesitant in approaching any official and had little opportunity to do so, therefore to have government representatives come to their doorstep was a novel and confidence building development. On the other, for government officials trying to deflect the criticism that they were indifferent to the needs of people at the grassroots, this was an opportunity to reach out. The model was hailed as the ‘innovation of the year’ by the administration in 2008.

But, what about the local government? The CHJK looked at panchayati raj institutions as important to its agenda because not only were they supposed to facilitate government programmes but also work on improving the sex ratio. Sahab Singh, who was sarpanch of Puraini village, Dholpur district, when CHJK was establishing its presence there, was very proud of his panchayat’s achievements. All the girls here now go to school and two women have even completed their B.Ed degrees. The CHJK programme, according to him, had made a difference because it took the trouble to explain the issues and today all the doctors in the region



are under “full control”, he claimed, a complete turnaround from the past.

Said Singh, “This village has 40 less girls now. Why? Because in the old days they were misusing ultrasound. Everyone knew where to go to get a sex detection procedure done and where to go for an abortion – they were being done openly. Later, after awareness creation and sting operations, the situation changed. Two doctors who were operating in this area even had their premises sealed.” In fact, now, he pointed out, it is the other problem. Even in emergency situations, women here find it difficult to have abortions.

Not every sarpanch may have displayed Sahab Singh’s level of energy – not even his wife, Sita Devi, the present sarpanch of Puraini – a traditional woman who did not seem to have much of a clue about issues of this kind. So bringing panchayats into the loop clearly remained a tough call.

The police was recognised as playing an important role under CHJK. The problem was that the police force was a highly masculinised institution, and most of its personnel saw a woman’s place as being in her home. The very atmosphere in a police station was so intimidating that far from encouraging women

survivors of rape or assault to approach the police, the very prospect of interacting with the supposed law enforcers only added to their distress.

CHJK tried to address the issue by engaging with sympathetic officers. In Dholpur, a Mahila Salah Kendra (women support centre) was established at the district police headquarters to provide legal services to women who faced violence in 2007. This was an important move but it was difficult to get the police to see it as more than a public relations exercise. “Much depended on the senior officers. Often, after we had to spend time and energy to build a good relationship with them. Later, when they began to respond positively to our ideas, they would get transferred from the district and we would have to start the whole process again,” pointed out Devendar Singh, Project Officer, CHJK.

His words revealed how the criminal justice system in both Morena and Dholpur districts let down women, especially when it came to violence. A chief judicial magistrate in Rajasthan once commented that women who registered cases under Section 498A of the Criminal Procedure Code were “liars and mischief makers”. He was only reflecting a view widely prevalent within both the local judiciary and the police.





Such derogatory and uninformed attitudes were the reason CHJK began working on developing reading materials on women's rights and laws. A set of four booklets, 'Apna Haq Pehchano' (Know Your Rights) was produced and it was so well appreciated that the Rajasthan High Court asked for 100 sets to be distributed among district judicial magistrates. To get lawyers involved, the CHJK also initiated a network of lawyers in Rajasthan. Each lawyer was given a fellowship and was encouraged to take up cases of violence against women, provide legal advice and participate in legal literacy camps conducted in villages. They even formed a district watch group to monitor the implementation of the PCPNDT Act. Many went on to become PWDVA protection officers and PCPNDT counsellors

and one was even selected as the PCPNDT state coordinator.

To keep the public focus on the girl child, CHJK would make it a point to celebrate International Girl Child Day (balika divas) with hospitals and officials being roped to preside over gift-distribution ceremonies for newborn girls. There was a constant attempt to link local activities to broader initiatives at the state, national and international levels, so that with good media coverage the issue got the



prominence it deserved. Observing the international fortnight of action against gender violence every year, from November 25 to December 10, became the norm and, in 2012, the CHJK community too participated in the One Billion Rising international campaign against violence.



Doctors Under The Lens

While CHJK looked at the issue of the declining sex ratio in the broadest terms, there was no getting away from the fact that it was the medical community that was singularly responsible for the alarmingly swift decline in sex ratio and child sex ratio. Despite criminalising sex selective abortions, doctors in both Dholpur and Morena were openly conducting the procedure, with many of them unaware that they were contravening the law. As for the law itself, it was a paper tiger. Not only were there no convictions under it, the law itself was rendered defunct.

This was also because the medical community was extremely well connected and socially respected. Policemen, lawyers, judges, the media, they all came under its influence.

It was mandatory that an appropriate authority be constituted, which would administer the law – that a signboard clearly indicating that sex determination was illegal was prominently displayed in the clinic/nursing home/hospital where ultrasound facilities existed, that all ultrasound scanning machines had to be registered. Even as early as 2002, the Supreme Court of India

had directed that ultrasound machines/scanners without registration be sealed and seized. “Despite the law, despite Supreme Court orders, nobody bothered to follow the requirements laid down by the law, and ultrasound clinics were proliferating when CHJK began,” Asha Singh recalled.

The first major breakthrough came in the form of a sensitive collector in Morena district, Dr Manohar Agnani. Disturbed by anganwadi records that showed fewer girls in village after village, he decided to take action. CHJK activists explained to him the misuse of technology that was taking place and undertook to collect information about the clinics. Before long, raids were being conducted by the district administration against 12 clinics, out of which seven had their licences cancelled.

Many of these establishments had not bothered to fill Form F of the PCPNDT Act, which was very crucial because not only did it provide data on the clinic and the registration number of its ultrasound machine, but a complete medical profile of the women who had undergone the procedure, and a declaration from the doctor conducting the ultrasonography on the reasons for the test.



***“The easy manner in which the clinics got their licences back indicated to us the clout of the medical community. So along with our advocacy and protest action, we decided to file a PIL,”
Sai Asha Singh***

Disturbingly, the Madhya Pradesh State PCPNDT Committee decided to let the erring clinics off the hook and they got back their licences within weeks. The JS protested immediately against this move by staging a torch rally and demonstrations outside the offending clinics. A signature campaign was also mounted and on Human Rights Day in 2005, it came together in an impressively long human chain to protest sex selective abortions. “The easy manner in which the clinics got their licences back indicated to us the clout of the medical community. So along with our advocacy and protest action, we decided to file a PIL,” said Asha Singh. This move had a significant impact: in 2009, the Gwalior High Court made eight more districts in Madhya Pradesh party to this case and later ruled that every district in the state of Madhya Pradesh set up its own

PCPNDT committees. Later, a similar PIL was filed in Rajasthan.

Asha Singh’s own activism and hard work on the issue was recognised (see box) and she was inducted into the PCPNDT advisory committee of Morena district and, later, became a part of the National Inspection and Monitoring Cell at the all-India level.

Dr G.S. Rajput, Chief Medical and Health Officer of Morena district, who heads the appropriate authority under the PCPNDT Act believed that a sea change had been achieved in the district. He pointed out that today doctors know that their licences could be cancelled without notice if their files were not maintained. “They stand to lose much more than they can gain from conducting these procedures. For an abortion they could make perhaps a profit of Rs 10,000. But if their licence is cancelled, it could spell their professional death,” he observed.

This, Rajput believed, had been achieved because of the CHJK campaign. The registration of ultrasound machines is now being strictly done and doctors have to fill all the required forms. Since 2005,





the Appropriate Authority and the Advisory Committees have been meeting every 60 days to discuss licence applications as well as general social issues. The records maintenance in Morena district has now been overseen by the Advisory Committee. Pankaj Jain, who is responsible for maintaining these records, added that sometimes random checks

on the information contained in the forms is made. In some cases where, for instance, a couple who has had three daughters goes in for a test, a physical verification could even be done. That the forms were being carefully kept in specially built cabinets was a sign of due diligence that was missing in an earlier era.

Asha Singh put it this way, “Doctors would criticise us and say that the forms they sent the Appropriate Authority were only tied in bundles and thrown in one corner. We realised then that we too needed to respect the process. So we got these cabinets built, and now there is a systematic maintenance of files, along with the minutes of the Advisory Committee meetings and meetings of the Appropriate Authority.” She now hoped to computerise the records when some funds came in.

Mind The Gaps

CHJK is a historic initiative for ActionAid, according to Prem Ranjan. “It had undertaken nothing like this so far, which attempted to address the social problem of a skewed child sex ratio through a process of empowering women. When the 2004 ‘Planning Families, Planning Gender’ had

presented many insights, we thought, and we could build on them as we went along.”

The way forward was full of uncertainties and the need for timely corrections was often felt. The 2004 study forewarned that this would happen. It noted



that any movement “towards equalising the life chances of daughters and towards greater gender equality often takes the form of one-step-forward-two-steps-back”.

Even something as casual as terms used in public discourse proved a challenge. The controversial term “kanya bhrun hatya” – which literally means murder of girls in the womb – kept being used. The deployment of this term contravened a broader understanding of gender rights since it framed the foetus as a human being.

Feminists have argued, a campaign against sex selective abortions should not end up stigmatising all abortions and promoting the public perception that an abortion is a “sin” or “immoral”. Not only does this undermine the right of a woman to her body, it can also make accessing an abortion when it is really required difficult because of the regulatory bureaucracy enshrouding it.

As Sahab Singh, the former sarpanch of Puraini village had pointed out, even in emergency situations, local women sometimes found it difficult to get an abortion. The initiative did not sufficiently make the distinction between abortions per se and sex selective abortions, although CHJK team

members have tried to foster the use of the more appropriate phrases like “ling adharit gharabhpaat” for sex-selective abortion.

Related to this were arguments used often by community activists. For instance, they would ask, “If we don’t allow girls to be born today, how will we have ‘bahu’ in the future?” The implication here that women existed only as mothers and wives was disturbing. Of course, it was true that rights-based work had to necessarily tailor its approaches and arguments to the community that was being served, but conveying first principles in sensitive ways was a task that cannot be shrugged off. This pointed to a larger weakness of the CHJK approach: gender rights were perceived only through the lens of education and violence against women, other

Even something as casual as terms used in public discourse proved a challenge. The controversial term ‘kanya bhrun hatya’ – which literally means murder of girls in the womb – kept being used



aspects – as, for instance, a woman’s right property – hardly figured in the conversation within the community. This lack of a holistic view on women’s empowerment also meant privileging short-term solutions rather than endemic change.

Sometimes the campaign also displayed elements of vigilantism, which could have been avoided. Getting the children of the Bal Manch to share their experiences at home in a participatory manner, is one thing, asking them to report on their families – as had happened in some cases – is another. There is a fine line between the two, and care should have been taken to ensure that it is not breached.

As for the initiative itself, while it had certainly proved transformative in villages like Umaria ka Pura in Morena district or Nagla Bhadoriya in Dholpur district, much depended on the dynamism of the field team. Impacts seemed to have varied across the 130 project villages.

How did caste, as an issue, figure in the initiative? Existing data had indicated that it was the more prosperous and educated sections among the higher castes that tended to plan families in terms of gender. Keeping this in mind the initiative did include caste leaders in its advocacy efforts and held

community-based events. For instance, an event organised in Morena in 2012, saw 5,000 members of the Rajput community pledging that they would not resort to sex selective abortions. However, in terms of consciousness-raising among JS cadres, the initiative seemed to have eluded the caste question.

The attitude of officials was found to make all the difference to the effectiveness of programmes on the ground. Some understood the issues almost intuitively. A government servant like Shobha Srivastava, the Child Development Programme Officer of Rajakhera block, Dholpur district, was extremely enthusiastic about CHJK’s approach. Her words to us said it all, “The happiness you get from the sight of seeing wave upon wave of girls going to school is greater than what you get in a temple!” But officers like her are rare, and often they are transferred before they can make a lasting difference. While this is a phenomenon that besets most projects, in one that was so closely related to attitudinal change, the absence of good government servants was extremely deleterious. Take the case of Dr Manohar Agnani. If he had stayed on in Morena for even a year longer, the change he could have brought about would have been enormous. CHJK coordinators indicated their frustration over the



transfer of administrators and senior police officers who had displayed the drive to take up the issue

energetically. But of course they also recognised that they could do precious little about it.

Baby Steps To The Future

Has the sex ratio in the project areas risen as a result of the CHJK intervention? Given the complex dynamics involved, it would be difficult to give a definitive answer to this question but according to a sex ratio survey conducted by CHJK activists in 104 villages in Dholpur, the ratio had risen from 863:1000 in 2005 to 916 in 2010. In Morena, the increase was even sharper: from 774:1000 to 909. If we are to go by these figures, some significant improvements have indeed taken place.

Observed Dr G.S. Rajput, Chief Medical & Health Officer, Morena district, “Change is certainly in the air. The feudal mindsets of the past are giving way and girls are going to school everywhere. The very fact that girls were being sent out of the home meant that their status was rising. But it is also true that such change is not taking place at the pace we want.” Rajput, incidentally, is convinced that the JS model is a useful one and believes that the impact of a few change agents working in a few villages can get greatly amplified over time.



According to Prem Ranjan, what CHJK has been able to change in the region is the understanding that sex selective abortions are a crime, “No family here will now actively seek this procedure. Also realisation of women’s rights and capabilities has grown, as seen in rising levels of education for women. But we could do very little about the innate son preference within the community. The demand for a son is still ubiquitous – and women continue to undergo multiple pregnancies in the hope of a son.”

The Census 2011 only underlined the continuing decline of the child sex ratio in many parts of the



country. In 2012, ActionAid took up the issue in campaign mode at the national level along with other organisations, even as CHJK itself was winding down after an eventful decade. Said Prem Ranjan, “Through the campaign, called ‘Beti Zindabad’, we decided to draw lessons from the Dholpur-Morena initiative. It covers 90 districts all over the country, both rural and urban.”

Meanwhile, to consolidate the gains made by the CHJK intervention and to keep the activism going long after ActionAid had itself withdrawn from the initiative, a registered organisation known as the Jago Sakhi Seva Sangathan (JSSS) came into being in April 26, 2011, in Dholpur district, with a former CHJK community cadre, Ram Bati, elected as its president along with five other office bearers. In Morena, a similar process got underway. Said Prem Ranjan, “As part of the withdrawal process, we planned the setting up of this multi-tiered organisation, by building the capacity of cadres and office bearers so that they take the initiative forward.” According to Devendar Singh, the plan was for JSSS to have a presence in 96 villages of Dholpur, as well as at the district level.

Ultimately, there was no silver bullet to address India’s declining sex ratio, embedded as it was in

a patriarchal order that had brutally discriminated against women for centuries. But what the CHJK intervention did indicate was that local communities can be mobilised in creative ways to make a difference, even on such a complex issue.

Itishree Sahoo, Monitoring and Evaluation Manager, ActionAid, who has been visiting the project area over the years, remembered that when she had first gone there, no woman would come outside her home and even the occasional figure that could be spotted was shrouded under a long ‘ghunghat’.

Recounted Sahoo, “I have been told that, earlier, when women passed a group of men on the road, they would not only ensure their heads were covered, they would remove their footwear as a sign of their supreme inferiority. Today, these very obvious signs of a woman’s secondary status have gone. Local women are exercising their rights, even in terms of sensitive issues like marriage. They are studying in colleges, working as professionals, speaking out against violence. Such momentous changes are what campaigns like CHJK have helped to usher in.”



Her words brought back an image from the village of Pyare ki Madhiya: four young rural women on a tractor, laughing loudly as they raised slogans

against the discrimination of daughters. In Dholpur and Morena, challenging patriarchy is certainly a work in progress.





Case
Studies

Crusader Against Daughter Discrimination



Asha Singh, in her early forties, is an unusual woman by any measure. Born in the small town of Morena, on the edge of the Chambal ravines of Madhya Pradesh, she has been able to powerfully project an important issue like the declining sex ratio on the national stage. A member of the Rajput community, with its strong patriarchal and feudal values, she grew up playing cricket and riding cycles and motorcycles – the motorcycle, incidentally, is still her preferred mode of transportation.

Asha believes it was her early childhood that made all the difference to the way in which her life took shape. It was her mother who brought her up and educated her along with her three brothers and a sister, her father having left home because of a family dispute when Asha was still young. “My mother did not have much of an education – she was a fifth standard drop out – but she was instinctively independent minded. After father left, she chose not to go back to her parents’ home as other women in her situation may have, and instead brought up her five children on her own in Morena. The family owned a hotel business and that provided financial support,” recalled Asha.

Unusually for a family in the region, the Singh daughters were not discriminated against in any

way. They were given the freedom they needed, with the sole stipulation that they must not misuse the freedom. During her growing up years, Asha kept testing the limits of that freedom. “I was drawn to athletics and delighted in running the marathon. I also played cricket and since there was no separate women’s league, I played with young men in the Indore and Gwalior cricket clubs. I still remember Sidhu and Azharuddin coming in to train us in those days.”

People would complain about her behaviour to her mother, saying that she spent far too much time in the company of boys. Fortunately, both her mother and her elder brother’s wife had immense faith in her. Their confidence was rewarded, when she went on to win the marathon in her district and received a bicycle as a trophy. She used that bicycle to win a 14-km cycle championship.

This drive to set new goals and excel, came to mark Asha’s personality. “For me everything was like a challenge. My record of having won the sports championship for five years while in college for my graduate and post-graduate studies is still unbroken. I was considered the champion among champions and also participated in several inter club cricket tournaments.”

But along with the fun and games, Asha was also getting ambitious about her professional trajectory. "I had completed by graduation and post-graduation in political science but felt I needed training in a profession. This led me to do my LLB," she revealed. Training in legal studies introduced her to concepts like human rights. For the first time a woman who had always considered herself "one of the boys" now understood that there was something known as gender discrimination. That realisation made her decide to work for the rights of women and children.

The local culture in which Asha had grown up glamorised masculinity and made heroes out of gun-toting dacoits. It also accorded the most horrendous treatment to women. What was to be a turning point in Asha's trajectory as a lawyer was a case of rape that came to her, "The husband of the raped woman, after filing a case against his wife's attacker, agreed to withdraw it because the rapist had offered him two bighas of land as a bribe. I was so angry over his behaviour that I remember asking him: 'Is this all you value your wife – two bighas? The woman herself was shaken but told me in piteous tones that she had no option but to go along with her husband since she had to live with him all her life after all."

That case revealed to her how heavily the system was loaded against woman. The 2001 census revealed that Morena and adjoining Dholpur, in Rajasthan, were among India's 10 worst districts in terms of skewed sex ratios. Asha involved

herself in a programme on the declining sex ratio conducted by the Madhya Pradesh Voluntary Health Association under which road shows were staged in seven districts of the state.

That experience helped her make the links between skewed sex ratio, on the one hand, and discriminatory practices like dowry, on the other. "I remember one boy coming up to me and saying, 'We don't ask for dowry, our parents ask for it. They have paid for our education and we are obliged to follow their diktat.' His words made me realise that it is vital for society in general to understand the women-related laws in our statute books," said Asha.

Taking her newfound interest in the skewed sex ratio of her region to the next level, Asha participated in a research project for ActionAid in 2003 that inquired deeper into the phenomenon. It brought her face to face with several social hypocrisies. "I would be amazed to see that if a buffalo died in a village, the whole community would gather to sympathize with the family, but if a female infant died, nobody bothered to mourn. The pressure on daughters-in-law to have sons was so bad that many young hapless women were seriously affected. As for doctors, not one of them took the law against sex-selective abortions seriously and were openly conducting these procedures," she elaborated.

Ending discrimination against daughters now became the single biggest objective of Asha's attention. In 2004, when the Dholpur based organisation, Prayatn in partnership with

ActionAid, began the CHJK intervention, Asha came on board. “We realised that since doctors had strategised on ways to protect themselves from the law, we too needed to think of ways to counter them. So we learnt to pit one doctor against the other to get information out of them,” she said looking back.

Asha and her colleagues discovered that sex selective abortions in Morena town were usually done under the cover of darkness and fetuses discarded late into the night where?. She personally supervised sting operations under the CHJK project. Once, when she happened to be in Gaya, Bihar, with noted feminist activist Varsha Deshpande, she herself posed as a pregnant woman wanting to test the sex of her child. The

one thing Asha was not was feeble hearted. She confronted the violators of the law head-on, “I would ask doctors who had conducted such procedures how they could sleep at night.”

Today, Asha is on the PCPNDT advisory committee of Morena district and is also on the National Inspection and Monitoring Cell at the all-India level. Over the last decade, she has seen a lot of positive changes but understands clearly that this is an issue that will continue to haunt India for years to come. She concluded, “It disturbs me that modern technologies, meant to improve health care, are being used in such a destructive manner. As a proud mother of a daughter, this is one social cause that has become a personal one.



Dr Singhal's Prescription For Doctors: Follow The Law

Dr M.L. Singhal, who runs the popular Singhal Nursing Home in the heart of Morena town, was among the first batch of doctors in the country to learn the new technology of ultrasound when it arrived in India in the early nineties. "The course was conducted at Apollo Hospital in Chennai, and the Larsen and Toubro machine, I think, cost more than Rs 20 lakh at that point. Later, other manufacturers like Wipro and Philips also introduced models," he recalled.

In those days nobody could have even imagined how this technology would come to be misused. As Singhal put it, "For us who were being trained in its use, it embodied a great revolution in diagnostics, we regarded it as a very useful aid for our medical practice. In hindsight, I would add, it was useful indeed, but only when it was deployed for the right purpose."

Right from the start, Dr Singhal was clear: there was no question of using his expertise or his machines for sex determination because it soon became clear that the new machine was being used for this purpose. "Since we had an ultrasound machine in our nursing home, I remember how people would keep coming to me constantly and

beg me to do sex determination imaging. I had no problem in refusing them then and have stood firm against all the pressure that patients have applied over the years on this count," he said.

This, incidentally, was even before the law proscribing the practice became better known among medical practitioners and the Supreme Court issued directions that every ultrasound machine be registered. "I didn't need to know the law to realise that using sonography for sex determination was wrong," said the doctor, who has always kept the key to his ultrasound room with himself at all times – even his wife, a practising gynaecologist, cannot access it. He also showed us the records of every instance he used his ultrasound technology – every form meticulously filled in his own handwriting, as mandated by the law.

Over the years Dr Singhal has always advised his colleagues to follow the law and educated his patients on the issue. Said he, "I have used every approach possible to dissuade people from opting for sex determination, with my arguments ranging from the spiritual to the technical. I have asked couples to accept each child that comes to them as a creation of the almighty. I have also

tried to give them lessons in genetics, pointing out that women have two of the same kind of chromosomes, XX, unlike men who have two distinctly different chromosomes, XY. I tell them that it is the man who determines the sex of the baby, depending on whether his sperm is carrying the X or Y chromosome.”

But getting people who are determined to have sons to change their mind is a tough proposition, the doctor admits, which is why he pins his hopes on the work of activists like Asha Singh. “The main

thing we need today is popular awakening and we need more people to take up the cause of our daughters,” said Dr Singhal. The law, he pointed out, is having its impact. The trade in sex selective abortions, which used to be openly conducted a few years ago, has been severely impacted. He said he could vouch for the fact that no self respecting doctor in Morena now conducted such procedures, although he added that he could not speak for other cities like Jhansi, Gwalior or Agra.



Media Matters: Making A Difference In Morena

When noted film personality, Aamir Khan, launched his popular television series, 'Satyamev Jayate', in 2012, one of the first cases he presented was that of Parveen Khan, a woman from Morena, who was brutally attacked by her husband for having given birth to a daughter, despite his demand that the foetus be aborted.

This small town in Madhya Pradesh, in fact, has been constantly making news for its treatment of the girl child, ever since the 2001 census revealed that its sex ratio was one of the lowest in the country. Both the national and international media had reported on Morena's declining sex ratio, and the local press took it up as a focus issue.

Recalled Satendra Singh Parmar of the Morena afternoon daily, 'Sadhya Jandarshan', "Ever since those 2001 figures became public, the media in Morena has had to be alert to this concern. Over the years, organisations like JSS have also

helped us focus by feeding journalists with new information and ensuring that the issue got the prominence it deserved."

The issue got a fillip when Dr Manohar Agnani came to Morena as district collector in 2004 and took it up in campaign mode. Mediapersons here recalled how he ordered the seizure of the records of clinics, shut down diagnostic centres and issued showcase notices to doctors. As Parmar put it, "Agnani really electrified the scene. No DM before him or after him has been half as active as he was. His actions gave us a lot to write about. The treatment of girls was not longer 'soft news', it became everybody's concern. I have myself written stories about villages where the sex ratio had been declining and also villages like Kaji Basai near Dhanela panchayat, where the sex ratio actually rose thanks to the efforts of a sarpanch."



Coverage of the issue has steadily increased over the last 10 years. “Every year, each of us has covered at least 15 stories related to sex selective abortions and we have been doing this for the last decade. Sometimes these stories have taken on the powerful. There was this story we did, for instance, of an IPS officer in Morena who went to Bhind to get an abortion done on his wife after the couple had two daughters. This would never have happened 10 years earlier,” noted Vinod Tripathi of the influential and large-selling ‘Dainik Bhaskar’. This newspaper, incidentally, even adopted the declining sex ratio as its campaign theme and on various occasions like Children’s Day has made it a point to publish special features on it.

According to Prakash Jantodia of the ‘Navbharat’, the pro-active role of the media has made a difference in three distinct ways: one, it sent out a message to the medical community that it was being closely watched; two, it flagged sex selective abortions as a socially condemnable practice. Three, such coverage has helped to strengthen the hands of the administration and police when they have taken tough action against those who contravened the law. Doctors constitute a very powerful lobby and work as a cabal to protect their interests. A few years ago, when a district magistrate took action under the PCPNDT Act against some of them, both private and government doctors banded together and went on strike. So those who are serious about addressing the issue stand to gain a great deal if they have a sympathetic media behind them.

But the real challenge before the media was to go beyond the sensational and highlight the larger social realities. Most of the coverage centred on female foetuses being found in garbage heaps, and the like, and such constant exposure to negative stories carries the danger of readers and viewers being rendered de-sensitised to the issue. This, in turn, may lead them to the conclusion that since it is difficult to change a phenomenon that has become so all-pervasive as to be almost ‘normal’, it is best to ignore it.

It is precisely for this reason that activists here want the media to bring in other aspects into their coverage. “Take, for instance, cases of daughters looking after their parents in their old age or performing their last rites in place of their brothers. If the media can contribute to breaking the stereotype that the daughter is a ‘burden’ on her parents, half our job would be done. This is why we keep involving journalists in our work, especially when we organise special events like our Balika Divas (girl child day),” commented Asha Singh.

Satendra Parmar agreed that it is important to see the issue in the broadest possible manner. “I believe that media stories on sex selection should go beyond sex selection stories. The fact that dowry is still being demanded impacts directly on the status of girls, so it becomes important to highlight cases of, say, parents refusing to give dowry.” Added Vinod Tripathi, “We also try to present positive stories. For instance, when one local doctor had a daughter and then went in for a sterilisation, it made news; or when 5,000

members of the Rajput community in Morena city pledged to ensure the protection of the girl child, we gave it good coverage.”

But the media personnel of Morena also know that this struggle against sex selective abortions

is not an easy one to win. Tripathi spoke for his colleagues when he observed that while the media can keep filing stories on the issue, unless society wakes up and sees the importance tackling it urgently, very little will change.

The Sixth Daughter: The Story of Babita



This is a case study from the CHJK files that revealed the potential of such an intervention and how much more needs to be done. It was the story of little Babita, who lives in the village of Karimpur, Dholpur district.



Babita's family is of the Jatav caste and she has a brother and four sisters. One of her sisters died of severe malnutrition, according to local sources. Babita herself is the sixth daughter in this family. She did not

attend school and spent her days for the most part cooped up in the family's small dwelling.

When members of the Jago Sakhi Seva Sansthan (JSSS), an NGO set up in 2011, visited her home in 2012, Babita looked pale and withdrawn as she sat in one corner of her home along with her mother. Unlike the other children, she wasn't playing or jumping around excitedly. She was a little over seven years old but looked no more than four. It was obvious that she was suffering from

the ravages of malnutrition. Her mother, when asked about her situation, explained that Babita had been a weak child ever since she was born. "She does not go to the school or the anganwadi centre because we are worried she would get hurt. She is very weak so I keep her with me all the time," the mother explained. What the woman probably did not realise was that her child was on the verge of starvation.

The JSSS members then discussed the case amongst themselves and with the process facilitators of the area. Several visits were paid to Babita's home and, finally, it was decided that since the child's situation was critical she needed urgent treatment. At first the parents were counselled about showing Babita to a doctor, but every time the issue was broached they would reply that the family was too poor to afford medical attention.

Finally, after much persuasion, Babita was taken to the paediatric department of the Dholpur district hospital for a medical examination on July 9, 2012. The diagnosis was unsurprising: it was established that Babita was the victim of chronic anaemia and malnourishment. Since her haemoglobin level was at the life-threatening level

of 2.5 per cent, what she needed urgently was a blood transfusion. But Babita's family refused to incur further expenses on her. Her family pointed out that since they did not belong to the Below Poverty Line (BPL) category, they would have to pay for everything, something they could ill afford.

Babita's case was then discussed with the Child Welfare Committee of district, after which the Principal Medical Officer (PMO) wrote a letter stating that the child be provided free treatment at the Dholpur District Hospital.

Since the blood bank in the hospital did not have stocks of Babita's blood group, her father was asked to donate blood. But the family once again refused. They were apprehensive that donating blood would badly affect the health of the father, who was the only earning member of the family. Only after it was explained to Babita's parents that any active and healthy adult can donate blood without any adverse impacts on his or her body that the father finally agreed to donate his blood for his child.

The impact was instantaneous. After the very first transfusion, Babita's haemoglobin level rose to 5.8 per cent. But, according to the doctors who were looking after her, much more needed to be done. For starters, she needed at least two more transfusions. Here the JSSS members stepped in and donated blood. After the two transfusions, Babita's haemoglobin rose to 8.5 per cent. She was now out of immediate danger, but the doctor explained that she needed regular doses of

vitamins and minerals as well as a nutritious diet, if she was to recover completely.

During the following months, Babita was kept under the observation of a medical team, and she had to make regular follow up visits to the hospital. Her daily diet was also tracked. Meanwhile, JSSS members began counselling her parents on the need to eliminate gender discriminatory practices within the home while making sure that they did not directly blame them for their daughter's plight. They were merely told that if Babita was given back a normal childhood, she had every chance of becoming a productive adult just like her brother, and would help them in the future.

This empathetic interaction with the couple made all the difference in their attitude to their sixth daughter. Today, Babita's mother makes it a point to take Babita for regular check ups. After just one month of treatment, Babita became a transformed child.

She now goes to school like any other child in Karimpur village and enjoys playing with her friends. She also looks forward to the mid day meal she gets at school. Her remarkable recovery brought to mind the fate of her older sister who had died. Could she have survived with timely attention, like the hundreds of young girls in this region who have not been allowed to enjoy their basic rights to a healthy and productive life? A distressing question indeed, and one that is still waiting for an answer.

O Daughter Go Away

Every region in the country has its share of dark secrets, including the many ways in which female infants were eliminated in bygone times. Either the child was poisoned by being fed decoctions made of the seeds of the 'dhatura' or other home grown poisonous plants; asphyxiated by being fed a grain of paddy or a piece of coir placed in her mouth, or physically eliminated by strangulation, being dropped from a height or drowned.

Sometimes it was the midwife who was given the task of doing this on the instructions of family members but often it was the older women who took this step in the firm belief that being rid of a daughter was good for the family's future. There were even local rhymes that went, "Laali, tum jao/ Lalla bhej diyo!" (O daughter you go back/send a son next time!)

The study, 'Planning Families, Planning Gender', noted that the fact that there is no cultural requirement for social mourning over the death of an infant or for cremation of the body only facilitated such practices.

The emergence of medical technologies that could reveal the sex of the foetus like amniocentesis in the Seventies and the ultrasound machine in the Nineties, only helped to greatly hasten the pace of such elimination. As experts have pointed



out, despite all the incidents of infanticide that had undoubtedly taken place a century ago, the country had a more balanced sex ratio in those days than it has now.

Even if families don't resort to sex selective abortions, the slow elimination of a girl child through neglect is common in this region. Neglect can take various forms, ranging from poor post-natal care – for instance, the infant would be denied mother's milk or her umbilical cord would be allowed to get infected – to inadequate nutrition and medical attention as she grows older.

The desperation for a son makes the expectant or pregnant woman the object of all attention. According to the study 'Planning Families, Planning Gender', "In Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, there is a belief that the sex of the child in the womb can be reversed by various precautions, abstinences, and locally prepared potions. The method used is called 'palta', or overturning. In MP, bandaging of the torso in particular ways by so called specialists is another technique adopted. Amulets and blessings are other methods resorted to..."

In fact, there is a thriving 'son' industry in this region, with local godmen making quick money from promises ensuring a child of the required gender. Revealed Asha Singh, who has studied these practices closely, "We discovered that the desire for sons had led to a proliferating industry of local babas, who made money peddling hokey-pokey remedies. For instance, women were told to eat the seed of the coconut early in the morning for the first two or three months of pregnancy to get a son. We were even told that in some regions the umbilical cord saved from a woman who has given birth to boys for three times was cut, dried and ingested by expectant mothers!" The dreams and desires of the pregnant woman would be carefully analysed and interpreted. If the woman craves for vegetables that were categorised as female – like bhindi or lauki – the conclusion was that she was carrying a female foetus. But if she

wanted mango (aam) or melon (tarbuz) - deemed male in Hindi – it presaged male progeny.

Everything was carefully scrutinised: the manner in which the pregnant woman walked, the shape of her stomach, the colour of her urine, her complexion, her appetite, whether she favoured spicy or salty food. Even something like the linea nigra that appears on her belly during pregnancy was considered. If it was straight it indicated a certain gender; if it happened to be zigzagged, it signalled the other gender.

Life was a veritable hell for the women who were subjected to such unrelenting intrusion. The pressure on them to bear a son was traumatic enough and if they finally gave birth to a daughter, it was as if there was a death in the family.

The CHJK Pledge

This pledge has been pronounced by various community and caste groups, as also medical personnel, government officials, and elected representatives.

- ▲ I, along with my family, pledge that we will not allow female foeticide to take place in our neighbourhood.
- ▲ I, along with my family, pledge to ensure that every girl and woman gets care, nutrition and love.
- ▲ I, along with my family, pledge to ensure that every girl, adolescent and woman, gets access to education.
- ▲ I, along with my family, pledge to ensure that we will not allow child marriage at any cost.
- ▲ I, along with my family, pledge to ensure that no discrimination will be meted out to girls and women.
- ▲ I, along with my family, pledge to fight violence against women and girls.

About the initiative

The bordering districts of Dholpur and Morena in the states of Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh respectively, are infamous for the highly misogynist feudal social structure and significantly lower sex ratio. The sex ratio has always been on a lower side over the last hundred years and killing of infant girls was practiced and accepted as in some other parts of the country. However with the introduction of ultra-sound technology combined with the evil of rampant medical malpractice and unscrupulous practitioners, sex selective abortions have become the norm.

The initiative Chahhat Hai Jeene Ki in partnership with Prayatn Samiti took it as a challenge to prove that the damage could be stopped and the trends reversed if concerted efforts were put in place. It not only proved its point in this decade long partnership with ActionAid India, but also played an important role in bringing the issue of adverse sex ratio to the attention of larger development community.

It started as a cross-border initiative in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh in the year 2004 with the focus of establishing rapport with the community and building a field based cadre of committed people to work on the issue. After gaining the confidence of people in challenging and addressing private lives and privately made decision, they created a strategic and targeted approach. They started organising children, teenage girls, and young men and of course adult women and men in separate groups to question the denial of human rights to women at all stages in life and created what we all now understand and call “the life-cycle approach”.

The strategy has been very successful in changing the way how villages now perceive private and social life and introduced to many other partners of ActionAid India.

Hope the experiences will leave an imprint in your minds to gain your solidarity in making this country a safer and nurturing place for the girl child.

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