

# Bringing A Change Collectively

Ms. Swapna MAJUMDAR (India)

Over 400 women from the backward and marginalised communities have joined hands to ensure their village council in Jhansi district in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh remain free of alcohol shops for the last four years.

This is no mean feat considering women here were rarely seen or heard outside their houses. It was only in 2008 that many women in Khajarahra Bujurg village council first stepped out to form self-help groups (SHGs) with the help of the Rajiv Gandhi Mahila Vikas Pariyojana (RGMVP), a non-profit institution working to empower women and alleviate poverty in the state. As the confidence of these women grew, so did the number of SHGs which increased from one to 40 in a span of four years, each with a membership of 10-15 women. In 2012, emboldened by the new-found awareness of their rights and success in pulling out their families from extreme poverty, these groups decided to take their biggest problem—alcoholism—head on.

“Alcoholism was a serious problem. During group discussions, we heard that some members’ jewellery was sold by their husbands to buy alcohol. Even when we went to our SHG meetings, we used to see men drinking on the roadside. They would taunt us, and it became a security risk as well. So we decided to put an end to it. This meant closing down the four alcohol shops in our village council,” said Meera, the president of Devi Mata SHG.

Interestingly, the biggest supporters of this decision were the wives and mothers of the men who ran the liquor shops. According to Nandini, she had tried to persuade her husband to close down the shop but he didn’t agree. “I am a SHG member and like the other women, I too wanted the shop to close, even it meant going against my husband. I also got the support of my mother-in-law. She is also a member of my SHG,” said Nandini.

However, they knew that it would be difficult for their SHG to do it alone. So a meeting of their village organisation, comprising these 40 SHGs, was called and a decision to close down the shops was endorsed by over 400 women who attended.

The men were approached and requested to close down their shops. When this didn’t work, a representative group of 40 women walked 12 km to the nearest police station to lodge a complaint and demanded the shops be closed down. This was followed up by a public rally by the women collectives the next day as a part of their anti-alcohol campaign.

“We also demonstrated in front of the police station. I also participated along with my mother-in-law. Her support was very crucial as I was raising my voice against my husband’s shop,” said Nandini

“Thanks to the awareness training given to us, we have learnt how to demand our rights. We realised that if we resorted to violence, it would result in more violence. If we went to the police then it would be within the law,” said Meera, also the president of the village organisation.

Such was their fervour that the police were forced to come the following day and closed down the shops.

The next few days were filled with tension with some women, including Meera, receiving threats. But the women had a plan ready. Having seen the power of collective action, a group of 50 women sat cheek to jowl in a tractor to meet the district magistrate. Although they had no prior appointment, they were able to meet him and get his assurance.

However, the women did not stop there. They knew that in order to ensure their village council remained free of alcohol shops, they needed to reach out to rehabilitate the men who had been running them. The wives were given loans from their SHGs to allow their husbands to start afresh. "I received Rs 5,000 and my husband used it to start a small shop. Today, it is our main source of livelihood. It has allowed us to send our two children to a private school. We are very happy that he does not have to open an alcohol shop ever again," said Nandini.



Women have joined hands to fight the menace of alcoholism.